

RUMINATIONS
A Book Of Short Stories

Martin Nelson

These are works of fiction. The characters are fictitious. Any similarity between them and living persons is purely coincidental.

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THE ASSIGNATION

THE ASSISTANT

THE BEGGAR

CAFFETIERE

THE CAT

THE DINING ROOM TABLE

THE FINAL LIE

THE PAINTER

THE PROFESSOR

SHELLSHOCK

STIR-FRY

THE TRAINEE

TSUNAMI

The ASSIGNATION

She was tall and slim with high heels enhancing her long legs. Wearing a close fitting black dress that hugged her slender hips she entered like a mannequin, poised and confident. All eyes undressed her as she made her way to the far corner of the restaurant where he was sitting.

Moduli's day had started as normal with his wife's voice, shriller with the years, calling him for breakfast. He no longer looked at her, not wanting to be reminded of the desirable young woman she was when they married. He gave her a perfunctory kiss and settled himself behind the morning paper. She had

come to accept that she would never regain her figure after the birth of their third son. She did the best she could keeping her hair smartly coiffured but these days he no longer saw her, he never kissed her, never made love to her. They were strangers living in the same house.

Today unknown to her there was a spring in his step and a sparkle in his eye. No longer young he regretted the passage of time that made him less attractive to women. He had always prided himself on his charm and good looks but time was erasing them and he didn't like it.

He remembered when Marylyn first came into the office, his former secretary had become pregnant and he was looking for a replacement. He recollected their first meeting as clearly as if it was yesterday.

There was a knock on the door.

'Come in.' He was still looking down at her CV when he heard her say,

'Good morning,' in a soft almost musical voice. He looked up and for a moment was overwhelmed by her presence. Not someone normally

mesmerized by a beautiful woman, she had immediately fascinated him and for a moment he was speechless. Coughing to clear his throat, he stammered,

‘Ah good morning, Miss, please sit down.’ He had carefully placed the chair away from the desk so that he could see the legs of anyone who sat on it. He watched as she lowered herself into the chair and slowly crossed her legs causing her short skirt to rise up showing a smooth light brown thigh. He struggled to pull his eyes away from it to her face. She sat calmly watching his confusion with a slight smile on her face, her deep brown eyes set in a child like face. Her full lips were slightly open to show a row of perfect white teeth. Clearing his throat again he went over the details of her CV skipping from page to page, He had already decided to hire her so why waste time reading this stuff he thought.

‘Good, good,’ he uttered although not taking in anything on the pages. Finally when he thought that he had spent enough time looking through her CV he asked,

‘When could you start?’

She had caused turmoil in the open office. The younger men fell over themselves to talk to her, to offer her drinks and to engage her in conversation during their meal breaks. She accepted it all with a smile having become used to male attention.

She did not understand what it was that made grown men behave more like children, with a new toy when in her presence. Ever since she was a child, she had accepted it and given it little thought until she started at college. Then she soon realised that she had inherited a wonderful asset. Tutors and even Professors fell beneath her spell. She learned that she could get away with anything as long as she smiled and cooed a little. Late returns of assignments, even failure to complete one was passed over with a smile and a pat on her knee.

It was inevitable that sooner or later her teachers would mistake her friendly nature for something else. Time and again she would find herself in a compromising situation but she soon recognised the difference between a friendly arm on her

shoulder and the grope for her breast that was about to happen as she passed by.

She couldn't remember when she suddenly realised that she had a saleable commodity that was no different from many others. Once she realised it she began exploiting it by accepting expensive dinners but always ending them with a promise.

It was chance meeting in a coffee bar that changed her life. She had dropped in for a quick break when an older woman, smartly dressed approached her table and asked,

'May I join you?' They fell into an easy conversation. The usual questions followed; what do you do? Where do you work? Are you married etc. Marylyn became aware that she was being interviewed but for what? The woman whose name was Josephine then explained,

'I am looking for someone like you to help me in my business. Would you be interested?'

'It depends,' replied Marylyn. 'What's your business?' Josephine leaned forwards and in a low voice said,

'I'm in the escort service. Only the most exclusive clients use us. Why don't you come and see me and we can talk more privately,' she said looking around at the crowded room.

Some days later Marylyn took the elevator to the third floor of Josephine's downtown office. Alighting she walked cautiously along the hall, her heels catching on the deep carpet. She stopped opposite a glass door on which was written, 'Your Confidante.' She paused and for a moment had misgivings.

If I enter my life may change, do I want that? She asked herself. Finally, I've come this far I may as well find out what it's all about. She looked for a bell saw none, waited and then pushed the door. It opened with a swish on well-oiled hinges.

She found herself in a light open office with a reception counter at the far side in front of a large window through which she could see some of the nearby high rise buildings. There seemed to be no one there and for a moment she was confused. Then a well-coiffured head rose above the counter.

‘Sorry I dropped my pencil,’ the young woman said. ‘Welcome, you must be Marylyn?’

‘Yes,’

‘Josephine is waiting for you.’ please enter that room,’ she said indicating a door to her right.

Marylyn knocked gently, heard a ‘come in’ and entered. The room was minimally furnished with white walls and carpet. The light coming from a number of ceiling points was subdued. Josephine wearing a loose fitting gown in pink was lounging on the settee.

‘Ah! Marylyn come and sit next to me,’ she said tapping the cushion. ‘I’m so please you came, you won’t be sorry I can assure you. I know you must have many reservations and I’ll do my best to answer them.’

‘You know I was very uncertain if I would come and see you at all. It’s something I don’t like the sound of, it’s too sleazy that’s my concern,’ said Marylyn.

‘I think that’s natural and I understand exactly how you feel but once you know how we work and the

safeguards we put in place, I think your concerns will be answered.'

'Let me explain. Our clients are some of the most affluent and successful men who need a break from their demanding lives. They are looking for a light amusing experience. We have a tight vetting system and anyone who has anything suspicious about his background is rejected. Be assured that you will be treated with respect at all times.'

Once she had been reassured that all was above board Marylyn began. Very soon she was taking on more and more engagements. One day checking her e-mail she saw a familiar name, her former boss was seeking a liaison. At first she hesitated, I know him too well she reasoned it would be embarrassing. But she decided that she needed the money and so made the arrangement. By now she had a new name, Persephone.

It was after seven when she made her way to the restaurant where they were to meet. Sitting waiting, Moduli glanced at his watch she was late. Then he saw her, tall and slim

entering the restaurant and walking towards him. There was something familiar about her walk the languorous way in which her hips moved. It's Marylyn what's she doing here? I must get rid of her she's going to screw it all up. She's coming towards me, what am I going to do?

'Hello Moduli, its lovely to see you again.'

'Umm I'm waiting for someone,' he said stammering the words.

'I know, you are waiting for me.'

The ASSISTANT

Chapter One

Deep in thought, the four candidates waited. They knew each other well but gave only the briefest of nods on arrival. They were trying to remain calm conscious that an ill thought out remark could destroy their chances. Julia the only female was thinking about how fate had brought her there.

She recalled that moment when her life changed and she decided to

become a doctor. The wish to help the sick and infirm began when she was very young. She had woken up one morning hearing a plaintive chirping coming through her bedroom window. She tiptoed out of bed and crept towards the sound. Peering over the windowsill she saw a small bird struggling to fly, its wing, torn and deformed. Unable to move in one piece it flapped uselessly. Julia felt a searing pain in her chest and for a moment couldn't breathe.

How could that have happened, who could have done that? Slowly she eased the window open and stealthily reached for the bird. It seemed to understand what she was doing and didn't flinch. Gently she cupped it in her hand and brought it inside. She was now able to see the extent of its injury. The left wing was broken in one place but otherwise it was undamaged. She wondered what she could do and then remembered a film she had seen where a bird was treated by a vet. She recalled exactly what he did and began to do the same. By the time she had finished the wing was splinted with a small toothpick. She recollected that there

was an old birdcage in the attic and after rummaging around found it. She was excited; she was doing something that mattered. She took the cage into the kitchen and was busily cleaning it when her mother came in. She watched as her daughter meticulously cleaned the cage marvelling at her diligence.

Suddenly the committee door opened. The members of the Medical Committee had interviewed three of the four applicants and had called the fourth. A tall slim figure dressed in a tailored trouser suit with a white silk blouse and a pale pink scarf wearing low heels entered. Julia's face was unmade except for a smudge of pale lipstick; a black eye patch concealed her left eye.

She stood waiting to be greeted.

'Good Afternoon Miss Aberdare,' Mr Rutherford the chairman stuttered almost speechless. 'Please be seated. Thank you for coming.' Julia was becoming used to the effect she had on people who hadn't met her before.

He began,

'You have applied for the post of Surgical Registrar to the University Department. We have seen your CV.'

A voice inside cautioned that he had to be careful how he continued.

'I would like to ask you a few questions.' Miss Aberdare looked around. Each of the committee members glanced away when her eye caught them. She could sense their embarrassment. She simply answered.

'Yes sir.'

Now he had to broach the subject. She could see him swallowing nervously searching for the correct words making sure he was politically correct. Miss Aberdare waited and then she decided to ease his confusion.

'Sir I lost my left eye in an accident as a child. My good eye has accommodated for the loss and as a result I have had no difficulty in reaching this level of surgical expertise. Is there any thing else you would like to know Sir,' she smiled.

'No that's fine I just wanted to go through your CV. I see you....'
The chairman finished speaking. The committee had completed their questioning.

'Miss Aberdare thank you please wait outside.'

Julia returned to the waiting room and sat pending the committee's decision. The door opened and one of the other applicants was called back to be offered the job. With her hopes dashed Julia got up to walk towards the exit.

Unexpectedly she heard her name called.

'Miss Aberdare would you please wait? The committee would like to speak to you.' She returned to her seat,

Some of the committee members were already preparing to leave when she returned.

'Ah Miss Aberdare, thank you for waiting, please sit down.' The chairman said pointing to the chair.

'The committee has asked me to tell you that you were by far the best candidate and all things being equal we would have selected you but and I think you will know what I am going to say....' Julia interrupted

'Yes Sir I know, I have heard it before but it hasn't stopped me from reaching where I am.'

'I am very sorry, good luck.'

Chapter Two

A few days later a letter arrived at Julia's home. The handwriting was unfamiliar. Julia excitedly tore open the envelope and read.

'Please excuse this hand written note. I wonder if you would kindly come and see me at the above address. I have an offer that may interest you.'

The address was a house in Harley Street. The signature was Mr Rutherford's the chairman of the committee.

Julia phoned her mother and read the letter to her.

'What do you think mum?'

'Mmm sounds interesting! What was he like?'

'Pleasant enough in his early fifties a bit like a friendly bear, I liked him.'

Julie knew Harley Street every doctor did. It was the pinnacle of success to practice there and the fees reflected this. But she had never been there.

Originally developed as an up market residential area in the late 18th century with fine Georgian styled

houses it passed from gentry to gentry until in the late 19th century it began to be populated by doctors because of its proximity to the major railway stations.

Julia was to meet Mr Rutherford at 10.30 am. She checked her appearance and saw feel both excitement and fear. She decided to take the bus, get off on Marylebone road and walk up Harley Street. It was further than she thought but she still arrived at 10.15 am, too early but she preferred that. Standing admiring the tall black lacquered door with its brightly shining bronze plate she read the names of the specialists who worked there. His name was at the top of the list probably been there the longest she guessed. The sparkling white Portland stone steps were almost too clean to stand on as she stepped up to ring the bell. From inside she heard it chime, then footsteps and the door slowly opened.

A nurse appeared.

‘Good morning, may I help you?’

‘I have come to see Dr Rutherford.’

‘Are you a patient?’

‘No it’s a private meeting.’

'Oh yes Miss Aberdare I remember, the doctor told me to expect you. Please follow me. He asked me to show you to his office and to wait there. He has been delayed but he won't be too long.'

'Thank you.' Julia followed her along a corridor and up a short flight of stairs into his office. She was becoming increasingly uncomfortable as she proceeded uncertain what to expect.

The room was spacious with a high window overlooking the street below. The intricate frieze and the elaborate central chandelier suggested it must have been a lounge or sitting room.

One wall was replaced by well filled bookshelves. She could never resist looking at other people's books and went over to peer. She recognised many of the mainly surgical titles but there were some autobiographies and novels. One section surprised her. It was a collection of books on magic, titles such as The Fitzkee Trilogy, Royal Touch by Cellini and the Tarbell Series. They were new to her.

Mr Rutherford entered silently and stood for a moment watching her as

she scanned the pages of a book.

‘Good morning Dr Aberdare I see you are interested in my small library.’

‘Oh Mr Rutherford I didn’t hear you come in, please excuse me.’

‘No it’s fine, you are probably surprised by some of my selection.’

‘Yes the books on magic were unexpected.’

‘I wanted to be a magician when I was younger and I still dabble a bit. Perhaps one could say we both practice magic. Surgery is a form of magic don’t you think?’

Julia was directed to a small table with two lounge chairs.

‘Come and sit over here. What would you like to drink?’

‘Black coffee please.’

‘While we are waiting for the coffee let me tell you why I have asked you to come and see me.’ Julia leaned forwards. For days she had been wracking her brain trying to guess but had come up with no satisfactory answer.

‘You are a very talented surgeon I can see that from your CV. Your references are excellent and every one you have worked with has spoken

highly of you but I believe because of your disability you will have great difficulty in getting a permanent surgical post, do you agree?’

Julia had faced this question too many times to disagree with him. But she still didn’t want to accept that it was true.

Mr Rutherford continued.

‘I need an assistant for my private practice, someone to help me in the operating theatre, organise the lists, see the patients pre-operatively etc.’

Julia hadn’t expected that answer. In her wildest dreams she had never considered that as an option, to be someone’s assistant rather than her own boss. It came as a shock; he could see the surprise on her face.

‘I can see you had not considered that possibility?’
At that moment the coffee arrived and Julia had time to think.

‘I don’t know what to say. I am very flattered by your offer. It is a very generous and tempting one.’

Mr Rutherford sat back with a smile on his face. At first he thought she would turn it down immediately.

‘Of course you must think about

it. In the next few days I will send you details of the job for you to consider.'

Julia stepped out into Harley Street as the late evening sun lit up the recent rain shining on the road and retraced her steps to the bus stop. She had a lot on her mind. How to decide her future? Should she accept the offer or continue on her journey to become her own boss.

She let herself into her small bedsit and called her mother.

'Mum I need to talk to you, are you in tonight?'

Julia's mother Suzanne now lived alone. In her late fifties, she had struggled to overcome the unexpected death of her husband. Initially she tried to keep up the family home but as Julia was working away so often she decided to sell and move into a smaller place.

Julia knocked and waited. Apprehensive she wondered how her mother would receive her. But today a smiling Suzanne was standing at the door. They hugged. Her mother looked younger.

‘Mum you look wonderful.’

‘Yes I decided to get my hair cut short and change my make up, do you like it?’

After a sumptuous dinner during which they decided not to talk about the situation, Julia and her mother retired to the lounge.

‘Now then Julia what’s on your mind, how did the visit go?’

‘Very well, he’s a nice chap. I really liked him, kind, soft spoken a gentleman.’

‘What did he want?’

You’ll never guess? He wants me to be his assistant.’

‘Assistant! What does that mean?’

‘He has a large private practice and needs an assistant to help in surgery and to run the show.’

‘That’s wonderful, what an amazing opportunity. I take it you accepted.’

‘I said I would think about it.’

‘I don’t get it, what is there to think about?’

Julia realised that her mother would never understand the burning ambition, which raged inside her to show that despite her disability and

being a woman she could climb the highest rung in the surgical world. Accepting this job would be tantamount to giving up and accepting second best.

Chapter Three

The winter that year had been especially harsh and snow still remained on the roads well into March. It thawed during the day but turned into ice at night. The roads looked safe but were a potential death trap. Julia remembered every detail. The memory of that night was seared into her memory. She still woke at night terrified as she relived the scene of the oncoming headlights glaring into her eyes.

Everyone was relaxed and were chatting about the events of the evening. Julia's mother was driving and turned to speak to her father seated beside her. Julia saw the lights first and screamed, 'mum' but it was too late. All she remembered was the sound of rending crashing twisting metal. She was winded as she was catapulted forwards and jammed against the back of the seat in front.

Suddenly it was quiet. Still struggling to breathe she could see that both her parents had been thrown forwards. Neither was moving nor making a sound. Then she heard her mum moaning and trying to move.

By that time the ambulance had arrived and the rest was too sketchy to remember. When she recovered the news was broken to her, her father was dead her mother severely injured. She had suffered a facial injury. The next few days and weeks were a haze, faces and events faded into each other. She became aware that the vision in her left eye was blurred but took no notice of it assuming it would recover she had other things on her mind. Gradually the vision faded until she had virtually no sight. Despite visiting many specialists she came to accept that she would only have vision in one eye.

Julia attended two more job interviews and each time came away with the same sinking feeling that although she was the best candidate they would never have the courage to appoint her. It's not fair she would shout at her image in the mirror hating the eye

patch and the reason she wore it. Taking the patch off she stared at her left eye. She loathed its dull and lifeless look. As soon as she closed her good eye the world became vague, distorted with indistinct shadows. Try as she might she couldn't make out any familiar features. Angry and frustrated she replaced back the patch and the world returned to normal. She thought again about having the eye removed and replaced with an artificial one.

The waiting room at the eye clinic was almost empty when she arrived for her appointment.

'Mum I can't see what the eye people can do they can't give me a new eye so why am I going?'

'Please darling do it for me you never know what new things are available?'

She sat down in the empty room and waited.

'What am I doing here?' She said to herself. 'Aren't I just exchanging one deception for another? People will still see that I am disfigured'

Just then the door opened and a man came in, nodded to her and sat down. She waited until he began to turn over the pages of a magazine before glancing at him. He was young with the freshness of youth. Her eyes travelled over his face noting the small tuft of hair spouting from his upper lip. Then she found herself staring at his left eye and could see that it didn't seem quite the same as the right. The realisation dawned on her that he had a glass eye. It wasn't immediately obvious but she could see that it didn't move as much as the normal one. It didn't really replace the real thing? It would only make its absence less obvious so why did he bother she wondered?

He must have seen her looking because he suddenly blurted out.

'Yes its not real. I lost it playing football.'

'I'm sorry I didn't mean to stare.'

'It's OK I've got used to it most of the time. What brings you here?'

'I was wondering whether I should do the same. I'm confused. Since I can't have a normal eye why have a glass one?'

‘I had the same doubts but have never looked back since I had the new eye. I had it inserted six months ago and am here for a check up.’

At the moment the nurse appeared and called Julia in to see the specialist.

‘How can I help you?’

‘I am thinking about having an artificial eye but am very uncertain.’

‘Have you decided?’

‘I spoke to the young man in your waiting room and he seemed very happy with his. I was surprised how realistic it looked. I think would like to try one.’

Chapter Four

Work at the hospital continued to occupy all of Julia’s time and energy and for a while she let the invitation from Professor Rutherford lie unanswered. It came up in conversation one weekend when she was out walking in the park with her mother. Suzanne was still unsteady and needed an arm for support. They had expended all the usual subjects, the family, the forthcoming Easter, the

weather when she suddenly stopped and turned to Julia.

‘Well?’ she asked, ‘have you decided?’

‘Decided what?’ Julia replied not knowing to what her mother was referring.

‘You know?’

‘No I don’t.’

‘Come on Julia, have I got to spell it out, the letter, the invitation?’

‘Oh that, I had completely forgotten about it.’

‘How could you?’

‘Because it’s not really what I want to do.’

Julia looked at the blank screen not knowing where to begin.

Dear Professor Rutherford, I would like to accept...

No that’s not right I’ll try again.

Further to your letter I would like to come and see you ...

I think that’s too formal.

Thank you for your invitation to work with you...

No that’s no good,

She sat with her head in her hands looking at the cursor blinking as if mocking her and saying ‘come on get

your thoughts together and do it.'

OK one last try.

Dear Mr Rutherford, I have decided to accept your kind offer to work as your surgical assistant. I would like to see you and discuss the job further.

Julia reread it several times and in desperation pressed 'Print.' She watched the white sheet disappear into the mouth of the printer and waited. Back came the letter, no smudges, no spelling mistakes perfect.

Mr Rutherford was preparing to see his first patient when his secretary knocked and entered.

'There's a letter from Miss Aberdare waiting for you.'

'Thanks I'll read it after I've seen today's patients.'

Tearing open the envelope he read the contents and called his secretary

'Make an appointment for Miss Aberdare please.'

Julia again arrived too early and was shown into the empty waiting room, the first patient not having arrived. She sat thumbing through the

tired looking magazines lying on the sideboard and chanced upon a gardening one. She began to read it and was so engrossed that she didn't hear Mr Rutherford approaching.

'You like gardening?' he asked startling her.

'Oh sorry I didn't see you come in.'

'Come into the office,' he said pointing to the open door.'

'Good morning Miss Aberdare I am very please to see you. You look different I can't quite make out what it is?'

She smiled and he suddenly noticed her left eye.

'That's very good, I wouldn't have noticed it if I hadn't known.' He wanted to know more about the operation and what problems if any she was having but it was too early for such intimate questions. His voice became more formal.

'I am delighted that you have decided you want the job?' Over the next thirty minutes she asked probing questions about the job, what it would involve? The hours, the salary etc.

John sat back in his chair.

'Phew! That was quite a grilling

but I welcome your questions. I hope you now know exactly what you are letting yourself into.'

'Yes I think so. I would like to repeat that it would only be a temporary appointment and that I would continue to be applying for permanent posts.'

'That suits me. If you are successful, I would like at least one month's notice so that I would have time to find a replacement.'

Chapter Five

John Rutherford parked his car in the garage and let himself into the house. His wife Claudine wouldn't be home for another hour or two. He went into the snug and poured himself a whisky. He hated coming home to an empty house, it reminded him of his childhood when he would often return from school to find no one at home. Then he would prowl around fearful that some evil spirit would pounce out on him. Many years had passed but he still had the same fear.

Claudine was his second wife. She had been his secretary. It was a time in his life when he was building

his practice and took on every case he could. It meant late nights and working weekends.

She was in her early twenties when she first came to work. He had seen her in the department and was immediately attracted to her. At the time she was working for one of his colleagues. By chance his private practice secretary gave her notice and he asked her to join him.

His first marriage was more than twenty years old when it fell apart. It slowly changed over the years and they had settled into a rut. They had begun to argue over trivial things and sex had become a routine almost a duty. But it was not always like that. He remembered the early days. They had known each other since childhood going to the same school and getting engaged when she was sixteen much against the families' wishes. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine her, how young she was and so beautiful, like a young gazelle. He would tremor at the thought of her. That was now all over. They had a bitter divorce.

He heard a sound and Claudine's

voice.

‘Are you home? It’s me.’ He stirred himself and went into the hall. She looked tired. They hugged. Her face was drained and her hair hung lank against her cheeks. She was carrying some bags.

‘Are you all right dear you look exhausted?’

‘Yes it’s been a hard day.’

‘What have you got there?’

‘Just some things for supper, it won’t be long.’

He helped her carry them into the kitchen and sat watching her as she unpacked them. Time was already etching faint lines around her eyes and under her chin. Her youthful looks were beginning to be lost and replaced by a stronger image that of a mature confident woman. He coughed.

‘I have invited someone to help me in the practice, one of the applicants for the recent hospital job a woman, very bright.’

He had decided not to tell her that he had appointed Julia but instead he said,

‘If she accepts I think she would make an excellent assistant.’ He

watched Claudine's face as he spoke. She didn't react so he continued.

'I wrote to her and am waiting for her reply.' Claudine continued emptying the basket and said nothing, She felt her chest tighten not certain how to respond. Finally she said in a slightly falsetto voice,

'Oh that's good, I would like to meet her.'

'She hasn't accepted yet, I'll let you know.'

John tried to make small talk over dinner but Claudine's mind was elsewhere. She was horrified by what John had told her, it was as if history was repeating itself. She didn't know what to do. At the time she married John and replaced his first wife she felt no guilt but over the years as she grew older she began to understand what she had done. She should have said,

'No go back to your wife,' but her pride wouldn't let her.

Soon after dinner was finished, she made an excuse.

'Sorry John I've got a bad headache I think I'll have an early night.'

'OK dear,' he replied. 'I'll have a brandy, watch the news and then come up.'

Standing in the shower with the hot water tingling her skin she reviewed her life. Meeting and marrying John seemed like a miracle. She was not well educated and the post as hospital secretary was her first real job after leaving school. She thought it would be the best she would achieve until he came along.

Chapter Six

Claudine couldn't stand the suspense she had to know. She waited for John to tell her whether Julia had agreed to take the job but he said nothing. She felt like a wild animal stalking its prey waiting for an opportunity to kill while John seemed totally oblivious of what was happening. How could he not know how I felt when he planned to appoint a young secretary? Didn't he realise it would hurt me?

Finally she confronted him at breakfast.

‘John what did you decide?’

‘About what?’

‘You know, your new secretary, did she want the job?’ As she asked the question she knew the answer. She had taken the job, why wouldn’t another young woman want the same, an opportunity to win a successful man.

‘Yes, yes she decided to try it for six months.’ John replied through a mouthful of toast.

That’s it, thought Claudine. I’m in a battle, a battle I’m going to win.

She busied herself until she saw John drive off to the hospital and immediately went into his study. She felt like a snooper in her own home as she rummaged through his desk. She was looking for the letter. She wanted to find the girl’s address. She expected to find everything neat and tidy but instead the papers were all mixed up. He’s going to know someone has been through his notes she knew as she turned over sheets of typed notes. What a mess it was in and for a moment she found herself tidying it up. No, I mustn’t do that; this is crazy I must find her letter.

It was at the bottom of the pile. The writing on the envelope was round and childlike with big letters joined together. She opened it and read the address. She knew the road and made a note of the house number. It was an apartment block.

Claudine couldn't get Julia out of her mind. She imagined her as tall and graceful with flowing blonde hair full lips and a soft musical voice. She saw her wherever she went, disappearing around a corner, going into a shop. It had become an obsession and much as she tried to forget her, Julia dominated all her waking hours.

