

RESOLVED

Martin Nelson

These four novellas deal with different aspects of human behaviour. A novella is a story dealing with a moral issue that sits between a short story and a novel. It is complete in itself. The word derives from Old Italian meaning *piece of news, chit-chat, tale*

*If you wrong us, shall we not revenge?
Shakespeare, Merchant of Venice*

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To Diana, Sarah, Paul and Families

*Resolved to take fate by the throat and shake a
living out of her*

Louise May Alcott 1832-1888

REVENGE
MY NAME IS INOCENT
FOISTED
A VILLAGE IDYLL

REVENGE

The solemn echo of the gong could be heard far across the valley. It was a sound familiar to the older citizens; another criminal in the nearby prison had been hanged. Since the abolition of Capital Punishment, it was violence or suicide, which now claimed its victims. Within the prison the incessant ringing of alarm bells shattered the silence. The long term lags knowing what it meant, muttered to themselves and turned over in their bunks.

Loud footsteps reverberated along the concrete corridors as the duty guards descended on block B. Voices shouted, as beams of light, probing the darkness, guided them to what was becoming a far too familiar sight. Hanging from a cord in cell 15 of Block 6 was the frail body of a 17-year-old boy no bigger than a 12-year child, called Stevie, his face contorted, bloodless and his body lifeless. He had become another terrible statistic for a jail that had one of the worst records in England.

A note in his local paper caught Dr Miller's eye as he was buttering his toast one morning. Two youths arrested on a charge of bludgeoning an old man to death. It was a brief article but it set him thinking. Why would two young men do that? What possible motive could they have? Was this an example of pure evil? Was there such a thing?

Miller was pondering these questions when the telephone rang. It was John Staites a fellow lawyer.

‘Miller I need a favour from you and time is short. I need you to examine a young man for me. He's in Ardley jail on remand. I need the report within a week. If you can do it, I can get the papers to you by special courier.’

‘Let me have a look at my diary and I will come back to you,’ the doctor replied. He knew that his diary was in the office. He never knew where to keep it and had promised himself that one day he would put it all on his computer but he hadn't got round to doing that yet.’ So as usual he had to ring his secretary. She wasn't in so he left a message on her voicemail.

‘Ring me as soon as you get in.’

As he put the receiver down, she rang breathlessly,

‘Sorry I missed my bus. What do you need?’

‘Have a look and see how I am placed next week.’

She checked his diary on her phone,

‘You're free after 11am.’

‘Thanks,’ he said, ‘close the rest of the day please.’

He rang the lawyer back and got his voicemail.

Damn, he thought, irritated. Why did he have to turn his phone off when he had asked me to phone him

back?

The message ended. He waited for the bleep.

‘It's me, I can make Wednesday after 11 am, ring me back.’ A few minutes later his mobile beeped. The screen read: 1 message received. He opened the inbox: OK, thanks, I will send the papers to your office. The jail will expect you at midday on Wednesday, Please confirm when you receive the papers. He returned to his breakfast but continued to think about the boy in jail. He wondered what it would be like to be in jail. He had seen enough murder mysteries on TV to have an idea but he knew that they were far removed from the real thing.

Dr Miller arrived early and parked in the Visitor's car park appearing to be the only one there. He sat in his car looking at the prison. It was an overpoweringly large Victorian building that loomed up before him. Built in the late 19th century, it still held some of the country's most dangerous criminals. Originally made of white limestone, it was now blackened with the smoke of years from the then coal filled skies.

Collecting his briefcase he made his way to the visitor's entrance, his footsteps crunching on the gravel breaking the silence of the morning. Standing in front of a discrete black metal door, he rang the bell and waited. There was a loud grating of locks and then the door was opened and a

uniformed figure appeared,

'Good Morning Sir, can I help you?'

'Yes, I have come to see Mr. Jones in order to carry out a medical examination at the request of his solicitor.'

'Oh! Yes, we have a request from Mr Staithes. What is your name Sir?'

'Dr Miller,' he said.

'Do you have a photo ID?' He handed him his Driving licence and the guard peered at it, looked at him and grunted, 'not very flattering Sir, follow me.' They crossed a small open courtyard enclosed by a barbed wire roof and walls before standing in front of another heavy metal door with a small entrance opening. The guard pressed the button and waited. They heard heavy footsteps and then the rattling of keys. Then the small window groaned open and a guard's face appeared.

'Can I help you?' he said.

'Yes, this is the Doctor who has come to examine one of your clients Jones.'

'Yes we were expecting you, please come in.' He heard the grinding sound of a key turning and the large iron door slowly opened.

Entering the main building, he followed the guard along a dull yellow walled corridor until they stopped outside a door.

'This is the examination room, please go in and I will go and get Jones.' he said. It was a bright airy room with an examination couch at one end

and two chairs and a small table at the other. A window overlooked an exercise courtyard where he could see some prisoners exercising. After a few minutes, the door opened and a young man entered. He was of slight build with blond hair and blue eyes and walked with a slight limp.

‘Hello,’ he said, ‘thank you for coming, my solicitor told me to expect you.’

‘My name is Dr Miller. I have a request from your solicitor Mr. Staithes to examine you and prepare a medical report dealing with your medical condition. I have been asked specifically to answer the question: Could this man kick someone? Is he capable of kicking somebody to death?’ Stevie laughed,

‘Of course I couldn’t, I am an amputee. I wear a false leg and there is no way I could kick anyone.’

‘OK, let’s start at the beginning.’ The doctor sat at the desk, pulled out his notebook and began. Stevie sat on the couch.

‘How old are you?’

‘I am 17.’

‘Tell me about your childhood.’

‘I was born in Pudsey, near Leeds. I have two brothers, I am the oldest. We lived in a back-to-back sharing the toilet with our neighbours. I never knew my father and was brought up by my mother and my grandfather.’ As he spoke the word grandfather, he winced and his voice quivered. Dr

Miller noticed the hesitation and asked,

'Did you not like your grandfather?'

'I don't want to talk about him,' Stevie shouted. Haven't you come to see me?'

'OK, tell me about the accident,' said Doctor Miller pointing to his leg.

'Oh that? I've almost forgotten how it happened now. It was a stupid accident. I was about thirteen. I'd had a row with my Grandfather. He was shouting at me because I hadn't done my homework. I lost my temper and rushed out of the house. We only had a short path at the front, and before I realised it I was in the road. I ran straight into an oncoming car. I think I was concussed because I have no memory until I was in hospital. They told me they couldn't save it, it was so smashed up. But it's not as bad as it could have been,' he said tapping his leg, I still have my knee.'

'Does it give you any problems?' The doctor asked, looking out of the window.

'Not really, I get a bit of pain in wet weather and the socket sometimes needs adjustment but otherwise I tend to forget about it.'

'What do you do about exercise?' The doctor asked innocently.

'I exercise in the yard and play football in the prison league.' Dr Miller held his breath and then very quietly asked,

'How do you kick the ball?'

'No problem, I am right footed so I stand on

my left leg and kick the ball with my artificial leg.'

'Could you show me?' Smiling, Stevie stood up, balanced on his left leg and vigorously swung his artificial leg in order to kick an invisible ball. Dr Miller wrote in his notes, *Stevie Jones can play football and showed me how he kicks a ball.*

Some weeks earlier in the late afternoon Stevie had entered Sharkey's Pub in Hull. He had arranged to meet his friend Jamie there after he had completed his day's community service. The two young men greeted each other warmly.

'What will you have?' asked Stevie.

'A pint of Black Sheep bitter,' replied Jamie and the young men began serious drinking. The conversation flowed easily and gradually the alcohol took over until they were laughing and gesticulating. At one point the landlord came over.

'All right boys, I think you are making a bit too much noise and you should slow down the drinking. They took no notice. Suddenly Stevie went quiet and began to stare at an old man sitting alone by the fire.

'Jamie,' he whispered, 'do you know who that is?'

'No, who?' Asked Jamie.

'It's me granddad, you know the one who used to live with us.'

'Don't be stupid, it can't be, it's not him, he's too old.'

'No! It's 'im I'm sure.'

At that point the old man became aware that the two young men were looking at him. He looked around nervously, finished his drink, got up and left.

'That's him, I know 'is walk, let's follow him,' Stevie said.

'What for?' replied Jamie.

'Cos, cos I want to talk to him that's why. Finish your drink,' shouted Stevie. He got up and walked towards the exit with Jamie reluctantly following some way behind. The fresh night air revived them as they walked along the road keeping the old man in sight. The man looked round and saw them and immediately increased his pace. Finally he turned a corner and stopped outside a small bungalow. He looked around nervously before getting out his key and opening the door. A light in the hall lit up his silhouette and then the door closed. Stevie and Jamie saw him before he disappeared indoors.

'That's the house,' said Stevie pointing to the bungalow. Jamie stopped and turned to Stevie.

'Now what?' he asked. 'What did we come all this way for? I'm cold.'

'I'll tell you what, I wanna meet him again and tell him what I think of him.'

'You're crazy, he's not your Granddad, he's just an old man. Why don't you leave him alone? Lets go back to the pub and have another drink.'

'No! I wanna see him,' and with that Stevie

walked down the short path and hammered on the door. After a minute or so, a weak voice from inside said,

'What do want? Leave me alone.'

'Grandpa it's me Stevie, I wanna talk to you.'

'I don't have a grandson, leave me alone.'

Stevie paused and then began hammering again. Suddenly the door opened letting out a beam of light. Stevie immediately put his foot out jamming the door, and then slowly pushed it open. The old man backed into the living room towards an open fire.

'I don't understand what do you want, money? I have a little, you can have it,' he whimpered.

'Don't you remember me Grandpa? Don't you remember me? I remember you; I'll never forget you. You made me life hell,' Stevie shouted. 'Have you forgotten?'

'You're wrong! We've never met. I don't know who you are. Please leave me alone, I am an old man.'

'I don't care. You never cared about me. I'll never forget the cellar.'

'What cellar? What are you talking about?'

'You don't remember? I don't believe you,' Stevie shouted,

'It was your favourite punishment, putting me in the cellar. I can still feel it, smell it. Mum used to try to stop you but you took no notice of her. How

could you have been so hard?' Stevie turned to Jamie.

'Let me tell you what it was like, what he did to me,' pointing to the old man,' yes you, you bastard.'

'What do you mean, he put you in the cellar?' said Jamie in amazement.

'Just that, it was my punishment and he used it every chance he got. My mum argued with him but he just ignored her. I would have to go down the slippery steps into the cellar that was dark, cold and wet. He would make me spend the whole night there. I can still feel the blackness that pushed down on me, that and the damp and the cold. I would shiver all night and cried myself to sleep. Mum managed to get food to me when he', he pointed to the old man, 'wasn't looking.' Stevie was almost in tears as he described his experience in the cellar. Then he grabbed the old man by his collar and began shaking him, and shouting,

'You bastard, I hate you, I hate you, I wish you were dead.' The old man tried to get away and fell backwards onto the fire, screaming. But Stevie was deaf to his cries. He pulled him out of the fire and as the old man fell to the ground, Stevie began to kick him, shouting as he did so.

'Stop Stevie, stop,' shouted Jamie, 'you're hurting him.'

'I don't care, he didn't care about me,' insisted Stevie and he continued kicking. Suddenly

the old man stopped shouting, his voice went quiet and he made a gurgling sound. Blood began to come out of his mouth. Stevie and Jamie watched as the old man's body gradually fell away limp and lifeless. The only sound was the crackling of wood in the grate.

'My God,' said Jamie, 'you've killed him, let's get out of here. For God's sake Stevie, let's get out of here.'

Stevie stood looking at the dead man,

'He deserved what he got,' he said coldly.

They both heard the police siren and saw the flashing lights behind them as they drove home on the M62 from Hull.

'Slow down Stevie, it's the police,' said Jamie. The car slowed and stopped waiting for the police. An armed policeman walked to the car. He peered into the car with his torch, smelled alcohol and immediately said,

'Please get out with your hands up.' The two men stood with their hands above their heads,

'What's the trouble mate?' said Stevie; 'we were just driving home, what's wrong with that?'

'Breathe into this,' said the policeman, handing Stevie a breathalyzer. He breathed into it and the gauge showed levels well above the limit.

'Now you,' he said pointing to Jamie.

Both men had readings well above the accepted level of 35 mcg per 100 mls of breath. As he

removed the device from Stevie, the police officer noticed a dark stain on Stevie's trousers.

'What's that on your trousers?' he asked directing his torch onto the stains. At that moment, a message came over his intercom. The police officer looked again at the stain. It looks like blood, he thought and turning to his colleague,

'What do you think that is?' he said, pointing to the stain.

'It's blood I am sure,' and turning to Stevie, he asked, 'where did that blood come from?'

'What blood?' 'That blood! Said the police officer. Stevie looked at his trouser leg.

'Shit,' he said, ' I thought I'd washed it off.' At that point, the police officer cautioned the two men, called for a police van and had them taken to the police station at Eastgate. They went through the usual preliminaries, fingerprints, and photographs and they were marched to a prison cell. As the heavy door slammed and the lock closed, Jamie looked at Stevie with contempt.

'Now you have really got us in the shit. What the hell got into you? I have never seen you lose it like you did.' Stevie looked at his feet.

'I just saw red. The old man deserved what he got. You've no idea what he put me through?' Jamie sat with his head in his hands.

'Don't you realise that we are on a murder charge. You don't think they give a damn about what he did to you do you?' As far as they're

concerned you're a murderer.' Stevie didn't reply at first and then suddenly,

'They can't pin this on me, you're just as much involved as I was.' We're both in this together.'

'Oh no, we're not; you were the one who hit him! I didn't touch him, said Jamie.

'But you didn't try to stop me did you? You're just as guilty as I am, an accessory is what they'll call you.' Stevie replied looking straight at Jamie.

The two men really no more than boys settled down on their hard beds. Neither slept well, tossing and turning and letting out an occasional groan. Next morning, torchlight in their eyes awaked them and they were ordered to get washed and dressed. After breakfast they were taken to the magistrate's court, a place that was familiar to both of them. Neither listened as the judge heard the argument for and against them receiving bail. What they did hear however was the judge's' refusal to grant them bail and that they would be transferred to prison on remand until their case came up at Court which could be several weeks away.

Although they had both come up against the police and appeared in the magistrate's court on many occasions, neither had ever been detained in prison before so it came as a shock when they were taken from the Magistrate's court in handcuffs and marched down narrow stone steps into a cell in

the basement. They were photographed, had their fingerprints taken and were handed some clothes.

'Get changed into these, empty your pockets and hand all your valuables to me,' said the officer on duty.' By the time they had changed, they were wearing khaki shirts and trousers with soft trainers. They were then locked up in separate cells for the night. The cell no bigger than a small bathroom, had a camp bed in one corner, a tap and a bucket in the other. After about an hour they were brought some food, luke-warm watery soup, some dried bread and a cup of tea.

'That's it for the night settle down, keep quiet and go to sleep,' said the warden.

'Hey! What about the toilet?' asked Stevie.

'Do you see the bucket, that's it!'

Stevie tossed and turned all night, dreaming briefly about his grandfather and the cellar. It got very cold and he shivered under the thin blanket. Bright lights flooding his cell waked him. A plate of dried up porridge and a mug of tea was pushed in.

'Twenty minutes, you have twenty minutes to get dressed and ready to leave,' bawled the guard.

'You there Jamie?' Stevie whispered when the guard left.

A voice from his right replied, 'yeah I'm here and having a ball, what about you?'

'No talking,' barked the Guard. 'You have five minutes.'

It was raining when they emerged from the

building. The Police van was waiting to take them to the prison. They were pushed roughly into the back accompanied by two burly policemen. Stevie tried some light comments but was quickly shut up by the look of one of the guards. Thereafter he sat slumped in his seat looking at the floor. After what seemed to be an interminably long journey, the van suddenly stopped and they were roughly ejected out into the cold air.

Looming above them was the prison, a dark bastion from hell. Stevie felt his stomach contract with fear. He was unable to understand what was happening. Why was he being taken here? What had he done wrong? It wasn't fair he kept repeating to himself as he was frog-marched through the series of locked gates. He lost sight of Jamie who seemed to be taken to a different section of the prison. After being rushed along a number of corridors he was roughly pushed into a cell, the door clanging shut behind him. Stevie felt sick, he leant over the bucket retching until his throat was raw.

'Order, order, all stand,' the court official called out. A smattering of people, family, solicitors and barristers stood as the judge entered the court and made his way to his seat. He settled himself, sorted his papers and opened his computer.

'Please sit,' he said to the assembled crowd. Mr Christopher Hughes a youngish man wearing a

small tight wig stood up. He wore a black gown over black jacket and trousers.

'Your Honour, I represent the prosecution in the case of the Crown versus Jones and Reid. These men are accused of the willful murder of E, a widowed pensioner who lived alone in his home in Hull.

'How do you plead?' the judge asked turning to the two men.

'Not guilty,' they said in unison.

'Please proceed.'

'I call my first witness Police Sergeant William Tethers.' A tall heavily built man in a police uniform stepped onto the stand.

'Tell the court your name rank and station.'

'I am Police Sergeant Tethers, stationed at Hull Police Station.'

'Please tell the court what happened on the night in question?'

Tethers took out his notebook and began reading,

'On the night in question, I was on duty at Hull Central Police Station when I received a phone call from a member of the public who lived next door to the deceased. He told me that . .

'Objection,' said Ms. Hawkes, the defense Lawyer, a slim young woman wearing a tight fitting dark suit with a cropped wig,

'That is hearsay.'

'Sustained!'

Sergeant, please tell the court what you found,' said

the judge patiently.

'I arrived at the house about 20 minutes after I received the call. The front door was open and the light in the room was on. I found an elderly man lying on the floor. His head and face were covered with blood, I checked his pulse but it was absent. There was a blood-stained fire poker. There was a fire in the hearth. There was no evidence that his possessions had been disturbed.

'What did you then do?' asked the prosecuting Lawyer.

'I phoned the station and reported my findings. An ambulance, a doctor and a photographer were notified and arrived on the scene about 20 minutes later. The Doctor confirmed that the man was dead. '

'What happened next?'

'The body was removed to the mortuary while the Forensics examined the room and the house.'

'How were the accused apprehended?'

'They were stopped on the M62 returning to Leeds on a suspected drink driving offence. There was blood....'

'Objection,' interrupted the Defense Lawyer. 'Your Honour, this Police officer is not a forensic expert.'

'Sustained.' said the Judge

The prosecuting counsel sat down and the judge turned to the defense Counsel.

'Your witness.'

'Police Sergeant Tethers,' she began, 'have you ever dealt with a suspected murder case before?'

'Objection, not relevant,' interrupted the Prosecuting Lawyer.

'Sustained,' said the judge.

'Ms Hawkes, any other questions to this witness?'

'No further questions, your Honour.'

'Mr Hughes, Please call your next witness.'

'I call Dr A Borredale, Consultant Haematologist.'

A thin almost cachectic man in his early 50s took the stand.

'Doctor, for the lay public please tell us what a Hematologist does.'

'Your Honour, a Haematologist is a specialist doctor in disorders of the blood.'

'Thank you, now please tell the court your qualifications.'

'Thank you, your Honour. I have a Membership of the Royal College of Physicians of London and a diploma in Blood transfusion from Hamburg.'

'Doctor, please tell the court what your findings were after you examined the accused.'

'On the night in question, I was called to the Police Station in Leeds to examine the two accused

men. Stevie Jones and Jamie Reid. They were both still under the effects of alcohol. I took samples of blood, which showed no evidence of drugs but levels of alcohol above the accepted level for driving. I also examined them and their clothing for evidence of blood.'

'Doctor, tells us what you found please,' said the judge impatiently.

'Yes Your Honour, on the body and clothing of Stevie Jones, I found stains on his trousers which were positive for Human blood Group A +. His trainers had been recently cleaned but in the welts I also found bloodstains that were positive for human blood Group A+. Examination of the body and clothing of Jamie Reid showed no evidence of human blood.'

'Doctor what is the blood group of the accused Jones?'

'Group A +.' An audible hiss came from the court.

'Silence please,' called the Court Clerk.

'Doctor, have you had a chance to examine the blood group of the deceased?'

'Yes I have.'

'Please tell the court what you found.'

'I took two samples of the deceased blood and they were consistent with Group A +.'

'What do you conclude from that?'

'That the blood stains on the accused's clothing could have come from the deceased.'

'No further questions. Your witness.'

'Ms. Hawkes, do you have any questions for this witness.' asked the Judge.

'Yes your honour.'

'Doctor, you found that the accused blood type is the same as the type from the stains on his clothing.'

'Yes.'

'What do you deduce from that?'

'That the blood on his clothing could have come from himself.'

'No further questions.'

'Mr Hughes, do you have any further question for this witness?'

'No your Honour.'

'Thank you Doctor, you may sit down,' said the Judge.

'Mr Hughes, please call your next witness.'

'Thank you your Honour. I propose to show from the post mortem examination of the deceased that the blood on the accused came from the injuries sustained by the deceased. I call upon Dr Barry Epstein, Forensic Pathologist to report his conclusions following the post mortem examination of the deceased.'

'Doctor, please present your qualifications.' requested the Judge.

'Thank you your honour. I have the fellowship of the Royal College of Pathologists specializing in Forensic studies. I have a PhD in

post mortem diagnosis.'

'Doctor, please tell us what your findings were.' asked Mr. Hughes.

'I will concentrate on the findings which are relevant to this case. The body was that of a seventy-two year old man. It showed evidence of widespread external trauma, injury to the chest and trunk. There were also multiple lacerations and bruising of the arms and legs, together with a fracture of the skull with internal bleeding. I am of the opinion that some of these injuries were produced by blunt trauma. The deceased was otherwise healthy for his age.'

'Doctor could any of the injuries be consistent with trauma from a kick?' Asked Mr Hughes.

'Yes the blunt trauma could have been produced by kicking.'

'Doctor, you have described severe external injuries to the limbs, trunk and chest. Would you expect the assailant to have had blood on his clothing and hands?'

'Yes, there was a great deal of external bleeding which would have definitely contaminated the assailant's clothing.'

'Thank you no more questions.'

'Ms Hawkes, your witness.'

'Doctor, as you will know, the blood group of the accused was A+, the same as the victim's so that the finding of blood stains on his clothing could

be explained as a result of a fall and be nothing to do with the deceased's injuries.'

'Yes it is possible but on balance, from the severity of the injuries to the deceased, I think that there is a direct connection between the deceased's injuries and the blood stained clothing of the accused.'

'Thank you Doctor. No more questions your Honour.'

'Doctor you may sit down. We will break for Lunch and hear the Defense case in the afternoon,' announced the Judge.

'All stand,' called the Court Officer as the Judge left the court.

Realising that the afternoon session promised to be the most significant in the case, there were no empty seats in the Court.

'All stand,' called the Court Clerk as the Judge appeared and took his seat.

'Ms Hawkes, please present the case for the defense.'

Ms. Hawkes stood up and turned to look at the Judge.

'Your Honour, I would like to call Stevie Jones to the stand.'

There was a hush in the court as the slightly built young man walked slowly to the stand with his hands in his pockets.

'Take your hands out of your pockets, Jones,'

roared the Judge angrily, 'this is a Court of Law and you will respect it.' Stevie turned to look at the Judge almost with contempt and then very slowly removed his hands from his pockets one at a time. Ms. Hawkes rose and waited until her client was on the stand.

'Your Honour please excuse my client, he is unfamiliar with court procedure.'

'Ms. Hawkes, it is your duty to instruct him,' retorted the Judge.

'Yes your honour, I apologize to the court for my client's behavior.'

'Please proceed.'

Ms. Hawkes then directed her comments to her client.

'Mr Jones, please tell the court your full name, age and address.'

'Yes Miss, My name is Stevie Jones I am 17 years old and I live with me Mum in Pudsey, near Leeds.

'Mr Jones, tell the court in your own words, what happened on the day in question, take your time,' Ms. Hawkes asked in a gentle voice.

'Yes Miss. Me mate Jamie and me decided to go to a pub which we knew in Hull. I said I would meet him there as he had community service to do.'

'Mr Reid, can you please tell the court what was that for?'

'I got into a fight didn't I? When a bloke called my mom a pro.'

'A pro?' questioned Ms. Hawkes.

'A prostitute Miss, I didn't like what he said about me Mum.'

'Yes of course. Now Mr Jones please go on.'

'I arrived at the pub, early, me mate Jamie arrived soon after. We had a few pints and I began to feel good, you know. We'd been there a few hours when I noticed 'im.'

'Who did you notice?'

'Im, me Granddad. He was by the fireplace on his own. I'd know 'im from anywhere.'

'So what did you do then?'

'I wanted to speak to 'im, didn't I?'

'About what?'

'About the way he tret me when I was a youngster. So I catch his eye don't I and he recognises me.'

'Are you sure it was him?'

'Yeah, I was sure, dead certain but when I goes over to him, he gets up and makes his escape.'

'How do you mean?'

'He scarpered and left the pub. So I decides to follow 'im because I want to talk to 'im didn't I? I told Jamie to follow me and we goes outside. I can see 'im walking fast ahead. He turns down a street and gets to 'is house. We are now close by and watch as he unlocks the door and goes inside.'

'What did you do then?'

'I went up to his door and banged on it. He

didn't want to open it at first but then he changes his mind and when he opens the door, I put my foot out so he can't close it.'

'Why did you do that?'

'Cos I wanted to talk to him that's all.'

'Did you?'

'Did I what?'

'Talk to him?'

'Yeah. We got inside and I told him what I thought of 'im. He said I'd made a mistake but I knew I hadn't. He then got angry and came at me with a poker. I hit 'im, I had to didn't I? In self defense, and then we left.'

'How was he when you left?'

'OK. I think.' Stevie said.

'Now on the way home, you were stopped by the police who saw stains on your clothes and shoes and these were proved to be blood, how did it get on you?' Ms Hawkes asked.

'I'm not certain Miss, but I think I fell and cut my hand, yes I cut my hand when I fell.'

'And the blood on your shoes?' she added.

'I dunno I can't remember it's a long time ago.'

'Stevie, did you kick the old man?'

'No - I can't remember - no I wouldn't do that.'

'Thank you, Stevie, no further questions.'
Stevie began to leave the stand when the Judge interrupted,

'Please stay where you are, you may have to answer some more questions. Mr Hughes, your witness.'

'Thank you your Honour.'

'Stevie, I suggest to you that you have told the court, a whole pack of lies.'

'I haven't Sir, honest.'

'I suggest that when you went into the old man's house, you accused him of being cruel to you. You had mistaken an old man minding his own business for your Grandfather, hadn't you?'

'It was my Grandpa, I know 'e was.' Stevie begins crying.'

Mr Hughes continued,

'I suggest that you had an argument with him and when he couldn't understand what you wanted you hit him again and again and then you kicked him.'

'Sir I can't kick, I have a gammy leg.'

'Yes, you have, but you can kick. The Medical Expert confirmed that.'

'You then left the old man. If he wasn't dead then, he died soon after as a result of your attack, isn't that the case? Admit it, you deliberately killed the old man?'

'I didn't, I didn't, I wouldn't,' insisted Stevie.

And then suddenly as if he could no longer bare the injustice he felt had been done to him he raised his voice and said,

'Yes I did it. I killed him. He had it coming for

'ow he tret me as a child. I ain't sorry what I did; he deserved it for 'ow he tret me.' Gradually the onlookers realised what Stevie had said and a roar filled the court. People were shouting and there was general mayhem, which slowly subsided to a pin drop silence.

'Mr Hughes, that's enough please,' requested the Judge.

'Thank you your Honour no more questions.'

'Ms. Hawkes, do you have any questions?'

'Yes, your Honour.'

'Please continue.'

'Stevie, did you intend to kill the old man?'

'I dunno, I lost it, I think Miss, I lost it.'

'Thank you, Stevie you may sit down.'

Again a roar erupted from the court, with shouts of 'Liar,' 'Murderer.'

'Quiet, please, quiet,' shouted the Court Office. Slowly the noise subsided again.

The Judge stood up and waited and then he spoke,

'Ladies and Gentleman we are at a crucial stage in the trial and I beg you not to let that happen again. Ms Hawkes?'

'The defense calls upon Dr M Stein a qualified Psychologist to give his report.' A small plump man with a trimmed white beard walked over to the stand and took the oath.

'Doctor, please tell the court your name and qualifications.'

'My name is Doctor Adrien Stein. I am a

qualified medical doctor with MBBS from London and I am a Fellow of the Royal College of Psychology.'

'Thank you, Doctor; I believe you have seen and examined the accused. What were your findings?'

'I saw Mr. Jones on four occasions in order to produce my report. Each interview was carried out while he was on remand in prison, not the most ideal environment for this purpose.'

'Yes, yes, Doctor, please continue,' demanded the Judge impatiently.

'I carried out two tests, an IQ test and a MMPI-2 Test.'

'What did you find?'

'Mr Jones' IQ test showed he had a score of 75. This is significantly below the normal range of 100-115. The MMPI tests 5 components, Personality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Emotional Stability and Intellect, both creativity and curiosity. His results were as follows: Mr. Jones showed severe introversion, associated with anger and emotional instability. He is of low intellect and curiosity. He feels worthless, neglected and ignored.'

'Doctor, what were your conclusions?'

'I concluded that these are the features of a person whose development has been severely stunted during childhood so that he has not acquired the qualities of a normal mentally healthy

individual. As such he remains like a small child, unable to know right from wrong and carrying a burden of hate and self worthlessness.'

'Thank you Doctor, Mr Hughes, do you have any question for the expert,' asked the Judge.

'Thank you your Honour. Doctor, as I understand from your report, the accused is of a simple mind, not unlike a small child who has never grown up, am I correct?'

'Yes, up to a point. I would not be happy with the phrase 'simple mind, but rather under-developed.'

'As you wish. Are you saying that he did not understand what he was doing?'

'Yes, you could put it like that.'

'So he didn't know he was drinking alcohol and getting drunk?'

'Yes, of course he would have known that.'

'So did he know that he was walking along a street, etc.?''

'Yes, he would have known that also.'

'And when he was kicking the old man to death would he have known that?'

'Objection! Objection!' Shouted Ms. Hawkes.

'Sustained,' said the Judge, 'Mr Hughes, I must warn you not to abuse your position.'

There was laughter in the court.

'Quiet please,' called out the Court Officer.

'No more questions,' murmured Mr Hughes returning to his seat.

Meanwhile Ms. Hawkes had caught the Judge's eye.

'Do you have another question for this witness Ms. Hawkes?' asked the Judge.

'Yes, your Honour.'

'Please ask it.'

'Thank you your Honour.'

'Dr Stein, in your expert opinion, would the accused know that what he was doing was wrong?'

'No, he wouldn't, he would believe that he was acting logically. Some one had ill-treated him and that could lead him to do the same to that person.'

'Could that include killing someone?'

