

TRILOGY

Martin Nelson

First Published 2016 Kenya

First Published as an E-book in 2016

Copyright © Martin Nelson 2016

This book is copyright under the Berne Convention

No reproduction without permission

Manuscript Publishing

LONDON SW7

Trilogy is three stories taken partly from life that explore the complex relationship between father and son

In 'Father', a son takes on the responsibility of his family at a young age because of the weakness of his father.

In 'Father and son', the loss of a mother and the failure to live up to his father's expectations leads to violence and reunion.

In 'Son' a man learns to forgive his father who through circumstances was absent in his childhood.

Father

I know you accused me of being a bad father and I guess I deserved it. But did you ever stop and wonder how I became the father you knew? Did you ever query why I was so inadequate in that role? Weren't you being a bit naïve in condemning me so quickly? It

was too easy for you to apportion blame without knowing the facts. How much did you know about my childhood and the influences that shaped me? How could you being born in the 1930's begin to understand what it was like to be an adult living at that time taking care of a family?

What example did I get from my father? Being a father has to be learned it is not natural like motherhood. There is no instinct to be a father; you need a role model, someone who teaches you when you are a child and someone to whom you look up to. And if you don't have that good fortune then it's a struggle.

As far as I know my great grand father's family came from Russian Poland in the mid-nineteenth century. They were part of the exodus that followed the increasing Russification, a time when the freedom to pursue your own religion, your own language, your own traditions was being denied. They came with nothing to a country that had no welfare, no health service and no support for the poor and needy.

My father Henry was married to my mother Margaret and lived in the East End. It was a crowded over populated area with no running water and no electricity. He was not very ambitious. My mother wore the trousers. They had eight children; Betty was

the eldest. I was the second child the eldest boy and although my name is James, I was called Jim. Then came Susan, Andrew, Lisbeth, Queenie, Simon and Steven the youngest. I was born at the turn of the twentieth century perhaps one of the most volatile centuries in the history of the world. I would live through two world wars and the depression. I grew up in an England, which was going through a very turbulent time but I wasn't aware of those momentous times when history was being made.

I was small for my age and had bright red hair, hence my nickname Ginger. From all accounts I was bright, inquisitive and fiercely ambitious which is why I so strongly resented that there was not enough money to send me to University like Betty. I hated her for that. What good is an education for a girl? All she needed to know was how to be a good mother. I could have done so much more if I had had the chance.

We lived in the East End; Hackney a slum area, a depressed region with old Victorian housing, poor sanitation and overcrowding. It was the part of London to which the Jewish immigrants came to join their fellow Jews. We lived over a shop. My family was poor and although my mother had a stall in the market, it did not bring in enough for our big family. I went to Grocer's a local school but had to leave when I was

thirteen. We needed the money so as soon as I could I went out to work. I had to.

Soon after my fifteenth birthday and a year after the First World War started, we were bombed. I had finished work when I heard a tremendous bang and saw smoke rising not far away. The date was the 31st May 1915. A Zeppelin/ Schutte-Lanz sailed over London and dropped bombs that landed on Stoke Newington not far from where I lived, killing several children. At that time London had no defence against an aerial attack. But by June there were 16 guns defending it. Later I read that the raider LZ.37 8 was followed to her base at Evére near Brussels where she was bombed by British aircraft and reduced to a smouldering wreck.

I worked for a while in a factory but didn't like the early morning start and the long hours. Tom a friend from work suggested I became a taxi driver. It appealed to me as I could work my own hours as long as I brought in enough money. He didn't tell me about the 'Knowledge' a test of London's roads that all drivers of Black cabs had to pass. I spent many months cycling around the streets of London learning their names, where they started from and where they ended and the shortest route from one place to another. It was really hard work and I failed it the first time. I made

a stupid mistake; I mistook Oxford Street for Regent Street.

I still remember my first day as a taxi driver. Tom introduced me to the gaffer, a frail old man with grey hair who wheezed loudly and kept on wiping his nose.

‘Let me see your Driving license and Test result.’ he growled. ‘You look too young. How old are you?’

‘Twenty.’ I lied.

The moment I got behind the wheel I knew it was right job for me. I was driving one of the new Oxford Black cabs, I felt like I was the king of the road. It had a clock with a flag, which measured the number of new jobs and how many units of miles I had travelled. I loved the freedom, to begin when you wanted and finish when you wanted. Also the serendipity, you never knew where the next fare would take you.

Passengers liked to talk and I had some really interesting conversations. I didn’t realise that a fare often spoke to the driver about something that was on his mind, a family matter or a political issue.

‘What do you think about...’ was a common opening question. I was a good listener and soon became very knowledgeable about all sorts of subjects ranging from politics to sport. But the overriding discussions I had were about the war. The news from the front was

depressing; thousand of men were being slaughtered on the fields of Flanders. Everyday the papers were full of lists of names. It was going to end in two years but it dragged on and everyone became morose and depressed. I didn't really understand what it was all about. All I knew was that the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophia were shot dead and that set it off but why I never found out.

I slowly got used to the routine. In the beginning I tried to work all the hours I could but soon learned that I had to pace myself, having time off to have fun. That was how I met Sofia. My mate Tom and I had gone to a local polish club for a drink and to play snooker. I was standing at the bar when two young women came in, one was my sister and the other I didn't know. I hadn't seen her before. I couldn't keep my eyes off her she seemed so innocent. She was a beauty wearing a simple cotton dress. She had a mass of dark brown hair encircling her face with blue eyes and chiselled features. I was drawn to her immediately and was dying to meet her. I am not usually the shy type but as I walked towards I felt distinctly nervous.

'Hi sis,' I said. Will you introduce me to your friend?'

'Sofia, this is my older brother Jim, he drives a taxi.'

'How do you do?' she replied lightly shaking my hand. I looked into her face, her smiling deep blue eyes and felt a sudden rush. I was a bit of a womaniser but I knew when I had met my match. Suddenly I was shy, I struggled to talk to her and all the while she was smiling as if she knew what was happening. I made some excuse and went to join my friends. My sister told me later that Sofia thought I was nice but a bit shy. Me shy? That's rich, that's one thing I wasn't at least not with other girls but her she seemed different. It took me some time to pluck up courage to talk to my sister Lisbeth about Sofia. We were at breakfast when I casually said that I thought she seemed a very nice girl.

'Come off it,' she said. 'You were tongue-tied. I've never seen you so shy. You liked her didn't you?'

'Sure she's Ok,' I said trying to be offhand.

'C'mon Jim,' she said, 'you don't fool me. When do you want to see her again? We're going dancing on Saturday, why don't you come along? Shall I tell her you'll be there?'

'No please,' I begged her. 'Don't, I'll just turn up with my mates.' I couldn't wait for the week to pass. I kept checking my diary and then it was Saturday. At that time I was the proud owner of an Austin 7 and wanted

to take her for a drive. I planned to drive to the dance and when it had finished offer to drive her home. But my last fare took me all the way to Greenwich so I was later getting back.

I am very careful about the way I look. I selected my favorite trousers with turn-ups and a slight flare worn high at the waist. My check tweed jacket had the fashionable broad padded shoulders and narrow waist. My shirt had a button down collar with the tie held by a gold tiepin. To complete the outfit I wore a Fedora hat. I checked my appearance in the mirror, I looked good if I say so myself.

It was after eight when Tom and I arrived at the club. By that time, it was in full swing with a dance band playing and people already on the floor. I looked around but Sophia was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps they had changed their minds and weren't coming. I felt dejected and disappointed. I had been looking forward to seeing her that evening all week. It shows you, I said to myself, don't get your hopes up, women always disappoint you.

Then I saw her arrive. She was standing at the top of the stairs looking around and saw me waving. Her face lit up. She was pleased to see me, and suddenly everything was fine. I had a good feeling that the night would be a great success. I waited

for her to come down the stairs and went over and greeted her kissing her lightly on the cheek. She blushed.

‘It’s good to see you,’ I said. ‘I almost thought you weren’t coming.’

‘Sorry the bus was late. How are you?’

‘Fine now you’re here.’ Would you like to dance?’

‘Yes but let’s get a drink first.’

I followed her to the bar.

‘What would you like?’

‘A Port and orange please.’ I had a beer.

‘Are you on your own?’

‘No I’d arranged to meet your sister here but she said she’d be late so I came on my own.’

‘Wasn’t that a bit risky?’

‘No my father dropped me.’

‘But suppose I wasn’t here?’

‘I knew you would be,’ she said with a twinkle. ‘You’re not the sort to let a girl down now are you?’ She was teasing me and I blushed.

‘No, of course not.’

‘Let’s dance,’ I said, wanting to change the subject.

She was a good dancer and we moved easily together with the music. I was very conscious of her nearness and could smell her perfume. Her hair occasionally touched

my cheek and I could feel myself getting excited. She must have noticed it also because she moved away a little.

Breathless I said,

‘Let’s sit down.’ I hadn’t noticed Queenie my sister until she came over’

‘Sorry I’m late, how are you two getting on?’ Neither of us answered.

‘That’s good,’ she said sitting down. That was my cue,

‘What would you like to drink?’ I asked.

‘Same as Sophia,’ she said pointing to her glass.

It was during the last waltz that I asked Sophia if I could take her home. I had completely forgotten about my sister so I ended up taking the two girls home together in the car. We dropped Sophia first. She lived in a large Victorian house in Down’s Park Road. I walked her to her front door but before I had a chance to give her a good night kiss, her father appeared at the door, he must have been watching through the curtain.

‘Sophia, say good night to the young man.’ he said firmly not wanting to know who I was.

‘Good night Jim, thank you for a lovely evening,’ Sophia said. She leaned forwards and kissed me lightly on the cheek. Then the door shut and I was alone on the

doorstep. Downhearted I walked back to the car where my sister was waiting.

'She likes you very much, I can tell.'
she whispered.

We were married six months later. The year was 1929, ten months later the great depression swept from the USA to Europe. October 29th was called black Tuesday. Sophia's parents gave us a plot of land next to their house and helped us build a small three bedroom detached house. Our eldest son was born a year later in 1930. We were to have two more sons at intervals of roughly two years, the youngest being born in 1936. I was sorry that we were not able to have a daughter but I was very proud of my family. I bought my first taxi, an Austin High Lot so named because it was much taller than its predecessor. Then I bought another and with financial help from Sophia I was able to open a garage, soon I owned a fleet of taxis and had drivers to drive them.

The clouds of war were gathering. The papers were full of the news from Germany. Hitler had taken over the Government and against the agreement of the League of Nations ruling was re-arming. We heard rumours of atrocities against Jews and in 1938 Krystallnacht occurred, the night when the police and the military attacked the

homes and businesses of Jews ransacking them and setting them alight.