'Why are you so late?' she would demand of John even before he had got into the house.

'I told you I had a late surgery,' he said. 'I said I would be late.'

She wanted to say,

'You've been with that woman I know, deceiving me just like you did Mary but she said,

'I forgot.'

Over the weeks the doubts gnawed at her. She sat in front of her mirror studying her face and seeing the

ageing around her eyes and the slight saggy of her chin. She tried to imagine how she looked when they first met, so open so willing. I must see what she looks like. I need to know what I'm up against. Slowly she evolved a plan.

It was on the night when John went to Rotary that she decided to act. Wearing a long black coat and a floppy hat which half covered her face, Claudine made her way to Julia's address. It was dark when she arrived outside the apartment. She hid behind some bushes and waited.

As the time passed she began to wonder what she was doing. So I see her what then? Am I going to accost her? As the doubts began to build up, the sky opened and a deluge began. She pulled her coat around her and glanced at her watch. John would be home in an hour's time and she didn't want to have to explain to him where she had been.

A taxi drew up and a young woman alighted. Her features were older than Claudine expected. She watched as she walked towards the front door and let herself in.

The rain was getting heavier as Julia reached her front door. While she was searching for her keys she had the feeling that she was being watched. She didn't turn to look. Once indoors she went into her unlit bedroom and peered out. She saw a movement and noticed a figure standing in the shadow of a nearby tree looking up towards her. Reaching for her mobile she called the police.

Claudine was preparing to go home when was suddenly faced by two policemen who grabbed her arms pinning them to her sides.

'What are you doing,' she shrieked as she was bundled into a police car and taken to the station.

'You may make one call,' said the sergeant handing her a phone.

Claudine grabbed the phone.

'Darling it's me, I'm at the police station.'

'What are you doing there?'

'Please come, there's been a terrible mistake.'

Twenty minutes later John entered the police station. He was still wearing his tuxedo.

'I'm looking for my wife,' he demanded at the grill.

'Sir when did she arrive?'

'About twenty minutes ago.'

'What's her name?'

'Mrs Rutherford.'

He checked his screen.

'OK I'll get an officer to take you to her, wait here.'

John waited in the small room with others looking to be united with their loved ones. Throughout his life as a surgeon he had met people from all walks of life but what he saw as he sat down was beyond his experience. It seemed as if all ages, genders and races were represented in that small space. He tried to overhear conversations but most evaded him as dialects and languages were distorted by culture and origins. He felt particularly conspicuous in his tuxedo and one man couldn't resist commenting.

'What yer doin' here dude you should be ont stage with that gear.'

His name was called and relieved he followed the officer into the far reaches of the station until they got to

the cells. He heard her call his name before he saw her huddled on a bed in the damp ill-lit cell.

‘Darling please get me out of here.’ She looked terrible her hair plastered to her face, her eyes swollen from crying. Her coat was muddied and wrapped around her like a blanket. The officer opened the door,

‘You can take her home Sir, settle the charges at the desk.’

Claudine lurched upright steadying herself against the wall and fell forwards into John’s arms. Holding her around the shoulders he guided her to the desk unable to say anything, so distressed he was by her appearance. She leaned against him repeating his name.

‘John, John I am so sorry, so sorry I don’t know what got into me.’

‘It’s all right darling you’re safe now. We will talk later. Let’s get you home and cleaned up.’”

The journey home was in silence. Claudine was so relieved to be out of that place. John was aghast by the recent events. At the red lights he turned and glanced at her. She was

slumped in her seat her eyes closed, her face pale and lifeless. He reached over and squeezed her hand; a brief smile flickered across her features. He had no words.

Once indoors he ran a bath and helped her undress. She stepped in. It had been a long time since he had seen her naked. She was so beautiful. He left her to soak and brought her a cup of tea and sat with her as she drank it propped up in the bath. Slowly the colour returned to her face and she smiled.

‘Thank you John you have been so kind I don’t deserve it. I love you very much.’

With her wrapped in a towel, they walked into the bedroom. As she reached the bed she flopped onto it. Mouthing, “I love you” she turned over and was soon fast asleep. John stood looking at her. Her towel had opened to show her breasts. He reached forward and stroked her silken flesh. Later he joined her in bed. It was the first time they had slept together in months. That night she turned towards him and in their sleepy stupor they made love.

Chapter Seven

Watching the police bundling the snooper into their vehicle, Julia slowly unwound. She closed the curtains and put on the light. It had been a long day and she could now relax. She busied herself preparing dinner unaware of the events occurring at the local police station.

When she arrived at the surgery the following morning, John wasn't there. He had left a message saying he wasn't coming in and that she should see the new patients. She thought it nothing unusual until the nurse brought in her mid-morning coffee

'Have you heard what happened last night?' Mrs Rutherford was arrested.

'Arrested, arrested for what?'

'She was caught snooping outside someone's house.'

Julia froze. Could it have been her's? No it must be a coincidence.

Ready to leave, she rang John to let him know about the new patients. After a long wait, he answered.

'John it's me, is everything all

right?’

‘Julia where are you?’

‘I have just finished the surgery.’

‘Oh yes I’m sorry, I should have told you I wasn’t coming in.’

‘How is Claudine?’

‘You’ve heard?’

‘Yes one of the nurses told me, She said she was arrested.’ There was a long pause.

‘You don’t know?’

‘Know what?’

‘Oh my God you don’t know.’

‘Know what?’ Julia repeated, ‘what are you talking about?’

‘Julia I think you had better come to my house we need to sort this out.’

It was a puzzled Julia who knocked on her boss’s front door and waited uncertain what had happened.

‘Ah Julia good, come in.’ He said. ‘Let me take your coat it’s a very chilly evening. Go into the study, Claudine will join us she has something she wants to say to you.’

John left and Julia heard whispers before Claudine entered clearly distressed. She was wrapped in a dressing gown her hair straggling

around her face. Her eyes were swollen and she was wearing no make. She was struggling to say something.

‘What has happened Claudine? Why are you so distraught?’

‘Don’t you know?’

‘Know what?’

‘It was me in the bushes spying on you.’

Chapter Eight

It started off as a normal day, three operations in the morning all of which seemed straightforward; Julia had got into the routine and slowly began to enjoy the variety of cases she was seeing. She was learning to relax. Her false eye was no longer dominating her thoughts; most people didn’t even seem to notice it. John was in good humour as he began to scrub for the last case.

‘It looks like a nice weekend the forecast is for sunny and dry,’ he said. John seemed to stutter the last few words. Then he grabbed his chest. Before she could catch him he slid to the ground groaning in pain. Julie acted immediately

‘Crash trolley,’ she shouted, ‘the chief’s having a heart attack.’

The words echoed in John’s brain as his vision faded. Despite the lack of circulation, his heart rate accelerated. His brain was struggling to survive. Within minutes the emergency team arrived and went into their normal routine. Once John’s condition was stabilized they waited and watched. Would his heart manage or would it stop? All eyes were on the ECG as it traced out an irregular pattern, which slowly became regular.

‘I think he’s winning,’ said the IC chief. ‘Lets get him to the unit.’

Julia watched aware of her own hammering heart. Sweat pricked her face. She moistened her dry lips. A touch on her shoulder focused her.

‘He’s going to be all right.’ said a nurse.

‘Let’s finish the case,’ Julia said knowing she wasn’t needed.

Later her mobile vibrated, it was the IC chief.

‘He’s stable and is asking for you,’

The IC unit was an oasis of calm with small triangles of light outlining the separate cubicles. The nurse

pointed to one on the right and
whispered,

‘The chief’s there he’s doing
fine, doctor.’

Julia tiptoed to the bedside and sat
down. John’s eyes were closed as if
he was sleeping. His colour had
returned and his breathing was quiet
and steady. She sat silently watching
him. He must have heard her
movement because his eyes opened.

‘Hello,’ he said.

‘How are you feeling?’

‘Ready for golf,’ he joked. ‘Pretty
good really the pain has gone.’

Then as if back to work he asked.

‘What happened to the last
case?’

‘I finished it, it went smoothly.’

Julia turned as Claudine appeared.
She was frantic, her face was unmade
and she was wearing a loose dress.

‘I came as soon as I heard. Is he
all right? What happened?’

Chapter Nine

Although the two women had
become good friends Claudine still felt
guilty about her behaviour and
doubted if Julia had really forgiven

her. They had never discussed it again after her humiliating apology. Sitting together beside John's bedside she needed to know.

'Julia, have you forgiven me?'

Julia wasn't listening, she was thinking about her future. With John clearly out of action for some while she would have to step into his place at the rooms,

'Forgiven you for what?' Julia wondered. 'Oh that I've completely forgotten it. You were having one of those bad days we all have them when we behave out of character.' Claudia could have left it there but she didn't.

'No it wasn't like that, it had been brewing for weeks. I had been struggling with my feelings for John when you came along. We were going through a bad patch and I was fearful that he would leave me like he did his first wife. Once you were appointed I immediately saw a difference in him. He seemed more relaxed and had time for me in a way he hadn't for years.'

'I let it build up. I saw you, as I was, a thief stealing another woman's husband. I tried so hard to control it

and for a while I managed.'

Claudia was no longer talking to Julia she was clearing out a lot of mess inside her. Julia said nothing Claudia needed to do this.

John moaned in his sleep and turned over. Was he hearing this conversation? Julia wasn't certain. She watched his face. His eyes were moving behind his closed eyelids. Did that mean he was listening?

Without a warning, Claudia turned to Julia,

'Julia I think this heart attack might be a blessing in disguise.'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, I have been trying to persuade John to retire and enjoy himself for years but up to now he has refused. Now that you are familiar with the practice perhaps this is your time?'

The BEGGAR

You wouldn't have given him a second glance if you saw him in the street yet in his field he was one of the most sought after barristers in

London. Short and stocky with a slight limp from an old rugby injury, Sir John Trevor presented a pitiable picture of a successful man. Although still in his early fifties his receding hair, sallow skin and demeanour made him look much older.

As he ambled along his mind was so preoccupied with the case he was defending that he didn't see the beggar laying on the pavement just inches from him.

'Hey mate look out where you're going,' mocked the figure struggling to avoid being trodden on.

'Oh I am sorry! I didn't see you,' He intended to say out loud. Instead, he stopped. Dressed in a mixture of rags, an oversized hat, a torn overcoat and a pair of filthy jeans, it took him a while to realise that beneath was a young woman who was hailing him. Immediately he thought of his own daughter, he hadn't seen for years. They had been so close until the divorce. He had hoped that they could maintain their relationship but she had made it clear whom she blamed. Since then, she refused to speak to him or hear his version of events.

He walked on and his thoughts returned to his case. The court retired early in order for the defence to find some missing documents and he took the opportunity to leave.

With the unexpected break, he stepped out into a warm sunny afternoon and ambled along the embankment, stopping opposite the houses of Parliament. He studied the complex arrangement of towers and thought about what went on inside. He was mesmerized by the tide rolling up against the concrete parapet until his eyes fell upon a coal barge loaded to the water line as it glided by. He was at peace with the world or so it seemed until the vision of the homeless girl re-emerged. There was something about her voice, which unsettled him. It was too educated the words too clipped.

The court recessed for the weekend and with her still on his mind, he decided to try and find her. The police station was less than helpful.

I'm sorry sir we are not allowed to release information about vagrants.'

'Please I think I know who she is.'

'I'm sorry sir it's not permitted. We need to protect their anonymity they have chosen to live that life.'

He knew differently. He had dealt with enough cases of poverty to know that it was very unusual to choose vagrancy as a way of life. Mostly it was thrust upon you like a disease. It often came on imperceptively and you were trapped before you realised that there was no way back.

I must find her he said retracing his steps. He was nearing the place where he first nearly stepped on her when he saw a figure in the doorway. He rushed forwards but as he came closer he could see that it was someone else, a young man.

He stopped abruptly conscious of the gap between them and dropped a pound coin into the empty cup.

'Thanks mate,' the man grunted.

'I was looking for the girl.'

'Oh yeh,' he winked.

'Oh no! Not like that I wanted to speak to her.'

'Sure I understand.'

He tried again,

'Do you know where she is?'

'Sure.'

'So you can take me to her?'

'It'll cost you.'

'Is five sufficient?'

'Make it ten.'

'Very well.'

'Follow me then.'

He trailed behind at a distance down narrow rubbish strewn alleys, across disused gardens and under railway arches until they reached an old rusting container.

'She's in there,' he pointed.

John stood uncertain what to do. Was this a hoax; was he in danger of being mugged? There was no way of knowing. Cautiously he opened the entrance flap and stepped in. The smell of stale urine hit him and he almost vomited. Gulping back the acid saliva he stood for a while as his vision slowly adjusted to the gloom. The young man pointed to a huddled figure at the back,

'That's her,' it said.

'Lizzy,' he called softly. The figure stirred and a bleary-eyed face looked out.

'Lizzy it's me, dad.'

'I don't have a dad.'

'Please Lizzy, please,' he pleaded.

'I think you should leave,' said a voice out of the darkness.

CAFFETIERE.

I took an instant dislike to him. It was a visceral feeling, a contraction of my stomach, a tightening in my chest and difficulty in breathing. I'm normally very tolerant, not easily upset but this man really got to me. It wasn't just his remark; it was his manner. I struggled to continue with the dishes, I was so angry I almost threw the hot water over him.

I had arrived in the early evening after a tedious journey. The M25 was solid for about forty miles and when I got onto the country road, I found myself behind a tractor pulling a pile of freshly cut hay. On any other occasion I would have enjoyed the leisurely drive through the countryside admiring the autumn colours, but I was late and I hate being late. It's a fetish with me it indicates a disregard for the occasion

or the person. As it was, by driving above the speed limit, I got there on time. Most of the others had already arrived and were introducing themselves. They were a mixed bunch but they all shared in common a burning ambition to get published, to see their work in print. After the introductions we were allocated our rooms and then presented with the week's programme. One of our tasks was to undertake domestic duties, cooking, washing up, table clearing etc.

I slept badly as I often do in strange surroundings and on the following morning I was on kitchen duty. We had finished breakfast and I had chosen to wash up. I was well into it when this fellow student came over and stood watching me.

'You're using too much soap on those dishes, it's unhealthy,' he said in a loud dismissive voice as if I was incompetent. I turned to see who was speaking. He was an older man, tall and slightly built with a shock of grey hair, well spoken, a public school type. I gained this just from his appearance, the sort of man familiar with getting his own way. I learned later that he had

been a barrister, used to ordering people about, someone who was respected for his erudition. I imagined him standing in the court eying the accused and intimidating him or her. He had an arrogant look. He made me feel self-conscious as if he could see through me and that like most men I didn't know a frying pan from a teapot. He wasn't to know that I am a house-husband married to a highflying wife, a situation I have reluctantly accepted. I think in his defence, he was totally unaware of what effect his words had had on me.

What made me react in that way? I don't know. Why didn't I just laugh it off? Why did he conjure up those feelings in me? Why did I let a remark like that affect me? I'm a grown man. I shouldn't have let it upset me but it did. It cut straight through as if touching a hidden nerve. That night I couldn't sleep. The events in the kitchen kept going round in my head. I disliked how I felt, I didn't like where I was. I hated the way in which a few words said by an unknown man had affected me so much.

I sat on my bed confused and unhappy. It was not what I had

expected to happen. As I have often done before, I turned to God. That may seem unusual but I am a believer. A voice began talking to me. I knew it was God and I was asking for help.

‘Dear God, I don’t know what happened to me this morning.’

‘What do you think of your feelings towards this stranger?’ Said the voice. ‘Are you happy feeling hate for him?’ I struggled with the question. I was humiliated by my feelings.

‘No I’m not, I don’t know why he upset me so much?’ I sat trying to understand what was happening.

Then the voice continued,

‘Does he remind you of anyone?’

‘No,’ I said without thinking.

Then slowly I began to realise that he was like my father, the father I didn’t meet until I was a teenager.’ I sat shaken by the realisation. Could the voice be right?

I remembered the first time I met my father. My mother and her husband who I assumed was my father brought me up. One day a stranger visited and my mother introduced him. She told

me that he was my dad. I was confused. How could he be my father? Why didn't I meet him sooner, my father? Didn't I have a right to know him? How could my mother have kept him from me and why didn't he insist on seeing me? I was confused but following that initial meeting I began to get to know him better and our relationship was deepening when he unexpectedly died. I was heart broken. He had left me with our relationship unresolved.

Did this man in some way remind me of my father? Remind me how I was cheated as if it was his fault. I fell asleep my thoughts still confused. I knew I had to resolve the problem, to make peace with this man.

The course really challenged me. The two tutors, published writers were at the top of their profession. They were sensitive to our problems and we all had a one to one tutorial with each. Mine was to be during the following afternoon. I had prepared some work to discuss. I felt nervous. It would be the first time that I had my work reviewed. Would it stand up, would it receive helpful comments?

Happily the tutorial went well. The tutor liked my work and I came away feeling pleased with myself.

Unexpectedly the opportunity to make my peace with my fellow student came the following morning. Like me he preferred ground coffee not the instant stuff. As I came into the kitchen he was making a small caffetiere and offered me some. I accepted politely. For a moment I imagined that he was aware of my animosity towards him but dismissed the idea and thought nothing more about him. The following day I was in the lounge when he came in and asked if I would like a cup. Thereafter we shared a caffetiere daily making small talk. I still don't think he was aware of my initial feelings, which by this time had changed.

He seemed someone who didn't observe the unwritten rules of behaviour. If he saw something with which he disagreed he spoke out. Most of us keep our peace and say nothing. It was as if he had not learned that. Some would describe him as tactless and insensitive but as I got to know him better I realised that

he was not malicious or sensorius, it was just his way.

I don't think he saw me when I first came into the kitchen. But he turned and glared at me when I made that remark. As soon as I had said it, I realised that I had done it again. Opened my big mouth and put my foot in it. OK he was using too much soap but so what. We were strangers, how could I presume to comment on the amount of washing up soap he was using? I thought I was being helpful. I met him later and felt an unfamiliar feeling. I sensed that he had taken an instant dislike to me. It was a distinct feeling of animosity. I had never felt anything like it before but I knew I hadn't imagined it. I didn't know what had caused it. I didn't relate it to the washing up incident.

Inevitably we met again. I like fresh coffee and could see that he also did. Later in the week I had made a caffetiere. I found him in the lounge after lunch and I poured out a mug and took it to him. I wanted some how to make him like me. Although I feel confident, I needed to resolve that

feeling between us although at that time I didn't know what had caused it.

The course was coming to an end and we were discussing transport home. I had a reserved seat on a the train at midday but it meant sitting on the station platform for about two hours which I didn't want to do. I overheard that he was driving to London and I asked if I could travel with him. There was something unresolved between us, which I had to settle. I could still feel it. I wanted to challenge him. I wanted to understand what had happened and I hoped the journey together would give me an opportunity to resolve the impasse.

We had been travelling for about twenty minutes when I broached the subject.

'May I ask you a question?' I hesitated. 'You took an instant dislike to me didn't you? I felt it immediately.'

'Yes I did ' he said not looking at me. 'I really disliked you. That remark you made about too much washing up soap really upset me,' and then he told me how during the night he had struggled with his feelings against me. Then he explained how some years

ago he had found God and often sought advice from him. By the morning he had resolved the problem. We drove on in silence and then he began to tell me about his upbringing, his confused relationship with his father and that he still felt a bit uncomfortable when people asked him what he did. When I left him at my stop he got out, said goodbye and we hugged me. I watched him drive away. It was a beautiful moment.

The CAT

Still in his operating greens Matthew made his way across the empty car park to his car. Striding out he took a deep breath savouring the bracing fresh air of the early morning. A senior theatre orderly at the St Groves General Hospital, he was in his late thirties, tall and muscular with a mop of reddish hair, his youngish face now grey and harassed from the strain of the night's grind.

He was about to start his car when something caught his eye. Outlined in the beam of an overhead

streetlight he saw a small mound of fur just visible under a bush. At first he dismissed it but then looked again. Curious he got out and walked slowly towards it. It was a dead cat, its fur muddied and torn, its right leg twisted and blood stained. He stood looking down at it appalled by the brutality of its injuries. Starting to walk away he turned. At least I can give it a proper burial. Gently slipping the mangled body into a plastic bag, he put it into the boot of his car.

He was about to close it when he heard a voice calling,
‘Pussy, pussy?’

It was Margaret a widow who lived alone after her husband of forty years died. She was calling Sally her cat, her best friend. They had shared a home for almost ten years. From her childhood she had found comfort in the presence of a soft furry coat to stroke and throughout her adult life a cat was her constant companion, she couldn't imagine life without one. Recently Sally had become increasingly fretful and moody so that when she disappeared one evening, Margaret was frantic. She waited

patiently by the back door expecting Sally to come skulking through the cat flap but when some hours had elapsed and she hadn't appeared, she decided to go out and look for her.

Matthew heard the call but couldn't tell where the sound was coming from. Then he saw a figure looming into view on the far side of the car park. Margaret appeared wearing a long dark coat and a woollen hat, which covered her head and made her face almost invisible. She stopped when she saw him and hesitated before asking in a strained voice.

'Have you seen my tabby?' Her face was drawn and strained and he could see she had been crying, 'She has run away again and I am looking for her. She is...'

He put up his hand and stopped her. He turned and gently lifted the bag out of his boot.

'I'm sorry I think this could be her. I found her under a bush over there.' he said pointing into the darkness.

'Oh no,' she whispered. 'Please don't let it be her?' she said as he slowly opened the bag to show her its

contents. Even in the dull light she could see that it was her cat. He watched helplessly as she collapsed into tears and then turned on him screaming.

‘You killed her, how could you?’

‘No!’ he said taken aback by her fury.

He blindly pointed to the bushes.

‘I found her over there.’

‘I don’t believe you. You ran her over and are trying to cover it up.’

‘No why should I? He pleaded.

Now he could see her more clearly. She was in her late sixties, tending to plumpness, with long blonde hair, wisps of which hung loosely across her face. Time had taken its toll of her skin, which was thickened and sagged below her mouth but her eyes though hooded were sharp and piercing.

‘I am going to report you to the police,’ she sobbed and before he could reply she had stormed off. He stood watching her go stunned by the whole event.

It was some days later that a notification from the local police station fell through the hospital post box. It was addressed to *whom it may*

concern. The hospital secretary Mr Brothers a retired local businessman opened it and scrutinised it suspiciously.

‘Helen,’ he called to his assistant. ‘Look at this, do you know anything about it?’ She looked blank.

‘A local woman is accusing one of our staff of running over her cat.’ He was about to throw it into the rubbish bin thinking they had better things to do than worry about dead cats. But then he stopped. She may be the wife of a prominent citizen and could cause trouble.

‘Make several copies and stick them up on the main notice boards. Someone is bound to remember.’

Several weeks passed and no one came forward and the manager was about to remove the notice when Matthew who had just returned from a two-week’s holiday saw it.

Oh crumbs he thought to himself. What a nuisance. I’d better go and see the hospital manager and explain. Having completed the morning shift he made his way to the office.

By the time Matthew had finished explaining what had

happened Mr Brothers was decidedly bored. Sitting back in his chair scratching his ear he asked,

‘Do you know how the blessed animal got killed?’

‘No,’ Matthew repeated. ‘I found it. It was run over that’s all I know. Now I must get back to the OR.’

‘OK but I think you should report to the Police station and tell them your story,’ said Mr Brothers.

The police station was a single storey building at the end of the main street less than a ten-minute walk from the hospital. Matthew entered the dimly lit reception, went up to the grill and peered in. He could just see someone’s back leaning over a desk. He coughed.

‘Won’t keep you a moment,’ said a disembodied voice.

Matthew waited. Finally a uniformed man appeared.

‘How can I help you?’ he asked tapping his finger impatiently on the desk.

‘I have come following your letter about the cat.’

‘What letter about what cat?’

The officer seemed completely unaware of the enquiry.

‘Let me explain,’ said Matthew exaggerating his words. ‘About three weeks ago I found a mutilated cat in the car park and was about to arrange to bury it when a woman appeared claiming it was her’s and that I had run it over. Apparently she reported it here and you sent a letter to the hospital about it. Do you know anything about that?’

‘I don’t. I am new here, replacing the regular officer who is on holiday.’

‘Listen I have come here to find out what you are planning to do?’

The officer looked decidedly uncomfortable.

‘Let me have a look at my files. What date did you say it was?’
Matthew handed him a copy of the letter. The officer disappeared into his office and Matthew could hear him rummaging about. Suddenly he heard a shout.

‘I’ve found it. It was issued about three week ago. A woman came into the office and made a complaint about a member of staff at St Grove’s

Hospital claiming he killed her cat.
She didn't know his name.'

'That's me,' said Matthew. She accused me at the time and wouldn't hear my side. That's why I am here. I want to make a statement.'

Twenty minutes later he signed a statement.

'Thank you sir,' said the officer. 'I will discuss this with my senior and come back to you. I will contact you at the hospital?'

Matthew had found the whole incident very distressing. He felt for the woman and her loss and was puzzled about what actually happened to the cat that night. But he was angry that the whole thing had become so blown up. A few days later he was called to the manager's office and was introduced to a tall uniformed man with short-cropped hair and a scar across his right cheek.

'Matthew I would like you to meet Sergeant Wiles. He's in charge of the case of the mutilated cat.

'Sergeant I am pleased to meet you,' said Matthew shaking his hand.

'May I call you Matthew?' He nodded. 'I have seen your statement

concerning the events that night and compared it with that made by the cat's owner. There seems to be considerable discrepancy between the two versions.'

'I can only tell you what happened from my point of view. I can assure you that the cat was dead when I saw it and put it into my boot.'

'Why did you do that Matthew, were you trying to hide the evidence?'

'Sergeant you have read my statement written on oath. I wanted to give the poor thing a proper burial that's all. I was not trying to hide anything,' he added bristling with anger.

Suddenly the door opened and Simon the hospital security officer came in. He was wearing a dark blue uniform and was carrying a box.

'Matthew I think you have met?' said the manager.

'Yes we know each other.'

