

PULLING BACK THE CURTAIN

A Memoir of Discovery and Shadows



JOHNNO HILLS

Pulling Back The Curtain

Johnno Hills



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Chapter 1 – Before the Storm

“Children are not things to be moulded, but are people to be unfolded.”

— Jess Lair

There’s a saying that goes something along the lines of having children doesn’t come with a rule book. Come to think of it, why would it need to? With every parent having begun life as children themselves, they’ve had first hand experience of what it feels like to be one. Yet, in reality this experience may count for little and be quickly forgotten by parents forging a child-rearing path which may well be influenced by how they themselves were parented.

So, if there is such a thing as an ideal childhood, I wonder what would it look like. Would it be a wholesome experience free from strife and hardship or perhaps one consisting of elements of both grief and harmony? Regardless of which is better, perfection in parenting seems to me to be an altogether unrealistic expectation. As for the child, the likelihood of enjoying a happy childhood depends upon many things, central to which is the character and past experiences of their parents.

Many people may pay the ultimate compliment to their own parents by emulating the way in which they were raised. Meanwhile, others may vow never to raise their children the way their parents raised them. Either way, at the heart of good parenting lies an understanding of the basic needs of children and a commitment from the parents to put such needs before their own.

Among the most fundamental needs of any child, or any person for that matter, is the need to know they’re loved and know where they belong. Indeed, the lack of a sense of either in childhood can have

dire consequences in later life and lead many an unfulfilled person to look for love and acceptance in the most undesirable places with similarly undesirable results. There are those who are fortunate enough to find family among their relatives while others are forced to look elsewhere. Furthermore, some will continue to look for love from those whose need to be loved is greater than any capacity to give love.

It is not my intention in the retelling of this story to paint a biased picture by emphasising the bad over the good. Indeed, in the interests of fairness to all concerned, I intend to present as best I can a balanced version of events in order for the reader to judge the character of those featured herein. Suffice to say this is not a hard luck story, but a success story. A story told from the perspective of a boy who struggled, fought and survived the very people who should have loved him and ensured he knew where he belonged. Instead, he ventured through life as if he were alone, a wayfarer, a joker, a protector, a truth seeker and a problem solver.

What I know of my parents' lives is based largely on what they and their respective family members chose to reveal. Born in London in 1934 to Jack and May Hills, my dad, John Robin, was thirty-eight years old by the time of my birth. The British Hospital for Mothers and Babies in Woolwich, South-East London, was the place where I entered the world as the third of John Robin's four children. His first child, a daughter named Leigh, was born in April, 1960, to him and his first wife, Jackie. John Robin and Jackie were married no more than seven years before she left him following an affair with his brother-in-law, Jim, who'd married John Robin's younger sister, also named Jackie.

Following the breakdown of his first marriage, John Robin left the family home in Lewisham and apparently went to sea intent on discovering the manhood his first wife had mocked him for lacking.

Upon his return to London in 1968, he rented a flat in Bennett Park, Blackheath, and rejoined the Prudential Insurance Company with whom he'd been an insurance agent since leaving the RAF in 1956. Tragically, in 1936, Jack Hills died of tuberculosis when John Robin was but two years old. Exposed to the deadly infection through his profession as a glass-blower, Jack's son would have no memory of his father.

Considering Jack's kind and gentle nature, it's little wonder that May was said to have been inconsolable when he died. With no other means by which to raise their son, May's older sister Liz and younger sister Grace looked after John Robin while May went out to work. Come the late 1930s, May married a man named Harry. May and Harry eventually settled in a large semi-detached council house in Campshill Road in Lewisham along with John Robin and his half-sisters, Val and Jackie, born of Harry and May. Feared by his wife and children as a mercurial man with a cruel temper, Harry never warmed to Dad and bullied him in a way he would spare both his daughters. While the reason for the bullying remained unknown, there's also no way of knowing whether Harry's cruelty actually created or merely reinforced his stepson's altogether meek and unassuming character.

Compounding his misery, May's apparent lack of affection towards her children did little to mitigate the effects on John Robin of Harry's bullying. Being six years older than his sister Val and almost eight years older than Jackie, John Robin often spent rueful time having to babysit his younger siblings. He would lament as much on numerous occasions in the future to his offspring how he felt he'd done his time looking after children. Following his perceived penance, in the early 1950s, John Robin joined the RAF as the force typist. With his travels taking him to Egypt and Cyprus, he tasted freedom for the first time until his discharge in 1956.

Following his failed marriage to Jackie and subsequent trip to sea, while living in Bennett Park in 1968, John Robin met the girl who would become his second wife and my mother. At the time of their meeting, at age seventeen, Mum was roughly half Dad's age. Dad never spoke of where they met or what initially attracted him to Mum. Nonetheless, if a mature relationship was what he wanted, it's doubtful he would have found it in the arms of a seventeen-year-old girl. Furthermore, Dad was a man of simple needs who, like many men of his generation, were accustomed to having a woman do everything for him. Therefore, as long as his dinner was on the table when he came home from work and he could get his leg over whenever the opportunity arose, he'd be a happy man.

As aware of Dad's fundamental needs as I eventually became, I found myself in later life questioning why he thought a seventeen-year-old girl would be a good choice for meeting them. While she would meet his needs in the early days of their relationship, by the mid 1970s a sudden and inexplicably dramatic change occurred in her behaviour. For a man apparently lacking in emotional intelligence concerned primarily with the fulfilment of his needs, Dad would soon find himself as powerless as his young children to cope with the sudden and tempestuous change in his young wife, Pamela.

Born in Camberwell, south-east London in 1951 to Ron and Lucy Edmonds, Pamela would be the first of their six children together. However, Pamela was not the eldest sibling, as both Ron and Lucy both had a child each from a previous relationship. Ron enjoyed a career in banking while Lucy kept house for Ron and their burgeoning family. The Edmonds clan lived a comfortable existence in houses in the Lewisham, Lee and Catford areas of south-east London. Home life consisted of an inter-generational household of parents, maternal grandparents and an aunt named Joyce, with the seven Edmonds children all sharing beds.

A strict disciplinarian, if Ron hit one child he would hit them all. However, not without kindness or favour it could be said that Ron was a fool for his wife. The standing family joke within the family went that Ron would give Lucy the top brick off the chimney if she asked for it. According to Lucy, Ron had an obvious favourite among their children who she considered to be Pamela. Her belief in her daughter's special status rankled Lucy and roused within her a deep feeling of jealousy and spite. However, it was not the perceived favouritism of Pamela that persistently pitted her against her mother, as much as Pamela's contention that she was being sexually abused by her maternal grandfather.

My mother spoke very little about the alleged abuse perpetrated against her, regarding it as too horrific to relive. However, she alluded to having been paid by her grandfather to keep schtum and hid the money in a crack in the stairs of the family home. When confronted one day by her mother, who had observed her concealing money and demanding to know from where it came, Pamela's admission of the abuse she had suffered was roundly rejected by Lucy, who then proceeded to accuse her of stealing from her purse.

The final nail in Pamela's coffin came following her rejection of her parents' attempts to plan her future. By 1968, now aged seventeen and long possessed of an unapologetically wilful character, Pamela resisted her parents' wishes for her to marry a member of their extended family. Her rejection of Ron and Lucy's proposal occurred around the time that Pamela met John Robin. Crucially, after a series of assignations, one night, Pamela committed the unforgivable transgression of staying overnight at John Robin's flat in Bennett Park.

While the exact details of the doorstep showdown differed depending on who was telling the story. Lucy contended that Pamela left the house of her own free will while Pamela maintained that her belongings were waiting for her on the doorstep when she

arrived home. Pamela's grandmother weighed in, along with her other daughter, Pamela's auntie Joyce, by slapping Pamela around the face. Regardless of whose version of events bore greater resemblance to the truth, nonetheless, Pamela's subsequent departure from the family home threw together two hapless individuals burdened by the wretchedness of their respective pasts. Time would reveal just how mismatched John Robin and Pamela were and how their peculiar coupling perhaps owed more to convenience than chemistry or common interests.

Although the present harmoniousness between John Robin and Pamela wouldn't last, by mid 1969, she had fallen pregnant. Suffering low birth weight and breathing difficulties upon his birth on 27th January, 1970, her first born child, named Matthew, died after only 12 hours of life. Following their move to a two-bedroom house in Southbourne Gardens in Lee, south-east London, Pamela learned she was pregnant again. In December of the same year, Pamela gave birth to a second child, a daughter, who I shall refer to by her nickname, Dee. Almost two years almost to the day following Dee's birth, in December 1972, I came along followed just under five years later by my younger sister, Saskia.

With Dad working as an insurance agent for The Prudential while Mum remained at home to take care of her children, their respective roles were typical of the time. While Dad, with his strong work ethic, was well suited to hard work, Mum was his polar opposite. Indeed, they were polar opposites in most respects and had little in common except the need for fulfilment of their respective emotional needs yet with virtually no capacity to meet the emotional needs of the other. In addition, they shared a joint propensity to place the fulfilment of their own emotional needs before those of their children.

So, with a hard working and productive father and a stay-at-home mother, my family ticked all the boxes of what was considered the nuclear family. However, this did not make the home environment a wholesome one because in many respects my family was far from normal. How could it be when at the centre of it all was a woman who, with her casual lies and cruelties, her deceit, her dark moods and her erratic behaviours, struggled to slay the demons of her past.

Drawn into the storm that had been building within her was a man hopelessly dependent on her yet powerless to resist her and equally powerless to control the most destructive elements of her character. Between the two ill-fated individuals lay three innocent children struggling to make sense of their world and find refuge amid the storm soon to rage around them which threatened to engulf them all. This is the story told from the perspective of one of their children; a story of a boy's fight for survival, a fight to escape his parents, a fight for life and the right to just be a boy, a boy called Johnno.

Chapter 2 – Welcome to Babylon, kid!

*“Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind,
flight to the imagination and life to everything.”*

— Plato

Nothing quite has the power of stirring memories, whether good or bad, quite like music. Funny how a familiar song can instantly transport the listener back to a certain time in their lives and make them feel all over again the age they were at that particular time. With memories of those events which occurred throughout my life still so vivid in my mind, I’ve needed little prompting to be able to recall them. However, should I need any assistance, I can merely draw on my recollections of the songs I heard at the time. Consequently, music has always been a source of enjoyment and comfort to me, a love created initially by someone who consistently sought solace in music, that person being my mother.

My earliest memories I can date from around the age of two. Among them are of my elder sister Dee and I being strapped into the back seat of my dad’s car and listening cheerfully to the music playing on the radio. The theme continued at home where Mum played the songs of her favourite artists of the day, such as John Denver, Abba, The Carpenters, and The Bee Gees. On the radio, Jimmy Saville’s Old Record Club of a Sunday lunchtime she’d particularly loath to miss. While in those days Mum tended to listen to her music aloud, there’d come a time when, lost to those around her, she’d don a pair of oversized headphones and retreat into her own far-away world.

Situated on a quiet suburban street in Lee, south-east London, our house at thirty-one Westdean Avenue was the first one which I firmly recall. The V-shaped avenue consisted of two rows of 1930s

terraced houses on either side each with their mock Tudor style apexes. Neatly trimmed privet hedges defined the borders of many front gardens, including ours. Our neighbour at number thirty-three was a grumpy middle-aged man by the name of Mr. Richmond. His large, dark rimmed glasses, similar to those worn by my dad, suited his altogether unfriendly manner. I rarely saw Mr. Richmond speak to my parents. He didn't seem a particularly happy man and struck fear into me and every other child on Westdean Avenue.

In contrast, Mrs. Bird, our neighbour at number twenty-nine, was a gentle and kind elderly lady. Next to her lived Auntie Mari. While not our actual aunt, all the children of the avenue referred to Auntie Mari by that name. A petite Asian lady, Auntie Mari would often come outside during warmer weather and doll out ice-pops of many different colours from a brown paper bag. Needless to say, Auntie Mari enjoyed considerable popularity among the children of Westdean Avenue.

Our home would've appeared to be nothing out of the ordinary to anybody who passed by. My bedroom window looked out onto the avenue alongside Mum and Dad's while Dee's overlooked our back garden. My earliest memories of Dee are of a rather shy and introverted girl. Her chestnut brown hair cut in a basin style so typical among seventies children framed a small oval-shaped face dotted with freckles. Her skinny frame lent itself perfectly to the kind of athleticism which enabled Dee to outrun most other five-year-olds and out-perform the boys in her favourite sport of football. Consequently, with her characteristic tom-boyishness and athletic prowess Dee was often asked if she was, in fact, a boy. As for me, with a carbon-copy pudding bowl haircut I resembled Dee yet without the freckles and dark brown hair. With my light-brown bowl cut resembling that of actor and comedian Tim Brooke-Taylor, my Auntie Grace would often remark each time she opened her

front door whenever we visited that I reminded her of the famed ‘Goodies’ star.

At little more than five feet tall, my mother’s lack of height rather accentuated her stoutness. Despite being overweight, her round and protruding stretch-mark ravaged belly and similarly large breasts were to me both comforting and reassuring. In addition, Mum sported a peculiarity in the form of a chipped front tooth which she said occurred following a fall while climbing out of a swimming pool as a child. With chestnut brown hair framing a pretty face, comparisons could be drawn between my mother and another well-known and overweight celebrity at the time in the form of international singing star, Cass Elliot.

As for Dad, he seemed like a giant to me, although most adults appear tall to small children. His dark, salt and pepper coloured hair brushed backwards exposed his receding hairline while his ever present dark-rimmed glasses created that same forbidding look of our neighbour, Mr. Richmond. Yet, Dad’s most prominent feature sported by many men at the time was his bushy, jawbone length sideburns. Being below average height at five foot six inches tall and plagued by bowel problems which would bedevil him throughout his life, Dad cut a rather unhealthy and fragile figure, both physically and emotionally.

A fundamentally unaffectionate man, I witnessed Dad belly-laugh and cry no more than once. On account of their mutual love of football, Dad had an easier time forming a bond with Dee than he did with me. With my enjoyment of the music that Mum played, I developed a stronger attachment to her than to Dad. However, that did not prevent me for now from gravitating towards Dad until such time in the not-too-distant future when the nature of our relationship would dramatically and permanently change.

Approaching his mid-forties by 1976, Dad had worked as an insurance agent for the best part of twenty years. Being a productive man, he appreciated routine and was one of life's grafters. His morning routine began by rising around seven o'clock and making a cup of tea before having a strip wash at the bathroom sink, with the door always remaining open. Consequently, I grew accustomed to the sight of Dad's naked, hairless buttocks and pendulous scrotum dangling free as he bent over the sink. Both Mum and Dad thought nothing of wandering about the house at times wearing very little clothing, therefore, the sight of their near naked bodies soon became a very familiar sight.

A further mark of his eccentricity was how Dad shaved with an old fashioned soap stick and brush. Signalling the completion of his ablutions, Dad would always conclude with a splash of Old Spice patted on each cheek followed by a little square of toilet paper covering the part on his face or neck where he'd nicked himself shaving. Always smartly turned out, Dad donned one of his many boxy suits before heading out to work.

On account of his rather reserved nature, Dad never enjoyed a particularly large circle of friends. However, one exception was a work colleague, a fellow Prudential insurance agent by the name of Bill Stone. Apart from my uncles, Bill is the first man I recall outside my immediate family. Peculiarly, although I knew Bill to be associated with Dad, I don't recall ever seeing them together. Indeed, Bill would only ever come to our house on those weekday evenings when Dad would be out collecting insurance premiums from his customers.

Possessing a charismatic personality with a frivolous streak, Bill appeared to be everything that my dad was not. With his warmth and friendliness and inclination to act the giddy-goat, Bill embodied the figure of fun character to whom children would naturally

gravitate. Indeed, he would leave Dee and me in fits of laughter each time he'd tell us to "park our bums." Although of a similarly slender build, Bill was slightly taller than Dad and had rather greasy-looking greying hair and a pointed nose. Also unlike Dad, Bill was a heavy smoker and not as smarty turned out. However, his charm lay in his exuberance rather than his appearance and Dee and I were very much taken with him. We were not the only ones, as Mum seemed quite taken by Bill, too. Unbeknown to me, I was about to learn how my mother truly felt about this marvellously captivating man.

Just a few months shy of her fifth birthday, by late 1975, Dee had begun school at nearby Horn Park Infants'. A year later marked the first time I'd be able to recall Mum and I walking her the short distance to the school. When I say walked, I meant that Mum and Dee did all the walking while I remained firmly ensconced in my buggy. At the age of three, my legs were far too small to be able to climb the steep hill leading to the forbidding looking school building situated at the top.

Having left Dee in the charge of the staff of Horn Park on this one particular day, Mum turned my buggy around before heading back the way we came. Even more terrifying than going up the hill was going down it. My fear of descending such a steep hill and the sight of the busy road at the bottom was such that the experience would give me nightmares for years after. Yet, these particular dreams were characterised by my mother letting go of my buggy, which hurtled down the hill before careening into traffic. At this point I'd suddenly awaken. To what extent these dreams led to my persistent bed-wetting, I cannot say, however, more often than not during the early part of my life I'd wake up with my pyjamas, sheets and mattress soaked through.

As we neared the bottom of the hill, rather than turn right and head for home, instead Mum crossed the road and pushed my buggy through a gate and along a garden path. Looking up, I saw a yellow door with the number 249 above it. No sooner had Mum rung the doorbell than the door opened and there stood Bill. Following his greeting, Mum unfastened the safety straps on my buggy before lifting me up and taking me inside. Leading me into Bill's living room, Mum suddenly disappeared following which in came Bill. As I looked up, the towering man before me suddenly produced a brown paper bag and handed it to me then left the room, closing the door behind him. Opening the bag, I reached inside and pulled out a game containing a blue-coloured plastic toy handgun and two table tennis balls.

With the apprehension of finding myself all alone in a strange place, I didn't bother to break open the plastic and cardboard packaging of the toy before I opened the door in search of my mum. With neither Mum nor Bill anywhere in sight, I made towards the stairs and began to climb them. Just then, I heard the sound of muffled voices. As I reached the top of the stairs, the voices grew more distinct. I followed the sound to a door at the end of the landing and, reaching up, I pulled on the handle. There before me removing what remained of their clothing were Mum and Bill, who then climbed into bed. Thinking they were playing some sort of game, I immediately took off all my clothes and climbed into the bottom of the bed where, fortunately, I must have fallen asleep, as I do not recall any more after that.

While as a three year old I couldn't have understood then that my mother and Bill were having sex, those images would endure and be revisited at a time when I was old enough to understand what they were really doing. Unbeknown to my mother, she had given birth to a child who could recall memories in vivid detail from the age of two onwards. Unbeknown to me, this particular memory was just

the beginning and served as a taste of the kind of selfish hedonism to which my mother would subject my sisters and me over the years to come.

Indeed, Babylon was merely the first stop on a roller-coaster ride I had no business being on. I wouldn't know it then but by that time I was already trapped; trapped on a ride driven by my mother, a ride that hurtled from place to place, from one upheaval to the next, and with no idea where we were headed or how to get off.

So, back to the power of music to stir memories. I'd also come to learn in time how for each chaotic episode there would be a song, or songs. In the case of Bill, there were three such tunes my mother associated with him which would form parts of the soundtrack to her dissolute life. As for me, whenever I hear 'If You Leave Me Now' by Chicago, 'My Girl, Bill' by Jim Stafford, and 'Don't Give Up On Us' by David Soul, I'm three-years-old once again, back on that roller-coaster ride yelling at the top of my lungs to be let off, a cry to which no-one ever responded.

Chapter 3 – My Tormented Tormentor

*“Innocence ends when one is stripped of the delusion
that one likes oneself.”*

— Joan Didion

Not long after mum’s secret rendezvous with Bill, Dad found out they’d been having an affair. To this day I don’t know how he learned of mum’s infidelity. However, Dad left Dee and me in no doubt that Mum had done something wrong when he lashed out at her in front of us. Despite the fact that his children were in the room, Dad rained blows on Mum while Dee and I stood by, terrified, helpless and sobbing. I wish I could say this was the only time as a child that I’d witness Dad beating Mum up, alas, I cannot. While he may have relieved his frustration towards her, time would reveal how thrashing my mother did nothing to deter her future behaviour. Furthermore, by lashing out at her in the way he did, Dad had begun to sow future seeds of resentment within me; seeds which, once germinated, would pit us against each other and foment the kind of mutual animosity from which our relationship would never recover.

On her part, Mum had embarked on a course of conduct which would alienate her not only from Dad’s extended family but, eventually, her own. Dad’s younger sister, Jackie, whose husband had left her following an affair with Dad’s first wife, had never taken to Mum, regarding her as devious and incapable of telling the truth. Mum cooked her own goose the day she telephoned Auntie Jackie to ask if she’d be Bill’s escort to the annual Prudential staff party. Smelling a rat straight away, Auntie Jackie flatly refused and told Mum in no uncertain terms that she knew what her game was. One more incident would seal Mum’s fate with her sister-in-law and soon enough that moment came.

For someone who thought nothing of having sex with another man in the presence of her child, anything is within their capabilities. Therefore, when Auntie Jackie revealed to me years later the events that unfolded one afternoon around the time of Bill, I wasn't at all surprised. At that time, Auntie Jackie shared the family home at Campshill Road with her mother and father and her two teenage sons, Adam and Nicky, providing care for them all. Relying heavily on the financial support of her estranged husband, Jim, Auntie Jackie received six pounds per week towards the upkeep of both boys.

Following Jim's weekly visit to drop off the six pounds, Dad, Mum, Dee and I came to visit. Within minutes of us leaving, Auntie Jackie went to check her purse and found the six pounds missing and broke down in tears. When her father, Harry, heard her crying he asked her what was wrong. Furious to learn of the betrayal, no sooner had Auntie Jackie revealed the theft to her dad than Harry rang our home and demanded to know who had taken it. Dad in turn confronted mum who revealed three-year-old me to be the culprit.

Fortuitously, my cousin Nicky had witnessed the theft with his own eyes, revealing that he'd seen my mum take it. Humiliated and suitably embarrassed, Dad drove straight back round to Campshill Road to return the pilfered money to its rightful owner. Consequently, to the accusations against mum in Auntie Jackie's eyes of being devious and incapable of telling the truth, the charge of thief could be added.

Despite what time would reveal to be an almost relentless succession of irresponsible and erratic behaviour, following the Bill Stone saga, Mum and Dad would enjoy something of a reconciliation. Following their reunion, in an act which was dubbed 'the baby to save the marriage', Mum fell pregnant again. In

September, 1977, my younger sister, Saskia, or Sas as she came to be called, was born.

Prior to Sas' birth, during the summer of that year, we moved the short distance of less than a mile from Westdean Avenue to a new home on Guibal Road in Lee. Situated at number 32, our house was actually located in a cul-de-sac off Guibal Road. With its kitchen on the ground floor, living room and Mum and Dad's bedroom on the first floor and our bedrooms at the top, our house at Guibal Road had a very topsy-turvy feel. Like our previous house, this too was three-bedroomed, however, all the rooms in our new home were noticeably bigger.

So, for now, by late 1977, the Hills family had moved home and gained another member in the form of little Sas. In addition, I'd joined Dee at Horn Park, starting in the infants for half-days for the first term, while Dee began her first year at Horn Park primary. Signalling the calm before the oncoming storm, the mood at home at that time felt particularly joyful. Central to the jubilation was of course our younger sibling. For one of the few times that I can recall, my parents appeared happy and united. There would be no better example of their joy than when they'd stand approximately ten feet apart from each other and throw Sas to and fro between them. While the little girl giggled with delight, I held my breath, afraid they might drop her. Alas, the joy of Sas' birth would be short-lived as the period following her arrival would see a sudden escalation in my mother's behaviour, which took on a darker and more unwholesome dimension.

Ordinarily a source of great fun for children, bath times for Dee and me of a Sunday night were no different. Following the hilarity of pulling our shampoo-thickened hair into bunny ears and sliding around a drained bath, we laid across Mum's lap so she could rub talcum powder into our skin. However, it was following bath time

that my mother began to both cup our genitals in addition to which she'd pull our buttocks wide apart before sinking her teeth into one of our cheeks. While this particular habit of grabbing our genitals originated following bath times, the biting was not a new occurrence and had in fact begun while we lived at Westdean Avenue.

While I'm well aware of how playfulness between parents and their children can take many different forms, any kind of activity which causes a child harm cannot be considered playful. Even if my mother's original intent in what followed was playful, it did not end that way. Continuing an act which I later learned she inflicted on her own much younger siblings, Mum took to biting Dee and me on our arms. With me being the smaller child, I bore the brunt of the assaults each time my mother scooped me up from the lounge floor where I'd be playing, hold me to her chest and begin biting my arms. However, this was not playful biting, as Mum would sink her teeth deep into my skin. The depth of her bite was such that when she finally let me go, a wailing and quivering mess, through my tears I'd look down at my arms and see teeth marks embedded in my skin. Adding insult to injury, with my pleas to stop whenever she bit me going ignored, I'd began hitting Mum in the face. As if to punish me for defending myself, in response she hit me back many times harder.

Alas, I wish I could say that my father was on hand to protect us but I cannot, even though he knew what had been going on. On a number of occasions during this time I'd arrive along with Dad and Dee at the home of Auntie Grace with bite marks on my arm. With no confirmation needed on my part as to who was responsible, Auntie Grace told me to tell my mum that if she bites me again, she would come round and bite her. My teenage cousin, Adam, would find me in similar circumstances with bite marks up my arm. Offering me his comfort after having found me sobbing on my bed

on one particular occasion, Adam reported back to his mum how she must've really hurt me.

However, gratuitous biting would pale in comparison with what came next which constituted the single most terrifying moment of my young life. Few who recall the most severe punishment they ever endured would forget what prompted it. While I had it in myself to be a naughty child, still to this day I cannot account for my mother's actions on the day in question. Yet, the shock of being grabbed by her so suddenly and so forcefully was such that before I knew what had happened, I was supine on her bedroom floor with a pillow hurtling towards my face. The next thing I knew everything went black and immediately I began to kick and scream. While Mum pressed down on the pillow I continued to struggle in absolute terror. In what must've been no more than a minute yet felt like an eternity, Mum suddenly let go of the pillow before running out of the room in tears. Feeling dazed and confused, I sat up and my tears began flowing with abandon. After having calmed down, I brushed sweaty hair from my face and made for the lounge, tears still rolling down my cheeks.

What happened next goes against the human instinct for self preservation, yet, in the context of a child's bond with a parent makes perfect sense. At that very moment, the only thing I wanted to do was be comforted, by my mother, the very person who had hurt me so brutally. Curiously, I'd witness the same inclination in other children many years later as part of my work in residential children's homes. Placed many miles away for their own protection from parents who only meant them harm, there were those among our young charges who'd abscond back to the very people who posed the greatest risk to their well-being. I wouldn't know it then but in a little over ten years time I'd find myself in similar circumstances to those children. For now, in need of her consolation, I went into the lounge and approached my mum who

was slumped in a chair, crawled under her arm and curled up beside her.

While the extent of my mother's violence would never again reach such an extreme as this, as long as we were small enough to be treated in such a way, she would continue to do as her mood dictated. Although not as harrowing, my mother would show a similar level of aggression the day I came home as a six-year-old smelling of smoke after having had a cigarette shoved in my mouth by a group of older boys who collared me while out riding my bike. Grabbing me with one hand and a piece of off-cut wood in the other, my mother made me hold my arm out and thrashed me across the wrist with it. While doing a kind of war dance and watching through tears as my wrist turned purple, I managed to tell Mum that the older boys shoved the cigarette in my mouth and told me to suck on it. Despite my confession, Mum continued thrashing me for not knocking on someone's door to tell them what the boys were trying to make me do. Needless to say that such a suggestion did not occur to me while surrounded by a group of menacing boys twice my height.

Although like mine, her perspective and experiences are uniquely hers, both Dee and I endured similar assaults against us at that time and also subsequently. Even the most minor of provocations were met with a totally disproportionate level of force. Indeed, my mother would think nothing of picking up a pair of scissors and throwing them at us. A similarly favoured projectile took the form of her wooden sole Dr. Scholl sandals while on other occasions she would take to us with the kind of black flex cord which powered a portable cassette player before proceeding to whip us, prompting another war type dance. Coupled with the ongoing biting of our bottoms and arms and the groping, Dee and I found ourselves on our guard very early on, having also learned quickly how to duck when some projectile came flying our way.

Although it's true to say that abuse takes many forms, the neglect that Dee and I would experience in later years also had its roots during this time. My mother, while wanting a comfortable home in which to live, took no pride in maintaining it and did the minimum she could get away with to fulfil our basic needs. With Dad being the kind of man who expected his dinner on the table when he came home from work, Mum ensured that she at least fulfilled that obligation. Any others, such as tending house, were done sporadically and reluctantly.

Indeed, two such glaring examples at that time were the condition of our toilets and my bed sheets. In the case of the former, our toilets became so thick with wee- and poo-stained limescale that on the rare occasion any extended family members came to visit, they refused to use the toilet. As for my bed sheets, which I'd soil nightly, instead of replacing them with fresh ones, my mother took to placing my bedside lamp underneath the sheet and opening my bedroom window. Consequently, I went to sleep each night to the acidic odour of a urine stinking sheet only to wake up in the morning and find I'd soiled it anew.

Furthermore, a similar odour would have hit anyone in the face who dared to open the laundry cupboard on the ground floor, as urine-soaked sheets were left to rot for months on end. However, my mother was not without a capacity to show care and attention. Indeed, she was never more attentive towards us than at Christmas, when she'd pull out all the stops to buy us the Christmas presents we wanted, and when we were poorly and off sick from school. Yet, that is where the extent of my mother's care ended and in the not-too- distant future, Dee and I would find ourselves alone, far away in another country where we had to fend for our own selves.

Despite the trials and tribulations of home life, nothing made me happier at that time than riding off for hours on my Raleigh Budgie

bicycle. Such was the way of parenting back in the 1970s that children would play out for hours on end without their parents knowing where they were or what they were up to. Therefore, I could ride far away on my bike for as long as I wanted and so I freely indulged my singular and independent streak. However, being a fast runner like Dee, we also enjoyed the opportunity of playing out with the other kids of Guibal Road, indulging in such street games as British bulldog, hide and seek, knockdown ginger and three bad eggs.

Interestingly, it was about this time in the late 1970s when the most unexpected and thrilling moment of my life thus far occurred. Out on my bike one sunny day, I came to the end of Guibal Road as usual, poised to turn left before coasting down the hilly Winn Road. For some unknown reason, I suddenly turned right. Just then, as I headed past a small green, I caught sight of a boy roughly my age playing alone on the grass. Drawn to him by the fact that I hadn't seen him before, and wouldn't thereafter, I stopped and said hello. Having exchanged pleasantries and a mutual desire to want play, my new friend invited me to his house to see his newborn brother. Being well in practice at cooing to newborn babies, I cheerfully accepted. To my surprise, my friend's house, which could be seen from the green, was situated directly across the busy main road of Burnt Ash Hill. Within minutes we were peering into the cot of his baby brother, who stared contentedly back at us as we shook the mobiles suspended above his cot.

Just then, the sound of heavy footsteps distracted me and as I turned towards the bedroom door, in bounded an enormous man, naked except for a towel in his hand which he used to dry the back of his head. Clearly fresh from bathing, my friend's dad stopping briefly to see what we were doing before continuing to dry his mop of curly red hair. With the exception of my Dad I hadn't seen another man naked. Yet, this man looked decidedly different to my dad and I

couldn't take my eyes off him as he continued to dry his hair. Each backwards and forwards motion caused the large muscles on his raised arms to jiggle. His hairy chest had a broadness to it quite unlike my father's while his large penis dangled proudly between muscular thighs and I found myself completely transfixed.

For the rest of that day and on many occasions since, I've revisited that moment which has remained so vivid in my mind. Although at the age of six I couldn't possibly have understood why it had excited me in the way it did, there would come a time in the future where I could relate an awareness of my orientation back to this one event. Furthermore, I'd become aware in time of the absence of similar feelings of intrigue and excitement about the naked female form. For now, however, I just wanted to be a happy boy, ride my bike and be free. Alas, until such time as my mother was no longer a part of my life, that would not be possible. You'd think I'd have learnt that by now, wouldn't you?

Chapter 4 – The Art of Imitation

“The child is the father of the man.”

— William Wordsworth

Standing behind me in the bathroom as he fastened the blue and gold striped tie around my neck, Dad prepared me for my first day at Horn Park Infants School. Until such time as I learned to tie my own tie, I relied on Dad to do it for me. To the feeling of the breath from his nose on the back of my neck and the scent of Old Spice, I stood as still as I could until he'd finished. As smart as I must've looked in my new grey shorts and blue v-neck sweater, I dreaded the prospect of my first day at school.

With my brown and orange faux-leather satchel flapping at my side, Dad led me by the hand up a set of steps and into the main building. The contrast in the light was such that it took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dingy concourse before us. A peculiar musty smell in the air I would later learn originated from the books on the bookcases bordering a carpeted area to one side. Standing tall in the corner among the bookcases was the object so commonplace in schools in the '70s and '80s. Concealed behind a cabinet atop four chrome legs and wheeled feet was the school television.

Having slowed us down with my gawping, Dad pulled me to him and led me in the same direction he must've led Dee two years earlier. Stopping outside a closed door, Dad knocked and waited. Just then, out strode the terrifying figure of Miss Norton, the school headmistress. Austere in both her dress and manner, Miss Norton cut an altogether severe, no nonsense character. It was while looking up at this fearsome looking lady before me that I eyed Miss Norton's most peculiar characteristic. Sitting just below her hairline

on one side of her forehead was a purple birth mark. Resembling a smaller version of that belonging to future leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, Miss Norton's birth mark immediately captivated me. However, I'd soon become distracted from it the moment Dad let go of my hand and left me in the charge of Miss Norton. While tears streamed down my face, Miss Norton lead me down a long corridor to the classroom of my new teacher, an equally stern and forbidding looking woman by the name of Miss Taylor.

Despite being the youngest child in my class, before long I had settled in fairly easily among my new classmates. All the teachers, with Miss Norton at the helm, ran a consistently tight ship. Their no nonsense approach to thwarting misbehaviour while offering little in the way of soothing words to a distressed child would characterise my school experience both then and in the years that followed.

The sternness of the teachers aside, school would become a perpetual struggle for me on account of what I came to recognise as an inability to concentrate for too long. Despite moments of almost zen-like focus and fixation on a particular task, from which I could not break until I'd finished it, on the whole my focus in class remained poor. In later years this would manifest itself in my disrupting lessons by seizing the opportunity to play the clown and the class comedian. Little did I realise then that I'd be merely emulating at school the role I'd end up falling into at home.

The difficulties of the classroom notwithstanding, like most children, the place where I felt happiest was in the playground. Remaining one of the smallest children in my class throughout school, I found myself blessed with winged feet. My ability to be able to outrun children much older than me stood me in good stead. In addition to being swift of foot, I had a tendency to be equally

swift of mouth, taking great delight in taunting my elders, whom I'd invariably outrun whenever they tried to catch me and duff me up.

In a similar manner to the classroom, the place where I felt most ill-at-ease was in morning assembly. As was the case in most schools around the country, assembly took place in the school hall. There, children sat cross-legged in rows on hard, varnished parquet floors. However, the discomfort of the floor paled in comparison to what happened each time assembly got under way. No sooner had Miss Norton begun to address the hall than I'd experience a sudden swelling sensation in my shorts. In a state of confusion, I immediately pressed down on the lump with both thumbs in an attempt to make it go away. For fear of revealing my embarrassment to those around me, I kept my head bowed until such time as the lump began to subside. Suffice to say that until those unfortunate episodes subsided, I found myself dreading morning assembly.

Nonetheless, with my first year at Horn Park coming to a close in the summer of 1978, I looked forward to showing Mum and Dad my work during parents' evening. However, it was not my parents' reaction to my sloping handwriting on the unlined page of my exercise book that I'd remember about my first parents' evening. No. This particular evening was more memorable for the first of many audacious acts on my mother's part of petty larceny.

With parents' evening having concluded, we made our way down the corridor leading to the dingy concourse and the way out. Before reaching the end of the corridor, in the last classroom, we passed a pretty array of whicker baskets. Just then, my mother darted into the classroom and seized a basket before rejoining us in the corridor. Despite my sense that she'd done something she probably shouldn't have, the effortlessness with which she acted made her behaviour seem strangely acceptable. Yet, I wouldn't realise until later on just how conditioned I was fast becoming by Mum's behaviour.

When my mother took a dislike to someone there'd be very little they could do to redeem themselves. From certain individuals to specific groups and from the old to the young, my mother could dislike someone at will. However, this often worked both ways each time someone learned that despite being charming to their face, she'd been talking about them behind their back. They in turn would end up distancing themselves from her. Indeed, there would come a time in the not-too-distant future where, on account of her behaviour, my mother would alienate herself not only from Dad's side of the family but her own as well. Unsurprisingly, there would never be a time in her life when she'd have any real friends.

During this period in the late 1970s, events transpired to set the family tone in a way which would endure throughout the 1980s. Aside from these, three specific events occurring around this time I recall with nothing else except shame and regret. Taken together, they provide a stark illustration of how my mother's behaviour had begun to influence my own. The first involved my discovering the whereabouts of the keys to my father's cash box from which I subsequently stole a small sum of money. What I'd fail to realise as a foolish six-year-old boy was that I had taken money paid to him by his customers for their monthly insurance premiums; money he would have to repay from his own pocket.

While stealing from my own father remained an isolated occurrence, so to was an incident which followed, although that in no way absolves me of any wrongdoing. Whether influenced by the so-called Battle of Lewisham, which saw five-hundred members of the National Front attempt to march from New Cross to nearby Lewisham in August 1977, my mother began to openly express a revulsion of black people, referring to them pejoratively as coons. To my shame I found myself one particular day facing the wall outside headmaster Mr. Thomas's office for having used an even

more revolting slur against a mixed-race girl in my class. Again, thankfully, this too remained an isolated occurrence.

As previously mentioned, even when my mother took a dislike to someone, being averse to confrontation as she was, she'd be nothing but charming to their face. Two examples from this time were our next door neighbour, a rather haughty Margot Leadbetter type called Muriel and my form teacher at the time, a lady by the name of Miss Costaras. In Muriel's case, I suspect that her crime was her snooty upper-class manner, something to which my mother aspired and of which, it is more likely than not, she harboured feelings of jealousy. Further damning Muriel in Mum's eyes was how she referred to her baby daughter. Rather than calling her Caroline, Muriel referred to her daughter by the nickname "Corky" for which Mum mocked her behind closed doors. As for Miss Costaras, this surly and unfortunate woman would get the treatment each time Mum referred to her as "horse-face" courtesy of her equine features.

While my mother remained charming in the presence of those she privately disliked, my half-sister, Leigh, remained the one person outside our immediate family to whom Mum would be openly spiteful. Unbeknown to me at the time, I myself would unwittingly become party to my mother's spite towards her step-daughter. Not until the early to mid 1980s would I learn of the existence of Leigh's, my father's daughter from his first marriage. This would only come about one July day when he received a birthday card saying 'to dear dad' and signed from Leigh. Dad never spoke of Leigh and it wasn't until March, 1989, that I'd meet Leigh properly, albeit under unfortunate circumstances. It would be another twenty years hence that I'd sit down with her as an adult and discover the full extent of my mother's wickedness towards her.

As Dee and I would have daily proof, my mother had very little patience and care for children. Therefore, it came as no real surprise

years later when she admitted to her dislike of them. As mentioned previously, this is not to say that Mum was immune to random acts of kindness. Indeed, she was never more attentive than when we were off sick from school, or more generous than at Christmas. She would even go so far on one occasion to surprise Dee, who'd gone into hospital to have her tonsils removed. With Dee's hospital admission coinciding with the popularity of Saturday Night Fever and Grease, Mum hurriedly cobbled together a scrap book of newspaper cuttings featuring John Travolta, a favourite of Dee's at the time. Furthermore, Mum would go on to exhibit similar generosity towards her children at certain moments in the future. However, given the context, her generosity perhaps owed more to a need to atone for her behaviour than a desire to do selfless good.

Despite having experienced first-hand how spiteful my mother could be towards children, the disclosures made during my meeting with Leigh left me shocked. Without a hint of malice in her voice as she spoke, Leigh explained how, as an eight-year-old girl, she would take two buses from her home in Kidbrooke to visit her father at his flat in Bennett Park, Blackheath. Following her knock at his door, my mother answered and informed Leigh that her father wasn't home. This turned out to be untrue, with the lie being confirmed to Leigh by Dad in a subsequent telephone call that he had in fact been at the flat when she called.

As if this first revelation were not appalling enough, what followed would be even more reprehensible. Indeed, Leigh went on to explain that on those occasions when she was able to see her father, they'd often walk along the street holding hands with my mother following behind. In an act of particular cruelty, Mum would take to slapping their hands in an attempt to break the bond between father and daughter. It wouldn't be too long before Mum would actually succeed in permanently severing the already fragile bond between them. This came on the day when Leigh, as a ten-year-old girl,

received a phone call from her father to say that in order to keep the peace at home, he could no longer see her.

Despite the devastating news, Leigh made consistent attempts at regular intervals throughout the seventies to contact her father by phone. These were similarly unsuccessful each time my mother answered and told Leigh that Dad was out and to stop calling. This is where I came in the day I sat with my colouring book on the bottom step of the stairs next to the telephone table at our home in Guibal Road.

The phone call which came this particular day would otherwise have been unremarkable had my mother not berated the caller by name before telling them not to call again. Being unaware of the existence of my half-sister at that time, I believed the caller to have been a male by the name of Lee. When the phone rang again, my mother told me to fetch my descant recorder and remove the mouthpiece. Following this, she said that if the phone rang again I must blow on the mouthpiece as hard as I could down the phone. Then, if that didn't work, she told me to lower my voice and announce that 'Lee' had come through to switchboard of the local police station. It was not until Leigh mentioned her attempts to phone her father that I realised I'd been used as my mother's stooge. Although I could not have been held responsible for my part in such a deplorable episode, this did not prevent me from feeling obliged to apologise to Leigh subsequently for any hurt that I'd caused.

While there'd be many times in the not-too-distant future when I'd find myself once again a stooge for my mother, the stooge in what can only be described as an utterly repulsive act of depravity this time involved my baby sister, Sas. With Dee and I already on our guard against various airborne objects hurtling towards us in addition to the threat of being mercilessly bitten, came perhaps the most disturbing act of all. Beginning during her nappy change, Sas

often ran naked around the lounge until she had a clean nappy put on. However, before then my mother would scoop her baby daughter up and, with Sas's back against Mum's chest, she'd pull her legs back, thereby fully exposing Sas's vulva and anus. Thinking it was all some sort of game, the giggling baby then found herself thrust genitals first into the face of whoever, between Dee or me, happened to be close by. With our faces covered in the revolting smell of our sister's unwashed genitals we'd rush in tears to the bathroom and frantically scrub our face clean. Such humiliation would continue until such time as our reflexes improved and Sas became too heavy for Mum to lift.

As for Dad, it would be his and Dee's mutual love of football which formed the basis of their bond as the 1970s drew to a close. Despite my disinterest in football, I'd often feel left out every Saturday afternoon that Dad and Dee went to see Charlton Athletic play at home. On the one occasion when Dad did take me, I misbehaved to such an extent that he vowed never to take me again. However, when he took us with him to see the greyhound racing at Catford dogs, that was a different matter. Indeed, the deafening roar of the spectators each time the dogs were released from their traps thrilled us immensely. Likewise, the discarded programs lying around on the ground like snow, which Dee and I would kick up and then watch as they fluttered back down to the ground as we left the stadium.

Nonetheless, by taking Dee to the football, Mum convinced herself that Dad meant to deliberately exclude me. For me, consolation lay in the records Mum would play as we sat together and listened. While football provided the bonding element for Dad and Dee, music provided the same for Mum and me. To my delight, Mum went out and bought me a radiogram, which quickly became my most treasured possession. To the song 'The Wonderful Thing About Tiggers' I'd bounce up and down on my bed and sing along,

pretending to be Tigger. Peculiarly, having experienced more alone time with Mum than did Dee, and by now aged seven, I found myself becoming more attuned to her moods and emotions.

For the first time during the summer of 1980, I sensed in my mother the kind of discontent and restlessness which would cause so much disruption to our family throughout the 1980s. Not only would the new decade see us make a number of regular house moves, it would also see us move abroad in pursuit of the kind of happiness which always seemed to elude my mother. With her perception that there were too many black people in suburbia, she began to openly protest at having to stay in London and suddenly proposed that we move to the country. The hand of fate would play a part around this time one Saturday in Lewisham. There, an event took place which my mother would leverage and bring about our move out of London at the end of 1980 for good.

With my first year at Horn Park Primary School fast approaching, Mum, Dee and I headed one Saturday to Lewisham precinct to buy our new school uniforms. As we walked, Mum suddenly stopped to retrieve her purse from her bag. No sooner had she reached in than three black youths ripped her bag from her hand and ran out of the main entrance. The next time we saw Mum's bag it had been handed in to her local bank, minus the contents. While being the victim of a snatch theft must have been unpleasant enough, Mum wasted no time in leveraging the youths' race in order to support her case for moving away. In addition to this, she would also invoke the name of her good friend, Pauline.

As stated previously, my mother would navigate life making very few friends along the way. Therefore, it came as something of a surprise when she began to speak of moving down to Maidstone in Kent to be nearer this never before heard of lady by the name of Pauline. It would transpire that Pauline and Mum had attended

school together. However, we had never met Pauline and, unsurprisingly, following our move to Maidstone we would meet Pauline only once. Nevertheless, in November, 1980, we moved the forty-six mile distance from south-east London to West Kent to a village to the south of Maidstone named Coxheath.

Sparing a thought for Dad, while he managed to gain a transfer with the Prudential with relative ease, London had always been his home and that of his ageing relatives. Indeed, despite our move to Kent, we would make regular return trips with him to see our aunties, Liz, Grace and Jackie. What these forays made clear was that Dad never wanted to leave London and only agreed to do so to appease my mother. Unfortunately for him, he would find himself in a similar dilemma less than six years later while torn between staying in or leaving the UK. Alas, he had begun to make a rod for his own back and it appeared there was little he wouldn't do to please my mother, regardless of the cost to his health and his wallet.

For now, having settled into our new home in Coxheath, Dee and I were enrolled in the nearby Junior School while Sas followed into the infants two years later. As for Mum, she was finally away from London and also the proud owner of a brand-new split level cooker she insisted be installed in our new home. Knowing that he'd be the main beneficiary of her demand, Dad was only too happy to oblige her. Yet, it remained to be seen for how long following this current move my mother would remain happy. Alas, we hadn't been in Maidstone for long before she and my father continued in earnest something which had begun in London. Between them they were about to embark on the kind of corrosive favouritism which would pit me against my father and create a mutual hostility from which our relationship would never recover.

Chapter 5 – Battle Lines Drawn

“The family is one of nature’s masterpieces.”

— George Santayana

Within weeks of our move to Georgian Drive, an event occurred which would shock the world. During the seventies, there were two particular images I’d consistently see in newspapers and on television. The first featured a thin man with round wire-rimmed glasses while the other featured an altogether captivating blonde-haired lady. While too young at first to know who they were, their images impressed upon me a sense of how very important they must’ve been to a lot of people. Tragically, I’d see the man again on the front page of Dad’s copy of *The Daily Mirror* when it landed on our doormat on 10th December, 1980. As for the lady, I’d find myself similarly saddened three and a half years later to learn of her death from cancer, such was the enduring popularity of British legends Diana Dors and John Lennon.

It seemed rather ironic considering the difference in purity between the London and Kentish air that within weeks of our move to Maidstone I’d be diagnosed with asthma. Almost overnight, I began having regular attacks which left me severely short of breath. Furthermore, the greater the attack, the more hysterical I became which in turn worsened the attack. My request to Mum to call a doctor would almost always be met with the response that a doctor wouldn’t make a home visit for a simple asthma attack. Instead, Mum would resort to sitting me on the floor following which we’d link hands and after placing her feet on my chest she’d begin vigorously rubbing up and down. Alas, Mum’s home remedy was no match for a steroid inhaler upon which I’d remain dependent until well into my twenties.

Although my difficulties with concentration and focus in class persisted, I wasted no time in making friends. Chief among them was a similarly short-legged fellow with boyish good-looks by the name of Dale. With our class and every other throughout the school separated into designated houses for sports and competitions, being in the same house as Dale, I naturally gravitated towards him.

In addition, I found myself before long drawn to an otherwise nondescript blonde-haired blue-eyed girl by the name of Elizabeth. As well as being a fellow recorder player, Elizabeth had her own horse. Peculiarly, I have no idea why Elizabeth in particular became the focus of my attention among all the girls in my class. With me being completely uninterested in football, the girls were the only ones at playtime with whom I could play. Yet, Elizabeth's tendency to wet herself in PE then put her hand up to be excused before rushing off in a humiliated state and leaving a pool of urine behind further endeared her to me. Why she didn't put her hand up before she wet herself, I'll never know. However, when Elizabeth started going out with Dale, I began to feel proper pangs of jealousy.

Our house at Georgian Drive was the first of two houses in which my mother insisted on having a split-level cooker installed. Ironically, the kitchen would be the room in which she'd spend the least amount of time. While she knew she could not avoid having to cook my father's dinner each lunchtime, my mother would not prepare anything for Dee, Sas and me for tea beyond a sandwich, a packet of crisps and a Cadbury's mini-roll. However, come the weekend, we'd sit together as a family for lunch. On these days we ate solely the kind of meals that Dad would eat, such as liver and bacon, beef stew and dumplings or sausage casserole. Never one to rush his food, and inclined to read his newspaper while he ate, Dad would always be the last one to leave the table.

Christmas 1980 marked the only time Mum's parents, whom we referred to as Nanny and Granddad, came to us for Christmas dinner. Although we'd visit Nanny and Granddad a number of times throughout the year, it was rare for them to visit us. Whichever way around it was, Nanny always greeted her daughter by remarking on her weight. Moreover, whether it was her intention to antagonise my mother further, Nanny would spend an inordinate amount of time praising Mum's younger sister, Kathleen, stating repeatedly how she had a heart of gold. Despite the festivities, Nanny then made a point of cleaning the kitchen from top to bottom, implying that if she didn't do it then it wouldn't get done.

Bearing in mind her daughter's lack of house pride, of course, Nanny was right. However, when considered in the context of her comments about Mum's weight and the high praise reserved for Kathleen, Mum saw Nanny's comments, perhaps justifiably, as thinly-veiled put downs. The lack of genuine affection for my mother by her own appeared obvious, despite Mum's attempts to try to please her. Dad, on his part, would always refer to Nanny as Mum, despite being only ten years her junior.

Unlike his wife, Granddad appeared gentle and kind and not at all the strict disciplinarian that my mother described. Regarding Granddad, Mum described a man who would take his belt to his children without a moment's hesitation. Furthermore, she recalled how her father would hit her in the face and make her mouth bleed while her mother stood by and laughed. By now, this man cut a much softened figure and seemed to enjoy nothing more than cooking, maintaining a comfortable home and keeping his wife happy.

On the other hand, with Auntie Joyce, Nanny's sister, living upstairs in their shared house, it's true to say that a browbeaten Granddad often found himself ganged up on. In less than four years I myself

would witness the fury of both women when they'd reveal their true feelings about my mother. Yet, Granddad's warmth endeared me to him, despite the awkwardness of our goodbyes. To Mum, Dee and Sas he'd invite them with outstretched arms to give him a banger (a kiss). To me, he'd merely pat me on the head and declare that boys don't kiss.

If it's generally true that families share a similar sense of humour, it's fair to say that ours was straight out of the bawdy Carry On mould. Music and comedy appeared to have the effect on my mother of lightening her mood and lifting her spirits. In addition, by this time I'd begun to develop the kind of quick-witted repartee she found appealing and which made her laugh. Consequently, our shared sense of humour and similar taste in music and film brought me firmly into her favour. The favouritism, such as it was, that my mother began to show me at this time she justified on the basis that she was merely compensating for what she felt I wasn't getting from my father. Even at age seven, I possessed the kind of characteristics which appealed to my mother and which she had not found in her husband, specifically the capacity to make her laugh.

Predictably, with my mother's focus firmly on me instead of my father, I began to find myself the target of his ire. This usually manifested itself by him hitting me around the head repeatedly for often trivial reasons. Indeed, the cat and dog quarrelling which took place between Dee and I provided him with the perfect excuse to intervene at the earliest opportunity and begin belting me repeatedly around the head.

As if the blows themselves were not enough, the signet ring Dad wore on his little finger would often catch me, resulting in a cut to my head. Tellingly, my father only hit me around the head and never Dee or Sas. Somewhat hypocritically, my mother, who was still very much in the habit of launching scissors and similar projectiles at us,

warned my father against consistently hitting me around the head. However, it's entirely plausible that he continued to do so in order to get back at her for making me the focus of her attention rather than him. Upping the ante, my mother would begin to belittle him openly by calling him a "weed" and remarked on how he wasn't happy unless he was "mithering about something". To his complaints about his sleepless nights or upset stomachs she'd dismiss them as being all in the mind and express thinly-veiled regret that he'd likely outlive us all.

Moreover, there were consequences for poor Dee, who would also be brought into the fray. It's fair to say that Dee regarded me as every inch the annoying little brother. It's also true to say that I sensed an indifference from Dee towards me and my merciless teasing of her was often a childish attempt on my part to gain her attention. However, Mum began to act towards Dee in the same way that Dad had towards me each time that with little provocation she'd hit Dee. Adding insult to injury, Mum would often criticise Dee for what remained of her south London accent, cruelly mocking her for sounding like a "fish-wife", and a "coal-man's daughter". These divisions would only deepen on all sides with each passing year until they'd reach the seemingly inevitable breaking point towards the end of the decade. In the meantime, Mum doubled down and ensured each Christmas that my presents were laid out on the lounge settee while Dee's and Sas's were crammed into the two matching armchairs.

On his part, Dad also doubled down in his behaviour towards me. In an attempt to belittle and intimidate me, Dad would often come into the bathroom after I'd gone to the toilet, or blown my nose, to check how much toilet paper I'd used. On those occasions where he considered the amount I'd used gratuitous, he'd resort to calling me a "waster". Next, if I ate more than one sandwich biscuit and one plain one he'd brand me a "gannet". Moreover, on the odd occasion

where I accidentally broke something he'd yell and call me a "clown" or a "toe-rag".

However, I was not then, and nor since, someone who would allow myself to be easily intimidated. Consequently, Dad and I would enter into running battles as to who'd have the last word, which invariably ended in him losing his patience and hitting me around the head once again. Yet, I would not roll over and his hostility towards me not only strengthened my resolve but served to deepen my resentment towards him. This resentment would become fixed eighteen months later following an event which threatened to tear already fragile bonds to pieces. Indeed, rather than address the favouritism problem, my father's hostility towards me merely intensified it and had the predictable consequence of bringing my mother and I closer together.

Keeping pace with one another, the emerging conflicts and the restlessness stirring once more within my mother set the tone for what lay ahead during the next few years. After only eighteen months at Georgian Drive my parents suddenly sold up. At my mother's insistence were about to move for the third time in five years although this time into rented accommodation on the other side of Coxheath. Yet, the move alone would not satisfy my mother. Maybe satisfaction would come courtesy of the only proper family holiday we'd have the month following our move in April, 1982.

However, my mother was beginning to display a tendency when the going was good to sabotage things for herself and those around her. So, in May of that year we jetted off for two weeks to the west coast of Cyprus to the ancient city of Paphos. How fitting then that the island considered the birthplace of the Greek goddess of love, lust, and passion would provide the setting for my mother's most audacious act to date; an act which would see her permanently

outcast from both sides of our family and brought her own to the very brink of destruction.

Chapter 6 – In Search of Koukليا

“Love is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all.”

— *Toni Morrison*

Following on from her grammar school days, my mother maintained a sense of self-education. During this period of the early 1980s, she’d develop keen interests in subjects such as heraldry, ancient Greek mythology and cosmology. The latter likely came about courtesy of the screening on BBC1 during the summer of 1981 of Carl Sagan’s thirteen part documentary series, entitled “Cosmos”. Unlike Dad, a creature of habit who remained steadfast with what he knew, Mum had a sense of adventure and a willingness to try new things. Both traits would be on full display during our upcoming holiday in Cyprus. Despite only having read about the eastern Mediterranean island, my mother decided she’d fallen in love before we’d even set foot there.

Whether kismet or mere coincidence, our holiday apartment in the west coast town of Paphos came about following an advertisement in my Dad’s company’s monthly newsletter. The owners of the apartment, a Greek Cypriot man and his British wife, ran their own holiday company in North London. By chance, our holiday coincided with the owner’s trip to Cyprus to visit his extended family who were also based in Paphos. Introducing himself to my mother by his Greek name of Stelios when he telephoned the apartment one particular day, we’d subsequently refer to him by the anglicised version of Steve.

While it’s fair to say that we were doing just fine before Steve made contact with us, things became much more eventful afterwards than they were before. Despite his intense dislike of driving, in order for

us to see the sights, Dad had to bite the bullet and hire a car. Top of Mum's list was the town of Kouklia, home of the remains of a sanctuary dedicated to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. The second on her list, 'Aphrodite's Rock', marked the birthplace of the legendary goddess born of the sea foam on the coast between Paphos and Limassol. Although we'd have no difficulty locating Aphrodite's Rock, owing to Dad's lack of confidence as a driver and unclear road signs, we'd never actually manage to find Kouklia, despite it being located no more than ten minutes from the rock itself.

Nevertheless, it's similarly fair to say that our holiday could be divided into two parts, the part before and the part involving Steve, who arrived at the apartment as arranged with my mother the day after his phone call. What transpired as he walked through the door I can only describe as the kind of combustible moment I'd witness between my mother and another man for the first and only time. Yet, the nature of Steve's appeal was certainly not in his appearance. At almost a year younger than my Dad at the age of forty-six, a little overweight and with a large, curved nose, Steve cut a rather ordinary figure. However, his appeal lay in the kind of charm, warmth, wit and sense of fun which, like a magnetic tractor beam, pulled us all in almost immediately.