I don't know when Sophia and I decided that England was not safe for a Jewish family but we had read about families being sent to safe havens such as Canada and began to look into the possibility. I was reading everything I could find and soon realised that the press were not telling the whole truth. Whether that was a deliberate policy of the government not to panic the people I didn't know. There were rumours that the royal family who had German roots would try and broker some sort of peace deal with Hitler. I remember one of my punters, an MP telling me that if he were a Jew he would get out of the country as fast as possible. That really scared me. Sophia saw it on my face when I came home.

'What is it dear? You look terrible.' I recounted the conversation.

'What are we going to do?' she wailed. 'If we can't stay here where can we go?' I was now convinced that some sort of agreement would be made on the assumption that peace would be safeguarded. But in September 1939 Germany invaded Poland. Knowing that we had a peace pact with that country, the UK had no choice but to declare war against Germany. I was now getting desperate I

knew that we had no defence against the full might of the German military machine. One evening when I got home, Sophia was in tears.

‘We can’t stay here we must all leave.’ She pleaded.

‘Darling,’ I said holding her. ‘That’s impossible I can’t leave, I’ve got to earn a living and the London taxi trade is all I know.’ You must go, take the children, at least you will be safe.’

‘No, I won’t go without you. I won’t leave you here.’

I could see how difficult it was for Sophia torn between being with me and the safety of the children.

‘There must be another way, there must be,’ she insisted but try as I might I could see no alternative.

‘Please do as I say, I will stay in London and send you money. I then looked around for somewhere to send them. Someone suggested Bermuda, it was a British colony and I learned that people were going there to get away from the war. It was a sterling area so I could easily send money there.

That night when I got home I raised the question again and mentioned Bermuda.

‘Please dear you must go, think of the children their future is at stake.’

It was with a heavy heart that I said goodbye to Sophia and the three boys then aged 10, 8 and 6. They didn't understand what was happening and when they saw their mother crying they all began to cry. Standing on the platform at Liverpool Street station as the train pulled out, I did not know if I would ever see them again. I returned alone to our apartment in North London. As time went on it was becoming more and more difficult to return to there at night with the blackout, so I rented a small flat near Marble Arch. It was more convenient and large enough for one.

The first letter from Sophia came by air a few weeks later, it was written on a blue air letter.

'Darling Jim, how are you? Saying goodbye was so difficult. I tried to explain to the boys why we were leaving you but I don't think they could understand they are just too young. The train journey was fine and we arrived at Liverpool in the early afternoon. We then boarded the boat and settled in finding our way about. We had a small cabin deep in the bowels of the ship with no natural light. There were many women with children like me and I have met up with a lady who has one son. We are thinking of setting up home together, her name is Freda and her son is Dennis. It would be company

for both of us. We had a scare the first night when some bombs landed in the harbour near us. We heard the loud splashes as they fell unexploded into the water. Life on board is very relaxed. It took us about eight days to reach Bermuda where we had a very warm reception. Freda and her son Dennis are going to join us in a house, which we will rent together. When we are settled I will try and get a job.

*The children send their love,
Your Loving wife,*

I sat holding the letter trying to imagine Sophia writing it and the boys watching her. I missed them all so much. I felt very alone fearful of the uncertain future. London was preparing for war. Everywhere sand bags were being piled up. While driving along Park Lane, I saw the railings around Hyde Park being removed to be melted for the war effort. Everywhere I saw men and women in uniform. There was urgency in the air. Somehow the looming war had activated people; they knew what they had to do.

In May 1940 Churchill had become Prime Minister and earned the nickname of the 'British Bulldog' due to his heavy build and large determined face. My life gradually fell into a pattern; I would drive to the Garage in Richmond Road off Mare Street, spend the day there and drive back to my

flat near Marble arch. I was OK for a few weeks but I missed like-minded company. The men at work were rough diamonds but not my sort. It was then that I got a call from Harold. He and his wife Marianne were good friends and the four of us used to go out regularly together.

‘Hello Jim,’ he said. ‘How are you managing now that the family are away?’

‘OK I suppose, life is hard as you know, never knowing what is going to happen.’

‘Look Marianne and I would like you to come over. Are you free on Saturday?’

I knew their home well, Sophia and I had been there many times but it felt strange going there alone. Marianne met me at the door. She looked ravishing in an off the shoulder dark maroon dress which outlined her figure and showed off her shoulders. I always admired a woman’s shoulders; they somehow conveyed comfort and strength. She could see that I was awe-struck and kissed me on both cheeks.

‘Welcome Jim, It’s been too long.’ I smelled her perfume a heavy honey fragrance.

‘Hello Marianne, it’s wonderful seeing you, you look gorgeous.’ I followed her into the lounge conscious of her buttocks moving under her dress. It had been such a long time since I had been in the company of a

woman and I missed it. Harold was standing by the fireplace smoking a cigarette. He offered me my favorite a Gold Flake.

‘You remembered?’

‘Of course, I couldn’t forget. How are you? It’s been too long.’

‘OK I s’pose. Living under this uncertainty is wearing me down.

‘How is the family?’ You must miss them.’

‘Yes I do. They have found somewhere to live and the boys are going to school.’

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

‘Have you a whisky?’

‘Yes, I have a man who gets me Johnny Walker. Would that be OK? Ice?’

‘No I’ll have it straight.’

I had a very enjoyable evening; it was good to be with friends again. But there was a strange atmosphere. I couldn’t put my finger on it. I thought about it on the way home but then forgot about it.

A few days later I had a phone call from Marianne, she sounded upset.

‘Can we meet? I need to talk to someone’.

‘Let’s meet for tea at the Café Royal.’

At 4 pm I parked my car behind Piccadilly Circus, you could in those days and made

my way to the foyer of the Café Royale. Marianne was already there. She came towards me. She was wearing a smart two-piece suit and looked good enough to eat. We kissed and I followed her into the tearoom.

We sat down and I could see that she had been crying. I reached out to hold her hand.

‘What is it? What has happened?’

‘It’s Harold, I don’t know what to do.’

‘What has he done?’

‘He has become so jealous, I can’t go anywhere without him accusing me of seeing another man.’

‘Have you?’

‘No of course not, I love him. I wouldn’t be unfaithful I wouldn’t.

Jim,’ she pleaded. ‘You are a good friend could you speak to him, tell him that I love him. Please!’

I sat watching this beautiful woman pleading, asking me to tell her husband that she loved him when all I wanted was to smother her with kisses and make love to her.

She could see that I was hesitant and asked,

‘What is it Jim?’

‘I don’t know how I could do that because I love you. I want you. He doesn’t appreciate you, what a stunning woman you are.’

‘But Jim! What about your wife Sophia?’

‘She and the boys are safe. Who knows how long this war will continue? I don’t want to think about it but we could be killed any day? We have to live for the moment, it is the only thing we have. Please, come back to my flat I want to make love to you.’

I didn’t know what I was saying. I was out of control and she could have told me not to be stupid but she didn’t. Instead a smile began to appear on her face, that was her answer.

We began to meet once or twice a week. She had a key and I would find her waiting for me when I got in. Life had suddenly taken on a new meaning. I was revived as if a new person. I woke rejuvenated, no longer with the sadness that I had felt. Marianne had restored my confidence. Now no matter what the future held, we had the present and I loved it.

I continued to receive chatty letters from Sophia. She was now working with the Censor Department and had access to the PX, the American equivalent of our NAAFI. She said she was meeting interesting people and coming to terms with her life.

One problem was looming, our eldest son Gerald was soon to be thirteen, a time

when he should be Barmitzvah, the coming of age of a Jewish boy. Sophia had asked me what we should do. She wanted me to be present but that was clearly not possible. We could either postpone it but for how long? No one knew how long the war would last or what the result would be, or he could go ahead and have it at the right time.

After some toing and froing we agreed to go ahead. I then had an excited letter from Sophia saying that she had found a Chaplain from the American Base at St George's who was prepared to teach Geoffrey his portion from the Torah (The holy Book) and to conduct the service. I thought a long time about it but in the end I agreed. It made sense to have it at the right time rather than wait for however long. Later I was sent a photo from the local newspaper showing Gerald reading his portion from the Torah. I received it with mixed feelings, happiness for Gerald and the family but sadness that the war had separated us.

The taxi trade was struggling as the war progressed. The bombings had resulted in an exodus from central London. Only the diehards and those that had no choice like me stayed and prayed. It was now over four years since I had seen the boys. Sophia sent me photos and I watched them grow older

but I was not in their lives. It was a sadness that I found difficult to bear.

I continued to see Marianne and she was now talking about divorce.

Harold however didn't take it lying down. He was often on the phone

'Jim I thought you were a friend how could you f... my wife behind my back?'

It wasn't like that,' I tried to explain. 'Your jealousy forced her away. She told me she couldn't live with you anymore.'

Then things began to happen. The invasion of Europe and the North African campaign together with the Russians on the Eastern Front had pushed the Germans back. Suddenly the war was changing, the Allies were winning.

It was a warm May in 1945, the blossoms appeared early and the wild flowers were abundant. Perhaps they knew something because on Tuesday the 8th, peace in Europe was declared. The country went wild; the streets of the capital were overflowing with people in joyous mood.

Marianne had stayed overnight and we lay in bed listening to the BBC as the news slowly percolated. But our mood was solemn. We held hands both realising its significance. Sophia and my three sons would be returning home.

'What are we going to do? I don't want to lose you.' She pleaded.

I knew that one day this would come and I had tried to rehearse what I would say but when it arrived I was tongue-tied. I knew what I wanted, for the situation to remain the same but I knew it couldn't. Then I received a telegram from Sophia to say that they would be arriving at Liverpool Street station at 2 pm.

'What are you going to do?' Marianne kept asking me? I didn't know what I wanted. My wife and sons were coming home after five years it was like a miracle. We would be united like a proper family. I wanted that but I also wanted my life with Marianne. Could I have both?

I arrived early at Liverpool Street Station but still had difficulty parking. Eventually I found a space and rushed into the hall. I scanned the arrival screen and found the platform number. Then I bought a platform ticket and went onto the platform. I saw a wicker basket and climbed on it to get a better view. Promptly at 2pm the steam train from Liverpool slowly entered the station and came to a halt, smoke billowing from her chimney. As soon as it had stopped people began to emerge from the doors. I watched uncertain wondering from which carriage they would emerge. Then I saw them a small

party moving together. Sophia looked tired and much older and the boys, I couldn't believe how much they had grown. Gerald was now taller than his mother. At last we were facing each other, Sophia and I hugged and I was introduced to the boys. I could see from their faces that I was a stranger. I tried to hug them but they drew away. They had been too young when we parted to remember me and I had changed, the five war years had left their ravages. I called a porter and we all went to my car. It was a bit crowded. As we set off everyone was very quiet. I tried to make conversation.