'Simon has informed me that we have CCTV surveying the car park. I have asked him to show us the film on the relevant night. Are you OK with that Matthew?' Said the Manager with a hint of sarcasm.

‘Yes delighted, I had no idea we had CCTV. It will show you exactly what happened.’

‘OK let’s have a look.’

The film began to run showing a wide expanse of the car park panning from right to left. Matthew’s parked car came into view. He could be seen getting out and walking away from it. Suddenly the screen went blank.

‘What’s happened?’ asked Mr Brothers.

‘I don’t know let me rerun it,’ said Simon. They watched intently but the same thing happened on the rerun. ‘I’m sorry I forgot we had to limit the coverage because the film wasn’t long enough to run all the time. It looks like it ran out of film. I’ll try the other camera.’

Once again they saw the empty car park and Mathew’s stationary car but this time they saw the woman shouting at him as she came towards the car. The boot was open but the plastic bag couldn’t be seen.

‘I had just put the bag containing the dead cat in the boot when the woman arrived,’ explained Matthew. Once again the screen went blank.

‘What do we do now?’ said the manager. ‘We need evidence; at the moment Matthew it’s your word against hers.’

Matthew knew he was in a spot. Unless he could prove that he hadn’t killed the cat, his position at the hospital was in jeopardy. That night he couldn’t sleep as the scene in the car park kept on reappearing. By the morning he knew what he had to do.

Checking his Satnav Matthew did a quick sum and reckoned he had about another 50 miles to drive before reaching his destination, a small fishing village on the Northeast coast fronting the North Atlantic. It was the home of his mother. She had lived there since his father died unexpectedly ten years earlier. His parents had been close and his father’s death had sent her into a deep depression. Matthew remembered it vividly. She would sit for hours rocking in her chair staring out of the window. Thanks to her GP, she slowly recovered but never spoke about him again.

But he hadn't helped. He remembered how he had struggled to accept what was happening to her and not judge her. How he had lost patience with her on several occasions and once shouted at her to pull herself together. The memory of that still smarted. How could he have been so insensitive? Now years later he understood her suffering. Was it too late to make amends?

She was now settled in a small fisherman's cottage and had made a new life for herself amongst the women many of whom had lost their husbands to the sea.

It had been an awkward telephone conversation beginning with her asking what he wanted.

'Mum I want to see you,' he pleaded.

'I know, you're in trouble you only want to see me when things go wrong.' He tried to laugh off her remark but then decided to come clean.

'All right mum I do have a problem and I need to talk to someone about it.'

Matthew parked his car off the road and walked up the short stony path to the cottage. It was a bungalow with a stone roof and shingled walls that hung precariously on the cliff. It was late summer and the roses still in bloom were dying back ready to be pruned for the winter. The sky was grey and hung like a curtain over the even greyer sea. It had a feeling of another era one that was no longer relevant. He paused in front of the front door its red paint peeling and knocked. Immediately he was apprehensive, aware of a sense of foreboding, uncertain that he would recognise her and that she would reject him. He listened for her footsteps but all he heard was the sea pounding on the beach and the gulls screaming overhead. He rang again more insistently and listened his ear against the door.

Then he heard her,

‘Damn who could that be?’ Her footsteps padded towards him. The chain was released and the door creaked open. A wizened face peered out.

‘What do you want?’ she asked screwing up her eyes against the

bright light. 'Who is it? What do you want,' she repeated putting up her hand to shield her face.

'Mum it's me Matthew.'

'Matthew?' She repeated as if the name was unknown to her.

'Matthew your son,' he repeated. He saw her face harden, her eyes grow larger her body stiffen and become taller.

'I don't have a son.'

'Please mum let me in.' She stood aside and he went in to the dim front room, its curtains still drawn. There was a smell of damp, as if the windows were never opened and the air had been used up. He turned and looked at her, She had aged. She was shrunken, her face withered and her hair uncombed with lifeless strands hanging loosely across her cheeks. She was wearing a stained pinafore. Her feet were bare. He felt a lump in his throat as he looked at her and remembered all the little ways in which she had cared and loved him. Overwhelmed he moved towards her and clasped her frail body to him. At first she hardened and tried to push him away but he hugged her tighter

and slowly she softened and he heard her small voice whisper,

‘Oh Matthew I have missed you.’

It was late into the night when he finally told her about his dilemma.

‘Have you spoken to the woman since the incident?’

‘No, it’s all been done through the police and she now threatens to go to the law. It’s really getting to me. At the time I thought I was doing a good deed but it’s come back to punish me.’

‘Oh come on Matthew it’s not that serious you have met bigger challenges than that this surely?’

‘Yes but I knew how to deal with them this is different. She is so adamant that I killed her cat even though she has no evidence just a dead cat in a bag in my boot. I feel very sorry for her. I would get her another cat but that would only make her think that I was guilty. What should I do?’

‘What do you think she wants? It can’t just be a replacement cat there is something more going on.’

‘That’s the problem I don’t know. I can’t understand why she won’t

accept my word and get another cat. I'm not sleeping worrying about it. It's ridiculous I know such a trivial thing but I've got to sort it.'

'What did you do with the dead cat after she confronted you?'

'I handed it to her and I think she arranged for it to be buried.'

'Can you remember what it felt like?'

'Yes it was stiff and cold.'

'So it had been dead some while?'

'I guess so.'

The sergeant looked up from his papers and eyed the two who were sitting in his office. Neither looked at the other. Margaret wearing a loose cotton dress was sitting facing the window carefully avoiding eye contact with Matthew.

'I have asked you both to come here so that we can sort out this problem.' He switched on the tape recorder and began,

'Interview with Margaret, the cat owner and Matthew with regard to the death of Margaret's cat.'

'Margaret I want you to tell me what happened.' After a few moments

had passed and Margaret hadn't replied as if she hadn't heard the question, the officer coughed and repeated it.

'Please Margaret tell us your story.'

'I have had Sally for many years. She has been by constant companion. She is like family I can't imagine my life without her. Have you a cat Officer?'

'No I haven't.'

'Then you won't understand what I am saying. You won't have had the love and loyalty that a cat gives you. Unless you have had a cat you won't appreciate the warmth and affection that it shares. It's like having a soul mate someone who knows your every wish who anticipates your needs and is always there for you.'

'No I wouldn't, but please continue.'

'Recently Sally had taken to going out at night and I have become frightened that she might get lost. On the night when she was murdered,' Margaret turned and stared at Matthew, 'I went looking for her calling her name. Usually she responds because she doesn't normally roam

very far. I reached the hospital car park and asked him if he had seen her. He pointed to the open boot of his car and then lifted a bag out and showed me its contents. It was Sally, my Sally mangled and dead it was horrible. He had run her over and killed her.

‘How do you know that? Did you see him do it?’

Margaret stopped her face become suffused with anxiety.

‘No but I know he did it, why would he hide her little body in a bag?’ Matthew began to speak but the officer put up his hand.

‘No Matthew you can speak later, I want to hear what Margaret has to say.’

‘Margaret, did you see him run over your cat?’

‘No but he was the only one there.’

‘What did the cat feel like when saw it in the bag.’

Margaret’s face greyed,

‘How do you mean? It was dead cold and stiff?’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes I’m sure.’

‘Do you know what that means?’

'No? I don't understand what you are saying?'

'It means that the cat had been dead for at least four hours. Rigor mortis had set in. Do you know what that is?'

'No, you are confusing me I don't understand.'

'It's the stiffening of a dead body after death. Matthew came off duty minutes before you saw him so he couldn't have killed your cat.'

Margaret looked puzzled.

'That's not possible he killed her. He ran her over.' Her voice became shriller and shriller. 'I know it.'

'No he didn't, your cat had been dead for some time when he picked her up.'

Margaret slumped back into her chair.

'What am I going to do?' she moaned. 'I want to die.'

Matthew leaned forwards and held her hand.

The DINING ROOM TABLE

Chapter one

It was too noisy. Everyone seemed to be talking at the same time. I was confused by the noise and the chaos. Someone was smoking a cigar. The fumes stung my eyes and made them water. I blinked back the tears and the man seated next to me lent over and offered me his handkerchief thinking I was crying.

‘There there,’ he said. ‘Dry your eyes, everything will be all right.’ Occasionally someone would pat me on the head, ‘poor thing, they’d say’ But I didn’t really understand what was happening. I didn’t even know most of these people. I had never seen them before so why had they come? Then I heard my aunt Madalena’s voice, loud and insistent.

‘I want the table in the other room the mahogany dining table, and the chairs,’ she added as an after thought. Everyone stopped talking. My other aunt Constantia whispered to her,

‘Not now, this is not the time; we are mourning the loss of our sister. Please let’s talk about it another time.’

‘No I am going to Paris in the morning and I can’t wait. Why can’t we sort it out now, the table is the only thing I want? Let’s sort it out now.’

I sat watching my two aunts squabble. I had never seen adults quarrel I thought only us children had quarrels. I loved them both very much. Constantia was the serious one and I knew she would always know the answer to any question I asked. Madalena was more colourful and excitable, her eyes flaring when she told me about another one of her extraordinary exploits.

The guests in the room stopped what they were doing. They waited and watched expectantly as the voices grew louder. Quickly the room fell quiet apart from the two, unaware of the attention they were drawing to themselves.

‘No this is not the time Madalena please stop,’ urged Constantia again walking towards her, her face rigid. Madalena tossed her head back and replied taunting her.

‘You always know what’s best don’t you? Ever since we were kids you have tried to boss me about well

today it's going to stop. I have made up my mind. I don't care what you think. I will arrange for a mover to come and take the table and that's final.'

Madalena turned around and stormed out of the room. Gradually the crowd resumed their talking.

I didn't think my aunts would fall out over a dining table but that is what happened. Aunt Madalena had already arranged a carrier to transport the table all the way from Portugal to her flat in Paris. It duly arrived at her apartment a third floor maisonette on the Left bank in sight of Notre Dame the following afternoon. She was resting when her front door bell rang. Uncertain she opened it cautiously not knowing whom it was and was confronted by three breathless young men in singlets carrying it.

'In there,' she said pointing to her dining room.

'Nice place you've got here,' one said looking around.

Madalena ignored his remark.

'How much?' she asked not wishing to engage in a conversation with the men.

They agreed a price and left.

No one was there to see the smile that crept across Madalena's face as she walked around the table stroking its smooth polished surface. At last she said to herself I have something of theirs, something that my sister should never have been given. When our father died I as the eldest daughter should have had the first pick but father never loved me and gave it to her. Now it's mine.

'You see papa,' she said looking up towards the sky, 'you can't hurt me anymore. Now I don't need to have anything more to do with them. I have got what I wanted.'

Constantia must have seen my confusion and took me into the other room

'You look tired dear,' she said. 'We have arranged for you to stay with Grandma until we can decide what to do.' I was now too exhausted to think about the future. I just wanted to get away and sleep.

It took me a long time to realise that my parents weren't coming back. At first I thought they had gone away but they had never done that before.

Chapter two

I was born in Agracoes a quaint town in northern Portugal. It had always been a thriving community of several hundred souls mainly farmers living in old rather dilapidated houses growing vegetables and fruit in the surrounding fields. Many also kept herds of cattle. But with the economic down turn many people, unable to eke out a living, left or accepted poverty and struggled on. My parents decided to stay. Our family had lived there for as long as we could remember and always hoped that the good times would return They had a smallholding with twenty cows, some sheep and a goat I called Branca because she had a white coat. She was my favourite. Branca was so gentle and loving. She would come and nuzzle my hand wanting grain or grass. I would stroke her smooth white coat and soft nose. She was my good friend.

From an early age I remember fearlessly walking amongst the cows in the field and being shown how to milk them. I loved the feel of the warm teats and the sound and smell of the

milk as it sprayed into the bucket. I found it difficult at first and kept squeezing too hard. It would upset the cow that would turn and give me a hard look as if to say 'please be more gentle.' It was a happy time. It seemed that it would never end. Little did I know what lay ahead?

That year there was a hard winter. It was the first time I had seen snow. We didn't usually see it where we were but that year somehow things changed. I went to bed as usual but woke up shivering. I pulled the blankets around my neck but noticed that when I breathed out steam came out of my mouth. My room was so cold. I looked across at the windows. They were all frosted up on the inside and when I wiped the frost away it made my hand wet. Looking out of my bedroom window I was shocked. Everywhere was white and in the distance, the fields and the houses were almost invisible. The whole world had disappeared. Even the trees were hung with garlands of white. I stood mesmerized at the window I don't know how long and then I heard my mother calling me for breakfast. She

must have seen my wide-eyed surprise when I entered the kitchen.

‘What is it? I asked. ‘What has happened, where have the fields gone and the road I can’t see anything but white?’

She hugged me and told me not to be afraid.

‘It’s snow silly,’ she said. ‘It’s rain that has frozen in the sky.’

‘Can I go out and touch it?’ I begged. ‘I want to touch it,’ I repeated, please?’

After breakfast, wrapped up in scarf, a woolly hat, my thick winter coat and wearing boots, I scampered out of the back door and sank into the snow. It almost came up to my knees. It was so strange to touch; it felt very cold but also very light. Lifting my knees up high I marched across the garden leaving deep footprints behind in the snow, it was such fun.

I heard my mother calling out to me, ‘Be careful you may fall and hurt yourself. Then, ‘I think you have been out long enough come back please.’ But I didn’t want to. I wanted to stay in the snow to run and jump in it and to roll myself in it but reluctantly I went back inside.

Winter eventually passed and spring arrived with the crocuses pushing their heads through the ground to display a multi-coloured carpet. The summer followed thrusting aside the spring showers until the sun began to shine all day and the soil warmed. It's what I had been waiting for all winter, the time when the river was warm enough to swim in. My cousin Carlos had promised that as soon as we could he would take me swimming in the river. Mother had agreed after some reluctance to let me go with him so one Sunday. As the sun rose and the warmth spread through the garden, we made our way to the river no more than a ten minute walk from our home. We chose a point on the bank where the grassy verge sloped gently to the water's edge. Carlos dived in first and as his head reappeared, he shouted to me

‘Come on in, the water's lovely.’

I took a deep breath and plunged in. I caught my breath and struggled to breathe in the stinging chill. Once my head was above the surface I struck out towards Carlos who was now some distance away. He waited for

me and together we swam towards the bridge.

The long sunny days seemed to rush by and too soon it was time to go back to school. I was attending the same school that my father went to. He was excited by my return as if it was he who was returning and not me. He wanted to come with me on that first day but I didn't want that, I thought it would make me look like a child.

'Please Papa let me walk to school on my own I'll be all right I know I will.'

'But daughter I want to take you. It would bring back memories of my own school days.'

'No Papa, I know my school friends will tease me.'

But my father had his way and after breakfast we set off. I lingered behind him not wanting to hold his hand but he kept stopping and waiting for me.

'Come on Elsa you'll be late if you don't hurry up,' he said. As the school came into view he pointed to a window on the first floor and said,

'That was my class. I used to sit by the window and look out across the

fields. Sometimes I would imagine travelling a long way away and then our teacher Miss Macintosh a dour Scot's woman would catch me daydreaming and would come and stand next to me without saying anything and when I turned back to the class she would give me such a fright. I can remember it so clearly as if it was yesterday.

As I listened to my father rambling on about his school days, I tried to imagine he wasn't there. Eventually he kissed me goodbye and I ran into school.

I knew my parents loved each other but sometimes they would have terrible rows. It could happen very suddenly like a tornado that had come from nowhere. I remember one day we were having breakfast. Father reached over and stared at a pat of butter.

'What is this?' he shouted at my mother. 'It's butter isn't it? It's butter,' he shrilled. 'I told you we couldn't afford butter. Why did you buy it, why did you disobey me, why?' My mother said nothing and went on eating her omelette. Dad's voice became louder.

‘Answer me,’ he said banging his fist on the table.

‘Please Papa.’ My mother used to call him Papa. ‘Don’t make such a fuss. I wanted to treat the children. We don’t have many luxuries these days.’

‘Are you complaining again?’

‘No I just thought it would be good for the children to have real butter instead of margarine.’ Dad would sit smouldering, lost for words. He knew my mother wasn’t wasteful but he just couldn’t let things go and had to make his point. Mother was very patient. She listened and tried to say nothing. Just let him get over it like a fire going out. Then he would smile get up and kiss her on the cheek murmuring he loved her and it was all over. Little did I know then that those little incidents would become the memories of our lives together that I would later cherish.

Chapter Three

One day I came home from school to an empty house. Even now as I remember it I go cold and tremble with sadness. It was so unexpected. Would I have coped better if I had

been warned? If they had been ill or something but as it was, it all happened as if in slow motion.

It began like any other day. I had walked home as usual thinking about my tea when I found the front door open. I pushed it and entered the kitchen. There was an unexpected silence.

‘Mama, Papa,’ I called out. ‘I’m home.’ There was no reply. That’s strange I thought, they must be outside in the garden. I went outside but they weren’t there. I called again but no reply. Then I saw Grandma Maria walking towards the house she was bent and stumbling. As she neared I could see that her face was drawn and she was wiping her red swollen eyes.

‘Come Elsa,’ she said taking my hand. ‘Come back to my house.’

‘Where are Mama and Papa?’ I asked.

‘Come,’ she repeated pulling my sleeve. I hurried after her. Her house was nearby. The back door was open and we went in. I smelled the familiar odour of onion soup mixed with clothes drying.

‘Sit down,’ she ordered. ‘Would you like a drink?’

‘What’s the matter Grandma, what’s happened?’

‘Elsa I want you to be very brave.’

‘Grandma what has happened?’

‘It’s your mother and father, they have had a bad accident and they are in the hospital.’

‘An accident, are they all right?’ I could see grandma struggling to find the words and then I had this terrible sense of dread.

‘Tell me they’re OK?’ I shouted. ‘Tell me!’

I don’t remember what she said but I knew that something terrible had happened.

‘I want to see them, take me to the hospital please Grandma. I want to see them.’

‘Elsa dear it won’t help, they were very badly hurt.’

Then it struck me. I had heard that one of my friend’s fathers had been killed at his work. I remember how shocked she was. Had that happened to my parents, both of them? I couldn’t believe it. I had to see them I had to know.

‘I want to see them.’ I shouted.
‘Please I must see them.’

‘All right wait till aunty
Constantia arrives.’

I loved my aunty Constantia, she always smelled so good. Her face would light up when she saw me. She would put out her arms out and I would run into them. She would clasp me so tight and I would bury my head in her ample bosoms. She made me feel so safe as if no one could hurt me no one could frighten me.

It was a very different aunty Constantia who arrived at Grandma’s that afternoon. She was wearing a sombre dark blue dress and her hair was combed close to her head. Her face was set in a grim look. She appeared so different from the confident aunty I had grown to love. I ran to her and she held me stroking my head. I could feel her heart beating fast.

‘Elsa you must be brave,’ she whispered. ‘I am so sorry to tell you that both your mother and father died in hospital after the accident.’

At first I didn’t understand what she was saying. Then her words began to sink in. ‘Died in hospital’, the words

stung my mind. It can't be true but then I could see from her face that it was. I didn't know what to do. I needed to know, I couldn't accept what she had saying.

'It can't be true, it can't be true,' I repeated. 'It must be a mistake. Will you take me to see them please? I want to see them and I want you to be with me.'

'Yes of course I will my dear one but be prepared it is not going to be easy.'

The hospital was some way away so we needed to go by taxi. The only cab in the village was a rather dilapidated Citroen belching smoke. It arrived twenty minutes later and we climbed in and set off. I was sitting close to Aunt Constantia holding her hand tightly as we bumped our way along the pockmarked road. The huge hospital building loomed into view. We got out and went into the building. Aunty went up to the desk and spoke to the receptionist. She looked at me and shook her head.

After a while a white coated attendant appeared. I heard the word *mortuary* but didn't know what it was. We followed him into the basement

and as we descended the air became cooler and I could detect a strong choking smell. Eventually we came to some doors, which the attendant opened with his keys. We entered a tiled space with white walls. I heard the doors being locked behind me. We were now imprisoned within this strange space. I waited, my heart beating frantically. I held onto auntie's hand as I watched the attendant open a small door in the wall and pull out a trolley, which slid silently into view. I gasped. I saw a sheet covering what look like a human form.

'Are you ready?' said Aunty.

'Yes,' I whispered taking a deep breath and holding her hand very tightly. The attendant pulled back the sheet and there was my mother lying asleep her eyes closed at peace. I wanted to shout out.

'Mama it's me,' but I knew that she could no longer hear. I felt a bursting in my chest and tears came wracking my body. Aunty held me as I shook with pain.

'May we see her father please,' whispered aunty as the attendant pushed the trolley back into the wall and pulled out another. As the cloth

was pulled back I saw my father lying asleep. He seemed so peaceful. I wanted to run forward and touch him but aunty held me back.

‘They loved you very much,’ aunty murmured as the second trolley was returned to its place.

I was empty, drained of emotion and sat like an automaton as we travelled back to Grandma’s home. Everything felt grey and lifeless. I saw the houses flash by as if I was in another world and I lost track of time. I didn’t know where we were going. I was so unsettled by what I had just seen. Everything was different. I was no longer a child. I had crossed a bridge over a chasm and was now on my own, an orphan alone in the world totally unprepared for what might come.

Grandma was waiting to receive us with a drink as we returned to her house. She sat me down next to me and handed me a cup, something hot. I cradled it in my hands.

‘It’s alright dear,’ I heard her say but I was in no state to listen. I mumbled and tried to speak but no words came. I turned away.

'I'm sorry,' I said. I needed to be alone and rushed to my room. It was warm and calm. I fell onto the bed cuddling the soft woollen blanket and snuggling up against it. I was completely exhausted.

I must have fallen asleep because when I woke the sun was shining. I heard voices and looked out of my window. My mother and father were resting in deck chairs holding hands. I saw my father lean over and kiss her. Then they got up and walked hand in hand to the raspberries and he picked one and fed her like a child. She looked into his face, her eyes was shining with happiness. I called out but they couldn't hear me. I looked again and they were no longer there.

Days went by and I waited. I knew that sooner or later they would have the funeral when they would bury my mother and father but I didn't want to think about it, the vision of them laying under the ground in the cold frightened me.

The day inevitably came. Grandma told me to go and choose a dress as we were going to the cemetery. I looked in my cupboard and chose the brightest frock that I

could find. It was pale yellow studded with red and green flowers. I thought it would be perfect to say farewell to my parents. Mama had bought it for me for the school party and I knew that she liked it. I put it on and went down stairs to show grandma. She was reading the paper when I entered and looked up when she heard my footsteps. I saw a look of disgust appear on her face.

‘No you can’t wear that, it’s too bright, find something darker no flowers.’ And she turned away and continued reading.

‘But mama bought it for me.’ I pleaded, ‘she said I looked grown up in it. I want to wear it for her, please.’

Grandma’s face softened.

‘All right my dear.’ she whispered. ‘You will look beautiful. Come here. I am so sorry. You must be so confused. How could someone so young understand what has happened?’ She reached out and I snuggled up against her not hearing what she was saying. I was beginning to accept the bad thing that had happened. I knew that my parents would never come back but I couldn’t think beyond that

I had never been to a funeral before and I dreaded what was to happen. I had seen a hearse go by on the street with people standing by crying. I saw the sadness in their eyes but at that time didn't understand it, now I did.

I could never have imagined how bad it was going to be.

Chapter four

Finally the day came. The morning light broke through the thin curtains, illuminating my room and woke me. I remembered and was suddenly alone and afraid. I was lost. I kept seeing my parent's faces and trying to remember their voices. It had happened so quickly and I didn't have time to say goodbye. Where are they now? I hoped they were with God looking down.

'It's not fair,' I shouted. 'Why me?' At last I could say it. Why me? Am I so bad that I have to be punished like this? I'm an orphan, the word shouted at me.

Then I heard Grandma calling,
'Elsa are you awake? Hurry get dressed breakfast is ready.'

Time seemed to rush by and before I could stop and think we were in the car on the way to the cemetery. I was sitting close to Grandma next to Grandpa. No one spoke. I looked up at their faces staring solemnly ahead. They were set in grey, the skin drawn tight as if fixed. I seemed to be the one out of place. What was I doing there? It had nothing to do with me?

The car stopped outside a small church and we filed inside. People were already present. I heard voices repeating,

‘I’m so sorry dear be brave.’ So many faces flashed by some kissing me others patting my head confusing me. Then everyone went quiet as the Minister began his eulogy.

I tried to understand what he was saying but he spoke too quickly. All I heard was ‘sad, tragic, loss, poor child, our thoughts.’ Then we were all standing up and singing,

“And did those feet in Ancient times.... Huge tears began to roll down my cheeks I let them fall.

It was suddenly all over and we were following the minister along a

gravel path between rows of head stones. I was in front with Grandma and Grandpa on either side holding my hands. We stopped opposite a hole in the ground with a huge pile of earth heaped up on one side. Then I saw the coffins lying side by side. They were beautiful, made of a shiny dark wood with brass handles and for a moment I forget what was inside. Then I remembered and felt faint and almost fell. It was so sad.

Later that day the minister came to our house. He had removed his vestments and was just like anyone else in a dark suit and a black tie. He seemed very nice. He came over to see me and smiled, touching my arm. It was an impossible situation. No words would bring my parents back and he knew it. Then he went over to speak to my grandparents in the corner.

Then it really struck me. I rushed up stairs. I was about to go to my room when I passed the open door of my parent's room. I was swept up with grief and rushed in flinging myself onto their bed. I smelled mum's

perfume and saw dad's socks still on the floor.

I don't know how long I stayed but I must have fallen asleep, as it was getting dark when I awoke. I could still hear voices from downstairs. I got up and went to my room and shut the door not wanting anyone to enter. I felt comforted by my bed covered with the pink quilt that mother had made and my small table with my dolls. I looked at the walls and traced the beanstalk as it disappeared into the ceiling. I reached for Olive my favourite doll with her big round face and pink cheeks and hugged her.

There was a knock on my bedroom door. I opened it to see Grandpa standing there. He could see my tear stained face and immediately reached out and held me as I wept uncontrollably.