On a separate yet related note, during our monthly visits to Auntie Jackie and the rest of Dad's family in London, I'd often hear her ask Dad what he saw in Mum. As if grappling for an answer, he'd always respond how she could be very charming. The part of her response I wouldn't hear as a child, although would learn as an adult, was how in addition to her charm she must be possessed of a 24-carat gold pussy. Indeed, her charms, which started from the moment she met Steve, would remain on full display for the duration of our holiday.

Starting as he meant to go on, the fun with Steve commenced the very first day of our meeting. In matching hire cars we began our tour of Paphos by following our host down to the harbour, home to a rather lonely looking castle and some enormous pelicans. From there we headed north for a swim in the sea at the renowned Coral Bay. Yet, perhaps the most memorable moment occurred as we entered a taverna on the hill above the beach following our swim. While we made our way through the entrance, an elderly lady reached out to my mother and handed her a small pastry parcel filled with cheese. Right there and then, in that simple gesture of hospitality, was the very moment my mother truly fell head over heels in love with Cyprus. Furthermore, in the days that followed she'd leave us all in absolutely no doubt whatsoever how she genuinely felt about one of its sons.

Continuing where we left off the following day, we headed over to the house of Steve's sister, Aristi. Sporting a similar shaped nose as her brother, we met Aristi and her four daughters, with the youngest two, named Christina and Stavroula, close in age to Dee and me. While sat on a bench under a large tree outside their rather dilapidated little home, with its wonky corrugated iron roof, Christina, Stavroula and I were tasked with making the tea.

On a battered old dual-burner camping stove, the girls boiled some water while I gathered some cups. In what would provide a moment of comedy gold, a solitary piece of crooked wallpaper stuck to the painted wall behind the burner suddenly caught fire. Following their initial screams, both girls quickly set about putting the fire out. That done, Christina then dove into a cupboard and produced a roll of wallpaper from which she cut a similar-sized square and placed it in the same spot on the wall in the same crooked fashion. Continuing on as if nothing had happened, both girls busied themselves once more with the tea.

As the days unfolded, the more time we spent with Steve the more captivated we became with him. Being exotic, cultured and fun, he embodied everything my father did not and the differences between both men could not have been starker. While eating out he'd teach me Greek phrases to say to the waiters. Furthermore, he'd do the same the evening Aristi and her daughters joined us all for dinner at the renowned Demokritos restaurant in Paphos old town. Yet, Steve truly secured his place in our affections the day he took us to an obscure beach located further up the western coast from Coral Bay. Upon the sands of Corallia Beach, he delighted us all by walking along a fair stretch of the beach on his hands. Such a feat my father would never have considered, let alone attempted.

In addition, the extent of Steve's thrill-seeking sense of adventure would be on full display during a subsequent trip into the mountains of Troodos. Following a visit to the famed Kykkos Monastery, Steve decided to take us back to Paphos the longer route via the mountains rather than go back the way we came. With the light eventually turning to dark and the mountain roads growing ever narrower, it became clear that Steve may have lost his way.

Being more like a footpath than a road, by now the ground beneath us was barely wider than the width of the car. Furthermore, the lack of any protective barriers against a sheer drop and the speed with which Steve drove left us all biting our knuckles to the bone. Adding insult to injury, Steve resorted to speeding up each time a mountain rabbit ran out in front of the car. Suddenly, with a loud bang followed by a bumping sensation, it became clear as we came to a halt that we had a flat tyre. With Steve and Dad working in tandem to change it, we were soon on our way and arrived back in Paphos late in the evening exhausted by our little detour.

Whether as a consequence of the recent activity, during the middle weekend of our holiday, I'd spend part of the day in the local

hospital following an asthma attack. Contrary to her usual indifference to them, this particular attack was sufficiently prolonged and intense for Mum and Dad to take me to Paphos hospital. After a few hours on oxygen, the medic packed me off, much to the amusement of all whom my father regaled subsequently, with two suppositories. How a suppository could prevent an asthma attack was anybody's guess. Indeed, had I rocked up with a broken leg, or worse, I suspect they would've handed me a suppository or two and sent me on my way!

Nothing which occurred at the beginning of our second week could've predicted how it would end. While the sudden change of pace was a welcome one and with Mum making no secret of the fact that she wanted to move to Cyprus, we'd spend the next few days viewing apartments. Yet, what started off as different and exciting soon became monotonous with each apartment we viewed. Consequently, when Mum announced one afternoon towards the end of the week that she and Steve were going to view another apartment, we were all content to stay home. Despite looking somewhat overdressed in a light cotton number she'd bought from a local gift shop, and with no objections, my mother left the apartment.

Considering how captivated Mum had been with Steve, and, seemingly, him with her, it should have come as no surprise to any of us when she didn't return to the apartment that night. Indeed, no-one who'd observed how engrossed in conversation with each other they were at any opportunity could deny the connection between them. Undoubtedly, he'd lit a fire under my mother and brought her fully to life in a way I'd seen neither before nor since. As unsettled as I was at the prospect of going to bed that night with her gone, in addition to being left alone with my father, I found myself invested in her happiness and went to sleep that night feeling strangely pleased for her.

Conversely, for my father I had little sympathy whatsoever. Although the sight of him sitting bolt upright on a sofa bed in the dark as I crept to the toilet in the middle of the night was a pitiable one, I naively considered him the source of my mother's unhappiness in addition to my own. The following day, my mother telephoned the apartment to say that she'd spent the night in the capital city, Nicosia. To the news that she didn't know exactly when she'd be back, Dad took us all to the beach opposite the apartment, which involved beating a mile long path through plantations and marshland.

With the two nights she'd been away having felt like an eternity, Mum returned the day before we were due to leave. Armed with boxes of Turkish delight for Dee, Sas and me, my mother wandered in without a care in the world. Considering how perfectly at ease she and Dad were with arguing in front of us children, the fallout I had expected didn't come, save a few cross words exchanged after we'd gone to bed on our last night.

The following day, the driver who'd fetched us in his Mercedes from Larnaca Airport met us outside the apartment for our return journey. Just then, at that very moment, Steve pulled up and came over to say goodbye. During the one and only time I'd see my father cross with another man, he proceeded to tick Steve off by telling him that he'd ruined his marriage. As our car pulled away, and with Mum sitting in the back with us, she pulled me to her and began crying, to which I found myself suddenly doing the same.

It took no time at all following our return home for us all to continue where we left off. Furthermore, Mum's dalliance with Steve compounded the ongoing tension between her and Dad. In addition, Dee and I continued to fight like cat and dog, as did Dad and me. As for Mum, she became increasingly withdrawn and began putting her headphones on and retreating into her own world.

Indeed, her lot would become a more onerous one following Dad's announcement that our rented accommodation placed an untenable burden on the family finances and that Mum must now find work.

Predictably, Dad's disclosure would not be music to the ears of someone who'd got away with doing as little around the home as possible and whose greatest pleasure at the time was sitting and listening to her music. Yet, the secretarial role Mum would shortly fulfil became the first in a slew of roles she'd gain and then quickly lose. Unfortunately for her, she possessed the kind of character inclined to talk about people behind their backs while remaining charming to their faces. Furthermore, until her colleagues knew better, they would unwisely take my mother into their confidence only for her to subsequently betray them to the rest of the staff.

Moreover, my mother engaged in the kind of shameless flirting with male colleagues which pitted her against the females in her office. Additionally, the prospect of an incident of petty theft remained a perpetual risk. All of these rather problematic tendencies meant my mother would be out of employment more often than in it. Indeed, jobs were easy enough for her to come by although much more difficult to sustain. Against a backdrop of failed appointments, in the years that followed, County Court judgements began to appear intermittently on our doormat.

By now the pattern was well-established in that my mother's moods tended to affect that of those close to her. Yet, rescuing her from her current misery, a padded envelope which landed on our doormat one day ensured her immediate relief. Upon opening it, a cassette tape fell out which she placed in the tape deck of her hi-fi before pressing play. Suddenly, the sound of a Greek bouzouki emerged followed by the familiar voice of Steve. As if transported immediately back to Cyprus, my mother came fully to life once again. With Dad being out at work, Mum played the tape right

through and would do so over and over. To the sound of Steve's musings interspersed between jokes recorded from the radio, even from afar, Steve had a power my father didn't have, a power I also possessed, to make my mother laugh.

Her contact with Steve suddenly re-established, my mother became completely preoccupied with the charismatic Greek-Cypriot once more. Engrossed by her tape, she'd take to playing it whenever she could, even listening to it with her headphones on while my father sat directly opposite. What with more tapes arriving on our doormat on a regular basis, it wasn't long before, with Dad at work, Mum and Steve began talking on the phone.

Between their lengthy conversations and her listening to his tapes, my mother was now completely engrossed with all things Steve. By now hopelessly smitten with him, she took to inserting his name into song lyrics she'd sing aloud while wearing her headphones. In a similar manner to Bill Stone, the soundtrack to her affair with Steve came courtesy of Abba tracks "Under Attack" and "Angeleyes" in addition to Barbra Streisand's "Woman in Love" and John Denver's "Shanghai Breezes". Needing to maintain some semblance of a connection with my mother, I'd often sit at her feet while she listened and sang.

Moreover, in moments of unguarded candour, my mother would listen to unlucky-in-love type songs before revealing how they reflected her own sense of desire and longing. As if further proof were needed, I opened a book on Greek mythology one particular day to find the words "...I miss him only on the days ending in y..." inscribed on the inside cover. Predictably, it would only be a matter of time before my mother and Steve conspired to meet again. I wouldn't know before then the part I'd play in their rendezvous or the ramping-up it would signal in their relations. Nor did I know

what would transpire the day my father's restraint and patience with my mother finally ran out.

Despite the eventual rupture, the summer of 1982 would be memorable for two particular reasons. Firstly, on the initial Saturday in June the whole of Coxheath village turned out for a fete on the green behind the village hall. Stalls, music and entertainment provided the build-up to the much anticipated World Custard Pie Championship held annually at the event. Taking my place alongside the other kids in the village brave enough, I stood behind either of the two opposing teams launching flour and water based pies at each other. When a team member ducked, the pie tended to end up in the faces of the kids standing nearby.

Then, during the six-week school holiday, Dee, Sas and I attended the summer playscheme which took place in the village hall itself. Once again, the children of the village converged from Monday to Friday to enjoy arts and crafts and such sporting activities as badminton, rounders and table-tennis. During a few games of the latter I met a rather bolshie young blonde-haired girl by the name of Michelle whom I recognised as one of Dee's classmates. Before long, she and I learned that aside from table-tennis, we shared a mutual love of actual lawn tennis. Seven years on from our initial meeting, Michelle and I would meet again and begin in earnest a friendship which continues to this day.

Electing to meet on a Saturday afternoon while Dad was out, Mum began dressing in preparation for Steve's arrival. Having finished curling her hair and applying make-up, Mum added the finishing touches with a dab from her L'aimant perfume compact to each wrist. Despite my mother being overweight since her mid teens, even her own mother conceded that she had a pretty face. Yet, expectation soon turn to frustration and then panic when Steve hadn't arrived by the arranged time. Dutiful to my mother and with

a desire to see her happy again with Steve, I quickly donned my sneakers before running up to the main road to find him.

Having perched myself high up on a fence, I sat and watched as car after car passed by. In my rush to leave, it hadn't occurred to me to ask what make and colour car Steve drove. My head moving this way and that as a stream of cars flowed by, after a while I still could not see him. Suddenly, a red Ford Granada Estate car came into view being driven by a smart-looking man in a dark blue jacket. Recognising the driver to be Steve, I waved my arms frantically and jumped down from the fence. Slamming on his breaks, he opened the passenger door and beckoned me in before he drove us the short distance to the house.

With Mum now happily aboard, she and Steve headed off. Only once his car had disappeared from view did I wonder where they were headed and, most importantly, when she'd be back. Nonetheless, my mother's absence on this particular weekend set the tone for what was to come over the next few months. Whereas on that first weekend my mother left on the Saturday and returned late the following day, during subsequent weekends, she'd disappear on a Friday and not return until late on the Sunday evening. Indeed, it became a regular occurrence for Dee and I to arrive home from school on a Friday afternoon to find cooking instructions sitting next to a casserole dish on the kitchen counter. Instead of him cooking food for us, my forty-eight year-old father ended up having his dinner prepared for him by his eleven year-old daughter.

Whereas on their first weekend my mother and Steve stayed overnight in a local hotel, on subsequent weekends she began travelling to London. Following her return on a Sunday evening, I'd take at times to sitting on the stairs in the dark and listen to them argue. To Mum's suggestion that they find a way to compromise,

Dad retorted that he'd compromised as much as he were willing to. As a nine-year-old, I didn't know the meaning of the word 'compromise' although knew I'd have to look it up at the earliest opportunity. I'd later learn that compromise meant something along the lines of having to live on certain terms.

Likewise, it wouldn't be merely my father having to compromise. With each absence I found feelings of resentment for my mother beginning to stir. It'd be another four years before I'd unleash the kind of anger and frustration on her that had been gradually building following the events of the previous ten years. In the meantime, what began as joy for her that she'd finally found happiness eventually turned to resentment; resentment that she'd gone in the first place and that, having done so, she'd left me in the company of someone for whom I shared a mutual resentment. Nonetheless, following her absence, my mother would always return of a Sunday evening without a care in the world bearing gifts from Hamley's and copious amounts of sweets. As would so often be the case, her motivation for giving owed more to atonement and buying affection than a genuine desire to do selfless good.

As for Dad, until such time as his patience with mum and capacity to compromise finally ran out, he'd seek relief in both the likeliest and the unlikeliest of places. Regarding the former, he'd have a captive audience in Auntie Jackie, who'd long since considered my mother bad news. Done without any consideration for the effect on his children, Dad would recount to his sister every last detail of Mum's antics both during and since our holiday in Cyprus. Yet, Auntie Jackie's response would be muted in comparison to that of Mum's own mother, from whom Dad also sought sympathy.

In a similar manner to our visit to Auntie Jackie, with Mum currently away in London, Dad took the opportunity with us present to bring Nanny and Granddad up to speed. Sitting in her armchair,

Nanny knitted frenetically while Dad spoke, pausing only briefly to take intermittent drags on her John Player Carlton cigarette. As Dad continued to relay the lurid details of Mum's shenanigans, the pace of Nanny's knitting quickened while the drags on her cigarette grew longer and harder.

Suddenly and without warning, Nanny slammed her knitting down before launching into a ferocious attack against her eldest daughter. Having never witnessed Nanny angry the hairs immediately went up on the back of my neck as the true extent of her resentment became apparent. From past to present, Nanny hurled every accusation possible at my mother, branding her a great actress who could turn on the water works at will, a thief who stole money from her purse, a snob who wouldn't deign to live in a council house and someone who, with these latest antics, had broken her father's heart.

It's worth noting that with the last accusation, Nanny took it upon herself to speak for Granddad, who sat opposite her in silence throughout the entire tirade. Declaring her daughter no longer welcome in their home, Mum suddenly found herself persona non-grata on both sides of the family. As for Steve, Nanny henceforth referred to him as 'the greasy Greek' whenever he came up in conversation. As a consequence of her vitriolic display, my view of Nanny changed that day and I'd remain forever wary of her. Little did I know then that less than seven years hence I too would become the target of her casual cruelty.

As for the unlikeliest of places for Dad to find sympathy, while he may not have exactly found that, he certainly discovered a kind of solace. Whereas in the future when my father found himself similarly besieged he'd seek sanctuary in his local Baptist church, during Mum's affair with Steve he sought distraction at a nearby nudist camp. A dyed-in-the-wool naturist, Dad would often walk around at home wearing nothing except a pair of flip-flops.

Indeed, there'd come a time in the future when, with Dee and I both at secondary school, Dad would wake us both at 7am each morning with a cup of tea. To the sound of his flip-flops I'd awaken all bleary eyed. Mercilessly, my first sight of the day would be my father's hairless buttocks bobbling up and down as he walked away after setting my tea down on my bedside table. Adding insult to injury, he'd often turn the corner to leave my room and fart on his way out. Nonetheless, providing some consolation to him what with Mum in London, Dad headed to a nudist camp nestled in the Kent countryside with Dee, Sas and me in tow. While we played in the club pool with the other children, Dad could often be found enjoying easy conversation with the other patrons.

On the Sunday that we'd been to visit Nanny and Granddad, we came home to the unexpected sight of Mum in the kitchen peeling potatoes. In a rush to denounce what I naively regarded as his treachery, I wasted no time in informing her that Dad had told Nanny and Granddad about her affair with Steve. To this, Mum branded him a big mouth just looking for sympathy and any excuse to stir things up with her parents.

Furthermore, I relayed to Mum how Nanny said she was no longer welcome in the family home. Facing potentially devastating rejection, Mum responded nonchalantly that as there were only so many times she were willing to be kicked in the teeth, she didn't care if she never saw her mother again. Indeed, the ease with which both women let each other go suggested there was no love lost between them whatsoever. While Dad would continue to take us kids from time to time to see Nanny and Granddad, our visits with them had become tainted and I'd never feel comfortable in her presence again.

With Mum's primary focus being her relationship with Steve, she began to harbour doubts as to the direction in which their relationship was headed. Their lengthy phone calls appeared to provide her with little reassurance and when not on the phone, Mum sought ever more solace in her music. One evening while occupying my usual position at her feet, Mum pulled her headphones away from one ear before revealing how she'd asked Steve on a number of occasions for clarification on the future of their relationship. Following this she explained how his response was always the same and mimicked his voice before saying "baby, don't worry". Yet, worry she did, so much so that she soon forgot discretion and began engaging in conversations with Steve with Dad in the house. Indeed, Mum's lack of tact would prove to be a bridge too far for him and, one Saturday afternoon, events were brought to a head in a sudden and altogether shocking manner.

On those occasions during their affair when Mum didn't go to London, it wouldn't have been down to her. Indeed, my mother wouldn't have given us a second thought if the opportunity arose to spend time with Steve. Therefore, the reason for Mum remaining at home this particular weekend is most likely to have been down to him. While unable to meet, this did not prevent them both on this particular day from engaging each other in yet another lengthy phone conversation. However, this call was different in that it took place while the rest of us, including Dad, were in the lounge watching the football on television.

With the phone perched on the windowsill at the bottom of the stairs opposite the open lounge door, Mum's conversation could be easily overheard. With her child-like giggles and lovey-dovey chat beginning to rankle him and in an attempt to drown Mum out, Dad turned up the volume on the television. Likely unable to hear for the noise, Mum came to the lounge door and slammed it shut. In response, Dad promptly sat down on the floor with his back against

the door. After a time and with her conversation with Steve having concluded, Mum attempted to open the door.

Just then, upon finding the door wedged shut, Mum began to kick it. Despite each mighty kick, Dad remained firmly against the door. Suddenly, following one almighty kick, Dad flung the door open and ran out into the hallway. No sooner had Dee and I ran out after him than we were met with the sight of Dad smashing the telephone receiver repeatedly into Mum's face. While Dee and I looked on in horror, Dad gave vent to all his pent-up anger as he continued to rain blows with the receiver. Unable to witness the assault upon my mother any longer and realising my powerlessness to protect her, I ran out of the front door in tears and headed straight for the phone box in the village.

After running half a mile without stopping, I reached the phone box still in tears having cried all the way there. Wheezing like a set of bagpipes someone had just sat on, I picked up the phone and, without thinking, immediately made a reverse-charge call to Steve's home. After accepting the charges, a lady on the other end of the line asked who I was. No sooner had I attempted to speak than I began sobbing once more. In my distress I hadn't even considered what I might say if anyone other than Steve had answered the phone.

Nonetheless, speaking to me in a gentle tone, the nice lady on the end of the line calmed me down long enough for me to explain to her the horrible scene I'd just witnessed before I dissolved into tears anew. Attempting to soothe me once more, the lady told me to return home as my mother would no doubt be worried about me. Eventually I calmed down sufficiently to promise the nice lady that I'd go straight home. With this, she told me she had to go herself and promptly hung up. Although unaware at the time, I'd learn subsequently that the kindly lady who'd answered the phone was in fact Steve's wife!

Moments later I found myself back home again having run all the way back from the village without stopping. Upon entering the living room I saw my father sitting in his chair calmly reading the newspaper. Opposite him at the dining table sat my mother with a cold compress against a lump above one eye which had swollen to the size of a golf ball. With the sight of my mother injured in this way coupled with the realisation of my powerlessness to protect her, at once I felt the kind of fiery resentment for him that would burn within me for what remained of my childhood. While relieving his frustrations in the way he did, in one fell swoop, he had shattered the little that remained of my sense of home as a place of safety.

Nevertheless, if my father reasoned that violence alone would be enough to control my mother's behaviour, time would prove him sorely wrong. However, the trips did indeed begin to occur less frequently as did the phone calls. Before long and without any explanation as to why, my mother stopped going to London altogether. In addition, she stopped playing the songs she associated with Steve and spoke less of him as time went on. Yet, on those odd occasions when my mother did mention Steve, her recollections were tinged with a noticeable sense of fondness, longing and regret.

Considering how much of her feelings towards Steve my mother had expressed so openly, conjecture leads me to believe that plain embarrassment prevented her from revealing how their affair ended. Furthermore, I suspect that my mother gambled by giving Steve an ultimatum, either his wife, their family and their business, or her. Indeed, Steve had far too much to lose to choose my mother over his wife. Indeed, my mother would not have thought twice about leaving her family in search of her own happiness and in her naivety I've no doubt she expected that Steve would do likewise.

Therefore, with the one who got away now gone, it begged the question of how my mother could expect to find contentment as a wife and mother ever again. The simple answer was she wouldn't, as she'd prove in the not-too-distant future. In the meantime she'd continue to do the minimum she could get away with in her dual role while withdrawing consistently into the escapist sanctuary of her music and losing jobs as quickly as she'd found them.

With my tenth birthday approaching at the end of the year, while by this time I'd stopped wetting the bed, one unpleasant aspect of this past summer's events would linger. Following Dad's assault on my mother, I began to experience particularly disturbing dreams. Confusingly, these dreams would feature my mother and an exact double of her. Both naked, the double would begin attacking my mother before pinning her down on the floor and biting her ferociously. Upon hearing my mother's screams, I'd attempt to enter the room where the attack was being taking place to find that the door would only open wide enough for me to witness the attack but nothing more. At this point I'd invariably wake up. While these dreams would not continue indefinitely, I became reluctant for a while to go out and play lest I'd return home to find my mother dead on the floor having been bitten to death.

Nonetheless, while we didn't manage to find Kouklia in the literal sense, albeit briefly, my mother found a Kouklia of her own with Steve. However, time would prove over and over how those whom she wanted ultimately didn't want her and those who wanted her she didn't care about losing. Unsurprisingly, following the events of summer, 1982, I found myself harbouring a visceral resentment for my father while the seeds of the same for my mother had by now been sown. Somewhat of a mouthy kid by nature, I had also begun to develop something of a chip on my shoulder.

Yet, the greatest sympathy during this time I reserve for my sister, Dee. Despite our mother's casual cruelties towards her, Dee too felt the disruption of Mum's repeated absences. Inevitably, this led a girl otherwise reserved in her emotions to seek ways of releasing her anger. Curiously, as if one kitchen fire wasn't enough for one holiday, the morning following the night I'd seen Dad bolt upright in the dark, I went into the apartment kitchen. On the wall where before hung a set of instructions on how to use the various appliances was now an empty space while the instructions themselves had been reduced to a pile of ash. With me being by far the naughtier child and Dad willing to believe in my eternal guilt, despite my protests that it wasn't me, I still got the blame. Why Dee waited until we were both in our forties to "fess up" is beyond me. Better late than never, as they say!

Chapter 7 – Soggy Daffodils

*“The child who is not embraced by the village will burn
it down to feel its warmth.”*

— African Proverb

Approaching my junior school gates on Friday 11th March, 1983, I had no reason to suspect this day would be different to any other. Yet, for the most unexpected of reasons, this particular day would turn out to be one I’d never forget. Having taken the register, my teacher, a tall and handsome man by the name of Mr. Harrington, closed it and stood up. Usually at this point, Mr. Harrington would walk over to the blackboard then sit down in front of it and proceed to pick his nose. Unconcerned by the grimacing faces of his class, he’d select a plum bogey and, after examining it for a few moments, proceed to pop it in his mouth. However, on this day he began by drawing our attention to the absence of Elizabeth, the horse-loving recorder-playing object of my affection still going out with my best friend, Dale.

Appearing solemn in his manner and tone of voice, Mr. Harrington announced that the previous evening Elizabeth had been knocked down by a car while crossing the road opposite her home. Upon hearing these words, suddenly my heart leapt into my mouth while others around the class gasped. Mr. Harrington went on to explain that while Elizabeth’s injuries were not life threatening, she’d be spending the next few days in Maidstone’s West Kent Hospital. Following the dreadful news, our third year class spent the rest of the day in a state of shock and disbelief. Upon arriving home the tears I’d suppressed all day overwhelmed me and no sooner had I put my bag down on floor than I began sobbing uncontrollably.

While not completely lacking in a capacity to console, I'd find my mother in this instance gentle and kind in a way I'd never known her before, or since. Having cuddled me until my sobs had subsided, she suggested I go into the garden and pick a large handful of the daffodils among those which had recently sprung up. Following my return to the kitchen, my mother explained that she'd phoned the hospital and was advised that I could stay with Elizabeth until visiting hours were over at 8pm. With this, she put the money for the return bus fare in my hand and packed me off to the hospital.

Soaked to the skin having been caught in a downpour, and with a bunch of wilted daffodils in hand, I presented myself at the foot of Elizabeth's bed. Sporting a doozy of a black eye, she remained in good enough humour to remark on how funny I looked as I came through the ward door all wet and carrying a handful of soggy daffodils. That night, Elizabeth's father dropped me home and it came as a great relief to overhear him explaining to my mother that once his daughter's fractured pelvis had knitted back together, she'd be as right as rain.

Eighteen months had passed since we'd moved into our current home, a rented semi-detached house in a quiet cul-de-sac named South Crescent. Our move to South Crescent came about, as did most things, at the insistence of my mother. Preceding this was the disclosure from a wealthy insurance client of my father's, a man by the name of Mr. Judge, that a tenant in one of his properties had recently been diagnosed with a terminal illness and a short prognosis. In his desire for a quick turnaround, Mr. Judge proceeded to ask my father if he would like first refusal. After viewing the house in question, a mock Tudor cottage nestled in a valley in the nearby village of Boughton Monchelsea during a brief drive-by, my mother decided we'd all be much happier living there.

Consequently, for the purposes of a speedy move once Mr. Judge's ailing tenant had died, and on my mother's whim, my parents sold our house at Georgian Drive following which we moved to South Crescent. Yet, eighteen months later, Mr. Judge's stricken tenant remained alive. Therefore, my father thought it wise to put himself and my mother on the property ladder once again. Remaining in the village of Coxheath, their purchase of a three-bedroom terraced house represented my fifth move in eight years. Characterised by one considerable disadvantage and one consolatory advantage, in late 1983, we moved into yet another new home.

Similar to our home in Georgian Drive, for our move to the new home in Chestnut Drive, my mother once again insisted on the installation of a split-level cooker. As to the obvious disadvantage, this came in the form of my bedroom, which would be in a rather dilapidated-looking wooden conservatory attached to the rear of the house. Worse still, while I'd be at one end of the conservatory, at the other was situated my father's office. With Dee having shared a room with Sas for the previous six years and approaching thirteen herself, she had more than paid her dues and needed her own space. Yet, while the prospect of being separated from everyone else at night didn't exactly fill me with glee, I soon overcame my disappointment when I realised that in the next street to us lived my good friend, Dale.

Following this latest move, the spring term of 1984 would see my class bid farewell to the nose-picker Mr. Harrington and welcome a new teacher into our fourth year class. Prior to the arrival of our new teacher, our headmistress, the formidable Mrs. Levick, paid our class an unexpected visit. Departing from her characteristically formal manner, Mrs. Levick explained to the class that in addition to being a good friend of hers, our new teacher, a lady by the name of Mrs. Stapleton, was very overweight and cautioned us to remain respectful. Suffice to say that her caveat was unnecessary as Mrs.

Stapleton, with the kind of warmth and care so sorely lacking in teachers of the time, charmed her way into the hearts of her young charges with considerable ease.

Indeed, so assured did I feel of Mrs. Stapleton's care and compassion that I found myself sitting before her one morning break time. While the rest of the class ran around the playground with abandon, I shared with Mrs. Stapleton the intimate details of the previous eight years of my life. From Bill Stone to Steve and from my mother's violence to my turbulent relationship with my father, she listened sympathetically as I spoke. Much like a similarly gentle teacher I'd encounter a few months later during my first term at secondary school, Mrs. Stapleton stood apart from the surly and slap happy teachers which were so commonplace at that time.

Regrettably, said surly and slap happy teachers were two-a-penny come September when I finally joined Dee at Cornwallis Secondary School. Situated in the adjoining village of Linton, reaching Cornwallis involved a daily three mile walk. On the first day, the first year pupils gathered in the lower school assembly hall where we were divided into our respective classes. With each class sat in rows one behind the other, I sat in silence and stared at the back of an unknown classmate's head until such time as our form teacher came to collect us.

During the two years I'd spend at Cornwallis, a French teacher by the name of Miss Baker would be my form teacher. Besides being petite in stature, Miss Baker's two most prominent characters were her heavy lisp and thick blue eye shadow which appeared to have been applied using a trowel. Each class year from the first through to the fifth year were divided into one of four houses. Expecting to be placed in the same house as Dee, named Monchelsea, instead I found myself in another house named Wayfarers, or "gay fairies" as we were otherwise known. Yet, it wouldn't be too long before I

realised that despite some menacing-looking characters among the upper school kids, the biggest bullies at Cornwallis were in fact the teachers.

Undoubtedly, it felt rather odd at first to refer to the teachers as “sir” and “ma’am”. Much like Coxheath Junior, kind and compassionate teachers were in very short supply, with ill-tempered characters very much in the majority. Two of the most fearsome teachers among the staff I’d encounter in successive years. The first, an overweight and perpetually bad-tempered woman by the name of Miss Burkett, or “bird shit” as she was otherwise known, I’d encounter as my first year music teacher.

Similarly, an equally bad-tempered man by the name of Mr. Greenslade I’d encounter as my science teacher in my second year. Sporting scruffy hair and a goatee beard, Mr. Greenslade resembled the television character “Catweazle”. Possessed of a wicked aim to rival that of my mother, Mr. Greenslade needed no excuse to throw the blackboard rubber across the room, or cane someone’s buttocks with a metre ruler, or thrash them with the rubber hose connected to a Bunsen burner or simply slap them around the face. Despite the overall strictness, I’d readily indulge my own attention-seeking urge to make others laugh by seizing the opportunity to be the class comedian where I thought I could get away with it.

Nonetheless, there was one man whom I wouldn’t have even dared to think of crossing in the form of the forbidding Mr. Andrews, head of the lower school. Following the first registration with Miss Baker, the boys were sent back to the lower school hall for a talk from Mr. Andrews. Like a drill sergeant barking at a group of young cadets, Mr. Andrews addressed the first year boys from the hall stage. While standing beneath him, we listened as he proceeded to remind us of the school’s strict uniform policy and how we were not to remove our ties in the summer until he’d done so first.

Consequently, during those odd occasions when Mr. Andrews actually removed his tie, news of the rare event spread through the lower school corridors like wildfire.

In addition to the over-abundance of strict and ill-tempered teachers, arguably the most hardening experience at Cornwallis was school showers. With the boys in winter playing football and rugby on the field in the pouring rain, our reward for doing so would be communal showering in the freezing sports hall changing rooms. While our male PE teachers looked on, approximately fifty mostly pre-pubescent boys caked in mud collectively froze to death under tepid water before rushing to dress amid the chill of the changing room. Perhaps more devastating to most than the bitter temperatures was the curious sight of the odd boy who'd already begun puberty while the rest of us had to wait a few more months in anguished expectation for hair to appear on our genitals and our balls to drop.

Menacing teachers and Baltic showers aside, like Mrs. Stapleton at my junior school, I'd find one teacher with whom I'd instantly connect in the form of my English teacher, Mrs. Firth. Having joined the staff during the year prior to my arrival, Mrs. Firth had already earned a reputation among pupils of being a soft touch. While I'd seize the opportunity in her class to indulge in my usual smutty banter, I found myself experiencing a sense of empathy for Mrs. Firth on account of one unfortunate physical characteristic.

Around this time, Mrs. Firth had endured a particularly stressful divorce which had left her with a noticeable bald patch on the crown of her head. While it was certainly within my capabilities to mock teachers for their appearance, I could not collude with those who, within her earshot, would so cruelly refer to Mrs. Firth by the nickname "baldy". While meeting Mrs. Firth again many years later, she revealed how she was fully aware of the unfortunate tag and disclosed the circumstances surrounding her sudden hair loss.

With Mrs. Firth's love of the printed word remaining undiminished, I admitted my regret at not having paid more attention in her class and how I too had come to share in her perpetual love of words.

Although I'd clocked him for the first time while we were all sat on the lower school hall floor waiting for Miss Baker, it was during our first English lesson that I'd become properly aware of a classmate by the name of Stuart. What made Stuart stand out was that he and I were the only ones in our class who showed up on our first day wearing a blazer. Consequently, having realised we were in a minority, we soon put our blazers to the back of our respective wardrobes. Yet, when Stuart arrived late to our first English class with a tear-stained face at having lost his way, I knew instantly that I wanted to be his friend. An academically bright boy, Stuart would leave Cornwallis for grammar school two years later.

However, in the meantime, Stuart and I would become good mates while forming part of a slightly larger group of friends. Made up of fellow classmates, our group consisted of Justin, a boy whose lankiness made him appear older and, therefore, ideal for buying cigarettes, along with Penny, whose parents ran a village pub, and Simone, an overweight yet pleasant girl whose father was a police officer. Despite our occasional ribbing of Simone, she'd show her mettle as a friend and come to my rescue four years later in perhaps the most desperate moment of my entire childhood.

As for Dee, she too had made conscious choices when it came to her friends, albeit with one peculiarity. Being somewhat of an anomaly was the pairing of Dee and another girl in her class by the name of Angela. A precocious girl with large breasts and an attitude to match, Angela's reputation preceded her. With a penchant for fighting and readily back-chatting teachers, Angela was the polar opposite of the shy and retiring Dee. Despite their opposing characters, Dee and Angela would become the best of friends.

Remaining curious as to their coupling, I'd ask Dee many years later what drew her to Angela. To this she replied that on account of the shit going on at home, she didn't want any trouble at school. Consequently, with Angela by her side, Dee ensured she'd be as safe as houses during her time at Cornwallis.

On the other hand, the house in which we were both less safe remained our own. While a relative tranquillity belied the next chaotic episode to come, the abnormalities of my mother's behaviour continued unabated. Indeed, my father was not the only one who'd walk around at times with next to nothing on. Giving him a run for his money, my mother would make a similarly immodest attempt to cover up courtesy of the single petticoat she'd so often wear while sitting around the house. Leaving little to the imagination, whenever her petticoat rode down her nipples were exposed although when worn too high up would leave her vulva fully displayed. One advantage of the petticoat was the ease with which my mother could pull it down and scoop up her ample breasts before shoving them in my father's face. Grateful for her attention by whichever means possible, my father would respond in kind and plant appreciative kisses on each of my mother's boobs.

Similarly audacious at this time was my mother's antics with a fellow work colleague of my father. Like Mum, my father had no real friends except a fellow insurance agent by the name of Clive. With Dad being much more organised in his accounts than his friend, Clive would visit each time he needed Dad's help to balance his books. A taller and stockier man than my dad and with an unabashedly juvenile sense of humour, Clive revelled in winding my father up. Enlisting my mother in the kind of shenanigans in which she'd be only too happy to oblige, the playful pair engaged in long and lingering kisses full on the lips. Realising he was being made the butt of their joke, my father would end up ignoring them

both and continue in his attempt to make sense of the mess Clive had made of his paperwork.

Perhaps the most peculiar occurrence which to this day remains unexplained took place after my bedtime. With my twelfth birthday approaching in December of that year, like every other pubescent boy at that time, I began to produce semen. While I had not disclosed this fact to my mother, its occurrence coincided with her coming into my room late at night and then waking me up to change my bedsheets. In addition to being in a state of groggy confusion at having just been roused from my slumber, I also found myself in a state of embarrassed arousal. While attempting to mask my erection with cupped hands, my humiliation would have been complete had my mother discovered the masturbation hole I'd fashioned in my mattress. Indeed, if what was to occur in the coming weeks had not taken place, I wonder on how many more occasions my mother would have woken me up in such invasive and humiliating circumstances.

Nonetheless, with Dee and I both settled in secondary school and Sas by now in the infants, 1984 was gradually drawing to a close. While a famine had begun to develop in Ethiopia, the striking miners battled the police on our television screens and the IRA attempted to assassinate Margaret Thatcher by placing a bomb in her hotel, our family was about to experience a bombshell of our own. Fresh off the school bus, Dee and I arrived home one Friday afternoon to find the house empty and our mother unexpectedly gone. As we walked into the kitchen our eyes were immediately drawn to the casserole dish sitting on the counter top and the set of cooking instructions lying beside. While we knew this could only mean one thing, what we didn't know then was where our mother had gone, with whom, and, most importantly, when we'd see her again.

Chapter 8 – Unapologetically Yours

“Perhaps love is like a window, perhaps an open door. It invites you to come closer, it wants to show you more.”

— John Denver

In a similar way to how my mother’s affair with Steve ended, how this latest one began was also something of a mystery. All she’d reveal was that she’d fallen in love with a man by the name of Richard who lived in Harrow, Middlesex. While occupying my usual spot on the floor by her feet as she listened to her music, Mum produced a photograph of her new love interest. A slightly overweight man with straight brown hair, full red lips and a moustache, Richard bore a striking resemblance to the ‘Shoestring’ actor, Trevor Eve. In view of the fact that my mother had recently lost her third job in two years and with no other occasion when they might’ve met, I could only conclude that she’d met Richard while at work.

Indeed, my mother’s latest dalliance represented the third time in the last eight years that she’d seek satisfaction outside of her marriage. While this latest affair came about without any warning whatsoever, it would prove equally as disruptive as those with Bill and Steve. In keeping with the latter, Mum began disappearing on a Friday and would not return until the Sunday evening. With his fear of losing his wife dictating his initially tame response, my father once again let my mother go and offered little more than a feeble admonishment upon her return. While still invested in my mother’s happiness, by this point I’d begun to feel conflicted by the realisation that, yet again, she’d placed her own needs above everyone else’s. Consequently, I found myself spending as much time as I could with my friends and thereby reducing the amount of time I’d have to spend in the company of my father.

Despite my best efforts to stay out of the house as much as possible, spending some time in the company of my father would prove unavoidable. While he'd continue to hit me around the head at any opportunity and hurl his time-tested "clown", "waster" and "toerag" barbs at me, his doing so would only deepen my resentment of him. Yet, this new mire in which he suddenly found himself had begun to detrimentally affect his already compromised health. With the anguish of his wife's latest infidelity becoming too difficult to bear, Dad began to experience sleepless nights and an explosion, literally, in the severity of his diarrhoea.

While the sound of Dad in the toilet would provide an endless source of amusement to the childish ears of Dee and me, his disrupted sleep would have consequences for me particularly. Unable to remain in bed, Dad began venturing downstairs in the middle of the night. Once down, Dad would come into the kitchen and turn the light then boil a saucepan of milk to make a hot drink. With my bedroom located next to the kitchen, whether by the light shining through my window or the sound of boiling milk, I found myself waking up at the same time. After making his drink, Dad then sat in the lounge and read his paper, with the light from the lounge also shining through my bedroom window. Regardless of his disrupted sleep, Dad would still bring Dee and me a cup of tea at 7 o'clock each morning before school. Of a weekend, we were expected to return the favour, which we duly did.

Whether made worse by my own disrupted sleep, I found my asthma symptoms worsening and began using my inhaler more frequently. Having run out of my rescue inhaler a couple of days before, I awoke one Sunday morning in November wheezing profusely. Unlike Dee, I never succeeded in making Dad's tea exactly the way he liked it. Yet, with it being my turn, I made his tea before setting the cup down on his bedside table. Breathless and wheezy as I spoke, I explained that I'd run out of my inhaler and

asked Dad if he'd call the doctor. To this, Dad replied that as soon as he'd finished his tea he was off to church and that if I needed to see a doctor, I should phone one myself.

Having by now become used to booking and attending my doctor's appointments alone, I rang the on-call doctor who came out and, after listening to my chest, provided me with a new inhaler. Interestingly, many years later, I'd have access to my medical records. While thumbing through them, I discovered an entry dated Sunday 18th November, 1984. In addition to documenting the circumstances of their visit, the doctor wrote "...Mum's in London, Dad's in church...what's happening in this family...?".

What was happening was that my parents' marriage was failing, my mother was in London with her lover, my father was in the local Baptist church and my sisters and I were left to fend for ourselves. With my mother's affair continuing come December, she would not allow the prospect of Christmas to spoil her fun and left for London as usual on Friday 21st. Furthermore, with our sleep by now so seriously disrupted, and with my twelfth birthday approaching on Sunday 23rd, in a rare display of generosity, Dad allowed me to top and tail with my seven-year-old sister upstairs in her bed.

Making my way to Sas' room that Saturday night, I'd convinced myself that not only was my mother unlikely to make it home for my birthday but for Christmas as well. In a sudden burst of frustration, I entered my parents' room where I removed from a drawer under their bed the Sony Walkman Mum had bought me for Christmas. To the sound of the tunes which made up the previous week's Top 40, I eventually fell asleep.

Stirring briefly from my slumber, I turned over and began to fall back to sleep. Just then, I felt something soft pressing against my cheek. To the scent of Pagan, my mother's favourite perfume,

hanging in the air, I opened my eyes to the sight of my mother leaning over me. As I pulled the headphones off my ears she kissed me again before wishing me a happy birthday. However, the warmth of her greeting gave way to a slightly sterner tone as she asked me why I'd taken my Walkman. In as contrite a manner as I could muster, I replied that I didn't think she'd be back in time for my birthday to which she called me a silly billy and pointed out that she always returned home of a Sunday.

Two days later and with the smell of the sherry and satsumas that we'd left out for Father Christmas still on her breath, my mother roused Dee, Sas and me early on Christmas morning. Predictably, we awoke to more expensive presents this Christmas than before, which I suspect had more to do with making up for her absence than a desire to do selfless good. As for Dad, he'd do what he always did on Christmas morning and arose later and joined us once we'd opened our presents. Surveying our gifts as he sat and drank his tea, Dad's composure belied the angst he must've felt as to how much all this had actually cost him.

With the Christmas festivities now over, 1985 began as the previous year had ended with my mother resuming her weekend trips to Harrow. Yet, trouble lay dead ahead and one Saturday night in January brought an interesting development. Having gone to sleep in Sas's bed that night, I awoke to the sound of the phone ringing downstairs. As the phone never rang that late, I became instantly concerned that something might have happened to my mother. Climbing out of bed, I crept to the top of the stairs where I crouched down and listened while Dad spoke to the caller.

Peering around the bannisters, I spied my father sitting at the telephone table at the foot of the stairs. With the caller speaking for what seemed like an eternity, Dad sat and listened, interjecting only briefly now and then. As I began to lose interest, my father suddenly

asking the caller what he should do and whether he should just beat my mother up immediately refocussed my attention. As the conversation unfolded, Dad revealed to the caller how his wife had been making regular trips to Harrow over the past few months and how he suspected her of having an affair. After a few more minutes of listening and briefly interjecting, Dad requested the contact details of the caller before ending the call. With this, I crept back to bed, intrigued as to the identity of the mystery caller. Feeling ever more resentful of my father for disclosing my mother's business, I went to sleep determined to tell her all about it when she came home.

We wouldn't have to wait too long to learn something of the unknown caller. Indeed, the following day, Dad revealed to Dee and me some of what he'd learned during the previous night's call. Sparing us none of the details, Dad confirmed that Richard, the man with whom Mum had been having an affair, had also been having affairs simultaneously with two other women. After having learned of each other's existence, the three women united to confront him at his Harrow address. Alarming, the confrontation had resulted in fisticuffs with my mother's whereabouts currently unknown.

As if this were not enough, my father went on to reveal that although he could not confirm at that time from where the funds came, my mother had spent £2,000 on a Jaguar car which she had subsequently gifted to Richard. While resentment towards my mother had begun to build, it hadn't yet reached the same level as that for my father and my lack of sympathy for him remained undiminished. Indeed, following his disclosure, I offered one of my own by revealing to my father that I'd overheard him on the phone the previous night and witnessed how he'd betrayed my mother. My resentment for him getting the better of me, I called him an "upstart", a term he would often use against me, before attempting to walk away.

However, I wouldn't get very far. With the shock of discovering that his wife having another affair coupled with the devastating news that she had potentially landed them both in £2,000 worth of debt, Dad suddenly snapped. As he lunged towards me I turned around and ran up the stairs and only made it halfway up before Dad pinned me down and began belting me around the head.

As the blows rained down, I could do little beyond raise my arms to cushion myself from them. Unleashing a torrent of frustration all his own, with each lashing, Dad merely strengthened my already seething resentment for him. After what seemed like an eternity, Dad stopped, at which point I fled upstairs to Sas's room and slammed the door. With my knees up against my chest and arms wrapped around my ankles, I buried my head between my legs and, with my upper body throbbing, began to sob. Right there, in that very moment, I hated him, I'd begun to hate her and, not only that, I'd begun to hate just about everybody.

Despite the negative thoughts stirring within me towards my mother, when she arrived home later that day I could not have been more relieved to see her. With her back to me as I entered the kitchen, I found my mother standing at the sink. Next to her was a plastic bag from which she pulled a blood-stained blouse. As she began soaking the blouse in the washing up bowl, my mother looked at me and saw that I'd been crying. No sooner had she asked what had been going on than Dad chimed in that I had the hump after he'd thrashed me on the stairs. Following my confirmation that Dad had hit me around the head once again, Mum began to berate him.

With the presence of blood on Mum's blouse unexplained, once she'd finished tearing into Dad, I asked her if she'd been hurt in a fight. To her admission that the blood on her blouse belonged to someone else, Dad revealed to Mum that he'd been made aware of

the events occurring in Harrow the previous day. To the sound of raised voices, I awoke later that evening. Climbing out of bed I ventured down the stairs. Stopping halfway down and close enough to hear Mum and Dad through the closed living room door, I sat and listened.

Expecting to hear them arguing about Mum's affair in addition to the revelations made by the mystery caller and from where the money came to purchase a £2,000 car, I was dismayed to discover that instead they were arguing about me. Growing frustrated that each attack on me would be met with a defensive reply from Mum, my father suddenly declared that he loathed me. Much like the moment during one of their previous arguments when I first heard the word 'compromise', I'd subsequently look up the word loathe in the dictionary and wasn't at all surprised when I discovered what it meant.

Suffice to say the feeling was mutual and with the rapid succession of events in the weeks that followed, my resentment towards my father would descend into unmitigated hate. The series of events began with my mother returning to Harrow in an unsuccessful attempt to retrieve the car she'd bought for Richard. The following Monday, I returned to school. With Dee off sick that particular day I'd make my way home on the bus alone. Upon arriving home, I found my mother sitting in the armchair next to her hi-fi unit with her headphones on. Crouching down by her feet, I could sense that something was wrong and asked her what had happened. With this, my mother turned up her top lip to reveal a large purple bruise on the inside of her mouth. Immediately I knew Dad had hit her again.

Wasting no time at all, I ran straight upstairs to find my father in his room getting ready for work and Dee alone in hers. Heading straight to Dee's room, I found her still clearly in a state of shock. When I asked her what had happened, Dee explained that our father had

beaten Mum up because she'd refused to do his dinner. Furthermore, and in a rare departure from her kinship with him, Dee proceeded to describe Dad as 'a psycho'. Crouching down, Dee then knelt on the floor beside her bed and reaching underneath. To my surprise, Dee pulled out a broken metal chair leg which she said she intended to use in the event that Dad started again. It being likely that Dad had overheard our conversation, he found the chair leg before leaving for work. Eyeing my father as he walked to the garage at the end of our back garden, I witnessed him throwing the chair leg over a fence. No sooner had he gone than I ran out and climbed the fence before retrieving the chair leg, which I then concealed under my bed.

As if hearing Dee's account of what had happened wasn't bad enough, my father would subsequently relate the entire series of events to the very person with whom he'd always have a captive audience. While I'd anticipated some trouble, had I known what would actually transpire during our visit to my maternal grandparents, I would've tried my best to avoid going. However, in a scene reminiscent of two years ago, Dee and I sat together in the kind of dutiful silence that we always did when visiting relatives while Dad, with Sas under his arm, had command of the floor.

Although the name of the man involved may have changed, the sordid details had not and nor, predictably, would Nanny's reaction. Yet, during their conversation, Dad would reveal a few details hitherto unknown to us children. Firstly, my father chose this moment to disclose that the mystery caller that Saturday night happened to be one of the spurned females involved in three simultaneous affairs with the caddish Richard. Secondly, he revealed that the money used to purchase the Jaguar had come courtesy of a loan for which he and my mother were both liable.

Right on cue, and continuing where she left off following Mum's affair with Steve, Nanny launched into another bitter tirade against her daughter. However, this time she'd have an ally equally opposed to my mother about to join us to put in her two pennies worth. Before then, Nanny declared once again how Mum had broken her father's heart, without explaining precisely how, followed by the suggestion that Dad ought to sell our house in Chestnut Drive and move us all into a council house. On the basis that my mother wouldn't deign to live in a council house, Dad dismissed Nanny's suggestion out of hand. By now clearly irritated by Dad's inability to take control of the situation, Nanny suggested that Dad beat Mum up to which he replied that he'd already done that a few weeks ago, bragging that at one point he really started 'whipping her'.

Having witnessed Dad's assault on Mum and understandably distraught at having to relive it, Dee suddenly burst into tears. As she did so, Nanny's sister, the fearsome Auntie Joyce, came into the room. Sobbing uncontrollably, Dee got up to leave the room but was stopped in her tracks by Auntie Joyce. Despite being by now fourteen years old and slightly taller than her great-aunt, the merciless Auntie Joyce grabbed Dee by the arm and, while pulling her back into the room, yelled at her that if she left the room now she'd end up a whore like her mother. With this, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up and the adrenaline began coursing through my body.

Forced back into her seat, Dee continued to cry. Tellingly, not once did Dad make a move to console his daughter or criticise Auntie Joyce for her man-handling of Dee or adding to her distress. Instead, Dad turned his attention back to Nanny, who pointed at me and asked him who's side I was on. With Dad's confirmation that my loyalties lie with my mother, I waited for a reproof from Nanny that, surprisingly, didn't come. Next, she glanced over at seven year-old Sas and asked which side she was on, following which Dad

pulled her close before declaring that she was with him. Nodding her approval, Nanny appeared gratified to learn that all but one person in the room was against her much detested daughter.

With Nanny and Auntie Joyce suitably wound up, Dad unburdened and Dee and I emotionally wrecked, we headed home to Maidstone. Despite my innate boldness, I hadn't lost sight of the fact that children at that time were indoctrinated to respect their elders. Yet, the elders in my life were not respectable people nor did they behave in a way worthy of respect. Indeed, my relatives allowed their resentment of my mother to prevail over any concern they felt for my sisters and me. Furthermore, at no time did any of them, my father included, talk to us with any tenderness about our feelings and how all this had impacted us.

In time I'd come to know myself as someone perfectly capable of respecting others, especially when given something to respect, while withholding respect for those not worthy of it. Indeed, it would not be unfair to contend that my mother gave me precious little to respect. Moreover, following a devastating act of betrayal against me later on that year, 1985 would signal a dramatic change in my relationship with my mother against whom I'd begin to rebel in earnest.

As was the case on two previous occasions, my parents were once again tenuously reconciled. Unlike before, my mother would have only one song, a reflective, wistful ballad by John Denver and Placido Domingo, entitled 'Perhaps Love', to encapsulate her emotions. With her character firmly fixed, it would only be a matter of time before she'd revert to type and the inevitable chaos ensue. In a little over a year's time, my mother would succeed beyond her wildest dreams in finally tearing her family apart. With her own character also firmly fixed, while Nanny would provide us with a much needed lifeline, she'd soon withdraw it when it no longer

suiting her. In the meantime, with my thirteenth birthday fast approaching, I'd meet a girl who, along with her mother, would subsequently come to my rescue at a time when my so called family seemed all too content to let me drown.

Chapter 9 – Dreamboats and Turncoats

“In the little world in which children have their existence, whosoever brings them up, there is nothing so finely perceived and so finely felt as injustice.”

— Charles Dickens

To my surprise during the spring of 1985, I found myself the object of someone’s affection. What made it noteworthy was that the fact that my love interest was a girl. While it wasn’t love in the truest sense of the word, the expression would be appropriate to describe the affinity I’d feel for a truly sweet girl by the name of Nicola. Being much taller than most of the other kids in our year, Nicola was easily spotted in the lower school corridors. With me being a veritable ‘short-arse’, it came as a surprise to learn from a mutual friend that Nicola liked me. Indeed, this all seemed a bit odd to me considering that up until now, I’d only really appealed to girls as someone who made them laugh.

Nonetheless, with her long dark-brown hair, low-hanging fringe and gentle nature, before long, Nicola and I started going out together. The eldest of three children, Nicola lived in a detached property nestled in a valley in the nearby village of Loose. Her home appropriately named ‘Valley House’, Nicola and her siblings lived with their parents, David and Janet. A former Miss Maidstone consistently dressed in pleated skirts and pearls, Janet cut an altogether genteel figure. Yet, the elegance of her appearance belied a deliciously saucy sense of humour and upon meeting her she and I connected instantly. Alas, the same could not be said for her husband, David, a rather reserved man always ensconced behind his living room desk with headphones on whenever my friends Justin, Stuart and I dropped by.

Despite her kind and gentle character, I knew full well that something in my relationship with Nicola didn't feel quite right. Indeed, it was no great shock to me to discover I had a physical attraction to my own sex. Considering my brain's response to the sight of my friend's naked father six years earlier, I had no difficulty accepting the fact. For me, the difficulty came in ensuring my true nature remained undetectable by others until such time as I no longer felt the need to conceal it.

Being as much the case back in the 1980s as I suspect it still is now, the ultimate high school put down was to be labelled 'gay' or 'lesbian'. Indeed, the mere perception of 'gayness' would be enough to trigger all manner of cruel slurs and threats of violence. While possessed of the kind of confident character which made me stand out, I also wanted to belong. Furthermore, while my tendency to be the class comedian and make others laugh deflected that kind of negative attention, so did my relationship with Nicola. Nonetheless, even before she and I began going out with each other, I'd harboured a long-standing crush on a boy in our year by the name of Matthew.

While my class belonged to the school house of Wayfarers, Matthew and his class were in the same house as both Nicola and Dee, named Monchelsea. A sporty kid with strawberry blonde hair and freckles, I first clocked Matthew in the summer of 1984 when, as fourth year pupils, my school played his at rounders. With the look of Huckleberry Finn about him, I focussed completely on Matthew and wondered if or when our paths might cross again.

Indeed, I wouldn't have to wait too long come September when we both started at Cornwallis as first year pupils. Not being in the same class or house meant my contact with Matthew was limited to passing him in the corridors or while going up and down the boys stairs. However, in August of 1985, I'd attend a party thrown by a

fellow pupil from Coxheath Junior who was now in Matthew's class. While nothing could have possibly happened, at least I got to hang with Matthew that night and found him to be a really cool kid.

With my thirteenth birthday approaching at the end of '85, come September, I'd begin what would turn out to be my second and final full year at Cornwallis. Indeed, a year from now I'd find myself physically, emotionally and geographically in completely different circumstances altogether. Yet, for now, I took my place among my fellow pupils who'd spend their break time discussing both the eccentricities and the sex appeal, or otherwise, of our teachers. A favourite among the boys was the maths teacher, the appropriately named Miss Ovary, whose low-cut knickers were clearly visible through her pencil skirt. As for the girls, they made a beeline for the well-built and moustachioed PE teacher, Mr. West.

Regarding the eccentricities, plenty of gossip and rumours had filtered down to the lower school ears from upper school mouths. For instance, in an attempt to recreate the effect of a female teacher's protruding nipples, some girls resorted to sticking pencils up their jumpers. In addition, girls were warned to be on their guard from those among the male teachers who'd deliberately drop their pens in front of the desks of female pupils as a ruse by which to peer up their skirts. Moreover, other teachers were singled out and mocked for their sweat patches, body odour and bad breath.

Furthermore, even the most innocent of remarks from teachers, such as "...let's get down to it...", or, "...right, let's get them out..." prompted sniggers and cheers from around the class for their supposed sexual connotations. For instance, when during recorder lessons our music teacher, the ill-tempered Miss Burkett, told everyone to "...finger and sing it..." the class went into near meltdown. However, the lesson of the year award for 1985 belonged to my science teacher, the fearsome Mr. Greenslade. In an attempt

in our class on reproduction to teach us about the birds and the bees, the hapless Mr. Greenslade instead spent most of the lesson teaching us the correct pronunciation of the male organ, stating repeatedly that it wasn't "penus" but "penis".

While the remainder of the year would turn out to be otherwise uneventful, it would mark a dramatic change in my relationship with my mother. For now, Mum and Dad had settled back into their usual malaise, with Dad remaining grateful of any attention and affection from Mum that he could get. Perhaps the best example of his need for Mum's care came of a night once a week when, bent over the bathroom sink, Dad washed his hair. Wearing only trousers and a towel draped over his back, Dad would lather his hair with shampoo. Signalling his readiness, Dad then whistled following which Mum trudged upstairs to rinse his hair. Being fifty-one at the time, it's inconceivable that Dad couldn't rinse his own hair, yet, by enlisting Mum's help in this way he received the kind of care and attention he craved from her.