'Yes, in my opinion he would not know that killing someone was wrong.'

'Thank you, I have no further questions.'

'It's getting late so we will adjourn until tomorrow 10 am,' announced the Judge.

'All rise,' called the Court Clerk.

'What time will you be home, Chris?' whispered Sam Hawkes into her I-phone.

'I'm just finishing off here in the office, shouldn't be long.'

'OK, I'll get dinner ready. I'm afraid it's a take away, as I didn't have time today to get out after the morning session in court,' replied Sam.

'No problem we could eat out if you like?' he suggested.

'OK, let's meet at the Chinese in half an hour.'

It was very noisy when Christopher arrived at the Chinese. The manager recognised him immediately and pointed to the corner where Sam was already sitting having chosen the seat against the wall. He added something but it was lost in the noise. She always bags the best seat, Christopher muttered to himself.

'Hi Sam,' he said leaning over to kiss her.

'What do you think of the case so far?' He asked as he pulled up his chair and sat down. 'I see you have taken the best seat as usual.'

Sam ignored his comment.

'You know we can't talk about the case, let's order,' she replied.

'I think you're going to win. The psycho's report was very damning to my case,' he continued.

'I don't want to talk about it,' insisted Sam.

'Come on, you know you like to compare notes during a case.' Sam wrinkled her nose, knowing that she couldn't resist finding out what he was up to.

'Well OK, I think you are right, you are never going to get a murder charge to stick, you know,' smiled Sam. 'The blood groups are interesting, both having the same?'

'It's quite a coincidence but then A+ is the commonest group,' commented Christopher.

The food arrived and they began eating each

deep in thought about the case. Sam broke the silence,

'Don't you have any feelings of sympathy for Stevie? I mean he had a terrible upbringing and was left with a great deal of anger against his grandfather and life in general. That description of being incarcerated in the cellar all night on more than one occasion was terrible. Don't you have any sympathy for him?' Sam repeated holding a piece of chicken precariously in her chopsticks.

'Sure I do but it's my job to prosecute and I must suppress any of those feelings otherwise I would not be doing my best. I took an oath which I mean to uphold.'

'Oh! Don't be so pompous, that's no reason why you shouldn't feel a touch of compassion for him. I don't like to think that I am having a relationship with a man who has no feelings.'

'You're joking, aren't you? You know I have feelings for you. Isn't that enough?'

'That's not what I mean, I'm talking about putting yourself in the other person's position and trying to understand how they feel.'

'Look, we both have a long day tomorrow. I need a good night's sleep.'

'OK I'll go and get the car, see you outside.'

Twenty minutes later the Mercedes 280 slid silently into the garage in Park Heights apartments in North Leeds. Neither had spoken since they left

the restaurant. Both were thinking of the following day and what they would say in their summing up aware that in many ways, it was the most important and significant part of the case.

Christopher let them into their 5th floor flat and turned on the lights. The ultra modern decor flared into light. He walked over to the large picture window and looked out at Roundhay Park now in darkness, lights twinkling on the pond in the distance. He was still preoccupied by the conversation in the restaurant. Was Sam right? Did he not have any feeling for the young man whose fate was to be sealed the following day? How would he feel if it was him sleeping in a cell waiting? He had been in that prison some years ago on a visitors' tour. He remembered standing looking into one of the cells and wondered what it would be like. He turned away dismissing the thought.

'I'm going to bed are you coming?' he called out to Sam.

'No, not yet, I'm just going to go over my submission for tomorrow, I'll see you in bed.'

Sam took out her file and began reviewing what she had planned to say the following day. It was some hours later when she stood up stretched her back and put away her notes. The light in the bedroom was still on when she went in. Christopher was snoring gently. She went over and kissed him on the forehead and retired to the shower. The

steaming water tingled on her shoulders and back as she stood stretching and easing her stiffness. Drying herself she thought again about the next day. She was asleep in less than five minutes of her head touching the pillow.

The judge rose and turned and faced the seated jury.

'Ladies and Gentleman of the Jury, you have now heard the evidence provided by the Prosecution and the Defense. I am now calling upon them to sum up their case before asking you to retire and give your verdict.'

Mr Hughes stood and turned to face the jury. He held some notes to which he referred.

'Members of the Jury, this is a very simple and straightforward case. Two young men with nothing better to do, one already serving a community service order for violent offences, go to a Pub in Hull where they become progressively more drunk. The younger of the two, Stevie had suffered an unfortunate accident when a child losing his right leg below the knee. He has worn a below knee artificial leg since that time.

The two men follow an old man to his home, force their way in and batter him to death. Forensics have subsequently shown that he was probably not dead when they left him but died a lingering death over the next few hours. By the

time the police arrived, the man was dead, kicked and beaten savagely. The men were subsequently stopped for speeding on the motorway where they both failed a Breathalyzer test. Subsequent analysis of the clothing and the mud on Stevie's shoes showed blood compatible with that of the dead man. Stevie has claimed that he was unable to kick because of his amputation. But expert opinion has confirmed that he was perfectly able to kick a football and therefore a human being.

The defense will plead that Stevie was not responsible for his actions on the grounds that he was suffering from diminished responsibility due to his unhappy childhood and his relationship with his grandfather, and that it was a case of mistaken identity. Even if that was the case and we do not accept it, there is no way that it is acceptable to kill.

In summing up, members of the jury, on the evidence placed before you, you have no other choice than to find them guilty of first degree murder: Stevie as the responsible party for the killing and Jamie, as accessory.'

The barrister sat down and turned towards the judge. The judge looked up and said,

'Will the defense counsel please present her case.

Ms Sam Hawkes rose to address the jury. There was an audible hush in the court. She walked slowly towards the bench and looking straight at the jury members began to speak,

'Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury, you will have heard the argument put forward by my honorable friend the Prosecuting Counsel. It is on the face of it a very persuasive account. The facts are not in dispute, namely that the two young men, Stevie Jones and Jamie Reid went to the house of a pensioner in York who when they left, was dying and died soon after. However, no one apart from the three men who were present in the house knows exactly what happened, no one! The prosecution has created an imaginary scenario the details of which you have just heard. It assumes that the two men killed the pensioner. I propose to describe the true picture.

As you heard from my client he believed that the pensioner was in fact his grandfather, a man who during his childhood had treated him abominably for relatively minor mistakes. He went to the house to confront his grandfather and to seek an explanation but the pensioner didn't admit who he was and became violent picking up a poker and attacking him. He had to protect himself and it was during this exchange that the old man was seriously hurt.

Stevie had no intention to kill the pensioner and that he was acting solely in self defense, Jamie tried to intervene in the fight but was not able to prevent the pensioner from being seriously injured. The Prosecution is claiming that Stevie is guilty of first-degree murder and are seeking a long

custodial sentence. It is the contention of the defense that he was acting in self-defense. He admits that he is guilty of injuring the victim but denies that he intended to kill him. The defense seeks a verdict of manslaughter on the grounds that Stevie was suffering from diminished responsibility.

Throughout the proceedings the ten members of the Jury had been listening intently. They had with difficulty followed the evidence presented and the closing statements of the two opposing lawyers. They knew it was now their job to decide on the balance of probabilities whether the two accused were guilty of first-degree murder or the lesser offence of manslaughter.

Six weeks earlier; they had been selected from the citizen's list and had received notice to attend the Court by post. Many had to rearrange their work schedule or get special leave from their employment to attend. Some saw it as an unnecessary intrusion into their day-to day-routine. Others had seen it as a citizen's duty and were looking forward to it. There were 6 women and 4 men. At their first meeting they had selected a foreman, Mary, a woman in her late sixties, a widow with two grown up sons.

Before the trial had started, the jury members had assembled in Judge Trimmingham's chambers. He was a big red-faced man with white

hair and a trim mustache. He was seated at a large mahogany desk in front of a double picture window through which a well laid out garden was visible. There were ten seats arranged in a half circle facing the desk. The ten jury members had filed in.

'Please be seated.' Chairs were adjusted and the members sat.

'Ladies and Gentleman, you have been entrusted with a grave responsibility, namely, to judge two of your fellow citizens. The jury system whereby his peers judge an accused is the bedrock of our judicial system. Many have criticized it but to date it has served justice well. You will hear the evidence against the two accused presented by the Prosecution supported by one or more witnesses and then the Defense will present the arguments refuting those accusations.

Remember that at all times a man or woman is deemed to be innocent unless proved otherwise. If in your opinion, the Prosecution fails to convince you of the accused's guilt then you must find a verdict of not guilty. Finally you must present an opinion which is agreed by at least eight of you. Have you chosen a foreman?'

'Yes,' replied Mary, 'I am the foreman.'

'I am addressing the following remarks to you,' said the judge turning to face her.

'Your role is to ensure that the opinions and views of all members of the jury are heard, and that at no time should one or more of the members try

to intimidate or bully another. Should such a situation arise and you feel that the procedure is no longer fair and open, you may call upon the clerk of the court to advise you. I am sure however that that will not be necessary. Are there any questions?'

There was no reply.

'Then thank you for giving up your valuable time to ensure justice is done.'

Mrs Jones, Stevie's mother was present on the first day of the trial. She knew that Stevie wasn't like other children. He became easily upset and rapidly violent at the flick of a switch. He had been brought up in a family of violence, first his father and then his grandfather. They had taught him to be violent and he had learnt the lesson well. She knew how vulnerable her son was and she had over the years, tried so hard to protect him. She suspected that this time she would be powerless and she knew that he would never be able to survive a period in prison. Now sitting with her hands clasped in her lap, she remembered a film she had seen in which the suspect's family found out details of the jury members that they wished to conceal.

It was while she was thinking about what to do that she looked more carefully at the Court Clerk who had just announced the entrance of the Judge. Standing with the onlookers she studied his appearance. He was a tall bulky man with a well-trimmed mustache. Suddenly she recognized him; it

was the mustache that had confused her. He was an old flame from her youth. She remembered he used to grow Marihuana in his greenhouse until he was caught and went to prison. Those were the days before the present lenient attitude. I wonder she thought, dare I approach him? Slowly a plan was formulating in her mind. The opportunity came during the lunch break. She was standing in the hall when he walked by.

'Hello Pete, what a surprise to meet you here after so many years.' He turned and saw a rotund middle-aged woman.

'It's Margaret, Margaret Jones, don't you recognise me? We used to be good friends.'

'Madam, I don't think we have met. Please excuse me,' he said in a condescending tone. He'd come up in the world since the old days she thought. Persevering she continued,

'You remember we were neighbours and we used to puff together at the back of the garden that is until you were caught and went to prison.'

'Oh, yes Margaret, how nice to see you. What are you doing here?' He replied uncomfortably.

'It's - it's Stevie, he's my son.'

'I see, I'm sorry, it must be very difficult for you, I must get going I'm afraid. It's been nice meeting up with you again.' And with that, he began to leave.

'No wait, I've something I want to say to you.'

I need your help.'

'I don't understand, what help?'

'I want the names, addresses, phone numbers and E-mails of the jury members.'

'That's impossible. It's confidential, illegal to pass on and I don't have them anyway.'

'Just get them, don't ask questions. I'm sure you can get them. I don't want to have to tell them about your past do I Pete? It would look a real treat in the local newspaper, Court Clerk a convicted drug seller.'

'You wouldn't, they wouldn't believe you.'

'Oh, yes they would. They would have a party.' The clerk glared at her wondering how to get this woman out of his life.

'Don't get any ideas. Just do as I ask. Bring me the list and I won't trouble you ever again,' she replied, 'ever again.'

'Ok I'll bring you the details. Where should I leave it?'

'Put them in an unmarked envelope and leave it inside the cistern of the first cubicle in the women's toilet.'

'I can't get into the female toilet, that's ridiculous!'

'I'm sure you'll find a way. Do it today without fail, do you understand, I'm serious.'

'OK', and with that he walked away with a heavy sense of dread, leaving Margaret shaking with fear. Would it work, would he report her to the

police? She was so driven by the thought of her son that nothing mattered anymore.

Later when the afternoon session had finished and when the public had left the building, Margaret slipped into the female toilet and locked herself in the first cubicle; lifting the top of the cistern she found the envelope. With shaking hands she tore it open to reveal a sheet of paper. There were ten names with addresses telephone numbers and Emails. For a moment she sat dazed, not believing what she had in her hands. More fear crept in. Could she do it? I must get out of here before someone comes, she realised.

At home she sat and considered how best she could use the information she had obtained. She had no reluctance to do what was necessary, to do anything to help her son even though she knew that she could be engaging in a very dangerous and seriously illegal activity. What she needed now was some facts about each member that they were ashamed of and did not want to be revealed. To help her she engaged the services of a long-standing friend who was a keen amateur private detective. Having discussed the issues with him and handing over the list she sat and waited patiently. Sooner than she expected she got a call.

'It was easier than I thought,' he said, 'I have found out some really interesting facts about your

jury members. I don't think they are going to want them revealed. I'll come and let you have them.' A few hours later Margaret read his report with increasing disbelief.

The ten members of the Jury filed out of the court and followed the Court Officer to the Jury Room where they would remain until at least eight of them had arrived at a consensus. It was a stuffy room with one small window overlooking a car park. There was an AC unit high up on the wall but it didn't respond when switched on. Mary went over to open the window. It was stuck but moved after repeated pushing, letting cool fresh air flood into the room.

'That's better,' she said moving towards the table. They soon settled themselves around the long table with the foreman, Mary at the head. Each place had a pad of paper and a pencil. She began,

'Are you all comfortable? There is water on the table, and coffee on the sideboard. Please help yourselves. My name is Mary; I am a retired Civil Servant. I worked in the financial sector. I would like each of you to introduce yourselves please. Say your name and occupation and then we will have the initial vote. As you heard from the judge our job is to decide whether Stevie and Jamie are guilty of first-degree murder. We have to have a consensus of eight out of ten. A hand went up,

'Yes John, you have a question?'

'What if we don't agree?'

'If we cannot agree we are permitted to agree a lesser offence of manslaughter. So let's begin.'

'Ali bricklayer; Peter teacher; John miner, retired; Simon office worker; Julia accountants' assistant; Sam (Samantha) hairdresser; Di secretary; Dorothy NHS nurse; Philippa bus driver.

'Thank you.'

'OK, let's have the first vote. Who is in favour of a guilty charge?' Five hands went up.

'Who's in favour of a not guilty charge?' three hands went up,

'And finally who is uncertain?' two hands went up.

'OK, who would like to start the discussion?' Ali's hand went up.

'Looks like they're both guilty, it's obvious. They went to this man's house intending to kill him and they did. Let's not waste our time; we are all busy people, aren't we? First Degree Murder that's the verdict.'

'Thank you Ali. Yes, Philippa?'

'I don't agree, Stevie's simple isn't he? He didn't know what he was doing, you know. How can he be blamed? It's manslaughter, that's what I think.' She insisted.

'Julia, you abstained, why?'

'It's difficult, I have so many questions, did the old man have any heart problems for example?'

He may have had a heart attack which was nothing to do with the attack?

'Rubbish,' interjected Peter, 'Stevie knew exactly what he was doing, they all do. We always make excuses for them. Most of them are living on handouts. He's as guilty as hell that's my opinion.'

'Thank you Peter,' Mary said patiently.

'Let's go over the story again,' said Julia.
'They were both drinking heavily and mistook the old man for Stevie's grandfather. That's strange isn't it?'

'What do you mean?' asked Christopher.
'They were under the influence, it confuses you. Ain't you ever been drunk?'

'As it 'appens no. I think it's against God's law.' exclaimed Julia.

'Oh! Christ' shouted Sam, 'we got a bleeding born again here!'

'Please Sam, let's not make personal remarks,' pleaded Mary, 'we need to discuss the case calmly. Who wants to speak?'

Dorothy raised her hand.

'If everyone concentrated we could be out of here in an hour, like Ali said.'

There was a long silence then Di raised her hand.

'Yes Di, what do you want to say?'

'I'm like Ali; I want to get on with it. The fact that Stevie is simple doesn't wash with me. I think the evidence suggests that he intended to kill the old man whom he took to be his grandfather. I don't

believe in the self-defense story. How can an old man stand up against a fit young man even if he has a bad leg? The expert said Stevie could kick a football that's good enough for me. They are both guilty as charged.'

'Philippa, you haven't said anything?'

'I know I was just listening to the others.'

'What do you think?'

'Me, I'm confused. If Stevie thought that the old man was 'is Granddad, the geezer who made his life hell when he was younger, I get why he might wanna do 'im in, the old man deserved it.'

Philippa said reluctantly.

'But it was mistaken identity chimed in Peter. You can't go around killing people just because you don't like them.'

'We do in wartime. What's the difference?' said Christopher.

'My boy, that's a totally different issue you know,' Peter said patronisingly.

'Mary, may I say something please?' said Julia.

'Of course you can, everyone has a right, a duty to say what is on their mind,' insisted Mary.

'Well I see it like this, the psychologist man said that he thought that Stevie didn't know he was doing something wrong. He said he was brought up in a home of violence and deprivation and that Stevie didn't know right from wrong.'

'Rubbish!' interjected Peter.

'Peter, please we know your views,' insisted Mary. 'Let's hear Julia's, go on Julia.'

'If the Psychologist is right, then Stevie cannot be held responsible for his actions, he didn't know right from wrong.'

'That's rubbish, bloody rubbish,' said Peter under his breath.

'Peter I've asked you before to not interrupt, you will have another opportunity to give us your opinion'.

'Carry on Julia,'

'If he didn't know that what he was doing was wrong, but nevertheless killed the old man, then we must find him guilty of manslaughter, that's what I think.'

'Thanks Julia. Has anyone not spoken?'
A hand went up. It was Simon.

'I'm sorry if what I say has already been said. I have tried to follow the arguments but got confused.'

'Please Simon, what would you like to say,' said Mary.

'I am not certain what to say, I can see both views.'

'But what is your view?' asked Mary, 'We need to know your view.'

'Oh! All right, I think he is not a murderer. I agree with Julia that he didn't know that what he was doing was wrong. He was following the bible - an eye for an eye.'

'That's not exactly true, he lost his leg and had an awful upbringing but no one killed him,' said Sam.

'They killed his spirit,' interrupted Di, 'he had no self worth, it was if they had killed him inside, isn't that worse?'

'I can see what you mean but kill means to take a life physically not mentally,' said Dorothy. Mary stood up and raised her hands,

'We have been here for two hours now and I would like to sum up where we are.

'There seems to be two views, the one that Stevie is guilty of first degree murder because he killed the old man whether he knew what he was doing was wrong or not, the other is that he is guilty of manslaughter because he killed the old man but didn't know what he was doing.

'Does anyone think he is innocent of both charges?'

No hands went up.

'Good. Then lets have another vote.'

'Guilty?' 3 hands went up

'Manslaughter?' 6 hands.

'Don't know?' 1 hand.

'Di, are you still undecided?'

'Yes, I think both views make sense.'

'Ok,' said Mary, 'lets have a break. I suggest we don't talk about the case until we are back at the table. I'll ask the Officer for some sandwiches and fruit.'

After a few minutes a tray of sandwiches and fruit was brought in and placed on the sideboard. Ali watched Di as she helped herself to a sandwich and then stood next to her as if getting a sandwich for himself.

'It's not easy is it Di, to decide what the truth is?'

'Mary said we shouldn't talk about the case.'

'I know but what do you think?'

'I have never found it easy to make up my mind. This is particularly difficult.'

'You know, we only have to make one of two decisions. He is obviously guilty of killing the old man, do you agree?'

'I'm not certain. He could be innocent.'

'How?'

'Well, the old man could have had a heart attack.'

'Yeah, but even so, they would have been indirectly responsible for that, which is Manslaughter.' Mary saw Ali talking to Di.

'I hope you two are just socializing? It's not OK to talk about the case in secret.'

'Come on Ali leave her alone,' said Peter.

Mary could see that everyone had reached an impasse so she decided to have another Vote.

'OK everyone lets sit down and have another vote. Those in favour of First-degree murder, raise your hands. Those in favour of manslaughter please raise your hands and those who think they

are not guilty, please raise your hands.'

Once again the decision was split. Mary was becoming increasingly frustrated.

'OK, I think we have had enough for today. We will continue tomorrow at 10 O'clock. Good night everybody, Get a good night's rest we need to resolve our differences and come to a conclusion.'

It was about seven that night when Margaret Jones went into the Internet cafe on the far side of town. Logging in, she composed five messages and then typed in the five email addresses into the 'c' line and pressed 'send'. She knew that this would send the message to each address without revealing the other addresses. Then she went into the telephone cubicle and phoned the other five in turn. If an answer phone replied she would leave the same message to each. If she heard a voice, she would give the message; most listened without interrupting. When she had finished she rang off.

The messages were as follows:

To Ali a Bricklayer, your wife wouldn't want to know that you have an illegitimate child.

To Peter English, a teacher, your wife wouldn't want to know that you download Pornography.

To John, retired Welsh Miner, your friends wouldn't

want to know that you let a colleague die in a mine accident to save yourself.

To Simon, office worker, your family wouldn't want to know that you take cocaine.

To Julia, Hospital Worker you wouldn't want your 16 year old son to know that you pick up men on the internet.

To Sam hairdresser, you wouldn't want your family to know that you are a lesbian.

Di, you wouldn't want your boyfriend to know that you are an alcoholic.

Mary Civil Servant, you wouldn't want your children to know that you are an inveterate shop lifter.

Dot, nurse, you wouldn't want your colleagues to know that you are a Sadomasochist.

Philippa, bus driver, you wouldn't want your husband to know that you are a part time lap dancer.

And at the end of each, a warning:

You are advised to VOTE Manslaughter with diminished responsibility.

Neither Stevie nor Robbie remembered the short journey from the prison to the court early that morning. On arrival they were escorted downstairs to the waiting cell and had fallen asleep when Ms. Sam Hawkes, their Lawyer came to find them.

'Wake up, get yourselves ready the jury has come to its decision.' They followed her up to the courtroom and were led to the dock where they sat blinking and rubbing their eyes temporarily blinded by the bright lights. Then they heard the judge call their names and request them to stand. Stevie noticed that the jury had returned and were all seated.

'Will the foreman of the Jury please stand?' said the Judge. Mary stood up. She felt so nervous she thought she might be sick. She tried to gather herself.

'Members of the jury, have you come to your decision?'

'Yes,' replied Mary.

'How do you find for Stevie Jones?'

'Guilty of Manslaughter with diminished responsibility, and Jamie Reid, not guilty.'

Margaret Jones rubbed her hands together in silent happiness; she had again been able to protect her boy.

Christopher looked across at Sam. He knew that she would take the news badly even if the murder decision was dropped. He didn't want to

catch her eye.

A small group of the audience shouted out triumphantly, presumably the members of Jamie's family.

'Quiet please,' called the Court office
Stevie was taken down to the cells. Jamie, now a free man went to his mother seated in the second row.

'All rise,' called the Court Officer.
Judge Trimingham's collected up his papers and left the court.

One week later, the telephone rang in Samantha Hawkes' Office. Her secretary answered it.

'It's for you, Sam,' she called.

'Hello, Ms. Hawkes?'

'Yes, speaking?'

'This is the Governor at Ardley Prison, Leeds. I am sorry to tell you that your client Stevie Jones was found hanging in his cell this morning. He was pronounced dead at 9.15 am. I have notified his family.'

Sam was hardly able to hear the words. She had feared that he might do this.

'It's the Jones' boy, he has killed himself,'
Sam whispered to her secretary her voice trembling. Then her I-phone rang, it was Christopher.

'I'm sorry.'

MY NAME IS INOCENT

My name is Inocent was written on a torn piece of the New York Times that was pinned onto the top of the child's soiled nappy. Only two days old he still had the healthy features of a well nourished child but this wouldn't have lasted long had a passer by not heard his wailing cry on that windy, grey morning in downtown East Harlem. Tom Hunter, hurrying to work with his collar raised and a woolen scarf wound tightly round his neck heard a sound like a cat meowing. He hurried on, but heard it again. He stopped and looked around but saw nothing but a rubbish bin with its top slightly askew. He approached it and looking around to see that no one was watching, slowly removed the lid. In it he saw a bundle of white cloth lying in a pile of torn newspaper. At first he didn't know what it was but then the bundle moved and a small pale, brown face with large brown eyes emerged and looked at him.

My God! It's a baby. What's it doing here? Where's its mother? Thoughts flashed through his mind. What should I do? I can't leave it here; I'm late for work. His instincts took over and he began to calm down. He decided to take the child to the office where they'd know what to do. Gathering up the damp and smelly bundle, he wrapped it in his overcoat and rushed to his office, only a short

distance away.

Tom Hunter, single and 38 years old were a budding IT expert. He had trained at MIT and was working with a software firm in East Harlem developing computer games. He had just got over a love affair some weeks earlier and was still vulnerable and unsure. The only son of a middle class family, he was brought up in the city and had gone to a local school. Being tall from a young age, he excelled in sport and was a popular young man. He was hard working and had no difficulty in attaining good results in his studies.

'Good morning Tom,' was the friendly greeting from Alistair the uniformed doorman as he rushed into the building.

'Oh, g-good morning Alistair, I'm sorry,' he stuttered, 'I'm late, can't stop.' Avoiding the lift he climbed the four flights of stairs, burst into the open plan office on the second floor and made his way hurriedly to his own office at the far end. A number of colleagues greeted him as he rushed by but he did not respond. He closed the door, took a deep breath and put the bundle on his desk. At that moment his colleague Griselda who had seen his hasty entrance followed him in. The sight that greeted her was beyond her imagination. Tom had removed some of the clothing to reveal a baby boy. He was beginning to cry softly.

'Tom,' she exclaimed, 'what on earth are you doing with that child?' Tom was struggling to stay

calm.

'I f-found it,'

'You what?'

'I found it in a rubbish bin. I heard its cry. I th-thought it was a cat and then....' Griselda could see how disturbed he was and put her hand on his arm.

'It's OK Tom, calm down, we'll sort it out, take it easy.'

'Wh-at are we going to do? The baby's hungry, he n-eeds milk,' stammered Tom almost at the end of his tether.'

Griselda thought for a moment.

'We need to take him to the Abandoned Baby Center in East Harlem.'

'OK, will you come with me?' begged Tom. Griselda nodded.

Twenty minutes later the taxi drew up outside the ABC center, a rather dilapidated building in East Harlem. It was founded by a group of Latino women in the 1930's to deal with the ever-increasing number of children abandoned during the great depression. Now it was under the auspices of "Hope for Children" a worldwide charity. The front door was decorated with graffiti illustrating children playing in the street. It was unlocked and Tom and Griselda pushed it open and entered carrying the baby. Matilda, the receptionist, a woman in her fifties saw them arrive and stepped forwards to greet them. She knew instinctively why

they were there, very few white Americans came through her doors.

'May I help you folks,' she said taking the small bundle from Tom's arms. 'My! What have we got here?' she smiled waiting for a reply.

'I f-found him in a rubbish bin on the way to work, I h-heard him crying, Tom blurted out, 'I thought it was a cat but when I looked there was this little f-fellow, he's called Inocent,' Tom continued.

'He needs feeding, let me get one of our mothers who is breast feeding and give him to her.' Reluctantly Tom handed the baby over. Somehow in that short time something had happened. He had begun to feel that the child was his. Griselda noticed his reluctance to let go of Inocent.

'Tom, we can come back and visit as often as we like,' she said, turning to Matilda.

'Yeah, sure you can, we wan' you to, until we find a home for him that is.' Matilda nodded. Tom watched the baby, as he was taken away, confused by the feelings welling up inside him. On the way back to the office he was strangely silent.

'Are you OK?' Asked Griselda noticing his unusual manner.

'Yeah I'm fine, it's just that...' he paused, 'no it's nothing.' Back in the office, Tom tried to resume his work. He had been struggling with a computer program portraying the battle between good and evil. So far he had been unable to visualise the

shape of each icon not wanting to use the conventional ones. He had wanted a new image for good and kept thinking about the baby. Perhaps, he thought, he, in a strange way, represented good as in the Good Samaritan, and the mother Evil as she had abandoned her son. But that seemed too harsh a judgement. He knew nothing about her circumstances and what had caused her to take such desperate measures.

Anna was only 16 when she managed to cross the Mexican-US border illegally and make her way north. The youngest of five children, a vivacious dark haired child, she had been neglected by her parents who hadn't wanted another baby. Her father Alejandro drank heavily and was violent both to his wife and to the children many of whom had left home as soon as they could. Most had made their way to the States where they worked illegally in bars, restaurants and private homes. Anna was the last to leave. Her mother Katerina had pleaded with her not to go but she was determined having suffered so much brutality at the hands of her father.

'Please, don't leave me alone with your father. I think he'll kill me in one of his drunken rages. I can't bear being alone with him,' pleaded her mother.

'You should've thought about that when he abused me. He's yours, not mine, me no blame for

that,' she shouted angrily as she left the house.

Alejandro recovering from a drunken stupor overheard the raised voices.

In his head the familiar diatribe began: that little bitch, he thought to himself, she don't understand, she never has. Don't she realise that she has had it good, not like me. What does she know? At least she knew her parents. I never knew mine, lived my life in orphanages didn't I until I ran away that is. Three of us seven year-olds escaped one night. We lived on a rubbish heap digging for scraps and sleeping under the mess to keep warm. At least I was free and we could do, as we liked. I met an American one-day who took me back to his hotel room. He wanted to play with me. I didn't mind since he gave me some clothes and food. I gave him pleasure and he looked after me. He got me a job in a bar cleaning the toilets.

He was now sober enough to call out to his wife,

'Why you beg her to stay, she no good, better she gone. She don't love you,'

'Shut up you drunken bastard, what do you know about love? You only use me for one thing.'

' That's all you good for, bitch.'

Three days later Anna was in New Mexico. Standing at the roadside in the early morning, she had hailed a passing truck. The driver had agreed

to take her across provided she promised him a blowjob and having no choice, she had agreed. He had hidden her in his cab as they had passed through the border. Then she was on her own, trying to thumb a ride on the freeway. Later that night two college boys driving east picked her up. They had agreed the terms; she would have sex with them and they would take her east.

Spread eagled on the bonnet of their car, she had looked up into the clear sky begging God to intervene as each in turn penetrated her and had his way whooping as he came. They had kept their word, fed her and agreed to take her to New York. It wasn't what she wanted but she felt she had no other choice. After a long and tiring journey they eventually arrived in New York and left her in East Harlem by the train station. There she had lived on the street for two days until picked up by the police and taken to a hostel. That had been her first experience of kindness and care. Despite her unhappy childhood she still felt homesick for the open countryside, the food, the sounds of the birds and her language.