'There there Elsa,' he said holding me tight. 'You know your Mother and Father are looking down on you from heaven, they wouldn't want to see you so unhappy.'

'But why did they have to leave me?'

'They didn't choose to. It isn't easy to explain why bad things

happen as they do. We just have to accept that is the way it is. You know that grandma and I will always be with you. Come now Elsa,' Grandpa said. 'Dry your tears and say hello to the visitors they have come to pay their respects. Your mother and father were very much loved.'

I came down with Grandpa and as soon as they saw me people crowded around. Eventually I crawled under the dining table and listened. I liked to pretend to hide and then suddenly appear but that day I couldn't. Instead I lay curled up in a ball and after a while I looked at the underside of the table and found my initials, which I had scratched in the wood many years earlier.

My grandparent's home felt almost as nice as my own. I had my own bedroom and they had arranged for my clothes to be brought from our house. After a while and as I began to feel more confident I returned to school. The school had made a special sign saying, "Welcome back Elsa we love you." My school friends were all very kind and went out of their

way to make sure I wasn't on my own for too long.

Chapter Five

Life seemed to go on as normal around me and I was beginning to accept what had happened when I had another terrible shock. I had been living with my grandparents for about a year when Grandpa became ill. I didn't notice anything at first so it was a surprise when he didn't come down to breakfast.

'Where's grandpa?' I asked when he didn't appear.

'It's alright dear,' said Grandma. 'He will be home soon.'

I waited day by day and then he came home but he had changed. He was no longer the happy friendly grandpa that I had grown to love. Instead he was withdrawn hardly speaking and spending a lot of his time in his bedroom.

Then one day I came home from school to find my grandmother ashen and trembling. She could hardly speak.

'What is it grandma?' I asked frightened by her appearance.

'It's grandpa,' she said taking my hand. 'I don't know what's wrong with him. He is lying in bed staring at the ceiling; he doesn't answer me when I speak to him?'

'Have you called the doctor?'

'Yes he is on the way.' I followed grandma into the bedroom. Grandpa was lying on his back breathing loudly. I went over and touched his face it felt cold and clammy. At that moment the doctor entered the room and I was ushered downstairs. After a while I could hear them talking in subdued voices. Then two men arrived and took grandpa on a stretcher to the hospital. Grandma wiping her eyes said that grandpa had gone to heaven.

I hope he will meet up with my mama and papa.

I was completely unaware what was being planned for me after grandpa died. The first I knew about it was when aunty Constantia took me to the local adoption agency. I was puzzled. What had this to do with me I wondered when I was seen by a local

doctor and had a number of tests?
When we got home I asked grandma
why I was sent to the Agency.

With tears in her eyes she said,
‘Dear Elsa, I am so sorry but you
can’t go on living here. I just can’t
cope. Please forgive me I love you
and I want you to be happy.’

At first I didn’t understand what she
was saying and she had to repeat it.

‘Elsa dear I have made
arrangements for you to go to a
children’s home. You will be well
cared for there and I am sure that in
time will be happy.’

It was so unexpected. I just thought
that I would go on living with Grandma
but now I was being sent to a
children’s home. I was shaking with
fear.

‘No please Grandma no! I don’t
want to leave you. Please don’t send
me away!’ I pleaded.

‘I don’t want to you know that. I
love you but I can’t do it. I am now on
my own and very frail.’

After that everything seemed to
happen very quickly. A very serious
looking man in a dark suit came to the

house and I was called into the lounge to speak to him.

‘Elsa,’ he said. ‘Your grandmother has asked me to help her find another home for you.’ I turned and looked at Grandma hoping she would say it wasn’t true but she just sat there avoiding my gaze.

My first sight of the home was through the tall oak trees that surrounded it. We were still some way off but it stood out like a white beacon, a tall towered castle. I shouted out,

‘Is that it Aunty?’ I asked my aunty Constantia. She had taken me, as Grandma was now too frail for the journey. On the way she had told me a bit about.

‘You are going to live in a lovely house which was previously the home of a county gentleman. He fell on hard times and had to sell it. It was bought by a children’s charity and turned into a children’s home. About eight children live there. You will like it; it is set in twenty acres and surrounded by rolling hills and a forest with a small stream running through it.

The car drew up outside the broad scrubbed white steps leading up to a

large carved wooden door. I struggled to unload my heavy cases and drag them with auntie's help to the front door. Grandma had helped me pack and kept on adding things that I didn't like but thought I needed.

'Just in case,' she kept repeating.

Aunty pulled the chain that hung by the side of the door. It seemed a very long time before someone came and opened the door. For a moment I hoped that there would be no one in and we could go back home. But I heard the sound of bolts sliding and the door slowly groaned open. A tall angular woman appeared wearing a white pinafore.

'Good morning, you must be Elsa, I am matron but call me Mrs Almeida. Bring your things in and say goodbye to your companion.'

'My aunty Constantia,' I interjected.

I turned to her with tears in my eyes.

'Goodbye Aunty I love you,' and before I could say anything else my arm was grabbed and I was pulled into the hall. I turned and waved as

Aunty Constantia walked away down the steps and out of my life. It all happened so quickly. Then Mrs Almeida took me into a large room with a long table surrounded by eight chairs.

‘This is where you will eat. That is your chair,’ she said pointing to one in the middle.

‘Don’t forget it, you sit there at every meal do you understand?’ I nodded.

‘Say ‘yes Miss’ when you are spoken to, do you understand?’

‘Yes miss,’ I said clenching my teeth.

‘Follow me I will show you your bedroom.’ I was marched up a winding staircase. It was very dark and I almost missed a stair stumbling against the bannister.

‘You’ll get used to it.’ she barked. Then I was in the bedroom. There were eight beds four on either side each with a small cupboard.

‘That’s your bed there,’ she said. ‘Leave your things on it and come downstairs I want you to meet the other children.’

I hesitated, the other children? I hadn’t thought about them. I wasn’t

good at meeting new children. I remembered how frightened I was when I first went to school. Mother took me. She knew I was scared and held my hand when I went into the class. All those faces starring at me I wanted to run away, but she stayed that first day and then I was Ok. But now she wasn't here and I felt a heavy thud in my chest. Where are you mother? I called inside. I miss you so much.

Mrs Almeida was calling me.

'Hurry I can't wait for you all day.'

I heard their voices long before I reached the room. It was crowded with small unfamiliar faces staring at me I wanted to run away. Mrs Almeida caught my hand.

'I want you to meet the other children,' and one by one they shook my hand telling me their names. Afterwards I was attached to a girl whose name was Philipa.

'She'll tell you what to do.'

Philipa was taller than me with dark shiny hair done up in a plait. She had deep brown eyes and flashing white teeth, which seemed to glow when

she smiled. I liked her from the beginning.

It took me a long time to get used to the routine at the home. I missed my parents very much. Philipa helped me a lot. She was an only child like me so we had a lot in common. Her father had sent her to the home after her mother walked out. He had brought his girlfriend into the house but she hated her. She said that they had terrible rows and the woman often hit her. When she told her father, the woman always denied it and said that she was lying. In the end he couldn't cope with the constant bickering and he sent her away to the home.

'I still love my father.' She said. 'He comes and visits sometimes with her, it's very difficult.'

'What about you?' Philipa asked me one day when we were out walking. 'Why are you here?' I struggled to answer. I felt so guilty, as if I had been responsible for my parent's deaths.

'My parents were killed in a road accident,' I said.

'Both of them?' she asked.

'Yes.'

Philipa went quiet. I could see she was shaken by my answer. She didn't say anything, she just took my hand and we walked silently on together.

Gradually I began to get used to the routine. We were called to breakfast at 7.30, a help yourself meal of bread rolls butter, jam and tea. The first lesson of the day was usually arithmetic. I enjoyed that and sat in the front so that the teacher could see when my hand went up to answer a question. Lunch was always soup sometimes green, brown or yellow but tasting the same, then a class in the afternoon usually Geography or History.

Once a week we had a free choice. I chose gardening. I was allocated a small patch of land and provided with some tools. Thanks to my father I knew what to do. I dug it over and soon it was ready for sowing. Luckily I was able to get some cuttings and some seeds and in a short time I had a flourishing herb garden. As the weeks went by and the plants took root I stood thinking about my parents and how proud of me they would have been.

I suppose that it was inevitable that I would want to escape, to get away from the regimentation and enjoy the freedom that I once knew. Funnily it was Philipa who first mentioned it. We were returning to the house from playing in a nearby field, which bordered the home when Philipa suddenly stopped me.

‘Elsa have you ever thought of trying to escape?’ The question didn’t come as a surprise. I had thought about it soon after I had arrived but as I settled in and felt more secure I forgot all about it.

‘Why do you ask?’ I said.

‘Because the field we were playing in is so close to the road. It would be so easy just to jump over the fence and we would be free.’

I was beginning to warm to the idea.

‘Where would we go?’ I asked.

‘Would you come with me?’

‘Of course, I couldn’t stay behind without you.’

Chapter Six

While we were thinking about escaping, the word went round that

there was an English couple that was looking to adopt a child. They were staying in a hotel in the local village and were due to visit the home that day. At breakfast Mrs Almeida wearing a newly starched pinafore came in and announced,

‘Quiet everyone I have an announcement. We have some special visitors today a couple from England. I want you to be on your best behaviour as they may want to take one of you home to live with them.’

There was a buzz of excitement. Everyone dreamed of leaving the Home and having their own home with someone to love them but it rarely happened.

I whispered to Philipa,

‘I wouldn’t go without you, you know that we are friends for life.’

Everyone was very nervous and moving about very quietly waiting for what was going to happen. Would it be me? Each of us was asking. Please God let it be me? I want to get out of here, was the prayer on everyone’s lips.

I had come in from my garden when I saw the visitors. He was middle aged, tall and fair-haired; she

was slight with a narrow birdlike face and smiled a lot. They seemed very nice. I watched them as they followed Mrs Almeida into the office. They stayed there a long time.

‘What do you think they’re doing?’ Philipa asked me when I met her at tea.

‘I suppose they must be going through our files deciding who they would like to take away with them.’

‘It must be very difficult there are so many of us. How do they decide?’ Said Philipa

‘I don’t know, they will probably have some photos to look at.’

‘But we have changed. I have been here three years so my picture won’t look anything like me, does that matter?’

‘I don’t know, we’ll have to wait and see.’

Meanwhile in the office the couple were pouring over dozens of files. They had a rough idea what sort of child they wanted. In the end they selected two girls who seemed to suit them and asked to see them separately so that they could decide.

Everyone was on tenterhooks when Mrs Almeida emerged from her office with the English couple.

‘Now girls,’ announced Matron. ‘These lovely people have chosen two girls whom they would like to meet.’ There was a hush in the room no one dare to breathe.

‘They are Philipa and Elsa.’

The disappointment on the faces of the other girls was visible as they crowded round to congratulate us. Then I realised that only one of us would finally be selected.

‘Come Philipa and Elsa, Mr and Mrs Trimingham would like to meet you.’ We looked at each other remembering the pact that we had made. Would we be able to keep it?

Mrs Trimingham did the questioning. She spoke to Philipa first. What did she want to be? Did she know anything about England, would she have any difficulty learning English and so on. Then it was my turn. By that time I was so confused. What if I was selected would I accept? And what about Philipa what would she decide? Then I knew what I had to do. I took a deep breath and spoke.

'Sir and Madam,' I began.
'Philipa and I are very honoured that you will choose one of us but I speak for myself when I say that I will not be chosen before Philipa. We are very close friends and I would not want to leave her despite the wonderful offer you are making.

At that moment Philipa interrupted,
'I feel the same I'm afraid.'

'I see,' said Mrs Trimmingham turning to her husband. 'What shall we do, dear?'

'Let's speak to Matron'

Philipa and I returned to the playroom and began to talk together. We were both frightened that what we had done would be held against us and they would choose another girl. Suddenly Matron appeared. I could see she was angry. She had a deep scowl on her face.

'Philipa and Elsa, I want to see you both in my office now!'

Oh no, I thought, this is it. We have gone too far. Sheepishly we followed Matron into her office.

'Both of you, stand over there by the window,' she commanded. 'I have something to say to you. Listen

carefully I will only say it once do you understand?' We both nodded.

'You were sent here because no one wanted you, no one! I agreed to take you in and look after you and I expected you to be obedient and to do what you were told. So when one of you was offered a new home, instead of grasping it with both arms you turned it down. How could you?'

I tried to speak.

'Matron' I began but she stopped me.

'I haven't finished. What is all this nonsense about wanting to be together? Friends, friends indeed?'

Philipa began to speak.

'Miss, matron I don't want to do anything to upset you. You have given me everything I could have wanted, more than I could have dreamed of and I will always remember this place and you.'

'But?' said Matron

'Elsa and me have become best friends, sisters. She is the only person I know who understands what it's like to be an orphan. I would rather stay here than be without her.'

'What about you Elsa, what do you have to say?'

'I feel the same.'

'Yes, yes I understand. Now it's up to Mr and Mrs Trimingham to decide. I have left them in the lounge to make their decision.'

Philipa and I were overwhelmed when we heard the good news that the English family had decided to adopt us both. We would now be real sisters. We hugged and kissed laughing and crying with joy. It was like a miracle; at last our lives could begin.

Then I remembered the others who would be left behind while waiting for their miracle. The news got around very fast and soon we were surrounded by the other children their eyes shiny enviously. I felt both great joy and sadness. I looked over at Philipa I could see that she also was sad. We had shared so much with the other children and now we were leaving them behind. It felt so unfair.

Chapter Seven

After a tearful farewell in which even matron was emotional, Philipa and I loaded our cases containing all

we owned into the large boot of the Trimmingham's Bentley. It was all so unreal and seemed to have happened so suddenly. One minute I was an orphan looking into a doubtful future and the next I was on my way to a new life.

In the back seat of the car I looked at Philipa, we smiled holding hands.

'It's going to be OK'. I whispered.

'Are you both comfortable?' called out Mrs Trimmingham as the car slowly moved off. Both of us had learned a few words of English so we were able to understand if she spoke slowly.

'Say goodbye to your old life and welcome to your new one.' She said turning to smile at us. As we left the drive I turned to glance out of the rear window. Several of the children were still standing on the steps waving. I waved back. I had a lump in my throat. I was sad to be leaving so many friends behind.

Mrs Trimmingham who was talking again interrupted my thoughts.

'You can't go on calling us Mr and Mrs Trimmingham. My name is

Rosalind and my husband George, so let's start with aunty Rosalind and uncle George how does that sound?'

'OK,' we both said.

'Girls we have a long journey ahead so why don't you try and get some sleep there are some blankets in the back.' said Aunty Rosalind.

It was a tedious journey through northern Portugal, lots of stops, bad bumpy roads, broken sleep and chilly nights as we crossed the border. Once into Spain it became easier, better roads and long stretches of uninterrupted travel. I felt so excited that we had at last escaped from the home. I was awake when we crossed the Pyrenees. At times it was really scary. We took sharp turns on narrow roads hugging the hill when we could but sometimes we had the open country on our right. I would lean forwards and look down into the valley, holding my breath until we reached the safety of the next cutting.

Once into France, the journey became easier as we travelled from one AutoRoute to another. We had several overnight stays, sleeping all together in one room. I soon lost track

of time as day and night seemed to merge. One minute we were passing through open fields with wheat as far as the eye could see and next through towns weaving along narrow streets.

Then we arrived at the coast with signs pointing to the channel tunnel.

Sooner than I thought our train emerged from the depths of the tunnel into the bright sunshine of Southern England. I could feel my excitement rising, I knew we were nearly at our future home I couldn't wait to see it. Three hours later we drove into the drive and I had the first glimpse of the house that we would live in for the next ten years. It was a modern detached brick building set in about a third of an acre of land with a garden front and back. As Uncle George skidded the car to a halt on the gravel drive the sun came out to greet us.

'Welcome to your new home,' he announced as we gathered up our belongings and followed him into the house.

'Come into the kitchen I will put the kettle on,' said Aunty Rosalind. 'I will show you your rooms after we have had something to eat.' I looked

at Philipa and she nodded to me. I plucked up courage and in my broken English said,

‘Please we sleep together?’

‘Yes of course, we have a twin room waiting for you’ said aunty.

Philipa and I ran upstairs to our room. It was like a miracle. There were two beds side by side and our own bathroom. I walked around touching things, opening drawers, turning on the taps and flushing the shiny white toilet, our own toilet. What more could we want? I jumped onto the bed and bounced up and down laughing uncontrollably. Philipa was doing the same yelping with joy.

Aunty heard us and came up to investigate, She appeared at the door

‘Are you OK?’

‘Yes we are.’ we replied in unison, ‘its wonderful.’

Chapter Eight

It was very strange at first being in our new home with our new parents. We had so much freedom; I was confused at first as it was so different to the Home. No one told us what to do. Aunty would even ask us what we

would like for breakfast and the food was so different. We had lots of fresh fruit and juices. One day we went with her to the Supermarket. It was huge with so many different items. I counted ten different breakfast cereals, I didn't know there were so many things I had never tasted before, bananas, and chocolate everything was delicious. In bed at night Philipa and I would talk about the day. What did you think about the bus? I had so many questions so much was new.

Then school? As soon as we had settled in aunty raised the question at breakfast.

'I think it is time to get you both settled in a new school,' she began. 'I have spoken to the head of our local school and she wants to meet you. After breakfast I would like you to put on a skirt and a blouse and we will go there.'

It was a short car journey through narrow lanes bordered by high hedges. As we travelled I could occasionally see a field through a gap in the hedge. I saw neatly sown fields with parallel lines of seedlings just appearing.

'What are those?' I asked.

'I think that's wheat. By the autumn it will have grown as high as your shoulders. Then they will harvest it.'

The school was a modern two-storey building of bricks and glass situated within large open grounds. Aunty parked the car in a car park, which was already almost full.

'Why are there so many cars I asked?' surprised by the number.

'Many of the older girls have cars these days. It's not like my younger days when only our parents could afford one.' I followed aunty into the bright foyer and was able to look up and see the blue sky through the long glass windows giving the entrance a welcoming feel. A sign directed us to the office of Ms Tate the head mistress. Philipa and I held back and waited as aunty knocked.

'Come in.' I heard a voice say. By now I was really nervous. It was all so new and strange. My school at home had one classroom only and the Home had a large hall where all lessons were taught. I glanced at Philipa I could see she felt the same I felt for her hand and squeezed it. It was clammy like mine.

The head was speaking.

‘Good afternoon Mrs Trimmingham, I am Ms. Tate, the head.’ She was a small compact women with grey hair swept up in a bun. She wore no make up apart from a touch of lipstick and spoke with a clipped manner as if she was in a hurry.

‘Are Elsa and Philipa your two children?’

‘Yes miss.’ we said in unison.

‘It must be very strange to be in England after your life in Portugal?’

Aunty replied,

‘They have both settled down very well. I am very proud of them. They are both beginning to speak some English.’

‘Yes, that could be a problem although we do have some girls from other countries. We have a special English class specifically to allow the foreign....’ She was about to say foreigners but stopped and said, ‘newcomers to catch up,’

‘Mrs Trimmingham, I see you have completed the application forms. What I would like to do is to talk to each girl in turn. Let me start with Philipa.’

Mum and I left the office and sat in the small waiting area while Philipa

was interviewed. I could hear the head speaking then Philipa's voice a little thin and wavering.

'What do you think they are talking about Aunty?'

'Probably asking her a bit about her early years when in Portugal. What lessons she liked and whether she knows what she would like to be when she grows up.'

'That doesn't sound too hard.'

'No she won't be trying to trap you, just trying to get some idea about you and your level of education.' After about ten minutes Philipa came out, She looked a bit flushed.

'It's not too bad,' she whispered as I went in. 'Just relax and answer the questions as well as you can. She is not trying to trick you good luck,' and she blew me a kiss.

It was just as Aunty had said. The head wanted to know a bit about my parents and the village I came from. She was particularly interested in the Home and asked a lot of questions about the teachers and the other girls.

Chapter Nine

I was so relieved that it was over as I was very anxious whether we would both be accepted. I didn't want to think what I would do if we were separated. I told aunty about my fears.

'Just wait and see I'm sure it will be OK.' It was several days later that aunty gave us the good news that we had both been accepted and would be in the same class.

Now that we were going to school life was beginning to have a routine. The days and weeks flew by. School was such fun. Philipa and I were allowed to sit next to each other as long as we didn't speak Portuguese. Sometimes at break we would slip into our mother tongue much to the horror of our friend who even tried to copy some of the words.

I suppose it was inevitable that sooner or later Philipa and I would fall out over something but when it happened it came as quite a surprise. It was the weekend and we had gone into the local village to get an ice cream. I had the money and went up to the counter and waited as the ice creams were scooped into cones. At first I hadn't noticed the young man

who was serving us but when I sat down Philipa whispered,

‘He’s dishy isn’t he?’ I thought nothing of it but later Philipa mentioned that she had a date.

‘With whom?’ I asked surprised.

‘The boy from the ice cream parlour of course,’ she giggled. I thought she was making the whole thing up but when she went off the following afternoon alone I was envious. I sat in the garden trying to distract my thoughts but I kept coming back to the two of them and imagining what they were doing. I couldn’t wait for her to return.

I heard her come into the house and waited trying to control my curiosity. Then she came into the garden and sat down saying nothing. After a while I said,

‘How was it then?’

‘What?’ she said.

‘Oh come on Philipa you know what? Your date?’

‘Oh that? Fine.’ and that was it.

Nothing more, no details just fine! I was furious and jealous. I needed to speak to aunty. Philipa had never been secretive before. I thought we were friends and shared everything.

Aunty must have heard me crying in my room because she came in.

‘What’s the matter Elsa?’ she asked sitting down on the bed beside me.

‘I’m so confused and so unhappy I don’t know what to do.’

‘What is it?’

‘It’s Philipa; she’s keeping secrets from me. I thought we were friends and shared everything?’

‘What secrets?’

‘She went out with a boy and won’t tell me what happened.’

Aunty sat back smiled and patted my hand.

‘That’s doesn’t mean she’s not a friend. It’s just that some personal things even friends like to keep to themselves.

‘But I thought that Philipa and I were different, you know closer.’

‘You are but at the present time she wants to keep it to herself and you must let her. It doesn’t mean that you are lesser friends you know.’

‘I suppose.’

‘Now dry your eyes, be friendly to her as if nothing has happened and you see she’ll tell you all in her good time.’

Philipa and I had been talking about uncle and aunty. We were feeling that they had been so wonderful to us and that we were now their family so at breakfast I raised the subject,

‘Philipa and I are so grateful to you both for the way you have taken us into your family, into your hearts that if you agree, we would like to call you mum and dad.’

Auntie’s face beamed as she turned to uncle and said,

‘That would be wonderful, we had always hoped that one day you would feel like that.’ Mum was crying I was crying. Dad went and got some tissues and we all laughed with joy.

Chapter Ten

One morning we came down to breakfast to find that Mum had baked a cake and was icing it. We watched as she piped out the words ‘Happy First Anniversary Elsa and Philipa’

‘It can’t be,’ I exclaimed. ‘It seems we have only been here a few months the time has just flown.’

'I feel that too but I checked the calendar and it is correct so I wanted to celebrate. I thought we could all go out to dinner at the weekend and enjoy ourselves I know dad would like that. While I am talking about anniversaries I realised that we haven't celebrated your birthdays.

'I had forgotten about mine,' I said. 'We never celebrated them in the home so I have not bothered to tell anyone. Mine is on the 14th of August, I will be sixteen.'

'And mine is on the 4th September,' Philipa chimed in. 'I will also be sixteen.'

'Let's wait until Christmas,' said Mum. 'We can all go to London and celebrate, what do you think?'

'It sounds a wonderful idea,' we both answered.

Chapter Eleven

I was still in bed when I heard the post box rattle. Mum and dad received many letters so I didn't take any notice and turned over to sleep some more

'Elsa, come down,' mum called up from the kitchen, 'you have a letter; it's from the Home.' I jumped out of

bed and bounded down the stairs, I had never had a letter before. Who could it be from?

'Here,' said mum handing it to me. I was so excited. At first I couldn't open it, as I was trembling.

'Here give it me. I'll show you how to open it, there's a special way.' Mum took a thin letter opener and neatly slit the envelope and handed it to me. Inside there was another envelope with a French stamp addressed to me at the home. I rushed upstairs and opened it in my room. At first I didn't recognise the small neat handwriting. It was signed by my aunty Madalena and smelled of her perfume.

My Dear Elsa, How are you? I hope you have settled down in the home and are safe and well. I am living in Paris and am very happy here. I have been thinking a lot about you lately and miss our walks together. I would like to come and see you because I have an idea. Would you like to come and live with me here in Paris? I have a small but comfortable apartment with a spare room you would be most welcome. Paris is a wonderful city and

the French people are very kind. You would love it here.

*Love,
Aunty Madalena.*

I was so thrilled I rushed down to show mum and dad.

‘Mum look at this,’ I shouted rushing into the kitchen.

‘Slow down Elsa you’ll have an accident. What is it?’

‘A letter, it’s from my aunty Madalena, you know, the one who lives in Paris. She wants me to go and live with her.’ No sooner had the words come out of my mouth, I realized it was a blunder. I saw mum’s face cloud over and realised that she thought I wanted to leave.

‘No I didn’t mean that I don’t want to live with her. I would just like to see her, you know, it’s been such a long time. You and dad have been wonderful. I don’t want to leave you. I know my mother and father would have loved you as I do.’ Mum came over and gave me a hug.

‘Dad and I love you like our own, we always will. Wait I have an idea I’ll talk to dad about it. Why don’t you and

Philipa go and visit her during the holidays?’

‘Could we mum?’

‘Don’t say anything to Philipa until I’ve cleared it with dad, I know he will agree. Maybe we will all come, he needs a holiday.’

That evening at dinner mum spoke to dad about the letter.

‘Elsa has received a letter from her aunty Madalena. She lives in Paris and would like to see her. I thought if you agree she and Philipa could go and visit her. Out the corner of my eye I saw Philipa’s face light up.

‘Would I go too?’ she asked.