As for me, I'd take the opportunity during this time of using my pocket money to pay for tennis lessons at the new tennis centre which had opened in Maidstone the year before. With Dee and I both sporty and possessing good hand-eye co-ordination, while she excelled at football, I'd find my niche in tennis. Yet, as well as I could play, on those rare occasions when Mum and Dad came to watch me, it would always end in strife.

Regrettably, conflict occurred between my mother and I in this instance as a consequence of her poor capacity for effective motivation and positive reinforcement. In an attempt to motivate me, she would often state that I'd always be a good "blah blah blah" but never a great "blah blah blah". Perhaps her intent was to inspire me to prove her wrong. Nonetheless, whenever I hit a poor shot in tennis she'd sit court-side and tut loudly her disapproval in full view

of the other kids and parents, leaving me suitably humiliated. Upon arriving home, she and I began to argue following which my father would weigh in and chastise me for speaking to my mother so disrespectfully. Indeed, that would not be the last time my father, with his own interests to protect, would conveniently disregard the hurt my mother had caused and seize the opportunity to cast me as the villain of the piece instead of her.

Nevertheless, with my own wilfulness, bolshie attitude and teenage hormones coming to the fore and my mother's hypocrisy and "do as I say, not as I do" mantra finally losing its power, she and I were set to truly clash. While what happened next would be nothing compared to the dramatic and very public confrontation which occurred in the summer of 1986, it would very much set the tone for what was to come.

Having prepared dinners, made tea and washed dishes, Dee and I were accustomed to doing chores around the home. Furthermore, when seeking affection from our mother, we became used to her turning around instead and asking us to tickle her back or her leg. Once again overlooking our needs in favour of our mother's, we duly complied. Moreover, being someone who felt the cold and had the heating on even in the summer, my mother would think nothing of sending Dee or me upstairs several times in one night to turn the heating from timed to constant and back again.

Unemployed once more and spending most of the day ensconced in the chair next to her hi-fi, my mother began firing off commands left, right and centre. When around 9pm my father returned from work, upon hearing his key in the back door and with the lounge in a mess, my mother would yell "quick, quick". Following her call to alms, Dee and I scurried about like lunatics tidying up and turning the fire down, which up until my father's arrival had been on full blast.

Furthermore, while we by no means starved, so as to avoid having to cook again of an evening, my mother insisted we have our main meal at school. Consequently, of an evening we made do with a sandwich, a packet of crisps and a Cadbury's Mini Roll. While I fully understand the merits of developing a child's sense of independence, the penny had finally begun to drop that my relationship with my mother was orientated more towards me meeting her needs than the other way around.

Therefore, while Dee remained dutiful and even began tackling the ironing, I objected to my mother sitting on her backside all day then using us as her lackeys. Consequently, while Dee continued to do as our mother told her, I began to say no. Unsurprisingly, my treachery did not go down well with my mother, who would take her revenge at the first available opportunity.

That opportunity came one evening after Justin, Stuart and I went to a friend's house where, in a joint venture, we stole a bottle of cherry brandy. Alas, our plan to drink the spoils was scuppered when we walked slap bang into a police officer on foot patrol minutes from my home. After I declared to the savvy officer that the alcohol belonged to my mother, he shrewdly insisted on escorting us home in order to confirm my story with her.

Having lied so effortlessly to the police officer by stating the alcohol was hers, my mother then asked to speak to him in private while I waited in the lounge. Considering myself in the clear, I was surprised when the officer came and sat down opposite me while my mother remained in the kitchen. Much to my astonishment, the officer began giving me a dressing down for my attitude towards my mother. While seething inside at her disloyalty, I couldn't bring myself to reveal to him my mother's behaviour over the past nine years and accepted a ticking off for whatever it was the officer had been led to believe that I'd done.

Nonetheless, rather than break my resolve, her hypocrisy served to strengthen it. Even with Dee and I both teenagers there remained occasions when we'd have to duck to avoid scissors and other projectiles or jump up from the floor when my mother looked set to pounce and bite us. Yet, it was around this time that my mother carelessly forgot herself and cupped my genitals in front of Stuart. No sooner had she left my room than Stuart turned to me and asked how long my mother had been doing that. Intrigued by his question, I casually responded that she'd always done that. To my assertion that surely every mum must behave in such a way, Stuart glared at me while shaking his head repeatedly. From that very moment, I finally began to realise that what went on in my family wasn't necessarily what went on in those of other people.

Nevertheless, with my mother, at under five feet tall, no longer able to control her five feet three inch thirteen year-old son by force, she took to using a far more powerful weapon in the form of words. Having branded me ungrateful and a thug for standing up to her and refusing to be her lackey, my mother still continued to possess, for now, the power to make me doubt and feel bad about myself. Seizing the opportunity whenever it presented itself, she'd use our latest move in mid-1986, to the nearby village of Loose, to put the boot in.

To my enquiry as to why we were moving yet again, my mother claimed that the reason we moved so often was because everywhere we went, I upset the neighbours. While I put my hands up to having knocked the odd tennis ball over a neighbour's garden, I failed to see what else I could've done to cause such upset that we had to move so often. Although in time I'd begin to see through my mother's spite, for now, I found myself giving more credence to her lies than they truly deserved.

So, in May, 1986, and for the fifth time in nine years, we moved home. Leaving Coxheath, we moved to a rented property located down the road from my friend, Stuart, in the nearby village of Loose. Coinciding with our move, after thirty years with The Prudential, Dad left his job as an insurance agent on health grounds. With precious little sympathy for him from Mum, she'd mockingly dismiss his health issues as being all in the mind and lament the possibility that he'd likely outlive us all.

With Mum remaining unemployed, Dad had to continue working to bring the money in. In complete contrast to my mother, my father possessed a strong work ethic and would not have considered it beneath him to take a cleaning job if necessary. Yet, his next move would be into something far better suited to him. Indulging his love of walking, during which he could walk for many miles, my father took a job as a postman. At the same time, my mother began scanning the situations-vacant column of our local newspaper and one June day a curious advertisement appeared which suddenly caught her eye.

With our new home situated no more than a quarter of a mile from Cornwallis, I applied for a pass which would enable me to leave the school grounds at lunch. With Stuart and Justin having done the same, we converged at lunchtime in a nearby cornfield where we stood around smoking. On the odd occasion, I'd sneakily keep my dinner money then pop home for lunch and raid the biscuit tin. Having arrived home at lunchtime one day, I found Mum in the living room reading our local newspaper. Just then, she brought my attention to an advertisement in the jobs column. Upon my sitting down next to her on the armrest of her chair, Mum pointed towards an article which began with the words "Work in the Sun". Below the heading was a list of European countries and, with Cyprus listed among them, I immediately understood why the advertisement had piqued my mother's interest.

While it had been easy enough for my mother to pressure my father into moving from London to Kent, it would be a real coup indeed if she were able to convince him to move to Cyprus. Yet, such was her hold over him that once she got an idea in her head, he'd be powerless to stop her. Consequently, it wasn't long before they were both on a train to London for interviews and not much longer after that when a letter arrived one day confirming the outcome. What began for my mother as excitement soon turned to disappointment. Unexpectedly, the letter explained that while the company were not due to set up operations in Cyprus until the end of the year, they hoped my parents would consider spending the summer in Malta. There, they could expect to gain valuable work experience before moving on to Cyprus at a later date.

While not exactly the news my mother had hoped for, she saw Malta as a stepping stone to where she truly wanted to be. Likewise, the news of a move abroad would not be to Dee's satisfaction, either. Unsurprisingly, with Dee about to begin her fifth year at Cornwallis in September and in the 'O' level group for all subjects, she had a lot to lose by leaving. Yet, my mother had made up our minds and with her at the helm, what could possibly go wrong???

As for me, although the prospect of heading to sunnier climes suited my sense of adventure, like Dee, I was reluctant to leave my friends. However, with my ongoing inability to be able to pay attention in class, I found school a perpetual struggle and felt glad to be leaving. In response to our enquiry as to what would happen with school come September, Mum made what would turn out to be a pie-crust promise to find us a suitable school in Malta.

Therefore, with our flights booked for the evening of Thursday 17th July, we set about getting rid of as much of our unwanted belongings as possible while the rest of our possessions, including Dad's car, went into storage. While Dee and I had finished

Cornwallis the previous Friday, the following Monday was our school sports day, with me due to run the second year boys 400m race. Much to my dismay, having expressed a desire to return to school to participate in the race, my mother said no. With my wilfulness by now more than a match for hers, I maintained I was going and went to leave the house. Alas, I wouldn't be able to do so without her aim finding its mark one final time. As I went to leave, my mother launched a pair of scissors which became embedded in the right side of my hip. Despite the intense stinging sensation, I yanked the scissors out following which blood began to trickle down my leg. With this, I ran out of the door and up to Stuart's house, where his mother patched me up. Following this, he and I joined the rest of our class for sports day, during which I won my race.

This last incident signalled the final time my mother would physically injure me, while psychologically she'd continue to do so in various ways for some time to come. Predictably, with all the anger of the past finally surfacing two months later, she and I were set for an explosive and highly public confrontation. Little did Dee and I know that in a place where the adults behaved like children and the children like adults, Malta sounded the death knell for whatever remained of our childhood. While she and I would have to keep our wits about us if we were going to survive, for our mother it was playtime, with Malta providing the best example yet that when my mother came out to play, her children would inevitably pay.

Chapter 10 – Tits Up... and Then Some!

“The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.”

— Maya Angelou

Despite our late night arrival in Malta and the difficulty of sleeping in the oppressive July heat, I awoke the next morning with a sense of excitement. Impatient to see the resort by day, I left our hotel room alone and headed out in search of the seafront. Upon reaching the end of the road, I looked back to see the name ‘Bugibba Holiday Complex’ in large brown letters on the side of the enormous sandstone building from where I’d just come. Making my way towards the sea, I passed a succession of low-rise sandstone apartment blocks with balconies upon which hung lines of drying laundry. My attention returned to the road just in time to avoid a pothole right in front of me. While I’d soon become familiar with the location of the numerous potholes, the endless succession of holidaymakers who stumbled into the hotel reception with bloody knees weren’t so lucky.

Having made my way the short distance through some back streets, before long I found myself on the seafront. Situated in the St. Paul’s Bay area of Malta’s north-east coast, the town of Bugibba had become a hive of tourist activity characterised by numerous hotels, a lido and rocky coastline. Located in the centre was Bugibba Square, a large roundabout bordered by a British-style pub, a jewellery shop and fruit stalls. Making my way along the promenade, known locally as the ‘Strand’, I passed a shop with a sign which read ‘Dolceria’. From behind the counter stood a man serving pies and pastries. The flour on his face and in his hair gave him an aged and somewhat ghoulish appearance.

Continuing along the Strand, on a ledge above the beach I spotted what looked like an ice-cream van and made my way towards it. While dodging the steady stream of holidaymakers coming towards me, on the road alongside me passed a steady stream of cars that would not have looked out of place on UK streets in the late 1960s. Interspersed with the cars were equally vintage-looking green buses which sounded like tractors as they chugged the length and breadth of the Strand en route to the capital city of Valletta. Busying herself behind the counter of the ice-cream van, or 'gelateria' as its sign read, was a plump girl with dark curly hair and exceedingly hairy arms. On the counter, a sign which read 'Catania Special', created a sense of intrigue in me as to exactly what one was. Alas, with no money on me, I decided to head back to 'the complex', as it came to be known, to tell the others what I'd discovered.

Exactly what my parents knew of the details of their new roles I cannot truly say. Furthermore, I suspect that considering her eagerness for a life free from the drudgery of being a wife and a parent, my mother would've jumped at the chance no matter how risky or unappealing the offer. Ostensibly, they had come to Malta as sales representatives working on a commission-only basis to sell timeshare to British tourists.

Put simply, timeshare ownership involves buying time in a holiday home, with additional fees to be paid for property maintenance and when holidaying in a different location. Although timeshare is considered a cheaper alternative to holiday home ownership, it is perhaps not as cheap as an annual package holiday. With the top floor of Bugibba Holiday Complex dedicated to timeshare, my parents' role would involve the selling of plush apartments to British tourists brought to the hotel by street canvassers. Predictably, timeshare came to be regarded as a con and its street canvassers a thorn in the side of unsuspecting holidaymakers.

By 1986, there were at least six hotels across the island with a section of apartments dedicated to timeshare, with half of them located in the St. Paul's Bay area. Needless to say, the competition on the streets was fierce to be the first to "pitch" those unknowing lily-white British tourists and spirit them to the hotel represented by the canvasser. There, they'd experience all manner of sales tactics designed to persuade them to buy timeshare. After little more than two weeks by the hotel pool while my parents spent their day upstairs in the sales lounge, I became restless and asked for a job. Following my request, I attended my first-ever interview with Minnie, the manageress of the street canvassers. With high hopes of joining their ranks, and having been successful at interview, I soon found myself pitching down on the Strand for Bugibba Holiday Complex.

Being a precocious child and someone who, like my mother, conversed easily with strangers, I took to the canvassing role like a duck to water. Each morning I attended the daily canvassers meeting before heading down to the Strand. Setting up shop on a street corner opposite the ice-cream van, the gelateria would be my first stop of the day. There, I'd enjoy my 'Catania Special', a cup filled with chocolate ice-cream and topped with a thick dark chocolate and hazelnut sauce. Wearing a green striped tabard and a white granddad style cap to keep the sun off my head, I'd get right to work. While like me, some canvassers occupied a particular patch, others went around in cars to bedevil the newly arrived holidaymakers. Although perfectly content to remain on the Strand, it would be a real treat for me on those occasions when Minnie picked me up to 'go riding' during which we'd travel farther afield to find fresh meat among the newly arrived Brits.

Despite my age and cocksure attitude, I settled in well among the other canvassers and the hotel's timeshare staff. Having turned fourteen three months earlier, the canvasser nearest me in age was a

boy called Trevor. The youngest son of the timeshare manager, a man by the name of Mr. Zahra, Trevor was both handsome and well-built for his age. While Trevor replaced Matthew as the object of my affection, my attraction to him took a dousing a few weeks later when he began dating my sister, Dee. However, their liaison would be over before it had even started when Trevor began canoodling with other girls in front of Dee at his parents' summer pool party. Incidentally, this whole unfortunate business represented the one and only time Dee and I would have our hearts broken by the same man!

Among the timeshare staff with whom I'd become good friends were two teenage sisters named Claire and Louise. Aged seventeen and fifteen at the time, both girls lived in an apartment around the corner from the complex. Tragically, they'd lose their mother to cancer while still young girls. Sometime after her death, their father married a real-life wicked stepmother. At their father's plan to move them all in together, Claire and Louise both refused. Proceeding with his plan, their father moved in with his new wife and left his teenage daughters to fend for themselves. Sympathising with our struggle, it would be kind-hearted Claire who'd come to the aid of Dee and me a little over a year later when in our hour of need.

The centre of activity for the timeshare sales reps and family members was, by day, the pool bar, or pizzeria as it was otherwise known, and by night, the hotel cocktail bar. While for the first few weeks we lived in a room in the hotel itself, eventually we moved to a ground-floor apartment on the opposite side of the hotel pool. Having been at work all day and with the pizzeria on our doorstep, my mother was not inclined to cook of an evening. Therefore, we ate most of our meals in the pool bar except on the odd occasion when we'd traipse around Bugibba studying one menu after another for something that Dad could eat. Being a meat and two-veg man

with an extremely sensitive stomach, he had to choose his meals carefully.

Suffice to say that the cost of feeding five people three meals a day in addition to drinks became expensive. Compounding the problem was my mother's tendency in the evening to curry favour in the cocktail bar where she'd regularly buy her colleagues drinks and run up a sizeable bar bill. To make matters even worse, the exchange rate at that time was fifty-four Maltese cents to one English pound. Despite Malta being a considerably cheaper country in which to live at that time, our accommodation and food bills soon began to mount up.

Moreover, with my parents not receiving a salary and being paid commission on the sale of any timeshare, it would be many months before they could expect to receive any earnings. Therefore, with the cost of our outgoings having to be met and my parents' savings rapidly dwindling, my mother turned to me for support. With me being the only one earning any money, she stated how it was incumbent upon me to support my family. While my mother received no opposition from me on this matter, I asked that whatever money I gave her she repay me once we reached Cyprus in the form of tennis lessons, to which she agreed. Consequently, I began handing over to her most of my weekly pay packet except for a few Maltese pounds, which I kept back for the odd piece of clothing, my morning Catania Special and drinks while out working on the Strand.

While Dee and I began joining Mum of an evening in the cocktail bar, Dad tended to spend the evenings in our apartment looking after Sas. Needless to say, when the cat was away the mouse would play, with Mum beginning to flirt outrageously with her male colleagues. Notwithstanding the drinks they'd happily accept from my mother, her largesse wouldn't prevent them from making fun of

her behind her back for being overweight. Furthermore, her generosity would not provide currency sufficient to see her fully admitted to a peer group characterised by one-upmanship, backstabbing and adultery.

In an attempt to keep herself in the mix, my mother referred to type and began talking about other reps behind their backs, telling lies about them and betraying confidences. To my shame, and in a similarly misguided attempt to be included and liked, I began mimicking my mother's behaviour and did the same. Considering the altogether unwholesome environment, my mother and I were merely playing the same game as everyone else. However, I'd soon come to understand there was a double-standard at play whereby my faults as a child were criticised while adults got away with the same behaviour judgement free.

The difficulty as a bigmouth kid of gaining acceptance among an older age group aside, courtesy of Claire and Louise, I met a mutual friend of theirs by the name of Connie. Aged eighteen at the time, Connie and her family were well-known in Bugibba. With business interests all over town including a hotel, a jewellery shop and a clothing boutique, the jewel in the family crown was their bar and restaurant, called 'Swiss Chalet'. Being another girl who had her own horse, Connie and I became firm friends.

Before long, I found myself on occasions joining her behind the bar at Swiss Chalet on a busy Saturday night to wash glasses on a fancy spinning-bristle cleaning machine. Like our mutual friend, Connie would also be there for Dee and me in our hour of need. Yet, the new friends I'd made and my success as a canvasser notwithstanding, I found myself starting to miss my friends in the UK and began making regular calls back home.

Unsurprisingly, the beginning of September came and went with no mention from my parents of enrolling us in school. What with me being the only one bringing any money in and my mother the main beneficiary, she did not appear in any great rush to alter the arrangement. Nevertheless, as September progressed, pangs of homesickness grew within me by the day. Exacerbating my feelings was a chance meeting by the hotel pool one day between my father and an elderly couple from Loose village.

In their mid to late seventies at the time, Joan and Charlie lived no more than two hundred yards from Valley House, home of Nicola and Janet. While my father did not go into detail regarding his conversation with Joan and Charlie, the part which did interest me was their offer to accommodate Dee if she wanted to return to the UK to finish her last year at school. Had their offer been made in early August, Dee may well have jumped at the chance. Indeed, in the first few weeks following our arrival, and still unhappy with our move, she'd remain in bed and not surface until lunchtime before joining us in the pool bar. However, come the end of September, my sister and I experienced something of a volte-face, with Dee now inclined to stay while I wanted to go home. Yet, in light of what happened next, Dad began to realise that he and my mother had been seriously misled.

Fundamentally, what should have given my parents cause for concern was the fact that as none of the foreign sales reps or canvassers had employment permits, we were all working illegally. Nonetheless, it would take two bombshells occurring in quick succession for my father to decide that he'd seen enough. First, he found himself presented with a bill for £350 for our flights, an expense which the company advised they would meet. Then, my parents received word that operations in Cyprus were no longer going ahead and that they could choose to remain in Malta or return to the UK.

Galvanised by the news from the timeshare management team, I began looking into the cost of flights home, without a thought for where I might stay following my arrival. With the only seat available within the next week costing more money than I'd saved up, I approached my mother one lunchtime while on our way to the pool bar. As she and I descended in the lift to the ground floor, I revealed to her my intention to go home and asked her to return all the money I'd given her. In response, my mother flatly refused to repay me and said I wasn't going home before turning and walking away. Suddenly, an intense wave of anger came over me, not just born of her current refusal but of all the times over the past ten years when my mother had abused me, lied to me, deceived me and neglected me.

Joining the rest of my family, I sat and ate my lunch in brooding silence. Yet, having gone beyond the point of no return and ready to erupt, I resumed my argument with my mother. Relying on a lie, I told her that as I'd already booked my flight home I'd be leaving whether she liked it or not. Her response coming through gritted teeth, my mother growled that I was not going home. These last words tipping me over the edge, I grabbed our apartment door keys which were sitting on the table and threw them with all my might at my mother, hitting her directly in the face. As she cried out in pain, the other guests at the bar, including my parents' line manager, turned around just in time to witness my father, for the last time, landing a violent blow to my head.

With this, I fled to the public toilets and ran into a cubicle before bolting the door. Born of the last ten years of my parents' abuse, I perched on top of the toilet seat and allowed repressed tears to finally flow free. Yet, although I hated myself for what I'd just done, I hated them both even more and continued sobbing until my tears ran dry. For his misguided loyalty towards my mother, Dad would not be rewarded by her and when he announced that he'd had

enough and intended to return to the UK, my mother and Dee expressed their desire to stay.

Despite my animosity towards my father, I knew deep down that I could not return home alone and so on Sunday 5th October, 1986, he and I flew back to the UK while Mum, Dee and Sas remained in Malta. Thinking that by returning home my problems would be over, I'd soon realise that they'd only just begun with the most disrupted period of my life about to follow. In the meantime, Dad and I landed at Heathrow and made our way to Auntie Jackie's flat in Kidbrooke, South-East London. Having been brought up to speed by Dad as to events over the summer, Auntie Jackie then asked Dad where he intended for us to stay. Alas, the way in which Auntie Jackie framed her question left us in no doubt that staying with her would not be an option.

Consequently, in the hope of us being able to stay with them, Dad then phoned Nanny and Granddad at their home on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent. After a few minutes, my father came off the phone and explained that he'd just spoken to Auntie Joyce. As luck would have it, Nanny and Granddad were no more than three miles from us in Grove Park visiting their daughter, my Auntie Jenny. With no time to waste, we sped by car to Grove Park to discover Nanny and Granddad's Austin Allegro parked outside Auntie Jenny's house. Finding themselves put on the spot at our unexpected arrival, Nanny and Granddad could do little else but take us back to the Isle of Sheppey with them, where we remained for the next two weeks.

While my grandparents were pleasant enough to our faces, with Granddad remaining as dutiful as ever, our ongoing presence in their home appeared to unsettle Nanny. Proof of this came via Granddad the day he took us to collect Dad's car from the storage facility. After collecting Dad's car, Granddad escorted us to a nearby petrol station. Following my goodbye to him, I returned to the car

and closed the front passenger door but not before overhearing him apologise to my father for us having to leave so soon and the fact that he had to live with Nanny. With the implication that Nanny had pressured Granddad into asking us to leave, Dad and I headed towards Maidstone. After dropping me off at Joan and Charlie's house, my father then set off in search of lodgings of his own.

Although their offer of accommodation had originally been extended to Dee, Joan and Charlie seemed perfectly willing to take me in on a short-term basis. Both creatures of strict routine, Joan and Charlie would not tolerate any disruption to their well-established way of living. Consequently, following my return home fifteen minutes after my 9pm curfew one night, Joan was understandably miffed and complained to my father. Following discussions with Nicola's mum, Janet, with whom I'd got along well, I found myself moving down the road to Nicola's home at Valley House. Making her feelings known, Joan telephoned Janet during which she slammed my mother for neglecting her maternal duties in favour of "whoring around in Malta!".

Notwithstanding Janet's kindness and affection for me, my stay at Valley House would be of a similarly short duration and end in tears, literally. Coinciding with my move there, Dad returned to Malta in early November in an attempt to bring his wife and daughters home. For the first time in my life I found myself parted from my family and despite Janet and Nicola's care, I struggled to deal with the separation.

Regrettably, things came to a head one night when, having received no contact from Malta in a few days, I took my host family's cordless phone to my room without permission and made a call to Malta. Unbeknown to me, Janet's husband, David, had picked up his desk phone to make a call and overheard me on the phone to my father. No sooner had he realised that I'd made an overseas phone

call than he burst into my room and yanked the phone from me before storming back out. Both hurt and humiliated, I curled up under the duvet and began to cry. Reaching in through my anger, confusion and frustration, just then, I felt the gentle touch of Nicola, who'd snuck into the bed beside me and began tenderly stroking my head.

Equally disastrous was my return to secondary school as a third-year pupil. With half my second-year class going off to grammar school, I returned to discover those who remained had merged with another class. Having had very little previously to do with the kids in the other class, I immediately felt, and was treated, as an outsider. Indeed, a hierarchy had been established and the kids were not about to allow anyone to upset the newly established order. Furthermore, having enjoyed a taste of freedom, earned my own money and have more control over my own life, I realised how much I'd moved on and felt I could no longer relate to my friends. Consequently, along with the struggle of a disrupted family life, I found the school environment confining and a place where I felt I no longer belonged. Yet, I lacked the emotional maturity at the time to figure out what that meant and where I felt I truly fitted in.

As for Dad's plan to bring everyone home from Malta, while Mum and Dee decided to remain abroad, Dad would accompany his youngest daughter back to the UK. Despite his earlier assertion that he'd done his time bringing up children, Dad appeared overwhelmed at having to parent nine-year-old Sas alone. Compounding matters was the difficulty he faced in securing more suitable longer-term accommodation. Until such time as he did, both he and Sas moved all over Maidstone to short-term placements which saw Sas changing primary schools every few months. Consequently, in need of support to meet his own needs as well as his daughter's, my father joined a single parent support group run by the Gingerbread charity. Needless to say that being preoccupied

with Sas, he had no objection whatsoever when I said I wanted to return to Malta.

At this point, I must take the opportunity to clarify that in the mid '80s, non-Maltese nationals were granted permission to remain in the country for no longer than three months. In addition, the foreign national had to leave Malta for a period of twenty-four hours following which they could legally return for another three month period and so on. Therefore, my journey back to Malta on 2nd December, 1986, marked the beginning of the rootless comings and goings between there and the UK which would characterise my life for the next eighteen months.

Approximately two months had passed since I was last in Malta. Streets which before were teeming with tourists in shorts and t-shirts were replaced by elderly couples in trousers and cardigans enjoying a three-month winter break. Even the hotel pool was concealed under a tarpaulin for much of the day. What should've been similarly concealed although on full display were the excesses of my mother's behaviour. To his horror, during Dad's brief return to Malta, he discovered that my mother had spent £1,500 of their money on a timeshare. Overlooking his past rejection of her, my father, when faced with his own, began writing to his eldest daughter, Leigh. In letters which I'd read as an adult, my father decried how my mother would refuse to leave the bar with him of an evening, electing instead to remain there and flirt outrageously with the male staff.

Indeed, I had not been back in Malta for more than a few days before my mother would outdo herself. Having moved from my old room at the front of our apartment, I began sleeping in Dee's twin room at the rear while my mother remained in the main bedroom. On one particular evening, having witnessed as much as we could bear of my mother's unbridled behaviour, Dee and I returned to the

apartment and went to sleep. The next thing I knew, I found myself awakened by a noise resembling a barrel rolling along the stone floor of our apartment. Upon sitting up, I found my mother perched at the foot of my bed. Surprised to discover her sitting there in the dark, I asked her what the noise was. Following her response that it was snoring, I asked by whom, to which she replied that it was one of her fellow colleagues, whom she'd brought back with her from the bar.

With winter bringing in fewer tourists, those who did come stayed for longer. Therefore, getting couples into the hotel in order to sell them timeshare became a challenge, as did making actual sales. Furthermore, my mother had yet to receive the commission from any of the sales she'd made over the summer. Consequently, with little money and the bills mounting up, my mother decided to return briefly to the UK. While there, she planned to arrange the surrendering of an insurance policy so she could settle her hotel bill and continue living in Malta.

However, there was one major sticking point. With the bills mounting and her being considered a flight risk, my mother had been made to surrender her passport to the hotel manager. Unable to leave without it, my mother asked me to remain in Malta while she returned to the UK. With the experience of being left alone still fresh in my mind I flatly refused. Using her charm, at the eleventh hour, my mother managed to talk the hotel manager into returning her passport to her. Following this, we made a mad dash to the airport just in time to make our flight back to the UK. Yet, the hotel manager needn't have fretted, as my mother had absolutely no intention of remaining in England. Indeed, she and Dee would be back in Malta in time for Christmas while Dad, Sas and I headed to Bournemouth to spend the festive season with his younger sister, Val, and her family.

Come January, 1987, South-East England would experience the kind of winter storm which saw twenty inches of snow dumped on the county and brought it to a standstill. The delay in my trip back to Malta allowed Dad enough time, following a plea from my mother, to surrender another of their remaining insurance policies. To do this would require her signature and after placing in front of me a copy of her signature and a policy document, he asked me one afternoon if I could copy it. Despite what I considered to be a rather pathetic attempt I obliged my father before handing the form back to him. Looking perfectly satisfied as he surveyed the form, my father took it to a wardrobe where pulled out another bundle of paperwork before merging the two. As he did so, I caught a glimpse of a letter written in my mother's handwriting.

My interest in the letter sufficiently piqued, I asked my father what it was about. Making no further attempt to conceal its existence, he handed me the letter which I began to read. While I did so, my father explained that it had been written by my mother two months ago to the new Front of House Manager, a man by the name of Manuel. Owing to its highly flirtatious and suggestive tone, it was handed to the hotel manager who then felt it best to deliver it to my father. Reading as if written by a lovesick teenager, throughout the letter my mother made reference to the sight of Manuel's bum in the tight cream trousers of his front of house uniform. The letter aside, while I had no sympathy for father, I couldn't bring myself to add further insult to injury by disclosing how the previous month she'd brought a timeshare colleague back to our apartment for sex.

Nonetheless, armed with the last financial bailout that my father could provide, on Saturday 24 January, 1987, I took a late-night flight back to Malta. Arriving at the hotel in the early hours, I found my mother waiting in the lobby. Expecting to return to our apartment, I was somewhat surprised to learn that we were moving back into the hotel. Having been given a key by David, one of two

night receptionists, my mother led me upstairs to room 407. As she opened the door I followed her inside and found myself in a tiny studio room containing two single beds along with a kitchenette and a small bathroom. With there being only two beds, it was just as well that Dee was conspicuous by her absence.

That night, I went to sleep in a bed opposite my mother, too weary from my travels to contemplate what had become of our family. Indeed, in less than a year, my parents had gone from owning their own home to living in cramped conditions in separate countries with money running out and bills continually mounting. Yet, inexplicably, the last thought on my mind before I nodded off belonged to the mysterious man in the cream trousers. Suitably intrigued, I resolved to find out more about the latest object of my mother's affection as soon as I possibly could. Alas, despite him being the object of her affection, she would not be his. Indeed, time would reveal that he was, in fact, very much attracted to someone else.

Chapter 11 – The Perils of Freedom

“Adventure is worthwhile in itself.”

— Amelia Earhart

With Dee having stayed out all night, I awoke the next morning to find that Mum had gone to work and taken my new cardigan with her. I'd later learn that Dee had stayed out the previous night with a new friend she'd made by the name of Hilary. However, this Hilary was not a female, but a nineteen-year-old Maltese lad from a town approximately ten miles to the south of St. Paul's Bay. While both Dee and I became good friends with Hilary, it was his infatuation with her that motivated him to venture north to Bugibba on a nightly basis.

On many an evening, either one or both of us would jump in Hilary's immaculate white Volkswagen Beetle and go joyriding around the island. Yet, this was no ordinary joyride as Hilary had installed the kind of sound system that would shake the car, and the occupants within, to the core. With my ears ringing, I'd bounce out of the car and into whichever bar we stopped at for a drink. Fancying ourselves so cool, we rode around the island with the windows down, music blaring and posing with a freshly lit fag. After dropping us off, Hilary would often call into the complex to catch up with long-time friend David, the night receptionist, before heading home. While Dee's lack of reciprocation would lead to and eventual souring in relations with Hilary, for now, she and I enjoyed the time we spent in his company.

As to Manuel, the man whose tight cream trousers had so titillated my mother, he had a type he went for and it was certainly not her. Indeed, he'd leave me in no doubt as to which the day he and I

found ourselves alone together in the hotel lift. His swiftness of movement matching his audacity, the bigger and stronger man suddenly grabbed me and pulled me towards him. Locked in his arms, Manuel slid his tongue in my mouth and began kissing me. Upon reaching the ground floor and with the intention of prolonging the moment, he sent the lift up to the top floor and back down again. Like a child feasting on their favourite lolly, Manuel circled around my lips with his tongue. Only the intermittent tickling sensation of his moustache on my mouth would interrupt the feeling of intense ecstasy I'd experienced in that moment.

Yet, the intensity of our initial encounter represented the high point of our brief interaction. What began with kissing soon progressed to me pleasuring Manuel orally. Having naturally developed into a horny teenager, I wanted to experience being pleased in my turn. However, my pleasuring of him in that way would not be reciprocated. Nevertheless, as a naive and inexperienced fourteen year-old boy, I hadn't realised I was being exploited by a man almost three times my age and mistook his lust as love. Predictably, my mother would provide no such guidance on the matter when I revealed all to her a few weeks later and, in fact, would attempt to leverage my disclosure to her advantage.

Although I hadn't intended to reveal the details of my relationship with Manuel to my mother, she rather forced my hand. Having returned to room 407 from work earlier than expected, she announced that as a result of a conspiracy against her by work colleagues, she had been sacked. Knowing my mother to be incapable of telling the truth about anything, particularly when it involved any wrongdoing on her part, I knew I couldn't rely on her to be honest. Yet, following her announcement that with money all but run out we could no longer remain in Malta and would have to return home, I broke down. In desperation, I revealed the details of my relationship with Manuel to my mother along with my belief in

my love for him. Sensing an opportunity, rather than caution me as to the dangers of exploitation, my mother suggested that if Manuel felt the same way about me, I should ask him for money so we could stay in Malta.

Needless to say, as much as I didn't want to leave, I had no intention of asking Manuel for money. Despite having returned to canvassing, with very few short-stay tourists coming to Malta during the winter months, I was not making the kind of money that I had during the summer. Furthermore, although I'd subsequently take a second job pot-washing in the hotel kitchen of an evening while Dee canvassed with me on the streets, it would not be enough to cover food and rent. Consequently, one evening in late February, Dee, Mum and I checked out of room 407 with nowhere to go. With our worldly possessions in a few bags around our feet, we sat in the hotel lobby and exchanged forlorn glances while privately hoping for an angel of mercy. Just then, Hilary walked in.

As was so typical of her, having spotted Hilary, my mother turned to Dee and asked her to approach him for help. While Dee refused, I had no such reservations and so I accosted Hilary before explaining our predicament to him. Following my plea for help, Hilary conceded that he could not provide us with accommodation. With my hopes dashed, I rejoined Mum and Dee to break the news to them. Having taken a moment to speak to his friend David, the night receptionist, Hilary then came over to where we sat. In a somewhat hushed tone, he explained that David had given him a key to a room behind the pool bar where we could sleep for a few hours.

After midnight, once the coast was clear, Hilary led us to the room behind the pool bar and ushered us inside. To the sight of bed frames stacked several high, it became immediately apparent that the room was being used for storage. On the two beds containing

mattresses, Dee, Mum and I bedded down. In an attempt to keep the chill of the cold February night at bay, we remained in our clothes and huddled together. Before departing, Hilary explained that if we were discovered, David would lose his job. Stating his intention to return at 5am, he then left so we could go to sleep. As we lay together in the dark, my mind wandered back to the moment a few weeks before when Dee approached me with a scrunched up five-pound note in her hand. With there being only two single beds in room 407, Mum had spent each night alternating between my bed and Dee's. As that night was Dee's turn to have Mum, she attempted to bribe me with the fiver into having Mum with me in my bed for an additional night.

As arranged, Hilary returned at 5am and, with his Beetle parked outside, spirited us out of the hotel via the rear entrance. In order to kill some time, Hilary drove us around the far-north of the island. While slumped against each other on the back seat, Dee and Mum slept while Hilary and I talked and smoked. Shortly after, Hilary took us to his family home where Dee and Mum continued to sleep while he and I went to a bar where we played pool and drank coffee.

Later that day, my mother made an interesting discovery which would provide us with a temporary reprieve. This chance occurrence came about courtesy of the timeshare she'd bought a few months before. Crucially, her purchase of one week in the low-season covering February and March enabled us to spend one week in a timeshare suite on the hotel's sixth floor. Consequently, in the space of twenty-four hours, we went from bedding down in secrecy in a cold storeroom to a plush two-bedroom apartment with panoramic views over Bugibba. Our reprieve allowed us vital breathing space to decide where to go next. While time was running out for my mother, she showed she wasn't ready to throw in the towel and return to the UK just yet.

In contrast to our plush surroundings, we had very little money for food and even less for new items of clothing. While my mother began borrowing skirts with elasticated waistbands from Louise that she'd eventually return all stretched out, Dee inherited my cast-offs. Among them was a pair of jeans that, owing to a broken zip, were not longer wearable. Although I couldn't risk wearing jeans with the zip broken, Dee didn't seem to mind, despite the fact that through the gap it created you could clearly see her knickers. As for our food, with regular meals in the pool bar a distant memory, we hit the local mini-market where we stocked up on pasta, instant coffee and tins of evaporated milk, which left very little money for other essentials, such as soap and shampoo.

Delaying the inevitable for a little longer yet, after leaving the timeshare apartment, we found ourselves completely reliant on the good graces of others. For the two weeks that followed, we stayed in a poorly heated apartment belonging to the parents of a friend of Claire and Louise. With no other offers of help forthcoming, my mother had to resort to drastic measures. Two mysteries arose from these measures. The first was how she acquired the rental on a small flat opposite the rear entrance to the hotel. The second related to where she met the man she subsequently moved in to share it with us. With Dee and I still canvassing for the hotel timeshare during the day and me pot-washing in the hotel kitchen at night, the location was convenient. Yet, far less convenient was the presence of the latest man in my mother's life.

In order to avoid confusion, I shall refer to the man as Rudi. While not his real name, Rudi shares the same name of an individual in this story with whom Dee and I would cross paths towards the end of 1987. As previously noted, where my mother met Rudi, I really could not say. With his tanned and leathery skin, curly grey hair pulled tightly to the back of his head and shirt open to the navel, he had the dishevelled appearance of a street drinker. A far cry from the

sophistication of my mother's previous lover, Steve, this man did not possess the look of someone with whom my mother would typically associate. However, when I came home from work every afternoon to find him cooking for Mum and Dee, I realised the nature of his appeal. While my mother got what she wanted, she ensured Rudi did too when he began staying over on a nightly basis.

Although I had nothing against Rudi as a person, his continued presence and the nature of my mother's relationship with him bothered me and so we began to quarrel. Our arguments becoming more and more heated, things came to a head one evening when my mother came at me with a steak knife she had stolen from the pool bar restaurant. Brandishing the knife in my face, I took hold on the serrated edge and snapped it off at the base. With my mother by now more furious than before, she lunged at me with the knife handle to which I pushed her away. At this, my mother spun round and fell backwards although not before hitting her head against a concrete pillar.

To the sound of my mother crying out and the sight of blood coming from a cut above her eyebrow, Dee suddenly appeared. For what must have looked to her like a deliberate attack on my mother, and not an act of self-defence, Dee began to berate me before running off to fetch our friend, Claire, who lived across the street. Little did I know then that my mother would use this bruising encounter to her advantage in a letter which I took back to the UK at the end of April. Throwing herself on my father's mercy, she told him how she wanted to come home and how in my company she feared for her safety as well as her sanity. Conveniently, she neglected to mention her relationship with Rudi and the other men she'd entertained in various beds over the past six months.

Crucially, after having received letters from my mother during this time, in particular the one I gave him following my April visit, my

father then wrote to his daughter, Leigh. In letters shown to me by Leigh many years later, my father expressed considerable doubt to his daughter about having my mother back after all the trouble she'd caused him. In addition and unbeknown to me at the time, my mother had disclosed to my father my relationship with Manuel. In turn, while expressing to Leigh his amazement that I'd found love with another man, he asked himself whether he should be so surprised after all.

Nonetheless, with my latest three month stay now at an end, I left Malta in the last week of April for a short stay with my father and Sas. When my father met me at Gatwick Airport, two things struck me. The first was how much weight he had lost as an already slender man, while the other was his uncharacteristic warmth towards me. However, I wouldn't have to wait too long to discover his motivation when, on the way home, he asked if I had any money. When I replied that I had a little to spare, he asked if I could lend it to him until he could draw the family allowance and pay me back. While I had no regard for my father, it brought me no gratification to see him so broken. As to his malnourished appearance, he disclosed having recently had a dodgy meat pie from a street van following which he suffered food poisoning.

Having arrived in Maidstone, I found my father and sister sharing a Victorian terraced house on a main road just outside the town. While Dad and Sas had a room on the first floor, the ground floor was occupied by a couple in their late twenties and their two young girls. Although I wouldn't go so far as to say my father and I got on like a house on fire, it seemed strange to enjoy uncharacteristically cordial relations with him. Yet, our bonhomie would not last once word had reached us from Malta that my mother had decided to come home. Following her request of him to purchase her a one-way ticket, my father and I went into Maidstone and got a good deal on a flight. Predictably, betraying none of the doubt that he'd

expressed in his letters to Leigh, my father welcomed my mother back with open arms.

Days before my own return to Malta, my father and I were back at Gatwick airport to fetch my mother. Despite her pleas to him and the current wretched state of her life, she appeared in no way gratified to be back in the UK. Her displeasure would be on full display upon discovering she'd be sharing accommodation with another family. That night, with Sas and me on bunk beds and my father on a divan, my mother sat on the edge of the bed and refused to get undressed. Having fallen asleep to her protestations, I awoke a few hours later to observe my mother still sitting bolt upright and fully clothed in the dark. Come the morning, I awoke to the sight of her dress on the floor and the owner fast asleep on the edge of the bed.

With my mother now back in the fold and me about to return to Malta, my father was only too happy to schlep out to Gatwick Airport once again. Heading back to Malta as a fourteen year-old, for the first time I faced the prospect of life without my parents. Yet, with my mother now back in England, I hadn't given any thought to where Dee and I would stay. At Malta airport, I'd be met by Hilary, who revealed that Dee was now sharing a room in a flat alongside a new cohort of timeshare canvassers. With the implication being that there was no room for me, Hilary offered me the single bed next to him in his parents' house until I could make other arrangements.

Unexpectedly, the intervention of fate would give me no such opportunity to make other arrangements and instead within two weeks of my return to Malta I'd find myself back in the UK once more. The incident which brought events to a head occurred one afternoon in the second week of June. While out canvassing on the Strand in Bugibba, I wandered into a gift shop to buy a cold drink.

Behind the counter sat the shopkeeper, a bespectacled lady I'd never seen before.

As I approached the counter to pay for my drink, the lady enquired as to the whereabouts of my mother. Somewhat taken aback by the question, I responded that she was no longer in Malta. With no idea how this woman knew my mother, or me, I asked why she wanted to know. In reply, the woman revealed herself to be the landlady of the apartment we'd stayed in along with Rudi. To my surprise, the woman went on to explain that my mother had never paid the rent. Furthermore, she alleged my mother told her that owing to a bereavement she had to go back to the UK and would reimburse her as soon as possible. In the absence of my mother, she demanded payment from either me or my sister. In no position to repay the debt, suddenly I felt the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. Demanding to know where Dee was living now, under pressure and in a moment of panic, I informed the woman of Dee's whereabouts.

With the landlady having subsequently tracked her down, understandably, Dee was furious with me. Later on that day, she and I entered into a blazing row in the hotel kitchen. While in the throes of confrontation, Hilary entered the room. Upon seeing Dee and I begin squaring up to each other, in a pre-emptive strike, Hilary intervened and proceeded to punch me in the face. No sooner had he done so than I fled in tears to Claire's flat around the corner from the hotel. Although unable to see things more rationally at the time, I'd found myself in a situation I was far too immature to manage appropriately. Furthermore, I'd make matters worse by leaving Malta without considering the longer-term consequences of having to live once more with my parents. Nonetheless, I couldn't see beyond my momentary anger and left Malta the next day vowing I never wanted to see my sister again.

Following my return to the UK, the summer of 1987 represented the first time I'd fall into what I'd later recognise as a bout of depression. Coupled with life under my parents' roof, contributing to my low mood was another failed attempt to return to school. Having witnessed me withdrawing ever further into myself, my father, in a rare display of concern for me, took me to the local courts for a game of tennis. With Dad at the net, I fired ground strokes at him which he blocked back with crisp volleys. When one forehand I hit went whistling past him, for the only time in my life, he complimented me for having hit a good shot. However, tennis alone would not be enough to lift me out of the funk. What made matters worse was that, with my anger having abated, I began to miss Dee and realised the mistake I'd made in leaving Malta so abruptly.

Realising the depth of my misery and the fact that as long as I was around, he wouldn't be the sole focus of my mother's attention, Dad phoned Dee and told her of his intention to send me back to her. Following Dee's acceptance, on 31st August, I returned to Malta. Our falling out swiftly forgotten, the sight of Hilary waiting for me in the airport arrivals lounge could not have been more pleasing. Likewise with Dee who, sporting a deep tan and yellow espadrilles, met me outside the hotel kitchen during her break. With minimal effort, I soon settled back into my canvassing role while Dee and I worked alternate nights in the kitchen.

Although Dee explained that I'd be staying with her, as all the beds were taken up I'd have to sleep on the lounge settee. Located in a coastal town next to Bugibba, our second floor apartment overlooked the sea and some salt pans. Despite the stench of sulphur, the discomfort of the settee's wooden frame digging into my ribs and the sound of mosquitoes buzzing overhead, I slept contentedly each night. Following the move six weeks later of Dee's

room mate, I began sleeping in the single bed in Dee's room while she slept in a double.

While throughout September I'd earn a reasonable amount of money from canvassing, come the end of the month the tourist trade began to die off. Had I learned the lessons from our struggle earlier on in the year, I would've been more conservative with my spending in preparation for the winter. Yet, Dee and I were living among a group of twenty-something Brits content to spend their evenings in the bar across the street from our apartment. Consequently, from time to time we found ourselves smoking and drinking alongside them. Unable to build up much of a tolerance to alcohol, I'd often end up being sick before reaching our apartment. On another occasion in the not-too-distant future, I'd overdo it once again although this time with disastrous consequences.

Before then, on Wednesday 14th October, I telephoned my parents to let them know I'd be coming home on the Saturday of that week. During our conversation my mother expressed her surprise that my voice had broken. Without much thought up until that point for the lot of my parents, on Saturday 17th October, I flew back to the UK for an eight-day trip.

While glancing out of the window as my plane approached Gatwick, the sight of flattened trees and power lines met my eyes. Not until we were heading home did I learn of the full extent of the hurricane which had occurred two days earlier. With the exception of a few roof tiles landing around the back of his car, Dad explained that the house had escaped undamaged. However, upon arriving home I looked across the street and witnessed the sight of an enormous tree which had fallen into the block of flats opposite. An additional surprise came with the news that, following the departure of the couple living downstairs, Mum and Dad had moved to the lower-floor to make way for a lodger. Furthermore, this lodger was

none other than Angela, Dee's fearsome friend from Cornwallis. While appearing more cheerful than usual, my father did most of the talking while my mother sat in silence. This was not the usual way of things and led me to wonder what on earth was going on.

Having not seen Angela since our last day at school the year before, I found myself excited to see her again. With her flame-red hair as big and vampish as ever, I couldn't wait to sit down and bring her up to speed with events abroad. As it happened, neither could she and before long she asked me to intervene in a situation involving my parents. My curiosity sufficiently roused, I listened intently as Angela explained that my father had been having an affair. Dismissing the notion out of hand, I revealed the full extent of my mother's infidelity towards my father and declared him incapable of doing the same. To this, Angela responded that during the past few weeks, he'd been going to the house next door but one and spending a few hours of an evening with the lady living there. In reply I stated this was not proof of his infidelity.

While Angela conceded my point, she revealed having been woken up at night to the sound of my mother pleading with my father to confirm whether he was having an affair. Sensitive to my mother's anguish, Angela asked me to speak to him. Considering her behaviour over the years, I had no sympathy for my mother whatsoever and, on that basis, declined to intervene. Nonetheless, what this occurrence did go to show was that while my mother didn't want my father, she didn't want anyone else to have him.

Following her disclosure about my father's supposed infidelity, Angela proceeded to lament the lack of fulfilment in her life. Citing a succession of unsatisfying sexual encounters and her dead-end job as a sales assistant in a wicker-ware shop, she rued her current prospects and wanted more. Whether Angela had been sending out subliminal messages that my mother had somehow picked up on, I

had no idea. However, I'm at a loss to account for her proposal on the day prior to us going to London to purchase my return ticket to Malta, that I take Angela with me. Suggesting that Angela could keep Dee company, when my mother offered to pay for her ticket, of course seventeen year-old Angela jumped at the chance. Therefore, with Dee unaware that I would not be travelling alone, on Sunday 25th October, Angela and I headed to Malta where Dee and Hilary awaited my arrival.

Having arrived late in the evening, Angela and I made our way through the airport to the arrivals lounge. Maximising the element of surprise, while I headed towards Dee and Hilary, Angela crouched behind me. Upon reaching them, Angela popped up and gave Dee a huge hug. Catching a glimpse of Dee's face, I perceived a mix of shock and surprise in her expression. Sometime later, Dee would confide in me that while she had been pleased to see her friend, she knew Angela to be a force of nature and someone whom trouble seemed to follow around. Indeed, time would prove Dee's fears to be founded and no more than a month had passed before an incident occurred following which we'd find ourselves homeless once again.

Wasting little time in creating an impression, the shenanigans of our new flat-mate began on her very first day. Actually, they began before that as became evident when Dee, Angela and I sat together in the lounge the morning following our arrival. While we were sat talking, Angela suddenly got up and went to the bedroom. Returning momentarily, Angela laid out on the lounge coffee table some cigarette papers, some rolling tobacco and a small ball wrapped in cellophane. Having laid out the papers upon which she sprinkled some tobacco, Angela then unwrapped the ball to reveal some dark-brown matter resembling chocolate. After taking her lighter to it, she began crumbling the substance over the tobacco as if it were an Oxo cube. While Dee and I looked on in astonishment,

it became clear that Angela had put us both at risk by smuggling what I later learned to be hashish into Malta.

With it being essential that Angela attempt to earn her own money, the next day she accompanied Dee and me to the complex. There, we talked the canvassing manager, Minnie, into giving Angela a job as a canvasser. In addition, on account of her bubbly personality and sex appeal, the catering manager snapped Angela up immediately and gave her a job behind the bar. Yet, the force of nature Dee had spoken of would soon emerge and before long Angela began hanging out with some wayward boy racer types and turning up for work whenever she felt like it. Things came to a head one Saturday night when she and I planned to have dinner in the hotel pool bar.

Having sat down at the very table where my mother and I had had our humiliating confrontation just over a year before, Angela and I began swilling pints of dry cider. Although she and I had gone out with the intention of having dinner, on account of the amount of cider I had drunk, I no longer felt hungry. When Angela's spaghetti bolognese arrived, the two small forkfuls I ate confirmed that I'd definitely lost my appetite. No sooner had she finished her meal than she and I headed upstairs with the intention of dropping into the kitchen to say hello to Dee before going on to a club.

Alas, we wouldn't even make it as far as the kitchen before Angela stopped to talk to a young guy. Possessing an innate ability to attract bad boys, before I knew what was happening, the three of us were holed up in a cubicle in the men's toilets where Angela produced a joint. While she and the guy passed it backwards and forwards, between them, at regular intervals, one of them would place it between my lips before telling me to breathe in. Taking small drags, before long I began to feel dizzy and lost some of the feeling in my feet. In need of fresh air, I stumbled through the hotel reception and made it outside where I sat on a wall for a few minutes. Just then, a

peculiar sensation came over me following which I immediately burst out laughing.

Having remained in this state for what seemed like an age, I struggled to my feet before tottering off towards the outside entrance to the hotel kitchen in search of Dee. Considering the prospect of surprising her absolutely hilarious, I grabbed a window shutter and thrust it open. To the sight of a startled Dee turning around from the kitchen sink to see what the noise was, I burst into laughter once again before slamming the shutter closed. From there, I made my way back up to the hotel's front entrance. Suddenly, I found myself joined by the guy from the toilets, minus Angela. Too disorientated to bother looking for her, I asked him if he wanted to go to a club. Thinking we'd need more money, we both stumbled back to my apartment. There, in a moment of disorientation and utter thoughtlessness, I took my pay packet from a drawer and gave him the entire contents. Promising to meet him in a club later on, I told the guy I just needed to have a little sleep beforehand.

To the sound of distant banging I gradually awoke in the dark. Stumbling over to turn on the light, I felt something warm and sticky on my cheek. After turning on the light, I looked over towards my bed and saw what looked like an entire bowl of spaghetti bolognese all over my bed and up the curtains. With the sound of further banging, I realised there was someone at the door and went to open it. There, looking exhausted and suitably pissed off was Dee. Leading her down the corridor to our bedroom and apologising profusely along the way, the last thing my sister wanted to have to deal with was a pile of vomit. Indeed, I'd leave it until the next day to explain to her that I'd given all my money away to a complete stranger, to which she deservedly gave it to me both barrels for my stupidity.

Hot on the heels of the cannabis incident, from which we'd both barely recovered, came the straw that broke the camel's back. Taking advantage of a warm November day, Dee, Angela and I decided to sit out on the apartment balcony. Just then, Angela got up and went over to the railings. No sooner had she done so than a car roared past to which she whooped and waved. To the sound of the car coming to a screeching halt, Dee and I immediately got up and went over to the railings. Down on the street below us in a flashy convertible were two boy-racer types. With this, Dee and I returned to our chairs just in time to witness Angela pull up her t-shirt and expose her bare breasts. Curious to see their reaction, Dee and I went back to the railings to observe both men standing on their seats. With their pants pulled down to their knees, both men jiggled their penises before roaring off into the distance.

Alas, what we considered to be nothing more than high jinks would turn out to have dire consequences. Unbeknown to us, on the day this incident occurred, our elderly landlords were sitting out on the balcony in the apartment directly below. Having become alerted by Angela whooping and the screeching tyres, they too looked over their railings to observe the young men exposing themselves. Suitably outraged, we, along with the other tenants, were given immediate notice to quit. While Angela threw her lot in with one of the boy-racers she'd been hanging out with, Dee and I were left once again having to rely on the good graces of others.

The first person to come to our rescue would be our friend, Claire. Despite strict instructions from her father that no males were allowed in their apartment, following my explanation of our predicament, Claire allowed us to stay with her for the next two weeks. With Dee and I still quite small for our age, were able to sleep comfortably in a single bed beside Claire. Following this, we found ourselves once again sharing a single-bed although this time on the upstairs landing of a converted garage. Similarly temporary,

our accommodation belonged to a short and overweight man by the name of Reno, a van driver for one of the other timeshare resorts in St. Paul's Bay.

Despite his kindness towards us, Reno seemed a rather mysterious figure about whom something just didn't feel quite right. Yet, with the odd hours he kept and the fact that he'd often stay out all night, there were periods when we saw very little of him. Consequently, with Dee having just turned seventeen and me two days before Christmas turning fifteen, she and I enjoyed our first Christmas without either of our parents. Providing a real feast, she and I munched on steak burgers and chips while playing our favourite cassette tapes.

When it came to having a bath, Dee and I resorted to boiling pots of water on the stove top. Owing to the number of pots required to fill the bath, we took to sharing each other's water. Furthermore, with there being no central heating in the garage, Dee and I kept warm courtesy of an old floor heater and the electric blanket on our bed. However, having shifted around in the bed one night, Dee had dislodged the sheet on her side and had been sleeping directly on the electric blanket. Being old and worn out, the copper wires had become exposed as a result of which Dee awoke the following morning to discover superficial burns down one side of her body.

While Christmas of 1987 may have passed unremarkably, New Year's Eve would provide the highlight of the festive season. With the hotel restaurant fully booked, both Dee and I were tasked to work. Having washed enough pots, pans and dishes to sink a battleship, we joined the chefs sat on one side of the kitchen for a beer and a well-earned smoke. Next to them on the counter top sat trays of leftover cake. In a moment of playfulness, one of the young chefs scooped up a handful of cake and threw it in the face of the eldest chef who was too slow to move out of the way. Just then, all

hell broke loose and with us all joining in, the air quickly became thick with cake flying in all directions across the kitchen. Not even a bollocking from the catering manager would blunt our spirits, as Dee and I ushered in 1988 on our hands and knees scraping cake up off the kitchen floor.

Alas, the new year would not signal a positive change in our fortunes and the beginning of January would see Dee and I leave Reno's garage suddenly. Our departure came courtesy of a comment made to me on the Strand by a canvasser working for the hotel for which Reno drove a van. During our conversation, the canvasser asked me if I was aware of where Reno spent his nights. When I responded that I had no idea, they revealed that Reno acted as a pimp for the working girls of 'Strait Street', the centre of Valletta's notorious red-light district. Whether or not a preposterous slander, Dee and I felt sufficiently unsettled by the prospect following which I resolved to find us somewhere else to live.

As luck would have it, an opportunity arose for us to share with two British men, also from Kent, who'd recently arrived from the UK to canvass for our hotel. Both in their mid-twenties by that time, Marcus and Eddie had secured a short-term rental on a third-floor apartment along the street from my friend Connie's family restaurant of Swiss Chalet. Initially, Marcus and Eddie shared with an older female canvasser. However, when it came to light that she had pilfered an alarm clock from Marcus and Eddie's room then concealed it in her bed, Eddie gave the woman her marching orders. With Eddie having invited us to move in, I arrived the following evening with our possessions.