'How was your trip?' But I only got single word replies.

The next few days passed in a haze. My flat was too small so we needed to find a new home. We settled for a house in Ealing, a four bedroom detached in a leafy road. It seemed ideal and soon the family had settled in.

I was now trying to live two lives. Unknown to Sophia, I had kept the flat and would meet Marianne there on the way home from the garage. This meant coming home late at night and I had to resort to the excuse that I was working late. At home Sophia and I decided to sleep in different beds. We felt like strangers and preferred to do that until we had got to know each other again. I tried to be affectionate but just

couldn't and Sophia soon began to notice it. I made every excuse not to make love to her.

Trying to live two lives was becoming a farce. It came to a head when Marianne phoned me at home. She was worried because I hadn't spoken to her for some days. The telephone rang and my middle son Michael picked it up.

'May I speak to you father?' She said. What I heard was Michael shouting into the phone,

'Leave my father alone.' In a fury I grabbed the receiver from him and said,

'Sorry dear I'll ring you later.'

Then totally out of control, I grabbed the boy's wrist and pulled him into the bathroom. Still holding him, I reached out and found a wooden handled hairbrush. I turned him over and thrashed him. Sophia heard his screams and came into the room. She snatched Michael from me and cuddled him. He was hysterical, tears running down his face, still shouting,

'He was speaking to HER.'

'Who?' Mum asked.'

'The same woman who rang yesterday, I heard them speaking.'

'Who have you been speaking to?' she asked me, puzzled by the whole affair.

'Marianne.'

‘Marianne,’ she repeated incredulously. ‘Why were you speaking to her?’ Then slowly I saw her eyes open wide and a look of disbelief on her face.

‘You’ve been seeing her, haven’t you? She said calmly.

I could see no point in lying any more.

‘Yes we are in love, I want to marry her.’

‘What about Harold? What has he got to say about this?’

‘Nothing, we love each other.’

Soon after I moved out and returned to my flat. I didn’t expect it to happen like this but it was a great relief. Now Marianne didn’t need to hide anymore. But I had one regret, Sophia could look after herself but the boys, I didn’t have time to get to know them and now I probably never would.

Some weeks later, I got a bombshell. My solicitor informed me that Sophia would agree to the divorce on one condition that the boys must have a good education; She wanted them to board at a Public School in North London. When he showed me the fees I blanched.

‘Ridiculous,’ I said, they don’t need to go to such an expensive school, what’s wrong with a local Grammar school?’

He replied,

'I said that to her but she was adamant. If you don't agree she said she would fight you all the way.'

I had no choice so I agreed. We were divorced and soon after I began to live with Marianne, She was trying to divorce Harold but he wasn't cooperating. It took another two year before she was free to marry me.

That's not the end of the story. I lost touch with my three sons again for many years though I managed to keep track of what they were doing. The youngest became a solicitor, the middle one a doctor and the oldest an RAF pilot.

It was some time later that I was looking out of the window watching the traffic when I began thinking about my eldest boy and was wondering what he was doing. On an impulse I rang him. He was between jobs looking for a something new so on an impulse I said,

'Look Gerald, why don't you come and see me at the garage I might have something for you.' When we met he told me that after he had left the RAF he had spent some time with Marks & Spencer's and had done a number of other jobs. We were in a café drinking coffee together and it seemed really good to be with my son so I said,

‘Why don’t you come and work with me.’ He agreed and began the following week. It was a good idea but it wasn’t easy working with him. We had spent so many years apart that I didn’t know how to treat him. We had no past so we began as if strangers. I could feel that he was suspicious of me after all I hadn’t been there when he was growing up so why should he trust me. For my part I didn’t know how to respond to him. I am not a naturally affectionate person so our relationship was a bit strained. We were like two animals stalking each other trying to find a point of contact. In the end I treated him like any other member of staff workman, checking up on everything he was doing. Looking back I was wrong, he was a grown man. The country had had enough confidence in him to train him to fly Jets yet I was treating him like a trainee. No wonder we had difficulties.

Then there was the matter of his house. He got married to a very nice young woman and needed a home so I agreed to buy a house from the business and let him live in it. I should have given it to him but I wanted to control him so that he couldn’t leave me. Why didn’t I trust him?

Fate has a nasty habit of reminding us who is the boss. Marianne had noticed something in her breast and when my second son the doctor was visiting I asked

him to look at her. I could see from his face that it was serious. The doctors later confirmed that she had breast cancer. I was shocked. We tried everything but with no avail. She died some years later and I was left alone living with a housekeeper in the house that I had bought especially for her.

My life now had no purpose, I had had the good fortune to have three fine sons but I didn't appreciate what a privilege that was and by the time I did, it was too late.

MY FATHER AND ME

It is now more than 20 years since my father died and throughout that time I have continued to look for him, trying to find the man I never really knew. I had no sense of him as I have of my mother, my brothers or friends. He seemed to be just a shell, an empty container which on rare occasions I was allowed to look inside. Yet he was a man like any other. Was it the war and the long separation? Five years, during which time I changed from a seven year old to a twelve year old, from a child to an adolescent with all the uncertainty of youth; from a seed to a plant still young and swaying in the breeze but changed and this change occurred without his influence and presence. No father figure to guide me; no male role model to shape and influence me.

Five long years, a lifetime of absence during which even my memory of him had faded. I cannot recall ever thinking of him, it was as if he didn't exist in my life. But I knew that he wrote to us. Mum used to read his letters out but I can't remember anything about them. What if I try and concentrate, ask my brother Geoffrey who being two years older might recall more and in greater detail, would I find part of him?

Was it the war that changed him? Living through the bombing the 100 days of continual bombardment and then the rockets V1 and V2 raining down on the people of London. That must have had an effect on him. Never knowing whether he would get through the day or night. Rushing for the shelters when the siren wailed its mournful tune. Calling him to take cover wherever he could find. Crowding into a tube station and trying to get some rest on anything he could find. That must have taken its toll and made him a survivor relying on his wits and depending on no one. Then it was all over and he had tried to resume a normal life with a wife and three boys he now hardly knew.

Was he a good father before I went away and lost him? What is a good father? There are so many definitions and all are satisfactory to some extent.

Let's try one or two:

A good father is one who is there in his children's lives, seeing them in the morning; sharing breakfast; accompanying them to school; helping with their homework; supporting their school activities; someone who reads to them at night; is at home before they go to bed.

A good father is one who has a deep empathy with his children, is able to share their fun and pain.

A good father is one who is on his children's side, who chides them but doesn't punish them, who is firm but not hard; who leads and supports. Who understands their fears and uncertainties of growing up?

This journey has prompted me to read a number of accounts of sons writing about their fathers: Paul Auster's 'The Invention of Solitude', Edmund Gosse's 'Father and Son', Sean French's 'Fatherhood'. There are innumerable accounts of sons searching for their fathers.

Fatherhood is not a natural in-built state. Unlike motherhood it has to be learned. It helps if the father has had a nurturing upbringing, an example to guide him; he does not come to it by nature. There is no archetype, as Jung would posit to guide him. And so generation after generation live and die without ever knowing

or understanding the nature of a father's love.

So many sons become failed fathers; a legacy of failed love stretching back it seems to the beginning of time. The biblical story of Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac maybe a pointer to the truth that under some situations a son maybe allowed to die. What a contrast to a mother's love unconditional and absolute? Nowhere in the bible does God test a mother's love. "HE" knows that there are no circumstances no situations where she would abandon her child, 'HE' doesn't even try.

Greek mythology is full of examples of sons trying to usurp their father either intentionally or by accident. Oedipus for example accidentally kills his own father and unknowingly marries his mother. Cronus the leader of the Titans castrates his father Uranus so as to rule over the whole universe. Perseus unknowingly killed his father Acrisius.

In Inuit folklore, it was the duty of the son to take an ailing father and leave him in the wild to die.

Yet some fathers break the mould and experience the special relationship that is 'a father and son', each giving to the other strength and support. The older guiding and advising, the younger acting as a bridge to

the new world that is unfolding with the passage of time, teaching his father to master modern technology- computers, game boys, mobiles - to understand and accept the changing relationships of the modern world, a world in which the young are brought up with the knowledge that the press of a nuclear button can annihilate us all; a world in which respect is no longer taken for granted but has to be earned; a place where youth is exalted and age and experience less admired. The list is inexhaustible.

And so the search for my father continued. What did I find? A series of fragments scattered over 30 years. Do they contain the essence that I am searching for? I don't know yet until I have explored them here on these pages but I have a number of facts, the foundations upon which his life was built.

MY FATHER'S LIFE

My Father was born on the 24th June 1901 the eldest son to Margaret and Henry Nelson. He died on 4th April 1987. He was one of eight children, four girls and four boys, Betty James, Simon, Lisbeth, Andrew, Susan, queenie and Steven. Henry was a tailor and Margaret ran a shop in the market. I recall a photo of her standing in the door of the shop, the window of which was covered

with chalk writing advertising the goods she was selling. Betty the eldest girl was very bright and was sent to university. I was told that my father always resented that and thought the money should have been spent on him and not on her. She went on to be very successful and eventually went to the USA where she married and had a family. My father went to Grocer's school and then at fourteen, to work in a paint factory, as there was no more money to educate him. Apparently he was always late for work and was sacked. At 21 he did 'the knowledge' and began driving a black London taxi. He was described as a smart dresser, and was said to be a womaniser despite his short height and bright red hair. He gained the nickname of 'Ginger'. He met my mother, Sophia through her sister Queenie with whom he was very friendly. They married in 1928 and their first child Gerald was born in 1930. I followed in 1932 and David in 1934. Dad rented a garage beneath the railway arches in Richmond Road in 1933 and by 1939 had about 25 cabs. His eldest son Gerald worked with him until his retirement.

Memories from my childhood

I was probably no older than five when I recall a journey with my father in a car. I was sitting in the front seat. I think it was an open topped vehicle possibly a

Chrysler or some other large American car. We were travelling down the Strand in the direction of Trafalgar Square. I recall it as an enormously wide expanse of road, such that I could hardly see the far side. Dad was wearing a white blazer and was singing in a high-pitched falsetto voice. Looking back now, it seemed surreal and of course the road is of normal dimensions, not excessively wide at all.