The hostel had placed her with a British family recently arrived in the states, Mike and Mary Jones. They had come from Wales. He was a teacher and she a Pharmacist. They had a young child called Sally whom Anna would look after while the parents went out to work. She was happy for the first time in her life. Everything seemed to be

going well. She had a good job, a warm room, enough to eat and kind employers. She began to dream about a better life, an education, a career, not just to be a housemaid. She had read of girls going to college and running small businesses, that was what she wanted to do. One day she noticed that her period hadn't arrive. Initially she thought that it was only part of her usually irregular cycle. But then she had begun to feel sick in the mornings and didn't want to eat. Mary had noticed that she wasn't looking well and one day had asked her outright, whether she was pregnant.

Anna had pushed her ordeal at the hands of the young men who drove her to New York to the very back edge of her mind but the dreaded reality suddenly struck her. Frightened of losing her job, she reassured her mistress that it was not possible. She also continued to deny it to herself. She pushed it further back in her mind and ignored her swelling stomach by hiding it under loose clothes. She kept telling herself it was because she was putting on weight. As it became more obvious, she realised that she could no longer hide it. She had to come clean. Standing in front of a mirror one day, she looked at what she had been dreading and hiding from herself, the undeniable swelling of a pregnant womb. Counting backwards she estimated that she would give birth in about four weeks. As the time approached she became more and more frantic. She had so much to lose and was

frightened to admit it to Mary, as she was certain she would throw her out.

The opportunity to reveal the truth came one Sunday at breakfast. Mike was out playing golf and Anna was in the kitchen when Mary came in and sat down next to her at the breakfast table.

'Anna, you can't ignore it anymore, I understand why you denied it but you can't anymore.' Anna tried to interrupt,

'I wanted to tell you,' but Mary ignored her.

'I have spoken to my husband and we want to help you have the baby but we won't be able to keep you and the baby after it's born I'm sorry.'

Anna returned to her room and sat on her bed completely dejected. Suddenly it all became clear. She didn't want the baby. It had been forced upon her and she had no feelings for it. She had heard of mothers who had abandoned their child after the delivery. That's what she was going to do.

As the time drew closer she began to have doubts. How could she give her baby away? How could she? She was wracked with guilt. With the help of her Mary she had been booked into a local hospital but events overtook her. Woken one night by severe abdominal pain, her waters burst and within two hours she had delivered in her bed. The baby lay, still attached to her by the umbilical cord. She called out to her mistress who immediately took her in the family car to the local hospital. Three days later she was discharged with a baby boy

whom she named Inocent. On the way home, confused and desperate to keep her job, she wrapped the baby in newspaper attached his name and left him in a rubbish bin downtown.

Tom had begun to look forward to his trips to the Baby Centre. Inocent was now a smiling healthy boy having been weaned onto formula milk. His shining brown eyes set in a light brown face beneath curly black hair made everyone love him. He seemed to recognise Tom and was soon saying 'Da Da' when he arrived. The staff used to make fun of Tom as if he was the real father which, strangely Tom was beginning to feel he was. He brought the boy small gifts, soft cuddly toys and little plastic bells that hung down from his cot. He often talked to his colleague Griselda about the boy and on one occasion when they were dining together he broached the subject that had been thinking about constantly.

'Griselda I've got a serious question to ask you about Inocent.' Griselda watched as Tom struggled with the words. She had an inkling of what it was about but wasn't certain. She knew that he had been visiting the boy regularly over the last few months and had become very attached to him but the question when it came still surprised her.

'I want to adopt him and bring him home to live with me.'

Griselda's eyes widened.

'Tom are you mad? Do you have any idea what it takes to bring up a child? It's for life you know. They grow up and change and you may not like what he becomes, you may not like what you become. Are you sure you have thought this through? I don't know much about the law but I can't believe that they would agree to a single man adopting a child.'

Tom listened as she spoke. He paused, thinking and then asked,

'If I was a single woman would they be more sympathetic?'

'Yes, common sense suggests that they would.'

'Why would that be?' Tom asked, naively.

'Because society sees women as natural mothers and carers. They are thought to be more naturally responsive in that sense.'

'But there have been many bad woman. What about the mother who discarded Inocent, what does society think of her?' Tom questioned.

'She is his mother and therefore there must have been an overriding reason why she rejected him in that way. It's not natural for a woman to abandon her child.'

Tom struggled with the seeming injustice that accepted adoption by a single female but rejected a single male. He pondered the question for several days asking anyone whom he thought might be able to help. Most of his friends thought he was

mad. Why complicate your life when you are free and independent? Why do you want to tie yourself down for the rest of your life through sickness and in health?

But no matter what they said to the contrary, whenever Tom visited Inocent, he was more and more certain that it was what he wanted. He remembered his own childhood, without a father. He knew instinctively that a child needed a father and that's why he wanted to be there for Inocent. He began to look on the Internet for information and he came upon an article that really encouraged him.

A single line headline in bold read: Are you a Single Person wanting to adopt a child? Click below. He did and it took him to the next page. We are specialists in the area of adoption by single parents. We are a small organisation with a single purpose; to give you the child you want with the minimum of hassle. There was an address near Marcus Garvey Park and an email.

Tom immediately sent off a message and by return the Centre replied giving him an appointment the following day. It seemed almost too soon he thought, too easy, but he dismissed the doubt and the following day checked the address and decided to cycle there.

Marcus Garvey Park, one of the oldest Public Squares in Manhattan, had been serving as a meeting place for the local inhabitants for more

than 150 years. It dated back to 1811 when the then plan for Manhattan had called for a public space to be made in the area. Originally called Mount Morris Square, it had received its present name in 1973 after the black Nationalist Leader Marcus Garvey. Tom dismounted and locked his bike to the nearest railing. He easily found the office with its name painted on a large wooden door next to a chemist shop. He pressed the entrance button and a female voice answered,

'Push the door and come up to the second floor.' The door groaned open and he found himself facing a stairway. It turned left at the top of the first stage and he continued to the second that was lit only by one small bulb. At the end of a short corridor he could see a frosted glass fronted door on which was written, Abigail Johnston, Lawyer. Inside he could see a figure moving. As he was a little early he decided to wait a few minutes before entering but he heard through the door the female voice again,

'Come in Mr Hunter.' Tom entered a tiny claustrophobic office with only one window. Seated behind an impossibly untidy desk was a young very attractive woman dressed in a smart dark suit. Tom was taken aback by her appearance somehow expecting a dowdy academic type. Abigail could see his surprise and smiled to herself. Coming forwards she proffered him a firm warm grip.

'Please sit down Mr Hunter,' she said

motioning him towards a dilapidated armchair. 'Excuse the mess; it's how I work. I can't deal with a tidy place it gives me the creeps.' For a moment Tom thought an untidy desk an untidy mind. But Abigail must have read his thoughts,

'Be assured Mr Hunter, that my mind is much tidier. Let's get down to business. You told me that you wanted to adopt a small boy. I must warn you that it is not easy to find unaffected boys for adoption, would you consider a child with a disability?' Tom interrupted,

'I thought I mentioned that I had found the boy, the boy I want to adopt. I have been visiting him for about six months since he was born.'

'I see,' Abigail said writing down the details as he spoke. She paused,

'Have you got the mother's agreement?'

'I don't know the mother,' Tom blurted out, 'I found the baby in a rubbish bin.'

'A rubbish bin, I don't understand?'

Tom patiently explained exactly what had happened.

'I just want to adopt him and give him a good home, that's all'

Abigail sat listening. She knew that she was going to have to enlighten this would be father about the facts of adoption.

'It's not as simple as that I'm afraid. The mother has to agree to the adoption in writing in front of a lawyer so that there is no confusion later.'

Tom looked utterly confounded.'

'Tom, may I call you Tom,' he nodded. 'We need to find the biological mother. She still has the primary right to her child even though.....' Tom interrupted her,

'Even though she threw him away, in a rubbish bin. How can she still have any rights? I don't understand.'

'The law is very straightforward about parenthood. The biological parents, mother and or father have the primary rights even if one of them is separated from their child for some reason.'

'Even if she d-dumped him in a rubbish bin,' Tom repeated, his voice rising.

'Please Tom; try to understand the court's position. It wants the best for the child and it believes that the biological mother and father are the best, so we have to find the mother.'

'I d-don't believe this, I have come to you to help me adopt an abandoned child and you're telling me we must find the mother.'

'Yes, exactly and I suggest you accept this advice now, otherwise you're going to be very disappointed.' Tom sat, dejected and confused. He was tempted to get up and walk out but he could feel that he was being given sound advice.

Gradually he brightened.

'If it has to be, so be it.'

'Good, what I need from you Tom, is the exact details of how you found the child, as much

information as you can. Then we will put that information on my website copying it to all the other adoption groups, the police and the local hospitals.'

When Anna returned home from the hospital, the house was empty. Running up the stairs she burst into her room, locked the door and fell onto the bed, crying uncontrollably. She had never felt so alone in her life. She must have fallen asleep because when she woke, the room was in darkness. She could hear movements from below and after washing and tidying herself plucked up courage to go to meet the family. Mary was in the kitchen. She turned when she heard her footsteps.

'Oh it's you? Anna how's the baby?'

'I not know I left it.'

'What do you mean you left it?'

Then it all poured out. By the time Anna had explained everything, Mary was distraught.

'We didn't mean you to abandon the child; we just couldn't have you here with a baby. My God! What a mess, Where is your baby? We must find it. Where did you leave it? Together they returned to the area where Anna had left the child. The rubbish bin was still there but it was empty.

'It's not here, it's gone,' cried Anna. 'My baby, he's been taken with the rubbish and dumped somewhere!'

'We must contact the police and the local hospital but you can't tell them you left him in a bin,

you must say he was taken or you put the basket down and then he was gone or else they will arrest you Anna,

The police had heard it all before. They had a list of missing or stolen babies and children. In a very matter of fact way the officer on duty said that he would put the baby's details on file and let them know if any information turned up. Mary and Anna returned home, each hardly able to speak. Mary was angry and at the same time sympathetic. She dreaded what Mike would say when she told him.

Abigail had put the details of Inocent's disappearance onto her website and had forwarded them to the other agents in the neighbourhood. Some months had passed and Tom was becoming more optimistic that Inocent's mother wouldn't be found. He was now much more informed about the law on adoption and realised how difficult it was going to be. One night while struggling with the dilemma he decided to ring his mother. He hadn't spoken to her for years, not since his father had committed suicide. He wasn't even certain if she was still at the same number. On hearing the dialing tone he tentatively pressed the numbers. There was a long pause followed by a familiar voice, albeit a little more tired and weaker.

'Hello this is Mrs Hunter, who is this?'

'Mum it's me Tom, how are you?'

'What's it to you?' she retorted recognizing

his voice, 'you don't care.'

'Please, I know Mum I know. I've got no excuse. I would like to come and see you?'

'What for? We have nothing to say to each other after all these years.'

'That's not true and you know it. Are you still at the same address?'

'Yes, I am. I've been here too long but haven't the money nor the energy to move. It's changed a lot since you were last here, a lot of foreigners have settled. You hardly see a white face and when you do they laugh at me or spit on the ground in front of me. The shops have all changed. We now have Indian, Chinese, Mexican so many different ones. I can't keep up with them.' She paused, 'tell me when are you coming and I will make up your bed in your old room. I haven't been in there for a long time.'

It took about three hours for Tom to reach his mother's home. He didn't rush, partly because he wasn't entirely sure he was doing the right thing. As the miles passed, he had felt an increasing apprehension and when he had reached the crossroads, which led to his mother's home, he had to stop and calm himself. He no longer called this place his home although he had spent more than half his life there. When he had walked out of the door so many years ago he had thought he would never come back, the memories were too painful but as the years passed, he had become more

philosophical and less critical.

As he drove slowly down the broad tree lined road, so little seemed to have changed. The well manicured lawns, the symmetrically pruned trees and the line of post boxes all reminded him of the past. He drew up outside the house and turned off the engine. He saw the curtain twitch and the next moment the front door was open and a frail grey haired woman in her seventies was waving to him. At first he hadn't recognised her, she had aged so much but then it had been twenty years. He walked towards her unable to fully take in her frail and small body like an older child. He wanted to hug her but was frightened he might crush her.

'Mum it's good to see you, you look well,' She was very quiet at first as if she was greeting a stranger but once they were in doors, the tears began.

'I'm very happy to see you son,' she whispered. He kissed her gently and wiped away her tears.

'There is no need for those mum,' he said. 'It's a time for happiness.'

'I am happy, happy to see you after such a long time. I thought I had lost you forever.' They exchanged pleasantries about his job. He explained that he had had a girlfriend but that they had broken up recently and he was now alone. As soon as he had phoned she had got a neighbour to rush out and buy the ingredients for his favorite meal,

Spaghetti Bolognese with butternut squash. Sitting in the kitchen it had seemed like old times. The years had seemed to disappear and he was back as a child sitting with his mother and father. But he wasn't there.

Tom remembered the day as if it was yesterday. He had come home from school to find his mother in tears. She had pointed to the stairs and he had rushed up to find his father lying on his bed. He seemed to be asleep but he wasn't moving. Tom, frantic, shook his body hysterically but there was no response. His father had taken an overdose some hours earlier and was dead. Tom rushed down to his mother shouting that she had killed him. She had sat speechless as he had torn at her clothes desperately trying to hurt her. She had tried to explain but he was too young to understand that his father suffered from Bipolar disease and had killed himself in a fit of depression. There was nothing she could have done. The man had always made light of his condition and had refused to see a doctor despite her pleadings. Tom never forgave her and as soon as he could, he had left home.

Sitting with his mother the memory of that event returned but now he no longer felt the anger or the blame. He now understood that she had done her best. It was some hours later after eating and drinking some wine that Tom had felt ready to tell his mother the real reason for his visit. But she

beat him to it. There was a pause in the conversation and then she spoke up.

'Now Tom,' she began. 'It has been wonderful seeing you and I am so glad you found time to come but isn't it about time you told me why you are here. It wasn't just to see me I know, that has never been your way. There is something on your mind isn't there?'

'As a matter of fact there is and you are the one person who I know can help me.' Tom admitted.

'Go on, what's the problem?'

'I want to adopt a small boy. Before you say anything I want to explain how I met him.' His mother listened as Tom described the events that day and what had happened since.

'I think it is an unusual thing to want to do at your age but that's your business. But what's the problem?' Asked his mother.

'The lawyer, a very bright woman says we have to find the mother and get her permission. That seems mad to me after all she gave him away, I didn't steal him, I just want to give him a good life that's all.'

'I understand Tom and I know that you are a good man but you must agree that the mother acted irrationally when she abandoned the boy and she must be allowed to think about what's she's done as she is the boy's mother.' As Tom took in what his mother was saying, he began to realise

that she was right, much as he didn't like the idea. He feared that as soon as the mother was reunited with her son, his claim to the boy would melt away. His mother as if reading his mind added,

'You can always adopt another boy, there must be many children waiting for someone like you.'

'But it won't be the same. I have come to love him as if he was my own son. It's him I want to adopt not any other child,' Tom insisted raising his voice. Tom could see that his mum was getting tired so he got up and kissed her good-night.

'I think we should get some shut-eye; we have talked enough for one day. Good night mum and thank you.' He tried to settle down for the night but his thoughts kept on coming back to the mother and why she had acted as she had.

The following day was Sunday. Tom knew his mother liked to go to church and although he was not a believer he accompanied her. The pastor had chosen a sermon on sacrifice and had quoted Solomon's ruling in the case of the two women who claimed the same child. When he had ruled that the child should be cut in two, the real mother had offered the child to the other woman and Solomon knew who the real mother was. Perhaps thought Tom, that is what I must do. On the last day of his visit, Tom was completing his packing when he heard the telephone downstairs ring. His mother answered it and called up to him,

'Tom it's for you, a woman called Abigail wants you urgently.' Tom's heart lurched. What could have happened for her to ring him while visiting his mother? He dreaded what she would say.

'Hello Abigail, it's Tom speaking, is everything all right?'

'Tom we have found the mother.'

As soon as Mike got home, Mary collared him,

'Mike you won't believe what Anna has done, she has abandoned her child.'

'How do you mean, abandoned?' Not understanding what she meant.

'What I said, she left him in a rubbish bin.'

'A rubbish bin, that's impossible, she wouldn't do that. She couldn't have been so cruel and uncaring?'

'Well, you can believe it or not, but it's true. She showed me where she left him but the rubbish bin had been emptied by the time I got there.'

'Did you speak to the police?'

'Yes, they were less than sympathetic and merely took down my details. Then I went to see the company, Bestway Carting Company who emptied the bin. The woman in charge was very helpful and told me that they take their rubbish to a tip outside New York State.'

'Mike,' she said raising her voice, 'that little mite has been tipped into a rubbish tip. I can't bear

thinking of it.' Mike put his arms around her and hugged her.

'Shush, it's all right; you've done all you can. Don't blame yourself. The little fellow is probably in a better place.'

Meanwhile Anna continued to work putting all her energy into caring for the young daughter. Over the months she thought less and less about her abandoned son but never lost the knot of guilt inside.

Mary had received a computer for Christmas and was getting to know it. She had recently learned how to browse the net. Almost without thinking she typed in Abandoned child East Harlem, and pressed enter. A list of addresses appeared. One caught her eye. It was a website dealing with abandoned children. She read on,

We are specialists in the area of adoption by single parents. We are looking for the mother of a newborn boy who was left in a rubbish bin six months ago in East Harlem. Mary read on, The boy had been found by a passer by and taken to the Abandoned Baby Center in East Harlem.' There was a telephone number to speak to a Lawyer. Mary grabbed a pencil and scribbled down the number.

'Mike,' she called out, 'come quickly I found something. Mike heard her and ambled over to where she was sitting.

'What is it? Mary,' he asked patiently.

'Look at this. I was looking for information about abandoned babies and I came upon this. It's about a baby left in a rubbish bin. He was taken to a baby centre. Do you think it could be Anna's? It would be a miracle.'

'Gosh! It could be Anna's baby. What a stroke of luck if it was. Ring the agent in the morning and see what they say,' suggested Mike.

Abigail Johnston let herself into her office just after 6.30 am. She always arrived early to avoid the rush hour, so she was surprised to hear the telephone ringing so early in the morning.

'Hello, this is Abigail Johnston, can I help you?'

'Yes, please, I'm sorry to ring you so early but I couldn't wait. I was so excited to read on your website about the little boy who was found in a rubbish bin. I think it could be the son of my nanny.'

'I see,' replied Abigail, 'could you come and see me with your nanny later on this morning?' Mary put down the receiver. She was excited by the possibility that Anna's child was alive. Suddenly she realised that she had assumed that Anna would want to see her son but maybe she wouldn't. Mary pondered how to break the news to Anna. Maybe the child was not hers so that the whole exercise could turn out to be a waste of time and maybe worse, very upsetting. Mary waited until she could hear Anna moving in her room and then she

knocked quietly on the door.

'Who's that?'

'It's me, Anna, may I have a word with you.'

Mary replied. Anna went to the door and opened it.

'Yes, come in. I almost dressed.'

'Anna I have something to tell you.'

'What is it? I done something wrong?'

'No, no it's nothing like that. It's about your little boy.' Mary paused, 'he could be alive.'

'Alive, me don't understand me thought...'

'I know but we could be wrong. You see some while ago, a man found a little boy called Inocent in a rubbish bin and took him to a baby center. He is now six months old.'

Anna suddenly put her hands over her eyes and began to cry,

'My God, it's my baby, I know it. I don't know what to do Madam, what should I do?'

'It's very difficult Anna, It depends on what you want to do,' she paused, 'I can't tell you what to do,' said Mary. 'I think we should go to the Lawyer and find out the truth then you can decide what you want to do.' Mary left Anna's room and busied herself with preparing breakfast. Anna sat on her bed in a quandary, one side of her wanted to forget the past and her child the other wanted to see the child, hold him and love him. What am I going to do? She sobbed rocking herself on the bed.

'Let's go,' shouted Mary through Anna's door, 'we must leave now or we'll be late.'

'OK, coming,' said Anna finally.

After a short car journey Mary and Anna arrived at the lawyer's office. The austerity of the surroundings surprised Mary who had always assumed that lawyers lived and worked in sumptuous surroundings. The narrow stairs leading to the small cramped office gave her serious doubts as to the professionalism of the Agency, but these were soon dispelled once she met Abigail Johnston. A firm handshake and a friendly good morning reassured her that this woman knew her job despite the chaos of her desk.

'Don't worry about my desk, Mrs. Jones, or may I call you Mary, it's the only way I can keep on top of the many cases that come my way. Now to business, we are meeting to consider the future of a boy called Inocent who was left in a rubbish bin, about six months ago. From what you said on the phone, this young woman, nodding to Anna, believes she is the child's mother.'

'Yes,' whispered Anna.

'Now Anna, tell me in your own words why you believe that.' As Anna spoke, Abigail began to write. In a quiet, almost inaudible voice, Anna told the lawyer how she had become pregnant and what she had done with the baby.

'Anna why did you do that? It's an unusual thing to do isn't it?'

'Yeah, but at the time it seemed only thing to

do.' said Anna.

'Why was that?' Anna began to cry.

'I no feel baby was mine. It a terrible time in my life, escaping to new country, my body abused, to be free and he, Inocent was the price I paid.'

'But you didn't need to have thrown him away,' Abigail prompted gently.

Anna looked at Mary,

'They told me I couldn't stay in house if I had a baby.' Mary shuffled uncomfortably on her chair.

'It wasn't quite like that. We live in a small apartment and have one daughter. We couldn't have Anna with a small baby as well,' replied Mary not looking at Anna.

'I see,' said Abigail making a note, it looks like the boy is hers.

'Now Mary, let me try and explain the legal position. First we need to confirm that Inocent is Anna's baby. That is quite a simple matter, by means of a DNA test. But there is a more worrying aspect. Anna is technically guilty of attempted manslaughter, a serious criminal offence. Here in the US, the law doesn't allow a mother to kill or attempt to kill her own child although it does deal sympathetically with the mother particularly if the child doesn't die. The issue is further complicated by the fact that the man who found Inocent has become very attached to him and wants to adopt him. I have met him and know that he is a serious highly respected person with a sound income who

could give Inocent a good life. I think the time has come for you and Anna to meet Inocent and we can go from there. There is no time like the present if you agree. I have phoned the hostel and they say we can visit any time. Are you ready for this Anna?' Anna looked at Mary and nodded,

'If OK with you Madam?' she asked.

On the way, Abigail sent a text message to Tom.

'Can you meet me at the hostel in about twenty minutes time?' The reply came immediately,

'I'll be there, Tom.'

Abigail led the way to the Baby Unit on the first floor. It was a bright open room with decorations on the walls depicting nursery rhymes and children's stories. Abigail saw Jack and the beanstalk and smiled to herself. Inocent was lying in his cot waving his arms and smiling. He was dressed in a pale blue baby grow. Abigail pointed to him and said,

'Anna, is he your son?'

Anna recognised Inocent immediately. There could be no doubt, his light brown skin, deep brown eyes and dark curly hair - he was her son. She ran forwards and clasped him, tears running down her face. The boy turned away from her, pushing at her shoulders. He didn't know this strange woman and didn't want her to hold him. At that moment Tom appeared and Inocent seeing him, shouted 'Da Da'. Anna turned to see a tall slim man in his forties walk into the room. He was smiling and reaching

out to the boy. She immediately realised that this must be the man who found her son. For a moment she was speechless. Releasing Inocent she went over to him, hesitating she asked,

'You the man found my son?'

'Yes, it was me. He is a wonderful boy.'

'I don't know to thank you. You give me greatest gift in the world, I can never thank enough.' and then her face distorted with pain. She covered it with her hands and her body shook with uncontrolled sobs.

'I so ashamed what I did. I can't believe I left him. I so desperate I didn't know where to turn.'

Tom instinctively stepped forwards and put his hand on her shoulder,

'It's all right,' he whispered, 'the nightmare is over and your son is alive and well.'

Some days later Abigail arranged to see Mary and Tom in her office.

'I need to talk to you both about the future of Anna and her son Inocent. I wanted to see you without Anna, Mary, as there is a serious legal problem to be resolved. Incidentally for the record, the DNA test was positive. There is no doubt that Anna is Inocent's mother but sadly, it is not as simple as it seems. I will have to report the incident to the police and they will almost certainly want to press charges.'

'Is that really necessary?' asked Tom, 'you can see how she acted on seeing her son. Couldn't

we sort it out ourselves?'

'Tom, I would love to but you can't ignore the fact that she left him to die and without you the boy would have perished and this story would have had a very different ending.'

Abigail was thinking about how to tell the police about the incident when events took an unexpected turn. Unknown to her, they had been notified by the hospital and had been looking for the woman who had abandoned the baby ever since. Within a few days, a summons appeared in her post to attend the Police station as soon as possible. She was asked to see a Sergeant Sullivan at the 23rd Precinct.

Abigail decided to plan her strategy ahead of the meeting with the officer. She began to jot down some facts and then some assumptions. Armed with her notes and her plan, Abigail went to see the Police Officer. She decided to go alone. She had allowed herself to become so emotionally involved in the case that her initial client Tom was in danger of being sidelined.

The 23rd Precinct Police Station was a typically run down 30's building in the heart of a street of unoccupied and boarded up houses. Rubbish was strewn everywhere. Many of the residents were seated on the outside steps, smoking and drinking when she arrived. It was a dismal and depressing place. Parking her car she

was approached by two small boys who offered to look after it, an offer not to be ignored. She had learned to her regret that ignoring the street boys inevitably meant scratched wings and stolen wing mirrors.

'Thanks boys,' she said brightly, 'I'll settle on the way out. Climbing the grey-stained stone steps she entered a dingy reception area and asked for Sergeant Sullivan's office.

'Second floor, his name's on the door,' barked a woman seated behind the reception desk.

'Thanks,' replied Abigail as she turned to climb the stairs. She found the Sergeant's glass fronted door and knocked. There was no reply so she knocked again, louder.

'Come,' was the curt reply. It was a typical police office, wall-to-wall files, several desks with computers and a coffee maker hissing quietly. Sergeant Sullivan a large uniformed man in his fifties was seated in front of a screen talking on a telephone. He looked up and nodded to her to sit. Finishing his phone call he turned to her but before he could speak, Abigail began,

'Good morning Sergeant, I'm Abigail Johnston and represent Tom Hunter, the man who found the baby boy.'

'Oh! Yeah, you're that lawyer dealing with the child abandonment case,' he said with an Irish accent.

Born in County Cork, Sergeant Sullivan

came to the US as a boy with his family during the depression. As deeply religious Catholics they abhorred divorce, contraception and abortion. They lived by God's law that preached that life was sacred and he had absorbed these doctrines. His father became a policeman in New York and practiced what he preached acquiring a reputation for applying hard justice. It was inevitable that the son would follow in his father's footsteps. He married a local girl also from Irish stock but the marriage didn't work and they separated but he had refused to divorce her. Living alone he became increasingly bitter and took it out on females whom he believed were the cause of most of the evil in the world.

'What about the woman, do you represent her?' He sneered.

'No, I don't think she yet realises her position.'

'Well, she soon will. I am going to come down heavily on her, make an example of her. Too many young women are getting pregnant and then disposing of the evidence, I mean the baby. It's got to stop.'

'So you are in favour of abortion?' Abigail asked innocently.

'No, I am in favour of restraint. Promiscuity is against God's law.'

Frustrated, Abigail interjected.

'Sergeant, you contacted me, how can I

help?'

'I don't know, I want to put this woman in prison and make an example of her but I know the public wants a more softly softly approach you know, psychological studies etc.'

'What's wrong with that?' interrupted Abigail.

'Come on, you know it's a lot of hokus pokus. The woman knew what she was doing, she wanted to kill the boy.'

'Then why didn't she? Why did she leave him to be found? That doesn't sound like intent to kill does it, Sergeant, does it? Said Abigail raising her voice.

'Hmm, are you sure you're not representing her?'

'I think I am.' decided Abigail on the spur of the moment.

'She can't afford you,' he said sarcastically.

'No but my colleague will.' decided Abigail on the spur of the moment.

'She can't afford a lawyer,' he said sarcastically.

'He'll do it Pro Bono for nothing!'

'OK, shyster I'll see you in court!'

Realising the meeting had ended, Abigail made for the door. As she left she added,

'People like you should have perished with the Dinosaurs!'

Anna returned home with Mary confused and

frightened. She hadn't been able to understand what was happening. She had just wanted to be with her son and was so happy when she saw him alive and well but when she wasn't allowed to bring him home, she felt deep despair. As soon as she could she asked Mary what was happening,

'Madam, why they not let me have my son Inocent? He needs be with his mother.' Mary didn't know what to say. She had felt guilty that she might have played a part in Anna's decision to reject her son.

'Anna what you did was a criminal act. Inocent could have died and you would've been accused of murder. As it was he was rescued but that does not mean that you are innocent. The law believes you are guilty of attempted manslaughter, do you understand?

'But Madam I no choice.'

'Yes you did, you could have taken Inocent to a Shelter for unmarried mothers. They would have helped you. You didn't need to abandon the boy.' Anna went quiet. She didn't want to remind Mary that she had told her that she couldn't stay in her house with the baby.

Suddenly the telephone rang,

'Hello, this is Abigail Johnston, is that Mary?

'Yes.'

'How are you?'

'Fine, how can I help you?'

'I need to see Anna on her own. She is about

to be arrested for attempted manslaughter. A colleague is offering to act for her,'

'I see, will that be expensive?'

'It will be Pro Bono, there'll be no charge.'

'That's very kind of you, Abigail,' said Mary; 'I'll bring her down to your office tomorrow.'

Anna sat fidgeting with the hem of her dress. She wasn't at all happy and now that she had to see a lawyer, her life was getting very complicated.

'Now Anna,' Abigail began, 'do you realise that you are in serious trouble. I saw the Police Sergeant recently and he wants to prosecute you for attempted murder.' Anna went pale, she suddenly realised also that her illegal status would be revealed. She'll be asked to show her ID and without it she would be expelled from the country.

'Tell me in your own words why you abandoned Inocent.' Anna quietly described her difficult home life, the escape to the USA and the realisation that she was pregnant. It was the last thing she wanted, it was the final straw.

'Something snapped inside. I knew I had to get rid of him, I promise I wanted him to be found.'

'Then why didn't you leave him at a hostel or an orphanage?'

'I don't know I panicked, just wanted rid of him.'

'You mean you wanted him to die?'

'At the time, maybe, but that's changed, I love him, want him back.'

'Anna, I'm sorry but you are going to have to appear in a court, it will be a children's court so don't be afraid, I will be with you.'

The Juvenile Court of East Harlem was held in a disused school Gymnasium. The wall bars were still evident as were the basketball markings on the wooden floor. The seats had been arranged in half circles with a standard desk in the centre. The officers were dressed informally as was the judge, Mrs Evelyn Probisher. She was wearing a summer dress with a ribbon holding her hair. Anna's was the first case of several to be heard that morning.