Following Marcus's move into the main bedroom, Eddie explained that Dee and I would have to share a bed, or beds, with him. In fact, his bed consisted of two single beds pushed together. Therefore, we agreed that he and I would sleep on the outside while Dee would

take the middle. On to the matter of rent, my body temperature began to rise and my heart rate quicken. With Dee and I making barely enough money for food, I knew that rent on top of having to save for our next trip home would prove to be a struggle. When Eddie explained that we'd need to contribute to the deposit which meant he'd need forty Maltese pounds up front, I began to panic. Making the excuse that I had to leave to go and fetch the money, I left our possessions on the floor of Eddie's room and fled. Having reached the bottom of the stairs, I stood outside on the street not knowing what the hell to do. Just then, I turned and saw the lights of Swiss Chalet glinting like a beacon of hope in the distance so I headed towards the restaurant in search of Connie.

To my eternal relief, I found Connie where she spent most of her time as a teenager, working behind the bar. Adding to my relief, when I revealed our plight, Connie was only too happy to lend me the money we needed. Indeed, this would not be the only time Connie came to our aid. In order to afford the rent, we had very little money left over for food. Consequently, we found ourselves some nights going to bed early to sleep through our hunger while on other occasions I approached Connie once more. Ever kind and generous, she'd load me up with pizza and bottles of beer to take back to the apartment to share with Dee, Eddie and Marcus. Furthermore, the nights when Dee or I worked in the kitchen provided us with an additional opportunity to scrounge some food.

Our stay with Eddie and Marcus would not be complete without some bedroom mishap for my unfortunate sibling. This time, it wasn't another encounter with a worn out electric blanket which would be the cause of Dee's latest strife. No. Going to bed each night, Dee would assume her designated place in the middle. However, on account of all the tossing and turning, the two single beds would separate during the night. Consequently, I'd wake up on many a morning to the sight of my sister with her bum on the floor

and her feet inches away from her face in a perfect 'V' shape. While Eddie and I saw the funny side of it, Dee didn't so much.

Come March, 1988, my sister and I had remained in Malta without our parents for almost seven months and had no contact with them since the previous December. With my latest three-month stay about to expire, I ventured home unaware that within a month I'd be back in the UK permanently. The circumstances which brought about my departure occurred during my latest trip back home. While in a shopping centre in Maidstone two days before my return flight, Mum and I bumped into the estranged wife of one of the hotel's timeshare managers. Upon learning that I still lived in Malta, the woman asked after her estranged husband. When I explained that he and his new girlfriend appeared to be getting on very well, the woman made her excuses and hurried off. Not until I returned to Malta two days later would I find out that with this throwaway comment, my fate had been sealed.

With Dee unaware of my return date, upon answering the door of the apartment she scolded me for not letting her know I was coming back. Furthermore, she explained that had I done so she would've told me not to bother. When I asked why, Dee explained that following my conversation in Maidstone with the estranged wife of the timeshare manager, she had phoned him to let him know she knew of the existence of a new girlfriend. Upon learning it was me who told her, the manager summoned Dee and advised her to tell me I was sacked and no longer welcome in the hotel. Furthermore, should I cross his path, the manager advised Dee that he'd probably punch me.

At a loss to understand exactly what I'd done and despite the warning, I went to the hotel later that day to speak to the manager. During a rather heated conversation he stated that with my comment I had made things difficult for him when the time came to divorce

his wife. Still none the wiser for his anger towards me, what I did know deep down was that without my job maybe the time had finally come for me to leave Malta and return to the UK. Unlike my mother, I accepted my fate and saw no reason to delay the inevitable. To some over the past two years I'd been a good friend and someone who made them laugh while to others I was cocky, immature and a pain in the arse.

Nonetheless, I left Malta at the end of April, 1988 and returned briefly for a week at the end of June. With Claire eighteen years-old by this time and allowed to entertain males in her apartment, I stayed with her and Louise. With the help of Connie, I enjoyed our time together to do all the touristy things that being a resident I never found time to do. Yet, one unfortunate incident which occurred during my stay I prayed would be forgotten the next time I visited in June, 1991.

Having completely abandoned my sense of self-restraint, one afternoon while sunbathing on the roof of Claire's apartment, I forgot myself and indulged an urge to masturbate. Concealing myself behind a wall, I sat down and began doing the deed. However, just as I was about to climax, Louise appeared. Realising she'd discovered me in an act of self-pleasure, she immediately turned around and walked away before calling my name. Suitably humiliated, I stood up from behind the wall and returned to the apartment, praying that Louise wouldn't mention the unfortunate incident to Claire. To my relief, no mention of it has been made, until now, of course.

Suffice to say that despite the trials and tribulations of the past year, the eight months Dee and I remained in Malta without our parents constituted the quietest period of my life thus far. Yet, one event which occurred following my fallout with Dee and return to the UK stands out from all the others that year. While driving towards

Maidstone with my father, with never much to say to each other, we headed into town in silence. All of a sudden, my father turned to me before blurting out how glad he was that I didn't turn out to be gay. Despite the frankness of his comment, I didn't care enough for my father to tell him the truth. Furthermore, I found myself more than a little surprised that he gave a damn whether I was or not.

Nevertheless, while I settled back into life in the UK, Dee too would return home for good three months later. However, Dee would not be alone for long. Indeed, within a few weeks of her arrival, her boyfriend, a Maltese man by the name of Joe, came to live with us. Our current home far too small to house six people, shortly before Dee and Joe's nuptials in September, we moved into a three-bedroomed house in the south Maidstone village of Boughton Monchelsea. With patterns of behaviour so well established, hot on the heels of the quietest period of my life came the next chaotic instalment. Indeed, this latest episode would culminate in my removal from the family home followed by a sudden and shocking event that nobody appeared to see coming.

Chapter 12 – Scorpions Will Sting

*“Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
they have to take you in.”*

— Robert Frost

The transition back to life in the UK would be made easier by the fact that my parents were in no rush to put me back in school. In fact, my mother had a much more important use for me. This use involved my labour, or specifically, the money this would generate. Having been the beneficiary of my labour previously, and with money still so tight, my mother saw an opportunity and began scouring the jobs column of our local newspaper. When at last she spotted an advertisement for casual staff for a new employment agency in the town, she encouraged me to give them a call. As we didn't have a phone, I ran to the telephone box down the road and gave them a call. Following the news from the agency that in order to register with them I had to show proof of age, I returned home somewhat crestfallen. Considering this no obstacle whatsoever, my mother hatched a plan.

Rummaging through a carrier bag full of odds and sods, my mother produced a piece of paper folded into a perfect square and handed it to me. Upon opening the paper, I discovered it was the birth certificate of my deceased older brother, Matthew. Having died twelve hours following his birth in January, 1970, Matthew would have been eighteen by the summer of 1988 had he lived. So, armed with my brother's birth certificate, I secured a job at the employment agency which specialised in supplying casual staff to hospitals and factories all over Kent. Purporting to be three years older than my actual age, on my first day I rocked up as Matthew Hills, aged eighteen. While my work with the agency continued throughout the summer, it would come to an abrupt end following

our move to Boughton Monchelsea, when we finally came to the attention of the authorities.

Much like our move to Chestnut Drive five years before, following our latest move I found myself once again drawing the short straw in terms of my bedroom. Indeed, the conservatory at Chestnut Drive was absolute luxury compared to the windowless store cupboard barely wide enough to accommodate the sun lounger on which I now slept. Unsurprisingly, despite the limited dimensions of my room, the amount I was expected to pay to my mother in rent remained the same. Meanwhile, for the first time in her life, at the age of eleven, my younger sister would have her own room.

For similar reasons to me, my parents would never completely take to Dee's new husband, Joe. At the risk of alienating his daughter, my father concealed his dislike from Dee. Furthermore, when she sought his consent as a seventeen-year-old to marry, he gave it unquestioningly. As for my mother, while initially she'd be charming and friendly to Joe's face, in the not-too-distant future during an all-family showdown she'd make her true feelings known. Before then, much to everybody's surprise, Dee learned she was pregnant.

While Dee's response to learning of her condition could not have been more muted, I found myself tickled pink at the news. However, my delight would be short-lived when a couple of weeks later Dee suffered a miscarriage. Similarly restrained in her response, Dee did not shed a tear whereas I found myself inconsolable for her loss. As newlyweds who had just recently endured the pain of a failed pregnancy, their need for privacy was understandable. Yet, the effect of the miscarriage was such that it further entrenched a tendency which began as soon as we moved. Following the event, Dee barely ventured out of her room except with Joe, who himself would only appear downstairs to cook their

meals before returning to their room. While time would prove my mother's suspicion that her daughter may be being controlled to be true, I became resentful of the possibility and began to be openly antagonistic towards my new brother-in-law.

With my resentment no doubt rooted in my own jealousy, I found my attitude towards Joe reinforced by my mother's assertions. Chief among them was her contention that the overuse of oil in the food Joe cooked Dee likely contributed to her miscarriage. Too naive to know otherwise and only too willing to believe in his guilt, my snubbing and open criticism of Joe began to bring me into conflict with the other members of my family. Providing only temporary relief from the tempers which had begun to flare on all sides was an unexpected visit one morning from Maidstone Police.

To the sound of my mother sliding back the door to my cupboard, daylight flooded in as I attempted to open my eyes. With great unease in her voice, she revealed that the police were downstairs and wanted to see me. Wondering what I'd done, apart from being a long-term truant from school, I got dressed and headed downstairs. Upon entering the living room, I found a detective opening a briefcase he'd set down on our coffee table. As I took a seat, I caught a glimpse of the registration card that I'd filled out for the employment agency among the contents of his briefcase. With my mother and I conveyed to Maidstone police station, Dad joined us not long after having been summoned from work. For the rest of the morning, the three of us were detained in separate cells and each interviewed in turn.

Perhaps on account of my sixteenth birthday being just over two months away, the police decided not to prosecute my parents. Instead, they turned the whole matter over to social services. On a rainy October night, our social worker, Carol, arrived on our doorstep. Appearing to be in her mid to late forties at the time,

Carol's straight talking approach appealed to me. Before I knew it she had me sat down on my own in Sas's room where she asked me to tell her about my life. Fearful of being taken away, I decided against retelling the whole sordid history in favour of more trifling matters, such as my father bursting into my room during petty arguments or telling me to turn my music down. However, had I known what was about to transpire, I might've thought more carefully before deciding against disclosing the truth.

Having convened in the living room for a meeting with Carol, minus Sas and Joe, my father immediately took to the stage. When asked by Carol for a frank appraisal of the problem, all my father could offer in response was how I teased Dee mercilessly when we were younger and my current attitude towards Joe, followed by other petty examples of misbehaviour. Quite how my father thought these examples explained my ongoing absence from school was anybody's guess. Yet, to hear him reel off a catalogue of misdeeds on my part and cite these as the root of our family's ills while ignoring both his and my mother's behaviour over the years left me seething. As for Mum, as she had the most to lose should the truth come out, her silence was to be expected. Similarly, Dee remained conspicuously silent.

Next, we went on to discuss the issues that I'd raised with Carol, earlier. Addressing the matter of my father bursting into my room, Carol declared my bedroom to be my personal space and admonished him not to enter without knocking. His facial expression resembling that of a man who'd lost a pound and found a penny, this did not go down well with my father at all. Nevertheless, he opted to just sit there and take a ticking off. Moreover, sensing a complete lack of respect from any quarter in terms of our methods of communication, Carol cautioned us on the benefits of using more positive language as an alternative to swearing at each other.

Lastly, having asked me to play some music on the living room hi-fi, Carol jumped up and went outside. While I turned the music up and down, Carol attempted to establish a volume upon which we could all agree and a level which could not be heard from outside. Having listed all the points to be adhered to, Carol advised she would draw up a family behaviour contract. Furthermore, sensing our collective need for relief, Carol offered me a weekend placement with a foster family in their home north of Maidstone. Alas, it would all prove to be a case of too little too late. In the weeks that followed, it would become all too clear that no family behaviour contract or offer of weekend respite could halt the direction in which we were headed, which was towards total family breakdown.

Before then, and serving to compound matters, for the third time since leaving school two years before, I found myself back there once again. Despite my having completed no more than three months of schooling in that time, the decision was taken to return me to my former year. The fact that in six months time my class would be sitting their GCSEs suggested that very little thought had been given to the matter. Undoubtedly, there was no way I could make up for the loss of two years worth of education in just six months. Unsurprisingly, I began to struggle in every respect and only the opportunity to rekindle my friendships with former classmates Justin and Simone kept me going. Indeed, it would be to the latter that I'd flee when the moment came one evening following the inevitable family showdown that I finally reached breaking point.

As is so often the case, years of unresolved conflict is less likely to light the touch paper of confrontation as much something trivial. Well, that is how this particular evening at home began. What started with mother and I falling out after she had accused me of making an international call on the family phone progressed to her

making dinner for herself, Dad and Sas while excluding me. In the throes of me remonstrating with her, my father then threatened to ‘stick one’ on me. As if this were not enough, when Dee and Joe appeared my mother began tearing into her son-in-law for keeping Dee away from her family. Jumping to her husband’s defence, Dee and Mum began physically fighting following which I’d finally reached breaking point. Just then, in a moment of utter despair, I grabbed a sharp knife from the kitchen drawer and ran out of the house into the night.

With no thought for where to go, I sobbed and stumbled my way through the dark for what seemed like an age. At that moment, I found myself on a footpath leading from Boughton Monchelsea to Loose, the home village of my friends Nicola and Simone. With this particular path leading more or less to Simone’s house, I headed there. Reluctant for my friend to see me in such an emotional state, upon reaching my destination, I chickened-out and headed for the woods opposite her home. Having found a comfortable spot, I sat cross-legged on the ground and removed the knife from my coat pocket.

While focusing on the blade, I reflected on the desperation that led to me grabbing the knife in the first place. But what now? Would I really be better off dead? If so, did I have the courage to go through with it? And what if I turned out to be wrong? Having rested my upturned left wrist on my leg, I contemplated all these questions. Despite my hopelessness, I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Was there a way to achieve the same end without causing myself any physical pain? Having resolved upon absolutely nothing, I returned to my former state of despair. Just then, out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Simone closing her bedroom curtains. Until I could devise a more pain-free alternative, I abandoned my plan and returned the knife to my pocket. Desperately in need of the comfort of my friend, I got up and ventured towards Simone’s front door.

Considering the lateness of the hour, it came as no surprise upon my knocking on Simone's door to see her father standing before me. Despite his somewhat forbidding air which befitted his role as a police inspector, upon witnessing the state I was in, Simone's father spirited me up to his daughter's room with haste. No sooner had I sat next to Simone on her bed than the tears began to flow. Eventually, I stopped crying for long enough to tell her of the night's events before producing the knife from my pocket. After I handed the knife to Simone, she left the room momentarily, no doubt to update her father on what had happened. Considering my home that night to be far from a place of safety, Simone's father contacted social services. Before I knew it, I found myself in the back of his car en route to my respite placement on the other side of town.

With it being after 11pm by the time of our arrival at my foster placement, we were not surprised to find the house in total darkness. Deterred by the late hour from knocking on the door, Simone's father explained that he'd be taking me instead to a children's home on the outskirts of Maidstone. Upon our arrival at the children's home, with the exception of a single light shining from a downstairs window, we found the home similarly in darkness. With the home resembling a medical facility rather than a place where children lived, we ventured inside. In search of a member of the night staff, we passed an older teenage boy sitting in a TV lounge watching *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Having safely delivered me into the care of the night staff, Simone and her father left and returned home.

Having become a notoriously poor sleeper, and despite the faint whiff of stale urine in the air of my room, I fell into a deep sleep that night. When I awoke the next morning, I would not do so alone. With news having got around overnight of a new arrival, the other residents decided to gather in my room. Upon opening my eyes, I

was rather unpleasantly surprised to find a group of fearsome looking boys standing around my bed. While some were dressed in full pyjamas, others wore just the bottoms and were bare-chested. Yet, there appeared to be not one friendly looking face among them and when the most muscular suddenly asked me if I was hard, I found myself lost for an answer. Unsure as to whether my response might give rise to the offer of a fight, I began to stutter. At that moment, one of the day staff, a lady by the name of Barbara, entered the room and told the boys to go and get washed and then come downstairs.

Following breakfast, I met with Barbara in her office where she announced that Carol would be coming over shortly to pick me up. From here, Carol intended to take me to my foster placement where I'd remain on a longer term basis. While my foster family were wholesome, sweet and kind, in fact everything my parents were not, the prospect of remaining with them indefinitely filled me with dread. Despite knowing full well that my parents were the worst thing for me, I struggled with being forced to stay away from them against my will. While I'd been able to maintain a safe distance from them for most of the previous year in Malta, that had been my decision. Indeed, tough decisions are easier to live with where there is a choice involved. Incidentally, I'd remember well my own conflicted feelings during this time in my future employment as a residential social worker in a Children's home. Like so many of the children for whom I'd provide care, I too began to abscond from my foster placement and head towards home.

Before then, following my move into the foster placement, the decision was taken that I wouldn't have to return to school. Instead, social services consented to me finding a part-time job. Having been given the go ahead, before long I found myself a seasonal post as a cashier in a popular newsagents in the town's main shopping centre. Furthermore, with my mother having recently started working in a

nearby employment agency, we began meeting up during our lunch hour. Voicing my struggles to her at having to live away from home, my mother echoed similar sentiments at the prospect of another woman parenting her son. Consequently, I began drifting back to Boughton Monchelsea, where not everyone, specifically my father and Joe, would be pleased to see me.

Predictably, with an interest to protect in keeping me away, my father made it known I wasn't welcome in the house. Being someone who always hated driving, in order to ensure my guaranteed departure, he'd cheerfully break his own convention by escorting me back to my foster placement personally, despite my protestations and tears. Events came to a head when, desperate to be in the last place I should be, I absconded back home one day. With the news that my foster family were on their way over to collect me, I absconded from my own home until they'd come and gone. That night, having been reported as a missing person, I squeezed under my younger sister's bed. Emerging the next morning in urine-soaked clothes, my mother decided enough was enough and after contacting Carol, she confirmed to our social worker that she wanted me back in Boughton Monchelsea.

Following my return to the family home I'd turn sixteen. With my presence casting a pall over Christmas, 1988, come the New Year, Dee and Joe moved out. As expected, my father blamed me. Desperate not to be outcast again, I knew the key to remaining at home lay in ensuring continued good relations with my mother.

Therefore, it came as something of a surprise to find myself of a Sunday morning escorting my mother to the last place I'd expect to find anyone with such anti-religious views - the parish church. However, no sooner had I clapped eyes on the dashing handsome vicar than I immediately understood the draw. With old habits dying hard, and despite the lack of reciprocation, my mother flirted

shamelessly with the alluring man of the cloth. With his warmth and charisma, the vicar enjoyed great popularity among his parishioners, particularly my mother. Alas, with him being happily married, all her efforts were in vain, not that she'd allow such a trifling detail to prevent her from trying.

Prior to Dee and Joe's departure, with the threat of school no longer hanging over my head, I secured my first legitimate full-time job as a cashier in the town centre branch of Safeway. Following receipt of my acceptance letter, which included the amount I would be paid, my mother demanded half my wages. Having resumed my place in my original digs, I felt aggrieved at having to part with half my wages on a room that was, in reality, a store cupboard. With neither of us capable of resolving disagreement with each other without descending into an argument, the inevitable fallout occurred one evening. While I stood in the dining room playing darts, my mother delivered the news of how much she expected me to pay.

Considering her demand excessive, it didn't take much before she and I descended into a blazing row. Following this, in yet another display of misguided loyalty towards someone who had shown him absolutely none, my father weighed in and berated me for speaking to my mother in such a disgraceful manner. Having finally had a gutful of his pathetic devotion to her, and as resentful of the man who now stood before me as ever, for the first time I told my father to "fuck off". No sooner had I done so than he made a move towards me as if to lash out. With this, I grabbed the handful of darts I had set down beside me on the breakfast bar and aimed them at him. Cautioning him to "back the fuck off", with these words I glared at my father, whose eyes displayed the kind of fear he'd likely seen in mine each time he'd lashed out at both me and my mother. Just for once I wanted him to feel the kind of fear from me that on countless occasions I'd felt from him. Realising I'd finally

lost my fear of him while he'd discovered his of me, my father retreated and went upstairs.

After this latest incident, Dee and Joe moved out following which I moved into their old room. Except to criticise me for the speed with which I'd taken Dee's place, to which I responded that with her room empty he could hardly expect me to remain in the store cupboard, my father and I wouldn't speak to each other again for another month. Monday 20th February, 1989, to be precise. Before then, in what would turn out to be a fateful night, I'd enjoy a few weeks of relative peace in my new job. Yet, with the pattern of my life appearing to be set, a period of calm would often be followed by inevitable chaos. When the disruption came, a life would hang in the balance. As if fate were intervening to prove her wrong, a phrase used by my mother so often to belittle my father would finally come back to haunt her one night in an altogether unexpected and dramatic fashion.

Chapter 13 – The Redemption of Toerag

“Grief is the price we pay for love.”

— Queen Elizabeth II

For as far back as I can remember Dad had agonised over the state of his health. With his perpetually slender physique, indifference towards alcohol and inclination for regular physical exercise, he possessed few bad habits. Indeed, his lifelong love of walking would often be the bane of our existence. Indulging a dual intention to avoid traffic and satisfy his desire to walk, many a Saturday trip into the town centre involved Dad parking at least half a mile away. Whereas Mum, Dee, Sas and I arrived weary and fretful without so much as a bead of sweat on his brow Dad always appeared as fresh as a daisy. Only his consistently high regard for gravy-rich dinners and steamed puddings betrayed an otherwise active and healthy lifestyle. Owing to his altogether lively appearance Dad enjoyed little sympathy among the rest of our family for the multitude of ailments he claimed to have suffered. Assuredly each time he complained of a restless night or an upset stomach Mum ridiculed him for what she regarded as his self-indulgent hypochondria. As if lamenting the prospect of being stuck with Dad for the rest of her life Mum scoffed and responded that he'd likely outlive us all. Indoctrinated by her prophecy, to me its probability never appeared in doubt. Unfortunately for Dad he cried wolf too many times for his complaints to ever be taken seriously and eventually I joined Mum in mocking him.

After returning from church one Sunday at the end of January Mum and I found Dad in the lounge cradling a bandaged finger. Barely allowing Mum the opportunity to remove her coat Dad quickly revealed a broken cup while washing the dishes as the cause of his

misfortune. Sensible to Mum's characteristic indifference Dad continued that suspecting the need for stitches he'd attended casualty that morning. Whilst being tended to Dad explained having disclosed to the nurse an uncomfortable sensation along his left arm akin to pins and needles. Appearing somewhat alarmed by his revelation the nurse advised Dad to visit his own GP. After doing so the following week Dad confirmed to Mum the doctor's suspicions of suspected angina. Seizing the opportunity to make light of his indisposition I asserted that I knew of a woman by the same name. Unimpressed by my poor attempt at humour Dad glared at me and announced that his friend Clive had offered the same predictable response when he'd informed him of the doctor's suspicions. Suffering a double dismissal, when Dad revealed having been woken the previous night bathed in sweat and suffering palpitations Mum disregarded the suggestion as being all in the mind. Wounded by her lack of sympathy Dad retorted that far from being in the mind his condition was very much in the body. While events transpired to prove Dad right, another three weeks would pass before he'd call out and this time for the only person likely to take him seriously.

Apart from my rather unsophisticated attempt to be witty, not since the day I moved into Dee's room had I exchanged more than a few words with Dad. Ever since then I'd decided to spend my time either outside the house completely or ensconced in my room listening to music. With my actions successfully preserving the silence between us it came as something of a surprise to find Dad standing at my door one bitterly cold February evening. In as few words as he could possibly utter Dad asked for my help in unloading the bags of logs he'd bought for our lounge fire on his way home from work. Seeing no occasion for rudeness I made my way downstairs and unloaded the logs from the car in silence. After dumping the last of the sacks in the lounge I darted back upstairs to the comfort of my room and settled down for the night.

To the sound of a female's voice sometime later I found myself drifting in and out of sleep. In a state of semi-slumber I laid and listened in the hope of quickly returning to my former state of unconsciousness. Just then a strained voice cried out my name. With the desperation in its tone alerting me to some particular distress I lifted my head from the pillow and listened. Before long the voice cried out again with even greater desperation than the first time. At this I leapt out of bed and opened my door. No sooner had I done so than another weakened cry called out my name but this time from Mum and Dad's room. Seeing the bedroom light on and the door open I ventured hastily across the landing and entered the room. Lying in bed in a foetal position I found Dad bathed in sweat and barely able to speak. A clenched fist against his forehead drew my attention to his ashen features. Before I had the chance to fully assess his pitiable state Dad uttered to me in a low and rasping voice to call him an ambulance. With his extreme distress no longer in doubt I flew downstairs to the kitchen to find Mum already on the phone to the doctor. Sensing not even the slightest hint of urgency in her voice, to my surprise Mum began to play down Dad's conspicuously weakened state. Appalled by her casual lack of concern I motioned behind me with my thumb and growled at her to get off the phone. As she lowered the receiver onto its cradle Mum eyed me warily and then scuttled back upstairs. While my heart pounded rhythmically I grabbed the phone and made a hurried call to the emergency services. After racing back upstairs to inform Dad that help was on its way I fled once more downstairs and waited anxiously in the dark in front of the lounge window. Illuminated by a band of light from the streetlamp opposite, the clock on the wall above the fireplace revealed the time to be shortly after two o'clock in the morning.

No more than twenty minutes had passed before the ambulance arrived and two paramedics were stood at the foot of Mum and Dad's bed. While one crew member unpacked a heart monitor the

other pulled the quilt away from Dad who lay naked and fixed in a foetal position. Sensing the need to preserve his dignity I went and stood on the landing outside his room closely followed by Mum. As I turned to face her, in hushed tones Mum began to make light of the paramedic throwing back the quilt which had caused the piece of tissue Dad habitually applied to the tip of his penis after sex to be made visible. Before I could berate Mum for her insensitivity, with his pitiful enquiry as to whether or not he would live my attention became immediately drawn back to Dad. Upon his pathetic assertion that he didn't want to die the paramedics assured Dad that he had in fact registered a normal heartbeat. Having overheard their earnest assurances I watched in surprise moments later to see them suddenly strap Dad into a portable chair and carry him off down the stairs.

In expectation of his being given a humiliating all clear from the hospital Mum rushed to dress herself before accompanying Dad into the ambulance. Standing shoeless in the cold night air I looked on in silence as the paramedics hoisted him inside. While they jostled Dad into position I took account of the horribly confused look on his face and realised that he hadn't once opened his eyes. As the doors were about to close Dad offered his thanks to me for calling the ambulance. Believing him to be unaware of my presence Dad's words left me in astonishment as I watched the ambulance disappear into the night. Despite his evidently sickly pallor I felt it better to believe in Mum's prediction that Dad's illness was all in the mind and he would indeed outlive us all. No sooner had the ambulance turned the corner than I darted back inside and checked on Sas who had slept soundly throughout the night's events. With Mum's promise in mind to phone as soon as she had some news I returned to the kitchen and sat patiently next to the telephone.

More than two hours had passed without word from Mum after which I found myself becoming angry. Buoyed by the injustice of

yet another broken promise I grabbed the receiver from its cradle and telephoned the local hospital. After explaining the nature of my enquiry to the receptionist I waited agitatedly while staff fetched Mum to the phone. Without a hint of care or concern in her voice Mum greeted me after which I began to berate her for not making contact as she had promised. In an attempt to mitigate her behaviour she explained that with Dad sitting up in bed talking to the nurses there appeared to be no real cause for alarm. Sensing that she'd begun to succeed in alleviating my fury Mum advised me to go to bed in readiness for work later that morning.

Having believed once more in the truthfulness of Mum's appraisal, a few hours later on a quiet Tuesday morning I presented myself at work. While sitting at my checkout waiting for the throng of customers, between bouts of intermittent fatigue I became preoccupied by thoughts of Dad. No sooner had I dared to fantasise about his possible death than Mum's prophetic assertions brought me swiftly back to reality. Despite his cruel disregard for me I couldn't allow myself to seriously consider such a prospect no matter how sorely I felt tempted. In a desire to correct my earlier transgression and clarify Dad's condition I telephoned the hospital during my lunch hour. Putting to rest any suggestion of his death the duty nurse informed me that despite being moved into Intensive Care Dad's condition remained stable. Sufficiently placated by the nurse's assurances I resolved to see out the rest of the day at work before making my way up to the hospital.

As is so often the way when attempting to travel anywhere in a hurry I encountered one obstacle after another. Having walked out of the supermarket I took my place at the end of a queue a mile long for a bus to the hospital. After two buses stuffed to the gills with standing passengers had whizzed past without stopping, the sight of a third virtually empty bus filled me with relief as it came into view. Predictably, the bus ground to a halt at practically every red light

thereby doubling the journey time to the hospital. Having eventually reached my destination at approximately half past five I walked briskly across the sodden grass towards the main entrance. Once inside I found myself standing in confusion before a multitude of signs not one of which gave directions to the Intensive Care Unit.

Gripped by a sudden impatience I ran to the reception desk and barked an abrupt request for directions to my intended destination. No sooner had the receptionist pointed to a set of stairs leading to the first floor than I found myself atop them and standing at the end of a long corridor. After being presented with another set of signs I searched in desperation for the one locating the Intensive Care Unit before continuing my brisk walk down the corridor. At the entrance to each passing ward I glanced anxiously down for fear of missing the unit completely. Jutting out from the wall in the distance I spotted a sign indicating the entrance to the Intensive Care Unit and suddenly I quickened my pace. Just then as I was about to turn the corner Dee and Joe came out into the corridor clutching each others hand. Her cheeks made wet by newly shed tears, upon meeting my gaze Dee declared that Dad had died.

At that very moment the world and everything in it stopped and nothing mattered other than seeing Dad. Despite Dee's obvious distress at the appalling truth I needed to look upon him with my own eyes before giving way to my emotions. Turning back in the direction they came I followed utterly stupefied behind Dee and Joe as they led me down a seemingly endless corridor. Upon reaching a floor-length curtain at the end Dee pulled it to one side revealing the foot of a hospital bed. At the sight of what I assumed were Dad's feet under a blanket a sense of apprehension suddenly stirred within me. After making my way through I stood in silence at the foot of Dad's bed while Mum sat impassively alongside him. While struggling to absorb the spectacle of his pale and lifeless body my eyes became fixed on Dad's rigid mouth and parted lips which had

drawn their last exhausted breath. Suddenly the corners of my mouth curled and my chest began to heave before the tears eventually came. No sooner had I started to sob than Mum stood up. Placing herself over Dad she began to repeat how he wouldn't wake up before dissolving into tears the timing of which I didn't initially question.

Just then a member of the nursing staff entered the cubicle. Upon seeing my distress she placed her hand on my shoulder before I fell into her arms and continued to sob. An hour or so later, having left the hospital to fetch Sas, we returned to Dad's bedside in order to say our goodbyes. My face still wet with tears, I ventured towards him knowing what I must do to make good our parting. At that moment the last sixteen years of my life with him were at once inconsequential. The only thing that mattered was this moment, the here and now, a moment which I would remember for the rest of my life. Placing my hand gently on his hair I leant over Dad and felt the warm skin of his forehead on my lips. Whether out of fear, obligation or as a token gesture I had parted from Dad in the only way I knew how and the only way that seemed proper.

As Joe's car pulled onto the driveway I became aware of a different reality beginning with entering a house of which Dad was now no longer a part. With one less person to fill it our house seemed suddenly much emptier and far less safe than before. After meeting with the vicar who'd called to offer his condolences I settled down by the phone and began notifying relatives of Dad's death. Despite her disbelief upon hearing the news Aunty Grace put aside her own anguish to offer me comfort. As I began to sob my diminutive yet formidable Aunt, who'd threatened to avenge me by biting Mum if she bit me again, treated me with kindness and compassion. Calling me boy and urging me not to cry I soon found myself consoled by her soothing words. With the only people left to inform being

Nanny and Granddad I dialled their number and waited, expecting to find them equally as sympathetic as Aunty Grace.

While Nanny's resentment for Mum had endured for the last seven years, Dee, Sas and I had hitherto managed to avoid becoming a similar object of contempt, until now. With Dad now dead nothing prevented Nanny from finally severing connections with her wayward daughter and her associatively guilty offspring. In tearful despair as I delivered the news of Dad's death, Nanny remained unexpectedly cold and curt. Even with my disclosure that I'd arrived at Dad's bedside too late to say goodbye Nanny proved her heart would not so easily be touched. Dismayed and somewhat exasperated as to what I could say to elicit a sympathetic and caring response I made a humble request to come and visit her. Gracious enough not to prolong my hurt Nanny offered a cruel and callous response that she had all the grandchildren she needed. With these few words she had created a wound far greater and less easily healed than that caused by Dad's death. Without any desire to avenge her hardhearted cruelty I uttered a tearful goodbye and put down the phone. From this moment I finally realised that I had never been loved or held in any real regard by Nanny with whom I remained estranged until her death eighteen years later.

Despite the unorthodox nature of my past I had never experienced death in any respect. With the advent of Dad's untimely passing causing me to recognise my own mortality I felt reluctant to fall asleep for fear that I wouldn't wake up. Being unaccustomed to either the emotional or practical considerations associated with death the ten days between Dad's death and his funeral were surreal indeed. Chief among such unfamiliar practices was that of visiting Dad in the funeral home. In the company of Dad's friend Clive, with whom Mum had enjoyed her playful clinches, we were led into a cold and dimly-lit backroom in a newly opened establishment in Maidstone. Wholly ignorant of the natural deterioration of the

human body the condition of Dad's corpse filled me with horror. While Clive began to weep I looked inside Dad's open coffin in shock at the sight of his sunken eyes and blackened fingernails. Accentuating Dad's disturbing appearance was the powder-blue satin shroud with lace trim in which the funeral directors had dressed him. With the shroud also forming the lining of the coffin, for a man who spent most of his life in a suit Dad never looked so inappropriately dressed. The haunting image of his sunken features I'd never forget and would resonate anew the moment the pallbearers pulled Dad's coffin from a hearse the following week.

On a mild winter's day bedevilled by rain those who knew and cared for Dad assembled in the local church to pay their last respects in a service presided over by the vicar so favoured by Mum. As he stood before us the vicar lamented the date during the previous week which, had Dad lived, would have been his and Mum's seventeenth wedding anniversary. Speaking of the sanctity of their marriage precious few among the congregation who knew of Mum and Dad's turbulent history would not have recognised the irony. For the duration of the church proceedings the rain continued to fall heavily. However, as if by celestial inspiration, as the congregation began to emerge from the church the sun shone brilliantly through the blackened clouds. Providing a glorious backdrop to Dad's burial, above the deer park behind the grave yard as if bound for the Heavens a magnificent rainbow soared across the sky. While the pallbearers lowered Dad's coffin into the ground the vicar clutched little Sas as he spoke. Realising my Dad's journey through life and mine with him was finally at an end I began to sob once more. Into the arms of Janet from Valley House, the one person who I believed had truly cared for me, I sought and found comfort.

Chapter 14 – The Adventure Game

“We do not receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us.”

— Marcel Proust

So, the last year of the 1980s, and my seventeenth year of birth, began with the sudden death of my father from a heart attack, or “myocardial infarction”, as stated on his death certificate. Dad’s death marked the first time I’d experience the loss of someone close to me, or, at least, someone in close proximity to me. He and I would never be bonded emotionally and our relationship remained, for the most part, an adversarial one. We couldn’t relate to each other, had very little in common during our time in each other’s respective lives, and, in his eyes, I would always represent a perpetual barrier to his securing his wife’s undying love and fidelity. Lacking any real emotional intelligence, Dad simply didn’t have the psychological wherewithal to understand my mother’s behaviours and manage them appropriately. If, towards the end of his life, he figured out how incapable she was of loving him, he didn’t reveal this and his love for and belief in her as the only one to satisfy his needs suggested otherwise. Therefore, I suspect he died in ignorance of her inability to either love anyone else or express love in positive and meaningful ways. In reality, whatever she had to give was always conditional and, upon reflection, really not worth having.

Prompted by Dad’s sudden absence, I found myself attempting to reconcile the expected and accepted expressions of bereavement with my deeply rooted feelings of hatred and disconnection. Having reflected on my outward expressions of emotion at the time of dad’s

death, I realised my tears were those of shock, and, to some extent, relief, rather than those born out of grief. His passing would not lead me to romanticise about our relationship and revise it into something better than it was and I can't admit to having been sombre in mood for too long before adopting the role of surrogate father for my eleven-year-old sister while providing some comfort to my superficially grieving mother. Yet, time and experience has enabled me to view my father slightly less unkindly and recognise my own gratitude for those ways in which I actually take after him. However, it'd be another eight-and-a-half years before I'd feel the kind of profound pain associated with death. This would come following the deaths of two people who died within two months of each other, one whom I never met and the other I'd never have expected to meet.

Meanwhile, at the age of sixteen, I found myself eager to discover where I fitted in and where I could truly enjoy and learn about life. In seeking the kind of pleasure and adventure born of youthful exuberance, having to experience the pain of life didn't occur to me at all. Nor did I understand my mind and body sufficiently at that time to realise how I had been, and would likely, respond in the future in certain environments and situations. I knew nothing of the wolves that had already begun sniffing at my door. They would continue to do so at regular intervals throughout my life and wreak havoc in my personal relationships until I could understand how to bring them under some control. However, without realising it, I'd already started to learn to be me although it wouldn't be too long before events conspired to test my character to the full and teach me about the kind of person I was, and would, become.

Those who knew me as a child, and then as a teenager, would rightly regard me as a number of things, depending on their interactions with me. To some, I was the fool, the joker, the class comedian and always up for a laugh. To others, I was cocky, an

attention seeker, a tormentor, and a kid with a huge chip on his shoulder. While failing to recognise the chip at the time as being exactly that, I realise in retrospect how easily roused I was to anger. I couldn't have expected much else given the environment in which I grew up, where my parents were unable to observe proper boundaries and take responsibility for their behaviour but expected their children to do just that, despite the lack of good example and everything to the contrary. The injustice of their hypocrisy would influence all my future relationships, both private and professional. Not only would it put me on constant guard against anyone remotely similar in character, it also set me on a number of collision courses with those similarly negligent in their responsibilities. Furthermore, it ensured that any semblance of a relationship with my mother became, and remained, as fractious and combative as that with my father. So, at this point in time, I had a conflict to resolve between my mother's self-exonerating assertions that we moved home so many times because I upset the neighbours, and that it was my behaviour towards my father that ultimately killed him, and my belief that I couldn't be the bad person she said I was. In truth, we moved so often on account of my mother's depression and her misguided belief she'd be happier, or less unhappy, elsewhere, coupled with the stream of County Court judgements that landed periodically on our door mat. As for what killed my dad, his death certificate made no mention of my behaviour! Therefore, I had to go out into the world in search of second opinions in order to learn about life, learn about me, and find out who was right and who was wrong.

The desire for fun and adventure in the early 1990s led me into a string of casual jobs, house moves, and both casual and lifelong relationships. In the summer of 1989, I began working as a terribly ill-prepared second chef at a local Brewers Fayre pub called 'The Horseshoes', in East Farleigh, another sleepy rural village located in the south of Maidstone, next to Coxheath, the village where I spent

six years of my childhood. With my formal education having ended following our move to Malta in July, 1986, I felt at somewhat of a disadvantage having no formal qualifications when applying for jobs, and landing a post at ‘The Shoes’, as it was known to locals, would not be the last time I’d have to blag my way into a job and trade on personality or previous experience rather than qualifications. Thankfully, some of the kids I’d known from school already worked there so it was good to see some familiar faces. One particular face belonged to my table-tennis buddy, Michelle, who I’d met at the playscheme held for local kids at Coxheath village hall in the summer holidays. Michelle was also in the same class in junior school as my elder sister, Dee. Sporting golden locks, thick eyelashes, a generous pout and an attitude that gave off intimidating “don’t fuck with me” overtones, I found myself instantly drawn to her. Her boldness and inclination to speak her mind dovetailed perfectly with mine. Delving a little deeper, and after having spent some time with her and her loving parents, I realised how they’d nurtured her with the kind of responsible and wholesome parenting that led her to become the honest, steady, and dependable woman I still know her as to this day. To me, she represented boundaries and stability, something my life had lacked, which further drew me to her. Her presence in my life provided something of an anchoring influence, a beacon in those moments during my life when I felt I’d lost my way, or couldn’t feel that I’d lost myself.

In complete contrast, an additional significant influence around that time came courtesy of another female, albeit someone almost thirty years my senior. While not her real name, I shall refer to this free-spirited force of nature as “Shirley”. The combination of her overly wrinkled skin, nicotine stained teeth and darkened roots emerging from beneath her short, peroxide-blond hair, made her appear older than her forty-eight-years. However, at heart, Shirley remained a good time gal who loved her family, her fags, her friend’s home brew cider, and, especially, her men!

Shirley lived on a council estate outside of Maidstone, named Parkwood. While Parkwood didn't have the worst reputation of all the council estates around Maidstone, it was a place where I would never have expected to live. However, needs must, and, having fallen out once more with my own mother, I found myself renting a room in a council house from someone almost ten years her senior. Moving to Parkwood also meant living among some rather unsavoury characters, two of whom were Shirley's prodigiously law-breaking sons. Specialising in commercial burglary and narcotics, within days of meeting Shirley's elder son, he asked me to drive him to a friend's place over the other side of Parkwood. I found this a little odd, as the flat we ended up in was well within walking distance. Nonetheless, I'd just bought my first car, a mark II Ford Escort, from a friend, and needed no excuse to take my new wheels for a spin. Yet, what spun me round was what happened shortly after we arrived. No sooner had we both walked into the kitchen than both Shirley's son and his friend began frantically applying tourniquets to their arms, and then, right before my very eyes, began shooting up what I came to realise was heroin. Not long after, her other son left me similarly speechless and wondering what kind of situation I'd got myself into. Having also recently made his acquaintance, I joined him one particular day for a casual stroll through the alleyways of Parkwood towards the local shops. Emerging from the alleyway, we wandered towards a rather nondescript looking white van which lay between us and the parade. No sooner had we reached it, and with me obliviously mid sentence, Shirley's son produced a baseball bat concealed down the leg of his jeans, and, with one almighty thwack, proceeded to put the back window in, sending shattered glass flying in every direction. Then, he casually returned the bat to its hiding place, sniffed the air and proceeded to rejoin me in conversation. To this day I don't know why he did this and I was too stunned at the time to ask. Somebody had obviously crossed him. Following the van incident, this

particular son would go on to steal from me, relieving me of my Philips twin-deck tape player and some pre-recorded VHS tapes.

Incidentally, despite having lied, cheated and stolen her way through most of her life, my mother would've looked down on Shirley and her sons for the fact that they lived on a council estate, regardless of their criminal exploits. She wouldn't deign to live in a council house herself, something her own cruel mother would mock her for, although my grandmother's hypocrisy would not be lost on me, and I suspect she wouldn't have deigned to live in one, either. In hindsight, there was very little difference in their respective behaviours except their socio-economic background and the conspicuousness of the crime. Interestingly, this would not be the last time I'd encounter similarly chaotic characters embroiled in a life of spiralling crime and substance abuse, albeit in an entirely unexpected capacity.

Having taken another cheffing job at a pub a couple of villages away from Parkwood, my new car came in handy for getting me to and from work. However, before long, I realised that I'd bought a bit of a dud and the money I'd have to spend on it, coupled with my poor budgeting skills, meant my outgoings exceeding my incomings, and I soon struggled to pay my rent. Confiding in Shirley my predicament, the naivety of my nineteen years was such that I didn't anticipate her suggested solution. Instead of what I had expected, an offer to perhaps slightly lower my rent, or stagger payments, Shirley suggested I pay as much as I could in addition to which we could have sex. Under different circumstances, the prospect might have terrified me, however, Shirley and I had already developed a connection and struck up a good friendship, one based primarily on a mutual enjoyment of adventure, humour, fun and pleasure. We found ourselves indulging in various childish pranks, the more outlandish of which involved me removing my velcro side-fastening underpants in supermarkets then placing them

on the checkout conveyor belt, along with our other purchases, and watching them inch towards the unsuspecting cashier, while engaging each other in deep conversation, but always with one eye on the reaction of the cashier, who would glare at them with a confused and horrified look on their face. I would chance my arm with a similar prank at that time when Michelle and I went with a group of other friends from 'The Shoes' to the local cinema to see the Arnold Schwarzenegger film, Kindergarten Cop. On this occasion I decided beforehand to cut the rear pockets out of my jeans and, except for the denim strip down the middle and wearing no underpants, completely exposed my bare buttocks. Upon them realising what I'd done, our group then splintered, with half too embarrassed to come to see Kindergarten Cop (so instead they went to see Rocky 5), leaving Michelle and I to see Kindergarten Cop as originally intended. However, Michelle, at the time, did not see the funny side and insisted we let everyone else in the cinema go before we attempted to leave. How I managed to make it through that night without having ten bells kicked out of me, I'll never know.

While it seemed like fun at the time, it's not exactly something I look back on with pride. I'd pull a similar supermarket stunt (what was it about supermarkets?) on poor beleaguered Michelle each time we stood at a checkout and I'd ask her, casually, but in a voice loud enough for the cashier to hear, whether her boyfriend still liked to eat her pussy, before watching her crumple into a mortified mess. Amid all the hilarity, Shirley's daughter, then in her late teens, would also be on hand on one particular occasion to provide a moment of supreme comedy gold. Having arrived home from the pub on a split shift and eager to get some shut-eye, I greeted Shirley and her daughter, who were cheerfully chatting away in the kitchen while chopping vegetables for their home-made pizza. They much preferred to buy a pizza base and create their own toppings. Leaving Shirley to sprinkle her grated mozzarella and her daughter to slice some chillies, I retired to my bedroom, and, after closing the

curtains, soon fell asleep. The next thing I knew, I awoke to the sound of Shirley's daughter screaming at the top of her lungs in the bathroom opposite my bedroom, followed by the sound of frantic pounding on the floor, as if she were doing some kind of crazed war dance which was then followed by the sound of the shower tap being turned on full blast. Once the screaming had subsided, I stumbled back to bed, only to learn subsequently that Shirley's daughter had dashed to the bathroom to change her tampon. In the rush to insert a fresh one, she forgot to wash her hands after cutting up the chillies for their pizza and by the time she realised she was onto a loser, it was too late...

So, in response to Shirley's proposal, despite being fully comfortable with my nature and attraction to my own sex, it didn't seem unnatural to me to try and enjoy sex with Shirley, which we did on a regular basis. While it didn't fulfil me in the same way as the sex I'd enjoyed with men, both before and since, Shirley made it fun and exciting, even recruiting the son of a former friend, with him being a year or two older than me, into my first experience with group sex. Having overcome my financial difficulties and managing to save up enough money for a three month return ticket to California, I'd leave Shirley's in mid 1992. We'd see each other again from time to time upon my return until she then settled into a permanent relationship with someone nearer her age. With Shirley I got to indulge a wild and rebellious side to my character that I couldn't with Michelle. What I had with Shirley was fun but fleeting, and what I had with Michelle was profound and enduring, even during those times when distance became a barrier to regular face to face contact, as America would feature in my life again in the not too distant future.

Then, in late 1994, I found myself back in Lee in South-East London, where my life began almost twenty-two years before. By this time I'd already left catering for a career in hotels and a new

job in the city. Owned at the time by the Stakis hotel chain, and in all its towering red-brick Victorian grandeur, London St. Ermin's Hotel stood proudly at the end of a cul-de-sac around the corner from Buckingham Palace and Scotland Yard. Opening as a hotel in 1899, the frontage of the Grade II-listed St. Ermin's resembled that of the legendary London Savoy Hotel, with its drive in and out courtyard. St. Ermin's could make its own impressive claims to fame, having been built upon the site of a 15th century chapel, where in 1940 Winston Churchill held a historic meeting to establish a 'Special Operations Executive', which formed the basis of the SAS. MI6 were also stationed for a time in the hotel, which, according to folklore, also concealed a secret passage which ran from behind the hotel's grand staircase directly to the House of Commons.

Being the company's flagship branch, St. Ermin's became my hotel of choice on account of my having tended bar at its sister hotel in Maidstone. I underwent an internal transfer from Maidstone to St. Ermin's, first, as a receptionist, then as a night auditor. While a diminutive Asian fellow by the name of Wan Cheah, who always walked with his head tilted to one side, oversaw operations in Maidstone, the redoubtable trio that were General Manager, Mr. Wakeford, Deputy Manager, Mr. Giauna, and Front of House Manager, Mrs. Harlow, ran a tight ship at St. Ermin's. With reception falling under Front of House, I reported to Mrs. Harlow, and had more to do with her than Messrs Wakeford and Giauna. With her finely-tailored navy blue blazer and matching blue tartan pleated knee-length skirt, Mrs. Harlow dressed for, and meant, business. Despite being no older than mid thirties, with her air of mild disdain, Mrs. Harlow struck fear into the hearts of all who worked under her. In manner of my friendship with Michelle, Mrs. Harlow's strict school headmistress demeanour and no nonsense approach to her work drew me instantly to her. She too represented boundaries and as much as I'd often taken pleasure in testing boundaries, I knew she was not to be trifled with. However, finding

ready favour with that pied-piperess, I soon joined Mrs. Harlow's merry band of queers, along with Richard and Thomas, the morning-suited hotel Club butlers. Being both expertly trained in their craft, Richard and Thomas's skills were in high demand and they could go anywhere they wanted, which they did at the end of 1994, when both left St. Ermin's to take up posts as butlers at the exclusive five-star deluxe Lanesborough Hotel on Hyde Park Corner. At that time, The Lanesborough housed the most expensive hotel suite in England.

Although now living back in Lee, where I spent the first seven years of my life, meant being close to my elderly relatives on my father's side of the family, while acquaintances were in ready supply, good friends were not. That made an unexpected knock at the door of the staff house one night from Tracy and Debbie, a couple I'd befriended at the Maidstone hotel, such a welcome surprise. Equally unexpected was their suggestion that they take me, for my first time, to a gay bar. At the tender age of twenty-one, I guess I was something of a late-comer to the scene. This was due to a combination of indifference to the scene itself, a lack of such venues in or around Maidstone, and, importantly, no other gay friends, before Tracy and Debbie, with whom to hang out. However, with The Gloucester public house, on the edge of Greenwich Park, but fifteen minutes away by car, before I knew it, we'd pulled up outside. Not knowing what to expect beyond gaudy décor, effeminate men and butch lesbians, once inside, I saw the kind of well-worn red velvet seats and red paisley carpet characteristic of most saloon bars in public houses across the country at that time. There was also nothing particularly conspicuous about the patrons, either, with the majority dressed in suits with loosened ties contrasting with those appearing casually in jeans; nothing that resembled the derogatory stereotype I myself held and to which I felt I really could not relate.

My second outing would really open my eyes, and, again, with Tracy and Debbie, saw us venture into central London one Monday night to a club in the huge basement of the London Astoria, opposite the Centre Point building on Charing Cross Road. Constructed in the shape of an arena and built on two levels, the upstairs of the LA2 consisted of a bar on one side and a viewing gallery on the other, while downstairs was situated an enormous dance-floor separated into two parts by a large catwalk. As we sipped our drinks, I peered inquisitively through the glass and down to the dance floor. There in the dark, a few solitary figures had already taken to the floor. Dancing with complete abandon, and seemingly oblivious to the gaze of others, they moved with confidence as the track 'Love Eviction', by House music outfit Quartzlock, blasted out across the floor and into the abyss. I'd never seen anything like this in my life and found the enormity of it all somewhat overwhelming, not to mention intimidating. I'd also never seen anything like the characters that started steadily streaming in, from lace-up knee length boots and chaps in cherry red Doc Martens, short pleated tartan skirts and denim jackets, to full-blown Marie Antoinette drag complete with powdered wig.

As the LA2 came to exuberant life, I sat demurely in my black trousers, white shirt and black waistcoat, looking like I'd just come off the late shift at Cafe Rouge. My bottomless antics in Maidstone aside, I pondered as I stared at the revellers below exactly how I'd fit in with the kind of ostentatious and pretentious characters I saw before me, if they were a typical example of London gays. I didn't feel the inclination to blur the lines of gender expression at that time in addition to which I was just beginning to learn how to enjoy manhood and dressing as a man would typically dress. That said, I would learn in time to think more critically about the issue of self-expression, what it meant to be a man and the kind of man I wanted to be. For now, I didn't feel the LA2 was for me, preferring something a little more intimate, less pretentious and with a smaller

crowd. Indeed, it wouldn't be too long before I'd find two such lower key venues, a rather dingy but friendly below ground bar on St. Martin's Lane in Covent Garden called The Brief Encounter (aka The Brief), and The Phoenix on Cavendish Square, to hang out of a Friday and Saturday night whenever my work rota allowed.

Curiously, approximately eighteen months later, it would be at The Brief Encounter where an altogether unexpected encounter would lead to a rather longer-term encounter, taking me on an overseas adventure which would end up changing the course of my life. However, the build-up to one of the greatest experiences I'd have up until that point in my life also lay elsewhere. That meant moving on from St. Ermin's after only seven months. Regrettably, it would also mean saying goodbye to the venerable Mrs. Harlow. I never did get to call her by her first name, Caryl, although one of my most endearing memories of her was the prominent gap she had between her two front teeth. I've absolutely no doubt though that she still runs a tight ship, wherever she may be. So, feeling hungry for a bigger and tastier piece of the London hotel pie as I was, in April, 1995, I followed where butlers Richard and Thomas led and headed to the exclusive The Lanesborough Hotel on Hyde Park Corner to be their new night auditor.

Chapter 15 – Between Two Worlds

“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”

— Mahatma Gandhi

In the chill of the March night air, sweat continued to trickle down my face. Nerves undoubtedly played a part, however, the main reason for sweating so profusely was the route I'd taken to reach The Lanesborough for my first interview. Despite being born in Woolwich, up until now, in March, 1995, I'd spent very little time in Central London, with the exception of my travels to and from St. Ermin's and the LA2. So, having ended my journey at Victoria Station, I jumped on the tube and then got off at Oxford Circus. Once above ground, I headed westward along Oxford Street then turned left down Park Lane, where I believed I'd find The Lanesborough situated at the bottom. Passing the famous Dorchester and London Hilton hotels on my left, I looked into the distance to see the twin flames of the torches above The Lanesborough's main entrance flickering in the wind. Being unsure of exactly where I was going, I'd left my home in Lee in plenty of time for my interview at 10.30pm with the hotel's Front of House manager, a man by the name of Michael Naylor-Leyland. I'd never met anyone with a double-barrelled name before, but it sounded like he must be very well-to-do. I'd also never had an interview that late before. However, as I'd applied for the post of night auditor, both my first and second interviews would be at night, followed by two further interviews on separate days.

Sitting down at the bus stop outside The Lanesborough, I glanced at my watch. Despite taking the long way around, I still arrived with plenty of time to spare. As the M People album, Bizarre Fruit, playing on my Sony Discman, I turned around to survey the hotel's

awesome edifice. Resembling a Greek temple, four large cream coloured stone pillars at the hotel's entrance, two on one side and two on the other, supported an entablature upon which was engraved the hotel's name. The flames of the two torches, each at opposite ends of the entablature, danced in the wind. Situated on Hyde Park Corner, The Lanesborough sits opposite the Wellington Arch, with the eastern side of the building overlooking the arch and the gardens of Buckingham Palace. Having been the former St. George's Hospital, as a hotel, The Lanesborough opened on New Year's Eve in 1991. Although the royal family of Abu Dhabi owned the building, Texan oil heiress Caroline Rose Hunt owned the business as the founder of Rosewood Hotels and Resorts. Rosewood Hotels held an impressive portfolio of luxury resorts all around the world, from London to Paris and from Dallas to Beverly Hills.

With the cool breeze having dried most of my face yet with no tissues to hand to dry off the rest, I turned over the cuff of my black bolero jacket and dabbed away the little sweat that remained then headed towards the hotel. Pushing open one of two heavy oak doors, as I stepped in, the sight of more cream coloured fluted Corinthian columns and a cream marble floor patterned with black squares met my eyes. I approached the hotel's twin reception desks where a tall, thin man in a morning suit busied himself plumping up the cushions of the four chairs split between two ornate glass-topped tables. Announcing that I'd come for an interview with Michael Naylor-Leyland, the man looked me up and down, glared at my bolero jacket, my beloved bolero jacket, and informed me he was Michael Naylor-Leyland. While not sounding overly well-to-do, Michael Naylor-Leyland, or MNL as I would often hear him referred to thereafter, had an air of charm and suaveness about him. Leading me away from the main reception and into a room off the hotel's library bar, called the Withdrawing Room, I gained a better look at MNL's brown hair, with flecks of grey, in a kind of shortened mullet style. Despite his seeming disapproval of my

choice of jacket, I seized the opportunity to redeem myself when a staff member interrupted the interview and reminded MNL to ring Saskia when he'd finished. In an attempt to curry favour, I mentioned to MNL the coincidence that I had a younger sister named Saskia, to which he explained that Saskia was his wife. So, my apparent fashion faux-pas notwithstanding, and for which I'd be gently mocked by future colleagues, I'd passed my initial interview. I would also pass the second, which took place this time with the night manager, an elegantly tuxedo-clad man by the name of Lawton Price. My third interview took place during the day with the head of Human Resources, a rather stern lady called Ann France. Making me work hard for my place at the hotel, and stating repeatedly that she didn't understand why I would want to work at The Lanesborough, (notwithstanding the fact that the hotel was a 5-star deluxe hotel while St. Ermin's was a mere 4-star), I would learn subsequently that the night audit post had been promised to a waitress in the Conservatory restaurant. However, Lawton wanted someone with night audit experience and something of a stand-off ensued between Lawton and Ann France, which, thankfully, Lawton won. My final interview took place with Mr. Gelardi, the hotel manager. Unbeknown to me, if you were fortunate to make it to an interview with Mr. Gelardi, that invariably meant you got the job, an audience with Mr. Gelardi being a mere rubber-stamping exercise. To say after four interviews that I felt relieved would be an understatement. I swore it would've been easier to get into Fort Knox!