83A UPPER PARK ROAD

The house, a detached brick built two storey building had a small garden surrounded on all sides by a wall the top of which was set with glass shards to deter robbers. It was built in the grounds of Grandpa and Grandma Zedman, my Mum's parent's house. Behind were the open Downs, in front was a large council estate and nearby was the well-known Grocer's Grammar School. I have scant memories of my life in the house except an occasion when Dad swore at Mum when we were about to go out. She went back into the house and burst into tears. I can see the car in the drive on the left side of the house leading to the garage. I don't know what car it was but I know Dad was one of the first to have a car perhaps because of his connection with the garage.

HOME-COMING

One of the abiding memories of my father, the one that remains clear in my mind despite the passage of time is the first sight I had of him standing on a pile of wicker boxes on the platform at Liverpool station in 1945. We had returned from abroad where we had spent the war years and I was sitting by the window as the boat train steamed into the station. My mother pointed out a short fair-haired man, an unfamiliar figure and said,

‘That’s your father.’

I saw a stranger, a face of which I had no memory. We alighted and he said hello to me. He bent down to hug me but I hesitated and I formally shook the hand of a total stranger and it remained so sadly until his death. I recall that we went to live in his flat near Marble Arch but soon moved to Ealing, Gunnersbury Avenue. I went to the local school, Acton Grammar School for a short while. At the same time Grandpa Henry who had been living with Dad during the war came to live with us. He did quite a lot of the cooking as Dad was often late from the garage and Mum was running a Millinery shop with a partner in South Kensington.

It was at this time that Dad’s affair with Marianne came to light culminating in the divorce but not before there was

increasing conflict between Mum and Dad. There were constant arguments as to why he was so late from the Garage (It turned out that he was seeing Marianne).

I answered a telephone call from her to Dad in the house and received a sound beating in the bathroom from my father with a hairbrush, a memory that is still painful to this day. Dad left and we were alone. Grandpa sadly died and we moved into Ivor Court near Regents Park and later Strathmore Court near Lords. After the divorce, which was particularly acrimonious, Gerald and I went to Mill Hill School a strict traditional boarding school as boarders and David went to Bedales, a progressive co-educational school with free discipline quite different from Mill Hill. I can only speak of my experience at Mill Hill. It was an unhappy one. I had arrived on the winter term, one term after my peers and they let me know it, with teasing, bullying and beating.

MILL HILL SCHOOL

I look back at my time at Mill Hill with mixed feelings. It was undoubtedly a watershed in my life. A time when I was uncertain about the direction I would take but luckily a meeting with an inspired teacher changed all that. But it was an unhappy time in many ways. Arriving after Christmas I remained a fag a term after my contemporaries and

suffered accordingly. It was my first time away from home, a broken home. I was confused and lonely. I was not a natural sportsman but unexpectedly I was a good hooker and played for the IST Rugby XV for two memorable years winning more than 90% of our matches. My life changed when I went into the sixth form at the age of 16 and came under the stewardship of Donald Hall. I remember him as a soft-spoken man, tall kind and gentle, in many ways the antithesis of the Public School System. It was he who proposed that I became a doctor. He recognised my love of nature and living things and adjusted the curriculum to allow me to sit for the University of London IST MB examination. I gained a scholarship to St. Marys Hospital Medical School and the rest is history.

VISITS TO THE GARAGE

The number 30 bus took me from Marylebone Road at the end of Gloucester Place to the garage. On the way it would pass Kings Cross station, the Angel and the Hackney Music Hall. It would stop at Hackney Road and after a short walk I would reach Richmond Road and the garage under the arches, I always tried to sit in the front upstairs in the bus watching the world go by. Looking back, I think I used to look forwards

to the trip. It was an exciting time, seeing London and meeting some of the drivers and garage staff. I remember Bill Argles a big man who I think was a partner and Alec the pump's man, a typical cockney, rough but as kind as could be. We would often go to a local 'greasy spoon' for lunch. After eating Dad and some friends would settle down to a game of Clubyas a seven-card game from Eastern Europe.

FRAGMENTS

I lost touch with my father for many years as my medical training progressed. I moved to Leicester and then Sheffield returning to London in 1958 when I lived at home with my Mother. I still held an antipathy towards my father. I saw him as the cause of my mother's unhappiness and I resented the other woman. Once back in London I began visiting my father who was now living with his wife Marianne at Deanscote a small house in The Bishops Avenue. Sunday was my visiting day and at the end of each week approached I felt increasing anxiety. It was never an enjoyable experience. I would arrive by car at about 11 am and ring the front door bell. Pamela the housemaid would greet me and tell me where Dad was. He was usually working in the garden in Wellingtons wearing his dressing gown over pyjamas. He had a

shock of white hair and big bushy eyebrows. I remember he had small hands with ginger hairs growing on them.

He never received me with pleasure often he would look at me and ask me what was I doing there, why had I come? Marianne always remained out of sight as if she knew the damage she had caused. My father's favorite tease was to ask me about my hair. He would start by looking at my head and shake his without saying anything. I was expected to say what's the matter and he would reply, your hair, where has it gone? He had kept his hair so he was able to mock mine. It became a regular game he never seemed to tire of it to my discomfort. Finally I would ask him for my pocket money, £6 a week which he dolled out very reluctantly. The whole experience embarrasses me to this day. I suppose the final ignominy was when I introduced him to Diana as my future wife. His only comment was to warn her that she would ruin my career. She was taken aback by his bluntness and I don't think ever felt anything for him, I think he somehow believed that marriage would hold my medical career back. Life has a strange habit of kicking one in the teeth. One Sunday my father asked me to see Marianne. She had found a lump in her breast. Sadly I knew as soon as I had felt it that it was cancer. I am embarrassed to admit that I felt a certain

justice had occurred. I wasn't to know then that the same disease would befall Diana some years later.

Our lives then went their different ways, I moved to Leeds and again lost touch with my father. Unbeknown to me he was developing Alzheimer's and slowly deteriorated. My final contact with him was many years later when I was told that he was very ill. I visited him at his home before he was taken into hospital for the last time. He was a shell of his former self. Unkempt, shrivelled and incoherent he was sitting on the floor in the corner of the room. His subsequent death and my attendance at his funeral did nothing to change my mind about him at that time.

VOLTE-FACE (The about turn)

Some years later Diana and I were in the USA and I went to see my cousin Michael a psychiatrist working in Boston. We had returned to his home after eating out and were sitting in his lounge drinking wine. The wine must have made me a bit sentimental because I began to talk about my hatred of my father. Michael listened and then made a strange suggestion.

'Why don't you write to him?' he suggested. The idea seemed preposterous and I said so.

'No,' he said 'I'm serious, write to him and tell him how you feel. Don't pull any punches.' So I did.

I wrote him a long letter telling him what a failure he had been as a Dad. How I didn't know him, the real him and now never would. It took me a long time to decide to do it; I had several false starts before I got down to it.

As I wrote, something really strange happened I began to understand his life, a really tough life at the time of the depression. How he took over the family and kept them together despite losing his mother and having a weak father. That he had built up a very successful business and stayed in London during the blitz having sent us to safety in Bermuda. I can't comment about the divorce except to know that it created a barrier between us. Nevertheless he provided us three boys with excellent educations and the opportunity to have wonderful careers. In my case it was at Mill Hill School that I was steered into medicine. At the end I was crying and missing him. If only I had understood then what I know now, I shouted at myself but the room didn't reply.

My Son

The pounding in Brent's chest was making him panic. His heart felt like it was trying to get out, he clutched feverishly at himself to hold it in. Gradually the thumping calmed as vivid kaleidoscopic flashes engulfed him. The sky expanded and contracted as images of people he knew circled in his mind.

The dealer had told him that it would be something he'd never felt before, better than sex.

'Wow! That's awesome man,' he shouted to the other fresher's who were taking deep breaths from their stubs of hashish.

The three had left class early asking to go to the washroom.

'No one comes here,' Brent told them. 'The teachers use their own. We can hang out here. I've got the stuff, you owe me five bucks each.' He handed out the brown tobacco like material with a cigarette paper.

'Roll it like a cigarette. Not too tight.'

They were all high when Brent heard something, a sound like a twig breaking.

'Chill! I think someone's near the block. I can hear footsteps. They took no notice; they were in no state to listen to him. Then he saw a shadow and Maria, a slight

dark-haired Mexican girl with deep brown eyes, came into view.

'Maria, what are you doing here?'

Brent whispered. 'You can't hang out here, go back to the classroom!'

'No, I saw you all leave and figured you were up to something. You're smoking? It's Marijuana. I know the smell.'

'Cool it Maria, go away,' Brent repeated. 'You'll get us busted.'

'I want some,' she insisted. 'Let me have a toke of yours Brent?'

'OK, and then you'll get lost?'

Mr Brantford the deputy head had noticed that three of his class had excused themselves; it was always the same bunch. I wonder what they're up to this time? When the class had finished he crept round to the changing room toilets and could hear voices and the occasional cough.

Brent's father, James Sutcliffe was proud of his own achievements and never ceased telling his son.

'I didn't need a rich father, I climbed the ladder on my own,' he would boast puffing out his chest. A retired Police Commissioner, he lived in an up-market penthouse in upper New York overlooking Central park with his second wife Alison and

his son Brent from his former marriage.
Brent was his pride and joy.

Mr Sutcliffe was at home negotiating the price of his second hand Ford and was about to seal the deal when there was a knock on the door. Before he could say anything, one of his colleagues, a burly Police sergeant entered.

‘Good morning Jim, I need to speak to you.’

‘Could you wait a moment officer, I will be with you in five minutes. I just need to finish this.’

‘No sir, it can’t wait.’

‘I don’t understand, what is so important that it can’t wait.’

‘Sir, I’ve some bad news.’ James stopped what he was doing.

‘I suppose it’s Brent again,’ he said.
‘That boy can’t keep himself out of trouble.’

‘No sir, it’s not your son.’

‘Then who is it?’

‘I’m afraid it’s your wife.’

James was suddenly tuned in to what the officer was saying.

‘Alison? What’s happened to her? As he spoke he felt his stomach contract and he almost spewed, gasping for breath. ‘What happened?’

Even before his colleague had answered he knew it was bad. He could see the way the officer was biting his lip struggling to find the right way of telling him.

‘I’m afraid she’s dead. There was a multiple pile up on the freeway, her car...’ James had a sudden vision of the scene; he had seen too many during his career. He saw her beautiful body mangled and crushed. His mind went blank. This isn’t happening; it’s a bad dream.

‘No please no, not Alison!’

They had only been married two years. They were so happy making plans for the future now that he had retired.

‘Where is she?’

‘She’s at the hospital. The body is being taken to the City Morgue.’