'Good morning Ladies and Gentleman,' announced the court Official, the first case is between the City of New York and Anna X. The City is represented by Sergeant Sullivan of the 23rd Precinct and Anna by Abigail Johnston. These proceedings will be recorded by the secretary, no members of the press will be allowed to be present.'

'Would Anna please come forward and sit on the chair beside me?' began the Judge. Anna wearing a pale blue smock with her black hair tied in a bunch at the back of her head walked slowly towards the chair, her head bowed as if unable to look at the judge.

'Sergeant Sullivan will you please begin the questioning.'

The Sergeant stood up and walked slowly to the front of the hall. Turning to Anna he began,

'Anna, please tell the court what happened on the relevant day.'

'Please Mrs Probisher,' Anna said, 'I start at beginning?'

'Yes please,' replied the judge.

Anna knew not to mention her illegal entry into the country but began when the two university graduates picked her up.

'It was like this Ma'am, I wanting to come to America so I decided to hitchhike.' Two men in a car stopped, picked me up. They offered take me if I sex with them. I no choice Miss so did it. They left me in East Harlem living on the street, I got job with Mr. and Mrs. Jones as a nanny, me look after their daughter. I not know I pregnant as me monthly irregular,' and turning to look at Mary Jones, she continued,

'They told me that I no stay with them with baby. I desperate.'

The Sergeant interrupted,

'Is that why you wanted to kill your child?'

'Objection,' interrupted Abigail, 'the Sergeant is putting words into my client's mouth.'

'Objection accepted,' said Mrs Probisher.

'Anna please continue.'

'I confused and frightened, I panicked. I knew no keep the baby so I give him away.'

'Not exactly,' interrupted the Sergeant, 'you

put the child in a rubbish bin, didn't you Anna, a rubbish bin.' There was a hush in the room.

'Sergeant I must ask you not to bully Anna,' insisted Mrs Probisher.

'I'm sorry Madam.' hissed the Sergeant.

'Anna, please continue.'

'Yes, the Sergeant right. I put my baby in rubbish bin but someone would find him, I not want him to die, a mother not want her own child to die, does she?' wailed Anna, sobbing.

'You tell us,' interrupted the Sergeant, 'we all want to know the answer, tell us?'

'Objection, the Sergeant is again bullying my client.' insisted Abigail.

'Sergeant, this is your last warning. You are not doing the City's case any good by your attitude. Do you have any further questions for the witness?' asked the judge.

'Yes Mrs. Frobisher,' he smiled and turning to Anna shouted,

'Anna you're a liar aren't you?' Anna was horrified, she turned to look at Abigail.

'I have no further questions,' announced the Sergeant, scowling as he sat down.

'Abigail, have you any questions to Anna?'

'Yes, Madam,' turning to face the girl,

'Anna, did you intend to kill your child?'

'No course not, I love him. I wanted best for him,'

'Madam I have no other questions for Anna.'

said Abigail.

'Anna you may return to your seat. I would like to call Tom Hunter.'

Mr. Hunter rose and went to sit in the chair next to the Lady Judge.

'Mr Hunter, tell the People what happened on the day six months ago.'

'I was on my way to work in the morning as usual,' began Mr Hunter. 'My office is a short distance from my home. I was nearly there when I heard what I thought was a cat meowing. I investigated and found the child called Inocent in a rubbish bin and took him to a local hospital.'

'Have you seen the child since?'

'Yes. I visit him daily. He has become very precious to me.'

Abigail intervened,

'Can you explain exactly what you mean?' she asked deliberately appearing puzzled by his answer.

'I have come to love him as if he was my own child.' There was a buzz of conversation in the room.

Tom continued,

'So much so that I would like to adopt him.'

'Thank you Mr Hunter,' said Abigail and she sat down.

'I see it is almost lunchtime let's adjourn and reconvene at 2 30 pm.' said the judge.

During the lunch break Abigail received a note asking her to go to the judge's office. Abigail wondered what Mrs Probisher wished to discuss as she sat down in front of the judge's large mahogany desk.

'First of all, thank you for coming to see me. You must be puzzled by what is a very unusual request; frankly I need your help. The sergeant wants to apply the full weight of the law. In his opinion Anna wanted to kill her child and it was only luck in the form of Tom who prevented it. My gut feeling is that she wanted the child to be found otherwise she would have killed him. What do you think? I know you are representing her and I assume that you have told her how serious her position is.'

'Yes, I have but I share your view that a custodial sentence would be serving no purpose. I think she needs to have psychiatric treatment and be put on Probation.

'Good we agree, Ms. Johnston. I would like to recommend you to be her probation officer. Perhaps you would like to think about it?'

'Are you sure you can do that in this case? If you can, I'm more than happy to supervise her.' replied Abigail.

'Well I am going to. The only person who may object is Sergeant Sullivan. I think I can convince him that sending this girl to prison would be a travesty.'

By the time the court had reconvened, Sergeant Sullivan had reluctantly agreed to accept the verdict of a two-year period of probation. Anna left the court with a big smile on her face. It was the happiest day in her life. But Abigail knew differently. First there was the little matter of Anna's illegal status, secondly was the ability of this very young person to take responsibility for her baby now residing in a children's home and finally, Tom's role in the child's future. All had to be resolved as soon as possible.

Abigail returned to her office. She needed time to think. She had won the first round but realised that there was a long way to go before Anna was reunited with Inocent and had permission to stay in the US. Searching the archives she found an article on Legal Guardianship. This confirmed that she would be allowed to take responsibility for a minor.

But did she want to complicate her life. Abigail had worked hard to become independent and now was in danger of losing that. She was about to break one of the cardinal laws of a lawyer; *don't get personally involved with your clients.*

Anna soon realised that she had only won one battle. There was a lot more required before she could be reunited with her son and live in America as a free woman. Her relationship with Mary was now shaky after she had publicly accused her of contributing to her decision to

abandon Inocent. Mary meanwhile confided in Mike that she wanted rid of Anna as soon as was humanly possible without appearing to throw her out.

'I don't want her here anymore, I don't trust her with our daughter, you never know what she might do.'

'If you say so dear,' he replied, 'although I've never found any reason to suspect her.'

'You are hardly ever here, you wouldn't know,' snapped Mary.

Abigail and Tom had developed a close friendship over the weeks and months. Over coffee one morning she suggested that Anna should go to work for him as his housemaid.

'It would solve a number of problems. It would provide her with somewhere to live and enable her to earn a living. Furthermore you have a spare room and you do need someone to look after you? What do you think Tom? She is very capable and I am sure would be loyal in view of what has happened.'

At first, Tom was surprised by the suggestion but the more he thought about it the more practical it seemed to be. Anna would have a home and a job. He could go on seeing Inocent and Abigail would feel confident that she wasn't getting into trouble. Tom agreed to a trial period and within a few days, Anna had moved into his apartment. Tom

hadn't realised what a bachelor's life he had been living, an untidy apartment, eating microwave meals, weekly visits to the Laundromat. Anna's arrival in the apartment changed all that. He began to enjoy the regular meals, clean, ironed clothes and a tidy home. It was nice to have a woman around the place he told Abigail.

'Don't get any ideas about her,' she warned with a smile.

'Don't you know it's you I love,' quipped Tom, hugging her half in jest.

Work was going well and Tom was happy. He liked coming home to a pretty woman and initially didn't realise that he was becoming increasingly aware of Anna's presence. The swish of her skirt, the lingering smell of her perfume, the occasional contact as she passed by began to dwell in his thoughts. He dismissed them impatiently, I am old enough to be her father he would remind himself.

The weather in New York was particular bad that winter, deep snow came early paralyzing the traffic and making it impossible to get into work. Fortunately, Tom could easily transfer his IT work to his home working from his small office. He and Anna were now spending more time together. She talked about her difficult childhood and the life she spent back in Naza-Chalco-Itza a slum in Mexico City. He knew these places existed but had never

heard first hand what life was really like living in one. He couldn't believe the deprivation she described, the total lack of sanitation, fresh water, electricity, things which he just took for granted. He became more and more drawn to this lonely, confused young woman and wanted to protect her.

One night there was a terrific thunderstorm in East Harlem, windows rattled and doors slammed, great streaks of lightning lit up the sky followed by long rumbles of thunder. Suddenly there was a loud crash outside. Tom lay still in bed puzzled by the noise. At first he wanted to get up and investigate but as there were no other outbursts he turned over and tried to sleep. Then he heard soft footsteps and Anna appeared, her figure framed in a white night dress against the light from outside.

'I scared Mr Tom, me come into your bed please? I always hate thunder and lightening.'

'Yes of course,' he replied. She climbed in besides him and lay down under the covers at the far edge of the bed. Gradually the storm abated and the two fell asleep. As dawn broke Tom woke to find Anna snuggled up against his back, her warm breath fanning his neck. He turned to look at her, their faces were only inches apart and spontaneously he kissed her lightly. She opened her eyes and feeling his kiss returned it.

For a moment he was conscious of the danger but couldn't stop himself, he wanted her. He

reached for her, sensing her soft skin. She embraced him and slowly reached down and caressed him. Moving on top of him, she gently guided him and then slowly they began to move, each feeling the other's presence. He lay back sated unaware of the smile that flitted across Anna's face as she realised that a new chapter had opened in her life. Then she was gone and for a moment he thought he must have dreamed her.

Anna served him breakfast the following morning as if nothing had happened so he foolishly thought that that would be the end of it. That evening he arrived late to find the apartment in darkness apart from a light in his bedroom. He was preparing to get into his bed when he saw the small mound of bedclothes move. Anna was already asleep. For a moment he thought of waking her but decided to leave it to the following day. In the early hours they again made love and he realised that he had become trapped by his own desire. During the following day he struggled with his demon. He knew what he was doing was crazy but there was no way back. He had crossed a boundary. He thought about telling Abigail but how could she understand. She would only have contempt for him; he was just another man who couldn't control his lust. After hours of self-analysis he decided that he would have to deal with this alone, no one would have any sympathy for him. He realised that he would have

to take control of the situation. Plucking up courage he arranged to talk to Anna to find out what she wanted to do.

That night Tom came home early and asked Anna to join him in the sitting room.

He began,

'Anna I think we need to talk. We can't go on like this. I'm old enough to be your father'

'Tom you no want me?'

'Yes of course but what I need to know is where you want our relationship to go?'

Although her English was not very good, she managed to say that she wanted him to marry her.

At first Tom thought the idea ridiculous but when she explained that if she was married to him, she believed that she would automatically become a legitimate American citizen, he understood.

The news that Tom was planning to marry Anna came as a bombshell to Abigail. He mentioned it to her at one of their regular meetings and said it in a matter of fact way, which completely took her by surprise. For a moment she was speechless, her mind racing to stay calm and behave in an adult manner although her immediate response was to ridicule the whole idea.

'When did you decide that?' Abigail said, aware that she was in danger of losing control.

'Well it seems to solve all the problems'.

'I don't understand, do you love her?' She asked. Tom paused,

'That's not the issue, I love her son Innocent and in this way he will always be with me. It will be a marriage of convenience nothing more, I assure you.'

Abigail was beginning to think he had lost his reason. No matter how hard she tried she couldn't keep her own feelings under control. Secretly she had hoped that they would become an item but as she listened to him making his plans she realised that she was jealous of Anna. That's ridiculous, she thought, how could I be jealous of Anna, a seventeen year, but she was. She wanted Tom and wasn't going to let this child get him.

Abigail Johnston was used to getting her own way, getting what she wanted. She was the only child of a wealthy middle class New York family. Educated at an Ivy League university she had graduated Cum Laude at Law School with glowing hopes for a successful career. Her father an eminent physician, now retired, had instilled in her the importance of public service which is why she turned down a partnership in an uptown legal practice for her own single handed office in a depressed area of East Harlem. Her private income allowed her to practice without the concern of charging large fees and as a result she attracted a big clientele mainly from Latino's and Afro-American residents.

Ever since Tom had walked into her office she had sensed that he could be her partner. Tall

and good looking, she had felt at ease in his company and as the weeks passed she had begun to fantasize about their relationship. So his unexpected announcement shook her, prompting her defence mechanisms to come into play, making her only more determined.

'I see, Tom do you think that's enough reason to marry Anna, in order to be with her son?'

'It's the only way I think. If I let her go, I lose the boy and I can't bear that.'

'What about her illegal status, couldn't that be a problem? Abigail asked.

'I was going to ask you about that. From your knowledge and experience would it be?'

'I am not certain, I would need to do a bit of reading and ask some colleagues,' replied Abigail secretly hoping that she would find some insuperable obstacle to the marriage. Then she added,

'I need to have some one-to-one time with Anna to find out exactly the circumstances of her entry into the US.'

'I could tell you,' Tom said trying to protect Anna from what might be a grueling interview.

'Thank you but no, I think I need to speak to her alone.'

That night, Tom explained to Anna that she would have to see Abigail to discuss her status and the proposed marriage.

'Tom, I no want to see her alone. I have fear

of her. She no wants marriage.'

'Nonsense Anna, she only wants the best for you, I am sure.'

'Tom, you don't see? She in love with you herself.'

'Rubbish, that's not true.'

Abigail was not at ease. Ever since Tom had told her about his wish to marry Anna, she had felt a growing anger. I want him and she is not going to get him, an illegal immigrant is no match for me. Deep inside her, an idea was forming. At first she rejected it but the more she thought about it the more it made sense. Ignoring the pounding voice of reason she began to make her plans.

Anna sat fidgeting with her dress, trying to control her nerves as Abigail wrote down her details.

'Right Anna,' she began, 'I need to know the exact circumstances of your entry into the US.'

'I hid on truck until got to New Mexico when I hitched ride to New York.'

'So at no time did you pass through immigration?' Abigail asked.

'No.'

'Does anyone apart from Mr. and Mrs. Jones and Tom and I know that you are illegal?'

'No, I not think so.'

'Are you aware that there are a number of problems for you if you want to marry Tom? First, as an illegal alien your marriage would not be

recognised but you have every right to get married, that's enshrined in our Constitution. Second, you would be in danger of being expelled if found out. Third you need to prove it's a genuine marriage not one of convenience.'

'It's all impossible,' said Anna in despair.

'It's certainly very difficult considering your status. As Tom is an American born citizen, you could use your marriage to him to apply for legal status but you would have to do that from Mexico.'

'I would have to go back to Mexico?

Impossible. I no do that, ' said Anna.

'That's the only way. In Mexico you would apply to the American Embassy for entry on the basis of your marriage to Tom.'

Later that day, Anna tried to explain to Tom what Abigail had said. He couldn't make head or tail of it, but was beginning to realise that he had started something that he might not be able to finish.

'Leave it to me I will speak to Abigail. I'm sure we can get it sorted out,' he assured her.

By the time Abigail had explained the difficulties, Tom was ready to give up the whole idea. But how would he be able to convince Anna. The more he thought about it the more complicated it seemed to have become.

Anna meanwhile had become very moody and slovenly around the house, staying in bed and crying a great deal. Tom was at his wit's end and

despite his initial best intentions had now decided he wanted her to go but how and where, he didn't know. They began to row.

'You have become a lazy slut,' he shouted at her one day in frustration.

'You don't say that when we are screwing do you? Then you all sweet and gentle.' she taunted him. Ignoring her remark he retorted,

'I can't have you laying about all day, either you improve or you'll have to go.'

'Do you want your girlfriend Abigail to know what you have been up to with me?' Anna giggled. Tom went silent. He realised that the girl was desperate and would stop at nothing. Things went from bad to worse. She began staying out late and wouldn't tell him where she was going. She would come home smelling of alcohol and almost incoherent.

One night she didn't come home at all. Desperate he went to the police to be told that an unidentified female body matching Anna's description had been found near the river. He agreed to see the body. Tom had seen many pictures of mortuaries in films. He knew that the bodies were held in long drawers, which could be pulled out to reveal a corpse, but he wasn't prepared for the smell, the penetrating pungent smell of formalin. He followed the attendant to drawer 34 and waited as it was pulled open. Taking

a deep breath he steadied himself and then had a closer look. The bleeding and bruising of her face and trunk shocked him. It was Anna, he could recognise her features despite her injuries.

'It's her,'

'Thank you Sir,' said the attendant. 'I wonder if you would wait in the waiting room the Sergeant wants to have a few words with you.'

I wonder what he wants me for thought Tom as he sat down by the open window trying to clear the smell from his lungs. After a short while the door opened and the Sergeant in his uniform entered.

'Ah! Mr Hunter, how nice to meet you again. Thank you for coming and identifying the body. Let's go into an office where we can speak privately.' Tom followed him to a small office off the waiting room, containing a table and two chairs. On the table there was some sort of recording instrument.

'Please sit down Mr Hunter, I am just going to speak into this machine to identify our conversation.' He switched it on and began,

'This is Sergeant Sullivan of the 23rd Precinct.' He gave the date and time of the interview with Mr Hunter following his identification of the female body as that of his housemaid Anna. He continued,

'Mr Tom Hunter, I understand that the young woman Anna is your live-in housemaid.'

'Yes, she has been with me for about three

months.'

'What was your relation with her?'

'I b-beg your pardon,' stammered Tom; 'I don't understand,' and then collecting his thoughts said,

'I don't think that's any business of yours. Am I under arrest?'

'No, not at all, I am just trying to eliminate you from my enquiry. Could you please answer the question?' Tom suddenly felt a cold shiver of fear that he could be a suspect.

'I would like to call my lawyer please. I am not prepared to answer any more questions without her being present.' He blurted out.

The Sergeant turned to the machine, shrugging his shoulders.

'Interview with Mr Hunter terminated. Mr Hunter you will attend my office in town with your lawyer tomorrow morning without fail,' he barked.

Abigail was not in her office when Tom rang. She returned his call after a few minutes.

'Tom what's the problem, you sounded very bad?'

'Abigail could you come round, it's urgent please.'

'Yes, of course, where are you now?'

'I am at the mortuary. Anna has been found dead badly beaten up. I have just identified the body. I can't believe it.'

'Tom go straight home. Don't speak to anyone and I will meet you there. We have some hard talking to do.'

Tom was at his front door when she rang the bell. Taking her coat he followed her into his lounge.

'Now Tom, what's this all about? You said you identified a body in the mortuary this afternoon. Are you sure it was Anna?'

'Yes, I have no doubt,' he said.

'Good God, I can't believe it. Are you all right Tom?'

'Sergeant Sullivan wants to interview me. I think he suspects that I did it.' Tom swallowed, 'I said I wouldn't answer any questions without you being present. He wants to see us in his office tomorrow morning.'

'God, what a mess,' Abigail muttered as she poured herself a Gin and Tonic.

'When did you last see Anna alive?'

'Yesterday morning as I was leaving for work.'

'How did she seem?'

'Well I have to tell you that things haven't been good between us ever since she learned that our marriage wouldn't be recognised and that she would have to return to Mexico. It seemed to make her lose control. She just went crazy.'

'How do you mean, crazy?'

'Well, she stopped doing anything, no

housework, no shopping no cooking and just lay in bed or on the couch. I tried to reason with her but it made no difference. Then she began to go out all night and come back in the morning very much the worse for wear. Drunk and or drugged, it was terrible to see her out of control. One night I followed her. She went into one of the smaller red light areas and stood around talking. She seemed to know some of the Spanish-speaking women. She was drinking and injecting I think. When I confronted her she simply told me to mind my own business. I didn't know what to do.'

The next morning Abigail and Tom arrived at the 23rd Precinct Police station and were directed to the Sergeant's Office.

'We know the way thank you,' said Abigail. They knocked on his door and entered. Sergeant Sullivan looked up from his desk at Tom.

'I have asked to see you Mr Hunter because I have reason to believe that you may be implicated in the death of Anna X.'

'Sergeant, let's get on with it. Please ask my client anything you want,' snapped Abigail.

'Mr Hunter, what was your relationship with the deceased?' Tom turned to Abigail who nodded.

'She was employed as my live-in housemaid.' he admitted.

'Did you have sex with her?' asked the Sergeant.

Tom stuttered,

'N-no definitely not.'

'I see, because the word on the street is that you had regular relations with her. Is it true that you told her that you would marry her?'

'Yes. But that was because I wanted access to her son Innocent.'

'Surely you didn't need to offer marriage in order to see him did you?'

'Tom you don't need to answer that question,' interrupted Abigail. Tom felt cornered. He didn't want to tell the Sergeant that Anna was an illegal immigrant and that if she were repatriated she would take the boy with her.

Abigail continued,

'Sergeant, what has this got to do with Anna's death?'

'OK, Mr Hunter when did you last see the deceased alive?' Asked the Sergeant accepting the point.

'Yesterday morning I told you that before. She had begun to go out regularly at night. I tried to stop her but she ignored my advice. That night I was worried so I followed her to the Red light area and saw her talking to some of the street woman. I spoke to her and tried to bring her home but she told me to go away so I returned home. She was found some hours later.'

Anna had begun to realise that she might be

sent back to Mexico without her son and that all her efforts to start a new life in the US would have been wasted. Desperate to forget her plight and finding some alcohol in Tom's home, she had secretly started drinking. She needed some excitement in her life and had found her way to the Red Light area where other Mexican women were living. She had begun soliciting punters and was making some good money, which gave her some independence. She hoped eventually to get enough money to run away. She had a secret plan to kidnap her son and escape with him. On the day when she was attacked she had left home late and was standing on the street when a large black limousine stopped. The driver invited her to get in for business. He drove to a deserted area outside town where they had sex. When she had asked for the money, he responded,

'Your dirty bitch, women like you should be locked up so that you can't tempt god fearing men.' Pushing her out of the car, she tumbled into the road. He turned, slammed the car door and drove off. Alone cold and frightened she began to walk towards the city lights. The sound of her steps echoed in the silence and then she heard others, footsteps in step with her own.

She stopped and they stopped. She turned around but could see nothing in the gloom. Continuing she began to walk faster, she struggled to get away but then she felt several blows to her

face and head. She put up her hands to avoid further injury. She screamed but no one was there to hear her. She then began to feel faint, voices and sounds became vague, there were flashing lights, the world seemed to be spinning faster and faster. Then everything went black, silence and she lapsed into unconsciousness.

The inquest was held a week later at the Law courts presided by Justice Williams. Present were the coroner who had performed the post mortem, Sergeant Sullivan who was in charge of the police investigation, Tom and Abigail. Striking the desk several times with his gavel, Justice Williams called order.

'I call Sergeant Sullivan to present the facts of this case.'

'Thank you your Honour.' he began. 'On the relevant night, at about 11 pm I was called to the Red Light area near the East Hudson River where the body of a young woman had been found. When I arrived she was lying on the pavement, she had been battered to death. A crowd had gathered to stare at the body. An ambulance was called and she was taken to the local hospital where death was confirmed.

'The body was then taken to the mortuary where it was identified by Mr. Hunter as that of Anna X. A post- mortem examination was carried out on the same day by Dr Oliver Green.'

'Thank you Sergeant, you may sit down.'

'Would Dr Green please take the stand. Now Doctor, you are a medically qualified pathologist?'

'Yes, your Honour.'

'You carried out a post mortem on the deceased.'

'Yes, your Honour.'

'Please tell us your findings.'

'The body was that of a young woman about 17 years of age. She was 5ft 2" tall and weighed 98 pounds. She was well nourished and had no scars or tattoos. There were rings in the nostrils and ear lobes. The general examination was normal.'

'Doctor could you get to the relevant findings, please.'

'Yes your honour, there were extensive soft tissue and bony injuries to the head, neck and face. X-rays showed extensive fractures of the bones of the skull and face.'

'In your opinion what was the cause of death?' asked the Coroner.

'Death was due to blood loss and brain damage. These injuries are consistent with blunt force caused by blows from a clenched fist and kicks. Finally forensics' examination found fresh semen internally although there was no sign of sexual violence.'

'Thank you doctor.'

'Would Mr. Hunter please take the stand?'

'Mr. Hunter, I believe that Anna X was an employee of yours?'

'Yes, your Honour, she was my live-in housemaid. She had been with me for about three months.'

'Do you have any idea why she resorted to prostitution when she had a good job with you? Tom looked at Abigail who nodded.

'I don't really know. She seemed happy enough in the job and I think I paid her well. The job was not heavy, she just had to look after the apartment and me.'

'I see and is there anything else you would like to tell the court?'

'I don't understand the line of your questioning?'

'Well Mr Hunter, let me lay it out for you. A middle-aged man living with a young attractive woman always raises questions about their relationship.

Abigail raised her hand.

'Yes Ms. Johnston, you have a question?' Mr. Justice asked.

'Yes, your Honour, what has my client's personal life got to do with this inquest?'

'Aren't you being a bit naïve Ms. Johnston? Your client's the prime suspect,' replied Justice Williams rather irritated by her question. Abigail suddenly went cold and doubts entered her mind.

'Justice Williams may I speak to my client?' requested Abigail.

'Yes Ms. Johnstone. We will have a short recess and reconvene in fifteen minutes.' The court rose as Mr. Justice left the room.

'Tom let's talk outside,' whispered Abigail. Sitting in a small side room, Tom enquired,

'What's going on Abigail? I don't understand. What's the Justice getting at?'

'Tom are you being deliberately slow. You heard what the Justice said. Can't you see that you're the prime suspect.'

'That's ridiculous, I tried to protect her.' begged Tom.

'I know but the facts point in a different direction. You had a motive for killing her. She was in the way of you and the boy and by your own statement she had become slovenly and lazy.'

'But I didn't kill her. I couldn't kill someone you know that Abigail, don't you?'

The court reconvened.

'Now Ms Johnston. Have you or your client anything more to tell the court?'

'No your Honour.'

Mr Justice sat for a moment going over his papers and then stood up.

'It is the verdict of this inquest that Anna X died from injuries sustained when she was attacked by a person or persons unknown.'

As Tom and Abigail left the court, Sergeant Sullivan hissed,

'Hunter, you and your girlfriend, won't get

away with this I promise you.'

Abigail was reminded that the wheels of justice grind slowly when three weeks late she was asked to attend Justice William's office. Unlike her's it was sumptuous. A large well lit room with an antique Persian carpet on the floor; drop crystal chandeliers and wall-to-wall mahogany bookcases. Behind an enormous mahogany desk sat the Judge outlined by the light from a picture window through which could be seen a well-tended garden. Abigail was momentarily blinded by the light and could only see him in shadow.

'Ah my dear, may I call you Abigail. I have some news that might interest you and your client. It refers to the unfortunate case of Anna X. No doubt you remember it? What I have to say to you is sub judice. The forensics have performed a DNA test on the semen and found two separate samples, one recent and one older. They are looking for the man or men.'

'Would your client be prepared to have a DNA test to exclude him?'

'I am sure he would. He wants to get on with his life and not have this thing hanging over him. I will arrange for him to come to the laboratory.'

A few days later Tom and Abigail were having supper at Sister's Cuisine near her office. They were at the desert stage when Abigail broached the subject of a DNA test. She decided

that the only way was to ask the question outright. She felt confident enough in their relationship not to be afraid.

'Tom, I saw Justice Williams a few days ago. He told me that Forensics identified the DNA of the semen in Anna's vagina and they are looking for the man. They would like you to have the test.'

Tom stiffened and looked at her.

'A DNA test, what for? You know I had nothing to do with her murder don't you?'

'Yes of course, but the police don't, that's why they want you to have it.'

Tom was thinking fast. He had had sex with Anna on the morning of the day she was found dead. He didn't use a condom but was careful he thought, so would his DNA still be identifiable? He felt trapped. If he declined the test he would be deemed guilty, if he had the test it might show up his DNA. He needed time to think but Abigail was sitting opposite him waiting for his answer.

'Look Abigail, I'm having a bit of a problem with this test. I don't know why but something is saying to me not to have it. I know that I am innocent so why do I have to prove it?'

Abigail was stunned by his answer. She assumed that he would just go ahead with it and it would all be over. She was puzzled. Had he something to hide?

Tom kissed Abigail good night at her front door and got back into his car. As he drove off he

thought about the evening. She had not referred to his decision again but was clearly both disappointed and confused. He needed to be certain that his secret would not be revealed. He didn't know how he would face Abigail if it was, he would be so ashamed. Tom suddenly remembered what he did last time he was in this quandary.

Three days later he was back home in his old room. His Mum knew that he had a serious problem to resolve but she didn't rush him to tell her. She waited until he was ready to talk. It was late on the second evening that Tom explained.

'I don't know what to do. I'm so scared that it will be my DNA.'

'Tom, listen to me did you kill the girl?'

'No, mum no, of course I didn't.'

'Then you have nothing to be afraid of. But if you love Abigail and she loves you, you must tell her the truth.'

Tom had chosen their favorite restaurant Rao's overlooking the river.. They were having coffee when he decided to confess.

'Abigail,' he began, 'I know you have been puzzled by my reluctance to have my DNA tested; there's a reason. I had been sleeping with Anna and was frightened that the test would reveal my DNA, I'm sorry I am so deeply ashamed.'

Abigail almost choked on her coffee. She looked at him not immediately able to take in what he had

said.

'You did what? You couldn't have Tom, tell me it isn't true. Tell me? I don't believe you could've fallen for that child, she's young enough to be your daughter.' Her voice was rising as she became increasingly angry.

'You're a monster, a monster.' she shouted, I never want to see you again!' Getting to her feet she glared at him and then grabbing her bag rushed out the restaurant bumping into a waiter. Tom watched her as she left. He sat staring at the door through which she had walked; his life in ruins. He had humiliated a sweet woman whom he admired and liked.

He left his coffee, paid the bill and walked out into the night. There was a slight drizzle but he ignored it as he walked along the now empty sidewalk. His mind was in a whirl. He dreaded going back to his empty apartment still full of the memory of Anna. He realised he had become very fond of her but that was now all history. He stopped at a coffee stall overlooking the river and watched the water streaming by glistening in the light from the other bank.

'Excuse me Sir, I am closing up,' said the stall owner beginning to clear the counter. Tom moved on and found himself near Marcus Garvey Park. Looking up he saw a light in Abigail's office. She must have gone back to her office he thought. Almost mechanically he pressed her doorbell.

'Who is it?' came her anxious voice.

'It's me Tom, I need to talk to you.'

'Go away I don't want to ever see you or talk to you. Go away,' her voice echoed across the deserted park.

'Please, I must talk to you, please.' The door suddenly clicked and he pushed it open. He climbed slowly up the familiar stairs and stood in her open door way. She was standing by the window her eye make-up staining her cheeks.

'I look a mess,' she whimpered. He gathered her in his arms kissing her eyelids, her cheeks and her neck.

'I'm so sorry, Abigail, I never wanted to hurt you, that's the last thing I wanted to do, please forgive me. I don't want to live without you. Can you ever forgive me.' Slowly her sobbing eased and she relaxed in his arms.

'It came as such a shock Tom. That you, you of all people could have done that.' She couldn't bring herself to say the words.

'It's going to take me a long time to get over this, if I can.' Wiping her tears, she added,

'I think we shouldn't see each other. I need time to think things over and decide what I want.'