‘Of course you would. What do you think father?’ she asked.

‘It’s a great idea; the girls would have a wonderful time. Paris is so exciting.

Mum hesitated,

‘I wonder whether we could all go, you are owed some holiday aren’t you?’ I saw dad look up at her. He was weighing up the idea. He had a dead line in three months time but thought he could finish it during a trip to Paris.

‘I think it’s possible in fact I like the idea.’ He said finally.

Chapter Twelve

By chance Aunt Constantia still living in her home in Portugal was having a spring-clean. She was rummaging through her cupboards when she came upon a photo of Elsa. She sat holding it her hand and remembered when she and her sister had that awful row. Then her mind moved to the day when she left Elsa at the Home. I wonder how she is now? She thought. On an impulse she decided to write to her.

'Dear Elsa, I hope you get this letter. I know it has been a long time and I am sorry that I haven't contacted you sooner. How are you? I would like to come and visit you. I am in the area next week will you be free?

All my love,

Aunty

'Elsa,' mum called. 'There's another letter from Portugal?' I rushed downstairs and took it to my room. Who could it be this time? I wondered. I opened the envelope and read it. It seemed impossible but it was from my other aunt, aunty Constantia.

I gave the letter to mum and she read it out loud. She turned to me.

‘That’s an amazing coincidence they must be missing you.’

‘What shall I do? I haven’t seen them since my parents died.’

‘Let’s tell her that we are going to Paris to see her sister.’

‘I don’t think that would be a good idea.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘They had a big fight over a dining table.’

‘A table?’

‘Yes it was a beautiful mahogany dining table which had been in the family for years. It had been given to my mother by her parents. Constantia was the eldest daughter and therefore she should have had first choice but mum married first and so she got it. After she died Constantia and Madalena both claimed it. They haven’t spoken to each other since.’

‘That so sad.’

After supper I excused myself and went to my room. I lay down on my bed staring at the ceiling. The letters had stirred up painful memories of my past. I had thought that everything

was now all right and that the loss of my parents had faded but it hadn't. Receiving the letters reminded me of that awful time and I began to have flashes of my earlier life, playing in the garden with my father, my mother coming to kiss me goodnight before I slept. So many images were racing around in my mind. I could feel the tension building and like a flood it released and I lay there sobbing helplessly. Philipa must have seen me leave and followed me upstairs because I heard a movement and she was standing by my bed. She touched my shoulder.

'It's all right Elsa let it go. Give in to it don't try and hold back. It's like a pool that slowly fills up and then overflows.'

'What about you?' I said through my tears.

'I have my bad times so I understand.'

At that moment mum called from downstairs,

'Are you all right girls?'

'Yes,' we said in unison.

I slowly collected myself and joined them in the lounge. Mother could see I had been crying.

'Are you OK Elsa?'

'Yes I'm all right I just had one of those....'

'Yes,' she said, we understand we think you're amazingly brave.' I smiled. Brave? I don't know if that is the right word but I didn't question it.

'Elsa, father and I have been talking about your aunt's letter. Do you think we could get them to meet?'

'Not if they knew the other was going to be present.'

'But could we do it with a little deceit?' said mother.

'Is there such a thing as a little deceit?' father asked?'

'Father you know what I mean. I think there is if it's for a good cause.'

'I suppose so,' he added staring at his hands.

'My idea is to invite Constantia to meet us in Paris. We could say that we were going on holiday with the girls and would love to have her join us. We don't need to tell her that we are planning to see her sister.

'What do you think Elsa? Would she agree to it or would she smell a rat?'

'We could try, it'll be super if she fell for it and the two met.'

Later I helped mum write the letters that were to be sent to each aunt. In each we made we made no mention of the other. I posted the two letters with a silent prayer and we waited.

I was on tenterhooks standing by the letterbox every morning hoping the letters would arrive. It was over two weeks before the first one arrived. It was from Constantia. She had been on holiday and had only got back when she found it waiting for her.

My Dear Elsa, how wonderful to hear from you and that you are now living with your adopted family. What a wonderful idea to meet in Paris. It's so romantic and exciting, I can't wait to see you. You must be very grown up now. Let me have the travel details as soon as you can. I am working part time and can easily get the time off.

*Looking forward to our reunion,
Love,
Aunty Constantia*

The letter from Madalena was equally enthusiastic.

'I have a spare room and two couches you could all stay with me.'

I could see that mother was very excited by the whole idea. Dad appeared to be less enthusiastic but he said nothing.

The reply letter dropped through Constantia's post box. She had just arrived home from a holiday with a friend in Lisbon. Idly she picked it up and put it on her kitchen table. She saw the English stamps and knew it was from Elsa. Eagerly she tore it open and read:

Dear aunty Constantia, I was so excited to receive your letter. I am now living in England with my new parents. My friend Philipa is also with us she is like a sister to me. Mother and father are delighted that you are able to join us in Paris. I can't wait to see you again after such long time.

*All my love,
Elsa*

Chapter Thirteen

Philipa and I sat in on the planning stage. Mother and father poured over English and French timetables and after a certain amount of toing and froing agreed a route and a timetable.

We would leave home on the following Monday and plan to be in Paris in two days time stopping overnight. I watched fascinated as dad worked out the route. We would drive from home onto the M6 then using our Satnav would navigate our way to the Channel Tunnel departure. There the car would be put on the train and we would be ferried through the channel. Once into France we would drive on to Paris. Philipa and I were so excited we couldn't sleep that night. Seeing my aunts again after such a long time seemed a miracle. Would they forget their anger and strong words and reconcile, only time would tell?

The journey took much longer than I expected. We had a long hold up at Calais due to a truck strike and had to stop overnight before we saw the signs for Paris. It was early morning when we left the Périphérique and entered the city. We were making for the Left bank. Madalena's apartment overlooked the Notre Dame. The cleaners were still out in their trucks cleaning and collecting rubbish before the early morning rush hour. We needed to get to my aunt before then. We passed the Eiffel tower, skirted the

Champs Elysees and made for the Pont de Archevêché passing below the towers of Notre Dame standing majestically in the early sunlight. Soon we were parked outside Madalena's home.

She lived in Apartment 304 on the third floor. Philipa and I couldn't wait. I was so excited at the prospect of seeing my aunt for the first time in so many years. Would she recognise me I wondered, I had grown so much?

'Be careful they drive on the other side of the road in France,' father called out as we rushed to the building.

The front gate was closed when we arrived. I knocked and a bleary-eyed concierge appeared. I mouthed that I wanted to visit Mademoiselle Madalena and he growled something and slowly opened the gate.

'Apartment 304,' he said turning and walking back to his office. There was a lift and we got in.

'3rd floor I suppose?' I said to Philipa.

We got out into a corridor and for a moment didn't know which way to go. I was now almost bursting with

excitement. Philipa could see that I was in a state and took my hand,
‘Calm down, you will explode if you are not careful.’

I think Aunt Madalena must have heard us because she suddenly appeared along the corridor. She looked wonderful. A little older but the extra years suited her.

‘Elsa,’ she cried. ‘How wonderful to see you,’ and we hugged and kissed.

‘You’re so grown up, I hardly recognised you. Is this your friend Philipa?’ I nodded.

‘I am pleased to meet you. Come in, I have some hot chocolate and some rolls you must be hungry. Where are your parents? I am dying to meet them.’

‘They are just parking the car.’

A few minutes they appeared at the door.

‘Aunt Madalena these are my new parents, Mr and Mrs Trimmingham, they have been most wonderful to me.’

My mother was moved.

‘We love Elsa like our own.’

After the introductions and having a cup of coffee, father excused himself and drove to the Charles de Gaulle airport to await Constantia.

Chapter Fourteen

Constantia was really eager to be seeing Elsa again. The last time that they had met was when Elsa was a small girl. She remembered Elsa's sad face when she realised that neither she nor her sister could look after her and that Elsa would have to go to a children's home. Constantia still felt guilty that neither of them could take Elsa in, as they were both very insecure at the time. Reluctantly they decided that the home would give Elsa a better chance. Constantia was so pleased when she was told that an English couple had adopted Elsa. Knowing Elsa was in a stable home made her feel much happier.

Constantia had only flown once before on a plane and it was very small so she was a bit nervous when she mounted the stairs and walked into that huge plane. It was so big. How could it fly? No one else seemed

to be afraid so she decided it would be OK.

Settling back in her chair, she was lulled into sleep by the plane's droning engine. Later a loud roaring jerked her awake to find the plane was beginning its descent. She passed through customs and had just collected her luggage when she heard her name called on the intercom.

'Would Miss Constantia just arrived from Lisbon please report to the information desk.' At first she thought it was a mistake but then it was repeated.

She saw a sign to the desk and made her way to it. A man in his late forties was standing at the counter. He had light brown hair and a moustache. She saw his face light up as she approached.

'Miss Constantia?' He asked.

'Yes,' she said.

'I am George, Elsa's adopted father. 'Welcome to Paris, how was your journey?'

'I was a bit nervous, I haven't flown often.'

'Let me take your bag. Follow me I have a car and we can go to your hotel.'

She followed George to his car that was parked some way from the terminal.

‘Do you know Paris,’ he asked as she settled herself in the front seat.

‘It’s my first visit. I can’t wait to see Elsa again. How is she?’

‘She is wonderful She has made us so happy. She is here with her friend Philipa we adopted both of them.

Measuring his words he asked,
‘Constantia do you ever see your sister Madalena?’

He could see that the question troubled her. She didn’t answer at first and then spoke as if to herself.

‘No I haven’t seen her since the funeral. We fell out over a piece of furniture. I had set my heart on a dining room table that was our mother’s. It was so beautiful, a smooth deep mahogany colour. I had known it all my life; it was part of me like a friend. Then after my sister was killed Madalena took it without even talking to me about it. I was furious and we had a terrible row. Now when I look back I realise that I have been so childish.

‘So why do you think you were?’
he asked after a long pause.

‘I think it started long before. We three sisters were very close, Raquel, Madalena and me. We did everything together. We shared clothes and even boyfriends. But when Raquel married it all changed. Elsa was born and Grandma doted on her. When they moved into their house she gave them the dining table that had been in the family for many years. It should have been for me, the eldest. It was all right while Raquel was alive but after her death I thought it should have come to me. But Constantia took it. How dare she take my inheritance? Father had promised it to me. He had wanted me to have it.’

As if he wasn't there Constantia continued.

‘I swore I would never see or speak to my sister ever again. But over the years I have realised that I was wrong. It was a table that's all. Why did it carry my father's love? I realised that it didn't. It was me that gave it that significance and I could take it away and I have.’

Constantia slumped in her chair clearly drained.

‘Have you tried to see her?’

‘No I haven’t, in any case I don’t know where she is. I have tried to forget all about her.’

Dad stopped the car outside the apartment and turned to her.

‘I have a surprise for you.’

‘Go over to that front door and go to apartment 304 someone is waiting for you.’

My niece of course, Constantia thought. She walked over to the entrance went in and started the lift. She went up to the third floor and made her way to apartment 304, She was excited to see Elsa again. As she walked towards the front door she heard her familiar voice. She couldn’t believe how she had grown up She was no longer the little girl I remember but was now a young woman.

‘Elsa how wonderful to see you, you are so grown up. I would have hardly recognized you.’

‘Aunty Constantia I am so happy to see you,’ Elsa said as they hugged.

‘Look who is here?’ she said turning. She followed her gaze. Someone was standing in the corner, her face in the shadow. She was calling Constantia’s name. She

seemed familiar. Could it be? She was confused. She was looking forward to seeing Elsa but now she could hear Madalena's voice. Madalena had moved into the light and she now recognised her. She hadn't changed.

'What are you doing here?' She asked.

'I live here.'

'Constantia couldn't understand she thought she was coming to see Elsa and now her sister Madalena was here, what's going on?'

'It was my idea,' Elsa said. 'I knew that you two had had an argument and hadn't spoken to each other for years. It made very unhappy so I decided to see whether I could get you together again. When I received the invitation to come and visit Madalena in Paris I persuaded Mum and Dad to come too.'

Madalena felt all her love for Constantia come flooding out.

'Constantia I'm so sorry,' she tried to say as they fell into each other arms.

Die GROSSE LÜGE- THE GREAT LIE

I was almost sixty. The years had flown by but I was still unwrinkled and considered attractive. I had hoped that once I was older the shame that had been passed on to me through the generations, like a poisoned gene, would become less raw and eventually disappear, but it hadn't. Even after so many years I still experienced the guilt and felt a cold shiver when the subject was mentioned.

I had arranged to meet a girl friend in a café. When I arrived, she was sitting with a man I hadn't met. We were introduced.

'Heidi this is Michael,' I smiled and we shook hands. Then I began talking to my friend. I had brought some earrings to give to her as a Christmas present. I had made them myself. It was a hobby-come-business. They were a miscellaneous collection of small semi precious stones that I had collected on my travels and found along the way in second hand and antique shops. I made them into necklaces, earrings

and bracelets and sold a lot to my family and friends.

As I was talking and sipping my coffee I could feel the man's eyes on me. I was used to being looked at by men and took little notice. I could sense him studying my appearance. I knew I still looked good. I was an attractive woman, with good cheekbones; clear brown eyes and hair dyed a natural colour combed into soft curls framing my face. I smiled a lot showing my even white teeth.

During the conversation I had mentioned that I was born in Austria. I saw him stiffen. Instantly I knew what that meant. He would have been old enough to remember the war and the terrible brutality done by the Germans and Austrians to the Jews. As if reading his mind I turned to him and said,

'I don't want to talk about that; it's in the past. I had a grandfather who was a Russian prisoner of war,' and I changed the subject defiantly.

I could see he was surprised by my outburst. My reaction had made him curious. Did the war still have a meaning to her?

The sins of the fathers.... that old biblical phrase from Exodus 34:7 came to his mind

I was born in 1956 in Neustift am Walde a town in the suburbs of Vienna. I was in my teens when I first became aware that there was a secret in my family, something that we never talked about. At the time I was living at home with my parents, my mother Viktoria, my father Oskar and my grandfather Wilhelm. I vaguely remember being told about an uncle, Benji who had died during the war before I was born. My aunt Felicia also lived with us. She was a nurse working in a local hospital. I had just celebrated my fourteenth birthday.

My grandfather Wilhelm, the head of the family had lived through the Second World War. He was 39 when it started. Now in his seventies he wasn't well. He suffered from nightmares I think it was Shell shock. I will never forget them. They used to frighten me. I would be woken from my sleep and hear him shouting:

‘Zu stoppen, Oder ich schiebe--
Stop or I will shoot,’ then he would
leap out of bed yelling ‘Help - hilfe.’
Night after night I would lie in my bed
shaking with fear. My parents didn’t
seem to hear him. One night when he
was particularly noisy I rushed into
their bedroom and got into their bed.

‘Mama what’s wrong with
Grandpa? He’s shouting again,’
‘Shush Heidi, my child, try to
sleep.’

It was at school that I began to learn
the truth. I was sixteen when I started
to study the Second World War. It was
early summer and the sun then low in
the sky sent warm rays to lull me to
sleep. I was dozing at the end of a
tedious lesson when I was suddenly
woken up.

Mr Engel my history teacher was
summing up.

‘At the beginning of the war,
there were 200,000 Jews living In
Austria of whom 180,000 lived in
Vienna. By 1942 near the end of the
war there were only 800 still living in
the city.’

I was stunned. I had never been told
about this before? Puzzled I waited

behind at the end of the class and approached the teacher. My voice was tense.

‘Mr Engel, did I hear you correctly?’ I asked and I repeated the figures.

‘Yes those are the official figures.’

‘I don’t understand, what happened to the Jews?’

‘Don’t you know?’ He queried.

‘Know what?’

Mr Engel stopped speaking. He looked embarrassed. The teaching board had sent out instructions directing teachers how to deal with the subject. They were advised to speak in vague terms and suggested that the pupil ask their parents.

‘Heidi,’ he said, ‘have you asked your parents this question?’

‘No we’ve never talked about it.’

‘I think you should. Your mother and father are in the best position to answer it.’

I hurriedly collected my books from my locker said goodbye to some friends and set off walking home. My mind was churning over with the facts. Why

didn't he tell me? Was he trying to hide something?

As soon as I got indoors I called out,

'Mama where are you?'

'Hello dear,' came her voice from the kitchen. I went to find her.

'How was school?' she asked, stirring a cake mixture. 'You look tired.'

'I'm OK Mama.' I said.

'Something happened in the class today which has really shaken me.'

'What was that dear?'

'We were having a history lesson and Mr Engel began to tell us about the war. He said that of the 200,000 Jews living in Austria before the war, only 800 remained after the war. I asked him what happened to them but he didn't want to talk about it.'

'Mama he had never done that before. He looked really uncomfortable. It was not like him. He was always open and we could ask him anything and he would do his best to answer but not this question. He said I should ask you. What's all the secrecy about?'

I saw my mother stop mixing; her face had paled, her gaze became anxious and her voice edgy.

‘Darling it’s something that I myself only knew vaguely about at the time. I was 14, about your age when the war broke out. It was 1938. We were living near Vienna. Grandpa was in the army. My brother Benji, your uncle was 16, I was the middle one and my younger sister your aunt Felicite was 8.’

‘Austria was facing the Anschluss (union) with Germany. It was something that had been in the air for years ever since the rise of Hitler. It was the increasing influence of the Nazi party in Austria that finally tipped the balance. Then on the 12th of March Hitler’s army invaded Austria and he made an announcement.

We were all sitting around the small radio listening to a voice interrupted by static announcing the news. We heard the national anthem of Germany ‘Deutschland uber alles’ and then a statement by Hitler, the Chancellor of Germany’.

Today we have reclaimed our motherland after years of absence.

We are at last one country one nation... Heil Hitler.

My mother said she asked her father what it meant. He seemed delighted and enthusiastic. He said that he thought that it was good news that at last Austria was as one with Germany as they had always been Germans at heart. My mother said that she saw her mother stare at him her eyes glaring. It was only many years later that she understood what that look meant.

My mother told me that her life seemed to go on as normal but then something happened that frightened her. There was a girl called Rebecca who lived next door, they were good friends and were in the same class. Her father was a doctor. One night, she told me, beams of torchlight flashed across her ceiling waking her. She could hear shouting outside. She could see the lights. She went to the window and stood watching unable to understand what was going on. On the street below there were a number of armed policemen standing and walking around. Then she saw her

friend with her family leave their house. They were carrying small suitcases and were walking towards a waiting truck. They were then forcibly shoved into the back of a truck and driven away.

The following morning at breakfast my mother mentioned what she had seen. Her mother looked at her father and he nodded.

‘They must be going on holiday,’ her mother said finally.

‘But mama,’ my mother said. ‘It’s the middle of term, no one goes on holiday until the end of the month?’

That was the beginning. When my mother got to school that day, something had changed. All the Jewish children in her class were missing. She knew who they were because they always had to sit together at the side of the class; now there were eight empty seats. At break she sat next to her friend Suzanne. She could see that she had been crying.

‘It’s terrible what the school is doing,’ Suzanne whispered. ‘It’s not their fault they are no different to us so why are they being treated so badly?’

My mother continued.

‘I remember as the Jewish children began to arrive at school that day they were all put into one classroom and the head spoke to them. He told them that he wanted them to go home, that they were no longer pupils at the school. The school didn’t want them anymore. It was horrible. The children were confused, some were crying.’

‘What happened then?’

‘They waited until their parents arrived. The mothers tried to question the reason but got no answer, finally they all left.’

She continued, ‘we all thought that the union with Germany would bring prosperity as the Austrian economy had been shrinking, but we were wrong. The Germans simply exploited our resources. But most people blindly welcomed the newcomers unaware of what was to follow. It soon became obvious that we Austrians had become a province of Germany and that our national identity had been stolen. At the time I didn’t really understand the effect this would have.’

I continued to go to school but could feel a distinct change in the teaching. We were being introduced to a new order in which Germany and the Aryan people would dominate the world. On the streets I saw acts of violence against Jews who now had to wear a yellow Star of David. I saw men and women on their knees scrubbing the street with onlookers laughing and jeering.'

'What did you do?' I asked my mother.

'What could we do? We were helpless; those who intervened were attacked so they kept quiet. In November that year there was a terrible uprising against the Jewish shops and homes. It was later named Krystallnacht. Thousands of Jewish shops and homes were razed to the ground. Vienna was ablaze with the fires that raged that night.'

'What was Grandpa doing?'

'He was in the army,' my mother replied. 'It was only years later that I learned that my father Wilhelm Kaspar was in the Waffen SS, Hitler's elite bodyguard. He was born in 1900 at the turn of the century, the eldest of three boys. He lived in Vienna but left

school when he was sixteen and tried to join the army but was turned down. Instead he worked in a munitions factory. He married my mother in 1921. Five years later he joined the Hitler youth as an officer. When the war broke out in 1938 he was drafted into the Waffen SS.'

It was only many years after the end of the war that my mother found out the truth about her father. He had always maintained that he was an ordinary soldier doing his duty and fighting for his country. But slowly facts began to emerge about the conduct of the Waffen SS. A well-known writer Gunther Grass who in 1999 was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature began to write the truth about the Hitler era.

My mother had read his book 'Tin Drum' and began to question her father. At first he denied all involvement in the many-recorded massacres and she accepted his word, she loved him, he had always been a loving tender father.

But my mother just couldn't let it go and found herself going through

the war archives and documents to find the truth. One day in the library she came upon a photo of her father in the uniform of an Oberfuhrer. She was shocked. It was taken soon after the massacre at Le Paradis. She read how a group of British soldiers had become isolated from their regiment during the retreat after France capitulated. About a hundred of them were defending a farmhouse when they were overrun and captured by a SS division. They had run out of ammunition and surrendered. The soldiers of the Waffen SS under her father's command had lined them up in front of a wall and slaughtered them in cold blood only two survived.

My mother couldn't wait to get home and tackle her father. He was in the garden smoking a cigar when she walked towards him. Brandishing a copy of the photograph she confronted him.

As she told me years later,
'She was struggling to contain herself. She now knew that her father, someone she had admired all her life

was a cold-blooded killer. How was she going to live with that?’

‘He saw me coming carrying the photo and I could see he was puzzled. Then I pushed it under his nose saying nothing waiting for him to explain, to say it wasn’t him that the photos must have been muddled up. I waited feeling my chest tighten with fear, struggling to breathe. I hoped upon hope that he would have an explanation, something that would allow me to distance him from that scene of carnage. Instead he sat there staring at the photo struggling to find the words he needed to say, needed to justify his involvement, needed to make an excuse, anything to allow his daughter to understand. Finally he stood up and flaunting the photo said, ‘It was war, them or us. We had no time for sentiment. I did my duty. I have no regrets.’

Some years later after her father’s death, my mother told me that she was sorting out his things when she came upon a notebook. It was dirty with brown stains and some torn pages. At first she was going to throw

it away but being inquisitive she opened it and read it.

On the front page was written Journal WK 1941, her father's initials. It was her father's handwriting, a scrawl with many spelling mistakes. She said she tried to read it but after a while put it away and forgot about it.

When I moved into my own home, my mother gave me a box of family memorabilia. I was rummaging in the box when I came upon the journal. At first I couldn't recollect what it was but I opened it and it all came back to me. I remembered what it was:

I am writing this because I don't think I am going to survive this terrible war. The year is 1941 and Germany is facing the greatest test in her history. Today we begin the task of conquering our ancient enemy Russia. In 1925 Hitler wrote Mein Kampf. In it he told us the German people that his aim was to conquer Russia. He said that Bolshevism was the enemy of The Greater Reich and that it had to be destroyed, a dream that he was born to fulfil.

I am proud to command a battalion of 100 men and to be part of 'Operation Barbarossa' due to start on the 15 May 1941. It will involve 1million soldiers invading a 3000 km line supported by ½ million motor vehicles and ¾ million horses. The Reich will go down in history as the greatest empire the world has ever seen

December 1941

Initially we made great strides but are now stalled outside Moscow. Our supply lines are too extended we are running short of food, we don't have clothes for this terrible cold. My men are dying. Our plan continues to be to enslave, execute and cleanse the Bolsheviks.

I was horrified by what I was reading. How could my grandfather believe in Hitler? I put the journal down not wanting to read anymore but my curiosity got the better of me and I returned to it. The writing was now almost a scrawl.

January 1942

Conditions have deteriorated. I am beginning to doubt that what we are

doing is going to be successful but I must lead. I am an Oberfuhrer, a fearless leader fully committed to the cause no matter what. I must believe. I am single minded and resolute, determined to win. But we are paying a heavy price in man and machinery. The sight of a soldier who five minutes ago was talking to me and is now a distorted unrecognizable mass of bleeding flesh is terrifying. Did we imagine that it was going to be like this?

At night when the artillery is sounding and the sky is lit up by explosives, I am scared. Inside me a small voice whispers, if it is to be please make my end swift, a clean quick finish like going to sleep not a long drawn out lingering end, in excruciating pain that sears the brain with nothing else but pain unable to move my limbs; my blood ebbing away and the cold numbing, burning and stiffening my limbs, alone screaming for help. Please not that.

The doubts are creeping in, why was I so certain? Is my death going to change anything? Will I ever know whether my sacrifice was worth anything?

January 14th.

I don't know what happened. I must have lost consciousness, I don't know for how long? I woke feeling myself being bundled into a sack. I tried to shout but no sound came. I realized I was being buried alive. I felt the heavy weight of the earth being thrown onto me spade after spade. Then it went quiet. I lay still, hearing voices disappearing in the distance. When I thought it was safe I began to move pushing against the sack. I found the top, which was untied and I slipped by hand out slowly opening it until I could crawl through. Slowly the earth covering me fell away and I was able to breathe. I was in that state when I heard the familiar voice of my Sargent.

'What happened to you Oberfuhrer?' he said helping be to stand up. 'They must have thought I was dead and buried my body so that the Russians couldn't get to it and burn it.'

'Where is the rest of the platoon?'

'Most are dead; there are ten of us hiding in a barn.'

I couldn't read any more. I was hearing a voice from the dead and it was breaking my heart. I put the book down. I could no longer face the truth about the past.