His customer had sat through this interchange without saying a word. He chose the pause in the conversation to mutter,

‘I’m so sorry Jim, I’ll go, you won’t want to do business now.’

James seemed to come to his senses.

‘Yes yes, let’s finish the deal.’

‘Are you sure? I can come back another day.’

‘No! Yes where were we? Oh yes you were signing the contract and arranging payment.’

The officer stood watching James. It was not the first time he had brought someone bad news but each time it got more difficult. He had spoken to the 'shrink' at the station but no one had a simple solution. He was always surprised by how they reacted. Some just couldn't function and sat dazed and incoherent, others like this man just got on with what they were doing.

He waited until they had finished their business and asked whether the Commissioner would like a lift to the hospital.

James looked up.

'Umm I,' the officer glanced at his watch,

'By now the body will be in the morgue. We will need you to identify her.'

How am I going to tell Brent? Oh my God! Brent, he will be devastated.

On the way he tapped in Brent's number and waited. It rang out but no reply. He must be on the sport's field he decided to try again later.'

Brent and his friends were in a sorry state when Mr Bentford came to the washroom and confronted them. They were lying out on the ground giggling and making facetious gestures. Maria was laying with her

skirt up showing her G-string panties oblivious of her condition.

‘What are you guys up to?’ he shouted. ‘You look like a bunch of idiots. Get up all of you. I’m taking you to the Principal’s office. You’ll be lucky if she doesn’t expel you all. Let’s go.’

They staggered to their feet looking for something to hang onto. Maria was in the worst state, not able to stand she tried to sit up look around but she was confused and babbling.

‘I, I’m Ok, I wanna sleep,’ and he promptly fell back down again. Brent went to her.

‘Come on Maria, do it slowly, I’ll help you.’ Gradually she stood upright hanging heavily on Brent’s arm and swaying dangerously. Together the four followed Mr Bentford into the school corridor. They continued to joke and laugh loudly unaware of what was waiting for them in the Principal’s office.

Miss Craig, a single woman nearing retirement, was trying to concentrate on marking some papers but her mind kept wandering to her two pet cats that had been left in the house since morning. Normally a neighbour would let them out after lunch but she was away. Anxious about their welfare,

Miss Craig was rushing through her work hoping to get away early.

There was a knock on her door.

‘Damn,’ she said under her breath.

‘Come in.’ She wasn’t prepared for what greeted her, four students clearly the worse for wear, walked shakily into her room followed by Mr Bentford.

‘I found these behind the toilet block smoking dope,’ he said contemptuously. ‘What shall I do with them? I would say hand them over to the police; they’ll know how to deal with this.’

Miss Craig pushed back her chair and looked at them,

‘What’s wrong with you people?’ she said. ‘I agree that would be my first reaction too but,’ she paused and spoke quietly, ‘we must think of the school. If this ever got out to the press, I don’t know what sort of backlash it would have. No, we have to find another way,’

She thought for a minute.

‘We need to contact their parents. Arrange to meet them and discuss the best way forward. May I leave that to you?’

Mr Bentford screwed up his face; he was hoping to get off home. He had planned a surprise dinner for his wife and didn’t want to be late. He nodded,

‘Ok Miss Craig, I’ll get on with it.’

Mr Sutcliffe got into the front seat of the police car and fastened his seat belt. It had become a habit; he wouldn’t travel in a vehicle that didn’t have belts.

‘A simple but very effective invention,’ he said absent-mindedly looking ahead. Within 10 minutes they had arrived at the Mortuary, a plain stucco-faced building behind the main Police station. It was a place that he knew too well.

The two men entered the building and made their way along the empty corridors, their footsteps echoing on the stone flooring. As they approached the mortuary an acrid irritating smell became stronger. Finally they arrived at the refrigerated area, which was in the basement. By now James was feeling decidedly queasy. He stopped on one occasion and stood breathing deeply.

‘I’m sorry to put you through this but we do need to be certain,’ said the Officer. James nodded, brushing tears from his eyes. He hated this place.

Eventually they arrived at a swing door with the words Mortuary No Entry written in bold letters.

James had seen many bodies before but to see his own wife that was different. At one point he thought that he couldn’t do it

but knew he would have to no matter what. The attendant wearing a mask met them.

‘This is Simon. He’s the attendant.’

They nodded to each other.

‘Simon we are looking for the female body brought in today about three hours ago.’

‘Yeah I know the one you mean.’ He walked over to a row of small doors, read the number and date and opened one. The stretcher slid out noisily on its runners as he pulled it into the light. Laid out on it was a body covered by a sheet. James watched as the stretcher came into view. He could feel himself shaking hoping that it wasn’t Alison. By now his eyes were burning and tears blurred his vision. Embarrassed, he wiped them away with the back of his hand.

‘Are you ok Sir’ asked Simon. ‘May I uncover the body?’ James nodded.

The sheet was pulled back to reveal a young woman whose face was partly bruised and disfigured. There were purple contusions on her chest and trunk. She couldn’t have been wearing a seat belt, said Simon to himself.

James said nothing as he gazed at his wife’s body, so recently a warm loving person and now reduced to a corpse on a stretcher.

‘Thank you Sir,’ said the Officer.

James was already thinking how he would

tell Brent. Where was Brent? He hadn't answered his phone. Then his mobile rang it was Mr Bentford from the school. Perhaps he knows where Brent is?

'Hello, yes Mr Sutcliffe speaking.'

'I am sorry to trouble you Sir, but Brent has got himself into serious trouble.'

'What sort of trouble?'

'He and a few friends have been smoking pot.' James burst out in a hysterical laugh,

'Trouble? Trouble, that's not trouble. Real trouble is losing your wife,' he shouted to no one in particular and then,

'I must get to him before he hears from anyone else.'

Pushing the officer aside he ran back through the corridors to the lift and left the Mortuary. In a haze, he made his way to the school and found Brent in the head's office. The boy looked terrible. He was slumped in a chair retching and coughing. His face was purple with his eyes streaming.

'Hello dad, what are you doing here?' He managed to stutter.

'I've come for you, let's go home.'

'I'm busted, just had a bit too much.'

'I know I can see that, let's go.'

It was rush hour when they left the school and made their way to the car. Brent

leaned heavily on his father's arm and struggled to get into the front seat. Once seated he promptly slumped forwards making it difficult for James to lock his safety belt. How am I going to break the news he wondered with Brent in such a state? Alison was not his mother but they were very close and he knew her death would be a shock to him.

They both stood without speaking, as the elevator rose soundlessly and stopped with a shudder at the 18th floor. The apartment was cool and shaded as they entered. James half expected to hear Alison's voice greeting him and offer him a cocktail as she always did. Today the place was silent. He turned to Brent preparing to tell him the news but found him already collapsed on the sofa and snoring loudly. I'll let him sleep it off, James decided.

During the night Brent woke confused, the city lights reflecting against the mirrors on the opposite wall flickered on and off. He tried to remember where he was, vaguely recalling the day before but his thoughts were blocked out by a throbbing headache somewhere behind his eyes. As he tried to sit up an acute giddiness enveloped him, the room swirling and swaying. He layback closed his eyes and waited for the world to settle. He knew he

was in trouble. His father had been in the antidrug squad and was strongly against drugs of any sort.

In the bedroom James was still awake and had momentarily forgotten about Brent. He was intensely aware of Alison's absence, her perfume, her nightdress folded carefully on her pillow, her dressing table with all her things neatly arranged. He felt an aching void enveloping him.

He heard a movement and saw a figure outline in the doorway. For a moment he thought it was her and then he recognised Brent. Oh my God, he doesn't know.

Brent's voice pierced his thoughts,

'Where's Alison Dad?' The question was simple enough but he didn't know how to reply. He began,

'She,' then he stopped there was no other way.

'She's dead,' he blurted out tears blinding him, 'she's dead.'

Brent saw his father's face ashen and contorted and ran to him,

'Dad, dad it's all right, hang in there.'

He didn't know what else to say. 'How? When?' he demanded holding his father and hugging him. James felt the boy's arms enveloping him and relaxed. He slowly regained his voice,

'Yesterday, she was driving home, an oncoming car lost control and slid into hers. She had no chance. She died immediately. Oh my God I can't believe it. I feel she's here next to us and that it's all a bad dream.'

The funeral was a private affair. Alison had never spoken about her wishes but James was very clear what she would have wanted, to be cremated and her ashes scattered in Central Park, on the reservoir running path a 1 1/2 mile circuit. It was her favourite and a place that she always returned to for solace and thought.

Once the funeral was over Miss Craig called Brent to her office. It wasn't the first time he had been to see her but he knew that this time his future at the school was on the line. He knocked on her door and waited.

'Come in,' She was standing by the marble fireplace, her notebook in her hand. She was dressed in a simple black outfit with a white blouse and a pearl necklace. Her light grey hair was combed back and held with a curved comb against the scalp. She looked angry.

He had chosen to wear the school baseball top with well-pressed jeans.

'Good morning Brent, please sit down,' she said, pointing to a chair by her desk. She waited until he had settled himself and standing behind him began,

‘Brent, I am very disappointed. We all are. When the school began the Peer group connections, you were a natural to lead a group of freshmen. Both Mr Bentford and I had high hopes for you as a leader. But you used your position to invite your fellow students to break the law. Smoking marijuana is not only against school rules it is illegal. I don’t know what got into you.’

Brent said nothing. He realised it was better to accept the bashing he was getting rather than try to justify his actions. He sat and waited.

‘Brent the school committee has voted unanimously to expel you. I’m sorry, you had a great future here but you wasted it. Have you anything to say?’

Brent was tempted to say that he didn’t give a shit what the committee thought but instead out of character he said,

‘I’m sorry I let you down.’

Brent knew that sooner or later his dad would bring up the episode at school but meanwhile he pretended he was still attending school leaving every morning and coming home at night. He found the spare time dragged and would go into the park, sit on a bench and watch people playing. There was one young man who caught his attention. He arrived every morning at the same time and sat on the same bench

staring into the artificial lake. His clothes were ragged and dirty and he was unshaven with a crude beard. Sometimes their eyes would meet but neither spoke.

One day Brent broke the ice and spoke to the young man.

'Hi I see you here all the time. What's up?' At first the man said nothing. He just stared back at him and then in a foreign accent said,

'Do you live near here?'

'Yeah in one of the apartments over there,' replied Brent pointing up to the nearest highrise building, 'with my dad and step...'. He hesitated and remembered. 'She was killed in a road accident recently,' he said. 'My name's Brent, what's yours?'

'Filipe,'

'Where you from?'

'I was born in Mexico,' he replied. Suddenly Brent looked at his watch it was just after five, he should be getting home.