Securing a job at The Lanesborough also meant having to find alternative accommodation and moving away from Lee. So, around this time I took a single room in a shared terraced-house on Davisville Road in Shepherd's Bush in West London, between Stamford Brook and Ravenscourt Park tube stations on the District Line. Consisting of a single-bed, a single wardrobe, a fridge and a wash basin, my room appeared sparse and pokey. Curiously, it also

had its own electric meter which gobbled up pound coins. With the bed lacking a headboard, I dragged the fridge to one end of the bed and against which I rested my pillows. I never saw any of my housemates. What with me working nights, and, presumably, them working days, we truly were like ships passing in the night. Not long after moving in, I also registered with the local GP surgery. Thank goodness I'd only have to go there the once. This occurred following an ill-conceived attempt to remove the hair from my scrotum. Mistaking the length of time I should keep the hair removal cream on, and after doing so for too long, I would later suffer an adverse reaction. Waking up the next day to an extremely painful and shrivelled scrotum that had morphed overnight from a perfectly smooth sack into something resembling the texture and appearance of an ugly fruit, in complete desperation, I booked an emergency appointment at the new doctors. With my humiliating predicament revealed in full, the doctor packed me off to the chemist in short order. Closing the door as I went to leave, suitably embarrassed and with prescription in hand, I heard the doctor let forth a rampant burst of laughter. Oh, well, *c'est la vie!*

Travelling to my new job also meant a daily ride on the tube. In the main, I'd walk to Stamford Brook and pick up the District Line eastbound before changing at Hammersmith. From there, I'd jump on the Piccadilly Line to Hyde Park Corner. What would certainly not be lost on me, even on my first night, was the difference between the sight before me while working my way up from the underground and where I'd find myself approximately twenty-minutes later. The smell of sweat and stale urine in the air coupled with the plight of the street homeless bedding down in the tunnels and walkways under Hyde Park Corner contrasted sharply with the image above ground of international celebrities, multinational CEOs, bottles of Bollinger and trays of petit-fours. Indeed, the summer of 1995 would transpire to be a hot one and the stifling

temperatures intensified the pungent odours of the London Underground.

In between work, that summer would see me begin to develop something of an active social life. When not at work, I'd head into town to meet the casual friends I'd made at 'The Brief', where we'd hang out in the dim light of the downstairs bar, strutting around to the dance tracks of the day, courtesy of resident DJs Glen and Orlando. Otherwise, when I wasn't working on a Friday or Saturday, we'd start off at The Brief then head to Cavendish Square, behind Oxford Circus, to another downstairs club called The Phoenix. Introduced to The Phoenix by a waiter at The Lanesborough, I found its intimacy and unpretentiousness instantly appealing and it became, for me, a happy place. Sporting my new cherry red DMs, white jeans and Mexican-style bandana, I'd head over to The Phoenix with my mates from The Brief where we'd tear up the tiny dance floor to such cheesy summer bangers as 'Sunshine After the Rain' by Berri, 'Santa Maria' by Tatjana and 'Sky High' by Newton. My energy was such at that time that I'd wake up early between night shifts and meet my deputy night manager, Tristan, for a game of tennis near his home in Wandsworth. I'd also meet some of my Lanesborough colleagues in Hyde Park in the late afternoons to play softball against other hotels in the area before convening in Shepherd Market in Mayfair for a few drinks. From there I'd go on to the hotel to work my night shift. Towards the end of that year, I'd find myself going to The Brief for a few drinks and meeting my friends there before heading to The Lanesborough to start work. By this time, I'd also finally grasped how to tie a full Windsor knot, something I'd struggled to learn to do and in which I'd often have to enlist the help of Tony, the night butler, on those occasions when we happened to be in the changing room at the same time.

Ever since its opening as a hotel in 1991, the twenty-four hour butler service set The Lanesborough apart from the other top class

hotels in London, while at a cost of £3,500 per night, the hotel's Royal Suite became the most expensive hotel room in England. For the price tag, guests could expect a suite which took up half of the second floor of the hotel and with a commanding view overlooking Wellington Arch and the gardens of Buckingham Palace, in addition to their own 24-hour butler and a chauffeur driven Bentley. As a night auditor tasked with shutting down IT systems, checking room rates, pulling reports for the accounts department and resetting systems for the next business day, most of my work took place behind the hotel reception and out of the way of guests. There, dressed in my morning suit, I'd answer the hotel phones, taking both internal and external calls. This I would do until things quietened down, usually around 1am, by which time I could begin my audit.

Not long after joining the night crew, I found myself tasked with training a chap named Daniel, a management trainee a few years younger than me, on the night audit element of his management trainee program. At the outset, it became clear that training Daniel would be no easy task, as he seemed more intent on star-gazing and hob-knobbing with the rich and famous at the reception desk than coming to grips with the rigours of the night audit. So, I did my best to persevere with my younger charge's intermittent dashes into the back office to announce that he'd just seen Christopher Walken, or Lionel Ritchie, or Michael Bolton. On my part, I did my best to steer clear of the higher profile guests and was largely successful in this, with the exception of two who were, at the time, among the biggest stars in the world. Throughout their stay in December, 1995, one of them would be the cause of innumerable headaches, while the other, visiting two months later in February, 1996, left me with the kind of memory I still hold dear to this very day.

Given the hotel's reputation for class and grandeur, it seemed a forgone conclusion that the Christmas tree that year would be

something special. Festooned with silver bows and an array of elegantly wrapped boxes piled up underneath, the plump ten-foot-tall fresh-cut tree stood proudly opposite the hotel's twin reception desks. Erected in the first week of December, the tree's appearance would coincide with that of a very special guest. The arrival of this guest would herald the one and only time I'd ever be chastised by Tristan. Following the departure of Lawton Price a few months after I joined night audit, as Lawton's deputy, Tristan took over the role of Night Manager. An altogether amiable man in his late 20s, Tristan made for a competent and experienced manager and, being tennis partners too, we enjoyed good interaction both in and out of work. All that changed one night during the week the Christmas tree appeared. What made this particular night a memorable one, and for all the wrong reasons, was the arrival of international superstar, Mariah Carey.

Mariah Carey's trip to London to promote her 'Daydream' album culminated in an autograph signing at Tower Records in Piccadilly on 7th December. Despite my reluctance to leave the relative safety of the back office, I joined the other available members of the night team to form a welcome party for Miss Carey, who was due in around 11pm by private jet. We assembled behind the two large oak doors which we kept closed in order to shield ourselves from the chilly December night air. Having turned the phone's ringer up so I could hear it from the main doors, I dashed to and fro several times during the next two hours to answer calls before rejoining the night staff in what had become by now weary anticipation. Just then, a large black car roared into the hotel driveway following which a large group disembarked. As we held the doors open, a young blonde-haired lady backed in clutching a Handycam. Following her camera-toting assistant, who continued moving slowly backwards, in skipped the renowned Miss Carey, wearing black knee-length boots, like the ones I'd seen at the LA2, complete with black leggings and black cropped skin-tight jacket. No sooner had she

spotted the Christmas tree than she skipped towards it, remarking that the presents beneath it must all be for the staff. Not so. In fact, our Christmas present that year would be a plush white bathrobe, the kind of which were to be found in the guest's rooms. However, our bathrobes would have 'The Lanesborough, London, 95', embroidered on the chest pocket. Skipping away gaily following her remark about the presents, Miss Carey headed for the hotel lifts and, as quickly as she arrived, she'd gone.

With all eyes on our world famous guest, I hadn't noticed a man come in after her and who now sat at the reception desk. This man I would learn was Mariah Carey's then manager, a man by the name of Randy Hoffman. Returning to the back office, I couldn't help but overhear Mr. Hoffman as he briefed Tristan as to a major change in procedure regarding calls to the Royal Suite, where Miss Carey would be staying for the next few days. Most high profile guests who stayed at the hotel relied on a pseudonym which would appear on the hotel guest list and would be given to external callers in order for the telephonist to safely connect the call. Miss Carey's pseudonym, I had been briefed beforehand, was Maria Beasley. I had also been told that under no circumstances was I to put any calls through to the Royal Suite unless the caller asked for Maria Beasley, or M. Beasley. Randy Hoffman explained to Tristan that the pseudonym was now being changed from Beasley to Hoffman and only callers asking to speak to Maria Hoffman, or M. Hoffman, should be put through to the Royal Suite. Tristan then came into the back office and explained the change to me. As soon as he left, I began my delayed night audit.

No sooner had I started than the phone rang. On the other end of the line, an abrupt sounding man with an American accent asked to speak to Maria Beasley. When I advised the man that we had no guest in the hotel by that name, he exploded. Yelling at me down the phone that he knew Maria Beasley was staying at the hotel, he

demanded I put the call through. Suddenly, I felt hot and began to panic. However, my courage rose and I repeated to the man what I'd told him before. With this, the line went dead. After having calmed myself down, I continued with my night audit, mulling over the thought that perhaps I'd spared Miss Carey from the inconvenience of a nuisance call. Just then, Tristan came flying into the back office and marched up to the other side of the table where I sat with my reports all spread out. Appearing even hotter and more harassed than I must've looked a few minutes earlier, Tristan proceeded to berate me for having upset Tommy Mottola, from whom it seemed clear, Tristan had just been on the end of an ear-bashing. Ignorant of this Tommy Mottola and not aware of having been rude to anyone, I became instantly defensive and told Tristan I had no idea what he was going on about. While attempting to calm things down, Tristan explained that Tommy Mottola was in fact the CEO of Sony Music Entertainment and the husband of Mariah Carey. Still puzzled, I explained that I hadn't spoken to him, at which point Tristan revealed that he'd phoned in just now asking to be put through to the Royal Suite. With the misunderstanding now becoming a little clearer, I explained that a man did call in asking for Maria Beasley, however, as the pseudonym had been changed to Hoffman, I didn't put the call through as per the change of instructions from Randy Hoffman. Never one to allow myself to be bullied, I pointed out to Tristan that had I put that call through and it had turned out to be a bogus caller, I'd be in the kind of trouble that could potentially have cost me my job. After all, it wasn't my fault that Tommy Mottola hadn't been made aware of the change of pseudonym, and, having defended myself vigorously to Tristan, I returned to my night audit, leaving him in no doubt that now I was the one who was pissed off.

I wish I could say that this incident was the beginning and the end of it all, but I'd be lying if I did. The difficulty continued a few nights later when Miss Carey called the phone of the in-room dining waiter to place a food order. If the waiter, at that time a good-

natured Dutch fellow by the name of Lambertus, was away from his desk, the call would divert to my phone in the back office. Being something of a creature of habit, I tended to take my lunch in the staff canteen around 3am each night. Yet, on the night in question, my plans for lunch would be scuppered when I went to head down to the staff canteen and a diverted call from the Royal Suite to Lambertus's phone came through to me. Answering the call, I recognised the voice of Miss Carey instantly. I apologised that she hadn't been able to reach in-room dining and asked her if she would like to leave her order with me and I'd deliver it to the waiter immediately. With that, she proceeded to reel off a food order that would've fed a small army, and, not wanting to upset her too after the Tommy Mottola debacle, I told her that I would ensure she received her order as quickly as possible. Dissatisfied with my response, she asked me exactly how long that would be. Reluctant to give an exact time for fear it would turn out to be wildly inaccurate, I wilted under pressure and said the order would be with her in about half an hour. After voicing her displeasure at the delay, Miss Carey hung up. Without a second to lose, I flew downstairs and handed over the enormous order directly to the only chef we ever had on at night and wished him the best of luck. Poor Lambertus. I'll bet he copped an earful!

Another source of frustration during Miss Carey's stay would be the additional work involved for back office staff. At this time, she was one of the biggest recording artists in the world and had travelled to London with a huge entourage. She also received a significant number of calls into the hotel from the United States. Ordinarily, when a guest was out of the hotel or unavailable to take a call, we in the back office would type out a message which was then printed onto elegant A4 paper in triplicate. Two perforations in the paper would enable us to tear the paper into three. These identical messages would then be placed in three separate envelopes, one of which was left at the concierge desk, one left in the butler's main

pantry on the second floor, while the third would be slipped underneath the guest's door. This meticulous process had been devised to ensure a guest never missed a message. Ordinarily, this wouldn't require too much effort. However, each time a call to the Royal Suite went unanswered, the caller would invariably request that, in addition to their message being left specifically for Miss Carey, in order to ensure she received it, the same message must also be left with every other member of her entourage. During her stay, Miss Carey's entourage was several members strong, with a single message having to be duplicated many times. Still, it certainly kept us on our toes!

Lastly, during one of the first few nights of Miss Carey's stay, she'd phone down to the back office and ask for the international dialling code for the US, to which I responded with 001. She'd do the same thing the following night and every other night that I took her call to which I'd respond with the same three digits, 001. Many years later, having become good friends with Daniel, the management trainee, and by then with both of us in our forties, he and I sat together one night and reminisced about our time at The Lanesborough. When it came to the subject of Mariah Carey, I happened to mention to him her habit of calling down each night and asking for the code to dial the US. With a wry smile, he then revealed that on his night shifts she'd do exactly the same thing with him!

Despite the temporary inconvenience of the hotel's more demanding guests, perhaps for the first time in my life, I began to feel a real sense of contentment. I'd never have imagined then that events would transpire to see me leave The Lanesborough by the middle of the summer. However, on account of those whose paths I'd soon cross, I'd come to realise that the summer of 1996 would see my adulthood begin in earnest. Who knows why we cross the paths of the people we do and how we can never know whether our lives

really do change course or whether we remain on the course we were always meant to be on.

So, prior to my unintended departure during the summer, within the first three months of the new year, I'd cross paths with two people, both of whom would leave lasting impressions on me, albeit for entirely different reasons. The first would involve an altogether brief yet surreal encounter, while the other I'd meet unexpectedly one night at The Brief Encounter. With the Mariah Carey fiasco of eight weeks ago now something of a distant memory, Tristan would shortly redeem himself in my eyes in a way I couldn't possibly have imagined. Amid an atmosphere of febrile excitement and anticipation, on Monday 12th February, 1996, arguably the biggest star in the world checked into The Lanesborough.

For the purposes of this retelling, the magic actually began during my shift on the night before. Having assembled as many of the night staff as he could in the back office, and clutching a memo from Sony Music Entertainment in his hand, Tristan read aloud. The memo revealed that our esteemed guest would be coming to London to receive a lifetime achievement accolade at The Brits Awards show at Earl's Court on 19th February and would be staying at the hotel for just over a week. As Tristan read on, my mind began to wander, until he reached the part where the memo explained that our celebrated guest did not sleep well at night, and, curious as to the goings on behind the scenes, could often be found during this time wandering the back stairs and checking out the kitchens. This was definitely music to my ears and gave me hope that one night in the next week, while making my way down to the staff canteen, I might come face to face with perhaps the most enigmatic entertainer of our time. Alas, fate would not conspire in my favour, with my nightly forays downstairs for my lunch that week proving fruitless.

With Tristan having finished reading, the night team disbanded to their respective duties, and with my reports scattered about me, I began my night audit. Suddenly, the phone rang on my work computer followed by the name 'Lewis Wilson' which flashed up on the screen. It didn't escape my notice that the call came from one of the extensions in the Royal Suite. Picking up the phone, I was pleasantly surprised to hear the voice of my butler friend Richard on the other end. With a heady mix of excitement and astonishment in his voice, Richard said that he couldn't believe what the staff at Sony Music had done to the Royal Suite in preparation for tomorrow's big arrival and suggested I pop up and see for myself. Knowing I was unlikely to get another chance once our megastar guest had checked in the following day, I hurried upstairs to the Royal Suite for what would be the only time I'd set foot in there, to see for myself what it was that had Richard in such a tizzy.

As I mentioned before, the Royal Suite consisted of half of the second floor of the hotel, with views overlooking Wellington Arch and the gardens of Buckingham Palace. During my time there, the Royal Suite became a home away from home for senior American politicians, international recording artists and global CEOs. With my role being a primarily back office one, albeit with some guest interaction, I ventured to the guest's suites on the rarest of occasions. However, this was undoubtedly a special occasion and something for which I've remained grateful ever since, considering what I was about to witness. Having found my way to the main door of the Royal Suite, I opened it and went inside. Immediately to my right, sitting unplugged on a counter top in a little galley kitchen, was a Häagen-Dazs ice-cream machine. Unsure of where to go next, I followed the sound of pinging coming from one of the rooms. I soon found myself standing in the living area of the Royal Suite amid an array of exquisite flower arrangements which had been carefully placed around the room. Peering into one of sprays to take a sniff, I suddenly spotted bottles of fruit juice and small packets of

M&Ms and Skittles hidden among the flowers. Just then, Richard called out and I found him in the room next door playing happily on a pinball machine. Creeping up behind, I flung my arms around Richard in gratitude at his having invited me to partake of this amazing spectacle. Having loosened my grip, I looked around me and realised I was standing in something resembling a sub-branch of Hamley's toy shop. While Richard continued to duel with the pinball machine, I marvelled at an enormous life-size metallic robot which stood motionless next to an equally large jukebox. Intrigued to learn of the musical tastes of our renowned guest, I took the liberty of thumbing through the selected albums to see if any of his own music were included. To this day, the album that I recall clearly, most likely on account of its peculiar cover art, was 'Jollification' by British rock band The Lightening Seeds.

Pausing briefly from his game, Richard suggested I take a look in the dining room next door. Upon entering, I noticed the long mahogany table and chairs I'd seen in the hotel brochure had been removed, to be replaced by a sea of stuff toys and the biggest teddy bear I'd ever seen. Anyone unaware of who would soon occupy this suite could be forgiven for thinking it was about to host the most magical children's party ever, not the man who had the biggest selling album of all time and who, two months prior, had bagged the UK Christmas number one spot with the eco-conscious anthem 'Earth Song', yet, when you're the King of Pop, you can clearly have whatever you want.

During the week that followed, the hotel was abuzz with excitement, both inside and out. Inside, anecdotes spread among the staff of their various interactions with the megastar, while at the rear of the hotel, a legion of loyal fans, dancing and singing to his music, kept a round-the-clock vigil, hoping to catch a glimpse of the global pop icon. Seizing the opportunity to make mischief, some of the more brazen among the hotel's butlers would go to a window of any

available suite overlooking the assembled masses at the rear of the hotel and deliberately open the window and, in an attempt to obscure their appearance, deliberately pull the curtain around their face and wave excitedly to the fans. Inevitably, this would send them into an absolute frenzy, thinking it was their idol in a playful mood. A rumour circulated that a butler had actually donned one of the famed black fedoras and red military-esque jackets before pulling back the curtain and waving to the milling throng, sending them into near meltdown. How anybody in the accounts office, which looked out onto the forecourt at the rear of the hotel, got any work done that week, I'll never know.

As for the King of Pop having everything he wanted, there was one notable exception. One night during the week between his arrival and The Brit Awards ceremony, Hamley's closed their Regent Street branch one evening so he could shop in private. In the window that night stood a fabulous model of Disney's magic kingdom. With the model having caught Michael Jackson's eye, an enquiry was made as to whether the model was for sale. However, Hamley's staff advised that while it was not, they would gladly oblige and place an order for a replica to be made and then shipped to the Neverland ranch in California. As the tales from the staff of their various sightings and interactions with the King of Pop continued to unfurl, it became evident that the majority of my colleagues appeared to have had some dealings with him, with one among the notable exceptions being... me. That fact would also not escape Tristan's notice and his moment of redemption for the Mariah Carey brouhaha had come, on Michael Jackson's last night at The Lanesborough, which also happened to be the night of The Brit Awards.

That night, I arrived in the back office at my usual start time of 10pm and sat down next to my computer terminal, ready to answer the phones. As I began pulling off the report I used each night to

check each guest's individual room rate, Tristan appeared at the door. Approaching the table in front of me, he explained he was aware that I hadn't got to meet Michael Jackson. To rectify this, he asked if I would like to welcome him back to the hotel later that evening following his return from The Brit Awards. Stunned into silence by Tristan's suggestion, I barely mustered my response before he told me to take my night audit down to the accounts office and begin it there and he would cover the phones.

With fumbling fingers, I gathered up my audit and hurried down to the accounts office on the ground floor, which looked out over the forecourt at the rear of the hotel. As I turned the corner and approached the accounts office, I could hear the sound of the fans outside, chanting and singing along to his music playing on a ghetto blaster. As I pulled back the net curtain covering one of the sash windows, I peered out and saw some of the fans breakdancing to the music. It was far too noisy, and far too exciting an atmosphere to even consider doing my audit, so, I just sat back and enjoyed the spectacle unfolding before my eyes. It wouldn't be too long before the man of the moment arrived back. Outside the door to accounts, members of the hotel security team had assembled and were in constant contact via radio with the Jackson security team. I popped my head out the door of accounts and told the security guards that Tristan had asked me to welcome Mr. Jackson back to the hotel to which they replied that his ETA was approximately five minutes. Instead of returning to accounts, I remained with the security guards on the inside of the main door. Although my view out onto the forecourt was obscured by the net curtain covering the door, I could tell his car had pulled up the moment that, all of a sudden, the crowd unleashed a mightily thunderous roar. Reminiscent of a football match, the controlled chaos continued for as long as the King of Pop remained outside, greeting the multitude of loyal fans who'd braved the chilly February temperatures in the hope of meeting him, and he had not disappointed them. All of a sudden, a

thin man, a little taller than me at no more than about 5 feet 10 inches, walked with purpose through the door. My eyes fixed firmly on him as he ventured in my direction, I wanted to take in as much of his image as I could to ensure that such a brief moment in time remained vivid in my memory before my eventual ageing would cause the rich detail to fade. Wearing tight-fitting black trousers and a military style black jacket, his clothing accentuated his pale complexion. I was struck by how thin he was and the angular formation of his eyebrows, suggesting they'd been shaped and pencilled or tattooed on. Upon reaching me I smiled and spoke aloud, welcoming him back to The Lanesborough. As he passed me, I looked down at the Brit award figurine clutched firmly in his hand. Having reached the same corner I'd turned earlier before going into the accounts office, he turned to face me, raised his hand to his head, smiled and then saluted. He turned the corner and then disappeared.

Oblivious to the fact that there was more to come that night from the King of Pop, I settled down in the back office and got on with my night audit. While working through my room rate report, I became aware of something I'd never heard at The Lanesborough, before or since, in the form of raised voices in the hotel lobby. My curiosity roused, I stood at the entrance to the back office and saw two burly African-American men involved in a tense exchange of some kind about who should have done this and who should have done that. At that moment the phone rang. I picked it up and on the end of the line was a lady who stated she was calling from Earl's Court. She explained she knew Michael was staying at the hotel and, while fully appreciating that I couldn't put her through to him, she asked whether I could get a message to him saying that he sang like an angel. While in truth that was impossible if I wanted to remain in a job, I didn't have the heart to say no outright and advised the affable lady I would try my best. With this, she offered her thanks and told me how lucky I was to be working in the hotel

where Michael Jackson was staying. She then made a comment about someone jumping on the stage during Michael Jackson's act and then hung up. With the furore in reception having died down and having hardly made any dent in my audit, I spent much of the remainder of the night playing catchup.

That is, until around 6.30am, when an internal call came in and the name 'Lewis Wilson' and the number 220 flashed up on my computer screen. Extension 220 belonged to the private phone in the bedroom of the Royal Suite, with Lewis Wilson the pseudonym of Michael Jackson. The heat was back on and I felt the same surge throughout my body as I had the night I'd taken Mariah Carey's hefty food order. However, this time the caller's voice sounded calm, quiet and unassuming, although peculiarly high-pitched...and unmistakably him. Beginning in a concerned and surprisingly informal tone, Mr. Jackson asked if I'd seen the news that morning. I replied that I hadn't as I tended not to read the papers although I said I was aware that the day's papers had indeed arrived. He went on to explain how he'd been made aware after finishing his rendition of 'Earth Song' that during the performance, someone had jumped up on the stage in an attempt to disrupt his act. He continued by saying he was also told that in the process of jumping up on the stage, the man had knocked some of the children off and that they had been injured. He expressed his concern, stating he wanted to check on their welfare and, while he did have a contact number for one of the families, every time he dialled the number the phone went "beep". In order to try to help him, I asked Mr. Jackson for the number so I could test it for him, to which he read the number back to me. Having then studied the number, I soon realised he was a digit short. Although desperate not to disappoint him, I explained that there was no way of knowing the number of the digit which was missing and where in the sequence of numbers it fell. Offering him my sincere apologies, I advised that there was nothing

more I could do. Nonetheless, in a calm and composed manner, he thanked me for my explaining the situation to him.

I wish I knew how to account for what happened next and what made me say what followed. Maybe it had something to do with what I'd seen in the Royal Suite, or hearing his concern for the allegedly injured children, or the fact that he seemed, and sounded, very childlike himself, but for some unknown reason I seemed intent on expressing my empathy with him. Just then, I asked him if I could say something to him. Responding in the same gentle manner as before he replied that I could. With this, I blurted out that while I couldn't relate to the kind of childhood he'd had, I understood how it felt to have your childhood taken away from you and how that feeling would remain with me for the rest of my life. In the brief silence that followed I could feel my heart beating hard in my chest, to which he provided my relief when he offered perhaps the most genuine and heartfelt "thank you very much" I've think I've ever received. With the Piccadilly line that morning temporarily suspended, I took the bus back to Hammersmith. Sitting at the back, I reflected on the surrealness of the last ten hours and just wanted to tap any of my fellow passengers on the back and tell them what had just happened, but I didn't. They probably wouldn't have believed me, anyway.

While stories of Michael Jackson and Mariah Carey et al may make for compelling tales to tell, what made The Lanesborough truly special was the people toiling away behind the scenes. They were the ones who really made magic happen. Chief among them were the hotel's courteous, professional and patient butlers, who catered to each guest's every whim, no matter how outlandish the request and wouldn't hesitate to answer a call to a guest in the bath who felt it was the butler's job to turn on the cold tap because the bath water they were in was too hot, or the unassuming group of Polish cleaners dressed in navy blue boiler suits, no socks and the kind of

black plimsolls we used to wear for PE at school. They worked like trojans night after night to keep the hotel clean and appeared to take great pride in scrubbing the corners of the downstairs corridors with toothbrushes, and none of them ever spoke a word of English. Then there was the highly efficient security staff, who kept us and the hotel guests safe. Everybody did their best, sometimes in the face of considerable provocation and ingratitude, to provide the best service in the world. Like theatre, what's going on behind the scenes can often be far more interesting than what's happening on stage and the back stories more compelling, exciting and representative of a life well lived.

So, by now it was March 1996 and, following a chance meeting at The Brief, I would leave The Lanesborough in June of that year, and the UK itself a month later. I'd find myself on a new adventure that would change my life and either make or break me. Oh and every time I see a bird of paradise or smell that luscious, heady scent of fresh lilies, I'm immediately transported back to The Lanesborough, although I wonder whether it was all just a dream.

Chapter 16 – An Encounter at The Brief

“I knew when I met you an adventure was going to happen.”

— A.A. Milne

Descending the stairs leading from the upper to the lower bar of The Brief Encounter that March night, I heard Orlando the DJ calling out over his microphone for a cork. Situated at 42 St. Martin’s Lane, just up from Trafalgar Square and set out on two levels, ‘The Brief’ had the dubious reputation of being ‘one step up from a toilet’. Presumably that was on account of the dinginess of the lower level, where I preferred to be. This was not for any kind of seedy sexual gratification but because the downstairs bar housed the DJ’s booth and was also where my casual friends tended to gather. While ‘You Spin Me Round’ by Dead or Alive began to play, I handed over my coat to the cloakroom attendant before grabbing a drink at the bar. Intrigued as to why Orlando had called out to the bar for a cork, no sooner had I reached the DJ booth than I understood why. Having realised I’d just walked into a fart cloud, I asked Orlando if he was the miscreant. Quick to exonerate himself, Orlando explained that he’d just been talking to “some old judge” who’d decided to drop one at the DJ booth before leaving. As ‘You Spin Me Round’ faded out, Orlando exclaimed, much to the amusement of the other revellers, how the fart had “spun him round” and that he “could still smell it”.

Giggling to myself as I left the DJ booth, I soon found my friends and was pleasantly surprised by the presence of two new members. By coincidence, two chaps among our group had friends visiting them, both Americans, and had decided to bring them both to ‘The Brief’ on the same night. Although strangers to each other, both men were soon engrossed in conversation and took little notice of the

rest of the group. The taller of the two had his back to me, while the other, a handsome dark-haired chap around my age, stood facing me. Catching up with my friends, we began discussing the terror of the Dunblane massacre that had occurred earlier in the week in which a teacher and sixteen of her pupils were shot dead while fifteen others were injured. Just then, the taller of the two men turned around and looked at me. Waiting for a suitable moment to interject, he asked me if I'd recently been up in Scotland. I replied by saying that I'd never been to Scotland and that I must have a double. Introducing himself to me as Warren, he agreed and explained that he'd just met this so called double during a short trip to Scotland. Despite only having just bought a drink, he asked me if I wanted another. From there our conversation began and an exchange flowed freely. Warren revealed that he was thirty-five years of age and from Fort Worth in Texas. Being a leggy 6'2", Warren was considerably taller than me and also twelve years older. A dark-haired and not at all unattractive man, he came across as polite and well-mannered. However, I found the other American, a fellow named Paul, the more attractive of the two and remarked to Warren how deep they appeared to have been in conversation. To this, Warren explained that he and Paul had been discussing the possibility of reversing a circumcision. To my enquiry into his knowledge on the subject, Warren revealed that he was on a study year abroad as part of his undergraduate degree with the St. George's School of Medicine in Grenada. Having spent the first part of his third year at Poole Hospital in Dorset, he was now based at the North Middlesex Hospital in Edmonton, North London. To the disclosure that he'd taken a room in shared accommodation on Broadwater Road in nearby Tottenham, I explained to Warren the notoriety of that particular area following the Broadwater Farm riots eleven years earlier. At this, Warren scoffed, revealing that as a paramedic in Fort Worth he'd witnessed, and been involved in, far worse.

Finding Warren's self-assuredness and good manners alluring, he and I began spending as much of our spare time together as we could. I didn't really delve too deeply at that time into what we had in common, although we'd later indulge our mutual love of tennis whenever we could. It didn't escape my notice that we dressed very differently. Having been swept up in the seventies revival in the early to mid 90s, in addition to my cherry red DMs and white jeans, I regularly wore wide-legged trousers with Cuban heel boots and fitted shirts. Despite this look being a common sight in London at the time, when Warren and I began going out to the bars he'd be openly critical of my dress sense, referring disparagingly to my outfits as "disco fever". My look contrasted sharply with his more conservative button-down 'Polo' by Ralph Lauren shirts, blue jeans and Timberland boots. What my naivete prevented me from realising at the time was that Warren's casual put-downs betrayed something darker in his character, something which would reveal itself to me fully before long.

In the meantime, and much to the chagrin of Warren's housemates at Broadwater Road, I began to sleep over regularly during my nights off. The inevitable fallout from this led to Warren and I moving in together, first of all renting a converted loft from a couple in Wood Green in North London. Then, in June, once Warren's internship at North Middlesex University Hospital had ended, he expressed a desire to return to the south coast and within a matter of a few weeks we'd moved to Southsea, in Portsmouth.

During our brief stint in Southsea, Warren received word from St. George's University advising him that if he hoped to secure a graduate post, he'd stand a better chance by applying while completing his fourth year back in America. Returning home one afternoon from the temp job I'd undertaken to be met with the news, I automatically thought Warren would be heading back to America alone. Unable to hold back the tears, I began to cry. To my surprise,

Warren explained that he wanted me to go with him. As certain as I could be of my affection for him and having concluded that if he didn't feel the same way about me, he wouldn't have asked me, it felt like the right thing to do to go with him. So, we set about planning the next steps in our future. While Warren began frantically applying to various U.S. hospitals for a placement to complete his year four studies, I secured a visitor's visa which would allow me to stay for an initial period of twelve months. With Warren having successfully gained a post at University Hospital in Newark, New Jersey, on Friday 26th July, 1996, we landed at Newark International Airport where we spent the night at one of the airport hotels.

Making good use of their connections, prior to us leaving the UK, Warren had contacted his father, Warren Sr, and his mother, Kitsy, (which she preferred to her real name, Katherine) for help finding somewhere to live in New Jersey. Warren's father was a minister in the Presbyterian church of Fort Worth, and a fellow minister with whom he'd worked, had transferred to the ministry covering the Newark diocese. As luck would have it, a recently refurbished house attached to the Second Presbyterian Church located in downtown Newark on the corner of Washington and James Street remained empty and may be available for our short-term use. Warren Sr had arranged for us to meet a lady named Carrie Washington at the house in Newark the following day. Unsure of exactly how to get there, Warren asked a room service waiter at the hotel for directions to which he replied that nobody goes downtown unless they really have to! Despite those foreboding words and weary from our long journey, Warren and I slept soundly that night, huddled on one side of the most enormous bed I'd ever seen. The next morning, my apprehension would be roused when we awoke to news that a bomb had been detonated overnight at the Olympic Park in Atlanta, Georgia.

The real cause of my unease was the fact that the next day, Sunday, Warren was booked to fly from Newark down to his home in Fort Worth. The idea was to fly down to Texas and retrieve his personal effects stored with his parents, collect his Honda Accord car then drive the sixteen-hundred miles back to Newark, arriving sometime the following Friday. This meant me potentially staying alone in a house I didn't know in a city seemingly considered too dangerous in which to set foot. Voicing my concerns to him as we headed in a hire car downtown, Warren told me not to worry and that he had a plan. Feeling less than reassured, I found the sight of several pairs of Converse sneakers tied at the laces and dangling from the telegraph wires stretched across the residential streets leading into downtown a curious albeit temporary distraction. Our destination, the Second Presbyterian Church of Newark, lay on the corner of Washington and James Street and, having pulled up outside the first house after the church on James Street, there waiting for us was our contact, Carrie Washington.

Standing on the steps of the three-story brownstone at number 19, Carrie, with her full set of luminous white teeth, greeted us enthusiastically before unlocking the front door. The door to this house was unusual in that, apart from a brown metal trim and central bar, it was full glass through which you could see from the street into every room on that floor. What I instantly noticed from the steps I would also observe on the two upper floors, that the house, although clearly recently renovated, contained absolutely no furniture whatsoever. Warren had arranged for a removal van to transport the bulkier items among his belongings, including his bed, from Fort Worth to Newark, although delivery would not be until the end of the following week. With Warren in agreement that the house would be ideal and Carrie similarly pleased that we'd be staying, 19 James Street looked set to be our new temporary home. Carrie's warmth towards us had taken me somewhat by surprise, having initially thought that most American's of faith were

automatically prejudiced against homosexuals. Warren's disclosure to me that in their spare time his parents judged drag shows coupled with Carrie's friendliness towards us led me to challenge my own pre-conceived ideas on this matter.

To Warren's aforementioned plan to help me through the next five days, while he'd come good on his plan, he'd do so in a way I hadn't expected. Assuring me that I wouldn't be alone during his absence, no sooner had we left James Street than we pulled up outside a warehouse type building which was home to the Humane Society of Newark. Unlike Warren, I hadn't considered us adopting a dog but before I knew it we were peering into metal cages stacked several high, with equally inquisitive faces staring back at us. With each one appearing more frightened and desperate than the last, I found myself beginning to well up. Just then, Warren turned around from one of the cages further along and asked about the dog with ears like a bat. Having joined him, I peered into the cage and looked straight into the eyes of a trembling brown and white Jack Russell, which sported the kind of deer-like ears that were completely out of proportion to the rest of its body. With its head bowed down yet looking up, it was clear our little friend was more uneasy in its surroundings than I'd been at James Street earlier. So, rather than getting a dog for my protection, Dee Dee, as we later learned was her name, ended up with me for hers. Stopping by a local supermarket, we grabbed enough by way of groceries and dog food to see us through until Warren's return the following week. With Dee Dee firmly ensconced between us, we went to sleep on the top floor of number 19 that Saturday night without the need for any blankets, courtesy of the sultry July heat. Although I more than likely imagined it, I swear I could hear the sound of gunshots in the distance each night.

Without doubt, the best thing about our brief stay at the church house on James Street was meeting our charismatic neighbour at

number 21. Epitomising the blonde-haired blue-eyed all-American stereotype, Ingrid was a law student at the Newark campus of Rutgers University, a few blocks away. Notwithstanding her academic abilities, Ingrid's charm lay in her love of life, her infectious laugh and, most importantly, her compassion for others. Meeting Ingrid and her boyfriend, Regis, during that first week at the house, we hit it off instantly. With Ingrid already the proud mum of a pound dog herself, a black 'Toto' type terrier by the name of Lennie, Warren and I won plaudits from Ingrid for having adopted Dee Dee, who Ingrid in turn adopted as her own. Having Ingrid nearby during Warren's absence reassured me and a few times that first week I found myself climbing out of the kitchen window on the first floor of number 19 onto a flat roof and then in through Ingrid's kitchen window at number 21 to share a Chinese takeaway. We'd also take it in turns to feed a homeless man named Joseph, heavily clothed despite the oppressive July heat, who'd climb up onto the flat roof and stop by our respective windows for some food and a chat. This would all come to an abrupt end one afternoon approximately three weeks later when Warren received a call from Carrie to ask if he and I were a couple. With Warren then confirming that we were, Carrie explained that we could no longer stay in the church house and asked us to move out as soon as possible. So, for the next three months, Warren, Dee Dee and I lived in a three story townhouse on a new development on the other side of Newark, in a rather posh sounding area called Society Hill.

Perhaps it was just as well that during our time in Newark I remained unaware of the fact that between 1990 and 1995, the city had the third highest average yearly violent crime rate in America. While a hive of corporate and academic activity during the day, downtown Newark at night resembled a ghost town. Regardless of our direction of travel, leaving and entering the city always involved driving through neighbourhoods blighted by poverty and deprivation. A few months later, along with my friend Daniel from

The Lanesborough, Warren and I drove through Detroit en route back from Niagara Falls. Having left The Lanesborough too, Daniel had come to stay with us for a few weeks before setting off on a three month North American tour. As we made our way through Detroit, the forbidding sight of seemingly endless decaying buildings roused within me the same sense of soullessness and despair I'd experienced in Newark. However, being in such close proximity to New York City had its compensations and with Warren at the University Hospital during the day, I'd take the opportunity as often as I could to ride the PATH train from Newark to New York for a dollar and spend the day wandering around Manhattan. On the other hand, it wasn't all play as I had an important objective to fulfil if I wanted to stay in America and, fortuitously, I had Daniel on hand to help me.

Having sought legal counsel prior to leaving the UK, I'd been advised that the only way to remain in the U.S. following the expiration of my visitor's visa was to change to student status, which would be recognised as long as I remained in the country. To leave for any reason meant having to apply at a U.S. embassy abroad for permission to re-enter as a student. In view of my original purported intent being to return to the UK, any application to re-enter as a student would likely be rejected on the grounds that my real intent had been to study in the U.S. all along. Therefore, I'd been cautioned against leaving the U.S. if I wanted to maintain my student status. Having said that, becoming a student and entering higher education required something I didn't have in the shape of formal qualifications. Fortunately, in 1942, the U.S. created the General Education Development program (GED), a series of four academic subject tests certified as equivalent to an American high school diploma. So, having registered to sit the GED in October, I set about salvaging whatever I could of my own fractured education and hit the associated text book with gusto. While the English, science and social studies elements presented no real difficulties,

being more proficient with words than numbers, the mathematics section absolutely baffled me. Yet, all was not lost and with Daniel being a whizz at maths and on hand to allow me the benefit of his tutelage, I'd receive notification in the December that I'd passed the GED. For now, all that remained was for Warren to pass his fourth year studies and secure an internal medicine residency, which involved a further three years of post-graduate study. He would of course achieve both, although doing so meant moving for the fifth time in six months, this time to a place I'd never heard of, somewhere by the name of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Although I knew he'd been writing one, I was not aware of the contents of the diary Daniel had kept during his American tour. Years later, he'd disclose to me that he'd written in his diary about his observations of my relationship with Warren and how controlling he felt Warren was. History would prove Daniel right. I was too immature and oblivious to recognise the more subtle attempts at control, although a more blatant example, when Warren told me before leaving the UK to get rid of my disco fever clothing and cherry-red DMs as nobody where we were going would be wearing that type of thing, didn't escape my notice. My emotional attachment to him at that point remained strong enough for me to overlook what would shortly become too much to ignore. For now though, with Dee Dee on a pillow on my lap as he drove, Warren and I headed two and a half hours westward towards Harrisburg, where, unbeknown to me then, the darker side of the man would soon emerge.

Chapter 17 – The Man Unmasked

“Shame, blame, disrespect, betrayal, and the withholding of affection damage the roots from which love grows. Love can only survive these injuries if they are acknowledged, healed and rare.”

— Brené Brown

Situated on North Front Street in Pennsylvania’s state capitol of Harrisburg, the elegant five-storey apartment complex called The Parkway became our new home. Warren and I had managed to bag ourselves a front facing two-bedroom corner apartment on the ground floor with an unobstructed view of the picturesque Susquehanna River. The prestige of living at a Front Street address suited Warren’s new status in the internal medicine residency program of the Pinnacle Health Group. The three-year program would see him working between Harrisburg’s main hospital further down Front Street and the Polyclinic Hospital further uptown on Third Street. Our apartment afforded us panoramic views across the river, from a small park opposite the front entrance to a mile long recreational area further down called City Island to two bulbous industrial chimneys billowing away ten miles in the distance. Despite how easy it was to confuse the conservative US state of Pennsylvania for the central Romanian region of Transylvania, the significance of the name Harrisburg meant nothing to me, nor did the name ‘Three Mile Island’. Yet, I’d soon learn that those bulbous chimneys puffing away in the distance on ‘Three Mile Island’ were, on 28th March, 1979, at the centre of a partial nuclear meltdown in which radioactive gases were released into the environment. To this day, TMI remains the worst accident in U.S. commercial nuclear power plant history.

During our first few days in The Parkway, Warren and I settled in a lot quicker than did Dee Dee, who remained on the pillow we'd carried her on from Newark, only venturing off of it permanently once she was absolutely sure of her new surroundings. It wouldn't be long before she'd feel settled enough for us to walk her in the little park opposite our building, something we'd end up doing several times a day and in all weathers. It also wouldn't be long before Warren and I wanted to experience all that the local nightlife had to offer, which we soon learned, didn't amount to too much. At Warren's insistence, I'd disposed of most of my 'going out' clothes prior to leaving the UK so before hitting the bars I'd visit the local malls with him to buy new. Being financially dependent on Warren at the time, I felt obliged to accept wearing the type of button-down shirts, blue jeans and Timberland boots he picked out for me, and wore himself, although I couldn't help feeling I was being dressed up like a little Texan.

Resembling older and younger versions of each other, Warren and I ventured out one night to the city centre. Having reached Third Street, and just along from the State Capitol building, we came upon a rather dull and nondescript looking building with no signage whatsoever and nothing to identify it as a gay bar. Wondering whether we were in the right place, we pulled the door open and went inside. The song playing as we walked in, a catchy tune entitled 'My Boo' by Ghost Town DJs, I'd never heard before. I'd hear this song many times since and each time be reminded of one of the people I'd meet that night. While Jell-O and Goldschlager shots were enthusiastically passed among the small but lively crowd, Warren and I made our way to the bar. I'd take a red wine while Warren plumped for a bottle of the local lager, something by the peculiar name of Yuengling.

Being the kind of person who'd talk to anyone, and with my British accent something of a novelty in this middle Atlantic state, I began

chatting at the bar to a lady in her late twenties or early thirties. As we talked, I asked her if she was single or in a relationship, to which she replied that she was straight, newly single and just looking to hook-up. Considering it unlikely that she'd find what she was looking for in a gay bar, I asked her anyway whether she'd seen anyone she liked, to which she shook her head. As she stood back from the bar, I noticed a Black guy sitting on a stool with his back to her in conversation with someone else. Singling him out for no particular reason other than his proximity to her, I motioned towards the guy and asked whether he was the sort she'd go for. Appearing not to have noticed him before, she discreetly glanced over her shoulder then looked straight back at me before leaning forwards and murmuring from the corner of her mouth about how her parents would have a 'fucking fit if she went home with a black guy'. Taken aback by the sentiment, I was left wondering about the kind of place we were now calling home, and whether hers was a common view in those parts.

For me it wasn't and before long I began talking to him, a young chap a few months older than me by the name of Ron. Being another of those Americans with perfectly white teeth, Ron hailed from the nation's capital, Washington DC, approximately two hours to the south. A recent graduate of Messiah University, Ron's Christian faith provided the kind of grounding and steadying influence that had drawn me to Michelle, and would in turn draw me to him. Warren and I would discover that the bar we'd found ourselves in, called the Strawberry Cafe, was one of three gay venues in Harrisburg, alongside another bar called Neptune's, located around the corner, with the town gay club, Stallions, next door to the Strawberry Cafe on Third Street. It was a sign of the times in the mid nineties in conservative Pennsylvania that none of the venues were allowed to display anything outside which identified it as a place where homosexuals would gather, which I

suspect had just as much to do with their protection as their marginalisation.

Not until August the following year would I be able, under my new student status, to register at the local college, Harrisburg Area Community College, or HACC, as it was known for short. Meanwhile, under the terms of my current visitor's visa I was also forbidden from working. While Warren worked between the two hospitals, I'd spend most of my days keeping house, doing the shopping and cooking and, of course, keeping Dee Dee company. Being a productive person, I soon grew weary of the lack of variation in my routine and figured that while I couldn't undertake paid employment, surely there was nothing to stop me doing volunteer work. As luck would have it, Warren's employers, Pinnacle Health, operated a hospice service providing palliative and end of life care to patients in their homes in the Harrisburg area. Having made contact with the volunteer co-ordinators and working the accent in the process, it wasn't long before they asked if I'd be interested in working in the main office and manning the phones. Ideally, I wanted to help care for cancer patients and those living with AIDS, however, working in the office was as good a way in as any in addition to which their telephone system turned out to be similar to the one I'd used at The Lanesborough.

With Warren having settled well into his residency, while I threw myself into my volunteer work, we appeared to have reached a period of harmony and mutual contentment, or so I thought. As 1996 drew to a close, events occurred which would suddenly undermine my sense of stability, and began following our first visit to Stallions nightclub. As usual, I had a habit of taking note of the song playing whenever I walked into a venue. This time it was another I'd never heard of called 'Be My Lover' by German Eurodance group La Bouche. Set over four floors, Stallions, particularly its upper floors, had the air and appearance of a disused

warehouse while the mirrored panels dated the two lower floors. With Ron having joined us at the main bar and dance-floor on the second level, we were greeted that night by an outwardly friendly barman named Phil, who'd regularly excuse himself to serve other customers although not before introducing us to his boyfriend, Bobby. With his straggly shoulder length brown hair, ball chain necklace and slender frame, Bobby had a unique style. However, it wasn't lost on me that he and a number of others in the club that night were wearing clothes similar to those that Warren had insisted I dispose of back in the UK. Particularly unique to Bobby was that he appeared to be slightly cross-eyed. After having left Stallions that night, we ended up at an after-party at a house where a keg full of Yuengling lager perched atop a mountain of ice in our host's bath tub became the focal point of our late night revelry. To drunken musings before I fell asleep that night, I reflected on how Ron's bonhomie was evident for all to see, while Bobby left me with a feeling that he may not be all he seemed. Nonetheless, I wondered whether we still might be friends. However, little did I know then that time would prove my concerns about Bobby to be entirely well founded.

Following our first night at Stallions and despite his busy work schedule, Warren started to want to party at every available opportunity, be it in the bars of Harrisburg or the various after-parties held around the city. With Warren being the bigger drinker between us, his consumption began to increase, while I began to limit mine in order to drive us to and from the bars and various after-parties. Perhaps by virtue of Dutch courage, Warren began suggesting that we had sex with other people. On account of him being my first proper partner, and taking at that time an altogether traditional view of relationships, I found the idea objectionable. However, Warren remained undeterred and persisted until one drink-fuelled night we brought a chap a few years younger than me

back to The Parkway where he and I had sex while Warren looked on.

No matter how disturbing I'd found Warren's previous suggestion, his next would leave me stunned. Around this time, Ron had introduced us to a friend of his named Laura. Laura in turn introduced us to her older brother, Dean, who lived outside Philadelphia in a place called Phoenixville, approximately two-hours to the east of Harrisburg. Dean would often join us all for a drink whenever he was in town. Having seen how easily he and I hit it off, Warren suggested after one particular night out with Dean that I leave with him and spend some time in Phoenixville. His suggestion left me speechless and wondering why on earth he would want me to go away, especially with another gay man. When I asked him why, all he could offer was that he felt we needed some time apart. With Warren never having expressed any frustration with our relationship or a desire to have me spend more time away from him, his suggestion that I leave absolutely shattered me. In addition, despite us being the assertive characters we were, we'd had very few cross words between us. Reluctantly, and reduced to a state of teary bewilderment, I consented to go, fearful that if I stayed he'd tell me to leave permanently, and believing that if I went, he'd soon miss me and ask me to come back.

Needless to say I couldn't settle at Dean's and despite his attempts to console me, nothing he said or did could relieve that sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. Desperate to be united with Warren, by the third day, I asked Dean to drive me the near two-hour drive, in near blizzard conditions, back to Harrisburg. Being the kind and good natured man he was, and realising the extent of my despair, Dean drove us westbound along the Pennsylvania Turnpike, at one point skidding off to the side of the road as he battled to maintain control his car amid the merciless storm.

As I opened our apartment door and went inside, I saw straight into the bathroom and observed Warren stepping out of the shower. Making my way to the bathroom doorway, I stood before him and began blubbing about how I couldn't bear to be away any longer. Appearing more shocked than pleased to see me, Warren said he had to make a phone call. In hushed tones from the next room, the secrecy surrounding Warren's call left me wondering whether my reappearance had scuppered the plans he seemed to have made for the evening. Having ended his call, he then announced that if there was to be any reconciliation between us, there was something he had to tell me. Thinking he was about to admit how he'd planned to have someone over that night, instead, Warren stunned me anew by revealing that while down in Fort Worth collecting his belongings, he'd met and had sex with a guy with whom he'd had a number of casual hook-ups. The tone of Warren's admission felt less like an apology and more like an ultimatum that if I wanted to stay with him, I'd have to accept it. Although with this revelation my feelings for him by now were beginning to wain, I still loved him very much and felt compelled to accept what he did. However, what occurred during the early months of 1997 would turn out to be the last straw and utterly destroy my remaining feelings for him, and for this, Warren needed an accomplice, which he'd find in Stallions barman Phil's boyfriend, Bobby.

Although I always made a point of saying hello whenever I saw Bobby at Stallions, we'd never have the kind of friendship I'd enjoy with Ron. In fact, Bobby didn't appear to have many friends and, on the contrary, I'd sometimes see him arguing and squaring up to other guys in the club. Employed as a waiter at TGI Friday's north of Harrisburg, Bobby had the reputation at work of being something of an easy lay. Nonetheless, each Friday and Saturday night that Phil worked the bar, Bobby would be right there on the opposite side chatting freely with him, only pausing when Phil went to serve customers. Furthermore, there was never any hint of the kind of

hostility between them that Bobby had displayed on occasions towards other club-goers.

Consequently, when Warren came to me one day during the early part of 1997 and revealed how Phil had been beating Bobby up, I initially found this hard to believe. Notwithstanding the lack of any obvious bruising, Bobby and Phil's public interaction never betrayed a hint of any private animosity in addition to which, if anything, it was Bobby who appeared to be the more volatile and belligerent of the two. However, Warren remained convinced and announced that he'd invited Bobby to move in with us. Although privately sceptical, I wouldn't have been able to forgive myself had Warren's assertions turned out to be true, so I offered very little resistance to the idea.

Before I knew it, Bobby had moved into our spare room. Currying early favour, he began bringing home large portions of TGI Friday's latest desserts and offering to walk Dee Dee on the narrow stretch of grass opposite The Parkway, taking the opportunity for a smoke while he did so. One particular day, he and I even jumped in his red Mazda Miata for a mini road trip down to Baltimore. At no time did he speak about having been the victim of domestic abuse and I on my part didn't want to pry. Yet, this entente cordiale wouldn't last and Bobby hadn't been with us for more than a week before Warren approached me and suggested we have sex with him. Foolishly, I hadn't seen this coming and couldn't have been more appalled at Warren's proposal. Unable to hide my disgust, I flatly refused, to which he tried a different tack and attempted to persuade me that as Bobby's friends, we should indulge him. In reply, I told Warren that while he might be in the habit of having sex with his friends, I certainly was not. I should've realised this wouldn't be the end of it, although following what came next the penny finally dropped as to what really motivated the sudden change in Warren's behaviour since we moved to Harrisburg.

For me, sleep's always been rather hit and miss, something in which my overactive brain has played no small part. Such is my capacity to recall events in great detail beginning before the age of two that I would often wake up with a start in the middle of the night to find myself passively observing my brain replaying past events of either great or no significance. Needless to say that during this period my sleep took a real nosedive, although having been so sleep deprived on successive nights, there'd come a time when I'd just crash, and enjoy some semblance of a good night's sleep.

On one such night, I wouldn't sleep so deeply that I didn't feel Warren getting out of bed. When, after a few minutes, he hadn't returned, I got up to see where he'd gone. Thinking he was in the bathroom, I went to look and saw no light shining under the bathroom door. Next to the bathroom was the spare room, the door to which was ajar. Stepping gingerly on the hard wood floor, I reached the door and peered through the crack. While he lay there fast asleep, Warren slipped into bed alongside Bobby and had begun cuddling him. Devastated by his shameless betrayal and sickened by the sight of them spooning, I crept back to bed and sobbed uncontrollably.

Spilling over into the next day, I balled down the phone to Michelle while trying to explain what had happened the night before and expressing my frustration at being unable to make my relationship work. At this, Michelle asked me to put Warren on the phone, following which the two of them spoke at length, with Warren listening more than he talked. With me now back on the phone with Michelle, she explained that she'd asked Warren if he loved me to which he assured her that he did. However, in that moment an epiphany occurred when I realised how truly devious Warren had been in telling Michelle what she wanted to hear. Right there and then I knew this couldn't go on and that I had to bring my own torment to an end.

Indeed, I wouldn't have to wait too long to bring matters to a head when, the very next night, Warren crept out of our bed and slid in once more beside Bobby. This time I wouldn't merely peer through the crack in the door, I forced the bloody thing open and, having woken Bobby up in the process, stomped round to Warren's side of the bed, yanked a gold band he'd bought me off my finger, slammed it down on the bedside table and announced that I was done.

By this time, I'd finally realised that what Warren truly desired, and had done perhaps ever since we'd arrived in Harrisburg, was the end of our relationship. He'd started going out partying and had enjoyed a taste of the kind of life he could enjoy more of as a single man. I suspect this was the point at which he regretted bringing me to the US with him, by which time it was too late. Lacking the courage to say so outright, Warren instead began to indulge in tricks and manipulations designed to drive me mad and drive me away, thereby placing me in such an untenable position that I'd be forced to end the relationship and leave. It worked, in part.

Having been open with him from the outset about my own disrupted childhood and abusive parents, Warren had counselled me to learn something of the self-respect he felt I lacked. How ironic then, that the man who taught me about self-respect would behave in such a way as to attempt to relieve me of it. However, it was my newly acquired self-respect which ultimately gave me the courage in the middle of August to finally end our relationship. Yet, having already changed my immigration status and enrolled to begin studying at HACC at the end of the month, I'd remain at The Parkway, where Warren and I would live together separately for another year.

As for Bobby, I never did find out if he and Warren were in cahoots, whether Warren was using him, or whether they were merely using each other. Whichever it was, it didn't really matter, as Bobby moved back in with Phil shortly after the ring incident. While my

battle against Warren was largely over, the biggest battle I'd ever had to face was about to begin. Bringing the torment of 1997 to a head were two events occurring two months apart, one quite unexpectedly during my first week in college while the other had taken root earlier on that year and at the heart of which lay a terminally ill young boy.

Chapter 18 – From Devils to Angels

“You matter because you are you, and you matter to the end of your life. We will do all we can not only to help you die peacefully, but also to live until you die.”

— Cicely Saunders

With a growing awareness of my capacity to want to care for and support others, in the early months of 1997, I became a volunteer with the hospice wing of Warren’s employer, Pinnacle Health. Like so many others who volunteer, I joined hospice to make a difference and support them in their valuable work. In south central Pennsylvania at that time, palliative and end of life care was provided within patients’ homes and not in a specific building designated for such care. Initially, I’d expressed an interest in working with cancer and AIDS patients. However, after hearing me on the telephone to them, the two perpetually cheerful volunteer coordinators named Val and Lisa had other ideas. So, come March of that year I began working in the hospice’s main office on the outskirts of Harrisburg. After revealing my recent hotel work and proficiency on the phones, the current receptionist, a lady by the name of Maryanne, trained me up on the hospice’s phone system. Having quickly gaining her confidence in my abilities, Maryanne soon left me to my own devices, fielding a glut of calls for the Chief Executive, Denise Harris, along with the various hospice nurse coordinators.

Despite not being a great reader as a child, studying for the GED the year before had enabled me to hone the ability to concentrate long enough to read a book from start to finish. Beginning in Southsea the year before, I chose ‘The Hobbit’ by J.R.R. Tolkien as the first book I’d read from cover to cover. The fact that this book had been read to my class by our second year primary school teacher made it

an obvious choice, while the second, 'Great Expectations' by Charles Dickens, I began reading during my first week with hospice. Being a volunteer, I wasn't subject to the same restrictions as the rest of the staff so I'd take the opportunity whenever I could to steal a moment between calls to dive back in between the pages.