The search for Anna's killer continued. More and more forensic information was amassed and it was assumed that she had been killed by one of her clients. Police Inspector Blythe was assigned to

the case. An experienced detective he relished the challenge of piecing together the disparate evidence until he had a coherent picture. The police had begun a search for men using the local girls and very soon they had eliminated almost all of them. One name kept on coming up. It appeared that one of the girls had seen Anna getting into a black saloon and got a brief glimpse of the man. She described him as well-built, middle aged and with an Irish accent. The area had a lot of people of Irish descent so this wasn't of help. No one remembered the make or number of the car.

The DNA tests revealed the same DNA profile on Anna's face and arms, which must have come from the contact between her and the killer. The net was closing in on one man, a local man, of Irish descent who lived alone and had no children.

One early morning the SWAT team broke into Sergeant Sullivan's house, searched it and found a stained shirt and trousers together with shoes. An attempt had been made to wash them but enough stain had remained. DNA tests confirmed that the stain was Anna's. Sullivan was arrested and although pleading his innocence, at a short trial he was found guilty and imprisoned for life.

Tom's life collapsed after Abigail broke with him. But he never forgot Inocent and continued to see him regularly. The boy was now a 1 year old,

talking and fast becoming a handsome boy. His future was still unclear. During one of his visits, Tom took Matilda aside.

'You know I still want to adopt Inocent. Do you think it's the right time to apply again to the Adoption Society?

'Yes, I think he is ready to start a new life. He's a fine boy and I know he looks forward to your visits. Tom knew he had to pluck up courage to contact Abigail to help him adopt Inocent. He knew that it was not going to be easy.

Abigail was in her office working late when she received a phone call. A gruff voice hissed,

'The job's done. I wanna collect.'

'OK, the money's in the agreed place.' She replied. 'Now I don't want to hear from you again.' The telephone went dead.

By coincidence Tom was phoning her at the same time but the line was engaged. He waited and called again. He was pleasantly surprised when she answered the phone.

'Hello Tom. How nice to hear from you. Of course I will help you with the adoption.'

Tom wasn't to know that she had been thinking about him and wondering how to contact him without making it seem that she was chasing him. She had thought long and hard about the past and had decided to give him a second chance. Tom wasn't certain how to greet her but she took

the initiative and kissed him on both cheeks.

'You look well Tom, how is the job going?' Abigail asked.

'Fine I had a promotion since we, um, last met. I am now Software manager. How have you been? Busy I hope?'

'Yes, mainly child work.' She paused, 'I guess you have come about adopting Inocent?'

'Yes, I really want to get on with it and let him grow up in a stable home.'

'You remember I tried to explain, that single person adoption has become easier in recent years because of the existence of increasing numbers of single parents either through divorce or bereavement. Society has begun to accept the idea that while not what it would like, single parents can provide a stable happy home for a child.'

As he listened to Abigail, he became increasingly optimistic.

'The first thing you need to do Tom is to complete an application form detailing your past medical and social history, your job etc. Then we need to carry out a complete Home Study. I'll arrange for a social worker to assess your home to see whether it is suitable for a small child. Did you decide which room would be his bedroom?'

'Yes, the smaller room at the front. I have had it redecorated. I also got a cot and a table, just in case. You should come and see it, I'm sure he will love it.'

'Tom, please don't get too excited. It's still a long way before we can go to court and present your case. Even if all your documents are passed, you may still not get custody. It all depends on the Judge; some are very helpful but others not at all.'

The social worker, allocated to carry out the Home Study report, was a woman in her mid fifties. She was very thorough and visited on several occasions usually without warning. She asked Tom a lot of questions about his interests and activities. She was from the old school and he soon began to feel that she disapproved of a man without a woman adopting a child.

Finally the day came for the court hearing. It was held in the same Juvenile court that had heard Anna's case a year before. As she entered the court, Abigail was aware of the last time she had been there; it brought back a lot of memories. The court officials had assembled. The court officer called silence and Tom was called to the stand. He went through the usual formalities of giving his name address and of taking the oath. The State Officer began,

'Mr Hunter, you have applied to the court to adopt the child Inocent who is at present in the care of a local children's home. You have completed the required documentation including a Home Study, which was satisfactory. Please tell the court why you as a single man should be given custody of this child.'

'Sir, it was chance meeting that brought this little boy into my life. I had no idea when I found him over a year ago that he would transform my life but that is what has happened. I have visited him on an almost daily basis and have formed a loving bond with him, so much so that I cannot imagine my life without him. It is usually believed that only a mother or a woman can build such a bond with a child but I want to assure you that that is not the case. A man has the same maternal feelings; I use the word *maternal* rather than *paternal* so as to remove the bias that that word can create. I love Inocent like a son and want to share my life with him and give him every opportunity to develop into a mature stable loving man.' He paused.

'Your honour, I have a representative Ms. Johnston. I would like to call on her to speak on my behalf.'

'Would Ms. Johnston please take the stand,' said the Chairman.

'Thank you your Honour, I have known the applicant for about 12 months as his legal advisor. I can vouch that he has an unblemished character, a clear past and a stable home and occupation. I have read the glowing testimonials from his friends and colleagues with which I concur. I believe he is a suitable applicant to adopt the boy.'

'Thank you Ms. Johnston. We will now adjourn and discuss the application and will return with our answer after lunch.' Abigail stepped down

from the stand and returned to her seat. She collected up her papers and was about to leave when Tom stopped her.

'Thanks Abigail, I really appreciate what you have done for me.'

'Tom, I was only telling the committee the truth.'

'Would you have lunch with me please. I need to talk to you? Over lunch in a small coffee bar, Tom pleaded his case,

'Abigail I have thought of you every day since we parted. I know what I did was wrong. I am so sorry that I hurt you. I love you and want you to be my wife.'

Abigail initially said nothing. She had missed him and had been tempted to ring him on many occasions but didn't. Slowly a smile appeared on her face. She reached out and touched his hand,

'Tom, I have missed you too. Let's start again. I would like a trial engagement. Let time decide what we do.'

They returned to the court to await the officials. After several more minutes the committee filed in and sat at the front table. The chairman rose.

'Mr Hunter we have given your application detailed attention and I must tell you that the members are divided so I am required to give the final decision. In view of your gender and age, I regret that I cannot support your application. It is

denied. You do have a right of appeal if you can provide new evidence.

Tom was crushed. He was holding out great hopes after the glowing testimonials. Abigail saw him go pale. She rushed to him and hugged him.

'Tom it's all right. We will appeal, don't worry.'

Tom continued to visit Inocent and saw him grow into a sturdy young man. No one had come forward to adopt him but as time passed, Tom became increasingly pessimistic.

'There must be something we can do. I can't bear the thought that he's going to grow up in an Institution,' he had said to Abigail one evening as they were dining in town. Abigail had been doing a lot of thinking. Despite Tom's earlier inexcusable behaviour she could see that he was an admirable man in every way and was beginning to have second thoughts about her refusal to accept his earlier wish to marry her. The more they saw each other the more Abigail found herself thinking about him. She had one major hurdle to overcome. She knew that he wanted to adopt Inocent and that he would have a much better chance if he were married. Could that be the only reason he wanted to marry her? The more she thought about it the more difficult it became to decide. After some soul searching she had made a plan. It was a tough plan and one that she had reservations about but she could see no other way.

New Year's Eve was close and she decided to have a party at her home and would naturally invite Tom. It would be a small intimate affair with some of her family and some colleagues from the bar. She planned to cater it herself and show her culinary skills. It would have an Italian flavour. She would serve a hot Minestrone soup with ciabatta bread, a wide variety of cold and hot starters, pastas and finish with zabaglione served chilled with strawberries. The guests had arrived early and the party was going well so that they lost count of time until her sister shouted out,

'Its almost midnight,' and they all began the count down, five, four, three, two and then the chimes from Times Square rang out on the television. Tom grabbed Abigail and kissed her,'

'Happy New Year darling. Will you marry me? I love you.'

'Yes, yes Tom,' and then taking a deep breath she said, 'I have one request,'

'Name it, anything,'

'I don't want us to adopt Inocent, I want my own family, please?'

Tom couldn't believe his ears. Abigail was asking him to abandon Inocent. After all he had gone through. He had set his heart on adopting him and now he was being asked to let him go, to decide between him and Abigail.

'You can't ask me to do that, how could you?' He begged. Abigail gritted her teeth. This was the

hardest thing she had ever done in her life but she found the strength and somehow knew that she had to hold fast. Tom's heart was bleeding. He knew he loved Abigail but to give up Inocent, it was too much to bear.

'Don't decide now,' she told him as they kissed goodbye.

Tom let himself into his house and sat in the darkened lounge letting the light from the lamp posts outside illuminate the room. Fighting back tears he tried to imagine his life without Inocent. Why? Why is she doing this? She knows how I feel about the boy. Is she trying to punish me?

The following day he visited Inocent, who seeing him enter the nursery shouted, 'Tom, Tom.' Tom spent several hours with him trying hard not to show his feelings.

He had at last made up his mind. He had to move on with his life. As soon as he could he arranged to meet Abigail at their regular restaurant. He arrived early and watched for her as she parked her car. He went out to greet her. He knew what he was going to say,

'Abigail, I love you and want to marry you. I have said my farewells to Inocent and am ready to share my life with you and without him if you will still have me?'

Abigail clasped him around the neck and kissed him.

'Yes Tom, yes I will,' and hand in hand they went into the restaurant. As they were having their desert, Abigail handed him an envelope.

'What's this? He asked.'

'Open it please, Tom,' she said.

He opened the envelope and read the message.

My darling Tom, I had to ask you to abandon Inocent in order to reassure myself that it was me you really loved and wanted to marry and it was not in order to be able to adopt Inocent. You have shown me what I needed to know. I share your love of Inocent and want him to be part of our lives.'

Tom's eyes filled with tears as he read the letter. He turned to Abigail but had no words to express how he felt.

Later Tom and Abigail were married with Inocent now aged five as their pageboy.

FOISTED

The plane had been about two minutes into its flight to the Canary Islands and was still climbing sharply, when Manu panicked, thinking that it would fall backwards, he instinctively held on to the seat in front to stop himself from sliding. The plane had then levelled off and the engine roar had reduced to a comfortable purr. He had relaxed and settled down for a quiet journey, when he had overheard a conversation that was to change his life.

Born in India to a European mother and an Indian father, Manu was brought up in the sprawling mass of Bombay, now Mumbai. He was the youngest of three sibs, an older brother and sister both of whom became musicians while he was drawn to the miracle of the living world.

From an early age, animals and plants had fascinated him. He remembered going into a wild overgrown park near his home, lying on the wet ground and watching that diminutive world unfold. He became awestruck at the lines of worker ants each carrying a load larger and he suspected heavier than itself. No obstacle was too high or too large. They would simply walk over or around it knowing instinctively where they were going. He saw beetles scurrying along, their shiny black carapaces gleaming in the sun.

He had learned that it was one of the longest

existing species in the world. The Egyptians had deified the dung beetle. The round piece of dung that they pushed along in front of them had become symbolic of the earth and its movements. Then Manu came upon mammals. His first was a guinea pig, a gift from a doting uncle. It lived in a special cage with a run allowing it to run into the light. He watched it nibbling at grain and corn that he fed it. It seemed so clever avoiding the unhealthy seeds. Then rabbits came along. He loved them with their industry and intelligence. He would sometimes imagine that he was a rabbit and used to hop about on his back legs, sniffing everything. His parents used to watch in amazement doing nothing to deter his obvious love of the animal world.

It was therefore inevitable that as he grew older, he would be drawn to biology and later to medicine. The family moved to England when his father was appointed Professor of History at Leeds University and later, when he was appointed Vice Chancellor of London University, the family moved to London. Living in North London, Manu was able to continue his love of nature rambling on Hampstead Heath.

He was on his way to the Canary Islands to stay with some medical friends to have some time to think. He had become disenchanted with the NHS and its emphasis on treatment at the expense of prevention, which he knew instinctively, was a

more effect way of controlling disease. The conversation he overheard was, he soon realised, between two scientists. They were talking about a new treatment for skin cancer, which was being developed, in a small community living on an island off the Atlantic coast of Spain. The island he later learned was called La Gomera, one of the smallest of the Canary islands, an atoll born of a volcanic eruption 20 million years earlier along the Atlantic fault line.

Manu strained his ears to hear more and overheard snatches of conversation, 'Melanoma....new amazing results- are using volcanic rock -acts as a DNA activist'... He heard that the two researchers were planning to travel to a remote village on the western side of the island to investigate the rumour. The skin disease they were investigating was a rare but often fatal skin cancer that began as a mole and then spread.

Sadly Manu already knew a lot about this vicious disease as an uncle of his living in Australia had contracted it. He had come to London in desperation as the disease spread throughout his system but to no avail. By the time he was seen in the London clinic, his disease was terminal. Manu was devastated. It didn't seem possible that a mole no larger than a small pea could by exposure to sunlight change into such a malignant cancer and wreak such havoc. There and then he decided to commit himself to trying to understand and

hopefully find a treatment, he knew enough not to talk about a cure.

Manu turned round to see who they were but it was only when he got up to go to the toilet that he had a chance to see them clearly. One was a young woman in her thirties with dark brown hair cut short to frame her beautiful wide-open face with blue eyes and dark brown freckled skin. He caught her eye and smiled. She returned his smile and then looked away to continue the conversation with her colleague, an older man with a rugged face topped by a head of white hair and a closely clipped moustache concealing a well repaired harelip. Manu couldn't help noticing the slight residual deformity of the nose, a common flaw linked with the defect. The man had a distinct American accent and may have come from Boston or somewhere near by.

Manu sat in the toilet pondering how he should go about meeting them. He was desperate to hear more about their research and what they planned to do when they arrived in la Gomera. He considered various tactics; he could just go up and introduce himself; he could wait until they arrived at Tenerife and hope to chat to them on way out of the airport or most cowardly of all he could follow them at a discreet distance and hope that an opportunity would arise to allow him to speak to them. Meanwhile someone was rattling the toilet door so he made a snap decision. He would go up

and introduce himself.

He left the toilet, apologised to the person waiting for being so long and walked up the aisle stopping where they were sitting. The young woman looked up and with some trepidation he introduced himself.

'Excuse me,' he said, 'I couldn't help overhearing your conversation about Melanoma and a possible new treatment. I am a postgraduate doctor at a London Hospital and have recently been working in Dermatology looking at the challenge of Melanoma. I would be very interested to hear more about your work if you would share it with me.'

'What a coincidence', she said and turned to her partner, 'John, did you hear what this young man has just said? He's a doctor, who has been working in Skins,' and turning back to him she asked,

'What's your name?'

'Manu Gombe' he replied. I'm working at St Chelsea Hospital in Westminster. I'm taking a short holiday to get away from the rat race.'

John interrupting, looked up and said,

'Sure, we'd be happy to, wouldn't we Suzie?'

'Yes,' she said.' We've some time before the ferry so after we land, let's meet in one of the coffee bars and talk.'

'I'd like that,' Manu said, smiling broadly. It would be a further four hours before they began their descent. He sat pondering about the forthcoming meeting and wondered what he might

hear from them.

He remembered that moment when he first learned that there maybe something medical that could be done about melanoma. At present the only treatment was surgery with wide excision or radiotherapy, which often left unsightly scars. He was in the hospital Laboratory having a brain-storming with the chief and a young graduate who had recently joined them. It turned out that the newcomer was born in La Gomera and after qualifying in Sheffield had returned to his home for a holiday. It was during that time that he had apparently heard about a local treatment for Melanoma. He had waited for a pause in our discussion and suddenly stood up. In faltering English he said,

'I have heard from some people in my home at La Gomera that a farmer was using a paste made of ground-up lava. He was applying it to early Melanomas and had produced some remarkable results.'

Manu listened, spell bound. Is it possible? He thought. He and his colleagues knew too well that it is not often that something simple works in medicine so they were all rightly suspicious about what the young man was saying. He had reminded them that nature gives up her secrets very reluctantly. He had suggested that perhaps it was because she had been at it so long and had had millions of years to build up layer upon layer of

modifications so that the scientist of today approaching the problem struggles to untie nature's complexity. Manu was learning that simple explanations were rarely correct.

The plane landed with a bump and a loud roar as the reverse braking system brought it to a halt giving Manu a sudden jolt. Thanking the staff, he left the aircraft, and went down the aluminium steps onto the tarmac keeping an eye on the two ahead of him. They were quickly through security and passport control and descended into a large hall where the luggage carousels were already beginning their weaving motion. He checked his flight on the overhead monitor and collecting a trolley, made his way to number three where he could see luggage already moving. He spied the couple and made his way towards them.

'Hi, that wasn't too bad,' Manu said and they nodded. He spied his bag as it bounced onto the carousel and grabbed it as it passed.

'I'll wait for you after customs and we can go together, he said to Suzie who was anxiously looking for her luggage. He knew the feeling, wondering if it will appear, having had his luggage lost on more than one occasion. He saw her face light up excitedly, pointing, she shouted,

'There it is.' He saw a large red case with a blue ribbon attached to it. As it passed by he grabbed it, lifted it free and placed it on her trolley.

'Thanks very much, I am always a bit

anxious that I will miss it or that it won't arrive.'
Meanwhile he saw John rescue his case and signal to them to carry on. They passed through the green channel and soon found a quiet corner of a café and settled themselves.

'Let me introduce us, 'this is Dr Suzie O'Brien and I am Dr John D'Souza,' said John. 'We both trained at Johns Hopkins Medical School in Baltimore.' Manu knew Johns Hopkins; it was one of the premier Medical centres in the USA. It was founded in 1873 by Johns Hopkins, a Baltimore merchant and banker. He bequeathed seven million dollars on his death, at the age of seventy-eight. The fortune was to be used to establish two centres in his name, a University and a Medical school, which have remained to this day, foremost institutions in the world.

'We are both now on the staff of Bioderm an Anglo-American group working on Skin Cancer. Our group has just received a UN grant to research melanoma. We are on our way to La Gomera to find out whether there is any truth in the rumours that have been circulating that they have a cure for it. I take it from what you said in the plane that you have the same interest?'

'Yes, I have done some work in our skin department where a Doctor from the island was also working. I was going to the Canaries for a break. I have some friends who have an apartment here but when I overheard your conversation, I

couldn't resist finding out more.'

'What was your medical background before you did skins? John asked.

'I went to Marlborough College; it is what you would call a private school. I boarded until 16 then left much against my parent's wishes. I was not happy and didn't seem to be getting anywhere. I then went to a cram school and got my A levels with high enough grades to apply for Medical school. I qualified and have now completed three years internship,' Manu replied.

'What have you heard about this treatment?' asked John.

'Not much, only that they use a paste made up of lava which is spread on the lesion. My colleague said that within a few hours the lesion changes its appearance. The swelling gets smaller and the surrounding skin less angry That's all I know. No! Wait, he said something about changing the growth pattern of the DNA.'

'Yes, we've heard the same but we don't understand how they determined that?' said Suzie.

'Apparently there is a machine at the International Observatory in Gomera that can 'see' what is going on.' Manu added.

He sat thinking about what had been said. He was very excited. He would love to join them even just to go along for the ride and find out what was really happening. But would they let him? Why should they let a complete stranger about whom

they knew nothing join them? After all if this turns out to be something big, there is a lot of money to be made and he could be an industrial spy who would steal the information and sell it to one of their competitors. How am I going to convince them of my bona fide credentials?

Meanwhile Suzie must have reached the same conclusion because she turned to John and said,

‘I would like to have a quick word with you John, Let’s go over there, pointing to another table and talk. I am sure Manu would excuse us, a moment, wouldn’t you?’ Manu nodded knowing full well what she wanted to discuss. Out of earshot, Suzie said to John in a whisper,

‘Manu wants to join us? Can we trust him? After all we really know very little about him, only what he tells us and it could all be made up. He could be working for one of our competitors. His story could all be a concoction.’

‘You’re right of course,’ said John, ‘but I have a feeling about him and we could do with someone prepared to document and keep our records. Let’s listen to what he has to say and then check upon him before we make a decision.’

Manu watched as they talked but couldn’t tell what their decision was. Then they got up and returned to his table.

‘OK,’ John said, ‘tell us about your background and why you want to join us.’ He told

them how he had become interested in skin disease after his uncle's death from Melanoma. They listened attentively, asking the occasional question but generally seeming to be interested.

Suddenly John, who was taking notes, got up and excused himself. Manu thought he was going to the toilet but in fact he went to a telephone and rang a UK hospital department.

'Hello! May I speak to personnel?

After a few minutes a woman's voice said,

'How can I help you?' John apparently had introduced himself and explained that Manu, one of their graduates wanted to join their research team. Could she confirm that he was a bona fide graduate of the college and be able to corroborate his story? She went away and after a further few minutes returned saying,

'Yes, Manu Gombe had been one of our medical student and had qualified three years ago and was currently working in Dermatology.'

John soon returned and whispered something to Suzie. She smiled and said

'Good that's settled then. You can join us, but we can't pay you anything, you know.'

The intercom suddenly came to life and a female voice announced that the ferry was due to leave in 10 minutes. They gathered up their things and together walked over to the quayside side where the boat was waiting. There was a line of passenger already climbing the gangplank and they

joined them. They were soon settled at a table in the lounge. It was big and bright with large picture windows on three sides. Tables and chairs were set out for breakfast. Manu could see several serving areas and smell bacon and toast. His mouth was watering, as he hadn't eaten for some while. He realised that they all had the same idea and looking at each other said in unison,

'Yes, let's get some breakfast.'

Breakfast was served at three counters, a cereal, milk, sugar and yogurt area with a do it yourself toaster, a cooked meal area comprising the usual eggs, bacon, sausages, mushrooms etc. and a third where drinks, tea coffee, chocolate, etc. were served. At each station they were given a bill, all of which were totted up and paid for at the cash register at the end of the counter. Carrying their now heavily laden trays they returned to their table. While his colleagues immediately began to eat from their trays, Manu set everything out neatly on the table before starting. They were obviously amused by his actions but said nothing. Manu thought it was a great start to the day. He was impatient to hear their plans but waited until they had finished their meal before he launched into his questions. He had so many. Before he could start, John must have sensed Manu's impatience because he began to outline the history of the project and their plans to resolve the mystery.

'Let me start by telling you how we began

this research,' he said. 'Suzie and I are basic scientist not doctors. We met at a conference in Boston where I was giving a paper on DNA and its significance in the causes of Cancer in general. On the same programme was a General Physician with an interest in skin cancer. He had seen a number of patients with Melanoma who had gone into remission following the application of a herbal medicine. He had described in detail four of these patients whom he had followed up for 5 years with no recurrence. They had all used a herbal cream containing lava from La Gomera. I was half listening when Suzie who I had only met the previous evening at the pre-meeting cocktail party jolted me. We were sitting together and I was dozing when she prodded me.

'Did you hear that,' she whispered, 'that's fantastic.'

'What?' I had said, not having heard a word of what the speaker had said.

'I'll tell you later,' and she began to scribble frantically in her notebook. I had looked over her shoulder but couldn't read her writing

'Later,' she had said, 'later, I will tell you everything.'

John had tried to follow the speaker but having missed the first part was only able to hear that the treatment had somehow altered the DNA and the cellular rate of growth. By this time he was inquisitive to know the full story so he waited

impatiently for the speaker to finish and then had whispered to Suzie

‘Let’s go and get a coffee. I want to hear what he had said while I was dozing.’

‘It was a fascinating paper. I almost can’t believe what he said. It seemed like a miracle.’ She had replied.

‘What are you talking about,’ He had said impatiently.

Suzie had got out her notes and scanned through them.

‘He said that his four patients all with secondary melanoma had all, yes! All responded dramatically to the treatment and that it had worked by altering the growing cells i.e. the cancer cells so that they reverted to their normal behaviour and what was amazing was, that this effect was seen in all the tumours throughout their bodies not just the skin lesion. It is as if the active agent was taken up by all the abnormal cells.

While Suzie was speaking, Manu was watching her face; it had lit up as if a glowing fire. Her eyes were shining and she was emphasising every word. What an extraordinary story, he thought. There must be a snag, miracles don’t happen certainly not in my lifetime and yet what he was hearing seemed to be some sort of miracle.

The intercom suddenly announced that they were nearing San Sebastian de La Gomera their destination. Car drivers were asked to return to

their cars while they packed up their belongings and joined a long queue of passengers waiting to disembark. On the quayside, John hailed a taxi and asked to be taken to a central hotel. Manu sat in the front seat. It was all happening too quickly. He was being carried along by the energy and drive of his new acquaintances.

‘What’s the plan?’ He asked.

‘Lets get settled in the hotel and then we can make a few enquiries. We are all tired and need time to rest.’ He nodded and they drove in silence to the city centre and stopped outside a small hotel.

‘This is the Metropolitan; it is a medium priced hotel but very comfortable,’ announced their driver. They checked in and went to their rooms.

‘Have a clean up and a rest and we will meet for dinner say seven?’ said John. Manu nodded and they parted. His room was on the fourth floor facing the garden. It was typical of many modern hotels, a rectangular room with a large picture window at one end and a modern en suite shower/toilet at the other. He pulled back the bed covers and lay down. He was soon fast asleep. A hammering at his door woke Manu. He looked at the time it was seven. He had forgotten to set his alarm and had overslept.

‘Sorry I fell asleep, I will be right down,’ he called out through the closed door.

‘OK see you downstairs. We will be at the bar.’ John replied. The bar was in subdued light

and stretched along the left side of a large reception room with coloured windows overlooking a brightly lit swimming pool. A few guests were still lazing in the pool. Manu found John and Suzie already into their first drinks.

‘Hi, said John, ‘what are you drinking?’

Manu thought for a moment and then settled for a beer. They were already on shorts but he wanted to keep a clear head and knew that if he started on shorts on an empty stomach he would soon be incoherent. They moved over to a table near the window. They were both very quiet, still tired like himself.

‘Look!’ He said, ‘we are all very tired and I for one am very hungry, why don’t we go and get some food and then discuss tomorrow’s plan?’ This seemed to be agreed and they moved into the dining room. They ate ravenously and the food worked. Everyone seemed calmer and ready to make plans. John started off.

‘From the information I have, we need to make for the south of the island near a place called La Dama which is a small village at the mouth of the Barranco de la Rajita. It’s about a two-hour drive. We need to take the major highway TF 713 and just beyond Roque de Agando we turn left and take the rough road.’

John was looking at a map as he spoke.

‘I’ve arranged for a hire car, which should be at the hotel tomorrow morning.’ He continued,

‘There’s a man they call Senor Dr Drago who will put us in touch with the farmer, who first collected the lava. After that, I think we will have to play it by ear. Apparently, others have been to see him but he’s become very secretive about where he found the stuff, and what he did about it.’

They finished their meal and turned in. Manu slept badly, as there was a lot of noise from the nearby disco, together with flashing lights from a neon sign on the other side of the road. Dawn came slowly. He was wide-awake and opening the curtains, looked out across the town and beyond. He could see the central hills of the national park in the distance. Despite no sleep he felt refreshed, excited and ready for the day.

Travelling by car in La Gomera was a strangely exhilarating experience coupled with moments of sheer panic. The road often no wider than one vehicle winded up and around the rocky outcrops and baranches, the name they gave to the deep ravines that radiate from the higher ground to the sea. One minute a breathtaking view of a valley and the blue sea beyond and the next, a hair-raising corkscrew bend with the front tyres seemingly hanging in space as the car careered around a bend. Manu fluctuated between wide-eyed disbelief at the beauty of the scenery and tightly closed lids so as not to see the sheer drop outside his window. Loud whoops of joy were interlaced with quiet moments almost of prayer as

they made their way towards the village.

It was about mid morning when they arrived at the second turning, sign marked for Playa de Santiago. The first was more direct but would have missed their destination, which was off the main road. Two miles along the road there was a right hand turn for Chipude. Along that road they would, they were assured; reach a left hand turning signed to Pavon and La Dama. Although called a regional road, it was more like one of those country roads in Yorkshire, hardly wide enough to allow a cart let alone a car.

The sign was tilted and seemed to point uphill but as it was the only road they followed it The road twisted and turned, at some places going very steeply downwards and at others it seemed to be ascending. Along the way they had tantalising views of the sparkling blue sea below. Following their map, they came to the left hand bend which directed them to Pavon and beyond to La Dama. They were now travelling on what the map called a paved road, even narrower than the previous regional road.

Manu was scanning the road ahead dreading the thought that they might meet an oncoming vehicle. He couldn't imagine what they would do. Meanwhile they were all getting very excited; their long trip was almost at an end. None of them knew what to expect. A sign to Chipude

appeared and they found themselves in a small village of about eight houses lining either side of the road.

Tall stone walled terraces were holding back the small raised gardens from cascading into the road. Beyond the houses were abundant green palm trees and a rainforest of bay trees. David stopped the car opposite a door on which was an enameled wall plate, which read 'Paradiso.' This is where he was told they would meet Señor Dr. Drago. No sooner had he read the name than a man appeared above the wall looking down on them. His appearance was initially quite overwhelming. Above average height, about 50 years of age, he wore loose fitting leather garments, which they later learned were made from goatskins. He had an unkempt dark beard with specks of grey, piercing blue eyes and a high forehead. He suddenly disappeared from view and next they heard the small carved wooden door creaking as he undid the bolts. It sounded as if it hadn't been opened for years.

'Good morning,' he said in perfect English. It was like a dream; the man standing in front of them had the appearance of what Manu imagined the Guanches would have looked like. They were thought to be the first known inhabitants of the Canary Islands having migrated to the islands sometime between the first and tenth century BC. The "Whistle" language of La Gomera Island was

considered to be a persistence of their language.

'I was told you were coming,' he continued, 'something about a treatment I think but please explain what you want. First come in. How rude of me not to invite you in right away.' We followed him up some short stone steps and entered a simple house with tiled floors and large windows. Through them could be seen the sea to one side and the mountains behind on the other. On the floor were several brightly coloured rugs.

'Please sit down,' he said, pointing to some large cushions which were lying on the floor. They lowered themselves gently onto the cushions, made themselves comfortable, and waited.

'I understand that you would like to meet the farmer who has developed a treatment for certain skin diseases. He has had a number of people wanting to meet him and has hidden away as he does not want to be the centre of so much interest,' said Dr Drago and he added,

'Why should I disturb his privacy for you?' Suzie and Manu turned to John, who was in effect their spokesman. He began,

'First of all, we would like to thank you very much for agreeing to see us. We are two scientists and a doctor, who are investigating the claim that the farmer has found a treatment for melanoma, a serious life-threatening skin disease. If it is true, his discovery could save thousands of lives. Melanoma has become almost an epidemic in white skinned

people living in hot climates.'

'I don't know anything about what he has found. All I know is that he has asked not to be disturbed,' replied the Doctor impatiently.