'I gatta go home, sorry man, see you later.'

His father was in his room as Brent let himself into the apartment.

'How was your day Brent?' He called out.

'Fine, we're starting exams but I'm doing OK,' he replied. Brent rushed to his

room before his father could ask him any more details.

It happened sooner than he thought. He came home as usual as if he was returning from school when his father called him into the office.

‘How did it go today?’ he inquired innocently.

‘Ok,’ replied Brent, ‘the usual.’

‘That’s odd,’ said his father. I went to the school today to meet you and bring you home but I met Miss Craig and asked her how you were progressing? She looked surprised,

‘Didn’t I know that you had been expelled three weeks ago she said to me? She said that she wrote me a letter and didn’t I get it?’

‘What do you think you’re doing? How long were you going to go on with this lie? Answer me?’

Brent was speechless. He hadn’t thought that far ahead. All he knew was that he was in a fix. Brent had never seen his dad so furious. It was as if the death of Alison had unleashed a side of him he hadn’t ever seen before. His face was suffused, his eyes bulging as he screamed in anger,

‘You are not my son, I am ashamed of you, I never want to see you again,’ he

shouted. Brent was stunned by the outburst and was beginning to feel frightened but then he found a new strength.

‘OK Dad, if that’s what you want, I’m out of here’ He turned and stormed out of the apartment. He was full of indignation. I don’t need him.

The damp cold air hit him in the face and brought him down to earth. He had no money, no clothes, nowhere to stay. Very quickly his confidence began to wane. He thought of going back and begging for forgiveness but that wasn’t going to happen. The only person he could think of who would understand was sitting on a park bench and he went to see him. Filipe will understand. He’ll support me. As he hoped he was sitting in his usual place. Brent saw him as soon as he entered the park and waved. The two young men greeted each other. Very soon Filipe realised that Brent was not his usual bright self.

‘What’s the matter dude? You look terrible.’

‘Yeah, things aren’t good. I had a fight with my old man and he kicked me out.’ Filipe thought for a minute.

‘I’m sure your dad didn’t mean it. Let him chill out and then go back and say you’re sorry. He’ll forgive you.’

‘I can’t,’ Brent said defiantly. ‘I can’t grovel. He’s got to come to me.’

'Don't be a jerk. Once he's cooled down, you can explain what happened,' said Filipe.

Brent ignored him.

'Can I hang out at you place, I've got nowhere to stay.'

'I dunno, my place ain't anything special and it's too small.'

'Look I'm beat, anything will do.'

'OK let's go and I'll show you. Then you can decide.'

Brent followed Filipe. They left the park and began walking towards 3rd Avenue.

'How far is your place?'

'It's a long walk. I live behind a hotel on 124th Street, you'll see.' About an hour later they arrived at a pile of disused rusting containers piled up by the side of the road.

'We're here,' announced Filipe.

'Here? I don't see any place to sleep here?'

'I am in that container over there,' said Filipe pointing to a rusty partly caved-in container lying on its side.

Oh my God Brent said to himself, people live in there?

'Home sweet home,' said Filipe, ironically as he pushed the stiff doors aside. A blast of putrid air, of stale bodies and faecal remains hit Brent as he followed Filipe into the dark interior. He gasped struggling to avoid retching.

Filipe unaffected, called out cheerily,
‘Anyone home?’ A hoarse voice from
the interior replied.

‘Who’s that with you?’ He had seen
Brent’s shadow outlined against the light
coming through the door.

‘Just a guy I met in the park. He’s
cool.’

‘I’m Rusty. Sorry I can’t stand as my
legs have gone. What brings you here? This
place ain’t your style. What’s going on?’

Brent looked at Filipe.

Filipe said ‘Tell him, you needed
somewhere to crash’

He said nothing.

‘He’s been kicked out by his dad.’

At that moment two more residents arrived,
Jonah a tall well built man with a thick red
beard whom they called Red for short and a
smaller man with a scar on his cheek called
Scarface. Brent soon learned that they all
had nick names. He soon acquired the name
of Kid due to his youth. Filipe was called Lip
due to his name. Brent found a place in the
corner and sat down. By now he had got
used to the gloom.

It was a dump, each occupant had a
pile of assorted rugs and blankets piled on
the floor. There were some broken chairs
and a table but otherwise the place was

derelict. While he was looking around two more people showed up, two girls one called busty and the other shorty.

'What do you think?' asked Filipe seeing Brent's face.'

'It's OK I guess,' he said, 'better than nothing, thanks.'

'Not like home eh?'

'No it's nothing like home but it's fine.'

'Have you...?'

'Have I what, I was just thinking, have you thought of setting yourself up?'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, I was thinking one or two of us could help you to...'

'To do what?'

'Well, get some of your things and perhaps some money.'

'How do you mean?'

'C'mon? Your dad's rich, we could pay him a visit and...' 'You mean beat him up?'

'Naw we wouldn't need to do that, we would go when he was out. Can you get in?'

'Yeah I've got the key and the combination.'

'There you are then. It's all set. We select an evening when he's out and you make a visit, nice and civilized no noise and no mess, just in and out. What do you think?'

'I dunno? I don't like the idea that he may get hurt.'

‘Naw he won’t. We would make sure he was out. Are there some nights he goes out?’

‘Yeah he plays poker on Monday and goes to a club on Saturday.’

Brent turned on Filipe and said,

‘What’s in it for you?’

‘Nothing, help a friend, perhaps a little something to say thank you that’s all. Sleep on it’. Brent tried to but the suffocating atmosphere and the sounds of snoring and muttering made it impossible. Restless, he thought about what Filipe had suggested - stealing from his own father, it was an original idea.

As the days went by Brent thought more about the idea. I can’t go on living like this he finally decided and approached Filipe.

‘Look if you think we could carry it off I’ll give it a go. I think Monday night when my dad’s out playing poker would be OK. If we go at 7pm, that’s the time when the security change over. I’ve noticed there is about 20 minutes without any cover.’

‘That’s sounds cool,’ said Filipe. ‘Who would you like to help you?’

‘You of course.’

‘No, it ain’t my territory. I’d be no good. I would panic if anything went wrong.’

‘Nothing is going to go wrong; it will be easy. All you have to do is to keep guard, I’ll do the rest.’

Brent and Filipe settled on a Monday two weeks later and prepared the plan.

‘I’ll go in first and take the elevator to the 63rd floor,’ said Brent. ‘I’ll let myself in and begin to look around. You come up 5 minutes later.’

A week later Brent and Filipe made their way to the apartment building. Brent entered first, opening the front door very slowly and peered in. No one was in the hall. The security guard was changing for the night as he had hoped. He tiptoed across the deep pile carpet and stood for a moment in front of the elevator listening. All was silent. He pressed the button and waited for the doors to open. He entered and pressed the button to the 18th floor. The doors closed soundlessly and the lift began to move upwards. He felt his hand sweating and his body shaking. He had never done anything like this before and was beginning to have doubts. The lift stopped with a jerk and the door opened, he stood listening. There was no sound. He stepped out and walked briskly to his father’s front door, paused and listened again. Hearing nothing he put his key in the lock and turned it. The door

opened with a slight squeak. He expected to hear the alarm begin to tick but it was quiet. His father must have forgotten to set it before he went out. There was a light in the lounge, which was unusual.

It was all beginning to feel strange, not what he had expected. He made his way quickly to his father's study where he knew some money was kept and was rifling through the drawers when he saw a shadow. It made him jump and then he realised it was Filipe. He had come in through the open front door.

'You scared me man,' Brent whispered.

'You were so long I thought something bad had happened.'

'No it's OK, I've found some money, let's go.'

Neither had heard Brent's father come into the room. James had heard a floorboard creaking and followed the sound. Now he was standing in front of the two young men, his eyes blazing.

'You,' he shouted pointing at Brent, 'I told you to get out of my life, what are you doing here?'

He saw the money in Brent's hands and went crazy. He waded into the two boys his fists flailing. There was the sound of gunshot.

James stopped with a look of surprise on his face. He staggered back blood was pouring from his thigh. Brent turned to see the gun in Filipe's hand.

'Jesus what did you do that for?'

'I thought he was going to kill us!'

'You've killed him!' said Brent rushing to his father's side, trying to staunch the bleeding. Don't just stand there, call an ambulance!'

Brent stood powerless as the paramedics attended to his father. He was unable to take in what was happening. He couldn't comprehend that in a matter of minutes his life could be turned up side down.

It was only a few minutes later that the police arrived. The sergeant took one look and recognised the commissioner lying on the floor. The two boys were handcuffed, read the act and taken to the waiting police car. It was a short journey to the police station where they were photographed, fingerprinted and locked up.

Brent turned on Filipe,

'You bastard, why did you do that? I could kill you.' He was about to strike him when the cell door was opened and the Sergeant was standing glaring at them.

'Brent your father is in a critical condition. I think you need to see him, he

may not last the night. We're to take you to him.'

Brent hated hospitals, the smell of death was everywhere even the white coated doctors seemed to him to be harbingers of death. James was lying in a single bed lit by a bedside lamp. A bottle of blood was dripping hypnotically slowly into his arm. The pale light reflecting onto his face gave it an almost cadaveric appearance. At first Brent thought he was dead. He didn't seem to be breathing and he was so pale but then he coughed a dry hollow sound, which shook his body. He had lost all his bluster and was now a frail man.

'May I kiss him?' Brent asked. The sergeant nodded. Brent bent over and smelled the tainted breath of a desperately ill man. He kissed him lightly on the cheek. James opened his eyes.

'You! How could you, your own father?'

'It wasn't me. I couldn't harm you. It was not what we planned?'

At that moment the doctor arrived.

'I think you should leave him now please, he needs to rest.'

Brent needed to know how his father was. He managed to corner the doctor before he continued his rounds.

'Doctor, what are my father's chances?' He asked.

'Fifty fifty, he's a tough man for his age but he has lost a lot of blood. We will know more by tomorrow.'

Brent was taken back to his cell. He couldn't sleep, the bed was hard, a light was burning all night shining in his eyes and he could hear the groans and snores from the other inmates.

James, hovering between consciousness and nothingness was transported into the past. He was in a garden on a lush green lawn, playing ball with his young son Brent. He had just caught the ball and was about to throw it back when the boy threw himself around his neck and kissed him.

'I love you dad,' he had said, his eyes bright and shining.

'I love you too Brent always,' he had replied surprised by the sudden affection.

'You and mum will never leave me, promise.' He had whispered.

'No of course not, we will be together for ever,' he had said in a moment of happiness.