Having transferred one of the many calls I'd put through to Denise one particular day, I then opened my book, rested it on the glass-topped desk in front of me and began reading. Just then, I glanced down at a piece of paper that had been slid underneath the glass and now sat between the open pages of my book. Printed on the paper were the names of all the patients currently in hospice. Making my way down the list, I took note of the names and their respective nurse co-ordinator. On account of its uniqueness, the last name on the list, a man by the name of Kyle Klock, especially caught my eye. Just as I began repeating the name over and over to myself, Val, one of hospice's two volunteer co-ordinators, came to the reception desk and, smiling broadly as she spoke, asked me if I liked children. Professing to being a big kid at heart, I answered in the affirmative.

Following my reply, Val revealed that a need had arisen for something to be put in place for those children who had lost a family member in hospice. She went on to explain how Pinnacle Health were proposing to run a two-hour bereavement workshop every Monday evening for six weeks at the Harrisburg office. The workshops were designed to create a safe environment where children could openly express their grief and learn to overcome their feelings of sadness and loss. Depending on the success of the workshops, the team were planning on running a weekend summer camp on a similar theme later in the year. So, over the next six weeks each Monday evening I found myself among those considered the new best friends of approximately fifteen children between the ages of six and twelve. Designed to address the children's thoughts and feelings, facilitators used the workshops to

explore concepts associated with child bereavement, one example being ‘magical thinking’, the belief some children hold that their thoughts or actions caused their loved one’s death and the guilt associated with these thoughts.

On the other hand, fun and laughter would also be used to great effect to normalise feelings of grief. This particular element involved us all sitting in a circle and performing the actions featured in the Michael Rosen book, ‘We’re Going on a Bear Hunt’, where a family looking for a bear face a series of obstacles in catching one, likening the obstacles the family faced to those of grief in that while you cannot go under or over the obstacles, instead you have to go through them. The last session of the six week workshop ended with a moving candlelit ceremony during which we all sat in a large circle while ‘Tears in Heaven’ by Eric Clapton played in the background.

Such was the success of the workshops that they would be held again in the autumn, while the summer camp version, entitled ‘Camp Dragonfly’, would be held at a Christian camp half an hour north of Harrisburg in June of that year. Such was my connection with the young children that I’d be invited to participate in both, which I’d go on to do during a period of three years. Indeed, the ease with which I interacted with the children and how quickly they focussed on me was not lost on Val, who’d approach me once more, although this time with a request so surprising that afterwards my life would never be the same again.

With the bitter chill of the Pennsylvania winter beginning to ease, nothing but slush remained on the ground as I pulled up outside 1222 Kings Circle in Mechanicsburg, twenty minutes from my home in midtown Harrisburg. Having turned the car engine off, I sat there and pondered Val’s words the week before that they simply could not keep volunteers in with this family. To my question why,

Val disclosed that with most volunteers being parents and grandparents, they found the circumstances simply too upsetting upon learning that the patient was a terminally-ill three year-old child, a boy by the name of Kyle Klock.

Subsequently, I'd learn that Kyle was stricken with incurable Tay-Sachs disease, a condition formerly more common in the Eastern European Jewish community, although many cases now occurred in people from other ethnic communities. The fact that Kyle's parents, Rob and Karen Klock, had no Jewish heritage in their respective backgrounds illustrated this point. Furthermore, where both parents are carriers of the fatal Tay-Sachs gene, a twenty-five percent chance that any offspring would inherit the faulty gene and develop Tay-Sachs is created. Rob and Karen's concerns were initially raised when Kyle couldn't sit up by himself and, following tests, Tay-Sachs was diagnosed with both parents identified as carriers. Thankfully, Karen and Rob would go on to have two more sons following the birth of Kyle, both of whom were born free of Tay-Sachs. Both highly athletic, Rob and Karen hailed from sporting backgrounds and played at collegiate level for their respective universities, with Rob playing American football at nearby Shippensburg while Karen played hockey at Gettysburg.

Despite some mild apprehension that I might go the way of the other volunteers, I walked along the path that led up to the front door of an enormous detached house which stood within a development of similarly enormous detached houses with their immaculately manicured lawns and rang the doorbell. A petite lady with short red hair answered the door and beckoned me inside. Introducing herself to me as Kathy, she explained that she was also a volunteer with hospice and had been the only one to stay since Kyle came into the service. Following Kathy across the hardwood floor of a spacious reception area, we then descended the few steps leading down into a huge living room.

My attention was immediately drawn to a peculiar bowl-shaped chair to my right, the kind of which I'd never seen before. Approaching the chair, upon reaching it I looked down and saw a small boy cradled within. His fine blonde hair was parted on one side, while his head appeared bigger and out of proportion to the rest of his body. His t-shirt had also ridden up, revealing his chubby little belly. As my eyes start to moisten, I crouched down beside him and clasped my hand around his, to which he suddenly flinched. At this, Kathy explained that Tay-Sachs babies were easily startled by sudden noises and movement. His growth entirely consistent with that of a healthy three-year-old child, Kyle didn't look like a baby at all. It also didn't escape my notice that his hand was cold to the touch while his eyelids, which twitched and fluttered briefly, were barely open.

Continuing with her briefing, Kathy described how Kyle was blind, most likely deaf, and had difficulty swallowing, so had to be fed his oat thickened Ensure drinks as if he were a baby. Offering two cautionary notes, Kathy warned there'd be occasions when Kyle would drink his bottle before throwing the entire contents straight back up again while if he were to become constipated, we'd need to go in with a lubricated pinky and dig it out. Undeterred by either prospect, I immediately felt that I'd do anything to help this little guy and upon leaving him and Kathy that day I knew I had to come back.

Indeed, the next time I visited I'd meet not only Rob and Karen, but Karen's mum, Jean, Karen's younger sister, Katie and Kyle's cute yet rambunctious one-year-old brother, Trey. A little over a month later, at Kyle's third birthday party on 17th May, I'd have the pleasure of meeting the rest of the family in the form of Jean's husband, Bill, Katie's husband, Anson, Karen's younger brother, Tom and his wife, Staci. Despite the hopelessness of their situation,

I came to know them all as being among the kindest and friendliest people I could ever have hoped to meet.

While I'd begun working with them as a hospice volunteer, the family soon treated me as one of their own and before long I started babysitting both Kyle and Trey, either at their own home or at Jean's. As a special treat one July weekend, the family invited me to accompany them to New Jersey for babysitting duties at Jean and Bill's beach-front retreat in Ocean City, three hours to the east of Harrisburg. Regardless of such precious moments, the hourglass sands continued their unstoppable flow downwards and with Kyle becoming less tolerant of sustenance and starting to lose weight, it became apparent by the end of the summer that his illness was progressing to its final stage.

Most of the time during the previous four months leading up to August had consisted of keeping Kyle comfortable, fed and clean, and helping out with basic household chores. Regardless of the likelihood that he was deaf, the best thing I felt I could do for him, as you would with any child, was to read to him. Armed with two Winnie-the-Pooh books that Warren's mother had sent him, and in the vain hope that he might hear me, I'd read to Kyle while he lay either in my arms or in his bowl-shaped papasan chair. Needless to say, my attachment to him was such that during those times when the realisation of my own helplessness overwhelmed me, I'd often return home to The Parkway where I'd lock myself in the bathroom and cry.

While reluctant to turn my attention away from Kyle, the time to recommence my formal education had arrived and during the last week of August I began studying at HACC. My intention at that time had been to embark on a two-year associate degree at community college level before completing my final two years of undergraduate study at a four-year institution. I hadn't anticipated

how well I'd perform over the next year, with my grades over both semesters good enough to earn a full scholarship to Dickinson College, one of the original thirteen colonial colleges, located about half an hour's drive west of Harrisburg. However, it'd be difficult to see beyond the end of next week, let alone a year's time, following what transpired that late August Saturday night.

With Warren on a night shift, at about 10.30pm I decided to check the online news before heading to bed. While our dial-up modem sounded its usual peculiar tones, I lent down to stroke Dee Dee, who had followed me into the sun room and laid down by my feet next to the computer desk. Suddenly, the America Online welcome screen appeared along with a news alert which read 'Diana crash boyfriend killed'. At this, I logged off and immediately turned the television on to CNN and saw displayed a strap-line along the bottom of the screen which read 'Princess Diana Injured'. While the station flitted backwards and forwards between the New York studio and eyewitnesses being interviewed above the tunnel in Paris, I cast my mind back to the documentary that had aired in America the month before which showed footage of Diana shielding her face with a tennis racquet while rushing through an airport in an attempt to evade pursuing photographers. The most poignant part of the documentary was an interview with Diana being played over images of her during which she asked the question 'knowing what comes with me, who would want me?'. To hear Diana pose her question with such pathos immediately filled me with pity, rousing the defensive side of my character, a side that wanted to protect her.

As I continued to listen to the accounts of those passing the Alma tunnel at the moment of the crash, the clock approached midnight. Switching suddenly from Paris back to New York, the wording 'Princess Diana Injured' at the bottom of the screen abruptly changed to 'Princess Diana Dead' at which point the newsreader confirmed the dreadful truth. Staring in disbelief at the television

screen and unable to comprehend how this could have happened, and in such a tragic way, at once I began to cry.

In the week that followed, with their wall-to-wall television coverage, the media continued to pore over every little detail of Diana's life and death. Leaving HACC on the Monday afternoon, I turned on the car radio to listen to the afternoon show on popular local station, WINK 104. The show opened with a replay of a casual joke made about the Princess the previous Friday followed by the host DJ lamenting the events of the weekend. For the first time in a year, I missed the UK and wished to be back there to mourn Diana with my fellow Brits. However, it brought some degree of comfort to see how moved many Americans were by her sudden death, with books of condolence opening in the British Embassy in Washington DC and other locations around the US. Similarly, an article appeared in a local publication illustrating the extent to which the American public had taken Diana to their hearts, lamenting that she was not only Britain's princess but theirs as well. Like everyone else moved by Diana's tragic and unexpected death, I spent much of the following week in tears. Yet, while the world mourned the loss of a princess, the flame burning for my little buddy over in Mechanicsburg had started to flicker and fade.

While Kyle's body continued to weaken, September soon became October and the leaves had begun to change. Although I wouldn't make it to Vermont or Virginia to enjoy the spectacle on a grander scale, the patchwork hues of red, yellow and orange seen from our apartment window across the Susquehanna River provided me with a glimpse of the awesome power of mother nature. Yet, the work of a force more powerful was almost complete and in the late afternoon on Sunday 19th October I drove over to Mechanicsburg, Winnie-the-Pooh books in hand, to read Kyle his final story. I entered to find Kyle settled in the sun room situated off the main living room.

Too weary by now to shudder and groan in the way he would whenever we moved him, Kyle's father Rob placed him in my arms then gently pulled the door closed behind him. Kyle had been a heavier little guy to move before although by now he felt so light in my arms and that chubby little belly that first greeted me had all but disappeared. Leaning forward, I softly kissed his pale white brow, which had become that much more pronounced with the weakening of his facial muscles.

Despite my breathing at once becoming more rapid and shallow, I opened the book and attempted to read. However, I hadn't even made it to the end of the first line before a wave of intense anguish overwhelmed me, the dam broke and a rush of tears burst forth. With my face pressed against his as I held him to me, a steady flow of tears streamed down my cheek and straight onto his and a searing pain tore through my chest. With her death still very much on my mind, once I'd stopped sobbing long enough to be able to speak, I said the only thing I could think of that might bring any comfort in that moment, murmuring to Kyle that the Princess would take good care of him. Unable to sleep, I'd return late in the evening the following night to check on them all and found Rob, Karen and Jean all curled up asleep on chairs in the living room. The next morning I awoke to a phone call from Jean's housekeeper, a kindly lady named Teri, who had called to tell me that Kyle 'was with the angels'.

En route to Kyle's funeral, and almost making myself late in the process, I stopped off to buy a red rose to place on his coffin. For some reason, I didn't get the message about the white roses that would be available at the cemetery for each mourner to place on his coffin and ended up giving my red one to Jean, who placed it atop Kyle's coffin among a sea of white ones. Having arrived at the Myers-Baker Funeral Home in nearby Camp Hill with minutes to spare, I'd lost the seat the other volunteer Kathy had saved me

beside her and instead listened to the service from a side room in the home. While others struggled through their eulogies, Jean delivered hers with a moving story about the ‘feisty little spirit’ that her grandson embodied. The following year, Rob and Karen would give birth to their third child, a son named Tommy, who like his older brother, Trey, would thankfully be born free of the dreadful Tay-Sachs disease.

While I’d continue to participate in the twice yearly bereavement workshops and weekend summer camps, for now, my academic studies prevented me from providing further palliative or end of life care. However, the experience had changed my life by revealing to me my innate capacity to be able to care for others in this way, albeit with a sense of guilt at feeling that I received far more than I ever gave, although I suspect the Klock family may beg to differ. So, if I’m ever asked whether I’ve had my heart broken, the answer is yes, I have, by a three-year-old boy named Kyle James Klock, born 17th May 1994, died 21st October, 1997.

Chapter 19 – Connectivity Lost

*“You never meet the right people at the wrong time
because the right people are timeless.”*

— Heidi Priebe

It often happens that the right person comes along at the wrong time. It could be argued, however, that if they're truly the right person then it doesn't matter when they come along. As for the wrong person, the same applies in that if they're genuinely the wrong person, there's never a good time for them to appear. While I'd already experienced both kinds, and would continue to do so in equal measure throughout my life, the closing months of 1997 would represent the first time the right person came along at the wrong time. This person's name was Scott.

Aged seventeen at the time, in his last year of high school and ranked second highest in his graduating class, Scott was an extremely bright young man with an equally bright future ahead. Little wonder then that medicine became his chosen field. Scott first came to my attention courtesy of Warren, who mentioned how the soon to be high school graduate had been shadowing him at Harrisburg's Polyclinic Hospital a few afternoons each week. The opportunity to put a face to the name came one particular afternoon when I went to fetch Warren from work. As both men emerged from the hospital's revolving door in their matching knee length white coats and scrubs, I focussed my attention on this bright young man Warren had spoken of so often and with such high praise. His wavy brown hair, bookish glasses and shy smile rendered him instantly endearing. Something about those demure glances in my direction each time I fetched Warren from the hospital made me want to get to know him better and led me to wonder whether the feeling might actually be mutual.

Much to the chagrin of Warren, who now appeared to have an interest in Scott beyond their professional relationship, he and I began to spend time together. The death of his father when Scott was young led to him being raised by a nurturing yet depressive mother. Despite his humble beginnings and as something of an overachiever, Scott excelled in everything he did. While kind, gentle and wise beyond his years, the absence of any psychological baggage clearly distinguished Scott from Warren. Although it wouldn't be too long before an attachment developed between us, something didn't feel right within me, a sense that something was amiss and I couldn't quite put my finger on exactly what it was.

Having never been a sound sleeper as a child and with an adolescent chip on my shoulder, I hadn't previously considered the link between them and the dysfunctional environment created by my parents. Prolonged stress does often effect sleep and following my strained relationship with Warren and the deaths of Kyle and the Princess of Wales, the gradual deterioration in the quality of my sleep would in turn affect my mood. Once again, I wouldn't consider the obvious link between recent events and my body's responses and instead I began to wonder what was wrong with me. There was something wrong with me but I didn't know what. Yet, I knew how popular culture reinforced the view that if you have a problem, there's a pill for it. Well, the pill for this kind of problem could be found in our bathroom cupboard concealed in boxes with a picture on the front reminiscent of an Edvard Munch painting.

Exactly when those oblong-shaped devils appeared in the bathroom cupboard, I couldn't say. I suspect they'd been there for a while before I'd taken sufficient notice of the intriguing image on the box to wonder what they were for. Appearing hand-drawn, the box featured a picture of a smiling figure bending to one side and stretching their arms aloft below the name of Serzone. In response to my question as to what they were for, Warren explained they

were a type of anti-depressant designed to increase serotonin levels and improve mood, emotion and sleep. Furthermore, Warren revealed he'd been taking them for a while along with similar types before that. With my disclosure of the continued difficulty I'd been having with sleep and mood, I asked Warren if it would be appropriate for me to take them. He replied that as these were samples provided by pharmaceutical reps and in such ready supply, I should take some and see if they made a difference.

So, for the first time in my life I found myself taking anti-depressants. Warren advised me that I'd feel worse before I felt better and that as it'd take approximately four to six weeks for the tablets to take effect, to ensure I kept taking them. He was partially right, in so far as they did make me feel worse before I felt better and that within four weeks or so I did indeed begin to feel better. However, I didn't realise then how taking anti-depressants would turn into a perpetual game of cat and mouse as their good effects, such as they were, would be short-lived and were not without their side effects. Regrettably, the one who'd end up bearing the brunt of them was a thoroughly innocent and somewhat unprepared seventeen-year-old boy.

While his mother's depression had given him some insight into the condition, Scott hadn't been involved with her management of it to the same extent he would attempt to be with mine. He knew enough about the potential positive effects of anti-depressants to understand that they work best when used in conjunction with talking therapies. By now being far too tightly gripped by what I'd come to realise was my own depression, I felt incapable of opening up to anybody, even Scott himself, who lamented how I'd suddenly stopped expressing my love for him.

Of course, he was right, and the reason being that I'd gradually lost the ability to feel anything, be it happiness, love, hunger, a desire

for sex, the ability to see the world in colour instead of black and white, or simply the feeling of being alive. Like a house plunged into darkness except for that one light which flickered feebly in its attempt to remain alight, my brain felt as though it were shutting down. My choice by then appeared to be between one of two states, a synthetic existence courtesy of Serzone and its ilk, or discontinuing their use and sinking into the depths of absolute despair with no way of knowing how to bring myself back to the surface. Staying on them meant a period of fragile stability which eventually waned with each increase in dosage. Coming off them meant consigning myself to a state of perpetual numbness characterised by a lack of motivation and self-imposed isolation. Either way meant a sense of disconnection from myself to say nothing of those around me.

While the right people come along at the wrong time, the same could be said for opportunities. Although the syllabi at HACC was not particularly exacting, I hadn't been in formal education for eleven years. Therefore, I didn't expect to attain the kind of grades during my year there which enabled me to secure a full scholarship to one of the most prestigious liberal arts colleges in the region. While my move to Dickinson College in Carlisle in August, 1998, meant leaving Warren and Dee Dee for good, I'd not be alone following Scott's decision to join me there. During the first semester of our freshman year we shared a dorm together. What seemed like a good idea at the time soon proved disastrous as we appeared to incubate the effects of my depression on our relationship and left ourselves with no safe space in which to find relief.

Compounding the tension building between us, prior to our arrival at Dickinson I switched to one particular anti-depressant following which I'd experience the worst side effects of any I'd taken so far. As usual, Scott had to bear the brunt, which ran the gamut from reaching out to him one minute to pushing him away the next.

Among the most trying moments for him must've been my angry outbursts for the most trivial of reasons and without any wrongdoing on his part. With her own experience of deep depression and as a secretary at a doctor's surgery, Scott enlisted the support of his mum, Dolores, in a last ditch attempt to reach me. An exceptionally kind hearted and deeply religious woman, Dolores would overlook her own struggles with depression to support me with mine, unaware of the fact that her son and I were in a relationship, albeit one entering its death throes.

In order to create necessary space between us, I moved into a dorm in the college's French House at the beginning of our second semester. With my departure signalling to him that all appeared lost, and in order to ensure his own protection, Scott began keeping his distance from me. While he did the right thing by seeing a college counsellor, I continued to save face by pretending in public that I had it all together whereas in private I wanted to die; or at least wanted the feeling of wanting to die to end, which is easily confused with actually wanting to die. Maintaining the facade had begun to take a toll as did the energy it required to maintain my grades. My position at Dickinson had started to become precarious although the alternative of returning to the UK at that time filled me with dread. Yet, in those rare moments when I could feel again, I realised how much I'd missed Scott.

His response to my declaration at the end of our freshman year that I still loved him demonstrated Scott's wisdom and his strength of character. Despite the reassurance that his feelings for me remained the same, Scott explained that the need to protect himself from further hurt was the stronger emotion. Although it hurt to hear it, of course he was absolutely right. Deep down, I knew the rejection I felt then was nothing compared to what I'd put him through during the past year. However, the pain I'd inflict upon him wouldn't stop there. A few months later during a particularly severe depressive

episode in the company of Dolores, I lamented the recent loss of a romantic relationship to which she instinctively asked me if the other person was Scott. In a foolishly unguarded moment while sobbing in her arms, I could do little more than nod my head in affirmation following which she too began to bawl.

As the first semester of my sophomore year drew to a close and the millennium approached, I finally began to tank, unsure of how much longer I could carry on at Dickinson. Dropping out meant having to leave the US, as there was no other way to remain there under the terms of my current visa. Unexpected news from the UK around this time also forced my hand. Yet, events were to take a sudden turn. Although I wouldn't know it then, a potential solution to one of my problems presented itself the night Ron introduced me to a long-term friend of his, an outwardly bubbly yet similarly tormented character, who I shall refer to simply as 'Jenny'.

Troubled souls seem to have a way of finding each other, although Jenny didn't strike me as particularly so when I met her at a sorority party in November, 1999. Like me, her personal struggles weren't evident to everybody, either. While her shoulder length strawberry blonde hair framed her pretty face, Jenny's most noticeable characteristic was her ample bosom. Despite her bubbly personality, Jenny hailed from a family beset by strained relations between various members and had been bullied mercilessly throughout school. Her story, once again, roused my protective instincts as a result of which she and I instantly bonded. Trusting to a fault, Jenny also possessed a fragility which made her particularly vulnerable to emotional injury. For now, conscious of each others internal struggles, we became good friends and she, Ron and I saw the new millennium in together.

In early 2000, I received a telephone call from my younger sister, Sas. With my older sister Dee having long since moved away from

Maidstone, only Sas remained living in the town in which we spent part of our childhood. With joy in her voice, Sas announced that she and her partner intended to marry in July and asked whether I could make it to over to give her away. Bringing her good humour to a halt, I explained to Sas how the restrictions surrounding my student visa prevented me from leaving the US. Despite my initial refusal, her request created a sense of obligation within me, reaching a point where I considered leaving and taking my chances with the US embassy in London, where I'd been issued my original visitor's visa three-and-a-half years before.

At a loss to know what to do, I confided in Ron and Jenny. Regardless of his steady nature, Ron could be prone to moments of frivolity so when he suggested that Jenny and I marry I found myself dismissing the suggestion as a joke. However, Jenny's lack of a similar dismissal didn't escape my notice and when a delayed rejection of the idea was not forthcoming, I nervously asked whether such a suggestion was out of the question. Declaring that she didn't see what harm it could do and much to my surprise, Jenny said she'd consider it. Although she did indeed say yes, Ron would have a complete change of heart and within a few weeks expressed his staunch opposition to the idea. In an attempt to resolve our differences, Ron, Jenny and I met one evening during which Ron revealed that he'd discussed the matter with a counsellor he'd been seeing who advised him to have no part in a sham marriage.

Despite having now lost Ron's support and, ultimately, his friendship, following our marriage a few months later, Jenny and I headed to the UK that summer for Sas' wedding to her partner, Paul. Despite the pleasure of seeing her marry, a stop-off in London to visit Auntie Jackie, my dad's younger sister, would end up overshadowing our trip. During our visit to London, Auntie Jackie asked us to accompany her to Lewisham Hospital to visit her aunt,

my great Auntie Grace. By now aged eighty-two, Auntie Grace was stricken with debilitating Parkinson's disease. On the way to the hospital, Auntie Jackie revealed that Auntie Grace hadn't opened her eyes for weeks. Nonetheless, having crouched down beside the little bird-like lady quivering in her bedside chair and placing my hand on her knee, I called her name. No sooner had I done so than she raised her head and revealed those piercing bluey-grey eyes that had struck so much fear into me as a child. After staring at me for a brief moment she then closed her eyes and bowed her head once more. So cruelly ravaged by Parkinson's, the stout and formidable character I'd known as a child had been reduced to a tremoring wreck.

By virtue of the cat and mouse game my body continued to play with my medication, the news a month later that Auntie Grace had succumbed to Parkinson's coincided with another sudden dip in my mood. Despite the knowledge that her suffering was now over, news of Auntie Grace's death only hastened this latest descent as a result of which I began confining myself to my room in the apartment Jenny and I now shared. Curled up on a single mattress on the floor, I sobbed and slept my way through the next few days, only leaving my room to go to the toilet. It was then, amid the grief and the storm raging in my head, that I took the first of two sudden and rash decisions. While the first decision, not to return to Dickinson at the end of the week for my junior year, only had consequences for me, the other would have devastating consequences for poor, unsuspecting and utterly blameless Jenny, but not before she had suffered a devastating loss of her own.

Following the death of Auntie Grace, a few months later Jenny would mourn the passing of her beloved grandfather, who she affectionately referred to as pop-pop. Despite his advanced years, pop-pop's death had crushed Jenny in the same way as the loss of Auntie Grace had affected me. Therefore, empathy should have

come easily, but it did not. Not even the sight of Jenny's pitiful expressions of grief were enough to compel me to put my arm around her, to console her, to be there for her. Someone so sweet and kind and in obvious pain was breaking down before my very eyes and there I was, powerless to stop it. I felt nothing except my own numbness, the sense of being there in body only, completely disconnected from myself and the world around me.

With the same sense of disconnection, I'd go about the two jobs I took on throughout the next ten months to make good my contribution to our bills. The time I spent when not at work alone in my room ensured a continued drift away from Jenny. Right there and then I knew I'd reached the end. No longer could I cope with merely existing over actually living. To live is to feel and to feel is to live. Indeed, the only thing I'd felt for the past three and a half years was a seemingly endless cycle of crippling numbness interrupted by brief periods of fragile stability followed by eventual descent back into the abyss. I'd lost count of the number of times I'd gone to sleep in the vain hope of feeling better when I woke up. Something was about to give. Little did I know and little did I care whether the decision I was about to make would see me jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. What I did know, somehow, was that whatever decision I made, I must avoid the path someone once warned me about, the path that can be regarded as a permanent solution to a temporary problem.

Chapter 20 – Connectivity Restored

“My recovery from manic depression has been an evolution, not a sudden miracle.”

— Patty Duke

With unlined curtains providing no barrier to the light whatsoever, I awoke to the glare of the morning sun and the sound of murmuring coming from downstairs. The hushed tones were indicative of people trying hard not to be heard. It didn't matter anyway as I couldn't hear what they were saying through the exchange of high and low pitched murmurs. Forgetting them for a moment, I turned over on my back. As I stared at the ceiling I began to wonder, I mean really wonder, where I'd gone. Where had I actually gone and what would it take, what would it actually take, to get me back. Not only that, I wondered whether there was anything worth getting back or whether my life from now on would be any other way. Suddenly, the smell of fresh coffee interrupted my thoughts as did the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. Following a gentle knock at the bedroom door, my sister, Sas, popped her head in to let me know Paul had made a fresh pot of coffee and asked if I wanted to join them. To my croaky response that I'd be down shortly, Sas closed the door and went back downstairs.

My thoughts then turned to Jenny's distress at seeing me leave the previous day and the promise I made to her which I'd never fulfil. The only condition she'd made to our marriage was that at some point in the future I'd help her realise a personal ambition to relocate to Denver, Colorado. Reneging on my promise, I fled America and now found myself languishing in a bed at my sister's house without the slightest idea of what to do now. Firstly, however, I had to face up to the gamut of emotions, from anger and tears to complete dismay, expressed by Jenny each time she phoned me

during the weeks that followed. I couldn't yet find the answers she needed and so she stopped asking the questions and eventually ceased calling. With Jenny subsequently finalising our divorce and moving to Denver later that year, it would be eight and a half years before I'd hear from either her or Ron again.

Despite any real idea of what to do next, I knew that anti-depressants had made my life, and the lives of those around me, hell for the past three-and-a-half years and so I had to come off them for good. What I didn't know was that this must be done gradually and not cold turkey. Had I known that I would've avoided some unpleasant side effects, the worst of which was an uncomfortable pulsating sensation in my head followed by what felt like a lightening strike, which temporarily impaired my vision. Nonetheless, an environment conducive to healing brought about an eventual improvement in my sleep which made the days more bearable and saw my mood finally start to lift. In the weeks and months that followed, with the ability to experience the sensation of feeling connected to myself and to others beginning to return, I found myself gradually coming back to life.

Yet, despite my emergence from the lowest point in my life so far, I became fearful of finding myself back in that dark place again and wondered what I'd have to do in order to safeguard myself. Time would aid my comprehension in this regard and enable me to understand how a tendency to depression would always be the elephant in the room. Moreover, I'd come to realise the importance of recognising my triggers, for instance feeling trapped, constrained or un-empowered and their mitigation by endeavouring to stay out of my head, taking regular exercise, having a purpose and giving to others. So, with a desire to discover a purpose and give to others reinvigorated, I took a major step in the process of restoring connectivity.

Following my involvement with bereaved children in hospice, in October, 2001, I took on the role of a residential social worker in a children's home run by a Kent based company called Castle Homes. Although based at a rented property south of Maidstone known as 'Court Lodge', I could expect to be sent at a moment's notice to any of the other three intensive support homes around the county. Intensive support homes, or ISPs as they were otherwise known, were designed to provide intensive support to one or two children aged between ten and sixteen years who, on account of their challenging behaviour, required constant adult supervision.

To what extent my own troubled childhood played a part in my new career choice, I cannot truly say. Nonetheless, I found myself pondering such questions as what it would take for the various children to turn their lives around, what they needed me to be and whether what they needed me to be was characteristically me, or something I could be. Whatever it was, I had the sense from what my own childhood had lacked that boundaries played a crucial role. Moreover, I soon learnt the importance of enforcing boundaries that could be subsequently relaxed as opposed to starting off lax then attempting to enforce boundaries later on. I'd take my cue from the children themselves as to the extent to which that had worked when it came to them saying goodbye to me before moving on to their next placement.

The child already in placement at Court Lodge by the time I joined I'd already met following my interview for the role. Twelve-year-old Andy came to Maidstone from the Birmingham area having been removed by children's services from his heroin dependent mother. To say nothing of the psychological abuse Andy had suffered, he came to Court Lodge with such horrific scarring in the crook of one elbow that he required skin grafts to heal the injury. According to the case history report in his file, while experiencing

the effects of heroin withdrawal, Andy's mum would inflict upon him the most appalling physical and emotional abuse.

So challenging was Andy's behaviour that he couldn't be placed in a mainstream children's home and was considered unsuitable for fostering until his behaviour improved. Being the only child in Court Lodge for much of his placement enabled staff to do some good work with Andy. Alas, all the good work would be swiftly undone when a fifteen-year-old boy named Roy came to stay on a short-term placement just before Christmas. While there, Roy wielded the kind of disruptive influence which galvanised Andy, following Roy's departure, to assault staff over Christmas which led to criminal proceedings being brought against him and his placement at Court Lodge subsequently terminated.

While our success with Andy may have been limited, my experience with him and the others in our charge taught me how with children in care there are no instant fixes and that much of our work involved planting seeds, which may or may not ever germinate. With each new child placed at Court Lodge, the bounded approach I employed brought me into regular conflict with children who'd had so much control over their own lives that when suddenly met with boundaries and all the control taken away, they hit a brick wall. I lost count of the number of times I began a forty-eight hour shift, which included two sleep-in duties, in a restraint with a child on the lounge floor for having said 'no' to something or other, while, in other instances, they hit out in apparent frustration at my having left at the end of my last shift or would employ violence as a means by which to prevent me from leaving at end of my current shift. Either way, once it was safe to release a child from the restraint in which I had them held, I'd often remark that if it was a cuddle they really wanted, why didn't they just ask?

Crucially, my time working in residential child care provided two particularly important insights to which I could personally relate. Firstly, I found myself struck by the lengths most children so horrifically damaged by their parents would go to in order to be reunited with the very people who'd committed the worst violations against them. The devotion of a child to their parent, even when the behaviour of the parent is so utterly damaging to the child, can be immensely difficult to overcome. In their reactions towards their parents I recognised my reactions towards my own psychologically damaged mother. Similarly striking was the tendency of the children to avoid taking responsibility for their actions, even on those occasions when they were caught red-handed. Consequently, I theorised that with their having been blamed and so brutally punished for things they hadn't done, when it came to accepting responsibility for the things they had done, they couldn't. Again, I'd witnessed the same behaviour as a child from my mother, someone who remained very much a damaged child herself and when comparing their behaviour to hers, it all seemed to make perfect sense.

After eighteen months of being a guardian, a protector, an educator, a disciplinarian and a punchbag, and having been promoted in that time to the post of senior residential social worker, I began to grow weary. In manner of similar physically and emotionally demanding jobs, this one also had a shelf-life in addition to which I felt I'd learned as much as I could in this instance. Perhaps the most eye-opening revelation during my time at Court Lodge was the considerable weekly sum that various children's services around the country were paying to place a child in our care. While the fee on a one-child one-carer basis alone was high, this sum would virtually double should the child require the care of two social workers, in order to ensure that Castle Homes would not lose money. While this realisation had provided me with some insight into the transference of services from the public to the private sector, it would not be the

last time I'd bear witness to the excruciating financial burden private enterprise places on local authorities. So, the tantrums, the abuse and the restraints which characterised most of my time at Court Lodge aside, I took heart from every child who told me they hated my guts right up until when the time came for them to say goodbye to me, at which point they'd suddenly burst into tears.

Come April, 2003, it would be my turn to move on, although the seeds of my departure had been sown just over a year earlier, during Christmas, 2001. At this time, I came across a news article regarding a Leeds man named Kevin Jackson, who died after being stabbed in the head with a screwdriver while trying to prevent three car thieves from stealing his father-in-law's car. Having been stabbed in the head and beaten with a wooden plank, the father of two was left in the road in a pool of blood and died on New Year's Day, 2002. While stories of violent crime had by now become commonplace, for some reason this particular story shocked me to the extent that it remained in the back of my mind throughout the year.

The story of Kevin Jackson's appallingly violent death coincided with me being invited at the beginning of 2002 to join an LGBT advisory group set up by Kent Police. Chaired by the chief inspector of Maidstone police station and attended by gay and lesbian officers and local residents, the advisory group had been created to establish better links between police and LGBT people living in the town. The level of concern and interest demonstrated by the chief inspector coupled with the important work undertaken by his liaison officers impressed me sufficiently to want to become more involved and support them in their endeavours. Rather unexpectedly, my interest in the police began to progress beyond advisory groups and towards the end of the year I surprised myself by completing an application to join Kent Constabulary.

In my suspicions that getting into the police wouldn't be plain sailing, I was not to be disappointed. While my recent experience working in a children's home appeared to stand me in good stead, the sticking point was my medical history, as detailed in the subsequent rejection letter I received from Kent Police's recruitment department. The rejection focussed specifically on my asthma, which had afflicted me more as a child than it had as an adult and by now my symptoms were few and far between. Following my petition to the chief inspector, he explained the perversity of the situation in that I wouldn't be kicked out of the force if I were to develop asthma after joining whereas a diagnosis of asthma prior to application would be an automatic disbar. Even the chief inspector's appeal to the head of recruitment wouldn't be enough to sway their decision. However, all was not lost when the chief inspector advised me to consider looking further afield and when I asked him which force I should try, he recommended Thames Valley Police.

Being the largest non-metropolitan policing area and bordering London's Metropolitan Police, Thames Valley's policing area encompassed the home counties of Buckinghamshire, Berkshire and Oxfordshire. With responsibility for roads policing of the M25, royal protection duties around Windsor Castle, not to mention the resources required for policing cities and large towns such as Reading, Slough, Maidenhead, Oxford and Milton Keynes, Thames Valley Police (TVP) became the next force to which I'd submit an application. Despite my asthma diagnosis, my chances of being accepted by TVP were increased on account of its proximity to the Met. Fortuitously, TVP had a retention problem on account of the regular exodus of officers who, once fully trained and out of their two-year probationary period, would travel the ten-mile distance to the Met border every working day. For their efforts they'd receive an additional £6,000 a year in their pay packets while in Thames Valley I could expect as a fully fledged officer to earn approximately £23,000 annually. Put simply, TVP had difficulties

keeping bums on seats, so with some degree of confidence I submitted my application form.

My optimism would be short-lived when, a few weeks later, I received a second rejection letter once again on the basis of my asthma. Around this time I'd undergone a rigorous exercise routine which included seven-mile runs three days a week and as a result I'd never been fitter. After poring over the rejection letter and my adrenaline levels had dropped sufficiently, with righteous indignation, I set about writing a searing rebuttal of their concerns, chief among which was any potentially adverse asthmatic reaction I might have to CS spray. As if guided by some unknown force, whatever it was I stated in my letter had the desired effect when, a few days later, I received a reply inviting me to attend a recruitment day at the force's training headquarters at Sulhamstead, just outside Reading in Berkshire.

Occurring at the start of 2003, the recruitment day began with scenario-based exercises whereby potential recruits would read information on cards taped to the door of six rooms. Referred to as a 'rotation station', each room contained a different incident that each potential recruit would have to enter and resolve. A fitness test followed the rotation station scenarios, both of which preceded the police initial recruitment test of maths and English in the afternoon. After receiving a letter a few weeks later informing me I'd passed the recruitment day, I returned to Sulhamstead, or 'Sully' as it was affectionately known, for a formal interview. Having successfully passed every stage of the recruitment process, Thames Valley Police consequently made me an offer of employment.

Hardly able to comprehend my success, I read the information in my acceptance letter over and over detailing the eighteen weeks of foundation training I'd undertake prior to my posting to High Wycombe police station in Buckinghamshire. Considering my

emotional state upon returning to the UK just under two years earlier, nothing could have seemed more unlikely than being on the cusp of joining the police. With high hopes that this would turn out to be my job for life, I counted down the days until my official start date on 7th April, 2003. Little did I know then that instead of being my job for life, supposedly the best job in the world, I was about to jump from the frying pan head first into the kind of fire which would lead me eventually to commit the boldest act of my life followed by the most explosive consequences I'd ever had to face.

Chapter 21 – High Hopes and Lowlifes

“In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing.”

— Theodore Roosevelt

Kneeling on the floor in my dorm at the end of my first day at Sully, I lifted up the large plastic bag containing all my police kit and watched as it slowly rotated in my hand. While surveying its contents, for the first time a doubt I hadn't had before crept into my mind, leaving me wondering whether I'd had what it took to make the grade. As before, I asked myself what I needed to be in order to become a truly competent and effective police officer and whether I possessed those characteristics or could develop them.

On the second day of a two week stint at Sully before my intake were to be split and sent to one of two police foundation training centres, we all assembled in the auditorium for a presentation by the Police Federation. Cutting straight to the chase, although somewhat muddying their subsequent message regarding the importance of joining the police pension, the federation rep related how police officers tend to live, on average, five years after retirement. Following this sobering thought, the fed rep also explained the potential benefits of paying a monthly subscription to Flint House, a designated facility providing physical rehabilitation and mental health support to serving and retired police officers.

Perhaps the most poignant take-away of day two was a talk from a former heroin user who explained how, while in the depths of heroin withdrawal, he'd think nothing of burgling a house even if he knew the residents to be at home. His revelation struck me in a similar way to reading of the violent death of Kevin Jackson in

Leeds and so I took heed, unaware of the future relevance for me of this man's disclosure. Despite the more sombre aspects of the day, I went to bed that night with the words of another fed rep exciting my anticipation that this was, in his opinion, the best job in the world.

It goes without saying that training for the best job in the world required a partner in crime with whom I could connect and share such a momentous experience. Always on the lookout for a Michelle, Shirley or a Ron type, the person to fill their shoes this time was a girl in my class by the name of Emily. Hailing from Bracknell in Berkshire and just under two years younger than me, Emily's wholesome middle-class image was amply counteracted by her disdain for formality and British stuffiness and her ready enjoyment of bawdy humour. In that respect, we made for perfect bedfellows. Therefore, when I learned that, instead of being sent to Ryton-on-Dunsmore in Warwickshire, where the majority of our intake were headed for our fourteen week core foundation training, Emily and I were to be sent to the police staff college at Bramshill in Hampshire, I couldn't have been happier.

Regarded as the principal police staff training establishment in England and Wales, Bramshill formed part of the Central Police Training and Development Authority, otherwise known as 'Centrex'. Set in idyllic countryside with a mile-long driveway leading up to a grand 17th century Grade I listed mansion complete with stunning lake, it's little wonder that Nazi Party leader Hermann Göring reputedly wanted Bramshill as his country retreat in the event of Britain falling under Nazi occupation. Bramshill became the home of the National Police College in 1960 as well as home to the National Police Library. Much like my second day at Sully, on my first day at Bramshill I found myself sitting in another auditorium, however, this time alongside a large intake of officers from the Surrey, Hampshire and Dorset forces as well as my fellow officers from TVP. On account of the size of our intake, we were

separated into three classes, 1J, 1K and 1L, and much to my delight, Emily and I were placed together in 1J.

With noticeably opposing characters influencing their individual teaching styles, our tutors for the next fourteen weeks were two serving officers, Mark Redpath, of Surrey Police and John Mullen of Hampshire Constabulary. It sounded strange to me at first with all eighteen of us sat in the classroom, our chairs against the wall in a 'U' formation, to hear both tutors refer to each other as 'staff' and their respective approaches couldn't have been more different. In the classroom, Staff Redpath's ability to effectively impart rather dry policing theory endeared him to us, as did his inability to be able to tell anyone they were wrong each time he'd respond to incorrect answers to his questions with "I like your thinking" or "I like where you're going with that"! By contrast, at times, Staff Mullen created more confusion than clarity in his lessons, which left us having to seek explanation from Staff Redpath the next time we had class alone with him. Despite the difficulties that beset Staff Mullen in the classroom, he more than made up for them with his role plays, which were much more realistic and representative of the kind of incidents we could expect to deal with on division than were the overly sanitised and gentle offerings from Staff Redpath.

Fundamentally, within the opening pages of the first of our Centrex foundation training manuals lay perhaps the most significant piece of policing theory we'd be taught and something to which I'd consistently relate much of what I'd see and do subsequently as a warranted officer. Referring to the commission of a criminal offence, 'The Crime Triangle' set out those elements required for successful completion where there is a victim, a perpetrator and the opportunity. Should one of those elements be absent, a crime could not take place.

Similarly, we learned of the three modes of policing in the form of proactive, reactive and investigative policing and how, originally, the police had been established first and foremost to be proactive in preventing crime, then reactive where they'd failed to prevent crime followed by investigative in order to identify the perpetrator and bring them to justice. The foundation manual went on to highlight how modern day policing impacts the three modes and creates competing demands in terms of the way in which officers police. However, we wouldn't dwell for too long on the crime triangle, modes of policing, or other bread and butter elements such as robbery, burglary and theft, covering the last three in one day on the Monday of our second week. By the time we left class at the end of that day, our heads spinning, whereas the remainder of the week would be taken up by lessons on equality and diversity.

Whether what we'd learned during the past fourteen weeks would adequately prepare us for what was to come when taking up our individual postings remained to be seen. Nonetheless, at the beginning of August, 2003, our passing out parade took place. Looking at myself in the mirror while applying my clip-on tie prior to the parade later that morning, I shed unexpected tears of pride and accomplishment at having passed my training by succeeding at Bramshill where I felt I'd failed at Dickinson. In between now and the start of my posting to High Wycombe, I, and the rest of my intake, enjoyed a well earned rest before returning to Sully for two final weeks of foundation training. The highlight of these next two weeks would be meeting our tutor constables who'd guide us through the first ten weeks on division spent in our respective station's tutor unit before going on to shift as response officers. With absolutely no idea who our tutor constables were, my intake assembled in the canteen at Sully one afternoon where we waited with excitement and curiosity for our tutor constables to arrive.

As they began to file in, each tutor constable had with them a piece of paper containing photos of the respective tutees. The photos were same ones used to produce our warrant cards given to us at our attestation ceremony prior to going to Centrex. With no officer headed in my direction and with the rest of my table having been met by their tutor constable, I got up to make my way around the room. Just then, I felt a tug on my trouser leg at the knee and, looking right, then left, I looked down to see a diminutive young lady smiling up at me. Thrusting her paper towards me she asked if I was Johnno to which I nodded while trying my best to stifle a wry smile.

Following our introduction, the young lady proceeded to introduce herself to me as Caroline Jones, my new tutor constable. Despite my initial surprise at Caroline's short stature, I'd soon learn that what she lacked in height she more than made up for in vocal firepower, possessing one of the loudest voices I'd ever heard. During our conversation that afternoon, Caroline explained that while High Wycombe was a relatively small station, the area remained busy as a burglary hotspot and the scene of a riot that had taken place earlier that month on the Castlefield estate on the west side of town. Leaving me rather slack-jawed with her revelation, the next time I'd see Caroline would be on Monday 25th August to begin my ten week stint on High Wycombe's tutor unit.

Perhaps it's a good thing that on account of how much I'd moved around in my life, I'd learned to travel light. This made the move to the police house at Flackwell Heath, located on the outskirts of High Wycombe, relatively easy by my being able to fit all my worldly possessions in my car. The first five weeks on the tutor unit, located on the top floor of High Wycombe police station, involved solely foot patrols in the town centre followed by mobile patrols during the remaining five weeks. Designed to orientate me to the layout of the town centre, our foot patrols helped me to gain

confidence in talking to the public, allow me to become familiar with the town's problem characters and enable me to hone my stop and search skills.

While our foot patrols would succeed in achieving these objectives, what struck me the most during this time was how, when members of the public stopped us to ask questions or report concerns, they would, without exception, focus their attention solely on me while ignoring Caroline completely. Little did they know that she was the one with all the experience and not me. However, I quickly learned to show genuine concern and ask all the right questions after which we'd soon be on our way.

It was following just such an encounter one particular day that a call came over the radio regarding a shoplifter detained at Mothercare in the nearby Octagon Shopping Centre. With a mix of excitement and trepidation at my potential first arrest, we made off at pace in the direction of Mothercare. Upon our arrival, a rather flustered sales assistant informed us that the male had also made off although she'd been able to retrieve some but not all of the merchandise he'd stolen. No sooner had the assistant provided us with his description and the direction in which he went than Caroline shot off into the High Street with me making a frantic dash of my own to catch up with her. Upon reaching the male, Caroline grabbed his arm and spun him around to face us to reveal sets of baby clothing draped across his arm.

Immediately, Caroline asked the short mousy-brown haired male his name and where he'd just been. Surprisingly pleasant in his reply, the man stated his name was Gary and that he'd just come from Mothercare. To my astonishment, Gary continued to answer Caroline's questions frankly including her next one as to how he came by the items he had on him. To his admission that he'd stolen them, Caroline advised him to listen carefully to what I was about to

say. What did she mean, listen carefully to what I was about to say? What was I meant to say? While they both stood there wide-eyed and expectant, I could feel my body temperature start to rise and an urge to say something, although I couldn't remember exactly what. Suddenly, it came to me and whether or not I'd delivered it faithfully I opened my mouth and out came a somewhat garbled attempt at the police caution, informing Gary he was under arrest on suspicion of shoplifting.

The process we were about to follow with Gary represented a typical example of the steps involved in dealing with an offender from arrest for a low level offence to charge. Following Gary's arrest, we placed him in handcuffs and walked him the short distance to custody, which, fortunately, was located below High Wycombe police station. Upon arrival, we waited with Gary in a holding room until the custody sergeant had finished processing another prisoner before releasing the door which allowed us to enter the custody suite. Ready to formally book Gary in, I explained to the custody sergeant the reason for his arrest to which the custody sergeant authorised Gary's detention and advised him of his rights while in custody. At this point I removed all personal effects from Gary that were not evidential which I bagged and tagged then placed in a secure locker. After escorting Gary to a cell, he then removed his shoes after which I shut the door. Following this, I booked the items of clothing seized from Gary into the property store then headed back with Caroline to Mothercare to take witness statements and seize the remaining items of clothing and any store CCTV. Once done, Caroline and I returned to the station and took photographs of all the seized items which were also booked into the property store.

Moreover, the next part of the process involved me completing an arrest statement detailing the circumstances surrounding Gary's arrest. Afterwards, Caroline and I formulated an interview plan

setting out all the points I'd have to cover to prove the offence of theft. Following this, as Gary had elected to have a solicitor present, I then had to put together a disclosure document setting out all the particulars of the case including the evidence I had against Gary. By now we were approaching the four hour mark and hadn't yet interviewed our suspect. Once Gary had had his consultation with his solicitor, the next step was the interview itself which would last as long as it took to cover the points to prove theft while putting our evidence to Gary and giving him the opportunity to offer a defence.

Part of the caution upon arrest involves informing the suspect that it may harm their defence if they do not mention when questioned something which they later rely on in court. The keyword here is "may" and in many cases where a suspect has legal representation and a considerable amount of evidence against them, they'd often go no comment in interview only to rely in court on a defence they could reasonably have raised in interview. Nonetheless, interview times vary in length and can last several hours depending on the complexity of the case. Even for the most straightforward of cases where the suspect has no legal representation you'd be hard pressed in most cases to complete a comprehensive interview in under half an hour.

With the clock by this point approaching the six hour mark and with Gary back in his cell, Caroline and I presented the particulars of the interview to the custody sergeant. With this specific case being a low-level offence and with the cost of the stolen goods under a certain amount, the custody sergeant could authorise charge. In more serious matters or where the cost exceeds a certain amount, the charging decision rested with a CPS lawyer with whom I could expect to undergo a lengthy exchange over the phone and via email to relay documents. In this particular case, Gary had admitted the offence, however, owing to his previous convictions he was deemed unsuitable for a fixed penalty notice. However, with Gary

considered suitable for bail, I subsequently charged him with the offence of theft by shoplifting before the custody sergeant bailed him to attend High Wycombe Magistrates' Court the following day.

Following Gary's release from custody, Caroline and I then put together what was referred to as a 'fast-track' file, completed when a guilty plea is expected and consisting of a series of forms created for their ease of use by the Crown Prosecution Service. Completion of this file, which involves collation of all relevant paperwork for even the simplest of matters, can take at least an hour or two to complete if done properly. Therefore, dealing with a straightforward theft can take up the best part of an eight-hour shift to process. An officer may consider themselves lucky if they make such an arrest at the beginning of their shift, which means they are likely to be able to leave work on time. If such an arrest is made half-way through, it's highly unlikely they'll leaving on time when considered in terms of a ten-hour shift.

Relating these numerous steps from arrest to charge to the crime triangle, this process immediately proves itself to be onerous and problematic in that once an arrest for any offence is made, an officer can expect to be committed in custody for the entirety of their shift, which is precipitous if you begin your shift, as I so often would, with fewer officers than the number of fingers on both hands. Each arrest which response officers make leaves one less officer available for duty. Considered in the context of the crime triangle, this greatly increases the opportunity for crime to take place and thereby increases the public's perception of becoming a victim of crime and a potential perpetrator's belief that they're unlikely to be caught.

Serving to further enshrine the principles of the crime triangle was the paperwork burden created by the persistent flow of slow-time enquiries. Each time an officer attends an incident, whether a live incident or a report following a recent crime, this requires the

completion of related paperwork, for instance, a crime report, witness statements and the seizing of anything evidential. Additional associated paperwork must also be completed for internal purposes, such as a domestic violence report going to the dedicated domestic violence unit, or externally for data monitoring purposes. Both requirements can soon lead to a considerable amount of duplication all of which has to be completed, in lieu of any admin support, by the attending officer. Consequently, the distinction between necessary and unnecessary duplication of information soon becomes apparent.

Therefore, officers rely on a system of fairness whereby, for instance, when on mobile patrol with Caroline, she'd pick up the paperwork and become the investigating officer for the first enquiry we attended, whereas I'd pick up the next and so on and so forth. Needless to say, with a daily income of both live incidents and new slow-time enquiries yet to be attended coupled with the paperwork from those previously attended incidents sitting in my in-tray with outstanding enquiries to be made and statements to be taken, I soon found myself chasing my tail and could forget, for the most part, about proactive and preventative policing.

At one point, the number of live investigations in the in-trays of all the officers across the five response teams reached sixty-plus and with some of those investigations having a time limit for a prosecution, the senior command at the station went into panic mode. Much to the anger and frustration of front-line officers, this resulted in the triggering of Operation Ganymede, which involved each team doing mandatory overtime in order for the other response teams to clear their backlog of enquiries. Expectedly, the success of Operation Ganymede was limited and any benefit woefully short-lived. Compounding such chaotic ways of working was public expressions to me of frustration with our lack of visibility. Indeed, I hadn't been in the job six months before I started to realise the

disparity between the job I'd joined to do and the one I was actually doing.

However, unlike the early or late shifts, during which I'd either be in the station completing paperwork, attending a live incident or a slow-time enquiry, the night shift did allow the opportunity for proactive patrol. Following the successful completion of my ten-week stint in the tutor unit, I headed for Milton Keynes to complete a two-week driving course which enabled me to respond on 'blues and twos'. After completing my driving course, following each night shift pre-brief, I'd make a point to go straight out on patrol to the town's hotspots. I reasoned early on that if I didn't head straight to the hotspots to provide reassurance and a deterrent, I'd be called up on the radio later on to go there anyway to respond to something that may not have happened had I been there to prevent it. Should that be the case, the job would become yet another slow-time enquiry to add to the growing number building up once again in my in-tray.

Yet, despite the freedom afforded by receiving a driving permit, the event could also be considered something of a poisoned chalice on those occasions when there was only one response driving officer on shift. On such an occasion, that officer could expect to have to criss-cross town and spend their entire shift desperately attempting to respond to every call for immediate attendance.

With High Wycombe having been a burglary hotspot for some time, with the burglary detection rate remaining stubbornly low, another opportunity for proactive policing presented itself during my two-week attachment to Operation Gaunt. Op. Gaunt was dedicated solely to hi-visibility patrols, seizing vehicles used in criminal activity and targeted stop and search of the towns persistent offenders. Gaunt, along with similar two week attachments to roads policing and CID were mandatory for all probationer constables.

Although having completed all the requirements as set out in my performance development plan and been signed off as competent earlier on in the year, in August, 2005, I found myself officially a fully-fledged constable. Furthermore, I'd earned the reputation among my sergeants as an entirely reliable officer who "got things done" and also garnered the confidence and respect of my fellow 'B' shift officers as a key member of our shift.

Curiously, at the start of that summer, posters began to appear on the walls around High Wycombe station detailing how every officer must aim to detect at least three crimes per month. With no formal briefing about this new requirement, the first I knew about it in earnest was during a discussion about my caseload with my shift sergeant. In the course of our conversation, my sergeant mentioned that I'd had no detections during the past couple of weeks. Indignantly, I pointed out how, during the previous week's night shifts, each night I left the station to go on patrol, I happened to run slap bang into a drink driver. Consequently, each drink drive arrest resulted in my spending the rest of the night in custody dealing with my offender and with no opportunity to go back out on patrol. It is worthy of note that offences committed under the Road Traffic Act aren't considered detectable offences in the same way as, say, an offence of theft, and therefore do not result in a tick in the detection box.

As a result, the perils of target driven policing were suddenly brought into sharp focus, illustrating their potential to dictate priorities and distort an officer's true output as exemplified by my drink drive arrests. Indeed, the week previous to my night shifts, I became embroiled in a daily flow of road traffic accidents which took up my entire shift while also providing no tick in the detection box. Predictably, one particular colleague happy to play the detection game would think nothing of disappearing for hours on end of a night shift and not call up on his radio to attend or provide

back-up to any immediate incidents. He'd then return towards the end of the shift with several evidence bags containing cannabis seized from teenagers around the various recreational grounds of High Wycombe. Needless to say, his detection rate went through the roof and made him appear, statistically, the most productive officer on the shift. Exemplifying the attractiveness of low-hanging fruit, the station would empty for a job where the offender had been detained on scene while other jobs where the offender was long gone would be considered of lesser importance.

It's self-evident that all first responder roles are inherently challenging and physically and emotionally demanding. Furthermore, first responders find themselves sandwiched between public demand and expectation and the internal pressures placed on them by excessive paperwork, onerous processes and misleading performance targets. Long and arduous shift patterns place further demands on the body as does the daily rush of adrenaline coursing through the responder's veins as they drive at high speed to make it to an incident, conscious of avoiding hitting a pedestrian or dozing off at the wheel during a night shift. All these pressures considered, it's easy to understand why many probationer officers seek to leave response policing following completion of their two-year probationary period.

Addressing this point during our attestation ceremony at Sully, Thames Valley Police Chief Constable Peter Neyroud explained how he would lose a third of us during the next two years. He was absolutely right, with some officers heading to London's Met for an entirely different style of policing while others headed for internal departments within TVP, such as CID and roads policing. This exodus resulted in valuable front line experience being lost and when I moved to Sussex police in September, 2005, with only two years of front-line policing under my belt, I was at that time one of the most experienced officers on my shift.

Gradually succumbing to the pressure, I found myself falling into the same trap as many of my colleagues who explained how they could not relax once home following their shift without first downing a bottle of wine. It wasn't until faced one morning with a mountain of empty wine bottles in the recycling bin opposite my front door coupled with a gradual decrease in the quality of my sleep and mood, a sky high increase in my stress levels and another romantic relationship which had broken down that I realised I had to make a change. All things considered, it's not difficult to see why such pressures lead to the onset of depression, mental and physical exhaustion, substance misuse and relationship breakdown. These factors may go some way to explaining the Police Federation rep's keenness to sign us all up to Flint House during our probationer induction that day at Sully!

So, come September, I found myself settling in among my fellow officers on 'C' section response team at Hove police station as a fully fledged constable. While the requirements of my role remained the same, my stint on 'C' section would be of an unexpectedly short duration. Foreshadowing what was to come, my sudden transfer from 'C' section came about as a result of my calling out the favouritism shown by my shift sergeant to two particular section officers consistently made the first response car and who were never allocated any live investigations, known in Hove at the time as 'Status 2s'. When I questioned the reason for this, the shift inspector explained that these two officers were the most productive in terms of detections when allocated the response car. I pointed out that this was hardly surprising if all they did was respond to immediate incidents all day while not having to attend to any slow-time enquiries. My audacity to question the clearly biased decisions of senior officers based on their conspicuous chasing of detection targets saw me swiftly transferred, albeit temporarily, to Brighton's custody suite on an industrial estate north of the city, to be an interviewer for the custody prosecution team.