'Is there any way in which we could persuade you to change your mind and take us to him.' Dr. Drago paused for a moment looking at them one by one with his deep blue eyes. It was a strange experience as if he could read their minds and assess their genuineness. Suddenly he stood up and went to a telephone and rang a number. There was a pause and then he spoke. They were not able to understand what he was saying but after a short conversation in which he seemed to do most of the listening, he turned to them and said.

'The farmer Señor Philippides has had enough and does not want to be disturbed.' Suzie and Manu turned to look at John. He was no longer smiling and looked as if he was lost for words.

'That's very disappointing, we have come a long way and hoped that if his claims were true, we would be able to develop a treatment which would have enormous benefits to your people as well as other people in the world. Dr Drago shrugged his shoulders,

'I don't know what more I can do?'

'At least you could please tell us where he lives or take us to him and let us try and persuade him directly.' After a long pause the doctor agreed.

'Señor Philippides lives in a small farm high up in the hills near San Sebastian. It can only be reached on foot and is about a six-hour's walk from here. You reach the path by walking along the coast to the West crossing over the barranco,' he said pointing to his right, 'and then walking up a steep winding footpath for about 10 km. There you should find a sign to direct you. It is not an easy climb and you must be prepared to spend most of the day, so take food and water, and if you have some, bedding and a tent, as you may have to stay overnight. Now that's enough of that, let me offer you a drink. Let's relax and share this lovely day.'

Like Suzie and John, Manu was confused. At first, Dr Drago had said the farmer did not want to meet them and now he was giving them directions how to get to the farm. It all seemed very strange and Manu could see on the faces of the others that they shared his confusion at the uncertainty of their venture. Having finished their tea, they bade the good doctor farewell.

'Thank you very much Dr. Drago—you have been most helpful – can we give you something for your pains?'

'No, thank you. It's always a pleasure to help fellow scientists in our common search for a cure of serious illnesses. I was pleased to help,' and with that farewell, they returned to their car and drove back to the hotel.

It had been a confusing day, but not a total

failure. A further 10 Kms and they drove into the mountain village of Chipude. They learned that it was considered to be the oldest settlement on La Gomera. The main centre of activity of the town was a wide plaza surrounded by many bars and cafes. Towering above was La Fortaleza de Chipude, an eroded volcanic vent with an expansive summit plateau at 1241 metres, historically considered a holy place of sacrifice and named Argoday, meaning 'the powerful.' It was an appropriate name for the imposing 500m high cliff face above which was a flat top on which the original inhabitants were said to have erected not only stone circles, but also sacrificial altars.

They had been given the name of a small local residence called Apartamentos Nelly, a family house which had rooms. In front there was a lush garden with palm and orange trees surrounding a beautiful pool.

They easily found the hotel and checked in.

'Let's clean up, and meet for dinner at 7.30.' said John and he and Suzy headed for their rooms. Manu was still rather het up by the events and went to the bar, where he sat nursing a whisky and soda. He began to feel calmer and his confidence began to return. He eventually went to his room, still rather crestfallen, and depressed.

He should have known that it would not be straightforward. They were now in a strange situation. Suppose the farmer really refuses to see

them, thinking that they are trying to steal from him, and he brings out a gun for example. What would they do then? They could be arrested as common thieves. They were visitors and didn't know the customs of this island. They could find themselves in very serious trouble. Their visas say they are on holiday. What would they say to the police if they were stopped, and they asked what they were doing here and the Police found out that they were looking for a special sort of lava? Manu's imagination was running wild. He decided it was not particularly valuable worrying himself like that. He returned to his room and fell into a fitful sleep during which he had a strange dream about a cave in which there was a vein of the blue grey lava running along one side. He awoke suddenly, shaking and soaked in sweat.

What did it mean? He wondered. He showered, dressed and joined the others in the dining room. Manu took the opportunity of having a glass of local wine, and they toasted to the success of their endeavour. They sat in silence for a while each deep in thought. It looked like the whole expedition was about to grind to a halt and they seemed to have no way forward.

That evening they had a surprise visitor, a man of average height with a dark swarthy complexion, a small moustache and deep blue eyes. He had entered the bar obviously looking for someone. He went over and spoke to the barman

who then pointed to our table. He came over and introduced himself as Pedro Philipides the son of Señor Philippides, the farmer.

‘Excuse me,’ he said in broken English, you are looking for my father, yes?’ Suzie and Manu both looked at John, who nodded and said,

‘Yes, we would like to meet Señor Philipides and talk to him about the treatment that he is using.’

‘Many people have come to see him and he no longer wants to meet any more. They make promises but never return so he has decided not to see anyone else.’ Pedro said.

‘We have come a very long way to see your father. We are genuine scientists who wish to find a cure for skin cancer which we understand your father has found.’

‘Yes, it is true, he has been treating local people for some years with his medicine,’ said Pedro thoughtfully, ‘I wonder, mmm, maybe? I have an idea. Let us meet later today here in this café and I will give you his answer,’ and he was gone.

‘Phew! What do you make of that?’ Said Suzie breathlessly.

John and Manu looked at each other.

‘Is it possible he might change his mind?’

‘I think we can only hope, let's meet back here in about two hours time,’ Manu said and then went over to the barman,

‘If Pedro comes back before we do, please

let me know so that we can get back in time,' he said and gave him 20 pesetas?

Manu left the others and went to his room. He lay down and fell asleep. A hammering on his door awaked him. Pedro had returned. He dressed hurriedly and came down into the café. The others were already there. Pedro had apparently spoken to his father. What he had said they didn't know but the farmer had agreed to see them but only for an hour. They thanked Pedro enthusiastically and after another drink he bade farewell.

They were left stunned but elated. Suzie was the first to speak,

'Let's summarise what we've achieved,' she said.

'First, we have an interview with the farmer and second, we now know how to find him, but we haven't discussed what we should say or do at the meeting? Since we may be away for a few days we will need full camping essentials so let's arrange to get all the equipment tomorrow in town, and plan our trip for the following day, weather permitting.'

Everyone was in agreement, their spirits had improved and they had a good evening. Manu again had a poor night, but this was because of the loud raucous pounding rhythm from a bar nearby shaking his room. Furthermore the air conditioning was poorly maintained and had a loud rattle, which got worse, the higher the setting. Manu tried earplugs, but in the end he put his pillow over his

head, and eventually fell asleep. He seemed to have just fallen off when his alarm rang and he had to get up.

They met for breakfast and found out that there was a shop in town that could supply the equipment. John offered to go to buy what they needed, and Manu made his way to the supermarket for food and water.

On his return he found Suzie sitting on her own. He began,

‘I was thinking, I know very little about you, tell me how you got here, so to speak?’ Suzie paused.

‘I was born in Baltimore in Maryland on the outskirts of the city and was the middle child, with two brothers. I went to a local state school. From used to go for long walks on my own collecting bits of leaves, feathers and small pebbles.

‘So did I,’ interrupted Manu, ‘what a coincidence?’ Suzie continued.

‘Both my parents had come from an academic background. I attended the Friend's School of Baltimore, which was founded by the Quakers, and then got a scholarship to St John's Hopkins University, where I studied Chemistry. My true love was Biology and as soon as I could, I got a job at the world renowned John Hopkins Hospital working in the genetics department.’

‘That’s a great Hospital,’ added Manu.

‘Yes I was very lucky to get in. Initially I did a number of studies on Human genetics, and then was seconded to the Dermatology department where I became engrossed in the study of disorders of the skin, and in particular, melanoma. This took me to the meeting in Boston, where I met John. She explained to Manu that John was a real high flier, one of the youngest Professors at MIT in Boston.

‘We seemed to hit it off as soon as we met.’ As she spoke, a soft smile appeared on her face and Manu realised that she was very fond of John although she knew that he was already married and had a young family. Manu hoped that it would not cause any complications on their trip.

It was some hours later that they reassembled in the bar; fast becoming their favorite rendezvous to consider their next move. Manu arrived first and set up the drinks. He was now familiar with his companion’s alcoholic preferences. Suzie liked Buck’s Fizz with champagne, not the inferior white wine commonly used. John was a whisky buff and liked Black Label on ice. Manu’s favorite was a very chilled Tio Pepe. They agreed a plan.

The farmer lived in a house high up on the side of a hill above Chipude, the village on the Southwest side of the island. They would drive to

the nearest point and then walk the final 10 kms. None of them knew what the following day would bring as they said their goodnights and retired to bed for a 6 am start. Manu's mind was ablaze with excitement but there was also a tinge of fear as they were beginning an adventure, which might change all their lives.

A local man told them that the hill could be reached after passing a nearby abandoned farmhouse. On its right-hand side was a path ending in steps leading up the hill. A stone pyramid marked the start of the route. From there they could hike directly to the plateau, from which there is wonderful view of the barranco and surrounding area. He also recommended the Pension Sonia a small four-roomed cottage where they could stay the night. Manu could hardly contain his excitement, they now was so close to meeting the farmer and finding out whether there was any truth in his discovery about the lava.

They arranged to meet later that evening. Manu returned to his bedroom and stretched out on the bed. It had old-fashioned springs, which made a lot of noise when he turned over. The room was small and dark with no view apart from the wall next door, but it was cool and clean. Lying on the bed he suddenly had an idea. Initially, he rejected it but the more he thought about it the more he was attracted to it. As he listened to the two talking excitingly about the possible significance of this new

treatment, a thought had crept into his mind. He could get a sample of the material and rush it back to the skin unit in London. They already had a number of patients ready to be 'guinea pigs' as their disease had progressed beyond the current treatment. They could write a preliminary report for the Lancet and get the kudos. That would be fantastic. He pushed the thought away realising that he was being unprofessional and dishonest but then he could justify his plan on the basis that it would benefit his patients who were after all the most important part of his work.

The more he thought about it the more he believed it might work. So he began plotting how he would obtain the material and make some excuse to leave the other two so as to get back to England as quickly as possible, He could feign illness for example, get taken to a hospital and then sign him self out.

His alarm woke him unexpectedly. He was immediately wide-awake ready for the day, which could change his life. After a hurried breakfast, the haversacks were loaded and they set off. The air was cool and the lower fields still had some frost on them but this burned off rapidly as the sun rose over the island. They stopped after one hour for a drink and some chocolate and then began the steeper part of the climb. After a further hour, a small farmhouse came into view. Towering above it were the massive cliffs of the Table Mountain

enclosing the cult site La Fortaleza. Looking through his binoculars, John said that he could see a man attending to some cows in a barn.

‘That must be Señor Philippides,’ said Suzie. ‘He could be armed, we need to go carefully now and not take any chances.’

‘I’ll go up and see him, you stay here and come when I beckon,’ said John suddenly. They hadn’t discussed how they would approach the farmer but John’s suggestion made sense and they both agreed. He removed his haversack and handed it to Manu and then with a smile walked slowly towards the man. It took him about 5 minutes to get within 20 metres at which point they could see that the two men were talking. Then they saw John beckon to them and gathering up their things they set off to join him,

Later they would hear how as John was getting nearer to the barn, the farmer saw him and shouted,

‘Don’t come any nearer. Who are you and what do you want?’ He spoke with a Spanish accent but otherwise John could understand what he had said. John had raised his arms and replied,

‘I am one of the scientists your son told you about. My colleagues and I,’ he had said pointing to us who were just emerging from their hiding place, ‘would like to speak to you about your discovery.’

‘Oh! Yes, I remember, my son persuaded me against my better judgement. You want to talk to me

about the material? Come into the house.'

By this time Suzie and Manu had joined John and they all followed the farmer into his house. It was a typical Canaries' house with two rooms. Large animal skins probably from sheep hung from the otherwise bare stonewalls. The floor was made of large irregular stones some of which were unevenly placed. There was a small fireplace and a kitchen at one end, and a closed door at the other, which Manu presumed, led into the bedroom. The whole place had a dank animal smell as if it was shared by some of his cows and other animals. In the centre of the room was a stone table on which were a number of earthenware jars, together with some tools, a hammer, a chisel and a few others, which he didn't recognise.

'What do you want to know? The farmer began in broken English, standing with his legs apart by the fireplace. They looked at each other then John spoke.

'We have so many questions and as I know time is brief, let me start by asking you how you discovered the material? At this point Suzie took out her notebook and pen ready to take notes.

'What are you doing?' The farmer said, shouting at her.

'Taking some notes of the conversation so that we can recall them later'

'I don't want you to write anything, just listen,' he bellowed. Suzie surprised by his tone,

looked at John who nodded to her. She put her pad away.

The farmer began his explanation.

‘I didn’t, it was my grandfather. He was a Shaman in the village, highly regarded as a medicine man so my mother told me. I never knew him; He died before I was born. Apparently, a number of the villages developed sores on their hands, legs and faces that wouldn’t heal. They were black and spread. Lumps would appear in their necks, armpits and groins and within a few weeks they weakened, stopped eating, wasted away and died, She said it was terrible and no one knew what to do. My Grandfather tried a large number of herbs without success. Then he hit upon the idea of using the black larva, which makes up much of the island. He mixed it with water and added some herbs obtained from local plants to make a paste. Then he began to apply the paste to some of the villagers, the ones who hadn’t yet developed lumps in their necks.

At first nothing appeared to be happening and then in one or two patients, the lumps began to flatten and no longer increased in size. He treated 15 patients in all and 14 of them responded, only one failed to improve. As Manu listened he realised that this could be the most important advance in the treatment of skin cancer for a generation.

Meanwhile, Suzie was explaining that they would like to test the medicine on a large number of

patients with Melanoma to confirm his finding. Finally she asked if he would give us some of the paste to try on our patients in England and the USA.

While Suzie was talking Manu excused himself as if to go to the toilet. He had noticed that to get to the toilet he would have to pass near the farmer's workbench on which the jars of the paste were standing. His idea was to take some of the paste while their attention was distracted and place it in a small jar that he was carrying. The opportunity came sooner than he expected. By chance there was a full moon that night and everyone that is except Manu went outside to admire it. He meanwhile scooped up as much of the lava paste as he could and put it into a small jar. No one seemed to have noticed.

By the end of evening, John had worked out a deal with the farmer to supply him with a steady amount of the lava to set up a trial in the USA. Back at the hotel Manu made an excuse that he wasn't feeling well and retired to his room. He packed and quietly left by taxi. Within two days he was back in the UK and began the trial on his Melanoma patients. The results were spectacular and he had the first preliminary results ready for publication within three months. He submitted them to the Lancet and waited impatiently for the acceptance letter. After two days of nail biting suspense, a letter dropped onto his hall floor. He recognised the

Lancet Logo on the envelope. With shaking hands he tore it open and read,

Thank you for your paper on 'The early results of treatment of Melanoma with lava paste'. Unfortunately we must reject it as we have already received a similar report from an American group based in Baltimore. This is in press for publication this week etc. etc.

Manu couldn't believe his eyes; somehow they had beaten him to it. The next day, a letter from the USA arrived. It read: We're sorry that you couldn't stay to the end of our trip to La Gomera. We knew what you were up to from the beginning. Have you seen our paper in the Lancet this week? Better luck next time, all's fair in love and science,
Regards Suzie and John.

A VILLAGE IDYLL

The Yorkshire Dales is renowned for its outstanding beauty with its miles of rolling countryside where hardly a whisper can be heard. It is the home to innumerable unique towns and villages. One such village is where Mike lives. Proudly northern he usually speaks with such a broad Yorkshire accent that no one other than the locals can understand him. He has lived all his life in the same family home, a small-detached house by the side of a quiet country road. He is the youngest of three sons born into a family that had farmed there for five generations and had shared a bedroom with his two brothers until they were old enough to make their own way. Now grown up he is a typical farmer with thickset shoulders, muscular arms and sturdy legs. A crop of reddish hair can usually be seen escaping from under his wooly hat.

Now living alone he has tended the family farm single-handed. Unlike his brothers, he had never ventured further afield than the neighbouring town five miles away. As he dressed in that dull November morning light, he again thought about what it would have been like living beyond those hills, the ones that he saw every morning through his back window. He had been very tempted especially when he fell in love with a girl from down south but it never came to anything. He had seen

so many exciting places on the TV but there was a deep fear of the unknown within him. No, he thought to himself, I've lived here all my life, like my father and his father before me. If it was good enough for them, then it's good enough for me. I'm not going anywhere; this is my home and I will live and die here.

About twenty lambs had been born that week on the farm. It was still too cold to put them out in the fields, so loading a barrow of grass he headed towards the barn dreading what he might find. He knew there would be a few of them lying rigid on the ground having been unable to survive the cold. He hated finding their frozen dead bodies but rationalized, it was nature's way of maintaining a strong herd. Later a job he detested, neutering the wethers, the male lambs. He and a farm hand worked together. One held the animal while the other grabbed the scrotal sac and quickly wound an elastic band around its base. Within a few days, the testes would atrophy and die. He hated the job but they had no use for the male lambs that would otherwise immediately go for slaughter. At least he thought, this way they would have some life.

It was while he was reminiscing that he remembered that he needed some supplies from the village shop. He had heard a rumour that it might be closing unless the owner found a new partner. It was a short drive there and as he entered the shop he saw a smart looking townee waiting.

'You go ahead, I am waiting for the owner,'
the man has said pointing to the counter.

'Thanks, you new in town?'

'Yep, but, I hope to settle here if I can.'

'You buying a place?'

'Nope, but I hope to help to run this shop.'

Mike suddenly remembered his ewes; he hadn't fed them.

'Please 'cuse, Mister?'

'My name's George,' said the man politely.

'Sorry, George, must get back to farm.

Perhaps see you later.' Mike said.

'Sure, I'll be here most of the day.'

George was born in Salford in the industrial north. He had always dreamed of living in the countryside away from the noise and dirt of heavy industry. In his teens he had spent a fortnight on a farm and this ignited his love of the country. Since then he had nurtured a dream of one day living in a small cottage in a quaint Yorkshire village. He was the only son of a businessman. His first wife Isabel was a local girl and didn't seem to feel trapped like he did. They had met at Leeds University. She was studying History of Art, he Engineering. They became engaged after they qualified and married soon after. Despite every attempt they remained childless. Sadly she had died after a long illness. It was during this time that he met Stella his present wife. She was a city girl. They were introduced and married soon after and they settled in the heart of

Wakefield. They had one child who died in childhood. He had risen to become foreman in the factory but always hankered for a life in the country. He was proudly conservative believing no one was owed a living and strongly disapproved of the welfare state. You only value the money you earned he always believed.

That morning, while thumbing through the Weekly Farming Times, an indulgence he regularly enjoyed to keep his dream alive, he had seen an advert that stopped him in his tracks.

Village shop to let due to bereavement, owner unable to cope alone, seeks help from able-bodied person.

Was it possible? He had wondered. He could feel the excitement rising in his chest making him struggle to breathe. It was something he had only dreamed about but now, could it be? His hands were shaking as he sought out the place on the map, a small village in North Yorkshire not far from Masham, ideal he thought, it's like a dream come true. I'll visit it and see what it's like before telling Stella. He lay awake that night dreaming of his new life in the countryside.

He awoke to one of those grey November mornings, and making an excuse to Stella that he would be late back from work, he caught the North Express to Wetherby and a local bus to the village. He knew immediately it was the place for him. He had seen it so often in his dreams, picturesque

cottages surrounding a large central village green with a single main road passing through it. The bus stopped at the far end of the village almost opposite the village shop. He looked around. It was still early and the village had not yet woken up, the few streets were still deserted. Having arrived early he decided to stand in the shade of a very old and majestic oak tree that dominated the green. He tried to visualize why it was there and surmised that it could be the last remnant of a dense primeval forest. The forest had long gone with the logging base slowly transformed over time into the present village. He had phoned ahead to make an appointment and spoke to the owner whom he assumed was the widow. She had a soft almost melodic voice and he immediately knew he would like her.

While waiting, he stood watching the shop. Its' entrance was to the left of a large display window through which he could see one or two customers standing and moving about. Outside there were several tables on which were piled fresh produce, fruit and vegetables. Checking his watch he crossed the road and entered. He was met by a cool fresh smell that was wafted by a fan on the far table. He stood looking around when a woman in her early forties appeared from a rear room and busied herself behind the counter. She apparently hadn't seen him. George approached her and introduced himself.

'I'm George, George McGuire. I think we spoke on the telephone.'

'Oh! Yes, I'm Dorothy, welcome to my shop,' she said, extending her hand. It was cool and soft, not what he expected from a shopkeeper.

'I am pleased to meet you,' replied George, 'What a delightful place you have.'

'Yes, I am very lucky, my late husband and I have been very happy here.'

She paused, 'but things change and I can no longer manage it myself.'

'I am sorry about your loss, but I understand, I lost my first wife,' said George.

'Well, George, may I call you George?' He nodded.

'What do you think? Is it something you would like to be a part of? I am looking for a working partner.'

She waited, then added,

'I am just about to have lunch, why don't you join me and we can get down to the details. I live a short walking distance away.'

Dorothy lived in an old farm cottage nearby with a small front garden and a front door that opened directly into the parlour, the main room of the house. A log fire was burning in the hearth. The room had a cosy lived in feel and George immediately felt at home.

'Please sit down and make yourself comfortable while I get lunch'.

While she was preparing the meal, he noticed the incense burners arranged on the mantle piece.

'I notice you have quite a few incense burners, do you collect them Dorothy?'

'No, it was my husband's collection, I don't really like them.'

Mike had finished his chores and was making his way back to the shop. He arrived to find it still shut with a notice on the door, back in twenty minutes gone for lunch. He decided to wait and sat under the oak tree smoking his pipe. He was still daydreaming when he looked up to see Dorothy opening the shop. George was accompanying her and they were deep in conversation.

'I'll go down and get my provisions,' he decided.

'Hello again, it's George, isn't it?' said Mike as he entered the shop.

'Hi, Mike, yes, I have just had a very informative talk with Dorothy, I think we have reached an agreement.'

'That's good, does that mean you will be working here with Dorothy?'

'Yes, all being well and subject to my wife's agreement,' replied George nodding to Dorothy.

'The villagers will be very pleased, there was a rumour going round that the shop was going to closed.'

'George and I have sorted out the details, he

will be starting in a week or so,' said Dorothy smiling. George suddenly felt a cold chill of fear sweep over him, have I been too eager he thought? Perhaps Stella won't like it and won't come with me. Suppose she decides to stay at home where she is, what would I do?

The train was on time as it pulled into his home station. Mike alighted, walked to the parking area and finding his car set off for home. He parked the car in the drive and let himself in.

'Is that you George, you are nice and early?' George walked over to her and they kissed lightly on the lips.

'I have a surprise, I didn't go to work today, I went to see a village shop.' George blurted out.

'George I don't understand, what do mean a village shop?'

'You know how I have always wanted to leave here and live in the country.'

'Yes, but what's that got to do with a village shop?'

'Well, today I went to visit one that is available, I saw an advert in the Farming Times. I met the owner and she wants to take a partner as her husband died recently, you would love it?' Stella listened; George had gone behind her back. He had never done that before. This must be serious. What does it mean? Then in a quiet voice, she asked,

'What do you want to do then?'

'I would like to leave my job and go and live in the village and work at the shop.' Stella couldn't believe what he was saying, she felt trapped. She had known for a long time that George wasn't happy living in the city but never thought that he would do anything about it. She had hoped that in time he would accept the situation. Now she realised that wasn't going to happen. She didn't want to move. I am happy where we are. No, she thought, I am not going to be bulldozed into this.

'How do you know it will work out, you don't even know the place? You! ...We might not fit in.'

'We will, I know we will, It's perfect, like a dream. All my life I have dreamt of a place like this, I know it will work.' The telephone rang.

'Hello, yes, I'm George's wife. George, yes I'll get him. George, it's for you.'

'Hello, yes it's George, Mike! How are you? We are fine. A party? When?'

'Saturday, 8' o clock, just a few friends,' said Mike.

'We would love to, wouldn't we Stella?'

'Yes, yes, OK.'

'Thanks Mike I'll get your address from Dorothy. Take care, see you next Saturday,' Turning to Stella, George said, 'That was very friendly, Mike is a local farmer, I met him in the shop.'

'George dear,' whispered Stella turning over in bed.

'Yes dear,'

'Do you really want to live in the country?'

'Darling, do you know what time it is?' murmured George.

'Sorry, but I couldn't sleep worrying about the future.'

'There's nothing to worry about, is there?'

'Yes, there is, I've decided I don't want to live in the country.'

George sat up.

'I see, what do you want to do then?' he asked.

'Stay here, you could come home at the weekend, couldn't you?'

'The weekends are the busiest.'

'Then you can come home during the week can't you?'

'You always do it, wait until I'm tired and then you begin your nagging. You did it when I was working. You're not fair!'

'I'm not fair? Who's planning to turn our lives upside down, not me.'

'Stella, I need my sleep, let's talk at breakfast.'

'No I want to talk now!'

George got out of bed pulled his duvet with him and stamped into the spare bedroom.

'I hate you! George I hate you!' Stella

shouted after him. George had already shut the bedroom door and didn't hear her. Unable to sleep he began to fantasize about Dorothy, I wonder he thought.

The following morning there was no breakfast on the table when George came down.

'Where's breakfast,' he called.

'Get it yourself, I'm on strike.'

'Stella this is ridiculous, you're being childish, I'll get some food at work,' and he stormed out of the house.

Meanwhile at the farm, the weather had improved and Mike decided to let out the ewes and their young onto the fields. The grass was lush and soon both mothers and young were feeding well. Suddenly his mobile rang.

'Hi Mike it's Dorothy, I have the new season's seed potatoes in. How many should I put aside for you.'

'I can't remember, same as last year I s'pose' replied Mike. 'Can you send them out to me?'

'OK, I'll come by in the afternoon.'

Later that afternoon, Dorothy arrived with two sacks of seed potatoes. She saw Mike in the field and called out to him.

'Where do you want these?'

'In the barn, I'll come over and help you.' replied Mike.

'Mike!' called Dorothy.

'Yeh?'

'What did you think of him?'

'Who?'

'George!'

'He seemed a nice enough chap. I've invited him and his missus to the party on Saturday.

'Oh! That's a good idea, he can get to know some of the locals,' said Dorothy.

'I hope you can come too Dorothy?' added Mike.

Stella was at her mirror tidying her hair when she looked through it at George's reflection.

'I am only coming to this party because you asked me nicely, but... I'm not going to live there, you know.' Stella insisted.

They got to the station early and sat on the platform impatiently waiting for the train. It slowly pulled in and they climbed aboard. It set off with hardly a sound. The air was cool and the seats well padded.

'This is very comfortable, it's been a long time since I've been on a train, what a difference,' remarked Stella settling herself with a sigh.

'Yes, these intercity trains are very luxurious, I love travelling on them.' said George.

They sat facing each other, she facing forwards. At first they said nothing, each deep in their own thoughts. Stella was wondering how she had got herself caught up in this. She looked at

George and remembered him when they had met. He had aged well, a bit grayer and a bit plumper but still a good-looking man. Any woman would be proud to be with him. They had known each other since childhood but each had gone their own way. That is until one Sunday when she and her best friend dropped in at the local Uni pub. He was standing at the bar when she noticed him. At first she didn't recognize the tall well built young man but then her friend pointed him out.

'Isn't' that George from school?' She had asked, looking in George's direction. Stella had looked more closely at him and at that moment he had turned and their eyes met. To her surprise she hadn't turned away but smiled and he smiled back. Cupid's arrow had struck the spot. They were married two weeks later in their local church.

George's thoughts were not on the past but on the future. He was imagining their life together in the village. Living in a small cottage with a garden at the front and back. He would be working half time leaving them enough time to explore the area and to get to know their neighbours. The miles had flown and suddenly the train was stopping and they were at their destination. A five minutes taxi ride took them into the village.

'That's it I think' shouted George to the driver pointing to a white staccato-faced house on the left. They stopped outside a typical farmhouse, a two

storey square stone building with a central front door. A small garden path lined by standard roses reaching almost to their shoulders led them to it. It was open and they could hear voices and music from within.

Suddenly Mike appeared,

'Hi, George,' and then turning to look at Stella, he said, 'I presume this lovely lady is your wife. How are you? Mrs. McGuire.'

'Stella please, my name is Stella. I am fine thank you.'

'Please come in Stella, you're very welcome,' Stella was a bit overwhelmed by the noise; she had imagined a quiet almost boring party. This certainly wasn't. Everyone seemed to be talking at once in what was quite a small room. Suddenly Mike put up his hand and called out,

'Shush, quiet, quiet, everyone.... friends...we have a very special couple here today.

Pointing to George and Stella he said,

'George and Stella McGuire...our new residents.'

Everyone clapped with shouts of 'Welcome' and 'Good Luck.' Stella grabbed George's sleeve and whispered,

'Did you arrange that?'

'No! No! It wasn't my idea,' he said smiling.

'Well! I don't think it's funny,' said Stella angrily.

Later, on the way home, George tentatively asked

Stella,

'Did you enjoy your self?

Stella was quiet and then reluctantly said,

'Yes, I did, they were a nice group of people and Dorothy was a very interesting person.'

'In what way?' Asked George.

'She has had a very unusual life. Did you know that she had been a teacher and before that she was in the army which was where she met her husband, sad isn't it?'

'What?'

'That he died so young.'

'Yes I suppose so.'

The refreshment trolley interrupted their conversation.

'Teas, coffees, fresh sandwiches, cakes, what would you like Madam?'

'Stella?' asked George.

'Oh! Tea please,'

'Sugar?' asked the attendant.

'No thanks.'

'And you, Sir?'

'I'll have the same, with sugar.'

After the trolley had moved on, George continued,

'What were we saying?'

'We were talking about Dorothy. Do you like her George? She's very pretty and bright isn't she?'

'I hadn't thought about it.'

'Come on George, don't kid me I know you

too well.'

'Well now that you are asking, I think she's very attractive.'

'You've decided haven't you, admit it, you're not going to be influenced by what I think, you never are.' George didn't answer, he had learned that it was better to keep quiet than try and persuade Stella once she had made up her mind. He didn't want to engage in a slanging match.

'Well haven't you? Oh! You are going quiet on me, like a spoilt child not willing to answer the question.'

'Give over Stella, it's been a lovely day don't spoil it.'

A few days later, George heard his mobile bleep. It's another of those unsolicited offers he guessed but it wasn't. Opening his inbox, there was a message from Dorothy.

'Hi George, you have been very quiet, have you decided? I do need an answer please./ Surprised but inwardly delighted, he went into his office to reply. What should he say? One part of him wanted to go but another was more cautious. He knew instinctively that Stella would never agree and any case, did he want Stella there with Dorothy. He had decided meanwhile to sit on the fence.

'Hi Dorothy wonderful to hear from you, hope all is well.'

Then he made a snap decision and tapped out,
'I'm coming down this weekend, looking forward to seeing you.'