Then in a flash James remembered Brent's look when he had announced that he was leaving. The day had started peacefully with everyone eating breakfast and then when his mother announced that she wanted

a divorce and wanted to remarry, he was hysterical shouting and screaming.

'You promised you would never leave; you promised. I hate you,' he repeated.

Brent was then torn between them, moving from one to the other throughout his early teens. Finally he decided to live with his father. James remembered that day.

Then the memory faded.

It was a long night. James lay shivering on the narrow bed in the pitch dark.

Eventually light began to creep into Brent's cell as the sun rose. He had a cold wash, which cleared his head and waited uncertain for what was to follow. At seven sharp a tray was pushed through the bars. He gulped down the warm unsweetened tea and sucked on the dried bread. Sinking back onto the bed, he went over in his mind the events of the day before. He was still reeling from what had happened and was desperate to find out how his father was. Frustrated by the silence, he pounded on the bars trying to attract the attention of the guard but got no response. Finally he called out,

'Will someone please help me?'

He heard footsteps and a burly guard appeared.

‘What do you want boy? Make it good because you’ve disturbed my breakfast.’

Brent’s first reaction was to tell the man where to get off but his father’s words came to him. ‘When you are in a hole, stop digging.’ So in his calmest voice he said,

‘I am so sorry to have disturbed your breakfast Officer but I would like to know how my father is?’

‘That’s a bit of a joke ain’t it when you nearly blew his head off.’ Brent could see no purpose in explaining exactly what happened but waited.

‘Yeah OK, I’ll find out and let you know.’

Brent could hear the man talking on the phone and then his footsteps as he returned to speak to him.

‘They say he’s out of danger that’s all.’

Brent felt a great sense of relief. Although he was angry with his father he certainly didn’t want him dead. Then he realised what a terrible situation he was in. He would be facing an attempted murder charge as an accessory.

Several days later Brent was released into the custody of a detention center while awaiting a hearing in the Juvenile court. It had all happened very quickly. Just after he

had eaten his breakfast a smartly dressed man was let into his cell.

He introduced himself.

‘Hi Brent, I am Peter Hubbard an attorney. I have been appointed by the juvenile court to represent you.’ Brent was lying on his bed at the time and turned over to look at the visitor who towered over him. He was over six foot tall with thick black hair and piercing brown eyes. For a brief moment Brent feared for his life. He had read about police violence and knew he had no protection if they chose to hurt him.

‘Good morning sir,’ he began, how can I help you,’ trying not to sound too scared.

Mr Hubbard repeated,

‘I’m from the Juvenile court. I am here to represent you at the fact-finding hearing.’ He looked at his watch; ‘it’s at 10 am this morning.’ He reached forward and extended his right hand. Brent shook it. It was cool and dry while Brent’s were hot and sweaty.

‘Let me tell you how this works. I am going to ask you a few questions and then we will go together to the court where you will be questioned by the judge. There will be no jury so it won’t feel like a real court although it is. There is nothing to be scared of, just tell the truth.’

Brent tried to follow what he was saying but the word ‘court’ threw him. He

had heard from his dad how the lawyers twisted words and made innocent people look guilty.

‘No I don’t want that,’ he shouted. ‘Why can’t you just punish me? Why do I have to go there?’

‘Listen Brent you didn’t hear what I said. Remember you are innocent until proved guilty so you have nothing to fear. I will do everything I can to help you so let’s start at the beginning. Tell me what happened?’

‘I don’t know,’ whispered Brent, ‘why should I trust you?’ They won’t believe me, I know it.’

‘They will. I will make sure they do so tell me what happened.’

Slowly Brent began to tell his story. How he blamed himself for his parent’s break up and wanted to run away. He felt it was his fault that they separated.

‘They loved each other and I made them separate.’

Slowly he described his feelings of guilt and then the events at school, how he liked to control the younger students. He was very excited when he was elected a school mentor but he couldn’t resist encouraging them into bad habits. When he was expelled he couldn’t tell his dad. But then my father found out and told him to go.

‘That’s when I got really angry at him,’ Brent explained. ‘I wanted to hurt him, to make him feel how he had hurt me. That’s when I met Filipe.’

‘The boy who was with you when your dad was shot?’

‘Yeah, I met him in the park. He was homeless and lived in a disused container with a number of other people.’

‘Oh, yes I know where you mean, off 3rd Avenue?’

‘Yeah, we got on well and I went to live with him. That’s when he suggested I get my own back, go and steal some money from my dad. I was desperate I had nothing to live on. It was coming to me anyway so I didn’t feel I was stealing. It was all going well until dad appeared. He should have been out playing poker. It was a real shock when I saw him.’ Brent stopped and began to relive what happened next.

‘Go on.’

‘I can’t.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well I didn’t mean to hurt my Dad. Felipe pulled out a gun. I thought he was only going to threaten him but when he shot him I, I...that wasn’t the plan!’ We had never talked about a gun. I love my dad. I wouldn’t hurt him for anything.’

Brent began to sob.

‘What did you do then?’

'I knew some first aid from school and tried to staunch the blood while Felipe called an ambulance. The rest you know. I was arrested and brought here to this dump and have been here since. When can I get out I hate it here?'

'It all depends of what happens in court. I think you have a good chance of getting away with a period of probation,' said Mr Hubbard with a smile. Brent sat in silence it sounded too good to be true.

'What about Felipe? What will happen to him?'

'It all depends what you say and whether the judge believes you.'

'How do you mean?'

'You told me that Felipe had the gun and you knew nothing about it. If you say that to the judge and he believes you, you will get a lighter sentence.'

'You mean I've got to snitch on him?'

'No, but you've got to convince the judge that you knew nothing about the weapon.'

Brent thought for a moment.

'I can't do that; he's a friend. He helped me out when I was down and desperate, I can't abandon him now.'

Mr Hubbard stared at him.

'If you don't, you'll be treated as an accessory and will get the same sentence as him, is that what you want?'

‘I can’t help it; he’s a buddy. I have to stick with him.’

The court convened the following Monday. It was held in a side room in downtown New York. Although it was called a court Brent thought it was nothing like the adult courts he’d seen. The room was quite small. The judge sat behind a table on the same level as everyone else. Brent sat next to Mr Hubbard. Felipe was a few seats away. Brent saw Felipe for the first time and managed to catch his eye and smile. Felipe made no move to acknowledge him. Maybe he didn’t see me Brent thought.

Everyone was seated when the judge entered. She was in her early fifties with short grey hair, simple make up and wearing a plain summer dress. She waited until everyone was settled and then began.

‘We are here today to undertake a fact-finding investigation in connection with the attempted murder of Mr James Sutcliffe. Will the State representative please present the facts?’

‘Yes Ma’am.’

A tall slim Afro-American woman in her early thirties stood up. She exuded confidence and peered at Brent as she spoke.

‘Ma’am, on the relevant night the defendants went to the home of the victim.’

'Miss Baxter please, we are in a juvenile court, try to avoid judicial terms.'

'Yes Ma'am. On the relevant evening the suspects went to the home of Superintendent James Sutcliffe and began ransacking his office. They were interrupted and one of them drew a gun and shot Mr Sutcliffe.'

'Miss Baxter, I am sorry to interrupt you but hasn't Mr James Sutcliffe retired?'

'Yes Ma'am.'

'Then his title is Mr, isn't it?'

'Yes-no! Ma'am. I'm sorry Ma'am.'

'Miss Baxter please continue.'

'Thank you Ma'am. Mr Sutcliffe was seriously injured and rushed to hospital.'

'Who called the medics?'

'Ma'am, may I interrupt,' asked Mr Hubbard.

'Yes please do.'

'It was Felipe.'

'I believe it was Felipe,' confirmed Miss Baxter.

'Thank you Miss Baxter.'

Would Mr Hubbard representing Brent please give us his side of the story?'

'Thank you Ma'am, Brent is an only child. He was very disturbed when his mother and father were divorced. He was 6 years old at the time and to this day blames himself. He told me that he was very

attached to his mother who has since remarried. He doesn't see her anymore. His father who was the Police Commissioner subsequently remarried a younger woman and Brent lives with them. Unfortunately his stepmother was killed in a car accident shortly before Brent left home. He is very popular at school and was appointed a mentor of a group of fresher's. He admits now that he foolishly began to smoke Hashish and encouraged others to do the same. As a result he was expelled from school. When his father found out he threw him out of the house, which is how he met Felipe and went to live with him in a slum area.'

'Thank you Mr Hubbard.'

'Now Brent, I would like you to tell us why you shot your father? There is no need for you to stand.'

'Your Honour umm Ma'am. I didn't shoot him. I wouldn't, I love him. I only wanted to get some money. When my dad kicked me out I had nothing and if it wasn't for my friend Felipe I would have died. So together we made a plan but it all went wrong. I didn't know that Felipe was going to be armed, how could I? I thought we would just go into the place nice and quietly, get the money and get out. When dad suddenly appeared I was confused But then when the firearm went off it was terrible I thought dad

was dead there was so much blood I tried to stop it.'

Brant stopped and went quiet reliving the moment,

'Go on,' said the judge.

'That's all. It was all a terrible mistake.'

'Did you shoot your father?'

'No.'

'Who shot your father Brent?'

It was Felipe but we were in it together.'

'So are you saying that if you had a gun you would have shot him?'

'No of course not, I love him. I wouldn't want to hurt him.'

'Then Felipe did it. He was responsible for shooting your father?' Brent looked at Felipe who was staring at the floor. He didn't look up.

'Yes I suppose he did but I m sure he didn't want to kill him just frighten him.'

'We'll ask Felipe to answer that. Thank you Brent that's all.'

The judge turned to Felipe.

'Felipe will you please tell the enquiry what happened?'

'Ma'am I'm an orphan. My parents died in a car crash in Mexico when I was 4. My grandparents brought me up but when they died I was thrown onto the street. Since

then I have lived on the street. I have a place where I sleep when it is winter otherwise I hang about anywhere.'

'How did you meet Brent?'

'I was sitting on my usual bench in the park when he sits down and we begin talking. We found we had a lot in common. I invited him to my place.'

'Tell me about the plan to steal from Brent's father?'

'We didn't see it like that. Brent thought he was getting his inheritance a bit early and as he was penniless, it seemed like a good idea. We decided to do it when he was out but the plan back fired.'

'Yes it did. What was your role in the plan?'

'I don't know. I guess Brent wanted some support. I think he was a bit nervous about going back into the apartment.'

'Why do you think that was?'

'When we spoke about the plan, it was he who suggested that I came along. I was surprised but reluctantly agreed.'

'Now let's talk about what happened in the apartment. You said to the police that you were to stay outside and watch for anyone approaching.'

'Yes ma'am.'