Consisting of police officers and civilian staff, the prosecution team provided the kind of support I wish we'd had available while on response in Thames Valley Police. The role of the prosecution team was to interview and charge or bail a suspect having initially received from the arresting officer a crime file containing enough evidence to complete, at the very least, an initial interview. Once an officer had booked their prisoner into custody and completed their handover file, the prosecution team would take over processing the suspect. Some officers would argue that for the length of time it took them to arrest a suspect, book them into custody then take statements and complete the handover file, they might as well stay on to complete the interview and bail or charge someone themselves. Meanwhile, other officers lamented the prosecution team's limited capacity as a result of which they were only capable of processing a small number of prisoners each day.

On those occasions when all staff on the prosecution team were committed in interviews, the arrest and processing from investigation and statement taking to interview and charge or bail remained with the arresting officer. Consequently, it'd be a source of great relief to an officer to find that the prosecution team would process their prisoner as it freed them up to return to the station to work on their ever growing number of live investigations or go out and complete their slow-time enquiries. Conversely, it would be a source of considerable disappointment when the prosecution team couldn't process a suspect, with the knock-on effect being one more officer tied up in custody, thereby perpetuating the cycle of inefficiency and reinforcing the three elements of the crime triangle.

Despite my return to response policing, my time on the prosecution team had not been wasted and had enabled me to significantly hone my interview skills. Yet, my sudden transfer back to response came as a result of there being a lack of officers with response driving permits. Owing to the size of Thames Valley's force area, I'd been

enrolled on my driving course not long after leaving the tutor unit and arriving on shift. Meanwhile in Brighton & Hove, response officers could expect to wait indefinitely for their driving course. After the fallout following my questioning of senior officers' overt favouritism towards two officers on 'C' section, I rejoined my fellow response officers although this time on 'B' section. Suspecting by this point that perhaps my days on response were numbered, I began studying in my spare time for the upcoming CID exam.

The camaraderie among my fellow 'B' section officers notwithstanding, the growing public dissatisfaction expressed to me directly coupled with some unsavoury and altogether unethical attempts to increase detections led me to question whether I actually had a future in the police after all. With each call I attended I found myself met with a succession of negative comments such as "we never see you", "you are never there when we need you" or "this is the tenth time this has happened to me and I haven't bothered reporting it as I didn't see the point". If only they knew, I thought to myself, how aligned front-line officers and the public are in so far as their officers wanting to do the job the public wants them to do.

That's the crying shame, that officers who want to be used up preserving life and protecting property end up bogged down in processes which reduce their effectiveness and the time spent on the street, which in turn increases the public perception of becoming a victim of crime and the belief of those who commit crime that they are less likely to be caught. Fundamentally, who could be relied upon to sort this mess out? Nobody except Police Federation chair Jan Berry seemed willing to speak out publicly and even then her words hadn't led to any meaningful change for the better.

Furthermore, where was the dialogue with our true boss, the British public? Didn't the views of those funding the service through their

taxes deserve to be sought? After all, politicians are quick to seek the public's views each time they knock on doors around election time, and what about policing by consent? If only the public knew what was going on behind the scenes they would not consent, but who'd have the guts to tell them, and how would they do it? The answers to these questions would become all too evident sooner than I realised. Meanwhile, I'd take and pass my CID exam following which I became a trainee detective constable on the Anti-Victimisation Unit based at Brighton police station. However, rather than celebrating, I found myself wondering whether my new role in the AVU would offer me a reprieve or whether the deeply-rooted sense of disillusionment I now felt meant that for me there was absolutely no way back. Unexpectedly, the answer revealed itself to me one evening while at home watching television.

By this time, December, 2006, I'd spent most of the year sharing a rented flat in Hove with Ian, a response officer from Hove station's 'A' section. Hailing from Norwich, Ian kept his main home there and would travel back to Norwich for his days off. With Ian spending his rest days in Norfolk coupled with our opposing work schedules, I often had the flat to myself. Laying on the sofa that Monday 11th December, I settled in with a glass of red wine and switched on the television. Just then, the opening credits began for 'The Tonight Show with Trevor McDonald' on ITV. The sound of sirens interspersed with snippets of interviews with police officers piqued my interest so I turned up the volume.

This particular night's programme, sponsored by the Police Federation, featured response officers based at Southampton central police station being followed by a television crew on a typical Friday night. Splicing footage of the officers on patrol with interviews of them back at the station, they explained how a simple arrest would take them off the streets for the rest of the night and decried the consequences for the remaining clutch of officers left to

police a busy city on a Friday night. As the officer spoke, I reflected on one of my last Friday late shifts on response and how, after making the first arrest, one by one I saw the rest of my shift trickle into custody with suspects they'd have to deal with themselves, a consequence of the prosecution team having no more capacity.

With each jaw-dropping revelation from the various officers, I listened with a mixture of shock and pride, shock that they were able to speak so openly, and pride in their accurate depiction of front-line policing as something I could relate to wholeheartedly. However, that soon changed when the interviewer sat down with the policing minister at the time, a man by the name of Tony McNulty. Incidentally, over the course of my life, with the exception of the ubiquitous Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, I'd paid very little attention to politicians and remained ignorant of their competence or any credentials required to do their job. In Mr. McNulty's case, his unsatisfactory responses to the interviewer's questions left me in no doubt that as far as front-line policing were concerned, he lacked both. When asked about officers policing according to targets and going for quick wins, Mr. McNulty responded with the platitude that he wanted police officers to remain true to core policing principles. His attempt to seemingly distance the Home Office from performance targets left me scratching my head as to who, if not the Home Office, had imposed such targets.

Nonetheless, Tony McNulty's vague responses and evasions coupled with his apparent surprise at each revelation from the interviewer led me to the conclusion that he had absolutely no idea what front-line policing involves. Furthermore, with such a poor understanding of the role, he was in no position to make decisions that can, and do, have disastrous consequences for front-line officers. Immediately following the programme and having located Mr. McNulty's parliament.uk email address, I took to my laptop and fired off the kind of searingly indignant email which had

characterised my letter to Thames Valley Police following my initial rejection three years before.

Unsurprisingly, the weeks passed and by February, 2007, I'd received no acknowledgement from Tony McNulty's office of my email. Following the lack of a response, I forwarded my email to Tony McNulty to David Cameron's office. Within days I received a reply from the office of Nick Herbert, the current shadow police minister, whose Arundel constituency in West Sussex was no more than an hour away from Hove. Later that month, I met Nick in Cafe Rouge in Brighton during which I provided him with valuable insights into my experiences as a response officer including the burden of paperwork, processes and the predictable consequences of target drive policing. In response, Nick explained that he'd been in touch with the various officers blogging online about the daily grind under pseudonyms, the most well known of whom at the time was 'The Policeman's Blog' written by 'David Copperfield', author of the best-selling book 'Wasting Police Time'. Nick confirmed the consistency between my examples and theirs and asked if I'd be willing to provide more insight to his office, to which I confirmed I would. However, before we had any further contact, events would take a different turn courtesy of an article featured in the Sunday Express the following week.

While 2005 would see me vote in a general election for the first time, and at this time for The Labour Party, my overall ignorance of politics was matched by my ignorance of the workings of the mass media. Not being an avid reader of print media, I had no conception of the political or social biases of the various different news publications. Nonetheless, in the same way as 'The Tonight Show with Trevor McDonald', I found myself taking notice of Ian's copy of the Sunday Express dated 18th February, 2007 left in the living room of our flat. What caught my eye this time was the paper's front page crusade to get officers back on the streets of Britain. The

article, written by a journalist named Michael Knapp, featured quotes by Jan Berry and a ‘crusade coupon’ for readers to enter their name and address to send into the paper in a demonstration of support for their campaign. Taking note of Michael Knapp’s details, I emailed him the next day, including the email I’d sent to Tony McNulty. Within hours, Michael responded, asking if he could come down to Brighton to meet me, which we did, on Wednesday 21st February, in a pub down the road from Brighton train station.

Dressed in a trench coat reaching down to the knees of his long legs and with tanned, leathery skin, Michael Knapp provided me with my first encounter with mainstream journalism. Unbeknown to me then, this encounter with a representative of the mass media would not be my last. Nonetheless, my discussion with him mirrored the one I’d had the week before with Nick Herbert. Yet, rather than ask if he could call on me again sometime for more insights, Mike required a more immediate offering and asked if I’d be willing to write an article for this coming Sunday’s edition. To my response in the affirmative, he expressed caution with his next question of whether I’d be willing to be named in the article. Reasoning that the public were more likely to take the article seriously if they knew it’d been written by an actual officer, and without regard to any consequences for me personally, I answered emphatically, yes. While Mike headed back to London, I hurried home where, yet again, I put incandescent fingers to the keys of my laptop driven by the same sense of righteous indignation as my email to Tony McNulty, albeit with a desire to ‘put the record straight’ with the public as to the true state of British policing.

In the days that followed, emails went backwards and forwards between Mike and me until we’d agreed upon a final draft. While the rest of the article remained unchanged, Mike had gone ahead and written a more dynamic and sensationalised opening paragraph. When I asked him the reason for the change, he explained that he’d

re-written in such a way as to more effectively draw the reader in. Having accepted his judgement and with the article agreed upon, all that was left to do was to meet with a local photographer to take a few picture of me suited and booted on Brighton seafront and again at the flat in Hove. That Sunday morning, 25th February, 2007, page 9 of the Sunday Express featured the article entitled ‘Angry Officer Backs Our Crusade, Branding Labour’s Targets and Paperwork a Criminal Waste of Police Time’.

Featuring once more their ‘crusade coupon’, the article provided a snapshot of modern policing experienced from the perspective of a front-line officer with reference to those political figures responsible. Serving as a criticism of paperwork, targets and the perception of crime from the perspective of both officers and the public, my overriding message was of a need to return to preventing crime rather than detecting it and how not everything a police officer does can be counted while not everything that can be counted truly counts. However, what I could count on was the response of senior officers and so it came as no surprise to me when I received a phone call later that day summoning me to a meeting on Tuesday 27th February in the boardroom at Brighton police station with the division Superintendent and the Detective Chief Inspector.

Chapter 22 – An Inside Job

“Silence becomes cowardice when occasion demands speaking out the whole truth and acting accordingly.”

— Mahatma Gandhi

Although the day after publication of my article in the Sunday Express would be a rest day, I'd spend it thinking of little else except what I'd be walking into the next day. A sense of unease which began building the previous day intensified during the bus ride on my return to work that Tuesday, knowing that within a few hours I'd be sitting in the boardroom with two senior officers, two against one. While not having been offered any representation, I hadn't felt the need to ask for any. However, I did make a call to the Police Federation the day before to explain my decision for doing something no-one else appeared inclined to do in going via the media directly to the public. Alighting on Jimmy Street in Kemptown, I followed my usual route and turned left onto George Street. Head down and contemplating my fate, my thoughts were briefly interrupted by a poster in the window of The Queen's Arms public house advertising the upcoming show of legendary local performer, Betty Swollocks. Alas, the grin this name so often brought to my face vanished on this particular day as quickly as it appeared once Brighton police station came into view.

With my morning briefing in the Anti-Victimisation Unit about to start, I quickened my pace up the main stairs to the first floor and entered the AVU. As I approached my desk immediately to the left, I met with an enlarged photocopy of my article sellotaped across my computer screen. With no mention by my fellow detectives of the article or who put it there, our morning briefing began. While at first it appeared to be business as usual, just then, a door opened at the other end of the office and along came the Divisional Commander,

Kevin Moore. Having never seen Chief Superintendent Moore in person, I suspected that seeing him on this particular day for the first time was no accident. With a possible desire to put a face to the treachery, he surveyed us all as he walked past until he found who he'd been looking for and glared at me before disappearing through the office's double doors and out to the stairwell. Considering that Mr. Moore had sent out an email across the division the previous day denouncing my article, such a gesture was to be expected. With my response colleagues bringing the contents of his email to my attention, they offered a collective counter-denouncement with the rhetorical question "...what fucking planet does he live on...?". With the morning briefing having finished, I made my way up one more flight of stairs to the station boardroom.

As is characteristic of any boardroom, this one was also bisected by an imposing and well-polished long table. Surprisingly less imposing were the two figures sitting opposite me, in the form of Superintendent Graham Bartlett and Detective Chief Inspector Ian Pollard. In a manner of calmness and composure, the superintendent began the meeting by revealing that a clutch of officers had approached Mr. Moore the previous day to complain that, as a result of my actions, I'd seriously damaged relations between them and their respective communities and undermined their good work. Before consciousness could take over and allow me to consider a suitable response, almost involuntarily, I opened my mouth and replied by pointing out the numerous occasions on which members of the public had berated me for the police never being there, how they never see us, or that they don't bother reporting crime in the belief that we won't do anything about it anyway. With my courage continuing to rise, I then raised the matter of Mr. Moore's denouncement of my article by relating comments made to me by fellow response officers, specifically the rhetorical question as to which fucking planet he lives on. To this, Superintendent Bartlett replied that he felt I was doing Mr. Moore a disservice to which I

explained that I wasn't doing anything in respect of Mr. Moore except relating those comments, whether I agreed with them or not, of fellow officers.

Maintaining his calm yet direct manner, the superintendent continued by stating that while senior officers were surprised by my articulateness, I had erred in my article by naming politicians. In response, I stated that this was actually the point and that as Home Secretary and Minister for Policing respectively, John Reid and Tony McNulty were ultimately responsible for the current state of policing. Following a prolonged exchange of views back and forth, Detective Inspector Pollard's sudden interjection represented the only time during the entire meeting that he would speak, asking me in a mildly condescending manner whether I'd joined the police to detect crime. While conceding that although I recognised the importance of detecting crime, I explained that my primary reason for joining the police had been to prevent crime and invoked Sir Robert Peel's ninth principle relating to how the test of police efficiency is the absence of crime and disorder, and not the visible evidence of police action in dealing with them.

Having reached something of an impasse, the superintendent agreed that despite presenting some valid points I'd acted in such a way as to bring the force into disrepute and that I could expect to hear more on the matter in due course. Furthermore, he forbade me from having any more contact with the media. Upon returning to my desk, my detective tutor constable, a kindly man named Andy, asked me in his typically gentle and sympathetic manner whether I was okay.

In contrast to Andy's enquiry, one of my other colleagues ventured to ask what I hoped to achieve by writing ambush articles. Somewhat surprised that I found myself having to point this out to someone who had not long left response policing himself, I

explained what I saw as the simple truth that our ongoing absence on the streets continued to enable crime, embolden criminals and increase the public perception of becoming victims of crime. Having just come from response, I knew this to be true and had not conveniently chosen to forget this fact now that I'd moved into CID. Suitably pissed off with his apparent "I'm alright Jack" attitude, I took heart upon hearing that during the main CID office briefing that morning, officers openly expressed their agreement with my views although it pained me to hear how their dissent had been swiftly shut down. In addition, I found Lee, one of my section sergeants, similarly dismissive during conversation with him in his office. To his question as to why I'd done it, I replied by asking what he would've done with my concerns had I come to him with them following which he responded bluntly with the words "fuck all"!

At home that evening, I replayed the events of the day over and over in my head. Although I hadn't received the kind of bollocking I'd expected, the seeming indifference of senior officers to the plight of front-line officers and a frustrated public irked me. On the other hand, considering the response of my detective colleague, it wasn't just senior officers who were wilfully unconcerned with front-line policing from which they were now so far removed. Critically, I asked myself how could I continue working for those I simply couldn't respect. Having lost my appetite, I settled down in front of the telly and opened my emails to find one from Mike Knapp. Following his enquiry as to how my day went, Mike then asked whether I'd be willing to pen another article for publication this upcoming Sunday. As if any additional confirmation of his cluelessness of policing were needed, Mike explained that following an approach to the Minister for Policing for comment on my article, Tony McNulty expressed disappointment with what I had written. Despite the test of my fortitude provided by Mr. McNulty's comment, I responded to Mike by declining his offer and explained

how I'd been told to have no more direct contact with the media. Little did I know then, although perhaps I ought to have done, of the consequences that awaited me the following day the moment I hit the send button on that email.

In the kind of fog and heavy-headedness that follows another restless night's sleep, I made my way into work along my usual route. Upon reaching my desk, I sat down and, as the officer in the case, began reviewing the witness statements in a domestic rape investigation. Having established a good rapport and high level of trust and confidence with my female victim and her family, I'd also won plaudits from Lee, who remarked on the speed and efficiency with which I'd managed the investigation and gushed at the prospect of the AVU's first rape conviction for some time. Just then, the section inspector emerged in haste from her office and announced she wanted to see me immediately.

As I sat down in front of her, the inspector explained that the Sunday Express had been in contact with headquarters to ask why they'd told me I could no longer have contact with the media. The inspector asked how the paper knew of the prohibition to which I explained that having received a request from Mike Knapp for another article the day before, I made my refusal on the basis that I'd been told to have no further media contact. At the inspector's request, I printed out my response to Mike following which she told me to return to my desk and remain there. Upon returning to my desk, that sudden feeling in the pit of my stomach told me right then and there that I'd reached the end of the road. In the time it took the inspector to summon me back to her office, I'd typed out a resignation email and sent it to her.

With a mixture of relief and apprehension, I sat before the inspector once more. In a manner and tone of regret, she acknowledged receipt of my resignation while questioning my wisdom in having

gone to the media in the first place. Furthermore, she advised that although my response to Mike Knapp had been to refuse his request, my reply constituted a breach of the superintendent's order not to have any more contact with the media, as a result of which, senior officers had authorised my immediate suspension. The inspector explained that she would make senior officers aware of my notice following which she asked me to hand back my badge and warrant card. Having gathered my personal effects I then said goodbye to my colleagues. To the sound of one of my fellow detectives breaking down in tears, I left the Anti-Victimisation Unit and was escorted off the premises by Laurence, Lee's counterpart as the other AVU sergeant.

Following confirmation that my resignation had been accepted, I found myself during the next four weeks on what's known as 'gardening leave'. If any additional evidence were needed as to whether resigning had been the correct decision, the next few weeks would provide it in abundance. Fundamentally, with the aim of my article having been to better inform the public, I felt compelled to continue in this way and enlisted the support of someone far more tech savvy than me to set up a website so that I too could begin blogging. The website, entitled 'Realpolicing' contained a call to arms to both my fellow officers and the public and attached to which could be found a petition calling for police reform. The petition itself would run until the following year, when it was presented on the floor of the House of Commons by Castle Point MP, Bob Spink. The aim of the petition had been to illustrate the public's dissatisfaction with target-driven policing methods and called on the Government to not only drop this method of measuring police performance but also reduce the paperwork burden and onerous processes which significantly impacts police visibility. Furthermore, the petition called for the role of Police Community Support Officers to be made one which supports the return of regular police officers to the streets.

Interestingly, it was my position on Police Community Support Officers while blogging which exposed a difference of opinion between myself and some among my front-line colleagues. While there can be no doubt that with the ever-increasing demands placed on police officers they need additional support in their role, I questioned the decision to provide the kind of support which did not have as its aim the intention to address the amount of time police officers spend on paperwork and processes. Consequently, with the sole aim of PCSOs to be the ‘eyes and ears’ of the police and with a remit to “withdraw and report”, in practice this meant that should a PCSO on patrol come across an incident, their limited powers would not enable them to deal with the matter beyond radioing in and requesting the attendance of a police officer.

Therefore, implementation of PCSOs had led to a ‘quick win’ approach to address, albeit partially, the lack of a uniformed presence on the streets while the longer term issue of reducing the paperwork burden and onerous processes remained unaddressed. Another practical example of a PCSO’s limitations presented itself each time I found myself out on patrol with one of them. As mentioned previously, while Caroline and I divided the work generated by each incident we attended equally, when crewed with a PCSO I had to pick up the paperwork of every job I attended as their remit also did not extend to crime investigation. In the same way as teaching assistants support teachers and healthcare assistants support nurses, of course there is a role for civilians to support police officers, however, the support in the manner implemented came in the wrong place, with PCSOs on the streets providing more of substitution for police officers than a means of support designed to put police officers back on the streets.

Following on from how agencies of the state respond when criticised or threatened, particularly from within, my time on suspension, or gardening leave, also gave me a grounding in the

ways of the mainstream media. After returning one afternoon from town following an interview I'd given to the BBC on Brighton beach, I was surprised to find a journalist from local paper 'The Argus' waiting for me on my doorstep. Having provided the journalist with exactly the same information I'd given to the BBC, the difference in the manner of their reporting could not have been different, with the BBC referring in their headline to me 'lifting the lid on figures' to The Argus's 'Detective lifts lid on 'fiddled' crime figures'. With The Argus article containing embellishments and sensationalist accusations I'd never made to the journalist, it came as no surprise that my request to see the article prior to it going to print went unanswered. Naively, I'd allowed myself to walk into a trap, with my words being sharpened into barbs to be used by 'The Argus' to hurl at Sussex Police.

Despite the incident with The Argus, I'd continue giving interviews to the media at this time and provided numerous anecdotal examples of the state of modern policing. However, Sussex Police left me in no doubt that I'd crossed the line after relating two specific instances of 'unsavoury practice' which took place during my final stint on response. The first of these involved the £300 cash inducement we were offered during one pre-shift briefing to the section which amassed the highest number of detections for that month, which we were advised could be used for a staff night out.

The second example concerned an incident I attended alone involving a runner, a dog walker and an allegation of common assault. After having got to the bottom of what exactly had happened, it transpired that while running past a man and his dog along a busy main road in Hove, the runner had run too close to the dog following which the dog snapped at the runner, causing him to stumble into the main road. Suitably incensed, the runner began to remonstrate with the owner to which the dog walker accused the runner of running too close to his dog. An altercation then took

place with the runner hitting out at the dog owner. In order to protect himself, the dog owner fought back. Having attended numerous incidents of the kind, this particular incident had been no different in its circumstances following which I'd only ever completed a crime report identifying one victim, one offender and one crime. When it became known that the dog walker had also struck the runner I was advised to "double-crime" the incident to show two detections, rather than one. In the same way that I would not have registered the victim of a domestic assault as an offender while attempting to defend themselves from violence, I would not have expected to be asked to do so in this particular instance. However, with great reluctance I did what I was told.

In addition to these two examples to which I personally bore witness was added one other which I did not. While I had no direct involvement in this specific incident, I had no reason to doubt the account of the response officer who did and who brought it to my attention prior to me writing my article. In the midst of a conversation during which we were discussing detection targets, the officer explained that having attended a sudden death and finding a bag of cannabis next to the body of the deceased, they had been directed to crime the cannabis possession. Having provided this example, among others, during various media interviews, Sussex Police then went on record and, in an attempt to rubbish my account, stated they'd investigated my allegations and confirmed them to be spurious. It's worth pointing out that whoever Sussex Police spoke to in order to determine my allegations to be false, they did not speak to me as the officer in the case of the altercation between the runner and the dog walker, nor did they speak to the officer who attended the sudden death, as confirmed by the officer to me during a subsequent conversation following Sussex Police's so-called review.

Consequently, these specific allegations made during the various media interviews I gave were enough to trigger an altogether unpleasant call from a fellow officer with a message from on-high. During a brief exchange, this particular officer informed me how I was beginning to seriously “piss off” senior officers and if I didn’t refrain from talking to the media they would revoke my notice and place me on indefinite suspension. Furthermore, the caller warned that the force would investigate any officer providing me with information and how all officers had been warned not to make any direct contact with me. This second point would prove problematic for Sussex Police in view of the fact that I shared a flat with a response officer from Hove station. Lastly, the caller also made it known how senior officers were aware I’d begun working with the Tories.

Exposing the futility of Sussex Police’s threats, it had been fed back to me during the last few days of my notice that officers were also banned from accessing my ‘Realpolicing’ website via force computers. Despite the various warnings, Andy, my tutor constable in the AVU, came to see me to “offer the hand of friendship” while a rep from the Police Federation advised me that if I ceased to speak out he might be able to save my job. However, it was too late, what with the attempts by Sussex Police to rubbish my allegations proving beyond all doubt that the honesty and integrity mantra driven home to us in police training only applies to the lower ranks and not the upper ones. Indeed, a quote from Sussex Police at the end of one particular interview I gave stated that my speaking out in the manner I did suggested a lack of experience on my part.

Whatever experience they regarded me as lacking, I learned very quickly during this period how state agencies respond when threatened in addition to some of the tricks the media employ to convert certain situations to news. Crucially, and comprising the third important lesson, would be how politicians leverage certain

situations to both their political and personal advantage. For now, despite the unpleasant threats emanating from a state agency clearly on the defensive, at the end of the day on 31st March, 2007, I counted myself no longer among their ranks and the following day became a civilian once more.

Until such time as I truly began to understand the implications for policing of political interference, for the next twelve months I continued participating in radio and television interviews to maintain a flow of information to the public. Among them were two police exposés as part of the show ‘Tonight with Trevor McDonald’, in addition to an interview on Eamon Holmes Sky News programme ‘Sunrise’, in which I explained the ills of target-driven policing, using the comparison of taking a drink-driver off the street to chasing the low-hanging fruit of cannabis possession and detection to illustrate my point, and an interview on BBC Radio Five Live with Richard Bacon. Prior to this particular interview, a member of the Home Office had been invited to join me at BBC Television Centre, Wood Lane, to debate the current state of policing. Unsurprisingly, the Home Office did not send a representative but instead provided a prepared statement which lauded their own achievements while addressing none of the issues I’d raised. However, it was the BBC’s Panorama episode entitled ‘Wasting Police Time’, in which I’d be particularly proud to take part.

Broadcast on 17th September, 2007, the aim of ‘Wasting Police Time’ had been to reveal the identity of ‘David Copperfield’, the anonymous author of ‘The Policeman’s Blog’ and the book ‘Wasting Police Time’. Interspersed with interviews with Staffordshire Police officer Stuart Davidson (aka David Copperfield) were the corroborative accounts of a number of serving and former officers designed to present an accurate picture of modern policing. This picture contrasted sharply with footage of

Tony McNulty speaking in the House of Commons during an attempt to denounce Stuart Davidson's faithful account of modern policing as "...owing more to fiction than Dickens...". With his attempt to discredit Stuart leaving me as unimpressed as had his previous comments on 'Tonight with Trevor McDonald' the previous December, I couldn't help but conclude that the calamitous Mr. McNulty had revealed himself once again to be 'one stupid bastard'.

Indeed, political ignorance and the lack of interest in police reform and greater efficiency had been the most surprising revelation of this entire situation, albeit with one notable exception. Having had no real understanding of political ideology or politicians prior to joining the police, I admit my own naivete in expecting those presiding over our ministries of state to have had some experience of working in those services over which they preside. At the very least, I expected them to have a good understanding of how those services currently do and do not work along with a desire to ensure their future efficient running. During my initial meeting with Nick Herbert, the shadow police minister, he asked the kind of questions of me which suggested a strong desire to not only understand the nature of the problem but attempt to solve it. It became clear once his 'Policing For the People' reform taskforce document had been published in 2008 that Nick's team had undertaken sufficient research to diagnose the problem and suggest solutions. Unfortunately, in 2009, Nick would be replaced by David Ruffley, the MP for Bury St. Edmunds, as the new shadow police minister, whose interest in policing would reveal itself to me to be decidedly different to that of Nick Herbert.

In contrast to Nick, David Ruffley's lack of genuine interest in policing and police reform suggested his interests were likely more political in nature. During the brief period that I acted as a consultant for him, I spent more time with his researcher, a pleasant

university graduate by the name of Will, than I did David. Having spent a day at a police station in David's Suffolk constituency, he, Will and I had a number of in-depth conversations with officers of all ranks, examining the numerous processes undertaken to deal with various types of offences. Upon our return to David's office at Portcullis House in Westminster, Will and I broke down each process in order to establish the degree of duplication and the scope for simplification. Interestingly, Will and I even began to compare policing procedures in Australia and America for possible incorporation into a more efficient UK model. Now and again, David would appear from his office to enquire about our progress and in one particular moment of exuberance with our perceived good work, David made as if to punch the air while talking excitedly about how "Tory stormtroopers" were coming to save the day for British policing. Following David's return to his office, I asked Will what that was all about and remarked to him that David appeared not to give a damn about British policing to which Will conceded that David's interests were "nakedly political".

While my interaction with two opposition Conservative MPs had left me with decidedly different impressions of their interest in the state of British policing, two brief encounters with Boris Johnson and Shadow Home Secretary David Davis respectively did little to inspire my confidence that policing would be back in safe hands should the Conservatives win the 2010 general election. With my name known to a degree among some Tories, I found myself being asked to simply attend and bring a degree of gravitas to the launch of various Tory crime reduction initiatives or actually give a talk on my experience of front-line policing. The latter I would do in February, 2008, at Millbank Tower in London, for the launch of Boris Johnson's crime manifesto as part of his campaign for London Mayor.

Despite never having spoken publicly in front of a live audience, I accepted the invitation expecting to have to do little more than speak from raw experience. What I did not anticipate was the depth of media interest in Boris' launch until the lift doors opened out onto what appeared to be something like the thirtieth floor and into a room full of what resembled a small army of journalists, cameras and microphones. With my hands through sheer nerves having turned to ice, I took to the podium in front of David Davis, Boris Johnson and what appeared to be the entire British media. Despite the involuntary trembling of my right knee against the side of the podium, I delivering a frank account of front-line policing, going full circle as I did from my recollections of police officers on the beat in London in the 1970s to my hopes for a return to common-sense policing in the noughties and beyond. Beginning and ending my talk in this way had not been lost on Boris, who, to my surprise, remarked on my having done so while introducing himself to me at the conclusion of the launch.

While the media requests for articles on aspects of law enforcement about which I knew nothing would continue for a while longer, the last time I'd be asked to assist the Tories came courtesy of a request for an interview with David Davis in his office in the Palace of Westminster. Having been met at Portcullis House by David's chief of staff, an outwardly pleasant fellow a year or two younger than me by the name of Dominic Raab, I found myself being spirited away from Portcullis House through a series of locked gates under Bridge Street and narrow corridors of the Palace of Westminster and into David Davis's office. With his back to us, Dominic sat at his computer and read aloud to David about the latest update on the parole hearing of Learco Chindamo, the killer of headteacher Philip Lawrence stabbed outside his Maida Vale school while attempting to protect a pupil in December, 1995. Glancing up to the shelf above Dominic's computer as he spoke, I spied a copy of Stuart Davidson's book 'Wasting Police Time'.

Armed with various pieces of police paperwork I'd amassed during my time working for David Ruffley, I spread them out on a table in front of the shadow home secretary, who, while the camera began to roll, opened and continued through the interview with very general questions. Immediately, the lack of depth in his enquiries led me to conclude that David had not even a basic understanding of the difficulties facing front-line police officers, let alone the complexities, which was confirmed to me in earnest once he began talking about a "bonfire of bureaucracy and paperwork". While I realise the need to simplify potentially complex and technical information for public consumption, his over-simplification of the nature of the problem left me with the impression that our interview has been less about aiding his understanding and more about creating a series of sexy sound-bites to further a future political end. My doubts would prove well-founded when that particular portion of our interview was featured in David's Conservative Party conference speech on law-and-order a few weeks later. Although he credited me to the conference audience for my bravery in speaking out, the decision to include the bonfire reference betrayed his political intentions as had David Ruffley's "Tory stormtroopers" remark a few months before.

In sum, despite my naivete, or "lack of experience" as it had been characterised, it was not difficult in the end to join the dots and understand how modern policing came to be the way it is now. From sergeants, inspectors, chief inspectors, superintendents, chief superintendents and chief constables who, for various reasons including their own vested interests, turn the other cheek to the need for police reform, to politicians who appear more interested in short-term solutions rather than solving complex long-term problems and thereby furthering their own political objectives, police efficiency and public safety are at the mercy of their indifference and self-interest. Indeed, this experience demonstrated that a politician being well-informed as to nature of the problem

means nothing if they lack the will and desire beyond the advancement of their own political careers to make British policing the best that it can be. Therefore, without the regular intake of similarly naive young officers to replace those leaving the front-line having had the idealism sucked out of them by a mercilessly inefficient system, front-line policing would be truly lost.

Moreover, while it's a little late for me to go "no comment", I have no hesitation in making full and frank admissions and taking responsibility for what was truly an inside job. With establishing intent always a factor in proving an offender's guilt, my intent was simple, to begin a potential chain of events which, sooner or later, would lead to a wholesale review of modern policing with a view to police reform, a decrease in the perception of becoming a victim of crime and an increase in the likelihood of being caught. From a purely psychoanalytic perspective, my actions were motivated by the government's failure to protect the public conflated with my own parents' failure to protect my siblings and me, thereby creating that deep sense of angst at not feeling safe.

So, with a desire burning stronger within me than ever before to prevent crime yet knowing the limitations of doing so as a police officer, I found myself wondering where I should go from here. Just then, as if to show me the way, a voice that had stayed with me ever since that second day at Sully suddenly came to the fore. As for that accursed crime triangle, if its inclusion in police training manuals is to illustrate what the current policing model enshrines, it has its rightful place. However, if its inclusion is intended to inform officers of the cycle they must work to disrupt, they will be bedevilled by their inability to meet this expectation before they've even left their respective tutor units. Therefore, it might be just as well to remove it all together, lest other similarly idealistic new recruits like me, hell-bent on preventing crime, also take it literally!

Chapter 23 – When Victims Become Perpetrators – Part 1

“The only thing that saves us from the bureaucracy is its inefficiency. An efficient bureaucracy is the greatest threat to liberty.”

— Eugene McCarthy

Common sense suggests that the last place in which a current or former police officer wished to find themselves would be in a prison. With a desire to prevent crime continuing to percolate within me, if I couldn't prevent crime as a police officer, working with those responsible for the vast majority of acquisitive crime seemed to me an obvious alternative. Yet, I'd take the indirect route into prison by spending the next eighteen months as an advocate, first for a charity supporting the victims of domestic abuse and then, after having moved from Sussex to south-west London, for another charity supporting the families of murder victims. As had become habit, I began both endeavours by asking myself what it was those who used the services needed from it and needed me to be, what I could expect to learn in each situation and what of my past experiences I could bring to bear on each role.

Based on the site of a local Sussex hospital, my role as a domestic abuse advocate consisted of providing emotional and practical support to victims of abuse. Although my stint in the domestic abuse unit would be brief, I remained there long enough to observe the devastating effects on victims resulting from the perpetrator's attempts to exert power and control over them. Regardless of any other forms of abuse, the fear instilled in the victim by the perpetrator created a formidable emotional barrier that in many cases my colleagues and I were powerless to overcome.

Of the many examples of people terrorised by their partners, a few in particular stood out. The first, a lady in her late sixties, had been physically and emotionally abused by her thirty-year-old son, while in another, a young mum disclosed how her young son had witnessed her being beaten on numerous occasions by his father following which he'd begun beating other children at school. In many cases, the psychological effects of the perpetrator's behaviour on the victim was such that key-working sessions often ran into several hours during which we offered advice and support, from panic alarms and extra mobile phones to refuge placements in areas well away from where they lived. Despite the prospect of a safe haven, I'd look on and observe the extent of my client's anxiety as they contemplated leaving before realising the implications of doing so then suddenly retreating back into their shell, disgusted with themselves for having considered an act of betrayal.

Furthermore, I began key-working a rather timid older lady who revealed how her partner would abuse her by "ringing her breasts out", as if simulating a Chinese burn. Following her disclosure and owing to understandable embarrassment, she asked to change to a female advocate as I reminded her too much of her grandson.

Come September, 2007, I moved from Sussex back to London, settling in Streatham where I shared an upstairs flat belonging to a true British gent, a man by the name of Gavin. Gentleman is a suitably apt title for one of the most honourable, intelligent and insightful men I've ever known, and continue to know to this day. Like those with both Scott and Jenny, my relationship with Gavin during my time in the police would similarly suffer following another bout of depression, resulting in another decent and altogether innocent person being pushed away. However, it's testament to his good nature, intuition and insight courtesy of his own experience with depression that he put the feelings of rejection and hurt aside and persevered with me. In doing so, he remains not

only one of the few people in my life with whom I've felt truly safe but an example of the feeling of safety I've sought to inspire in others, with one notable exception!

Following my return to London and on the back of my police article in the Sunday Express, I came to the attention of one Norman Brennan. Having never heard of Norman prior to him contacting me, I'd learn subsequent to meeting him that he was a serving British Transport Police officer and founder of both the police support group 'Protect the Protectors' and the charity Victims of Crime Trust, which advocated on behalf of the families of murder victims. In addition, Norman found the time to provide regular comment to the media on a range of criminal justice issues as a self-appointed 'victims' champion'. With Norman seemingly appreciative of my stance against police inefficiency, I took a short-term role as an advocate for the trust, juggling my time between their office in Twickenham and Portcullis House in Westminster as part of my work on policing with Conservative MP David Ruffley's office.

Among the patrons of the trust were Damilola Taylor's father, Richard Taylor, Jamie Bulger's mother, Denise Fergus, and Sarah Payne's mother, Sara Payne. Although my advocacy work consisted largely of completing administrative tasks on behalf of victim's families, one request came up a number of times during many conversations with them. This request was for information on support groups or to be put in touch with families who'd lost a loved one in the same or similar circumstances, only wanting to engage with others who they knew would be able to relate to their particular trauma. Perhaps the most gratifying aspect of my time at the Victims of Crime Trust was the opportunity to observe the tireless work of director Clive Elliott, a thoroughly empathic and selfless man who had the confidence and respect of many among those families for whom he advocated.

Throughout life, I've come to appreciate the importance of finding others with whom I can relate and who can relate to me in their turn. I'd be reminded of this fact each time a scruffy young lad in a grey sweater and matching bottoms would lean over the railings and shout down to me something along the lines of "...what can you tell me about drugs...?". In response to their question, I'd often ask what they needed me to tell them about drugs. Of course, while I could tell them very little about drugs and their related effects, for they knew far more about that than me, I could express an awareness and understanding of the reasons why people take them and the reasons to try to stop. After all, as a copper, I'd seen first-hand the devastating impact of substance misuse on communities and how, in one way or another, perpetrators often start out as victims themselves.

Although I'd eventually become a prison-based and then community-based substance misuse worker, I began working in HMP Brixton in June, 2008, as then governor Paul McDowell's audio typist. My task in this particular role was to produce typed transcripts of disciplinary hearings following allegations of officer misconduct. Considering the level of trust and responsibility placed in prison officers and staff, some of their misdeeds were enough to rival those of any of the men who found themselves on the other side of the bars. During the twelve months that followed I put my skills to good use, initially by clearing the huge back-log of disciplinary hearing transcripts and then as an auditor in the department of internal audit. It was there, during one particular audit on the displaying of information of the various external agencies based within the prison, that I took notice of one particular poster describing a role which, rather unexpectedly, would become my next job.

With their posters so crookedly displayed on numerous walls around the prison, before becoming a CARAT worker, I paid very

little attention to the notices advertising their services. However, the more time I spent on the landings of the prison's various house blocks, or "wings" as they were otherwise known, I began to see more of these posters before coming into direct contact with CARAT workers themselves. An acronym for counselling, assessment, referral, advice and through-care, the job of a CARAT worker involved everything the acronym suggested and more. While the role required good listening, organisational and record-keeping skills, CARAT workers were not trained counsellors although this was perhaps the most important aspect of the role. Again, I posed the question to myself of exactly what I needed to be in order to be effective in my new role and whether that was characteristically me or something I could learn to be. For this, I brought to bear all that I'd learned in both the children's homes and in the police. Before long, I realised that all it would take for those with substance misuse issues, from the seriously malnourished to those who strutted through the door all muscled and menacing, to open up to me was to present to them someone willing to listen to their life experiences without judgement and in front of whom they felt safe enough to break down.

Again, despite not being trained as counsellors, we quickly fell into a therapeutic role and had to skilfully balance the need to make clients feel listened to while gathering valuable information about their drug use to be collated and fed back into the government's National Drug Treatment Monitoring System (NDTMS). Interestingly, I'd learn subsequently that whether in prison or out in the community, a client sitting for an initial assessment would count for monitoring purposes as them being "in treatment", even if they went out and scored drugs immediately afterwards. Naively, I thought "in treatment" meant they were in rehab or similar short or long-term program designed to actively address their substance misuse.

Much like the time spent as a police officer, my time working within the penal system exposed my naivety yet provided those precious opportunities to observe and learn. Of those things which shouldn't have surprised me but did was the ease with which, between corrupt officers, unscrupulous prisoner visitors or the prisoners themselves, drugs entered the prison. This realisation took me back to a moment in the police when, after having read the charge sheet out to a suspect following interview and asking if he had any response, he replied by pleading not to be sent back to prison as the last time he went to prison he became hooked on heroin! Indeed, the lengths a perpetrator would go to in order to smuggle drugs into prison beggared belief, from disembowelled rats and tennis balls stuffed full of drugs being thrown over the prison walls to female visitors secreting drugs either in their vaginas, under their breasts or within the clothing and blankets of their babies. The regularity with which some prisoners secreted drugs in their anuses gave credence to the statistic that illicit substances have been up approximately ten backsides before reaching their intended recipient.

Further opportunities to reflect and learn came courtesy of the prison environment, prison regime, and candid admissions made by prisoners themselves. Having had the opportunity of working in prisons run by the Ministry of Justice and those run by the private sector, I couldn't help noticing the reduced numbers of prison officers on the landings in those establishments run by the private sector relative to those overseen directly by the Ministry of Justice. However, common to both was how young, unsure and inexperienced many officers appeared and how negatively many older prisoners responded to taking orders from officers so much younger than themselves in addition to the long periods of time prisoners often spent in their cells and also the ever present smell of weed on the landings, especially on the house-blocks occupied by prisoners with a heroin addiction. In order to stabilise these

particular prisoners, they were given daily doses of methadone, a prescribed substance which mimics the effects of heroin and reduces the symptoms of withdrawal.

Interestingly, alongside these specific prisoners and those non-users involved purely in drug supply, I took the opportunity at one particular prison to sit-in on a therapeutic support group entitled “Supporting Change & Recovery (SCAR). Arguably the two most significant nuggets of information came courtesy of prisoners who explained that, as dealers, they could earn several thousands of pounds per week selling drugs and make more in a week than they would in a year working a typical nine-to-five. When the facilitator pointed out the inherent risks in terms of getting caught, the prisoners dismissed this as merely an “occupational hazard” and explained how they get away with it far more often than they are caught.

Despite being fathers, there were those who lamented missing their children while in the next breath professed to being seduced by the luxury lifestyle their illicit activities afforded them. Fuelled by a belief that it’s the system which is at fault and not them, rehabilitating these prisoners would undoubtedly prove a challenge to their offender managers and which put me in mind of a burglar I once interviewed who rationalised his activities on the basis that if he didn’t have something he wanted while someone else did, he felt justified in taking it.

All this led me to realise that if for no other reason than to protect the public, there are those for whom incarceration is the right thing until such time as they’re motivated to make different choices. Meanwhile, there are those whose choices are largely influenced by their entrenched drug addiction for which they may or may not receive the appropriate support in prison. While it goes without saying that the public must be protected from the devastation

wrought on communities of drug abuse, for a prison-based support worker one of greatest challenges is presented by methadone prescribed prisoners coming into the prison on short sentences.

With the requirements of my role being to assess an addicted prisoner's drug use and their social care needs, provide them with talking therapy-type exercises as part of key-working sessions (otherwise referred to as "psychosocial interventions") and arrange a prescribing appointment back in the community upon release, short sentences, in many cases of merely a week, served to frustrate most if not all of these objectives. In the best case scenario we barely managed to complete an initial assessment and arrange a prescribing appointment while in the worst, albeit rare occasion, some prisoners were discharged without a prescribing appointment in place, which increased the likelihood of them going to their dealer upon release to "score". On the other hand, there were also those so chaotically entrenched in the cycle of addiction and crime that coming to prison provided temporary relief not only to the individual themselves but also to the community so disrupted by their drug use.

In order to cope with the psychological demands of such a role while working meaningfully with service users, a supportive management is essential. However, this was not the first time, nor would it be the last time I'd find myself hamstrung by unnecessary duplication of information resulting from onerous processes and outdated IT systems which together served to significantly reduce my overall effectiveness. Nor was it the last time I'd be part of a client-facing team beleaguered by an incompetent and self-serving management team more inclined to protect their own interests than challenge the calamitous decisions passed down to them from their superiors. While I'd witness more of the same in the not too distant future, perhaps the most egregious example came courtesy of a pilot scheme intended to improve efficiency in drug treatment services

between custody and community. However, rather than improve efficiency, the project led to the thoroughly predictable consequence of tearing apart two separate teams working rather inefficiently yet relatively contentedly while leaving service users feeling unsupported and, in some cases, abandoned.

As was the case with the rest of my colleagues in the CARAT team, I applied for the role in order to work in a prison. The same could be said for the majority of the London Borough of Lambeth's community drug team, who joined to work specifically in the community with no interest whatsoever in working in prisons. Nonetheless, in mid 2010, merge we would to become the pilot scheme entitled "End2End". As the name suggested, the year-long pilot had been created to ensure that the same support worker followed Lambeth residents involved in drug-related crime through the criminal justice system. This journey would begin in Lambeth's police custody suites and into Brixton Prison for those given a custodial sentence, or back into the community for those handed a community sentence by the courts.

In addition to providing continuity across police custody, prison and the community, another objective of the pilot had been to reduce both the number of assessments conducted with the service user and, consequently, the administration burden. As anyone working on the front-line in public sector services countrywide would attest, any opportunity to meaningfully reduce the burden created by both onerous and inefficient processes and outdated IT systems is always welcomed. However, rather than improve efficiency across all three locations, all the End2End pilot ultimately achieved was to highlight the inherent difficulties one worker would encounter working across the three locations, difficulties which could've been identified by the front-line workers themselves had they been invited to participate in the brainstorming process instead of, as was

actually the case, being brought into the fray on the Friday before the pilot went live the following Monday.

At this particular meeting attended by both prison- and community-based drug workers, it became clear that fatal errors of calculation had been made in terms of the proportion of prisoners in Brixton prison who were actually Lambeth residents and how we would still need to provide assessment services to the remaining service users involved in drug-related crime from other boroughs who formed the majority of the prison population. Furthermore, with additional recruitment of drug support workers not getting underway until after the pilot had commenced coupled with prison security clearance taking several months to come through, having to provide sufficient cover across all three locations proved logistically challenging and left Brixton prison on many days with only one or two support workers in situ.

As a result, rather than the barely manageable chaos of working within one site, we found ourselves working amid the unmanageable chaos of the three sites of police custody, prison and the community. As for reducing the paperwork burden, those responsible for the End2End pilot had failed to take into account that paperwork completed within the prison establishment could not be removed from the prison which resulted in two sets of paperwork, one for prison and one for the community, having to be completed. This careless oversight served to frustrate the pilot's main aims of reducing the admin burden and repeated reassessment of a client group whose members may come into custody as often as every few weeks!

Suffice to say that I didn't stick around long enough to witness the inevitable scrapping of the End2End pilot, as I and many of my fellow colleagues abandoned ship long beforehand. However, after having experienced the chaos and inefficiency of prison-based drug

treatment, my interest in whether or not community-based services were similarly hampered had been piqued. Based in the south-east London town of Woolwich, the place of my birth, in August 2010 I joined the team at the Greenwich Drug Intervention Program (DIP). While it may be true that the grass is rarely greener on the other side, for what I was about to encounter, not even a ride-on mower could cut through the kind of chaos which awaited me there.

It has to be said that the obvious advantage of working in prisons is that at least you know where to find your client. Alas, the same cannot not be said working as a community-based case worker and given the chaotic nature of addiction, I could expect my client to be absolutely anywhere, anywhere that is, apart from the DIP offices. At this point it may provide context and clarity by explaining the work of a DIP in addition to how services are commissioned and by whom. In the case of both Lambeth and Greenwich, the borough council commissioners put contracts out to tender on which various organisations bid against each other to provide services in that particular borough.

At that time, the contract for Greenwich DIP was held by a charity called CRI (Crime Reduction Initiative). CRI held a number of contracts among the London boroughs and home counties, including Lambeth, until the advent of the End2End pilot. Having experienced the “not enough bums on seats” phenomenon as part of the prison team’s amalgamation with Lambeth CRI, I should have anticipated what was to come having subsequently learned how CRI, by undercutting their competition, would win contracts easily while failing to recruit a sufficient number of case managers to work meaningfully with service users. Therefore, it should’ve come as no surprise to me to walk in on my first day to discover I’d inherited the case load of a departing colleague consisting of upwards of one hundred clients. Specifically, my caseload comprised live clients who were actually engaging, those who had fallen off the radar,

referred to as “community tracking” and those previously active although were now in prison, known as “prison tracking”.

At this point it’s worth taking a moment to describe the kind of circumstances which lead to addiction and subsequent accessing of drug treatment services. In most cases, service users come to treatment services having suffered various forms of abuse, such as physical, psychological and sexual abuse, as both children and adults, or other forms of emotional trauma, such as relationship breakdown and PTSD, or other forms of hardship such as debt, loss of a loved one or simply getting in with the wrong crowd.

Dealing with the feelings created by any one or more of these issues can, for various reasons, be too much for some to bear and so they self-medicate to avoid them. However, in certain cases they self-medicate with a substance, such as heroin, upon which the body becomes dependent. The dependence then requires regular intake to avoid the symptoms of withdrawal and the return of the emotional turmoil which led to their misuse of heroin in the first place. Most will turn to crime in order to fund their increasing dependence. This in turn creates a huge burden on the criminal justice system and blights communities, to say nothing of the effect on the users themselves in terms of infection, incarceration, further abuse and unwanted pregnancy, relationship breakdown and, in many cases, homelessness.

It goes without saying that engaging a client group whose unresolved trauma and related addiction perpetuates a cycle of chaotic substance misuse and crime is no easy task and the demands placed on empathic drug workers to support their clients are considerable. It’s lamentable that the working environment consisting of high case loads, onerous processes, unnecessary duplication of paperwork and outdated IT systems is not conducive to meaningful working with an inherently difficult to reach client

group. Inevitably, the many and varied yet familiar accounts of abuse, loss, infection, addiction and crime as related to the support worker by their client can and does weigh heavily on the empathic support worker, who takes on not only the pain of their client but a sense of obligation to try to relieve it.

Therefore, it's not difficult to imagine the stress and burden which accompanies the responsibility of managing a caseload of one-hundred people. For me, in practice that meant actively engaging my live clients in regular key-working sessions in addition to contacting various local services, such as the nearby methadone prescribing service, in an attempt to locate those "community tracking" clients who were now designated as such having dropped out of the service. Where that proved fruitless, the only other option would be to conduct an outreach service to my client's current address in a last-ditch attempt to locate and re-engage them. As for my "prison tracking" clients, managing them proved somewhat easier as long as I remembered their release date and the prison from where they were due to be released.

Mirroring the chaotic lives of service users deeply entrenched in the cycle of substance misuse and crime, before long I found myself battling to contain the chaos that had become my caseload, as clients moved from active to community tracking having suddenly stopped engaging, then from community tracking to prison and from prison tracking to active. Amid the chaos there remained a steady stream of new clients coming through the door, each with similar stories to reveal to their weary and overburdened support worker steadfastly committed to helping them change their lives.

Working in such chaotic ways led me to two specific conclusions. The first of these is that there are no quick wins when trying to support someone to address their substance misuse. Indeed, the fruits of any meaningful work may not bear fruit until such time as

the client grows tired of the cycle of drug addiction and crime and is then motivated to become substance free. The other is that there were those among my clients who would only engage when in crisis, needing help to get their benefits restarted when they'd failed to attend appointments, or needing their tenancy saved having been served an eviction notice or needing a new appointment with the prescribing service for their methadone or buprenorphine having missed three consecutive appointments. Once I'd helped fix the issue, my briefly active client would disappear again, soon to be relegated to the ranks of "community tracking" and back into a self-perpetuating cycle of self-medication, supplied to them courtesy of their dealer, along with the kind of abuse associated with substance misuse (whether as victims or perpetrators) and, inevitably, crime. In the case of these client, I felt my intervention was merely enabling their chaos, not helping them to address it.

Needless to say that after ten years of working in public service roles and rendered hopelessly inefficient by poor management, onerous processes, unnecessary duplication of paperwork and outdated IT systems, I started to feel the effects of burnout. Seeking a change of pace, I'd work for a time in domiciliary care before returning to prisons to co-lead a team of prison-based drug support workers. By now, I'd identified a pattern of inefficiency and incompetence emerging in our public services and would find myself battling these familiar foes once again in the future in an attempt to provide the public with the service they're paying for and the service which they expect. Before then, I'd meet another significant individual from whom I'd experience the opportunity to learn about life which would once again see me leave British shores.

For now, however, those questions remaining unanswered from my time in drug treatment relate to our current drug policy and the endless dispensing of opioid substitutes. Rightly or wrongly, it seems to me that the prescribing of opioids, such as methadone and

buprenorphine, is an example of a sticking-plaster measure which, while preventing to some extent the effects of withdrawal, appears to have had no noticeable effect on the demand for illicit drugs, with the supply of potentially lethal and adulterated substances still very much in the hands of the dealers. Yet, who is allowing the status quo to prevail and why, who does it benefit and is it an example of yet another system that appears to be broken but in truth is working just as those who created it intended?

Chapter 24 – When Victims Become Perpetrators – Part 2

“The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed.”

— Carl Jung

It comes as no real surprise to me to realise how my perspective on relationships has been shaped to a considerable extent by the influence of my parents. While I won't enter into a full-scale analysis of them as individuals or their relationship, suffice to say that my parents were not good role models and their relationship a fractious one entered into on rather tenuous grounds. Upon such shaky foundations, my father, a frugal and self-centred man, and my mother, a narcissistic depressive, inveterate liar and philanderer, conducted the kind of unhealthy coupling one might expect considering their respective personality traits. Amid the chaos, three children were born to them, with the first two, my elder sister Dee and I, witnessing on a regular basis the inevitable fallout of a relationship characterised by unrequited love and unmet needs. Regrettably, they both brought fractured characters into their relationship with exactly the same needs, with my father looking to my mother to fulfil his and my mother looking anywhere else but to him for her fulfilment.

Suffice to say that while not setting a positive example of a loving relationship characterised by kindness, mutual respect and understanding, my parents' tempestuous coupling provided an excellent example of what an inherently unhealthy relationship looks like and something to avoid at all costs. However, I've come to understand how unrealistic avoidance is, considering how many

people with whom I've crossed paths remained adversely affected by unmet childhood needs. In my own experience of having grown up around two people looking outside for the fulfilment of their needs with little consideration for those of their children, I've come to realise how certain needs are self-fulfilling while there are those that can only be met in conjunction with others. Furthermore, I've come to appreciate how the most fraught and fractious relationships and experiences of my life have often provided the best learning opportunities.

Looking back on my childhood, I recall having an incessant urge to seek the affection and attention of my school friends' mums. In retrospect, I recognise my behaviour as an attempt to fulfil an unmet need. Considering their eager reciprocation, I suspect my friends' mums picked up on my need which in turn triggered their maternal instincts. Consequently, I quickly attached myself to them in order to meet the need for their care and attention. This inclination continued into adulthood where I found myself attaching quickly to someone in order to fulfil a need without due consideration of their character and respective needs. Realistically, I can't be too hard on myself as I don't think many people in the throes of youthful impulses tend to consider such things. Consequently, many find themselves in a succession of dalliances and short-lived experiences beset by strife born of the perception of unmet needs and expectations. It's only as I've grown older that I've considered more at length the type of person I am, the kind of needs I have, which of my needs are self-fulfilling and which can only be met by others. Likewise I'm now inclined to consider more carefully what kind of character my partner is, which of their needs are self-fulfilled and which do they look to me to fulfil.

Yet, even a reasonable understanding of my own character and needs in addition to those of my partners hasn't enabled me to avoid conflict in relationships, particularly romantic ones. I've come to

reason that key to cultivating a healthy relationship from the outset is an openness as to my character and needs, recognising when someone is capable of meeting them and whether I am capable of meeting theirs. So, to my parents' turbulent example characterised by unmet needs and expectations, I add my own. In doing so I give credit to my parents, something I rarely do, for it is partly on account of their own unhappy example that I found myself able to navigate arguably the most challenging relationship of my life outside that with my mother. Unfortunately, I'd been duped before, most notably by Warren, and I would again during the summer of 2011 following a meeting with another American working in London. Unlike Warren, this man was immediately charming and confident with the kind of broad, luminescent smile that would've given The Bee Gees a run for their money, however, like Warren, a deeply troubled person lay behind it.

Come the summer of 2011, a period of almost five years had passed since my relationship with Gavin had broken down. Since then, fear of pushing away and hurting another innocent person left me far too wary to enter into another relationship and I didn't trust myself enough to do so. However, come August of that year, at the age of thirty-eight, I began chatting online to a forty-seven year-old man with whom the conversation seemed to flow effortlessly as a result of which I started to gain some of my confidence back. In order to protect this man's identity, I shall refer to him as "Chuck". While "Chuck" was not his real name, the name Chuck used to introduce himself to me was not his real name, either, but an Americanesque play on his middle name. Meanwhile, his family and those who worked with Chuck referred to him by his real first name. Consequently, whenever in their company I found myself referring to him by his real first name. While I'm sure there was no attempt to deceive, even his ex-wife remarked to me a few years later that she couldn't understand why he did that.

In order to gain a better sense of the enigmatic Chuck, I shall describe his background as related to me by him during our first date and subsequently. The accuracy of his recollections were later confirmed to me by two of his sisters. Born in Arizona in late 1963 into a Mormon family, Chuck was the ninth of ten children. Serving as perhaps his most painful childhood memory, Chuck explained that his mother revealed to him at a young age how she didn't want him. Cruelly, she went on to disclose that upon learning she was pregnant with him, in order to induce a miscarriage she would roll around on her belly. As if this weren't shocking enough, she also revealed to him how she didn't love her husband, Chuck's father, and reserved her true affections for her husband's brother.