I then knew that this shadow, this blight hanging over my family would never go away. It would reappear generation after generation as each descendent tried to understand the incomprehensible and that every time the word Austria was spoken we would be plunged into a morass of guilt.

In the cafe the ceiling fan hummed as it slowly turned. My friend and I were still talking preoccupied with discussing our plans for Christmas. The man sat deep in thought. It seemed as if nothing had changed.

The PAINTER

'I use nature in my work,' was the phrase I overheard him say on the

radio, then the word, '*monastery*.' His voice was almost inaudible and I wasn't really listening as it was still early and I was half awake. He continued,

'I chose this place because I am close to nature,' he was saying, 'the wind whistling through the open walls, the sound of the distant sea hammering on the shore and the scuttling of the bats in the eaves at night; they all calm my inner rages.'

Suddenly I had a vision of him, alone, a lost soul struggling to find meaning. It was so strange; I felt an immediate affinity with him as if he was voicing my thoughts, my hopes and my dreams.

The radio station had asked me to research him. It was my first assignment and I was very nervous. Just out of school, I had always wanted to be a journalist ever since I edited the school mag. I was excited by the chance but could feel my hands shaking. I ran over in my mind the guide lines I had been taught about interviewing, let the person speak, try not to interrupt, ask open question, don't suggest reasons, the list seemed endless. Would I be good enough? I

wondered. I checked my bag, notebook and pens, recorder, was the battery OK? All seemed there.

Running down to the car park I jumped into my old Ford, threw my bag onto the passenger seat and started the car. It turned over a few times, coughed and died. I tried again and I thought it wouldn't start. Not again I thought the garage said it was OK. I'd had trouble with it all winter and then, a whoosh and the engine caught and began to purr. I put her into gear and set off without checking in my mirror and almost hit a cyclist in my eagerness as I careered onto the main road. Calm down I said to myself, you've got to get this right. It was my big chance to show the editor Tom Watson a big burly Irishman with a sharp tongue but a heart of gold, what I could do.

I knew it wasn't far, only about two miles to the turning and then I would see the building in the distance. It came up sooner than I thought, a misty ghost like shape in the far distance. I learned that it was an old Cistercian Monastery built in the 12th C. Monks occupied it for three hundred years before falling into ruins.

I parked my car in a field nearby and sat allowing my nerves to calm. I took some deep breaths and gathered up my things. In the distance, I could see it a solitary building, consisting only of exposed walls, the roofs having collapsed many years before. Constructed of local limestone it was bleached white by the centuries of rain and snow and shone brightly in the morning light. The dew was still on the grass soaking my shoes as I tramped across the fields until I reached the outer walls. I passed the graveyard where there were a few remaining headstones tilted and broken with unrecognizable writing.

I entered under the first arch into the gloom. As my eyes accommodated I saw him, a frail bent figure with a mass of white unruly hair hanging down his back. He was wearing a loose paint-splattered smock over a pair of faded jeans. Unshaven, his beard was tinged with grey. Still in his early thirties, his hunched shoulders made him look much older. I watched him for a while fascinated by the energy that seemed to emanate from him.

He must have heard me because he suddenly looked in my direction with an almost imperceptible movement of his deep blue eyes. They appeared lifeless, vacant, staring, looking but not seeing.

‘Good morning?’ He said, his voice low and rasping, ‘who is there?’

‘My name is Griselda. I’m from the local radio station. I hope you don’t mind. I heard that you were living here in this derelict monastery and I wanted to come and see your work. May I come in? Am I disturbing you?’

‘No please, I’ve just started for the day as I only work in natural light.’

I watched him as he arranged his tubes of paint and brushes on a rickety table. A large piece of stretched canvas, propped up against one wall, was already covered with streaks of colour. I wanted to ask him so many questions but I waited and watched. He selected a tube of paint and seemed to be weighing it and then he put it down and picked up another, then another, finally squeezing small worms onto a flat palette. He mixed them with his

fingers and applied them to the canvas in long strokes leaning forwards with his face close to the surface. Soon his hands were covered in a rainbow of paint. He seemed to be looking for something as he would stop, grunt and repeat the process. Sometimes he would work very fast slapping on the paint in a frenzy. Other times, he would stop as if mesmerized, staring at the canvas for moments on end, willing to see it.

I sat with him throughout the day until the light faded, watching as the white canvas was painstakingly replaced by spirals of colour, overlapping and blending, becoming an ever-denser whirlpool of shades and lines. Thick bands of paint had formed ridges and valleys as if the canvas was mutating into the landscape. Gradually it seemed that he was no longer there and that the work was speaking for him, expressing his frustration, his despair, his loneliness. He stopped suddenly and remembered me.

‘That’s enough for the day,’ he said and together we listened to the sounds of the outside world; the wind whistling gently in the trees and

beyond the waves thundering on the beach and hissing as their strength was slowly spent.

‘Tell me about yourself?’ I asked tentatively, frightened that I would break the spell that seemed to enclose him.

‘My name is Diederick but they call me Diedie. I was born in a small town in North Holland called Groenveld. I can see it still, the small houses and the fields stretching for miles and beyond the blue sea. I knew every part of it. Our family came to England as my father an Engineer got a job here. I was very happy and had no cares until one day. It was a lovely day; the sun had come out into a clear blue sky one of those magical early summer days. I was twelve and strong for my age. I was out cycling with some friends when we decided to have a race. I could never resist a challenge and set off peddling hard and slowly got ahead. I was exhilarated, life was good and I turned to shout to the others when my wheel must have hit a rock and I lost control. The bike went wild like a mad animal, with a life of its own. I tried to control it

but it went spinning into the air. I was thrown off and then nothing. I seemed to have entered a void and I remember hearing voices coming out of what seemed to be a cavern, echoing sounds calling my name. I tried to recognise who it was and then the sound became clearer and it was my mother's voice.

'Wake up Diedie, wake up you're OK.' I opened my eyes but everything seemed blurred as if a piece of gauze was covering them. I tried to wipe it away with my hand but it didn't seem to make any difference, the haze wouldn't clear. I was full of aches and bruises but nothing was broken. After a few days in hospital I returned home to my own familiar room. Everything was still in a haze but I thought it was just a matter of time. I kept on telling my mother that I couldn't see but as I knew my room so well, it wasn't very long before I could get around as if I could see. So much so that I began to hear the word 'hysterical' attached to my blindness. I was imagining it was I? What a joke? Who would be such an idiot?

My mother was desperate that something must be done my father, older than her was more philosophical.

‘The doctor said it will get better in time. I think we should wait.’

‘That’s always been your approach, wait and see.’ I heard them arguing.

‘Well this time I’ll not.’ She insisted.

My mother was an only child and was used to getting her own way. That is until she met my father. They seemed to be such opposites but they clearly loved each other and married. I was the only living offspring. I think she lost a child before me but no one talked about it.

I began a round of specialists, each listening patiently to my history and examining me using complicated instruments, whose bright lights glared into my eyes. Nothing was found and so I struggled on with a white stick at a special school.

I would hear whispers from the teachers.

‘It’s hysteria; he’s not really blind. Why doesn’t he stop it and live a normal life?’ No matter how I tried I just couldn’t see beyond a few moving

shadows that changed shape the harder I looked at them. Little did I know that the problem was not mine but the technology? I remember the technician trying to explain that before we had scans, x-rays could only show us a front or side view of a complex three-dimensional structure.

Everything was compressed into a single plane. She said that when scans came along they provided more information so that conditions previously ill understood became clearer.

Another examination? I was getting used to being a guinea pig or so it seemed and no longer expected any new information. But it all changed when we went to see the new specialist after the latest test. It was performed on the most up to date scanning machine and apparently showed things much more clearly. The scans were up on the screen. I was sitting bored knowing what was to come when I heard the doctor say to my mother,

‘The recent films show that when your son fell off his bike, he sustained a fracture at the base of the brain, which has damaged his Optic

Chaisma.' I sat up. What on earth was that I wondered?

He continued,

'The optic nerves carrying sight from each eye join together on their way to the optic centre in the brain at a junction called the optic chiasma which passes through a bony canal. The fracture had displaced and severed his optic chiasma.' The news came as a bombshell. Mum began to cry and Dad stood up and walked to the window. I was left puzzling what it all meant. The specialist patted my arm. There was a silence in the room. No one knew what to say.

I waited, unable to keep quiet and said,

'That's it then, I'm blind so let's go home.'

Mum turned to me and began to smile. Dad leaned over and hugged me. The specialist stood up awkwardly, feeling very much out of place. Then we all shook hand with him and went home.

The light was now fading and the shadows lengthening as Diedie sat smiling at himself, remembering that day and then he said something to

himself as if I wasn't there. It made the hairs on my neck stand up.

'I never believed that one day I would be freed from the blindness that came so violently.' What did he mean? How could he be freed from his blindness, it didn't make sense? I wanted to ask if he needed any help but I knew he didn't.

'I must go home,' I said, 'may I come again?'

I submitted my piece the following morning and waited for the call. The station director wanted to see me after lunch

'Griselda, this is very good. Do you think you could broadcast it?' I wasn't prepared for that and didn't know what to say. I felt a mixture of pride and apprehension. Present it on the radio that would be amazing, I thought.

'We would help you rehearse,' he was saying. 'I'd like you to do it, I know you can.'

The day for the reading arrived. It would be recorded and then broadcast a few days later. I had re-read it many times so that I almost knew it by heart

but nevertheless I had my script when I made the recording.

I began,

‘A few days ago, I heard about an amazing young man born in Holland. He was an artist although he had blind from a childhood accident. I sat watching him paint using his fingers as paintbrushes. I was enthralled as the painting developed with colours so bright they were reminiscent of another Dutch artist Vincent Van Gogh...’

Later I went to see him carrying a recording of my reading hoping to let him hear it. There was an unfinished painting on the wall but he was nowhere to be seen. I called his name and heard a movement somewhere in the darkness. Panicking I shouted Diedie. I heard a moan and followed the sound which seemed to be coming across the main hall now almost in darkness. I picked my way avoiding the large stones that had fallen years before from the roof. He was lying in a corner his right leg bent beneath him. I heard him whisper,

‘Who is that?’

‘Diedie it’s me, Griselda. What happened?’

‘I don’t know. I was trying to get to my bed when I tripped over something. I fell and I can’t now move my leg.’ His right leg was bent beneath him and I could see he was shivering and I threw my coat over him.

‘Try and stay warm,’ I said. ‘I’ll go for help. I’ll be back as soon as I can.’

Luckily there was still enough light to see my way out. Once outside, the full moon lit up my path through the fields. It took me no more than ten minutes to get to the hospital and ask for help. An ambulance was dispatched and soon Diederick was on his way to hospital. I was in reception when he was rushed into the Emergency room. I tried to follow but was stopped by an orderly.

‘Wait at the desk Ma’am,’ he said dismissing me and hurrying off. I was distraught; I had somehow got caught up in this tragedy and was unable to think rationally. Standing at the desk I bombarded the receptionist with questions. Finally she asked me, ‘Are you a relation?’

'No' I yelled in desperation, 'I'm a close friend.'

'Only family can be given information.' Finally I was told in clear terms to sit down and wait. The doctor will be out soon.

In the emergency room there was chaos. Three emergencies had been brought into together and the staff were struggling to cope, Voices were raised and tempers frayed.

An x-ray of Diederick leg had shown a badly broken thighbone, which needed immediate surgery. He was wheeled into the OR and put to sleep.

Diedie began to have a strange dream. He described it to me later.

I was a mythical King in my castle in Amsterdam when an emissary arrived to tell me that the Germanic King Tuisto was massing his troops on the southern border.

'Bring the captain of the guard to me we need to make plans immediately,' I commanded.

Diederick was now deeply anaesthetized ready for surgery. The

leg was draped and a long incision made over the outer thigh.

'Sir the enemy has crossed our border and are advancing.' I was told.

The wound was deepened and the bleeding vessels stopped.

The latest report says we are repelling the enemy and are holding the line.

The muscle was split to expose the shattered bone. The pieces were meticulously realigned and a plate selected to be attached to the bone.

At that point the recorder indicted that the heartbeat had become irregular.

'Doctor.' said the anaesthetist, 'Please stop, I am having some trouble controlling his heart rate. The ECG showed many extra beats. Suddenly the heart stopped.'

The battle raged furiously with large numbers killed on both sides.

'Quick the defibrillator,' shouted the anaesthetist, 'stand back.' A sudden surge of current was sent through my

chest. There was a pause and my whole body jerked and fell back; the heartbeat suddenly returned to normal.

A sudden attack by the Dutch struck deeply into the enemy lines, which began to break up in disarray. Soon the enemy was fleeing, and my troops were victorious.

The operation now continued with realignment and fixation of the fracture. The wound was closed and the patient returned to his room.

I returned to my palace in Amsterdam. The people were hailing my great victory. Huge crowds had gathered to cheer me. I waved enjoying the adulation of my subjects.

I was pacing up and down when the surgeon came out of the OR into reception. I pounced on him.

‘How is he? I asked.

‘He’s fine, the operation went well.’ There was no need to tell her about the hiccup over the stopped heart, the surgeon decided.

‘May I go and see him?’ I asked.

‘Yes, he’s in room B6.’

I opened the door slowly and at first couldn’t see the bed in the subdued light. Diedie was asleep with an infusion dripping slowly into his arm. I sat by his side and held his hand. I lost track of time and must have nodded off when I felt his grip tightened.

‘Is that you Griselda?’ he asked. What are you doing here?’

‘I couldn’t leave you until I knew you would be all right. At that moment the surgeon came in.

‘Young man you have been very lucky; the broken thighbone came back together very nicely. You should be out of here in a week or so.’

I came to see him daily. I wanted to find out so much more about him and his art. I was wondering where he would go after leaving hospital when I came to see him one day to find him no longer in his room. I rushed to the desk.

‘Where is Diedie?’ I asked.

‘He was collected by a relative.’

The PROFESSOR

'Sew up please Professor,' mocked the Chief surgeon Mr Simon Arncliffe, in his usual sarcastic manner. Storming out of the OR, he swung the plastic doors vigorously on their hinges creating a loud thwack as they closed behind him. A product of the English Public School system, his arrogance and size was more suited to the second row on the rugby field, a prowess that had gained him an Oxford Blue.

The senior resident David Johnston tall and slight of build stood smarting from his words. His had been a very different upbringing, Grammar school followed by a redbrick University and unlike Mr Arncliffe, he had been drawn to swimming and gymnastics, both inclined to be solitary sports.

Why did he have to use such a sarcastic tone when he spoke to me and why does he insist on calling me Professor?

The scrub sister had noticed the resident's discomfort and nodded

knowingly to her junior number. Later over coffee she discussed the incident with an assistant

‘What a pig that man is,’ she said to her younger colleague. ‘Why does David tolerate it, why doesn't he answer him back?’ The junior smiled to herself. It was never a good idea to answer back one's seniors even if you are right it only led to trouble.

David could still recall that first occasion. It was only his second day in the job. He had come up from the South to work in a Northern surgical unit, one of the best in the country but he found to his cost that the chief, Simon Arncliffe was tough, tough to the point of being cruel. Nevertheless he was very pleased to have got the job in the face of really strong competition. He knew from his colleagues down south that Arncliffe was hard and unrepentant. There were so many stories of his temper and his intolerance but all agreed that if you got through you were a better surgeon for it.

Monday was the Grand Round when the Chief conducted the weekly review of all the patients with all the medical staff present from the

students to the senior surgeons. The ward had been given an extra clean and all the nurses were smartly turned out in their starched white caps and pinafores. About four patients had already been seen when they stopped opposite the bed of a 60 year old man with diabetic gangrene of his leg.

The Chief began,

'Here we are gentlemen, one of life's little tricks played on the innocent.' The junior resident stepped forwards and as if an automaton presented the history to the assembled doctors. One by one, each suggested to the Chief how the gangrenous leg should be treated. Then he came to David.

'Now, Professor,' the Chief continued with deep sarcasm,

'What miraculous cure are you going to offer this unfortunate?' David was taken aback by this childish attempt to be humorous at his and the patient's expense. For a moment he was speechless. He had been warned about the chief's mockery but this was so unexpected. His silence prompted another attack.

'Come! Come! Professor, don't be shy, we are all dying to hear your pronouncement? Have you nothing to say?'

David almost choked as he tried to blot out the Chief's taunts. He cleared his throat, paused and then gave a careful well-considered assessment of the clinical problem and a clear solution. As he finished he could see his chief's shoulders stiffen.

'Very good, thank you David,' the older man said reluctantly.

In the canteen afterwards, a few of the younger doctors came over to introduce themselves and to pat him on the back congratulating him on his performance.

As a senior resident, David knew he would work up to six months with each Chief. He knew he was in for the long haul. The relationships were close, ones in which much time was spent together discussing patients and working in the OR. You needed to be able to get on. `

The following night, David was on duty when a multiple road accident was admitted. As he was still finding his feet, he felt it only right to phone

his chief to let him know what he was going to do. The telephone rang for a very long time and only then did the familiar voice answer.

'What do you want?' it barked. David started to outline the problem and what he was going to do about it but before he had hardly said anything, the voice barked again,

'Why are you telling me all this? Aren't you able to deal with it?

'Yes, Sir, but?'

'But what? I don't want to be disturbed just to make you feel better.' Before David could reply, the line went dead. David stood looking at the silent receiver. He fought back his revulsion at what had happened. The surgical Sister who was standing nearby must have overheard the conversation because she peered at him and shrugged her shoulders.

The following day David was in the Out Patient Clinic with the Chief. He went into the Chief's room to ask for some help with a patient. When he had finished, he thought he would take the opportunity to speak about the emergencies the night before. He

had only begun to describe a few details when the chief interrupted,

'Sir,' he pontificated, 'did you have any problems?'

'No Sir,' replied David.

'Then why are you troubling me?' David left the room in silence.

Mr Arncliffe sat alone. He was not at peace something was troubling him. What's got into me? Why am I so impatient and bad tempered?' I have become a bully and a tyrant but I'm not really like this. The staff must think very badly of me. It's this thing in my head, he thought holding his head.

Unaware that the Chief had a problem, David gradually got used to his ways and said less and less. Most of the time he was more than able to get on with the job and when he thought he couldn't stand it any more, he confided in his wife Dorothy. She wasn't medical but was very practical and usually gave him good advice.

'Why is he such a pig?' he asked her one night in bed in desperation. 'Sometimes I just want to punch his lights out. He hasn't got a good word to say about anyone.'

' I don't know,' she replied, 'but it's only for a few months more thankfully.'

It was inevitable that sooner or later they would come to a confrontation. It happened sooner than David expected. He was preparing the operation list for the following day when the hip patient suddenly went berserk and began to shout and break the chairs in the ward. David was called and attempted to placate the patient unsuccessfully. He had no choice but to ring the chief and tell him that the patient was not fit for surgery. No sooner had he explained the situation than the chief began to shout.

'I can't believe that you are so incompetent that you cannot sedate an excitable patient to make him fit for surgery?'

'Well,' David began.

'Don't *well* me, this is a man who pretends to be a surgeon? You had better improve your performance or else you are out.' The receiver went dead. David was visibly shaken but he knew what he had to do.

The following day the chief wanted to know why the hip patient was off.

'I told you last night,' said David defiantly and with that he went into the scrub room and began to prepare for the first case.

A few nights later as he came into the house after parking the car, Dorothy was impatient to speak.

'I've got some interesting news.'

'What's about? David asked somewhat disinterestedly.

'It's about your boss.'

Suddenly David was paying attention.

'What did you hear?'

'I was at the Gym and I met a very friendly lady and guess what? It was his wife, his second wife to be exact.'

'What did she have to say?'

'You are going to be amazed.'

'Come on, tell me I can't wait,' insisted David.

'It appears that your boss went into the army after leaving Medical School and stayed until he qualified as a surgeon. It was while he was a senior resident that they found he had a brain tumour. It was benign

but after surgery, his personality changed. He ceased to be the friendly helpful man she married and instead became introspective, suspicious and morose, the man you know today.'

David listened without saying anything then looking up said,

'That explains so much, I think I am beginning to understand why he is the way he is. I am so glad that I have never had a confrontation with him although I have been sorely tempted to. I am glad that I just kept quiet and said nothing.'

Some months later David was on duty. It had been a quiet day and so he went home early, early enough to read the children a good night story.

'Tell us a story,' they both shouted when he went up to say good night. It was the first for many weeks and he felt very guilty. He fell asleep at about 9 o'clock and was in a deep sleep when his wife shaking him waked him,

'It's the hospital you are wanted urgently, your boss and his wife have been involved in a road accident, the other chiefs are away at a meeting so

you are apparently now the senior man.' David dressed hurried and rushed to the Emergency Room. He had no time to think about the enormity of what he was about to do.

Mrs Arncliffe had minor injuries but her husband was less fortunate. He had sustained a crushing injury of his pelvis and had lost a lot of blood. He was ashen and pulseless when he was admitted. David sprang into action. The emergency team knew what to do and within an hour the patient was stable with a blood transfusion running and his respiration controlled. Surgery took over four hours. At one point David almost gave up as the broken bones refused to be realigned and secured. But with patience he succeeded and by the time Mr Arncliffe was wheeled out of the OR his pelvic fractures had been fixed and his pelvic reconstructed. His condition was good.

It was over three months later that David received a brief note from management. *Mr Arncliffe would not be returning to surgery and had taken early retirement.* The note continued, *management invites you to accept the*

locum until the post had been advertised.'

'What does that mean?' asked Dorothy when he returned home that night. 'Is it good news?'

'The best,' he enthused. It was a jubilant David who later accepted the permanent post of Surgeon following a short interview.

A year later David and his wife were invited to the Arncliffe home. It was an old detached house in the country with a large garden surrounded by mature trees. They were shown into a well-proportioned lounge with an open fire crackling away in the hearth. After dinner, the men retired to the study while the ladies remained to enjoy the fire. The two men sat for a while not speaking and then the Chief began,

'David firstly, I haven't really thanked you properly for looking after my wife and me. As you can see, I have made a full recovery,' and he got up and walked around to demonstrate his healed fractures. 'Secondly and more importantly, I want to thank you for your understanding and

forbearance with me and my rudeness to you. I think you know why it happened. You are a fine surgeon and it has been a pleasure working with you. I know you will have a very successful career.'

On the way home Dorothy asked David how the evening went,

'Better than I could have hoped,' he said reaching out and squeezing her hand.

SHELLSHOCK

Chapter One

Constance was putting the final touches to her make up when a familiar sound interrupted her. A car had pulled up into the drive. At this time, who was that she wondered? She waited for the engine to fade and to hear footsteps on the gravel path but it continued to tick over. That's strange she thought, giving her face a last glance. Shrugging her shoulders she got up and went over to the window. She was surprised to see her husband's car. He was sitting motionless his head bowed concealing his face.

Something was wrong. She could feel a clamp tightening around her chest and her heart began to pound. Oh my God what's he doing home at this time? He was usually in the OR. It was Monday morning his usual operating day. She wanted to call out to him but something stopped her instead she waited and watched. She glanced at her watch it was 10.30 I am going to be late she thought. He'll soon come in she expected but he didn't move. Why doesn't he come in? Something must be wrong, Her mind became jangled: he's ill; he's had a heart attack. I must get to him.

She ran downstairs and out onto the drive. He hadn't moved. She could see him still sitting motionless. Cautiously she approached fearful of what she might find. She tapped lightly on the window and at first he didn't respond. What was he wearing? She could see it was green. It was his OR clothes, what was he doing still wearing them?

'Darling,' she shouted tapping harder, 'are you all right?' She cautiously opened the car door. At last he looked up staring vacantly at her as if she was a stranger.

Slowly he seemed to focus and looked around,

‘Oh my God! What I am I doing here? What happened?’

‘Darling its all right, why don’t you come in?’

He looked around for the key and switched off the engine. Constance followed him as he swayed towards the back door.

‘Aren’t you going to take those off?’ she asked pointing to his greens.

‘Oh yes, I forgot I was still wearing them I’ll change later.’

He looked lost and wandered around the kitchen looking for something.

‘What do you want darling?’ she asked.

‘I’m hungry what’s there to eat?’

‘There’s some cold ham in the fridge and some bread in the bread bin. Sit down and I’ll get it for you.’

Constance waited her thoughts in a tangle. She had never seen him like this before. He was normally so sure and decisive. She had always admired his clear thinking and quick actions so his irrational behaviour baffled her.

Over the next few hours Constance began to piece together what had

happened. Half crying and half stuttering Charles began to explain everything.

‘It was my father, what was he doing on the operating table? Why was he there? I couldn’t operate on him could I? Why would I? It would have been wrong wouldn’t it?’

‘Yes dear it would have been wrong you did the right thing.’
Constance sat listening stunned by what he was saying.

Still unsure she decided she must phone the hospital and find out what he was talking about. Before she could her telephone rang.

‘Hello may I speak to Mrs Blackstone?’

‘Speaking.’

‘Good Morning Mrs Blackstone it’s Mr Kirkpatrick the Hospital Manager’s secretary speaking. ‘Mrs Blackstone something unusual has happened.’ She was choosing her words carefully. ‘Your husband,’ she began but Constance interrupted her.

‘He’s here he has just come home.’

‘Oh good I’m so relieved, we...how is he?’

'I don't know yet he has only just come in, he's still wearing his theatre greens he seems very confused.'

'I am so glad he is with you, I won't trouble you any more now but when you can, give Mr Kirkpatrick a call on his private phone I think he needs to talk to you about what happened.'

The line went dead. Constance stared at the silent mouthpiece not sure what to do.

Chapter Two

Charles had woken early that morning, he hadn't slept well, he didn't before surgery. He went over in his mind the details of the operations he was planning to do. The first case was a man in his sixties who needed a hip replacement, one of his favourite procedures.

He helped himself to cereal, had a cup of coffee and shouting goodbye to Constance set off for the hospital. The journey was so familiar that looking back he couldn't recall any part of it. It was just a blur in his memory. Arriving at the hospital he edged his car into his reserved

parking place grabbed his case and set off for the OR. Entering through the swing doors he said good Morning to the Head Porter and received a cheery reply. Bounding up the stairs onto the familiar main corridor he made his way to the OR.