'So why did you go into the apartment?'

'Because Brent was taking a long time.'

'What happened then?'

'His father appeared and went for him. I could see that his father was abusing him.'

'Do you mean physically?'

'Yes he was trying to hit Brent'

'So is that why you shot him?'

'No it was reflex. I only wanted to scare him so that we could get away.'

'Let me ask you, did Brent know you were armed?'

'I don't think so.'

'So you mean he may have?'

'No. I'm sure he didn't.'

The judge glanced up at the huge wall.

'I see it's nearly 10 O'clock. We will recess for half an hour,' she announced.

Brent sat with Mr Hubbard while the court cleared. Looking around, he saw Felipe out of the corner of his eye and got up to greet him.

'Where are you going?' asked Mr Hubbard.

'I just wanted to say hello to Felipe.'

'No. That's not a good idea.'

Getting up as if he hadn't heard anything, Brent went over and hugged Felipe.

'How are you doing? Are you OK? What a mess it all is.' Felipe said nothing. He

had been in court too many times and just wanted to get it over with as soon as possible. Brent returned to his seat and looked straight ahead.

‘That was not a clever thing to do,’ said Mr Hubbard.

The court reconvened and the questioning continued.

‘Felipe, just before the recess you were telling me why you were carrying a weapon and that you didn’t think Brent knew that. I want to ask you again, think carefully. Did Brent know that you were armed?’ Felipe sat thinking.

‘I. I don’t think so.’

‘What do you mean? Did he or didn’t he know? Did you tell him?’ ‘No I didn’t.’

‘I see,’ said the judge.

Brent was only half listening when he heard Felipe’s reply but immediately sat up. He is incriminating himself he realised, I must support him.’ Jumping to his feet he called out,

‘Your Honour, we were both in this together.’

‘Brent please sit down and be quiet, you are not being addressed, Felipe is.’ commanded the judge glaring at him.

Brent turned to Mr Hubbard pleading for him to say something but he stared stonily ahead.

At that moment there was a commotion at the back of the room as a guard tried to stop a man in a wheelchair from entering.

Pushing himself to the front of the aisle James staggered to his feet and called out, 'Your honour, that's my son on the seat over there. He did not shoot me, the other man did.'

'Sir, please sit down you have no right to come in here and interrupt the proceedings, who are you anyway?'

'I am Brent's father, a retired Police Commissioner.'

'I see Commissioner, I'm sorry I didn't realise that it was you. Please come to the front. I would like to ask you some questions later if you don't mind.'

James Sutcliffe nodded and wheeled himself to the front and took his place.

'For the record I was just finishing my questioning of Felipe,' said the judge. 'Just to recap do I understand Felipe, that you were the only one carrying a gun and that your accomplice knew nothing about the gun?'

'Yes your honour, I have always carried a gun ever since I was mugged as a boy.'

James struggled to his feet.

‘Your honour, please; after all I am the victim. You must allow me to speak.’

‘This is very irregular. You must not interrupt the court otherwise I will be forced to ask you to leave.’

‘Please your honour I am still very weak and cannot stay here much longer.’

‘All right, please say what you must and then I must ask you to leave this court.’ James turned to the Judge and in a low and measured tone said,

‘I love my son very much but I hurt him desperately when his mother and I were divorced. He took it very badly and I think it affected him deeply. He is a very talented bright young man and so when he was caught leading a group of young people into bad habits and was expelled. I lost my temper and kicked him out. I had expected so much more from him. Then he was homeless and without money so what could he do? I sincerely believe that he did not intend to do me any harm and knew nothing about the gun that his companion was carrying.’

He paused, looked at Brent and said,

‘In short I forgive him and do not intend to pursue any charges against him.’

The judge looked up at the clock.

‘Thank you Commissioner, there is no need to detain you any longer, the hour is late and we will convene tomorrow morning at 10 am when I will present my verdict.

The following morning both young men were sentenced to four years in a youth detention centre, to be detained there for a minimum of two years and if they received a good report, to be released on probation for a further two years.

James was at home when he heard the sentence. He was outraged. He couldn't accept the verdict and the punishment. The more he thought about it the angrier he became. It was my fault that my son tried to steal from me. I sent him away with nothing, what was he to do? It is me who should be imprisoned not him. Over the next few days he slowly hatched a plan. It was crazy he knew but he felt he couldn't just sit there and do nothing.

About three weeks later James was first allowed to visit Brent. He had arranged it through the local prison authority, which occupied a former bank on the high street. It had felt strange entering it having known it as a bank. The entrance was much smaller with a number of private cubicles in which officers sat seeing the public.

Arriving 10 minutes early he sat on one of the metal chairs along the wall waiting

his turn. Looking around he was pleased to see that they had retained some of the former features of the building, the old architrave that defined the long windows and the egg and dart motif decorating the ceilings. Suddenly his name was called and he was directed to cubicle C. A woman in her mid fifties with neatly combed white hair framing a dark face welcomed him. She looked up as he entered.

‘Mr Sutcliffe please sit down. My name is Clarissa.’

Looking at the papers she asked politely,

‘Do you still retain the title of Commissioner?’

‘No I’m just plain Mr. now but most people call me James.’

‘OK, good afternoon James, I see you have requested an appointment to see your son Brent, he’s in a Youth detention Centre.’

‘Yes, I’m sorry to say that I feel very much to blame for what has happened.’

‘That’s very natural, parents often do.’

‘You know the whole story then?’

‘Yes I have it all here. How are you feeling by the way? It sounds like you’ve been through a tough time.’

‘Yes it hasn’t been easy but I am ok now thank you.’

‘Visiting is twice a week, would next Wednesday at 2 pm be convenient?’

‘Yes that would suit me fine.’

‘Good I’ll just ring up and find out if your son is OK with that. If you would like to sit outside I won’t keep you long.’

James returned to his seat a little puzzled by her last comment.

A few minutes later she came over to him.

‘Yes that would be fine, he is looking forward to seeing you. Good luck I hope it goes well,’ she added with a smile.

It was a familiar journey to the Centre one he had travelled many times during his career. He watched in his mirror as the familiar outline of Manhattan slowly faded being replaced by open fields and distant hills. Twenty minutes later he turned into a narrow lane signed New York Penitentiary (Youth Facility) and shortly after entered the large asphalt car park. He parked his car, turned off the engine and sat aware of a mounting fear of uncertainty. It was all so familiar but now he was hesitant. Brent knew he was coming and had agreed to the visit so why was he afraid, and of what? He mopped his face and took a deep breath.

Glancing at his watch he noticed he was about ten minutes early. In the distance he could see the building more like a large industrial facility than a prison. There were no barbed wire fences, no lookout posts or even police guards patrolling. A passer-by

would be totally unaware of its purpose and certainly would not have thought it was a prison.

Getting out of the car, he stood up, bracing his shoulders and checking his wallet and phone. He removed a small piece of paper from his shirt pocket and reread it. *First floor room D.* He mounted the front steps and waited as the automatic door swung towards him. He entered the foyer aware of the cool air coming from the wall mounted AC unit.

A man in civilian clothes stepped forwards, 'Good afternoon Sir, may I help you?'

'Umm yes I have come to see...' He paused glancing down at the paper. 'I want to go to Room D on the first floor.'

'It's on your right,' the man began, but James interrupted,

'It's OK I know the way.'

He made his way up the familiar stairs to Room D. He read the number on the door and stood outside composing himself. The place had changed so much since he was last here. Gone were the uniformed guards with truncheons hanging from their belts. There was a relaxed air, the staff were chatting amiably with the inmates who were being called by their first name. How had this come about he wondered?

He was totally unprepared for what he would find when he entered the room. It was laid out like a café with tables and chairs and some visitors were already engaged in conversation. It was not possible apart from their ages to distinguish who were the visitors and who were the inmates. James was directed to a table by a window that overlooked the garden. He could see men working in the greenhouse where oranges and bananas were growing. He looked up to see his son coming towards him. Brent looked bronzed and slim and was wearing a T-shirt, jeans and sneakers. James stood up and for a moment the two men were confused and after an awkward pause, hugged.

‘Good to see you Dad,’ James heard Brent’s muffled voice.

‘Me too son, you look terrific.’

‘You too Dad thanks for coming, I’ve missed you.’

For a moment they had nothing more to say. James sitting facing his son experienced an unexpected ‘Déjà vu’:

He was a small boy looking at his own father. He had just been caught shoplifting and was about to be sent to a detention centre. He remembered his father’s horror and disapproval. It was his experience in the centre that was the reason why he decided he wanted to be a policeman. His avowed

ambition was to rid the country of such places. Now facing his own son he felt that in some way this place was a vindication of all he had fought for.

The moment passed and he smiled.

‘It so good to see you looking so well, this place must be suiting you.’

‘It is certainly not what I was expecting.’

‘In what way?’

‘Well I had read about the dingy dismal harsh places where violence is the norm. It certainly isn’t here. The staff are like friends wanting to understand and help in whatever way they can.’

‘It sounds too easy.’

‘Not at all, there is a strict discipline but within that there is time to study or learn a trade. I’ve started an online legal course. I’m hoping one day to be a lawyer.’

‘That’s wonderful Brent, I am so proud of you. But there’s something I want to talk to you about. I know you weren’t aware that your friend umm....’

‘Dad! His name is Felipe.’

‘That Felipe was carrying a firearm. I think the judge made a wrong judgement when she named you as an accessory. I think you should have been found not guilty and walked free.’

‘Dad I knew what I was doing and I still stick by it. I know what I am doing.’

‘Do you see anything of Felipe?’

‘Yes every day we spend some time together, he’s studying accountancy.’

‘I didn’t mean to criticize you, I just felt that maybe he is not the right friend for you.’

‘Dad I love you and I am really sorry for what happened but I have learned a lot since I have been in here. I am not the same person I was when we last met.’

James listened to his son as if for the first time. He was no longer a child but a man despite his young years. He was making his own decisions and living with the consequences. He felt a growing respect for him and realised that their relationship had altered.

Changing the subject, Brent asked,

‘How are you feeling Dad?’

‘Fine the old leg seems to be as good as ever, just a bit of rheumatism now and then but nothing serious.’

Brent thought his dad had aged but was pleased to see that he seemed to have recovered fully from the bullet wound.

James had a lot to think about on the journey home. He had gone to see Brent intending to persuade him to seek an appeal against his sentence on the grounds that he had lied when he said he knew about the gun and that he did it to support his friend. But now having spoken to Brent, James

realised that things had changed. The boy was now a young man. He'd made a decision and was sticking to it. He was taking responsibility for his actions. As James drove away he began to think about his own life and what was ahead.