George waited a few days before telling Stella. During breakfast, he looked up from his paper.

'I've decided to go to the village this weekend, are you free?' Stella stopped what she was eating and looked at him for some time before answering.

'That's it? No discussion just I'm going. Is this something I need to get used to? You've never made a decision before without discussing it with me so what's changed?'

'Nothing, I just didn't want a row every time I want to do something.'

'Is that what you think was going to happen?'

'Well hasn't it? Ever since I told you about my plans to live in the country you've been negative, no more, positively obstructive.'

'Are you surprised? I don't want to move. I'm happy where we are.'

'Well I'm not. This is my chance in a lifetime. I'm not getting younger and this opportunity won't come again.'

'So you've made up your mind, have you?'

'I think so.'

'Where does that leave me?'

'I want you to come with me?' Insisted George.

'Do you, do you really? Wouldn't you rather

be on your own?'

'Go on say it, I know what you are thinking.'

'Yes, with her, admit it.' Blurted out Stella.

'This conversation is going nowhere. Can we shelve it until we are both more rational.'

'You can speak for yourself. I've never been more rational. All I can see is that our marriage is over,' and with that last retort, Stella left the room, shouting over her shoulder,

'And you can get your own supper, my days of serving you are over.'

George sat alone eating his cold supper. He couldn't understand how in a matter of weeks, his marriage seemed to have fallen apart. Surely he had the right to do what he wanted but there was a little nagging voice that kept on saying,

'Didn't you commit your life to Stella when you married her. Didn't you make a vow.'

'Shut up,' he said to the voice, 'I know you're right but I don't want to do what is right I want to do what I want.' Feeling tired he decided to have an early night but had not anticipated what he would find when he went to the bedroom. He found the door closed. That's unusual he thought but when he went to open it, it was locked. Stella's voice from within shouted,

'Go away, you're not sleeping in my bed ever again.'

This took him totally by surprise and for a moment he saw red. How dare she, he thought. I'll break it

down, and then common sense prevailed and he realised that in a way she had made the decision for him. He wouldn't wait for the weekend; he would go down to the village tomorrow. Collecting his clothes, he packed a light case and made up his bed in the lounge. He slept badly, his mind alive with the excitement of the next day.

Dorothy shut the shop early that afternoon as everyone was preparing for the village Fete the following day. She let herself into the cottage; the rooms were still bright from the evening sun. As she closed the door she felt the familiar sense of ease and calm from the familiar objects around her. She was beginning to emerge from her recent tragedy and could feel a sense of hope almost of happiness. Putting the kettle on she undressed and went into the shower. Memories of shared showers flooded back and for a moment the water and her tears mingled. I've got to stop looking back, he's not ever going to return and I've got to get on with my life. She began to think about the chance decision that brought her into farming and into her present life. The decision was not hers but her fathers. He had been steeped in motor cars, the taxi trade and car hire from childhood, But after meeting his wife, her mother, his ambitions changed. He had a yearning to get nearer to nature, to get back to the land, a dream he had had since childhood. They decided to rent a farm and found the ideal one in Hoddesdon in Hereford.

Intending to try it for a few years they found themselves still there ten years later.

During that time, Dorothy was born. She grew up with the cows and sheep, the harvest and the myriad of things that make up a modern farm. From an early age her job was to collect the eggs and to clean out the chicken hut. Later she learned to drive the tractor and cut a straight plough line. Her education was not neglected thanks to the efforts of her mother who while not well educated herself had enormous knowledge and knew the importance of a good education even for girls at a time when getting married young was every girl's ambition. Having qualified as a teacher, she taught at the local school although still living at home. A chance meeting at a village dance sealed her fate when she met and fell in love with a young farmer from a nearby village. Having learned all they could from their parents they found their own farm in North Yorkshire one of the unknown treasures of the English countryside. The wide-open spaces with deep valleys and high hills had attracted them immediately. It was sheep-rearing land with free ranging pigs and chickens. A small dairy herd provided them and their neighbours with milk, cheese and yoghurt.

But fate was to step in sooner than expected and one day, a phone call told her the worst, her husband had had a heart attack and was not expected to survive. She was at his bedside every

day. Slowly he recovered but never to the vigour of his previous life. They decided to sell the farm and found a local farm shop that suited them perfectly. For some years all went well but then a second massive heart attack struck him. He died, not recovering consciousness so she was unable to say Goodbye. His death hit her hard, they had had so many plans but without him they all seemed hollow dreams and she found she was no longer able to run the shop alone.

The whistling kettle rudely interrupted her reminiscences. Drying herself she put on a housecoat and went into the kitchen. Pouring out her tea she watched the steam as it spiraled upwards. What will her meeting with George today bring? She dared not guess.

George was awoken by his alarm. He glanced at the dial and confirmed 6.30am. With luck he could catch the 8.30 train that would get him to the village by midday. I must remember to text Dorothy to let her know what time I'll be arriving. The train was on time and he soon settled down to read the details of the partnership. He wanted to daydream about the forthcoming day but fought the inclination and began to skim the newspaper and the usual political opinions. Why do journalists always give their opinions with so much certainty? Haven't they learnt that what they write today will probably be proved wrong tomorrow or do

they just not care as long as they fill the required space on the page? Then the salacious stories about the so-called Celebs. He always found them particularly nauseating. The book reviews caught his attention. Someone had written another book about the Second World War. It was said to be the authoritative account. He sniffed; it's probably too early to put the history of the Second World War into context. Historians were only beginning to get to grips with the First, so many interrelating factors needed to be considered. He was enjoying the papers. He rarely gave himself time to read them leisurely. He glanced at his watch, another thirty minutes; time was passing very quickly, he thought.

Dorothy glanced at her watch, I'll give him a surprise and meet him at the station and we can talk on the way back. What shall I wear? She wondered. Gosh that's the first time I have thought about my appearance since, she stopped in mid sentence feeling a tightening in her throat and pricking in her eyes. Pull yourself together Dorothy she thought. She settled for a pair of close fitting jeans, a bright low cut top and some fun jewelry.

The train slowed as it entered the station. George stood up checked he had everything and got out. At first the platform appeared empty and then he saw her, a figure in the distance walking towards him waving and smiling. It was Dorothy. He felt a surge of happiness as he hugged her smelling

her light flowery perfume. He felt happy. She had been decidedly nervous waiting for the train to stop but when she saw him her fears melted. Then they were hugging, his rough tweed grazing her cheek.

'Lovely to see you, I had forgotten how pretty you look.'

'Thank you kind sir,' she replied with a slight curtsy, 'how was the journey?'

'Fine, I caught up with some reading.'

'Have you had a chance to read the partnership agreement?'

'Yes it seems fine but if you don't mind I would like my solicitor to run through just to be sure.'

'Of course, that's OK, I would expect you to do that.'

George followed Dorothy to the car, having to walk fast to keep up with her. She stopped opposite an old Range Rover and got in. He climbed up into the front seat struggling a bit until he found the handhold.

'Can you manage?' She shouted over the noisy diesel.

'Just about, I've not yet got used to this country life.'

'You will. It won't take long.'

They set off at a fast pace; Dorothy was clearly a confident driver. He thought of Stella and her hesitancy at the wheel. What a contrast to this feisty lady.

'Did I tell you about tomorrow? We have the Annual Village Fete, it should be fun.' Then pausing Dorothy added,

'Why not ask Stella to come up? She would have a great time and be very welcome. Since the party everyone is talking about her.'

'I don't know, she's not very keen you know. I don't know if she would.'

'Is everything all right?' Dorothy asked turning to look at him.

'Well not exactly.' George admitted.

'How do you mean? I don't want to pry.'

'You're not; we haven't been OK for a long time, even before I said I wanted to move to the country. We had a flaming row when I said I was coming this weekend.'

Dorothy staring straight ahead said, 'has it anything to do with me? I don't want to come between you.'

'No, it's nothing to do with you, it's me,' George murmured.

Dorothy heard what he had said and without thinking, stopped the car. She turned to him and smiled. He leaned forwards cupped her face in his hands and kissed her.

'You know I am very attracted to you, I can't keep you out of my mind,' he said kissing her again. Dorothy returned his kisses then stopped,

'Whoa, we are in a public place, everyone can see us.' cried Dorothy.

'I don't mind, I want the whole world to know.'
George felt as if a huge weight had been lifted from his heart.

Dorothy parked the car and led the way into her house. Once inside she turned and they were in each other's arms. She could feel that he wanted more but they had work to do so she gently pushed him away,

'Later, we'll have all the time in the world,'

'OK, you're the boss, what's the plan?'

'You'll need some working clothes and I need to change. You can use that room,' she said pointing to the sitting room while she disappeared into the bedroom. She returned with some old corduroys and a leather jerkin.

'Try these on, they were my husband's, he was about your size.'

He reappeared five minutes later wearing a pair of brown slacks with a heavy woollen sweater.

'They're perfect for the job,' said Dorothy, admiring George's gear, 'Do you want anything to drink or eat before we get going?'

'No, I'm fine I'm keen to get started.'

Dorothy parked the car and went ahead to open up. George followed bringing some perishables that had been in Dorothy's freezer. There were two customers waiting. Dorothy opened the front door to let the light flood into the shop. Within a few moments the musty smell had

dispelled and they were ready for business. The word went around that George was in the shop and a number of locals came to say hello and welcome him. He spent the morning becoming familiar with the stock and the accounting system. It was a bit archaic by his standards. He found that there was no automatic stocktaking linked to sales so Dorothy kept a written record. He made a mental note to discuss it with Dorothy when they had a moment. The day seemed to flash by. They hardly had time to think let alone speak. George loved the dynamism, the interaction of customer and salesman. He could feel that this was the life for him, away from the humdrum routine of the office. Whenever possible he would touch Dorothy when she passed, or smile at her when their eyes met. A lull in the mid afternoon allowed a few words of exchange.

'How are you enjoying yourself?'

'I'm having a ball,' he replied, squeezing her hand.

Leaving the house, George gently closed the front door. Stella heard the click and realised that he had made good his threat and had left. That's it, she thought, there's nothing I can do now. But as the day wore on, she became increasingly angry. How dare he walk out on me, she swore. I'm not going to stand for it. He's making a fool out of me. That woman must be laughing her head off at how

easily she has stolen him from me. I'm not going to let him get away with it. I am going to make him pay.

Stella rang one or two friends to seek consolation and support but no one was available. That only added to her anger. He had said something about a Village Fete the next day. I wonder, she thought, have I the nerve to carry it off?

'I think we could close up now,' called out Dorothy from the back room. 'I don't think we will have any more customers today and in any case I want to prepare for tomorrow.'

'OK, Dorothy what do you want me to do?'

'Could you pack up the eggs, we will need ten dozen for the egg throwing competition and could you check that we have enough Hot Dogs, Hamburgers and rolls. We will be manning the food stall and the villagers have big appetites. I have checked on the apples, that's always a popular game.'

'I don't know that game, what is it?'

'Oh, we float apples in buckets of water and the punter has to pick one out with his mouth.'

'That sounds easy enough.'

'It's harder than you think, the apples keep bobbing about and you end up with your face in the water struggling to breathe.' Dorothy said. 'Most of

the other stands are being run by the villagers. We will have a shooting range, and many more activities besides, you'll see tomorrow, that's if you are coming.'

George didn't reply, he was hoping to stay overnight but Dorothy hadn't said anything about it and he didn't want to suggest it. As if reading his mind, Dorothy called out in matter of fact voice,

'You could stay overnight,' she paused, 'at my place.'

'Would that be all right?' he hesitated.

'It's fine by me, what about you?'

'Y-yes that would be fine,' he stuttered.

'Good, well that's settled then.'

'I'll ring Stella and let her know, otherwise she'll be worried,' added George.

'That's a good idea, mention about tomorrow, and see if you can persuade her to come, she'll enjoy it I'm sure.'

Stella saw his name appear on her mobile and for a moment hesitated before replying.

'Hello George, what do you want? I'm busy.'

'Hello Stella how are you?'

'Fine as if you cared.'

'Oh come on, of course I care, I love you.' He said it out of habit but the words now had a new meaning. He had just said the same to Dorothy, what am I doing?'

Stella interrupted his thoughts,

'If you loved me you wouldn't be doing what you are doing.'

'Stella please! I rang to ask you to come tomorrow. It's the annual village fete, you'd enjoy it. Please come.'

'Do you really mean it?' Stella asked.

'Of course, I mean it.' George replied. The words had tumbled out before he had time to think what he was saying.

Stella continued, 'Are you coming home tonight?'

George paused, 'No I'm staying over.'

'Where?'

'Dorothy's has a spare room.'

'I see.'

'What do you see?'

'Oh, nothing, let me think about it and I will let you know later.'

'OK, but please come.' and the line went dead.

Stella sat thinking looking at the blank mobile screen. It was a strange conversation. She didn't know what to make of it, it was not a situation she had ever faced before and didn't like it. Without thinking too much she dialled a familiar number. A voice that she knew almost as well as her own answered.

'Darling, How nice to hear from, it's been too long?'

'I know Mum, I'm sorry; the weeks just seem

to fly by. How are you?'

'I'm fine. Now we have got over the niceties, what's the matter? I can hear it in your voice. Do you have a problem? Is it George?'

'Yes, how did you know?'

'Mothers have a way of knowing these things.'

'George wants to leave me.'

'What happened?'

'He has found a place in the country he wants to live in.'

'So what's the problem?'

'I don't want to go.'

'So you think he is leaving you?'

'Yes, don't you?'

'No, it could be said that you are leaving him.'

'You never understand Mum. Why are you on his side, I'm your daughter, have you forgotten?'

'No I haven't and I love you very much but I don't understand why you don't go with him?'

'I don't want to live in the country, I'm happy where I am.'

'Yes, but?'

'But what?'

'Isn't it written somewhere, I seem to remember, that it is the wife's duty to support her husband?'

'Mum,' Stella despairingly, that's so out of date. No one believes that anymore.'

Stella was getting impatient with her mother's replies. She began to regret having phoned her. She had forgotten that her Mum never seemed to agree with her view of life.

'And another thing, he wants to work in the village shop with the woman owner.'

'What's wrong with that?'

'I think he is falling for her. She's a widow. Mum what do you think I should do?'

'Go with him, she's even more reason for you to go with him. Try it. You might just like it. Give it a chance. You could rent your house while you're deciding whether you want to stay in the country or come home. Doesn't that seem a good compromise?'

Stella listened without interrupting. It made sense she decided. It wasn't what she wanted but it was better than losing him.

George's mobile lit up: an SMS from Stella, I'm taking the nine o'clock train, can you meet me at about midday?

George didn't get it right a way but saw it some hours later by which time Stella was getting desperate. I'll ring him she decided and then immediately changed her mind. No I'll wait; I don't want him to think he's won. I know one thing; I love him and don't want to lose him. Finally her mobile bleeped,

Wonderful, will meet you at the station, looking

forwards to seeing you. Love George.

George waited while Dorothy locked the door of the shop. Turning to him, she smiled and said,

'It's been a good day. It's wonderful having you here. You have already made such a difference. I feel as if you have taken a load off my shoulders I'm no longer alone.'

'I have really enjoyed it, but I have a lot to learn,' said George.

They walked in silence to the car. It was only a short drive to her cottage. There was a small light in the porch lighting up the front door. Dorothy went in and turned on the lights. It was getting dark.

'George, let me show you to your room and you can unpacked and clean up. Supper will be ready in about twenty minutes.'

'Can I help? You've been working so hard and I don't want you to have to serve me.'

'OK, I'll cook and you can wash up. How's that?'

'Perfect. See you later.' George disappeared into the spare room. It was small, with one window at the back looking out over a field in which cows and sheep were grazing. He stood at the window watching as the last rays of sunshine disappeared. He felt calm and at ease, a feeling he hadn't had for years. He showered, shaved and dressed and then heard her call.

'Supper's ready,'

'Thanks I'll be right there.'

Dorothy was in the kitchen wearing a bright yellow and blue apron. A small table was set with a variety of fresh salads, meats and cheeses.

'Hi,' said Dorothy shyly, 'what would like to drink?'

'Wine, if you have it?'

'Red or white?'

'Red would be perfect.'

'Sit by the window,' suggested Dorothy, 'there is a good view of the fields behind.'

'Yes, I saw it from my room just as the sun was setting, what a terrific place you have.'

'We were very lucky to get it. It was only on the market for a day before we made our offer, luckily we were the first and we didn't haggle,' said Dorothy. 'Please help yourself, there's plenty more so don't stint yourself.'

George tucked in. The food was delicious, the fresh vegetables had a very special taste so different from the supermarket fare he was used to.'

'That's homemade bread,' Dorothy said proudly pointing to a large wholemeal loaf.

'I can't eat any more. It was all delicious. If I stay here any longer I'll get as big as a horse.'

'Don't worry, the hard work will make sure you don't'

'OK, it's my turn, show me the way to the kitchen and I'll set too.'

Twenty minutes later Dorothy went into the kitchen

to find it spick and span.

'Wow, you've done a great job, clearly your Mum taught you well.' George smiled.

'I think we should have an early night we have a very busy day tomorrow,' said Dorothy leaning forwards and kissing George on the cheek.

'George, please don't misunderstand what happened in the car, I was just so pleased to see you. I don't want you to misunderstand, I don't want to come between you and Stella.'

For a moment he was puzzled. Was this an invitation, he wondered? But she turned and walked towards her room and closed the door behind her. George watched her leave and for a moment was tempted to follow her. Then he thought of Stella. No, my life is complicated enough without adding to it.

He was unfamiliar with the sounds of the countryside, the lowing of the cows, the wind in the trees, the bleating of the sheep so it took him a long time to get to sleep. It seemed only minutes before he heard the light knock on his door and realised it was six o'clock. Dorothy called out,

'Good Morning, George, hope you slept well, breakfast will be ready in half an hour.'

'Thanks Dorothy, I slept very well, be ready soon.'

George could smell the bacon frying as he entered the kitchen. He gave Dorothy a peck on her cheek and sat down.

'Smells good, it's been a long time since I've had a cooked breakfast.'

'Well I hope you're hungry, you've got the full Monty, including the local black pudding. I hope you like it.'

'I've never tried it, so I'll let you know.' He bit into the hard black cake. 'Mmm I don't know, it's an acquired taste.'

'Does that mean you don't like it? You don't need to answer,' said Dorothy laughing.

By eleven o'clock, the village green was alive with activity. The egg-throwing course had been marked out as well as the various stands including a hot dog stand, a barbecue corner, a carousel, a bouncy castle and an air rifle range. For the gamblers there was a 'Throw the penny' booth, 'apple biting' buckets and the spinning wheel for people wishing to try their hand and much more.

Stella's train arrived promptly and George was waiting on the platform when she alighted. She smiled with pleasure at seeing him and hugged him enthusiastically. He was a bit taken aback by her obvious pleasure at seeing him. He had anticipated a much cooler reception. Clearly something had happen since they last met he thought, I wonder what brought about the change but he wasn't about to complain.

'Hello darling,' he said, 'how was your journey?'

'Fine, it was very smooth no hitches. What a wonderful day for the Fete, I hope you get a good crowd.'

'You'll see, the crowds are already beginning to arrive.' George said.

Stella could hear the crowd a long way before they arrived at the village green. People from all the neighbouring villages had assembled with their picnics and sunshades as the weather forecast had predicted bright sunshine. The day promised to be a great success. By two o'clock, a platform had been erected on which the small village band was seated, playing popular tunes. The organiser was trying the microphone, his voice calling out 'testing, testing' rang out across the Green. Then as the church bells pealed, the crowd went quiet. They knew what to expect. One of the village elders had mounted the stage and began to speak,

'Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to the one hundred and tenth village fete. We are especially privileged to have as our chief guest the Lord Mayor, Mrs. Jessica Brown who has kindly agreed to open the fete.'

A plump smiling lady stepped forwards.

'Thank you. Ladies and Gentlemen, I am deeply honoured to have been invited to open this year's village fete. It promises to be a lovely day so I hope you will all enjoy yourselves and don' forget to buy a raffle ticket for my charity, in aid of

supporting the countryside communities. So, without further ado, I now declare the fete open.'

A tremendous roar rose from the crowd with shouting, clapping and whistling. Stella was overwhelmed by the excitement and obvious pleasure of the hundreds of people who had assembled. She looked over at George, who was manning the shooting range. She caught his eye and they smiled at each other. Perhaps living in the county side wouldn't be so bad after all.

Looking around the Fete, Stella didn't know where to start. As she was trying to make up her mind, she felt a tug on her arm. It was Dorothy smiling,

'Hello Stella, I'm so glad you could come. You couldn't have chosen a nicer day. Let's go and sample some of the stands. I think George is manning the shooting range. Shall we start there?' The two women walked over to the stand where George was waiting for customers. Stella greeted him with a peck on his cheek.

'Hello darling, what a glorious day. How are you enjoying your self?'

'I am having a great time. Why don't you try your luck?' George said pointing to the target. Stella selected a gun and chose the middle target. She had never touched a gun before let alone shoot one. George saw her hesitation and gave her a brief tutorial.

'Hold it tight against your shoulder, line up

the sight and squeeze gently.'

The gun made a sudden pop as the lead pellet buried itself in the target just beside the bull's eye.

'Beginner's luck,' said Stella keen to have another try.

The two women to their surprise found they had a great deal in common. Stella was warming to the village and the idea of living in the countryside didn't seem so bad. By the time the Fete was closing, Stella had met many of the people from the party all of whom greeted her warmly. She wasn't used to such friendly people and initially felt somewhat overwhelmed.

'Is everyone always so friendly?' she asked Dorothy when they were alone.

'Yes by and large, it's a very happy community. Everybody is keen to help their neighbour.' That evening the three went to the King's Arms a local hotel. George and Stella had booked a room for the night and had invited Dorothy to join them for dinner. It was a typical Pub meal with a choice of soup or salad, a buffet bar serving a variety of roast meats, vegetables and potatoes, and an elaborate sweet. The dining room was crowded, as many others had had the same idea so the service was painfully slow. Keen but inexperienced waitresses struggled to serve the large number of hungry visitors.

Having dined well. Dorothy, Stella and

George retired to the lounge for coffee. Once they had settled themselves in deep armchairs, Dorothy turned to Stella,

'Stella, now that you have had a chance to get to know us a bit better, do you think you could be happy here? I think George would be an ideal partner in my shop but only if you are happy with the arrangement. I don't want to come between you and George.'

Stella listened while Dorothy was talking. The day had turned out very differently from what she had expected. She had hoped that George would have seen that village life was not for him but instead she found the day very enjoyable and Dorothy a delightful bright and attractive person.

'It's been a very enjoyable day. The local people are very friendly and have made me feel very much at home.'

'Does that mean that you are prepared to give it a go?' Asked Dorothy.

Stella took George's hand and looking at him said,

'Yes I think I could be happy here.'

George and Stella were sad to leave when the following morning came. They hardly said a word on the journey home. Coming into the house, George turned to Stella and asked,

'Did you really mean what you said about being happy to live in the village?'

'I think so, I have had a long think on the way

home and agree that perhaps it's time for us to make a change. Many of our friends have moved away and we are in danger of being isolated here.'

Then followed a hectic period of contacting Estate agents, visits to see possible homes, decisions about what to keep and what to let go. That was one of the most difficult tasks. They had each amassed a lot of clothing and other belongings that they didn't need. Like most people, they had just allowed the things to accumulate, but now they realised that they must get rid of everything that was surplus. Bags of unwanted clothing were taken to the Charity shops. Old broken electrical items were dumped into a rented skip. It was soon filled and another one supplied. Surprisingly they both felt a sense of lightness and enjoyment at getting rid of so much stuff. Some things however were really difficult to part with, particularly things belonging to their parents, things they had kept for old time's sake but which they either didn't like or had no use for. As they had not yet settled on a home in the village they began to put the things they wanted to keep in a storage facility. Not for long they hoped, as the costs would begin to mount up.

Then one day they found it, a delightful eighteenth century cottage that had been thoughtfully modernised. It was just off the main road with a view of the distant hills. It had two

bedrooms, each en suite, a large sized lounge, dining room and a good-sized kitchen with an Aga something Stella had always wanted. There was a small garden in front and a larger one behind with a greenhouse and a small lawn. They both knew it was right as soon as they saw it.

The following weeks passed in a haze. Looking back, Stella wondered how they managed it. There was so much planning and so many things that could go wrong but as she said to Dorothy,

'It went as well as we could have expected. We are very pleased to see it all behind us.'

The two women had become close friends speaking to each other almost daily so much so that George began to feel excluded.

'What do you two talk about?' he often asked. 'I don't understand how there is so much to say.'

'Only women's talk, you wouldn't be interested,' was the reply he got.

Meanwhile he was becoming familiarised with the village shop. He had finally persuaded Dorothy to install a computerised stock system that had reduced their waste costs considerably. Working close to her he found himself thinking about that day when they kissed. He wanted to tell her how much he was attracted to her. Dorothy was not unaware of his attention but she didn't want to be the cause of any friction so she remained rather cool and aloof. One day he decided to confront her.

They had just opened the shop and it was still early so as yet no customers had arrived. It was his opportunity.

'Dorothy,' he began, 'I don't understand, I thought that you were fond of me yet you seem to be giving me the cold shoulder.'

'Please George don't get me wrong, I am very fond of you but you are married to Stella who has become a dear friend and I don't want to be the cause of any unhappiness.'

'Dorothy, 'it's you I love, not Stella, part of the reason why I came here was to be near you, The more I have got to know you the more I want you. I need you, please I need you,' and with that he flung his arms around her neck.

'No, George,' she insisted, pushing him away. 'It's not right; I don't want you to think of me in that way. We are just good friends that's all.'

Some days later, George was getting dressed when he heard the phone ring. He crept to the door to overhear the conversation. Stella was talking to Dorothy. They were arranging to meet but he couldn't hear the details so when he heard the conversation end, he innocently called out,

'Stella who was that?'

'Oh that! It was a wrong number.'

George was puzzled, why didn't she want to tell me she was talking to Dorothy. He couldn't understand why. He forgot about it until later that day. He was at the shop when Dorothy called out,

'George, do me a favour, I've got to go out. Will you keep an eye on everything until I return?'

George watched as she put on her coat and left the shop. She seemed in an awful hurry and he wondered why. What could have made her rush off without an explanation? He waited a few minutes and then on an impulse decided to follow her. He closed the shop and put a sign on the door saying back in five minutes. Once outside he saw her walking briskly up the hill in the direction of her cottage, George, now very curious, followed at a discreet distance. Once or twice she stopped and looked around as to check that no one was following her. Crouching behind a bush he saw her stop at her cottage and let herself in. George was about to leave when he heard footsteps and stepped back as he saw Stella coming towards him. He quickly hid behind a tree and watched as she knocked lightly on the cottage door and was let in.

What on earth are they up to he wondered? He crept up to the window and tried to peer through but there were thick curtains and he couldn't see anything so he decided to return to the shop. About thirty minutes later Dorothy returned looking a bit flushed.

"Is everything all right? George asked, did you manage to do what you wanted?"

'Yes, fine, it all went well, thank you.'

George tried to forget the incident but it kept nagging at him. What was Stella doing meeting

Dorothy in the middle of the day and in such a clandestine way? When two days later the same thing happened he decided he had to find out what was going on. Having followed Dorothy to her home and watched Stella enter he took courage into his hands and gently pushed at the front door that was still ajar and entered the front room.

What he saw stopped him in his tracks. Both Dorothy and Stella were half naked on the couch hugging and kissing each other. He watched for a moment utterly confused and unable to comprehend what he was seeing. He then realised they hadn't seen him so he turned and left closing the door quietly behind him. He stood outside rooted to the spot. What had he seen? Was it real or had he somehow imagined it. He then heard Stella's laughter and realised it was no dream. He turned and walked away as if in a trance and found himself outside the village pub. At that moment one of his neighbours passed by and noticed his confusion,

'Hello, George you look as if you've seen a ghost, what you need is a stiff whisky,' and he propelled George into the Pub and guided him to the bar.

'Give George a double whisky and a single for me please,' he told the barman.

George sipped the whisky feeling its sharp taste stinging his throat. It wasn't his favorite drink but he wasn't in any state to complain.

‘George we haven’t met,’ said the man, ‘although I saw you with your wife at George’s party. My name is Tom, I run the local Dairy farm.’ George shook his hand in silence.

‘What’s the trouble old boy you look awful, do you want to talk about it?’ Asked Tom. George was still confused and almost incoherent.

‘I,’ he began and then stopped. ‘I don’t know where to start,’ he said half aloud. ‘I don’t know what to say. I’ve just seen something I don’t understand and it has really thrown me.’

‘Look George you don’t have to say anything but if you want to I’m listening.’

‘I don’t know where to start?’ George began again. ‘I’m so confused. I thought by the time I was an adult I would be able to cope with anything that was thrown at me but this this has really shaken me. You know it all seemed straight forward a man was a man and a woman a woman, that’s how God made us. A man marries a woman and if fortunate they have children and life is recreated by every generation. That’s what it is, what it says in the bible. I’m not a religious man but I believe that. His face became suffused with pain,

‘And then something happens. We hear about men going with men and women with women but we’ve never met it so it doesn’t mean anything until one day.’ He paused.

‘What?’ Said Tom puzzled.

‘Until one day when you are forced to

confront it.'

'Confront what?'

'Reality!'

'What reality?'

'That things are not what they seem, what you have always believed.'

'George what are you are you talking about? You've completely confused me.' And then George blurted it out,

'My wife Stella and Dorothy, they were together, I saw them.'

'So what?'

'Your don't understand.'

'No I don't. Please explain. Calm down. Just tell me what you saw.'

'They were, they were cuddling each other, making love.' Tom looked aghast.

'George, you must mistaken. Are you sure?' George looked at Tom, his eyes filled with tears.

'Yes, I haven't made a mistake, I'm sure.'

George let himself into the house. He stood listening. There was no sound. Stella wasn't home yet. He went into the lounge and looked around. It seemed so familiar yet it had all changed. Nothing would be the same again he realised. He sat down and leaned forwards, his head in his hands staring at the floor. What am I going to do? He wondered.

Then he heard the car pull up outside; the car door slam and footsteps echoing on the gravel

path.

'Hi I'm home,' Stella called out. 'Where are you?'

'I'm in the lounge.'

'How was your day?' Said Stella entering the lounge. What she saw shook her. George was sitting with head bowed.

'What's wrong George, don't you feel well.' She said going over to him.

'Don't touch me. Stella, you know what's wrong.'

'What's happened? Tell me,' screamed Stella. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Don't lie I saw you, I saw you with her.' Stella stopped, Oh! My God she thought. How could he have seen us? Deborah said he was in the shop. He couldn't have seen us. Someone must have told him. Question after question kept rushing around her head. She was about to ask him and then stopped. I don't want this.

'So what, we are friends. What are you talking about?' She said finally.