At that time in the morning the corridor was almost empty apart from a few nurses going off after a night on duty. The day felt like any other as he entered the OR suite and made his way to the Surgeon's changing room. He had nodded to his assistant Edward who was already changed and ready to gown up. By now he was focussed on the job ahead and was going through in his mind the stages of the operation he was about to perform - incision, dislocation, selection of the new hip and positioning, the details flashed by in stages.

He opened his locker and mechanically undressed. He donned his greens and finally pulled on his rubber boots. He was ready. Adjusting his cap and mask he entered the OR. Sister Jenkins looked up and nodded to him that she was ready. He turned and looked in at the anaesthetic room

to greet the anaesthetist and say hello to the patient. The patient, a middle aged man with greying hair, was laying on the trolley his eyes closed. For a moment Charles hesitated, the image of his father flashing into his mind. He saw him in the garden checking on his roses, he faltered blinked and the image cleared. He continued to the scrub up area, activated the foot pedal and warm water flooded into the sink.

Mechanically he began to scrub. His mind was now racing, a deep fear was beginning to rise up from his belly but he shrugged it off. He finished scrubbing put on his gown and gloves and advanced towards the table standing empty beneath the overhead lights. From the corner of his eye he saw the trolley enter with the man on it. It was being placed alongside the operating table and he watched as the patient was gently transferred to it.

Sister pushed a loaded swab holder into his hand and he prepared to clean up the operating site. For a moment he paused and shook his head, the man's face had changed it was now that of his father who was smiling at him. Confused he was

unable to move, he couldn't understand. He was stunned into immobility.

'Are you all right Sir?' asked Edward his assistant 'Would you like me to prep up?' Charles was no longer aware of what he was doing. All he wanted to do to was to get away, he had to banish his father's image. How could he think of operating on his own father, he was dead? It was abhorrent to him. Mechanically he turned and without saying anything rushed out of the OR. The rest was vague but somehow he found himself in his car at home.

Chapter Three

Charles was restless; his mind was racing at top speed preventing him from sleeping. He was continually disturbing Constance.

'What is it dear?'

'I keep thinking about the interview with the Psychologist tomorrow.' I don't know why they want me to see a Psychologist. Do they think I'm mad? What do they think it will tell them?'

‘Just do what they ask dear. You are due to see a Miss Baldwin. I imagine she will talk to you about what happened in the OR? Try not to worry I’m sure you’ll be fine, try to get some rest.’

Charles arrived early at the Department of Psychology and sat in the empty waiting room trying to relax. He fiddled with his mobile. It had become the centre of his being.

Just before 9.30am a tall elegant woman with short dark hair combed closed to her head, not more than forty he guessed came in and greeted him, ‘Good morning,’ before disappearing into one of the offices. He had seen her before in the hospital refectory but didn’t know what she did. Now he thought that she must be the psychologist that he was due to see, she looked very young.

After what seemed a long wait, his name was called.

‘Doctor please come in.’ He entered a large room almost devoid of furniture apart from a desk and two armchairs. She was sitting in one and gestured to him to sit in the other.

'Good morning, my name is Elaine Baldwin please call me Elaine. May I call you Charles?' He nodded. She sat drumming her fingers on the arm of her chair; her brain was flicking through pages of memory as she searched for a point to begin. He waited as she crossed her long legs and smoothed down her skirt. Nice legs he thought to himself.

'Charles what do you think happened in the OR last week?' She had a low soft voice with a slight Glaswegian accent. Charles thought for a minute, where to begin?

'I couldn't go on I couldn't operate. He was my own father I couldn't do that.'

'Why did you think he was your father?'

'I saw him. I arrived early and went into the anaesthetic room to check the patient, I always like to say hello and satisfy myself that we have the correct patient mistakes have been made. He was half asleep with his face turned away from me. I leaned over to check and it was my father. I had such a shock. When I looked again his face had changed, it was the patient. It was a weird

experience and I was a bit confused but dismissed the feeling and went to scrub up. By the time I had scrubbed up the patient was lying on the operating table. When I looked again it was my father I was sure. What was he doing there? He didn't need surgery. He's dead. I was completely bamboozled. I said I can't do this and walked out.'

'Now that you know the truth what do you feel?' Asked Miss Baldwin.

'I don't know that I do. Clearly it wasn't my father but why did I think it was him? It didn't make sense. How could I be mistaken like that? After all I have been doing surgery for over fifteen years and it has never happened before?'

He paused,

'Have you met this before?'

Elaine paused.

'No I don't think I have which is why it is all the more unusual and interesting,' she added. 'I don't know what the hospital is going to do but at the present I think you should take some time off.'

'But I am not sick. I want to go back to work.'

‘I know but it’s a way of keeping your job and at the same time having some treatment.’

‘Treatment? What sort of treatment?’ I don’t need treatment there’s nothing wrong with me.’

‘I agree you are not physically ill but you must agree that what you did was very unusual suggesting that there is something wrong don’t you think?’

‘Possibly I did act in an irrational manner. What sort of treatment would you recommend?’

‘Talking therapy like we are having now.’

‘This is treatment? OK I’m all right with that.’

Constance wasn’t at home when Charles let himself into the house. She often came in after him so he was used to finding himself alone. He liked the quiet emptiness. He walked into his study and idly switched on the TV. It was a local news programme. The presenter was talking about a medical event when he heard his name mentioned. He listened intently.

‘Local surgeon Charles Blackstone has been suspended from

duties after walking out of an operation without any explanation. His assistant finished the procedure, the patient is doing well.'

Charles sprang up angrily jabbing his finger at the announcer,

'You! You know nothing sitting there telling us the news.' He shouted.

'Why on earth did you think what I did it was newsworthy? Have you nothing else to talk about? You idiot.' He reached for the controller and flourishing it in his hand roared,

'Take that,' and pressed the button. The screen faded.

Constance had just come in and hearing his raised voice rushed into the room.

'What on earth are you shouting at?' she demanded.

'That announcer,' he said pointing to the empty TV screen.

'Darling,' she said hugging him. 'I don't think he can hear you. Come and sit down. How was your day, you saw the psychologist didn't you?

'Yes, it was OK very relaxed.'

'Did you enjoy it?'

'I wouldn't say I enjoyed it but it was interesting.'

'What did she talk about?'

‘She didn’t. I did all the talking.’

‘I would have liked to have been a fly on the wall,’ said Constance.

‘I don’t think I said anything that you don’t already know. I talked about my childhood. I told her that I was an only child and was left on my own a lot. I told her that when I was ten or thereabouts I used to go into the woods near our house and talk to the animals you know the birds, the rabbits and even the ants sometimes.’

Constance had forgotten he must have been very lonely as a child but she said nothing.

Chapter Four

Charles began his regular sessions the following week. He was scheduled to have six in all and then his progress would be reviewed. By the third session he was getting used to his weekly visits and was almost enjoying it. He had gone over his early childhood and was beginning to talk about his teenage years.

He was in the middle of describing his secondary school when Elaine looked up from her notes and suddenly asked,

‘Did you like your father?’

Charles stopped in mid sentence and swallowed. She repeated the question.

‘Did you like your father?’ This caught him completely off guard. Up to then it was all going very smoothly. He had said as much to Constance. Now he felt trapped. He struggled with the truth.

‘I. I didn’t really know him very well he was away a lot. I knew my mother much better. I loved her very much.’

‘Charles tell me about your father?’ Elaine repeated looking up from her notes.

Charles could sense her eyes on him and felt a pulse beating in his temple. He took out a handkerchief and wiped his face. He adjusted his chair. He had not expected this question.

‘Would you like a glass of water?’ Elaine asked.

‘Yes please,’ he replied grasping at any straw. He gulped down the water, spluttering and almost choking on it. He wanted to be loyal to his father but at the same time he wanted to tell the truth.

Unexpectedly his loathing tumbled out like a dam bursting,

‘I hated him he was a cruel and hurtful man. I don’t think he had an ounce of love in him. He treated mum horribly shouting at her and sometimes hitting her.’

He was stumbling over his words.

‘I tried many times to protect her but he would push me aside telling me it was none of my business. I watched helplessly as he struck her again and again sometimes knocking her to the ground. She said nothing just accepted it. I hated what he was doing I had to stop him. He was hurting my mum I couldn’t let him do that?’ His voice rose childlike in its anger.

Charles could feel his anger boiling up; he was ashamed that he couldn’t control it. He felt like he was that boy again and began to shake, heavy moans wracked his body. Elaine wanted to reach forwards and calm him but fought the impulse and left him to struggle.

‘I’m sorry I don’t know what came over me I am so ashamed.’

‘You needn’t be, that resentment has been locked up for too long and you had to let it go.’

When Charles got home that evening after his session Constance could see that something had happened to upset him, he looked flushed and was visibly trembling.

‘What is it, what happened dear you look terrible?’

‘I told her about my father.’

‘What about your father?’ She was puzzled.

He went cold, he had never spoken about him, it had never come up in conversation and now she was asking him.

‘What did she say?’

‘She said I needed to let it out.’

‘Let what out, I don’t understand?’

Constance sat dumbfounded as Charles described the events of his childhood still unable to tell her everything. At time angry and at others sorry she gradually accepted why he had not told her. Finally she reached out and hugged him as he let go the calamity of his past.

It was several hours later that Charles and Constance crept up to bed both drained by his revelation.

As soon as he had left her office Elaine was on the phone. It was her weekly chat to her counsellor Andrea Baxter. She knew very little about her apart from the fact that she was a trained Psychologist; the Association had given her details to her. They had been communicating for over five years. Usually it was just routine but now something serious was troubling her.

‘Hello Elaine how’s it going?’

‘I think we’re getting somewhere. He has told me about his childhood and his relationship with his father. But I think he is holding something back, I don’t know what it is. I still can’t see the connection between his childhood and walking away from an operation.’

‘Be patient it sounds like you’re on the right track so keep going. How are you?’

‘OK I guess still not getting on with my mother. She keeps telling me I should get a proper job and stop interfering with other peoples lives.’

‘How do you deal with that?’

‘I get angry and put the phone down and then I feel guilty, guilty as hell.’

‘Your mother has to let you go. You’re an adult. It’s up to you how you spend your time. I think you’re doing a great job keep it up.’ There was a click and the phone went dead.

Elaine sat looking at the receiver. I wonder could mum be right am I wasting my time, is talking therapy a real benefit?

Chapter Five

The news soon got around the surgical department and tongues began wagging.

‘Did you hear what happened in the OR this morning?’ was on everyone’s lips. ‘Mr Blackstone just walked out and left the op to his junior.’

A discussion took place in the junior’s changing room.

‘You can’t do that,’ said one

‘He did it didn’t he?’ said another.

‘I’m surprised it doesn’t happen more often,’ said a third.

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Well sometimes when I am about to make an incision I suddenly realise that it’s a fellow human being under my knife and for a moment I freeze.’

‘But you’ve never abandoned an op have you?’

‘No but I get pretty close what about you?’

‘It’s never crossed my mind, once the sheets have covered the patient it’s just a body and I’m just a technician.’

Elsewhere in the department opinions were more heated. The senior surgeon Colin Cartwright a man nearing retirement was holding forth with his two colleagues, Michael White and Mark Nash at the weekly unit meeting.

‘I don’t think Charles is up to the job, if he can do it once he can do it again. I think we should ask him to resign and find another job not involving surgery, such as teaching.’

Mark Nash the most junior surgeon having been on the staff for less than five years looked a bit surprised and said,

‘I think that sounds a bit harsh after all this is the first time and we need to know why it happened before we can judge him don’t you think?’ The others nodded.

‘OK,’ said Colin. ‘Let’s ask management to appoint a locum for say six months, that should be long enough for us to know whether he has recovered and is fit to resume his post.’

Chapter Six

Henry Kirkpatrick was a self-made man coming from simple beginnings. He was the eldest of four children and was born in Stornaway on the Isle of Lewis a wild barren windswept place. When he was twelve years old his father was drowned while out fishing and he assumed the head of the family. As soon as he could he moved to Edinburgh where he began working in a factory. Within a few years he was the foreman and when the owner died he took over. A tall full-bodied man with a mop of greying hair he had a very practical approach to life. After retirement he was asked to become the Secretary of the Edinburgh

General Hospital. He jumped at the opportunity assuming his experience in the factory could be transferred to running a hospital but he soon learned differently. He believed that if an item wasn't selling you stopped making it. He had a rude awakening when he realised that the greatest obstacles to efficiency in the hospital were the patients who blocked beds and there was nothing he could do about it because there was nowhere for them to go.

He was in his office when his secretary brought the news of Charles Blackstone's walk out in the OR.

Astounded he asked,

'Are you telling me that a senior surgeon just quit an operation without finishing it?'

'Yes sir, that is what I have been told by the OR staff. They said the assistant finished it and the patient is doing well.'

'That's a relief, where is the surgeon now?'

'He's on sick leave pending a decision about his future. I rang his wife to let her know what happened and asked her to come and see you when she was able.'

Henry leaned back in his chair folded his hands across his ample belly and thought for a moment. He needed to get some advice. Soon after he was appointed he tried to run the hospital himself, which he would have much preferred, but he soon realised that there were too many issues that he didn't understand. Reluctantly he had set up a medical advisory committee. Now facing this very unfamiliar situation he decided that the medical committee would be the place to discuss the problem and arranged for it to meet at midday in his office.

Top of the agenda was the Blackstone walkout. It had received so much publicity that it had to be discussed and a statement released to the press. He had invited the heads of the main clinical departments of Medicine, Surgery, Paediatrics and Oncology, all of which dealt with the direct treatment of patients as opposed to the ancillary departments of Radiology, Bacteriology and Pathology.

The four heads arrived just after 10 am and helped themselves to

coffee before sitting down. The manager Henry opened the meeting.

‘Colleagues you all know why I have called this meeting. We need to respond to the adverse publicity following the event in the OR. We must assure the public that the hospital is functioning as normal. Colin as head of surgery would you like to begin the discussion?’

‘Henry I really don’t know what to say,’ Colin questioned, leaning on his hand and rubbing his forehead. ‘It is something completely outside my experience. I have made enquiries and no one has ever heard of such an event before. Having said that I agree that we need to produce a statement for the press and to reassure our patients.’

A raised hand caught the manager’s eye. He nodded towards Miss Clements from Paediatrics.

‘Chairman, I have checked the literature and found one case of a neurological surgeon who walked out of the OR saying he was too tired and left the operation to an inexperienced junior. The patient died. There is no doubt that it is a most unusual

occurrence and one I hope never happens again.'

By the end of the meeting they had agreed a statement for the Press:

The Management and Staff of Edinburgh General Hospital wish to assure all their patients that the recent surgical incident was an aberration and they can be confident that the high standards of surgical care for which the hospital is renowned will be maintained.

As he left the meeting Colin was overheard to say to his colleagues,

'That's OK for now but the public won't be satisfied and will want to know what will happen to the surgeon. This is not the end.'

Chapter Seven

Charles' relaxed approach to his sessions with Elaine had changed. He became increasingly agitated as her gentle probing continued and she began to suspect that he had buried a dark secret that he intended never to let surface. It came to a head when she asked him to describe what he

meant when he said he couldn't let his father do that to his mother.

Charles' unease increased as his thoughts flashed back to that day, a day he hoped never to have to recall.

'No No I don't want to talk about it.' He pleaded burying his head in his hands. 'Leave me alone,' he whimpered. Elaine sat back resting her notes on her knees. She watched him as he tried to control himself. He was no longer the competent surgeon but just a small lost soul struggling with his fears. She knew that at last she was getting to the real issues, the events that he was striving so hard to hide.

In a childlike whisper he began to unveil his past. Elaine could see the pain on his face, his eyes were screwed up against the light and his hands clenched with his knuckles blanching from the tightness of his grip.

'I couldn't help it,' his voice wavered. 'I had to do it I couldn't let it go on. I couldn't stand and watch my mother being beaten mercilessly.'

'Charles tell me what happened.'

'I don't want to talk about it. I have never spoken about it before I'm

scared.' Then as if talking to himself, Charles' voice steadied, it was low and rasping. He began to recount what happened.

'It was at supper mum and I were sitting waiting for dad to join us. She had cooked a hotpot, which was on the table when dad sat down. I could see from the frown on his brow that he was in a bad mood. His eyes were steely and he was staring all around. I smelt alcohol on his breath. I felt my stomach tighten. I was fearful that something bad was going to happen. Mum took the lid off the pot and began ladling the stew onto his plate. I saw him watching and a look of disgust appeared on his face. He then lunged forwards and pushed the ladle out of her hand tipping the contents all over the tablecloth.

'I want proper food woman,' he bellowed, 'not this rubbish that you serve up it's not fit for pigs!' He reached over and grabbed her by the throat and began shaking her while shouting obscenities. I looked on stunned and then I reached out and felt a knife in my right hand. I had to do something to stop him he was hurting my mother. I grabbed the

handle and lunged at him pushing it into the left side of his body. I watched petrified as he turned and stared at me. I saw a look of surprise on his face and then he fell backwards clutching at his chest. A gurgling sound came from his throat as he slid to the floor; frothy blood trickled from his mouth. He took a few gasps and then there was silence, he lay there still. At last we had peace. After that it is all very vague. The police arrived and took mum away. My mother took the blame and was put in prison.'

His voice was now almost inaudible,

'She died there.'

Elaine felt a mixture of sadness and elation as she listened to his tragic story. She knew that a last Charles was revealing a secret he had held imprisoned since his childhood and she had helped him unburden himself.

That was why, she recalled, against all advice she had trained to be a Psychologist.

Charles sat slowly recovering his composure. Gradually a look of dread creased his face as he realised what

he had said, that he had just confessed to a murder, the killing of his own father. Elaine was non-plussed she had never before faced a situation like this and didn't know how to proceed. She needed to speak to Andrea her counsellor as soon as possible.

Composing she said,
'Charles I think that's enough for today, I'll see you next week.'

As soon as Charles had left the room, Elaine rushed to phone Andrea. She drummed her fingers impatiently on the table waiting for her to reply. At last she heard the receiver pick up.

'Hello,' she said impatiently. 'Is that you Elaine?'

'Yes speaking, how are you?'

'Fine I have a problem can you speak?'

'Can it wait? I'm tied up right now I'll phone you back in about an hour is that OK?'

'Yes that's fine.'

Elaine busied herself making a cup of coffee her mind in a whirl. She was still shaking from the realisation that at the age of ten Charles had murdered

his father. Nothing in her training had prepared her for this.

Chapter Eight

Charles was trembling as he left Elaine's office. He held on to the bannister to steady himself as he stumbled down the stairs into the open air. He took a deep breath and felt the fresh air fill his lungs. He was dreading the future. But he felt that the weight of sadness and shame was leaving him. Now that the truth was out he had to tell Constance, she had a right to know but how would she deal with it?

Charles let himself into the house and called out to Constance.

'I'm in the kitchen,' she replied.
'How did it go?'

'Not good,' he said gravely. 'Not good at all.'

'In what way?' said Constance coming into the lounge wiping her hands on a dishtowel? She saw his face crumpled in pain.

'Oh my God! What is it what has happened?'

'Come and sit down I have something to tell you.'

Constance felt a shiver of fear. What could be so serious to affect him so much? He was normally so calm and strong but now he seemed to have lost all his confidence.

‘What is it?’ she pleaded.

‘I have never told you about this before; I just hoped it would never be necessary that it would fade away and disappear. But today during the session it came bubbling to the surface and I revealed it to Elaine.’

‘Revealed what? What are you talking about?’ Constance’s voice was harsh and impatient. Charles was now calmer and in control. He began to tell the story as if it had nothing to do with him. As the details were revealed Constance became more and more agitated. At first she thought it was a game. Charles was making it up but gradually as he described the details, the horror of what he was saying sunk in. She needed to clarify her thoughts to make sure that she understood exactly what he was telling her.

‘Are you saying that you killed your father?’

‘Yes, I killed him and my mother took the blame.’

‘And you have kept this locked up all this time. Oh my darling I can’t believe it why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I was so ashamed and I thought that it would gradually go away and I would forget all about it. I thought it had until today. What am I going to do?’

‘Darling it’s going to be OK,’ she said hugging him. ‘We have each other.’

Chapter Nine

About an hour later Elaine’s phone rang. She recognised the voice.

‘Thanks Andrea, I need to speak to you. I have just seen Charles the surgeon. He has confessed that he killed his father and his mother took the blame.’

‘My God, when was that?’

‘He was just a child ten years old.’

‘That’s a real bombshell. I think I need to get back to you.’

A few days later Andrea rang.

‘Elaine, I’ve had a long talk with my supervisor and it’s a bit complicated. The issues that she mentioned were: ‘He was a minor at the time, his mother confessed and

was jailed. It was more than thirty years ago, it's time barred.'

'Are you saying that I don't need to tell any authority about it?'

'That was the general opinion.'

'Thanks Andrea that's really great news, I'm sure he'll be extremely relieved.'

As the days passed Charles became more and more withdrawn. The realisation that by confiding in Elaine he had put both him and her in a very tight spot gradually dawned on him. Would their confidentiality clause protect him or would she have to tell the police? He was very tempted to cancel the next appointment and make some sort of excuse. He seriously considered going into hiding. But he soon rejected that idea. He had run away from the truth for too long he was not going to do it any more. He would stay and face up to his past.

Their next meeting was in two days. On the day of the appointment, he sat in the kitchen cupping his coffee and watching the seconds tick by on the big wall clock above his head.

'Don't be late,' called out Constance as she let herself out of the front door.

His reply of 'I won't,' was lost by the howling wind that met her as she opened the door.

He arrived five minutes early and sat idly rolling his wedding ring around his finger. Looking at it he recalled the moment when he and Constance had exchange them. So much had happened since then. His career seemed to be going so well until - his thoughts were interrupted.

'Come in Charles,' he heard Elaine call. He got up and followed her into her room.

'Good morning, how have you been?' she asked settling herself in her chair. He sat forward. He was eager to find out what they had decided but instead replied,

'I'm fine thanks.'

'You were telling me about your father?'

'It's hard to remember what happened next it was such a long time ago.' Elaine looked down and scribbled a note in her file.

Charles continued.

‘I was sent to a children’s home. It was a pleasant enough place. The staff were very kind and I was happy there. It was there that I became interested in Biology. We had a visiting teacher who took us out on trips into the countryside to study the plants and trees. It was fascinating. I was soon hooked and so it was natural that I wanted to be a doctor.’

By this time Charles was bursting to find out what they had decided.

‘Elaine what did your supervisor decide about my confession?’

‘They were very worried by your admission and decided to seek the advice of a lawyer. He said that as you were under age and it was such a long time ago he thought that if it came to court you would be given a suspended sentence.’

‘That’s wonderful news, does that mean I can return to surgery?’

‘That will now depend on the hospital. I will be giving you a clear report.’

Charles felt a great weight lifted off him. He was no longer in danger of being arrested so he could go back to surgery.

Constance was so relieved when Charles told her about the decision. He now seemed a different person no longer frightened to talk about the past.

Chapter Ten

The appointment for Constance to see the management about Charles' future was looming. As the day came closer she wondered what they wanted to speak to her about. She knew that Charles wanted to go back to work but thought it would be difficult for her to convince them that he was ready.

There would be three surgeons present at the meeting, Colin Cartwright and his two colleagues Michael White and Mark Nash. She knew them all socially but had never been asked to discuss Charles.

Six months had passed since the incident and they were now deciding what to do about the locum. He had almost completed his tenure and wanted to apply for the permanent post assuming Charles wouldn't be returning.

‘What do you think Mark?’
Asked Colin the senior. ‘Have you heard how Charles is recovering? He was treating Charles’ behaviour in the OR as an illness.

‘Let’s wait until we see Constance, she is due here at 10 am. She’ll be able to bring us up to date with his recovery,’ said Mark fidgeting with his pen. He was still a bit nervous in the presence of his senior colleague.

Promptly at 10 there was a knock on the door and the secretary came in.

‘Excuse me Sir Mrs Blackstone is here. Shall I bring her in?’

‘Yes please Nancy.’

‘Hello Constance thank you for coming I think you know everyone here?’ Constance looked at the three men and said,

‘Yes hello.’

‘You must be wondering why we have asked you to come and see us?’

‘Yes I am a little surprised.’

‘We know that Charles has been attending counselling and obviously what happened is confidential but we think you are the best placed to advise us. You see he is a very talented and

well-loved doctor and our patients miss his expertise. We have received an optimistic report from his Psychologist of a general nature but we need to know more. How is he and more importantly, in your opinion is he ready to return to surgery?’

‘I think I can say without breaching his confidentiality that he’s much better. Whatever happened during his sessions seems to have lifted a heavy burden from his mind. He is from my point of view much calmer and focussed. I know he is very keen to return to work but he understands the difficulty you may have in convincing the management.

‘We don’t think that’s the issue they will be advised by us. Would he feel comfortable coming to see us?’

‘I’m sure he would be very pleased to see you. After all this time I think you will see a change.’

Chapter Eleven

Constance couldn’t wait to get home to tell Charles the good news.

‘Charles,’ she shouted. ‘Where are you? I’ve got some wonderful news’

'I'm in the study.' Constance rushed in and grabbed him spinning him as if in a dance.

'What's all the excitement?'

He looked puzzled,

'It's your department. They want to see you?'

'What for?'

'To get you back to work stupid!

'You're joking aren't you? The last time I saw them they were pleased to see the back of me, what's changed?'

'I think they miss you and I see too much of you dear so go and see them and be gentle.'

Nothing had changed as Charles entered the entrance of the hospital. It felt as if he hadn't been away. He nodded to the Head Porter and made his way up the stairs to the Consultant's offices. One or two nurses acknowledged him as he walked along the main corridor. It felt like the old times but his courage began to fail him as he stood outside the office poised to knock. His footsteps must have been heard inside because Colin the senior surgeon opened the door for him.