He continued as if he hadn't heard her.

'When Deborah left the shop I followed her and saw you and her. It was disgusting.'

'George you don't understand, it's beautiful; we love each other.' Please try to understand I didn't want it to happen.'

By this time George had calmed down.

'How could it have happened? We were

getting on so well. I thought you loved me.'

'I do love you, George.' Stella sat down and took his hands. 'I have never told you this but it's not the first time.

'Not the first time,' his voice rising, 'how do you mean?'

'When I was at Uni, I had a fr-friendship with a fellow student, a girl. It happened very suddenly I didn't realise then that I could be attracted to a woman. We had been to a party and it was late when we left. Rachel, that was her name, had a long journey home and I suggested she stay with me overnight. We slept in my big double bed. I didn't think anything of it when we turned off the light. Sometime during the night we moved together. I awoke to find Rachel caressing me. At first I resisted her but then I found I liked it. I felt comfortable and at ease kissing and loving her. It came as a shock but once I had started I continued. I've had a number of affairs since; that is until I met you. This is the first time since...I promise.' I thought I had got it out of my system'. She reached out and touched his hand but instinctively he drew it away.

George sat listening to her words unable to comprehend what she was saying. How hadn't he noticed anything before? They had lived together for many years and he had not suspected anything, why? They had slept together, made love together and he had no inkling that she had another side to

her life a side that he found beyond his grasp. At last he spoke. Taking a deep breath and not looking at her he said,

‘What do you want to do?’ I’m dumbfounded, I just can’t get my head around it.’

Stella got up and walked to the window. She stared outside for a few minutes and then turning said,

‘Why can’t we carry on as we are? I love you and am your wife.’

‘But...’

‘But what?’

‘You love Dorothy for G-d sake. How can we go on as if nothing has happened? How?’

‘Why not? I don’t see any difficulty. We’ve been doing so for a long time already.’

‘But I didn’t know then.’

‘Exactly you didn’t know so why is it so different now that you know?’

‘Because,.. because I don’t want to share you.’

‘But you won’t need to. My love for Deborah is not the same. I haven’t stopped loving you, I love you more now than ever.’

‘So why do you need Deborah? Why aren’t I enough?’

‘I don’t know I don’t understand it but it isn’t. Every now and then I feel this need. I try to resist it and most of the time I do but Deborah saw it and she also felt it.’

George was getting more and more

confused. In desperation he said,

‘Where do we go from here?’

‘I guess it depends on what you want. I’m happy to go on as we are. I am settling down well here and would like to stay in the village.’

George looked at her, she was radiant her dark glossy hair shining in the sunshine, her deep brown eyes glowing. How could I not love her he thought, even though I don’t understand why she needs someone else?

Deborah was already in the shop when George arrived on Monday morning. She looked up as he entered feeling embarrassed and confused. Stella had told her that George had seen them.

‘I,..I don’t know what to say to you. I feel such a fool. I didn’t know it would happen and am so sorry.’

‘Look Deborah, whatever you say won’t make any difference. I’m also confused and have no words for what you and Stella are doing. I’d heard about it but never thought it would come into my life.’

‘What do you want to do about the shop?’

‘How do you mean? Asked George.

‘Do you want to continue working with me or do you want to get out? I would understand if you chose to leave. I would be sorry as I think you’ve settled in well and are doing a great job.’

George didn’t answer immediately. He

recalled his excitement when he first read about the shop and how pleased he was when he began working. It was a dream come true and now everything seems to have fallen apart.

'I need to think about it. I love working in the shop but I don't know I could bear seeing you every day and knowing.....' He paused. 'Look, I need some space. I'm taking the rest of the day off,' and with that he picked up his jacket and left the shop.

Outside George felt the fresh air on his face and took a deep breath. He didn't want to go home. It no longer felt like his home, so made his way to the Pub. It was almost empty when he arrived. John the publican was behind the bar.

'Hi George,' he said, 'good to see you. I'm so sorry. It's all around the village. Nobody can understand what's going on'.

'Me too,' shrugged George. 'It's a mystery to me. May I have my usual please? John reached for a single malt and poured out a shot. George downed the whisky in one gulp.

'That's what I needed.' he said as the sharp liquid burned his throat and a feeling of warmth began to settle in his stomach.

'Another please, John. I want to get drunk!' The pub began to fill up as the locals finished their day's work and came in to unwind before going home. George sat drinking quietly in the corner. Occasionally someone would engage in him in conversation but for most of the time he was in his

own thoughts. The whisky was slowly dulling his brain so that he was able to forget the dilemma that he was in. He welcomed the peace that it gave him and he began to smile. The pub seemed to have brightened up and with it his problems seemed to melt away.

John had lost sight of George as the bar filled up so he wasn't aware of just how much George had drunk. As he called for Time Gentlemen Please he caught sight of him slumped in his chair. As soon as he could he went over to him. George's voice was blurred

I...I'm OK,' he said to John as he staggered to his feet. 'I'll be f..fine,' he stuttered as he made for the door.

'Wait, I'll call Stella to come and get you,' John called to him but his words were lost as George reeled out into the cold night air. A mist had descended but he knew his way and set off towards his home, singing quietly under his breath.

Stella was in the bedroom when she heard the ping of her mobile She had left it in the hall and rushed down the stairs to answer it, She saw John the Publican come up on the screen

'Hello, Is that Stella. Hi, it's John from the Pub, George has been drinking – too much; he's walking home. Can you come for him?' The screen went blank. Stella felt a sudden dread it wasn't like him to drink too much.

She backed the car out of the drive and

made her way towards the Pub. The mist was now a bit thicker and visibility was poor but she knew that George would still take the country road. She knew it well and put down her foot. Coming around a bend Stella saw him at the last moment outlined in her glaring lights.

Her car lights had seemed to appear from nowhere and George momentarily blinded by the oncoming beams had staggered towards them. Stella braked hard but the tyres failed to hold on the wet road, the car began to slide and she was unable to avoid hitting him. She saw his frightened face staring up at her before with a thud he disappeared under her wheels. She let out a yell of horror, got out and rushed to him.

His body was outlined in her beams, curled on the road a thin line of blood dribbling from the corner of his mouth, otherwise he seemed asleep.

‘George! George! My God,’ she shouted, ‘I’ve killed him.’ He made no sound as she tried to rouse him.

The telephonist in the local Ambulance depot received the call and immediately dispatched a vehicle. Describing the call to a friend later she had said that Stella was hysterical, shouting, I’ve killed him I’ve killed him Oh My God I’ve killed him.

Crouching by his side, Stella saw the lights weaving through the countryside long before the

ambulance arrived. Please hurry, she whispered, please hurry. Suddenly it was there screeching to a halt. Two Paramedics emerged and rushed to the inert form lying by the roadside.

'He still breathing,' Stella heard one say.

'I've got a pulse,' said the other. One opened the rear of the vehicle and pulled out a trolley and George was gently lifted onto it. Stella stood helpless; she couldn't believe what had happened so quickly and her fault.

'How can I ever forgive myself?' she wailed.

'We going to Fearby hospital, follow us,' they shouted and they were off.

Stella glanced at the waiting room clock it was 3 am. George had already been in surgery for over three hours. Deborah was with her sitting with her head in her hands. She had come immediately. Stella had told her what had happened. The two women looked at each other. They were racked with guilt, each feeling responsible for what had happened. Stella paced up and down carrying her third cup of lukewarm coffee in a plastic cup.

The surgeon who had seemed too young for the task ahead told her that George had internal bleeding from a blunt abdominal blow probably caused by the bumper.

'I have to stop it as soon as possible or else he will bleed to death. The scan had shown it was probably due to a ruptured spleen one of the most

awkward places to get to, under the left rib cage behind the stomach.' He didn't tell her that this was the first time he had faced this particular challenge without help and was conscious of his own heart racing with a mixture of excitement and fear.

He had gone over the stages in his mind, step by step. He knew that once the abdomen was opened there would be a torrent of blood welling out of the wound. He had to dive in and find where it was coming from and pinch off the bleeding. Then he would suck out the remaining blood enabling him to see the torn vessel, seal it and if necessary remove the spleen.

It was just after 4 am when the waiting room door opened and the surgeon still in his greens splattered with blood, came in. He looked pale and tired. Both Stella and Deborah looked up.

'It's good news,' he said, 'I've stopped the bleeding; he's weak but stable'. There was a gasp of 'thank God' from Stella and Deborah who by this time were holding hands.

George meanwhile was floating on a sea of deep blue. Above he saw white fluffy clouds floating by. All was calm and peaceful. This must be heaven he concluded. Then he heard a sound like a woman crying a long way off. He called to her but his voice was muffled. Now he was walking in a forest of tall conifers, his footsteps making no sound. Above the sun was shining through the branches dappling the

leaves on the ground. Coming to a clearing and overwhelmed by fatigue he lay down and slept.

He was roused by a voice calling, 'George wake up, it's all over. You're back in your room.' Through a haze he could see a blue and white uniform. A young face was leaning over him.

'It's all over. The operation was successful and you are now on the mend,' said a young nurse. He heard the door open quietly and Stella and Deborah came towards him.

'I'm so sorry George,' said Stella, 'I didn't see you, I didn't see you.' She took his hand and began to weep. Deborah comforted her.

'It wasn't your fault, it was dark and you didn't know where George was,' she whispered. George tried to talk but his throat was sore and his voice came out as a croak.

'It's all right, please don't blame yourself. I'd been drinking and wasn't careful. It was my own fault, you weren't to know where I was.'

Later, on his own, he tried to decide what to do but he was still groggy from the painkillers and couldn't concentrate. He knew things weren't right and at some stage he would have to make a decision but how he wondered. Faced with difficult problems in the past he had coolly considered both sides of the issue and come to a decision but this was different. It wasn't only up to him. Both Stella and Deborah needed to be considered. It was in

that state of confusion that he drifted off into a deep sleep.

Drifting slowly upwards towards the light, George opened his eyes. At first he was confused by the unfamiliar surroundings. The bed seemed to be in the wrong place, where are my books? He wondered and then he remembered, he was in hospital. He had had an accident. He tried to sit up; a sharp pain in his belly stopped him. He reached down and felt a bandage across his abdomen. That's odd he thought. Why was it there? Then he tried to move his legs. The right one was OK but the left one felt heavy and stiff. Pulling back the bedclothes, he saw that his left leg was in plaster from the toes to his groin. A feeling of panic suddenly swept over him.

'Nurse, nurse,' he called out as loud as he could. The door opened and she entered.

'Good morning Mr. McGuire, are you OK? You called me.'

'No I'm not all right Nurse. I am far from all right. I'm in a lot of pain and don't know how I got here.'

'I see, you don't remember what happened?'

'No and I would like to know please.' The nurse thought for a moment.

'I think it would be better if the doctor explained don't you think so?' George nodded.

'All right if you say so. When will he be

coming to see me?’

‘He usually comes in around 11. Do you feel up to seeing visitors? You do know that there are two ladies to see you.’

‘No I didn’t, do I look respectable?’

‘You look just fine, I’ll ask them to come in.’

Stella and Deborah had left the hospital at about 11 pm having spoken to the Doctor and been assured that George’s condition was stable and there was no longer any cause for concern. They returned to Deborah’s cottage and sat in her small sitting room. She had left her telephone number with the hospital in case there was any change. Neither spoke for a while, each deep in thought. Suddenly Deborah got up and shouted from the kitchen,

‘Stella, would you like a drink? I’ve got some chilled white wine in the frig?’

‘Yes please, what a good idea.’ She was going to say, we could get drunk, and then thought better of it. Deborah poured out the wine and sat down beside her.

‘Cheers,’ she said and Stella returned the greeting.

‘We must find a solution to this crazy situation’, began Stella but then both women were lost for words. They didn’t know how or where to start. At last Stella said,

‘Let’s sum up what we know and maybe we

can come forward with a compromise?’

‘Don’t you think we should wait until George is fit to take part?’ asked Deborah.

‘Of course we need to know what he wants to do but don’t you think we should have our own plans ready?’

‘OK you start,’ suggested Stella. Deborah leaned forwards and cupped Stella’s face in her hands.

‘The most important thing is that I love you. You are the most important person in my life. I want you to know that.’ Stella smiled as if a heavy load had been lifted from her.

‘I needed to know that,’ she said kissing Deborah on the lips, ‘and you are the most important person in my life.’

‘But what about George?’ asked Deborah, ‘you are married to him; you are legally bound to him. Where does he come into your life?’

‘I know, I am very aware of that. When we were married, in a church, I promised to love, hold and obey until...’ her voice faltered.

‘I didn’t know then that I would fall in love with you, how could I?’ She began to cry silently, tears rolling down her cheeks. Deborah patted them away,

‘Don’t cry please, I can’t bear it; we’ll find a way I promise you.’

It was after 11am next morning when Stella

and Deborah arrived at the hospital. They knew their way and went straight to George's room. They knocked and entered. He was sitting up in bed.

'Good morning Ladies,' he announced with a grin. 'You'll be please to know I am feeling much better.' The colour had returned to his cheeks and he was clean-shaven. Stella reached over and kissed him on the cheek.

'You look wonderful,' she exclaimed, relieved that he looked so different from yesterday. She had been dreading seeing him, fearing the worse and was still smarting from her guilt about the accident. Why didn't I see him she kept saying to herself?

'I am so relieved George I thought I had killed you.'

'It might have made things easier,' he quipped. 'So what have you decided? Am I to know?'

'Yes of course. You're central to any discussion we have about the future.'

'Oh good I just wondered,' he said sarcastically.

'Be serious George, it isn't easy.'

'You're telling me, I think it's nigh impossible.'

'OK I'll begin,' offered Stella. Deborah and I love each other but and it's a big but, I'm married to you and have made certain promises to you.'

'Oh! I wondered if you would remember, something about till death we do part.'

'And now that you need to be cared for, I

know I can't leave you, at least not now.'

'OK, now let me have my say. I have had some time to think about what has happened and have decided that I prefer to live on my own, at least for the time being.'

'But you need to be looked after and that's my job isn't it?'

'It used to be but that's all changed hasn't it. Yes, I need to be looked after but not by you. I'll move into a nursing home when I leave here and in time I hope I'll recover sufficiently to go home.'

Stella looked at Deborah confused by what George had said She had expected to look after him until he had recovered but clearly that was not what George wanted at least not at the moment. Then George said something that made them both freeze.

'Don't you think you both need some sort of Psychological treatment for your condition?' He said almost contemptuously. As if a chorus they both asked,

'What condition?'

'I think they call it Lesbianism don't they? You know two women having sex. But you would know better than I. It's against nature, it's a mental disease.' Stella looked incredulously at George.

'You're surely not serious are you?'

'I was doing some reading. I needed to understand what was happening in my life.'

'So what did you find? That we are two

monsters?

‘Don’t joke, it’s too serious for flippancy.’

‘I know I’m sorry,’ said Stella.

‘It’s confusing, some people say that we are all a mixture of male and female and that there are all sorts of degrees of relationships. We can even change during our lives if circumstances are conducive. My natural reaction is to call the whole thing a joke but I know that wouldn’t get us anywhere would it?’ Said George.

‘Where do you want to get to?’

‘I want to go back to where we were,’

George said wearily as if it was becoming all too much for him. Stella could see that he was getting tired and needed to rest.

‘Look George, you need to rest. Deborah and I will come back later.’

George looked at her,

‘I don’t understand,’ he said. ‘When? Where did you? He hesitated. ‘I don’t understand, you never showed any indication that you were ...

‘Gay! Say it gay.’

‘Yes gay a Lesbian, I hate the word.’

‘No I didn’t and I wasn’t until,’ she swallowed, ‘until I met Deborah.’

Then she stopped; a sudden memory a fleeting image crossed her mind. That’s not true she said to herself. There was one person, a long time ago, so long that the events had become buried under the years she had lived with George, a time during

which she was to all intents and purposes a happily married woman.

Stella was the elder of two sisters. She was her father's favorite. Tall and slim with dark brown hair and brown eyes, she had what was called Mediterranean colouring. She was bright at school and wanted to be a lawyer. At eighteen she had gone to Nottingham University. She recalled the time. She had just started her first year at Uni. Her room was on the second floor of the student's residence that she shared with Ruth a small quiet girl who was studying art.

As she had mounted the stairs she had felt a mixture of both excitement and fear. She had looked forward so long to going to Uni but when it came to it she had deep fears and couldn't stop herself bursting into tears.. She was excited that she was leaving behind her old life to begin a new and unknown one. But as the time approached, all the doubts that she had about coping came flooding in.

Saying good-bye to her parents was the most difficult. They had clung to each other until the taxi came and then grabbing her luggage she had torn herself free and ran to the waiting vehicle. The last things she had remembered were the fading calls of good luck, we love you, and then she was alone with the quiet hum of the engine as the car took her away from all she knew to an unknown place.

The first meeting with Ruth was unexpected. Although they were strangers, from the beginning they had an unexpected affinity. It was as if they had known each other for years. Their backgrounds were very different. Ruth was an only child. Her mother died when she was very young and her father, with a housekeeper had brought her up. Ruth spent long periods on her own and as she would later confide to Stella, she was very lonely.

Stella had become increasingly fond of Ruth like a younger sister but more. The girls had shared a lot in common and soon became inseparable. Although they were studying very different subjects they were able to spend a lot of time together. They had begun to sit side by side on the floor after a meal just talking sometimes holding hands.

'I love the soft feel of your skin,' Stella said one evening after they had eaten.

'Would you like me to massage you?' Asked Ruth shyly. Stella had found Ruth's touch very calming and sometimes they would massage each other. Neither had felt embarrassed by their closeness, it felt so natural. One or two of their classmates even commented about their friendship.

As they approached the end of their first year, they talked about where they would move as Uni only had room for first year students.

'Let's find a place together,' suggested Ruth one evening. Stella had forgotten that they would have to leave the Residence.

'Yes, fine,' said Stella looking up from her book.

They found three other students, a girl and two men and together they rented a five bedroom flat quite close to the college. Neither Ruth nor Stella wanted to be on their own so they shared one bedroom and made the other into a study.

'Do you think there is something unusual about Ruth and Stella?' said one of the flat mates one day. They seem to spend a lot of time together?

'It's none of our business what they are up to,' replied another but somehow the word got out and one day on the notice board a sign appeared, 'Ruth loves Stella.'

The word got to the Principal and the two girls were called to see her. They sat outside her study after lunch wondering what they were wanted for?

Just after 2pm the polished Mahogany door opened and they were ushered into the Principal's office. Mrs. McIntosh seated behind a desk was a large lady with short grey hair wearing a tweed suit. She pointed to two chairs and the girls sat.

'Do either of you know why you have been called to see me?' She asked looking from one girl to the other. Both girls shook their heads.

'It's because of the notice on the board. Do you know what it means? Stella looked at Ruth and they both nodded their heads?'

'I guess it means we like each other,' Said

Ruth.

‘So why do you think it was put on the board?’

‘We don’t know. Does it matter?’ asked Stella.

‘Well yes it does. This University frowns on Homosexual practices. I’ll say no more.’

Stella looked at Ruth and back to the Principal,

‘Is that it?’ She asked.

‘Yes you may go.’

‘Thank you,’ and the two girls left the office. Outside they looked at each other.

‘Is that what they think? That we’re, um! Lesbians. That’s ridiculous,’ said Stella, ‘we are just good friends aren’t we, just good friends?’

Ruth took her hand, ‘I thought we were more than just friends? Don’t you know I love you.’

‘Of course we love each other,’ said Stella off hand.

‘No I mean I love you. Ever since I met you I have loved you. I knew that I was different I didn’t like boys you know trying to touch me, but you were different. I wanted you to touch me, to hold me and love me. Stella could feel Ruth’s eyes on her. She was excited by what Ruth was saying. Breathless she said,

‘Let’s go home.’

That night the two hugged each other and for the first time explored each other’s bodies. They had taken an irreversible step. They had crossed a

forbidden boundary.

They left Uni the following year after graduation, promising to keep in touch but neither did. Stella sometimes wondered where Ruth was but didn't follow it up. Then George came along and that whole episode in her life was consigned to memory.

Stella had returned home and for a while did nothing, just enjoying the freedom from studying. But she soon realised that nothing goes on forever and she began to feel bored and became irritable. A number of applications to Law firms for pupillage had been unsuccessful and so in desperation she began working as a clerk in an export firm. One of her bosses was George. . He had recently lost his wife and was in a very depressed state. He had noticed her soon after she had arrived and arranged for her to work in his department. He began to struggle with his conscience wanting to get to know her better but aware of the rigid rule about staff fraternization and kept his distance. He doesn't like me, she had decided and maintained a strictly business relationship always referring to him as 'Sir'. Some weeks later she was invited to a masked birthday party. She had decided to go as a courtesan with a frilly skirt, a low bodice and black stockings. The room was crowded when she arrived all the guests were wearing masks so it was difficult to know who was who. George had arrived

late and felt self-conscious and out of place. I knew I shouldn't have come he had said to himself. This is a mistake; I'll stay for a few minutes, say hello to the hostess and then quietly slip away. He was just leaving when he saw her. There was something familiar about the line of her neck and the way she walked. Suddenly he realised it was Stella. He felt his face flushing and his heart beating faster. Their eyes locked and he panicked. She smiled and mouthed Hello. He relaxed and returned the smile walking towards her. They kissed cheeks and it was as if they had known each other for years.

Deborah was the youngest of three daughters. She was very close to her father, a farmer. They lived in the midlands. She was tall and slim with long golden hair and bright blue eyes. She was very popular with the boys but wasn't interested in them. Her mother worried about her seeing her sitting in her room night after night when the other girls were going out. She agreed It was ironic really as most mothers were worried about what their daughters might be up to whereas she was trying to get her out more. It came to a head one weekend. It was Saturday and Deborah's mother casually asked her what her plans were for Saturday evening,

'What are you doing this evening, Debbie?'

She had asked

'Nothing Mum, I've got some reading to do,

to catch up on some schoolwork.'

'Why don't you ring up one of your friends and see a movie or something? Didn't that nice boy from across the street want to go out with you?'

'Oh! Mum please, I'm happy as I am. I don't want to go out with him.'

'Why? He seems a very friendly young man.' Debbie paused. Mum's right, she thought. I should go out more but I don't seem to want to. Why? Is there something wrong with me? Then she thought about Joanna, a girl in her class. They had exchanged numbers but neither had rung the other.

Joanna was small and dark with short dark hair, brown eyes and an infectious smile. They had been in the same class for several months without speaking but one day they found themselves sitting at the same lunch table and began to chat. They had a lot in common. Both like reading and taking long walks. Neither found it easy to make friends and tending to prefer their own company.

I'll ring Joanna and see whether she would like to meet up, thought Deborah. The phone rang a few times and then an unfamiliar voice answered.

'May I speak to Joanna please?' asked Deborah.

'May I ask who's speaking?'

'Yes, it's Deborah, a school friend of Joanna.'

'This is her Mum, wait I'll get her.' Deborah heard the conversation.

'Joanna! Telephone. It's for you.'

'Who is it Mum?'

'Deborah, she says she's a friend from school.'

'Oh yeah, I'll pick it up in my bedroom.'

'Hello!'

'Hello!' Both girls were shy and there was a long pause.

'It's Deborah from school. How are you?'

'I'm fine. How are you?' Deborah took a deep breath.

'What're you doing this evening?' She asked.

There was a long pause then,

'Nothing, why d'you ask?'

'Because, eh, because, I wondered if you would like to go somewhere?'

'Yeh, yeh, why not? I wasn't doing anything.'

Deborah put down the receiver she was shaking and sweating. What's wrong with me, she thought? I've only arranged to see her so why did it make me so nervous? What shall I wear? Something plain, a skirt and sweater, low heels. She began thumbing through her wardrobe rejecting anything that was too colourful. Looking at herself in the mirror she saw a rather plain young woman, an image that she felt comfortable with. Not for her was the modern sexy look with its short skirt, low cut top and an uplift bra which she had seen in a women's magazines at the Stationers and which paraded on any High Street.

They had arranged to meet inside the library,

a place familiar to both of them. Deborah arrived early and began to browse the books on display. One, particularly caught her eye, it was called 'Lesbos'. She was thumbing through it when Joanna arrived.

'Hi, what are looking at? She asked peering over Deborah's shoulder.

'Oh, it's just a book I saw. Um, it's something I..I don't understand.'

'What don't you understand? Asked Joanna curious to know.

'It's about girls who like girls, you know, Lesbians.' She had difficulty saying the word but there was something about it that attracted her, I wonder she thought, I wonder.

'Where shall we go? Asked Joanna,' it's a nice evening, why don't we walk down by the river; there's a small café there. We could have a coffee or something.' Not waiting for a reply, she set off across the road and into the nearby park that led to the riverside. A number of couples were lying together in the grass enjoying the late sunshine. One particular couple, two girls caught Deborah's eye. They were completely engrossed in each other wrapped together as if in one skin. Joanna saw Deborah looking at them and smiled at her.

'Isn't that what you were talking about?' Joanna said, 'they are enjoying each other, what's wrong with that.' Deborah was a bit taken aback by Joanna's frankness as if it was perfectly natural but

said nothing. They reached the riverside and began walking along the towpath. It was quite narrow barely enough room for two so they kept bumping into each other. Joanna took the initiative and put her arm around Deborah's waist,

'That's easier isn't it?' She said. Deborah felt a bit sheepish and glanced at Joanna as if to ask for permission, She then slowly slipped her arm around Joanna's waist. It was warm and firm She liked the feel of another person so close. She could smell her perfume and feel the warmth of her breath, at home they rarely touched or hugged she realised. Joanna began to walk a little faster and soon they were skipping along together keeping in step. Breathless they stopped and laughed.

Joanna's face was close to hers and impulsively Deborah kissed her on the lips, they were soft and yielding. Joanna felt a momentary surprise and then kissed her back. The two girls held each other locked in an embrace. Breathless they separated.

'Oh! Sorry, sorry,' gasped Deborah, 'I didn't mean to, I didn't,' but her words were stopped by Joanna's finger across her lips.

'It's OK, it's fine, why shouldn't we?' Looking back to those days she felt a pang of sadness, we were so young and free, the world was at our feet we had so much to look forwards to.

George was making good progress and the time came to discharge him from hospital. He was

not at all comfortable with the idea of going back to his own home with Stella now that he knew that he was sharing her with Deborah. But initially he had no choice. A bedroom was arranged down stairs and once he was confident on crutches he began to feel more independent. Both he and Stella were avoiding discussing their future. Deborah was getting concerned. George was not able to help in the shop and she was struggling to keep it going. She raised the subject with Stella one day.

‘You know Stella I’m going to have to give up the shop because I can’t manage it on my own and George will be off for at least three months so the doctor said.’

Stella suddenly came up with a suggestion.

‘Why don’t I come and help you until George is fit,’ she suggested. Deborah suppressed her delight at the suggestion. She didn’t want to cause more friction by suggesting it herself but she accepted the offer with alacrity.

‘What a good idea,’ she had said finally. ‘Is George OK with it?’

Stella didn’t reply at first then she confessed,

‘I haven’t asked him. He would be against it I’m sure so I think we should just go ahead. You’ll have to teach me everything because I have never worked in a shop.’

George meanwhile was making good progress. He had discarded his crutches and was

taking weight on his cast. Up to now he hadn't thought about the shop but as he sat in his garden he had a lot of time to think. More importantly he hadn't resolved the Stella-Deborah issue. He tried to analyse it as if it was someone else's problem. What advice would he give? He then conducted an imaginary conversation.

'First of all you will need to discard any ideas about right and wrong, about morality etc. What the bible says and so on. It comes down to how much you love your wife and whether you can share her with another. This is ridiculous,' he shouted to the trees, 'ridiculous. How can you share someone's love, it's all or none isn't it?

'Maybe not? Maybe it can work if the people involved want it to and have more to gain by sharing. In some respects it's a bit like polygamy and that's been in existence for years. The more he thought about it the more reasonable it seemed. He loved Stella and certainly was attracted to Deborah. Just after 5pm he heard Stella's car stopping on the gravel drive. He waited. He heard her footsteps and then the front door opening

'Hello, George I'm home,' she shouted.

'Where are you?'

'I'm in the garden,'

'Oh that's nice, its been a lovely day. What have you been doing? Stella asked.

'Thinking, I've a lot of time to think.'

'What about?'

'About us of course.' She leant forwards and kissed him on the forehead.

'What have you decided?' she said. George looked up at her. She seemed younger and prettier than he could remember. Obviously life in the country was suiting her.

'I think we need to sit down, the three of us and talk. You and I can't decide for Deborah. Why don't you ring her and invite her for dinner tonight?'

Stella excused herself and went into the kitchen. She needed to speak to Deborah in private. Dialling her number she listened to the tone until Deborah picked up.

'Hello Deborah can you speak?'

'Yes, is there a problem?'

'No, not exactly, George wants to talk to us together. Are you free to come over here for dinner say seven-ish.' There was a pause and Stella could hear Deborah talking to someone probably a customer.

'Sorry, I just had to finish something. Seven-ish, that would be fine.' The line went dead.

Stella called out to George.

'I've just spoken to Deborah, she'll be here for dinner at seven. Why don't you go and have a rest? I'll wake you in time for dinner.'

Deborah looked around the shop, checked the lights, the windows and the fridge, saw that all was in order and left, locking the front door. She felt

uneasy, uncertain how the evening would pan out. She had thought long and hard about the situation and couldn't see one that all three of them would accept and be able to move on with their lives. She became more uneasy as she approached the house wondering whether she would be able to cope with what she dreaded was about to happen. Stella saw her approaching and opened the front door to her. The two women kissed and hugged briefly.

'It'll be all right,' whispered Stella seeing how nervous Deborah was.

'I don't know why I feel so scared,' Deborah replied. 'It is if I am in some way on trial and that my whole future happiness depends on what happens here tonight.'

'I'm finishing off in the kitchen; George is in the lounge, you know where that is,' said Stella. Deborah stood for a moment, straightened her skirt and went to greet George.

'Good evening George, How are you? We haven't seen each other for a while.' George grunted,

'I'm Ok I suppose? I'll be glad when we settle this. I'm getting fed up not knowing where I am.'

The meal passed in relative silence, just the occasional, please pass ...and thank you. After the meal was finished they moved to the lounge for coffee.

'OK,' began George, 'let's not mess about

any more. I want to know what you two have decided.' Stella looked at Deborah who nodded.

'We have decided that we love each other and want to be together. But we want you to live with us,' she said turning to look at George.

'We know it's going to take some adjustment but neither of us wants you to leave and be on your own.' George sat his head bowed. It wasn't what he wanted, he wanted Stella to himself but he now knew that that wasn't possible.

Later that week in the Pub some of the locals were talking.

'Did you hear that they have sorted it out. George is going to live with both of them.'

'Lucky sod,' someone shouted out from the room.

The End