‘Ah Blackstone welcome how good to see you,’ he said as he hustled him into the room. ‘You know Michael and Mark?’ They nodded to each other. Charles was by now very confused. He had not expected such a warm reception and wondered where it was all leading.

Colin took the floor as Charles sat down.

‘Coffee?’

‘No thanks I have just had one.’

‘Charles, we have asked you to come because we need to know how you are and whether you feel you are able to resume your job. We have had a large amount of correspondence from your patients asking when you will be returning to surgery. Some are putting their operations on hold waiting for you to return.’

Charles listened amazed. He was overwhelmed at the welcomed news.

‘My therapist says that I don’t need any more treatment so I’m ready to start as soon as possible.’

It wasn’t only his patients who were pleased to see him back. He received a warm reception when he arrived for his first operating session. The staff

had lined up in the corridor and clapped him in. He was presented with a bunch of roses.

‘Speech,’ shouted someone at the back. The room quietened.

‘My friends I am overwhelmed by your warm reception and can only thank you for your trust in me, I will not let you down again I promise’

STIR-FRY

Priscilla couldn't decide what to cook for her new boy friend. It was the anniversary of their first date and she was excited. I must make something very special she thought but when she looked in the fridge there were only the remains of last night's meal. There is nothing there she decided. I need to go shopping.

As she manoeuvred her car into the supermarket-parking bay she remembered how they had met. The train home from the office had been crowded but she found a seat and flopped down into it moping her brow.

'Well done,' said a cultured male voice beside her. They fell into conversation. His name was Simon and he worked in the City. She didn't normally speak to strangers but he seemed interesting. Most men bored her with their football and jokes those terrible joke. He was handsome in a classic way with soft wavy hair, a roman nose and deep blue eyes.

She selected some smoked salmon and some lemons and put them in her trolley. I'll do a stir-fry and she began to reach for some vegetables, carrots, a cabbage some onions and garlic. As she turned to put the items in her trolley it wasn't there. She saw it being wheeled away by a complete stranger.

'Hey,' she called out, 'that's my trolley you're pushing.'

At first the man didn't respond and then he turned and stopped.

'Do you mean me?' Peter asked surprised.

'Yes that's my trolley you're pushing.' Confusion spread over his face.

'Oh I'm so sorry I didn't realise I had taken yours. I don't know how it happened.'

‘It’s all right, don’t worry, I think I must have yours.’

He peered into the one she was pushing

‘Yes that’s mine, Oh! What a fool I feel.’

‘No please don’t worry.’

‘Look I must make amends. He glanced at his watch. It’s coffee time why don’t you let me buy you one?’

Priscilla liked the look of him and thought it might be fun but she was in a hurry.

‘Perhaps another day, let me take your number and I’ll phone you. What’s your name?’

‘Jonathan.’

He realised it was a turn off but thought I may as well you never know.

Priscilla was humming as she began to prepare the meal. She turned up the radio and began to sing with the music. She laid the table and took out her best cutlery. She was just adding the vegetables to the stir-fry when the phone rang.

‘Sorry dear,’ said Simon. ‘I’m held up at the office, hold dinner I’ll be in late.’

Priscilla slammed down the receiver and sat staring at the food bubbling in the pan. Damn she thought switching off the cooker. She sat for a moment and then angrily grabbed the pan and dumped the food into the waste bin.

‘That’s it! I’ve had it up to my neck,’ she shouted.

Suddenly her mind clicked she knew what to do. She remembered the man with the trolley. He was nice why don’t I? Simon will never know. She checked her phone and found his number. Her hand was trembling as she tapped it out.

‘Hi, is that Jonathan?’ her voice wavered.

‘Yeah,’ his voice was surprised.

‘We met over a trolley?’

‘Yeah I remember. How are you?’

‘Fine.’

‘I was wondering, if you were free? We could take in a drink. There’s a nice restaurant bar I know.’ Her voice was trembling.

‘Yeah that would be great I’ll meet you there.’

Her friend Cynthia would be proud of her thought Priscilla as she chose a

low cut blouse with a tight skirt and her highest heels. They always made her feel confident. She winked at her appearance as she left the room. I look good she whispered to herself.

The bar was crowded when she entered and for a moment she wavered. She wasn't in the habit of entering a bar alone but she gathered up her courage and went in. The lights were low and for a moment she hesitated until her eyes had accustomed to the gloom. She looked around and at first didn't recognise Jonathan seated at the bar. He looked different. He was wearing a loose t-shirt and Jeans. She remembered his smart suit and tie. She faltered and was about to leave when she heard a familiar voice'

'What are you doing here?'

Simon asked.

The Trainee

I was excited at the prospect of starting a new job. I had seen that TV series about the lawbreakers and I was hooked. They seemed invincible,

brave intelligent men and women fighting evil. It was inspirational and I decided there and then that was what I wanted to do. My family was working class, my father a market trader and my mother a waitress but we always had books in the house and I was encouraged to read. Now eighteen, I could pass for twenty-five but I was gangly with long thin limbs and a head that seemed too big for my body. I envied the body builders with their rippling muscles so I was working out at the Gym trying to build up some bulk.

It was such a relief to have left school. I got so angry at the constant need to do as you were told especially if it made no sense. Detention could have been a positive influence but turned out to be a repetitive task such as repeating one hundred push-ups or 200 hundred steps on the spot. Boarding school had been tough but I got through it a wiser person. The physical battles were a pain but I managed to get some good grades, good enough to apply for an attachment to a Legal firm.

Having completed the application and found two referees, I waited impatiently for a reply and was overjoyed when I was short-listed. Now I needed to prepare for the interview. I had done some XXXX background research and knew who would be on the interviewing board, Mr Pete Grant the senior Lawyer, a grammar school boy who went to a redbrick university. Mr Sunson the son of the firm's founder, a man in his forties, quietly spoken with thin greying hair, and a distinct tremor which he tried to conceal by holding his hands together as if praying. The third member was Miss Macleod, the company secretary. She had a thin pointed face with straight grey hair combed into a tight bun at the back of her head. She was getting on and showing the frailty of age.

When I was called into the room, the three people were already seated behind a long table, their names printed on small plaques in front of them. I recognised them from their website photographs. Mr Grant started the questioning sending in a fast accurate low ball.

‘Why do you want to be a lawyer?’ I was prepared and kept my bat straight. I replied looking from one examiner to another, keeping eye contact. My father had drummed it into me how important eye contact was. I had practiced it at home in the mirror.

I replied,

‘Although we have no lawyers in the family, I have always been attracted to the law. I don’t think the importance of it can be over-estimated,’ I said. ‘A society without law is no better than a jungle. Every one in a civilized society has the right to be judged fairly and that means if necessary to be represented by a lawyer.’

‘Why have you chosen this firm?’ This seemed to me to be a superfluous question but I kept control and said,

‘Because I have heard such impressive things about it.’

The final question came from Miss Macleod. Clearing her throat, she asked in a thin wheedling voice,

‘Have you decided what branch of law you would like to pursue?’ That was a googly. I watched it as it landed and didn’t take my eyes off the ball.

How on earth could I answer that question. I thought that whichever branch I chose, someone could ask why not another so I decided to play safe.

‘At the moment all branches of law interest me. But maybe later as I learn more I will have the knowledge to decide in which one I should specialise.’

After some more gruelling questions, some of which flummoxed me, I was invited to speak.

My father had prompted me to say something nice about the firm.

‘I just want to say that I have heard only good things about this firm and I would be honoured to work here. I am hard working and ambitious.’

Looking back over the interview I was very impressed with the senior, a tall well built man in his forties with a shock of white hair overhanging his steely blue eyes. He knew what was what, no nonsense with him. He spoke such good sense I knew I was making the right decision.

I waited for the letter, which arrived two days later. I tore open the

envelope and read, The Committee regrets...

When my father came home that evening I told him the disappointing news.

‘Leave it with me son,’ he said. ‘They owe me a favour, I’ll get the decision changed.’

‘Dad,’ I pleaded, ‘please don’t. I clearly wasn’t the best man on the day.’

‘I’ll see to it that you get the job, don’t you worry.’

I still smart as I recall that interview and his intervention. I have been with the firm for over twenty years and am now the senior partner.

The TSUNAMI

I had just celebrated my 39th birthday and suddenly time was running away from me and I was beginning to fear for the future. My mother had died suddenly and my father was ailing. He and I had a very special relationship but I used to see him once a week for lunch, which he insisted on preparing.

‘Just sit there and I will bring lunch to you,’ he would say rejecting any assistance that I offered.

He was in his eighties with a wicked sense of humour and managed to see life as an adventure. He was becoming rather frail and bent and depended on a stick to get about although he still remained stubbornly independent.

I think Darren my husband was aware that I was going through a difficult time and presented me with a white envelope that appeared at the breakfast table that morning. I ignored it at first as if I hadn’t seen it. He did the same until Hugh our son piped up.

‘Mum what’s that?’

I acted as if I didn’t know what he was talking about.

‘What dear?’

‘That?’ he repeated pointing at the envelope. I could see that Darren had entered into the spirit of the game and sat waiting to see what I would do.

‘It’s nothing,’ I said. ‘Someone must have left it there by mistake.’

‘No mum it’s for you.’ He added in desperation. ‘It’s for you open it,

open it,' he repeated getting more and more excited.

'All right,' I said, 'I'll open it later.'

'No mummy no, open it now,' he shrilled at me.

I wasn't prepared for its contents. Disbelieving I took out tickets and documents for a family holiday to Haiti. I was overwhelmed and gave Darren a big hug.

'Thank you thank you, it's just what I needed.'

It was going to be a great holiday I knew it, going somewhere exotic and romantic just the three of us. It had been such a long time since we had been together. No school or office work just the opportunity to find time to reconnect after such a long time.

So I couldn't believe it when Darren suddenly informed me that he wouldn't be able to come with us. It was too much. He claimed he needed a break, even helped me chose the place and seemed to be as excited as I was to get away but as soon as I had arranged it he was tied up. I was sick of his excuses.

'The research department is short staffed since the assistant

Professor became ill,' he pleaded. 'I have to step up to take his place. We're working on a new drug for cancer and they need me. Dearest, I don't like it anymore than you but I can't leave now.'

'Can't you just say no? When will you put Hugh and me first? I managed to get time off from the hospital although we are short-staffed, if I can why can't you?'

Speechless I eventually gave up.

'OK we'll go on our own and you can join us later.'

Then I felt a jolt in my belly, had I forgotten so soon. This had all happened before. I thought back. It was almost the same, we had planned a weekend away, and it was before Hugh was born. Then at the last minute he couldn't come. It was my friend Mary who told me in hushed tones that she had seen him with a woman from the office talking intimately at a café. He denied it of course but I knew it was true. I was devastated. I thought my marriage was on the rocks. Then followed late nights at the office, whispered phone calls and lies, always lies. Then the tears and regrets. Was history

repeating itself? I sat wondering what to do and then remembered my mother's wise words.

'It's what men do; don't take it to heart it's nothing to do with you just get over it.'

Over the next few days I busied myself with packing. It had been a long time since I had been away without Darren and I had butterflies in my stomach. Would I manage without him? I brushed the doubts aside and busied myself with the preparations.

I had never been to Haiti before but my hairdresser Evelyn had and couldn't stop talking about it. The name had appealed to her and when she read the brochure she was persuaded. She had booked a hotel that fronted onto the beach. She showed me her photographs they were fantastic.

'All we would have to do,' she said, 'was to step through the large patio doors and we would be on the beach with not another soul in sight.'

It seemed too good to be true. I was convinced and couldn't wait to get away.

The winter seemed to be going on forever but now I had a chance of

some sunshine. I was excited. I imagined myself laying in the shade listening to the birds and the distant breaking of the waves against the shore, nothing to do but relax and enjoy the surroundings.

Eventually the day for departure came. It was overcast with a slight drizzle. Soon we will be away from this I thought as I checked my list for the umpteenth time - the dog had gone to kennels, the house minder had confirmed, the fridge was stocked. Everything seemed to be covered. Finally I laid out the documents on my bed, passport, money and credit cards, then my mobile and charger and my Ipad, everything I would need. I carefully packed them into my small shoulder bag.

Manchester airport was bedlam when Hugh and I arrived. He was unusually quiet and stood overawed by its size. He had stopped crying and was blinking trying to stay awake. Saying goodbye to his dad had been upsetting and he didn't understand why he wasn't coming with us.

'I don't want to go without you dad,' he whimpered.

‘I’ll be there before you know it,’ he replied. ‘I just have something I have to do. Please Hugh, you’re a big boy now and mummy needs you to be brave.’

‘I don’t feel brave,’ he snivelled.

Now I was searching for the flight departures board with Hugh holding tightly onto my hand. The scene was bewildering and unnerving. People were scurrying back and forth. It was like a frenzied merry-go-round. For a moment I froze I regretted coming alone. It seemed so straightforward at home with me on the computer and Darren patiently helping but now I felt lost. Walking further into the hall I finally spied the screen. Shielding my eyes from the glare I ran down the list of places and at first couldn’t see our flight. Panic hit me. Are we in the wrong terminal? Is it the wrong day, the doubts flooded in? I wanted to hide, to be anywhere but here. Why did I think I could manage this I thought? It’s too difficult. I felt trapped, part of me wanted to run away, to abandon the whole trip. I felt my chest contract, my breathing difficult. I couldn’t get enough air.

I remembered the same feeling when I got lost as a child. I was no older than Hugh. My mother and I had gone into the supermarket as usual on a Friday. She was pushing the trolley piled high. I remember we were at the check out when she spied something.

‘Over there Bronwyn,’ she pointed to the vegetable section.

‘Could you get me a bag of carrots?’ My mother often asked me to get things. It made me feel grown up. Off I darted and when I arrived at the vegetable counter I looked and looked but there were no carrots left. I found some on another counter but when I turned to go back I was lost. The shelves were so high that I couldn’t find the right gangway. I went round and round and began to panic. Frantically I began to call out

‘Mum, mum.’

I was so scared I thought I would never see her again. An assistant heard my cries and came over and took me to an office. I heard them calling over the intercom.

‘Would the mother of a little girl called Bronwyn please come to the office your daughter is looking for you?’

Hugh squeezed my hand; somehow he had sensed my uncertainty and wanted to reassure me. I looked down at his small serious face and smiled.

Then I saw our flight listed on the screen.

Haiti via Miami - flight delayed.

I took a deep breath and relaxed. I now had time to calm down. I searched for somewhere to sit down. I don't think I will ever get used to flying. Waiting in the lounge for the flight to be called always made me feel that I wanted to run away. No matter how many times Darren had explained to me the dynamics of air flight it still seemed that the plane was defying gravity so I sat nervously waiting. Hugh was happily playing with a little girl in the children's play area. He had found a game with building blocks that the little girl kept on knocking down a game that had them both in giggles.

Feeling calmer I watched the activities on the runway out of a huge plate glass window. A plane close by was being prepared for its flight. Two men had erected a ladder under the tail plane. One was reading from a

book while the other started examining it. I shuddered at the scene. He seemed to be giving instructions to the other man who was removing a panel with a spanner. Wow I thought that could be our plane having last minute repairs. I didn't like the idea at all. Then I thought maybe having the book to check the work made sense. I had read somewhere that surgeons take anatomy books into the OR to check they are doing the right thing. It still seemed very creepy to me.

I could see that the desk staff were beginning to assemble and realised that the flight would be called very soon. I had better get Hugh to sit next to me.

'Will parents with small children please begin to board?' There were quite a number of us; mainly couples but I noticed one or two fathers on their own. By now Hugh had gone very quiet. His face looked a little strained and I hugged him. Then I squeezed his hand as we checked in and walked along the corridor towards the plane. We were almost knocked aside by our fellow passengers but eventually we were directed onto a

coach. We were heading for a large plane some distance away. I was glad it wasn't the one I saw having the last minute repairs.

Our coach stopped opposite the plane and we all piled out and made our way to the ladder. It was very steep and Hugh struggled to mount each step. It shook and rattled a bit and didn't seem strong enough for the job.

Hugh was given a bag of sweets and I was directed to our seats. We were in row 18, the window and middle seats. Hugh rushed ahead and climbed onto the window seat and stared out. He was very quiet. I suddenly thought of Darren. I'll ring him before we set off I decided.

'Hi darling how's it going?' He replied.

'We're fine. Hugh has been very good; we're on the plane waiting to take off. How are you?'

'Good I'm still in the office. We have a meeting later this evening. The project is going well.'

'OK, I will phone you when we get to Miami, love you.' The phone went dead.

I sat back. This was the bit I dreaded, waiting for the plane to take off. I knew that this and the landing were the most dangerous times when things can go wrong. I was sitting next to an older woman and we nodded to each other. I could see that she was thinking the same as me.

Eventually everyone was settled and the staff began going through the final checks. Then the doors were swung closed and locked and we were ready to go. I sat numbed by my thoughts of what was going to happen. Hugh in his innocence loved it, pointing to the buildings rushing by in the distance as the plane began to gather speed. But I was in a different world. So I sat tightly within myself trying to ignore the roar of the engines and the kick in my back as we rose majestically into the air, another miracle of science. Once in the air I was fine. I was even able to look out of the windows for a short while until my imagination kicked in and I looked away frantically. By now I had expended all my nervous energy and I needed to recharge. I could feel my eyes growing heavy and slowly I fell

asleep with Hugh already deeply in slumberland by my side.

I must have slept for several hours because it was dark outside when I awoke. We had missed dinner but the hostess had kept some food for us and when she saw me wake up came over.

‘Did you sleep well? I have kept some food for you, are you hungry?’ She brought a meal for Hugh first. Sausages with chips and beans his favorite meal and one I gave him very rarely. He beamed at me as he scooped the food letting the beans spill down his chin. I settled for a chicken salad with a glass of white wine.

I had just finished eating when there was a loud grating and a bang. What on earth I thought panicking something was wrong. My companion must have seen my fear as she whispered,

‘It’s the undercarriage-the wheels are going down, we are almost at Miami.’

Our landing was so smooth that I hardly knew we were down until I saw the ground flashing by as the plane slowly came to a halt.

I heard the word Port au Prince on the intercom and pricked up my ears.

‘Will those passengers proceeding to Port au Prince please follow the transit sign to their next departure gate.’

I stood up feeling momentarily giddy and waited a few minutes until I had regained my balance before setting off down the aisle with Hugh trailing behind me. It had been raining and the exit ladder was decidedly slippery as I walked gingerly down.

We followed the line of passengers into the terminal and I looked for the in-transit sign. A number of passengers were doing the same and we were directed to a desk where our tickets were examined.

The flight to Port au Prince took just two hours and then we were descending. By now the sky was bright blue with not a cloud. I looked down and saw the outline of the coast rapidly approaching. Soon we were gliding onto the runway and we landed without a bump. What a relief I thought here at last.

Having completed passport control, I found the carousel and watched as the cases bounced onto it

from a chute. Hugh was desperate to climb on it but I managed to stop him just as our two pieces of luggage came into sight. Once out onto the terminal floor I looked for our transport and spied a small man carrying a banner with my name written on it. I waved to him and soon we were speeding through narrow winding streets on our way to the hotel. Suddenly the promenade came into view with the beach stretched out before us. Then we were outside our hotel, a low-lying building with many smaller chalets fronting onto the beach. I couldn't wait to see our room and rest.

As I had hoped we were booked into a self-contained unit with a balcony. I wanted to stand there and just breathe in the unspoiled views of the sea, that unique sensation of sight, sound and smell that engaged all of my senses. But Hugh was tottering with fatigue and once in our room climbed onto the bed and slept. I did the same.

We were woken the following morning by a knock at the door. It was the mother and daughter who we'd made friends with at the airport. They

were going to the beach and wondered if Hugh could come. Hugh's eyes lit up.

'Please mum let me go and play with her,' Hugh pleaded. The mother assured me she'd keep an eye on them.

Soon after they had gone I called Darren. He picked up straight away.

'Darling it's heaven here please try and come as soon as you can. I can't wait to share it with you. Hugh is out playing with a little girl we met, he is already at home and loving it.'

'I'll be with you very soon,' he said. 'Love you.' For a moment I let myself wonder was he telling the truth, was he once again up to his old tricks but I pushed the thoughts away. I can't go on doubting him I just have to get over this and believe what he says.

Standing alone on the balcony I looked out on a scene of calm beauty. In the distance I could see the wide expanse of white sand stretching to the horizon, in the foreground rows of palm trees waved in the wind. It was what I had come for, a brief moment of paradise before returning to my humdrum life in Wales. I thought again

of Darren and couldn't wait for him to join us.

Then I felt a slight tremor under my feet as if a heavy vehicle had driven by. It lasted for a fraction of a second and was gone. But everything then seemed to change. The sky darkened and the wind suddenly dropped. There was an uncanny calm and the birds previously in full voice were stilled. The wind seemed to have changed direction. It was no longer blowing into my face and I tasted salt on my lips. I had no time to understand what was happening before I heard a loud boom. It seemed to be coming from the open sea and then there was another even louder. I felt suddenly alarmed, something awful was happening like the end of the world.

As I watched I could see the sea that had been calmly lapping on the beach now slowly receding and exposing more and more of the shore. At first I assumed it was the normal tide going out but then I saw in the distance a line of foam. It was on the crest of a wave that extended across the whole horizon. It was growing higher and higher as I watched. It seemed to have veered up from

nowhere. What was before a calm sea was now a great seething mass of water bearing down on the beach as loud booms echoed across the shore? Then I heard the sound of rushing water and still couldn't make sense of it.

I watched wide-eyed unable to take in what was happening. Incredulously the wave was growing higher and higher before my eyes? Helpless on the balcony I was paralysed by fear. I watched mesmerized by what I was seeing. I panicked. I had never seen a tsunami before but I realised this was what it was.

I remembered Hugh was on the beach. I must get to him. I felt my heart racing as I shouted

'Get off the beach, get off the beach.' But by then my cries were lost in the raging chaos. Frantically I tried to descend to the ground but a large wave thundered by. Covered in spray and unable to push against it I retreated. Standing helplessly I then watched in horror as the raging waters pushed all before them, tearing into trees and buildings shoving everything ahead of it in a swirling maelstrom. People were being thrown aside like

tenpins. Hugh, where was he? Had the family realised what was happening and got out before the wave struck? My mind was in a whirl, but I was helpless to do anything, trapped by the ferocity of the turmoil. I was desperate I didn't know where to turn. Suddenly my mobile rang it was Darren.

'Darling I have just heard about the tsunami, are you all right?'

'Darren,' I cried. 'I've lost Hugh he was on the beach. I can't see him.'

'My God where are you, are you safe?'

'Yes, I'm on a balcony above the water.'

'I'm coming I'm going to get a plane now. I'll be there as soon as I can.'

I couldn't just stand there I must find Hugh so I descended again into the swirling waters. For a short while I managed to proceed hanging onto tree trunks and lampposts but then I felt a sudden surge and I was flung off my feet turning rolling gasping for breath. I was knocking against walls and objects as I was jettisoned about and then I felt a bang on my head and everything went black.

I was being swept along eventually coming to rest against a bush. It was later that I learned that fate was on my side. A local resident, a nurse had seen me and pulled me to safety. She gave me CPR and saved me. I woke some time later in the hospital to find Darren leaning over me

‘Thank God you’re OK,’ he was saying tears in his eyes.

‘Oh my God darling where is Hugh?’ I managed to stutter.

‘He’s here thanks to an amazing escape.’

Then I heard the whole story.

I was not the only one watching the disaster unfold. Nearby there were two others, Jonathan an old man and the other a tiger. The old man saw it all. In his late sixties, round-shouldered, pot bellied and unshaven he sported a small tobacco stained beard and straggling untidy hair. Wearing torn and stained clothing, his piercing blue eyes had observed the scene. In that moment he had a sudden flash of clarity. He realised that he could do something at last, something to help another human being.

He had lived on the East sea front for more than forty years after escaping jail for fraud. Then more than two years ago he had finally reached Florida from where he had made his way to Haiti. He lived in seclusion in the hotel next door. Woken by the noise, he had crouched by his window and watched as the huge wave rushed towards the buildings. Then he saw the boy trapped in the tree and heard me calling his name.

Hugh had been building a sand castle with his new friend when the waters enveloped them. He was swamped with the deluge and pushed along gasping for breath. By chance a heavy branch was travelling with him and he clung on to it. Together they were shoved upwards onto the crest of another wave and came to rest in the crook of a tree to which he clung desperately. He was soaking wet and hungry. He didn't know what to do and then he heard me calling but couldn't see me. He had shouted back but his voice was lost in the howling wind.

The man had eyed the tree and imagined how he would climb it. He traced out the steps he would take up

the trunk measuring the distance between each step. I could do it he said to himself remembering the agility of his youth. He selected a pair of rubber-soled shoes and slowly descended from his balcony to the ground.

By this time I could see him. Where was he going? I wondered. I waited and then I saw him disappear between two buildings. Huw told me later that he saw the old man wading up to his waist through the dirty water calling,

He then climbed the tree and,' shouted to Hugh.to climb on his back. He was wet and slimy and Hugh almost slipped off. Then the man steadily began the climb down step by step stopping to catch his breath until they had reached the ground.'

The tiger was in his pen when the wave hit, tearing down the wire fence. He got up and leisurely walked outside and eyed the scene of devastation. He was wet and cold. Twenty years earlier he had been a cub reared by a mature female in the Indian savannah when she was

stalked and killed by the same old man, then a hunter.

He had set out with a party to find and kill. They had travelled for some days when they came upon a spore. One of their guides excited by the find went ahead disappearing in the scrub when a loud scream was heard. Rushing to the sound the others found his mangled body half eaten. Standing over it was the largest Tiger they had ever seen. The hunter shaking with fear raised his gun and shot it four times. Three of the shots missed and the fourth hit its flank inflaming the beast. The chief guide standing nearby saved the day by one shot into the beast heart. It sunk to the ground moaned, rolled over and died. As they stood admiring the huge beast they heard a meow and found a cub no more than three months old. Taking pity on the poor thing the man decided to rear it as a pet.

Hugh took up the story.

'It was amazing me being carried on his back. Then the tiger appeared I was a bit scared but the man told me not to be afraid.