Furthermore, Chuck stated feeling that nothing he did was ever good enough for his mother. Nonetheless, desperate for both her attention and approval, Chuck would spend the rest of her life trying to please his mother, despite her continual put-downs and openly favouring his younger sibling. Therefore, the confession to me of his elder sisters a few years later of how their mother "...fucked them all up..." came as no surprise. Considering my experience with my own parents, it wasn't difficult to understand how these early interactions with his mother and his unmet childhood needs shaped the man he'd become.

Furthermore, the rejection so deeply felt by Chuck as a child would not be confined to his mother. In addition to a brutal description of how severely his father would physically chastise him and his siblings, he would suffer the kind of rejection to rival that of his mother many years later at the hands of the Mormon church. As a devoted follower of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the early 1980s would see Chuck travelling to France to attend his mission. A Mormon right of passage, the mission involves the fledgling missionary, typically in their late teens or early twenties, leaving their families for a period of two-years and travelling to a

designated location anywhere in the world to evangelise Mormonism. Prior to their posting, young missionaries attend their local training centre where those who are being posted to a non-English speaking location attend intensive language immersion classes. In order to maintain their focus and avoid any outside distractions, a Mormon mission is characterised by strict routine and limited contact with the missionary's family.

With Chuck and his family's culture and beliefs firmly rooted in their Mormonism, Chuck worked his way up the ranks to become a bishop at his local church. However, his relationship with the church would soon be torn apart following his disclosure of the kind of internal struggle so at odds with established doctrine that he was at once cast out by the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, shunned by the local Mormon community and suddenly at odds with his family.

In the meantime, the already burdened man of the cloth received the kind of life-changing news that would affect his health, his character and his future relationships. The late 1990s would see Chuck diagnosed with the degenerative neurological condition Multiple Sclerosis (MS). Severely impairing vision, coordination and movement, the effects of MS on the central nervous system also have consequences for cognition and the afflicted individual's emotional state. Severe episodes can often leave the sufferer requiring hospital treatment and strong medications which in themselves can lead to severe physical and emotional side effects.

Despite the impact of being raised by an unloving mother and stern father against a backdrop of strict religious observance and debilitating health issues, Chuck worked his way up to one among a number of vice-presidents of a global hotel chain. His success would bring him to London in June, 2011, to live and work and it was there that we eventually met on the August Bank Holiday

Monday. I say eventually owing to the fact that we began talking online at the beginning of August at which point he revealed being recently divorced and with five children, three of whom were staying with him for the month of August before returning to the family home in Las Vegas.

So, no sooner had Chuck's children departed than we arranged to meet late afternoon in front of the Eros statue at Piccadilly Circus in central London. Coming up to teatime that day, I headed into the city to meet the handsome bald-headed blue-eyed man in the photograph he'd sent me earlier that month. Aware of the fact that this was my first proper date since the breakdown of my relationship with Gavin, I reached the Eros statue where I waited with a sense of excitement tempered by trepidation.

With the agreed meeting time having passed I sat down on the steps of the statue's north side and watched the world go by. Just then, in the distance among a sea of feet, I caught a glimpse of a pair of pointed grey leather shoes headed in my direction. Having stood up again, I suddenly caught sight of a bright bald-head reddened by the summer sun moving hastily towards me, leaving scraggy pigeons scrambling left and right as if to clear his path. Wearing a casual grey blazer over a turquoise coloured plunge neck t-shirt and dark skinny jeans, he spotted me and immediately quickened his pace. Upon reaching the steps, Chuck extended his hand and smiled broadly with teeth so luminously white I could almost see my own reflection in them. From there we headed the short distance to Soho, walking and talking freely as we went.

Making the most of the balmy August evening, we ventured to Soho Square to a bar called The Edge, one of London's oldest gay bars. After having found a table for two outside and ordered our drinks, we sat down and continued our conversation. Just then, a familiar feeling stirred inside me, the need to feel truly relaxed, the need to

feel safe, the need to know I wasn't sitting opposite another Warren or, worse still, my mother. In an attempt to relieve my fear and as a means to sketch Chuck's character, I found myself doing what I so often did when meeting new people, particularly in the context of a date, and began to scattergun questions at him. Despite Chuck's admiring glances and intermittent flashes of that winning smile, I assailed him in such a way that he could be forgiven for regarding the evening as akin to a job interview, rather than a date.

Amid my assault, and not for the first time that evening, someone passed our table before stopping to ask if we had any spare change. Explaining how he was street homeless and needed money to get to a refuge, the unkempt young chap turned his focus to me as I switched my scattergun questioning to him. At that time I had been working with a Westminster-based community drug project and, summoning all my local knowledge, I launched into drug assessment mode while Chuck looked on approvingly. While I had not contrived my interaction with the man as an opportunity to woo Chuck, wooed he appeared to be, with the coup de grâce delivered the moment I handed over my oyster card to our new friend, advising him that the card had enough credit on it to see him safely to the nearest refuge.

Incidentally, It wouldn't be lost on me that in our subsequent interactions when out and about in central London, Chuck would also practice random acts of kindness on people in apparent difficulty or need, for example, purchasing a ticket for an elderly lady struggling to operate a London Underground ticket machine and escorting someone seemingly lost to their destination personally rather than give directions and leave them to walk off in a state of confusion to find their own way.

It was during these initial moments that Chuck disclosed what he wanted me to know about his past. His revelations aside, the person

he presented and the man I perceived in the beginning appeared stable, wise, confident and self-assured. In addition, the magnetism and energy he exuded created the impression of a powerful character, which only added to his appeal and allure. Furthermore, the Zen Master like calmness about him and the sense that nothing seemed to phase him led to me eventually letting down my guard and allowing him in. In the spirit of openness and transparency, I made a point during our first trip abroad together a few weeks later to reveal important aspects of my past and their influence on my character. Moreover, I went on to explain how although past adversity had influenced my sense of self-reliance, I retained a sense of feeling fundamentally broken. However, over the seven years that followed I'd come to realise how much more open about my character I had been than Chuck. Likewise, I'd eventually learn, considering his family's dysfunction and rejection coupled with relationship breakdown and long-term debilitating illness, what it meant to be truly broken.

While Chuck had begun his relocation to the UK with a brief stay in Uxbridge, it wasn't long before the lure of city life proved irresistible and three months later he moved to Central London. No more than two months had passed following his move into a one-bedroom ground floor flat in Marylebone before I'd join him. By this time I had transferred to Surrey Drug Intervention Program (DIP) and commuted by car each day from Central London to their office in Leatherhead. Prior to his move, Chuck intended to enjoy city life to the full and eschewed cooking in favour of regular visits the short distance away to the nearby restaurants on St. Christopher's Place.

Considering Chuck's charm and charisma, I expected him to seek out more finer dining options, instead of which he tended to prefer cuisine akin to home cooked food. Consequently, we found ourselves making regular pilgrimages to the flagship branch of

Spanish tapas chain La Tasca to enjoy their mouth-watering tapas, paella and red wine. While Chuck earned the kind of salary that enabled him to eat out night after night, I did not. However, as a dutiful son, husband and father, he saw himself as a perpetual provider. Whether just the two of us or with his friends, wherever we went, he always took it upon himself to settle the bill, often doing so on the pretext of going to the toilet. Yet, what appeared initially to be acts of selflessness I would come to interpret decidedly differently in the future.

For now, while enjoying the advantages of living so centrally right behind Oxford Street, Chuck and I often took the back streets wherever we went to avoid the constant hustle and bustle. Being from the American south-west, Chuck craved the kind of Mexican food he'd been used to at home. Therefore, we'd often find ourselves at weekends in the Mexican restaurants of Soho and Covent Garden gorging on fish tacos, enchiladas and chimichangas. With Chuck's days of Mormon teetotalism firmly behind him, we often washed down our Mexican fayre with a pitcher of frozen classic margarita.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it would be the public ridiculing of his former faith which brought Chuck the greatest pleasure of London. Consequently, we spent many a weekend falling out of a Mexican restaurant and into the matinee or evening performance of theatre production *The Book of Mormon*. A musical satire of the lives of Mormon missionaries in Uganda, *The Book of Mormon* provided the kind of irreverent mocking of his former faith that Chuck likely found cathartic, with his guffaws at gags we'd come to know so well among the most raucous in the auditorium. Chuck's taste in theatre shows was for the most part restricted to musicals, with the hit show 'Jersey Boys' another firm favourite.

Aside from a few incidents during that first year likely born of an unresolved insecurity, life with Chuck during this time felt both adventurous and exciting. Having become sufficiently attached to Chuck, I took the opportunity in summer of 2012 of popping the question, to which he turned me down. Despite declining my hand, the degree of Chuck's attachment to me was such that when not at work he wanted to spend every waking minute with me. Furthermore, he seemed to want, or indeed need, me to feel the same way about him. While I didn't need to spend every waking minute with Chuck, I certainly wanted to spend most of my time with him while making as much time for others in my life as I possibly could. Being as independent and self-reliant as I perceive myself to be, I have never been the type to clear the decks of my friends the moment I enter into a relationship.

However, not until sometime after we were eventually married would the extent of the disparity between our individual needs and expectations become apparent, leading to the kind of conflict that would threaten to destroy our relationship. In the meantime, following my acceptance of Chuck's proposal to me during a trip to Paris two months prior, on a rainy Friday in October 2012, we were married in the presence of a few friends and relatives at The Old Marylebone Town Hall. Having begun to venture out of London more frequently at the weekend and with Chuck's head office based in Buckinghamshire, in March, 2013, we moved to nearby Gerrards Cross. There, we rented a flat in an art deco style development by the name of Bulstrode Court. The following month we enjoyed a delayed honeymoon in The Maldives before settling back into our respective roles, me working in domiciliary care and Chuck continuing to travelling all around Europe in a new amalgamated position within upper management.

The demands of his role were such that Chuck could spend half his working week on a plane and during busier weeks had meetings

scheduled in many different European countries. Unfortunately for him, Chuck was not a confident flyer and attributed a subsequent bursting of his eardrums, which led to him needing bi-lateral hearing aids, to the relentless air travel. Amid all this he still had to manage the debilitating effects of MS, with cramping episodes so severe he would be left vomiting and in intense pain. Indeed, the severity of his leg cramps were such that I could effectively knock on his calf muscles as if knocking on a solid wood door.

With the intensity and frequency of such episodes increasing, so did Chuck's dependency and reliance on me, which at that point seemed both understandable and manageable. His disclosure around this time of how he had sought to sabotage our relationship during our first year together led me to conclude that his growing dependence owed as much to his deeply-rooted insecurity and a fear of rejection as it did to the progression of his MS. Nonetheless, I considered it my duty, my obligation and my pleasure, given the financial imbalance in our relationship, to care for him, keep house and drive his family members around England and Continental Europe whenever they came to visit, which they frequently did.

Furthermore, in an attempt to try to manage his MS symptoms, Chuck and I made regular forays to Amsterdam where he could partake of legal cannabis. While the consumption gave Chuck much needed respite from the advent of vicious cramps, the period of relief it provided grew less. Consequently, what started out as approximately six weeks between cramping episodes gradually reduced to two to three weeks between them. Prior to our move to Buckinghamshire, Chuck had also begun to experience an increase in macular degeneration, another MS symptom, which affected his peripheral vision and left him requiring glasses. As if this were not enough to contend with, he'd also have to endure a constant all-over sensation of pins and needles and the feeling that his feet were on fire. Following the severest exacerbation yet in the summer of 2015,

Chuck would find himself in treatment under a neurological consultant at Charing Cross hospital in west London. The events leading up to his eventual crash were, with hindsight, eminently predictable while his career hung in the balance.

For a variety of reasons, I confess to having had long periods of estrangement from certain relatives. I use the term relatives and not family as, owing to this estrangement, I have sought and found a greater sense of family among my friends than among my relatives. However, not long after meeting Chuck, and after a long period of estrangement with my younger sister, I reconciled with her following the birth of her first child. To a great extent our reconciliation had been prompted by the news that not long after giving birth, her partner had left her. Feeling a sense of obligation to support her and her newly born daughter, Chuck and I began to make regular trips between Gerrards Cross and Kent.

Coinciding with our forays to Kent, at the request of a former colleague from my days at Greenwich DIP, I accepted a role as team leader for a drug treatment program based in HMP Thameside in south-east London. Feeling sufficiently re-energised following some time away from drug treatment and with a desire to contribute more financially to my relationship, I accepted the role, despite the almost two-hour commute into and across Central London to Plumstead. Although I confessed to Chuck to feeling a little weary of the daily commute, being in my early forties and in reasonably good health at the time I saw no reason not to continue.

Therefore, I am unable to account for the reasoning behind Chuck's suggestion at this point that we relocate to Kent. Having ingratiated himself with my siblings and my friend, Michelle, and knowing the affection in which I held the county in which I'd spent some of my childhood, I can only conclude that Chuck wanted to recreate a sense of family for us there and enjoy the gratification of being the

one responsible for bringing me back home to Kent. However, regardless of my affection for Kent, I had no overwhelming desire to live there again and instead suggested that if he wanted us to relocate, we choose somewhere equidistant to our respective places of work so neither of us would have to endure an arduous commute.

Crucially, both this next move and the one following would signal a dramatic change in our fortunes. Unbowed, Chuck continued to insist that we move to Kent, so move we did, in March, 2015, to a village called Meopham in the north-west corner of the county. Effectively transferring the burden from me to him, my journey into work was comparatively easy whereas Chuck spent a lot of time stuck in traffic on the M25. Consequently, this led to him having to get up earlier or stay at work later to avoid the rush. No longer than four months had passed before the strain of travel took its eventual toll on the already compromised Chuck and the inevitable crash came, literally, one afternoon while leaving Meopham train station where he blacked out while reversing his car and smashed into a station bollard.

Following his blackout, Chuck's consultant neurologist informed him that his latest brain scan revealed a new lesion on his brain stem and how if medical retirement from his job was an option, he should seriously consider taking it. With the writing seemingly on the wall, Chuck took a medical leave of absence and considered his long-term options. However, he wouldn't have to wait too long for inspiration. Whether by chance or fate, one afternoon while convalescing on the sofa at home, he and I were sitting watching television when on came a Channel 4 programme entitled 'A Place in the Sun'.

Piquing our interest from the outset, this particular episode featured the southern Spanish region of Andalucia and a small rural mountain village by the name of Galera. The uniqueness of Galera,

and other surrounding villages in that area, lay in the fact that the majority of home owners lived in caves. To my expressed surprise to learn of these modern day cave dwellers, Chuck remarked how there were areas of his home state of Arizona where people still lived in caves. Eager to learn more about the mysterious village of Galera, I went on YouTube where I found a video of a man riding a motorbike around the village with a camera attached to his helmet.

With sustained intrigue, we watched as the man wound his way around narrow hillside streets populated by clusters of cave homes, with their whitewashed exteriors and mediaeval looking doors and windows. With our appetites sufficiently whetted by this first-person perspective, we wanted to see this rural Spanish utopia, which resembled what you'd likely get if you crossed Tolkien's 'The Hobbit' with 'The Flintstones', for ourselves. So, with Chuck on indefinite sick leave, within two weeks we found ourselves standing inside a cave home and marvelling at the white plastered walls, Moorish detailing of the tiling and light fixtures in addition to their characteristic wood-burning stoves. No more than another two weeks had passed following our return to the UK than we were the proud owners of a cave home at the top of Galera with panoramic views across the valleys and mountains beyond. While we'd initially intended to use our new cave home as a bolt-hole, a few days later a call came from Spain which would dramatically alter our plans.

Considering the number of emails we'd exchanged over the previous month with the British owner of the Galera estate agent and his Spanish-speaking British assistant, we thought nothing of it when the phone rang one particular day. With great excitement in her voice, the assistant, a gummy-smiled girl in her thirties named Ailis, proceeded to tell us that the business lease on the village hotel, imaginatively named Hotel Galera, was up for sale and asked if we were interested in purchasing it. For the sake of context, we

had originally been booked into ‘Hotel Galera’ during our first trip to the village. However, upon our arrival Ailis informed us that the owner had cancelled our reservation which left her scrambling to find us last minute accommodation.

Furthermore, Ailis explained how in order to keep his costs down, the current owner only opened on sporadic days and how the hotel was closed more often than it was open. To Chuck’s disclosure that he had extensive hotel management experience, Ailis responded that he should consider running it, unaware of how foretelling her off-hand comment would be. Following Ailis’ declaration over the phone to us that day of how the hotel was “a goldmine”, and along with her offer to co-manage it alongside us, during the last week of November, 2015, Chuck and I boarded a ferry at Portsmouth bound for Santander. With little more than three weeks worth of Spanish self-tuition in my case and little more in Chuck’s, nine hours later we arrived in Galera.

Although it was difficult to see how a ten-bedroom hotel set in a rural village surrounded by mountains and farmland could be considered a goldmine, we headed towards Galera with the expectation of a better quality of life and a renewed sense of purpose for Chuck who, by this time, had taken medical retirement. Little did we know then that rather than signalling the start of a new life for us, Galera would in fact turn out to be the beginning of the end.

The seeds of our demise were sown early on and were manifold. Chief among them were Chuck’s insistence that the hotel be run in a relaxed manner. Having grown to dislike the rigidity of corporate structure, Chuck desired a working environment free of the constraints of the corporate world. While Chuck’s wishes were understandable, this decision would lead in the future to chaos and confusion. For now, his running of the kitchen enabled him to

display his culinary expertise in Mexican and Thai food, while alongside a petite and delightful flame-haired villager by the name of Rosario, I ran the hotel bar. As for Ailis, having hailed from a catering background, she flitted effortlessly between the two. Eager to provide some villagers with jobs, Chuck employed two additional cooks along with a part-time cleaner. While providing jobs to locals was all very well, the expenditure of additional wages and social security payments far exceeded our early revenue and we soon found ourselves drawing from our savings. Despite Chuck's prediction that, rather than a goldmine, at best the hotel might turn out to be little more than an expensive hobby, it enabled him to do what he did best, and that was to play mine host.

Regardless of its origins, I suspect that at the heart of Chuck's desire to want to make others feel good was a deeply-rooted desire at the very least to be liked and the very most to be adored, with the hotel floor providing the ideal stage upon which to demonstrate his talents. Whether Spanish or English, each guest who walked through the door would be greeted with equal ebullience as he declared each one in turn to be his favourite customer. Whatever his motives, I've no doubt it must've felt good to him to make others feel valued. Likewise for the objects of his adulation, it must have felt good for them, too. However, Chuck's generosity would not be restricted to praise and therein lay a caveat which sowed further seeds of discontent.

It goes without saying that while in business one must speculate to accumulate. How this maxim related our business concerned those among our patrons, typically British ex-pats, who had retired to Spain on the kind of pensions which were insufficient to sustain their new lifestyle and who expected the kind of freebies which Chuck appeared only too happy to supply. His desire to ingratiate himself with the locals meant the kind of compromise of his business nous that Chuck appeared only too happy to make.

Furthermore, lacking any real business nous myself, it came as something of a surprise to me to have to point out to him how we were supposed to be running a business, not a charity, and that if he continued to give the goods away for free, people would come to expect it.

As for me, I had no such difficulty advising customers that of course they could have another tapas, as long as they bought another glass of wine or a beer. Likewise when it came to asking a drunk and abusive customer to leave before going hands-on when they refused to do so. Both occurrences had the consequence of pitting me against Chuck, thereby exposing the fundamental differences in our respective approaches to running the hotel. While I was all for dishing out additional free tapas, I remained alert early on to any potential “piss-takers” from Galera and the surrounding villages who came to make one or two drinks last the whole night while enjoying copious amounts of tapas. Regrettably, the rift beginning to open up between Chuck and I would not be restricted to the hotel.

Prior to our departure from the UK in November, 2015, the neurologist at Charing Cross Hospital prescribed Chuck a new course of medication called Tecfidera. A powerful medication designed to mitigate some of the more unpleasant effects of MS, Tecfidera was not without unpleasant side-effects of its own. Serving as a kind of double-whammy to MS related fatigue and nausea, Tecfidera caused fatigue and nausea of its own in addition to severe flushing. Indeed, there were a number of occasions while driving along in our car when I’d feel a sudden warmth on my arm. Glancing in Chuck’s direction, I could see how his face and arms were beetroot red, giving him the appearance of someone about to combust.

Aside from the physical effects of Chuck's medication, coming to grips with his psychological presentation at that time would present the greatest challenge of our relationship. Harking back to those early days together, Chuck betrayed his insecurity and lack of trust with each occasion that he remarked on the amount of time while in his company I spent on my phone. In doing so he neglected to take account of the comparable amount of time he spent on his phone, without any criticism from me. It was not long after that before he began to look through my phone and iPad, both of which were not password protected, before questioning me on my search history. To this, I challenged him on why he felt the need to check my search history when I had given him absolutely no reason for suspicion.

Consequently, these occurrences, coupled with the disdain Chuck would often show whenever I did something that moved the focus of my attention away from him, led me to conclude that he expected to be the focus of my attention twenty-four seven and that I must also feel the same way about him. To deny him my constant attention would be interpreted to suggest that I didn't love him, and, if that were true, there must be someone else. It is apropos at this juncture to mention exactly what I pointed out to Chuck very early on, that having witnessed the impact on my father of my mother's philandering, I have never, nor would I ever, cheat on my partner.

Insofar as how all of this relates to his psychological presentation at the time, it is also worth noting that during my time with Chuck, both in the UK and Spain, other than when we were both working, very little of my time was spent outside his company. Furthermore, we were currently living and working in a rural area of Spain not known to be overly populated by other homosexuals, either male or female. Nonetheless, during this time Chuck began to double down on comments about how much time I spent on my phone, which more often than not consisted of updating the hotel's social media pages and seeking out ideas for theme nights, which involved

purchasing costumes for the staff to wear. Moreover, on those occasions when in the throes of an MS episode Chuck was too poorly to make it out of bed, he would often criticise me for not coming straight home to him. Only on the odd occasion did I chose to stay behind for an hour to relieve some of the stress building within me in the hotel gym. Likewise stopping for a gin & tonic with an English couple we'd both befriended whose cave home was situated on the way to the Spanish farmhouse on the outskirts of Galera where Chuck and I now lived.

Confoundedly, for me a conundrum lay in trying to figure out to exactly what I could attribute the abrupt changes in Chuck's mood. To what extent were pre-existing insecurities a factor? To what extent was he merely displaying symptoms of his cruelly degenerative MS? Furthermore, what was also a side-effect of his powerful MS medication? Whatever the cause(s), the effects manifested themselves in mood swings and such volatility that I could make the most innocuous statement one day, only for it to pass without incident, yet make the same statement on a different day and all hell would break loose. Inevitably, this would lead to the kind of clashes during which I would state something only to have my words twisted and misinterpreted while Chuck would make a statement of his own which he would subsequently deny making. This powder-keg exploded into daily arguments which, instead of being restricted to home, would eventually spill over into our work. With the friction between us becoming apparent to those around us, while he may no longer have had many smiles for me, much like theatre, he certainly had them in abundance for the expectant public. As for me, I found myself becoming ever more stressed, irritable, and wary of falling into yet another depressive episode.

Notwithstanding the ever increasing friction between us, there were many days when, with Chuck too poorly to make it out of bed, I managed the hotel alongside Ailis, who also maintained her role in

the estate agents. On those days when Ailis couldn't make it in, and with no prior experience in hotel management, I found myself running the hotel alone. As if the freeloaders were not enough, we were constantly beset by suppliers who supplied goods to the hotel and then expected immediate payment, despite their invoices stating that we had twenty-eight days in which to settle our account. Compounding matters, we had recently changed over to a different energy supplier following promises of cheaper bills, yet, when the new bills went through the roof so did my stress levels and after almost eighteen months I felt as though I'd reached breaking point. However, someone else beat me to it.

The saying goes that all things come in threes. Well, this would've been true if the impending upheavals were limited to just three. However, the first occurred in the Spring of 2017 during which Chuck suffered an MS-related stroke which saw him hospitalised in nearby Granada followed by a period of convalescence. The advent of his stroke saw two of his sisters fly over from America to support with looking after him. Coincidentally, it was during his period of convalescence that Chuck's sisters would witness for themselves the kind of emotional outbursts to which I'd been subjected and to which there would be no way to reason with him. Consequently, they put me in mind of the kind of mood swings to which I'd subjected poor Scott almost twenty years before. Serving to increase the intensity of these outbursts, his stroke also appeared to intensify his dependence.

The next blow, following Chuck's recovery from his stroke, came with the announcement from Ailis that owing to the amount of time spent working in the hotel, her family life had begun to suffer. Therefore, Ailis resolved to give up her role in the hotel and return to her estate agent job. This was perfectly understandable as Ailis, with a husband and two young daughters, had been burning the candle at both ends for a while. The third source of frustration was

the time I spent engaging the services of an immigration lawyer to help process Chuck's application for leave to remain in Spain.

Alas, engaging a lawyer's services turned out to be the easy part. Indeed, I hadn't banked on the overly-bureaucratic nature of the Spanish authorities and the time we'd spend travelling to and from Granada to attend interviews at the regional immigration office. The greatest frustration came following one particular interview during which we were turned away for bringing insufficient copies of our documents to then be told to come back another day. The onerous task of having the relevant documentation translated from English into Spanish and then officially certified presented its own challenges before we could even state Chuck's case, first to the local police in the nearby town of Baza, and then to the regional immigration authorities in Granada. Predictably, it took just one final argument one afternoon in July, 2017, during which I told Chuck how I'd reached breaking point, to which he replied that I was being a martyr, for me to finally snap.

Following our showdown, I informed Chuck that while I'd continue to support his application to remain in Spain, I could no longer live nor work with him. The following day, I moved my personal effects into the cave home of a British lady who offered beauty treatments at the hotel. Following this, I resolved with Chuck that whichever shift at the hotel he chose to work, I would work the opposite. Yet, when it became clear to me that these measures were not sustainable and how the tension between us was clearly too great to conceal from both staff and customers alike, I knew one of us had to go.

It would take one final confrontation at our home during which, as I went to leave, Chuck motioned towards the house in an attempt to remind me what I was about to leave behind, for me to realise that going was the right thing to do. I knew right there and then that no material object could induce me to remain in a relationship that had

become so toxic, and in which I was always to blame by someone who never took any responsibility for any wrong doing himself. Furthermore, I had no more energy left to go on trying to satisfy the ever-growing needs of my physically sick and emotionally dependent partner who, like my own psychologically damaged mother, had virtually brought me by now to my knees.

As I attempted to close the car door to leave, a tug-of-war ensued. After managing to shut the door, I drove off and turned the car around. With only one exit out onto the main street, this meant having to drive back past our house. Upon my approach, Chuck stood firm in the middle of the pathway. With little room to drive around him I mounted a bank in order to avoid him but in doing so I clipped him with the driver's wing mirror before hearing him cry out in pain. To my surprise, within minutes of arriving at my temporary address, a mutual friend of ours arrived following a report that I had deliberately run Chuck down. When I explained what had actually transpired, he proceeded to check over my car and remarked how he couldn't see any blood or signs of a collision!

While lying in bed at my elder sister Dee's Lincolnshire home in the days that followed, I stared at the ceiling while attempting to make sense of it all. Dissecting every moment with Chuck, I contemplated what I had or hadn't done to cause any of this and whether there was anything I could've done to change the outcome. Regardless of any wrongdoing on Chuck's part, I'd taken my marriage vows seriously and felt a sudden surge of disappointment in myself for having let him down. In addition, I found myself harking back to the time sixteen years prior when I laid in bed at the home of my younger sister and stared up at the ceiling in a similar state of numbness and confusion. However, for now I needed to heal and did so with the support of my sister Dee and her wife once I felt ready to leave the sanctuary of her spare room.

During the months that followed, I took a job in domiciliary care before progressing to live-in care, in which I worked a three weeks on, three weeks off, shift pattern. This arrangement lent itself to my reconciliation with Chuck during October, 2017. Despite Dee's reservations and the inherent challenges of being in a relationship with someone so physically unwell and emotionally dependent as Chuck, I reasoned, rightly or wrongly, that with us no longer working together in the hotel, which Chuck now managed alone with some help from Ailis, and with me away in the UK for three weeks at a time, both may well provide our relationship with the opportunity to mend. Alas, the ten months that followed revealed the damage to have already been done and our relationship beyond repair with each argument during which Chuck seized any and every opportunity to chastise me for having left him. Consequently, I would do so for the second and last time in August, 2018, which coincided with a visit to Galera from my friend Daniel and his young family.

Despite his attempts to re-engage with me, during the two years that followed, I'd have very little contact with Chuck except through our respective solicitors. With yet more rejection from me, I'd learn that following posts on social media by Chuck detailing my mistreatment of him, one person referred to me as "scum", while another reminded him of how much of a "wrong-un" they'd told him I was, while another declared a willingness to punch me in the face if ever they saw me in the street. Of course, I could not have expected any different from those who'd only heard his side of the story, which he chose to make so public while I would never have dreamt of laying bear our relationship in such sordid detail at that time. Indeed, I have elected not to do so now and resolved to only go into the level of detail necessary in order to explain what led to my decision to leave; an explanation only I can give. The details of the most humiliating incidents I have elected not to share on the basis that I do not need to do so in order to illustrate precisely what

led to our relationship breaking down and informing my belief that we were, fundamentally, incompatible.

Following a stressful and prolonged divorce drawn out over the best part of two-years, I gained a £23,000 settlement from Chuck, half of which went to my solicitor in legal fees. Owing to the associated stress of divorce I immediately became insulin resistant which resulted in almost overnight and seemingly unstoppable weight gain followed by sudden hair loss. However, as is the case with every challenging situation I've encountered, the knowledge I've gained from the experience more than makes up for anything I've endured or lost.

As a result, my relationship with Chuck has reinforced my belief in continuing to be open at the beginning of any new relationship about the kind of person I am and the needs I have, or lack thereof, while encouraging others to be open and honest about theirs. Only then can I be as sure as is possible to be of enjoying the kind of compatibility that will enable the relationship to truly thrive. Indeed, an over-reliance on one person to meet the unrealistic needs of the other is likely to lead to resentment followed by the kind of suffocating pressure which increases the likelihood of relationship breakdown, even in those cases where the person meeting those needs has their own innate need to be needed.

That said, I have to remain realistic and take into account variations in people's understanding of their own self-awareness, their insights into their needs and their willingness to be open about those needs of which they are aware. Undoubtedly, there will always be those who pretend to be something they're not or conceal something they are in order to secure a partner who then let the mask slip once their feet are firmly under the table. That's how I was duped and realistically I cannot rule this out from happening again depending on the type of person with whom I cross paths in the future.

Furthermore, among other lessons I've learned involve the importance of remaining boundaried, particularly with someone inclined to continually test them, in addition to how a person, or more to the point, their brains, respond when they perceive their needs are not being met. In Chuck's case, as in my own, he had a right as a child to expect his parents to meet his needs. As an adult, the responsibility of recognising and addressing the long-term impact of his unmet childhood needs remains solely his. However, rather than fundamentally addressing his unmet needs and facing up to his faults, it was easier to focus on what he perceived to be faults in me.

Indeed, Chuck spent a great deal of time during the more fraught periods in our relationship projecting the more unpleasant aspects of his character onto me and without any attempt at introspection. Consequently, I had judgements made about my character by him that I had never heard before or since from people who have known me for most of my life, who in turn heard things about me from him that they simply could not believe. At the root of the largesse and the rapid attachment was the need to have his needs met while at the root of the lashing out, the name calling and the undue blame was resentment born of the perception of my failure to meet those needs.

Regardless of any lasting impressions Chuck may have of me, I continue to respect myself as someone possessing a strong protective streak along with a tendency to provide for, and support others, in any way I can. Therefore, I considered it well within my capabilities when the time came to provide Chuck with palliative care. However, that task will now fall to someone else. Having, like Chuck, also had my childhood needs go unmet, I had some insight into how he came to be the person I eventually saw. However, no amount of insight would provide me with the fortitude sufficient to be able to contend with the pressure and expectation to meet his needs indefinitely. Stating to me on a number of occasions how his

greatest fear was rejection, Chuck takes his place among those I have known in my life whose behaviour brings about the very situation they claim to fear. In a similar manner was his disregard of his previous disclosure to me of how the divorce rate in marriages to someone with MS stood at approximately seventy percent.

So, having avoided entering into another serious relationship since my divorce from Chuck, I remain content to continue to meet my own needs, in addition to those around me as best I can. Wherever Chuck is now and whatever he's doing I wish him well and trust he's happy, as he deserves to be. As for me, I am happy, as I deserve to be; happy with me and happy to take my place among every man for whom Chuck reserved the same high praise in order to secure their affections, that they were without exception the best man he'd ever met!

Chapter 25 – Use Them Up and Wear Them Out

“The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”

— Martin Luther King Jr.

The summer of 2018 represented one of the rare occasions during my adulthood when my mother would once again be a presence in my life. Yet, being the damaged person who consistently sabotaged anything positive which came her way that she was, she would soon be gone again from my life as suddenly as she re-entered it. For now, however, a fall during which she broke her femur coupled with her irascible husband’s inability to provide any practical care saw me step in. My doing so provided some protection from his impatience and lack of understanding of her immediate needs.

Having moved from Maidstone the year before, my mother and step-father now resided in the rather obscure Norfolk village of North Walsham. Primarily a matter of geography, the task of caring for my mother during her convalescence fell to me rather than my siblings, with my elder sister Dee living in Lincolnshire while my younger sister, Saskia, remained in Maidstone. Furthermore, having worked in care consistently for the past year and being the child most likely to enforce boundaries with her, I seemed the obvious choice in the short-term.

The brief stint during which I provided care for my temporarily infirm mother coincided with my role in live-in domiciliary care. With my current placement situated on the Wirral, I found myself taking the train every three weeks between Norwich and Liverpool

to care for an elderly bed-bound gentleman with severe vascular dementia. Despite the additional support of local domiciliary carers, I could expect to work up to twenty-four hours should the need arise and with a two-hour break each day. While care work is inherently challenging and among the most rewarding work I've ever done, my wages in no way reflected the demands and responsibilities of the role. While I've never chosen a job based on pay, of all the roles I've undertaken, this is the one with the greatest disparity between the responsibilities and risks involved and the amount of money I earned.

To some, care work may sound pretty straight forward and not overly taxing. However, in reality, care work involves supporting a client to maintain their personal hygiene, prompt or actually give them their medication, prepare and, where necessary, feed them their meals, provide them with companionship, take them to appointments and advocate on their behalf. In certain cases it can also involve staying up with them all night in addition to managing the day-to-day running of their home. Furthermore, working with a dementia client can present far more difficult challenges. Nevertheless, care work left me in no doubt that clients would die far sooner without care than they would otherwise. Left to their own devices, many clients, especially those living with a dementia, would neglect to wash and eat thinking they had already done so when in fact they'd done neither. Similarly, they often forget to take their medication or, worse still, forget that they had taken their medication already and end up double-dosing.

While I feel sure that few carers enter care work expecting to make their fortune, there is, for owners of care homes and care companies, money to be made in care. Indeed, my time working in children's homes gave me a glimpse of the cost implications for already cash-strapped local authorities of outsourcing care to the

private sector. This matter would have relevance in my next role and, as such, is a concern I shall revisit later on in this chapter.

Meanwhile, being unaware as I was at that time of any alternatives by which to provide my services, I continued working for a care company based in Central London. Curiously, this particular organisation had decided to set up operations across the entire floor of an office block above one of the busiest train stations in the city. While I considered the company both professional and their training delivered to a high standard, I found myself questioning their motivation in operating from such an obviously expensive location considering how much they were paying their carers. Indeed, I'd learn subsequently how my client and his family were being charged in excess of £6,000 per month for twenty-four hour live-in care while I had been earning little more than minimum wage.

Desirous of a piece of the pie commensurate with the life-preserving responsibilities of the role, I progressed from live-in care to become a personal assistant (PA). Despite having to manage my own taxes, being a PA enabled me to keep more of my earnings which otherwise would likely end up in the pockets of company shareholders. Incidentally, my time working in live-in care enabled me to work in places around the country to which I'd never been. One such place, considered home to the English Riviera and the birthplace of Agatha Christie, has, since the beginning of 2019, become the place I too regard as my home.

It's true to say that I came to Torquay quite by accident, literally. However, this accident happened not to me but to the client for whom I'd come to the south-west to provide crisis care. On account of his unsettled night-time presentation, my client, a spindly ninety-seven year-old gentleman, required waking night support. Having arrived back in Norfolk from Bude the day before, I had not expected to be travelling back down to the south-west again so

soon. Yet, to the south Devon town of Totnes I headed by train the following day in anticipation of being met at the station by my client and the day carer. From Totnes, we were then to make the short trip by car to my client's home situated on a cliff edge in the coastal Devon village of Hope Cove.

With an arrival time of approximately 9pm that early February night and with half an hour still to go, I gazed out of the window past my own reflection and into the darkness beyond. Travel weary, my head began to dip and my eyelids lower when the sudden ringing of my phone brought me back to full consciousness. Having answered, I listened intently while an unknown caller explained how there'd be nobody to meet me at Totnes station and to wait on the platform until someone arrived. The caller went on to reveal how my client was at that very moment being conveyed to Torbay Hospital having fallen while getting out of the car at Totnes station and hitting his head on the kerb. Consequently, while my client would spend the night unexpectedly laid up in Torbay Hospital nursing a head injury, I unexpectedly found myself tucked up in a hotel bed a stone's throw away from Torquay seafront, intrigued as to what the coastline looked like in daylight.

Come the morning, I would not to be disappointed after peering out of a hotel window to be greeted by the sight of winter sun, palm trees and Torquay's cheerful looking promenade stretching far away into the distance. The presence of palm trees were particularly intriguing as I had never seen them anywhere else in the UK. While my client convalesced in hospital, the day carer and I made regular visits to him to provide company and complete his personal care. In addition, a little off-time during the few days that followed allowed for further exploration of Torquay's seemingly endless promenade and its vibrant harbour. Consequently, I found myself sufficiently charmed by the little I'd seen of Torquay to feel somewhat

disappointed upon the news that my client had been assessed as medically fit for discharge.

Despite the blow to his head, the advancement of my client's dementia had led him to become so torturously unsettled at night that his sudden death from a suspected stroke the following month provided welcome relief of his suffering. Yet, his death meant temporary unemployment with the end of my current assignment and the need to secure another. However, with no other assignments on the horizon with my current employer and nowhere else I needed to be, a voice in my head told me to head back to Torquay, and that's exactly what I did.

Considering how much I've moved and been moved around in my life, it's little wonder that starting over has never really bothered me. Indeed, I feel no apprehension to 'up sticks' and head somewhere where I don't know anyone. Wherever I go, I make friends, and enemies, with relative ease. Furthermore, travelling lightly through life and accumulating little more than I've needed to live has been conducive to my freedom of movement. That said, having eventually reached the point in life of wanting somewhere to settle long-term, I'm glad to call Torbay my home.

Having lived in Hove fourteen years before, I'd come to appreciate the nostalgic and faded charm of British seaside towns. Therefore, prior to my move to Torbay, I took the opportunity while in Norfolk of hopping on a bus and heading down to somewhere else I'd never been before, Great Yarmouth. With Yarmouth still very much in mind as I ventured away from Torquay seafront, I couldn't help but notice Torquay's comparatively quieter high street a feeling of gloom in the air relative to Yarmouth. Indeed, there appeared to be little around me as I wandered through the town to attract people and keep them there. While Yarmouth retained many of the big name stores, Torquay hadn't, with many of them relocating to retail

parks north of the town. Unfortunately, the sight of the numerous empty shops peppering the town centre and a lack of variation in the stores which remained, painted a rather dismal picture altogether.

Lamentably, the most noticeable sight common to both Great Yarmouth and Torquay was the prevalence of street homelessness. Soon after moving to Torquay, I took the opportunity of enjoying hour-long morning walks which took me through the town and along the seafront. In contrast to the physical exertions of the town's street cleaners were the slumbers of those who had taken up temporary digs in the empty shop doorways across town. Indeed, my walks through town invariably consisted of dodging cleaners, either on foot or in cleaning vehicles, window cleaners, delivery men and those feet poking out from under a soiled old duvet or shabby sleeping bag into the street.

Similarly pitiable was the sight I'd often witness when taking the stairs of the multi-storey car park at the top end of town. Situated in an area named 'Castle Circus', also the location of Torquay's homeless shelter, I'd often find myself having to step over a small gathering of the town's homeless folk smoking heroin. As shocking a sight as this must be for innocent bystanders, what else is to be expected when the housing needs of vulnerable people are in the hands of uncaring and under-resourced councils while control of their addiction lies firmly in the hands of their dealer? Therefore, in lieu of any long-term solution to address the problem, vulnerable people will continue to cause disruption on the streets where many among the town's residents declare themselves too fearful to go.

Despite those unfortunate elements which blight Torquay and serve to detract from the allure of the 'English Riviera', Torbay's mild climate, attractive seafront and coastal beauty charmed me sufficiently to want to stay and seek work locally. This I did initially working as a personal assistant. Desirous of seeing more of my

hourly wage in my own pocket than that of care company owners, I joined an introductory agency as a PA to provide domiciliary care. Among the services provided, including personal care, meal preparation, medication prompting, light housework and taking clients to appointments, were akin to those I provided for live-in care. Interestingly, the individual circumstances of clients and families for whom I provided support would inform my understanding of the complexities of the role I'd undertake next.

At this point, it is worth describing in very general terms the circumstances of everyday clients and their families. Indeed, most of my clients lived alone and while some did have family and friends locally, some did not while others had none at all anywhere. Curiously, despite the crude categorisations, I found myself during my time as a PA dividing my clients and their families into one of three categories. The first category consisted of families who were both caring and supportive of their loved one and their carer and were always available when needed. The second category consisted of those family members who, for various reasons, were content to abdicate all responsibility for the care of their family member to carers.

Arguably the most fractious situation was the third, in which territorial and controlling family members, friends, or, quite often, a disgruntled housekeeper, would officiously attempt to micro-manage and undermine everything the carer attempted to do. The difference in their respective approaches lay in intent, with carers acting in the best interests of their client, whereas family members or friends tended to act in either what they considered to be the cared-for person's best interests or, in certain situations, their own. Regardless of the category into which the client fell, the critical point about care lay in the individual needs of the client and whether domiciliary care provided the most appropriate means by which to meet those needs. This principle would be central to the

role I'd undertake following my departure from PA work. Little did I know beforehand that while lacking the disciplined culture of the police, the structure and related inefficiencies of the organisation I was about to join would resemble my former employment in every other respect.

Despite the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic of March, 2020, which occurred the month after I joined the NHS, for all front-line workers it was business as usual. Generally speaking, my role in social care consisted of processing referrals for such community-based services as physiotherapy and occupational therapy in addition to conducting assessments of need for domiciliary care. Depending on the outcome of these assessments, a number of measures were put in place to meet those needs, from a piece of tech equipment such, as a pill dispensing machine, to a walking aid, such as a frame in addition to a package of care involving the kind of services I provided as a PA. Predictably, Torbay's local demographic, consisting of a significant retirement population, presents particular challenges in order for the supply of services to keep pace with an ever increasing demand.

For a front-line worker, managing that demand effectively depends from within on critical elements such as supportive and competent management, streamlined processes and fit-for-purpose IT systems. From without depends upon realistic public expectations as to what the service can provide in addition to its appropriate use. Furthermore, it goes without saying that what underpins all of this is sufficient funding. That said, sufficient funding is directly related to efficient and appropriate use of funding and I've come to realise how wasteful it is to continue to throw ever greater sums of money at public services which are no longer efficient for either those who work in them or those using them.

While I've no doubt that inefficiencies exist at all levels within public sector organisations, as a front-line worker, I can only speak from my experiences in public facing roles. Specifically, my experiences in the police and the NHS have led me to recognise the negative impact on both services of the 'top down' structure of management both currently operate. Moreover, I've come to recognise how a lack of protection and clear understanding of the nature of front-line roles has led to inevitable chaos resulting in inefficient and highly unsafe ways of working.

It seems self-evident that organisations are structured in the way they are so as to maintain order and maximise both productivity and efficiency. Effective leadership of these organisations and their efficient running depends upon crucial elements such as good communication, a strong understanding of how individual departments relate and how decisions intended to solve a problem for one department may spell potential catastrophe for another. The lack of awareness by every organisation's leader and managers below them of these crucial considerations can, and does, quickly lead to inefficiency and chaos, particularly for the front-line worker.

Indeed, contributing to the mounting inefficiency and chaotic ways of working are those individuals placed in managerial positions created unnecessarily. Likewise those promoted to positions of responsibility who without question pass down potentially erroneous decisions which can, and do, cause mayhem where the buck stops, with the front-line worker. The conclusion of numerous workplace studies that the most-stressed among a workforce tend to be those who have the least amount of control over their work must come as a surprise to no-one.

Predictably, a system of poor leadership, incompetent management and a lack of communication can, and does, have dire consequences for front-line workers trapped within an inefficient structure while

attempting to provide a high quality of service to the public. To do so relies ever more on their good graces in going the extra mile and, in many cases, doing the job of two or more people. While previously as a police officer and currently as a front-line NHS worker, I've lost count of the number of times my colleagues and I would be pulled into a meeting to be informed of a change in process which would adversely affect the quality of service delivery and further weaken our efficiency. Quantity often comes at the expense of quality.

Regrettably, it is so often the case in the public sector that what is not broken is readily fixed while what is truly broken remains that way indefinitely. For a police officer such sudden changes often meant yet another form to fill out which further reduced the time I spent on the street. As an NHS worker, yet another detrimental change often leads to corner-cutting elsewhere in order to manage the administrative burden.

The material point is that we as front-line workers can spot a mile off the potential flaws to any, and every, change imposed upon us yet are consistently only ever consulted immediately before implementation of any change. It is lamentable that those with the most comprehensive knowledge of their job and what they need in order to do their job effectively rarely find themselves part of the decision-making process, yet, have to manage the potential fallout of decisions they had no hand in making. Two prime examples of incompetence and a short-sighted approach to problem solving I myself experienced in the form of Operation Ganymede, Thames Valley Police's quick-fix attempt to purge our ever-growing in-trays and Lambeth Council's flawed End2End drug treatment pilot scheme.

The consequences for front-line workers of incompetent management aside, much of my work in social care involves

managing public expectations and meeting the needs of the individual in the most cost-effective way. Yet, in the manner of those families for which I provided care as a PA, generally speaking, I can divide the majority of callers into social care into two crude categories. These categories consist of those who contact the service with particular regularity and those who should have made contact with us long before they actually did.

It is worth pointing out that the function of social care is to keep people out of hospital and adopting a person-centred approach to assessing and meeting a client's needs while promoting their independence. Nonetheless, there remain those among the general public who unnecessarily over-burden the service although who tend to be offset to some degree by those who either don't call at all, or call only call reluctantly, once they find themselves in crisis. Among the things I learned during the Covid pandemic was how, in the vast majority of cases, where people have no other option but to meet their own needs, they can be very resourceful. Similarly, to a certain type of individual, as long as services remain easily accessible and, most importantly, free, they will continue to overburden them.

Some take the view that in order to fix healthcare you must first fix social care. Yet, meeting the domiciliary and residential care needs of an ageing population comes at a considerable and ever-increasing financial cost. Since working in children's homes and learning of the considerable sums of money my former employer had been charging local authorities for residential care services, I've become more aware of the financial burden placed on local authorities. The Covid pandemic effectively demonstrated, in the absence of any in-house care, just how much local authorities are dependent on profit-driven private sector providers. With care costs increasing year-on-year and demand set to do likewise, something will eventually give. Adding to the grim forecast, a declining

birthrate tends to suggest how in the future there will be fewer people among the workforce to pay the valuable national insurance contributions which fund both health and social care. Personally, I remain sceptical of the view that outsourcing care to the private sector is more cost-effective than the provision of in-house care and local government-run care homes. However, I have learned to base my views on fact, not ideology, and will go wherever the evidence takes me.

As the Covid pandemic laid bare, the true test of an organisation's efficiency is how well it performs in times of pressure and high demand. While I remain incredibly proud to have worked within the public sector, I don't consider any organisation in which I've had experience currently fit for purpose. Considering its public-facing aspect, the front-line should be sacrosanct and its roles among the most sought-after in any organisation. Instead of which, for many if not most, the front-line represents relentless stress, pressure and chaos compounded by mismanagement, onerous processes and outdated IT systems, all of which serves to frustrate any attempt to deliver a quality service to the public. For the overworked, overburdened and under-resourced front-line worker, many of whom following their working day must go home and be parents, once sufficiently used up and worn out, they resort to self-protection mode, seeking less stressful positions away from the front-line and taking their valuable experience with them.

While I cannot claim to have all the answers, part of the motivation in finding them comes with the realisation that our needs can only be comprehensively met by services fit for the 21st century. However, this will not come about as a result of short-term solutions and quick fixes. Instead this is perfectly achievable with the kind of reform that deals once and for all with wastage, poor management, inefficiency and self-interest. No longer can our public services and those protecting no other interest except their own, remain resistant

to fundamental change. The greater interest of those who fund and use those services and those who work in the interests of their organisation's continued success demand it. To those who have no interest in becoming part of the solution, I say get the fuck out of the way and clear a path for those who do.

Chapter 26 – Fiddler Meets The Birdman

“When patterns are broken, new worlds emerge.”

— Tuli Kupferberg

In March, 2024, I'd meet a man, and not just any man. This was a man of thought, of technology and of creativity. This man visualised a world of endless possibilities and looked more to the future than the past. A Torbay native and resident for many years, this man's journey through life culminated in time spent in Asia where he established and ran a successful tech company. Returning to Torbay twenty-five years later, he brought with him a knowledge of management, technology, business, politics and people infused with a ruthless dose of Asian efficiency. Dismayed with what had become of his beloved Torbay, he couldn't bear to stand by and witness its continued decay. Just like me, this man felt a burning desire to be part of the solution, and following a stroke of serendipity, our paths would eventually cross.

For the first thirty years of my life, like a lot of people, I had no interest in politics. Furthermore, I had no real understanding of political ideology or the difference between left and right or of the workings of Westminster. However, that soon changed once I began working in the public sector. Not until then did I come to understand the role politics plays in the continued running of public sector services and the impact on services of decisions taken both centrally and locally. Consequently, I came to recognise the inconsistency in my thinking between a desire to be a part of a service both efficient and fit for purpose while continuing to dismiss politicians as corrupt, all the same and only in it for themselves. No longer could I be content to decry the state of our public services while remaining

disinterested in the activities of those responsible for their management.

With the aim of gaining a better understanding of how politics, government and the law operates, I embarked on two courses of action. The first was to absorb as much information from as many different sources as possible. For this I looked to texts on political history, economics and social mobility in addition to online interviews and podcasts. Having retained a keen interest in law from my time in the police, the second course of action involved my enrolling with the Chartered Institute of Legal Executives and completing a diploma in law and practice. While I've no doubt that an understanding of law is of some benefit to being a member of parliament, I suspect that an understanding of people and their individual and collective needs is of greater value. So, with that in mind, I kept reading, listening and watching until one particular day I stumbled upon a podcast that enabled me to begin piecing things together.

While I don't fully understand exactly how algorithms work, I'm aware that based on an individual's search history, similar types of videos are then suggested. I'm unsure what I'd viewed beforehand, however, my attention was drawn this one particular day to a ninety minute interview on economics and wealth inequality by a former city trader named Gary Stevenson. Despite my ignorance of both, the apparent contradiction of a wealthy former city trader discussing wealth inequality roused my curiosity and so I listened intently to everything he had to say.

Without realising at that point the path down which the algorithm would take me, I began watching similar interviews with figures aligned with what would be considered left-wing politics. Setting aside any preconceived ideas about their views while remaining conscious of my own biases, I listened and learned as much about

what they believed as I could. Whether I'd see the merit of their ideas was another matter and for that I needed to hear more. Fortuitously, I stumbled across another interview around this time promoting a new left-wing party by the name of Transform.

Of all the interviews I watched during this time, this particular interview stood out for the candour and confidence of the interviewee. A spokesperson for Transform, this young lady spoke commandingly as she dismissed criticism of the left for perpetual infighting and a failure to agree. Having first laid out the problem, she presented Transform as a means to "unite the left". Roused by her stirring words, I jumped at the chance to be involved in something which, on the face of it had the potential to make a difference and improve the quality of people's lives. That appeared to me to be a cause worthy of anyone's support. After having joined I then set about establishing a local chapter of Transform in Torbay. However, my dalliance with left-wing politics would be of extremely short duration as I came to see how the criticisms of the left as expressed so articulately by Transform's spokesperson were not entirely unjustified.

In order to progress this part of the story, we must go back forty-six years to the summer of 1979. Sitting in the middle of the living room floor of our south-east London home one day in early May, my sister Dee and I were embroiled in a fierce battle of the table-top football game, Striker. While the portable Sony Trinitron played to itself in the background, my attention suddenly shifted from the game to the woman appearing on the screen in a blue jacket and hair similar to those of my great aunts. While men gathered around her, she mentioned something about bringing harmony where there's discord, truth where there's error, faith where there's doubt and hope where there's despair, or words to that effect. This lady spoke about adult things the meaning of which at that time I did not understand. However, my brain had a tendency to retain images and

words I couldn't immediately comprehend for some future decoding. While I didn't know then who this lady was, her commanding presence and forthright manner left the same impression on me as the domineering females in my extended family. My impression of this woman would grow stronger each time I saw Margaret Thatcher speak on television over the eleven years that followed.

Given such strong impressions, I've often found myself comparing the leadership style and the way in which the public in general responded to Margaret Thatcher to every other subsequent leader. Regardless of her politics or the way in which she implemented policy, Mrs. Thatcher fashioned an image of strong leadership like no other prime minister who came after her. Consequently, I feel it safe to conclude that the public both expects and respects strong leadership, competence and decisive action. Arriving as a police officer to deal with a bar fight or, for that matter, any crime in progress, brought me to the realisation of public expectation. Therefore, I learned early on to conceal my doubts and fears and exhibit the kind of confidence and self-assuredness the public expected to see. It is an awareness of those individual and collective needs that has led me so often to ask myself what a situation requires me to be and whether what's required is within my capabilities.

Within our collective needs I recognise my own need for strong and competent leadership and decisive action. I suspect the lack of it in my work life explains why I have so often clashed with my managers. Furthermore, I've sought to embody the kind of strength and reliability that I've sought and so rarely found in my own life, with one notable exception that I shall come to shortly. So, how this relates to Transform, and left-wing politics as a whole if Transform is any example of it, is that I didn't find what I needed there. Instead, what I found in Transform was a distinct lack of leadership

and cohesion, characteristic infighting and a strong aversion to decisions being made in a top-down way or by any other methods except via a committee.

While I'd be among the first to decry the damage top-down management has wrought on the front-line of the public sector, that is not as much a criticism of the top-down structure as it is the incompetence of the actual decision makers. Indeed, many a sound decision can be made within a top-down structure as long as the front-line is made part of the brainstorming and consultation process, rather than being involved solely at the implementation stage.

In addition to the innate distrust of the top-down model I observed among the left a similar aversion to any one person being responsible for leading and decision making. If replete with competent management and good communication, the top-down model can and does indeed work. On the other hand, the greater the number of people involved in decision making, the greater the opportunity for disagreement and discord. Moreover, leaving everything to be decided by committee does not lend itself to dynamic decision making especially where people cannot meet at any other time than as part of a committee.

In sum, I suspect that most members of the general public, myself included, expect to be able to go about their daily lives without hindrance, unconcerned by what does not directly affect us. In addition, I suspect they expect a certain level of competence among both their elected officials and managers within the workplace. Furthermore, I should imagine that any number of people look especially to those in public life for someone to respect, for someone upon whom they feel they can rely, someone whom they can trust and someone whom they feel they know. While I do not consider myself an ardent royalist, over my lifetime, the person in

public life for whom I've reserved the most respect is Queen Elizabeth II. Where there is competence among those in authority, trust, confidence and respect naturally follows.

So, were it not for my brief association with Transform, I would not have crossed paths with the man to whom I referred at the beginning of this chapter. His aforementioned credentials and experience coupled with his character, vision, drive and honest intentions inspire my confidence in him and, consequently, my respect. This man first came to my attention during an online meeting of Transform's Torbay chapter. Amid a lengthy group discussion as to how to get our message out there, this man, who had hitherto remained silent, suddenly put his hand up and asked "what about AI?". Following his suggestion, the meeting fell silent for a moment while my co-facilitator and I thought of an appropriate response.

Beyond the kind of humanoid robots featured in Hollywood blockbusters I knew very little of Artificial Intelligence and its capabilities. Furthermore, I knew even less about the mystery man hiding behind a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles and sporting a fisherman's cap in manner of Tevye, the protagonist from musical 'Fiddler on the Roof'. However, his bombshell suggestion and enigmatic appearance intrigued me sufficiently to want to know what he knew about AI, and thereby learn more about this intriguing man.

Therefore, one dull and dreary day in late March, 2024, I headed over to somewhere I'd rarely ventured, to the centre of Paignton. Having visited Paignton's main thoroughfare of Torbay Road only once before at night, I had no idea where I should park. After eventually finding a space a few streets away, I headed in the direction of Torbay Road, conscious that by now it was 10am, the time we'd agreed to meet.

With no idea of the location of our meeting point, a coffee house by the name of Caffé Tutto, as I turned from the side street into Torbay Road, I looked somewhat frantically left and right. Just a few doors down on my left, a rather gaudy looking shop-front caught my eye. As I ventured nearer, three weather beaten cast iron pillars came into view above which hung a large red sign displaying the name of the café. Peering in, I spotted a man in his mid-sixties wearing a black and orange American college style varsity jacket, wire rimmed spectacles and a fiddler cap sitting directly behind the window.

Opening the door, I approached the table where he sat looking down. Pulling the chair opposite him towards me I removed my coat and sat down. While his eyes remained firmly fixed on an iPad resting on his leg, I took the opportunity to study the peculiar looking character before me. The white hair splaying out at the sides from under a brown corduroy cap contrasted sharply with his neatly trimmed yet equally white goatee. Blending hipness with eccentricity, the most prominent feature of this enigmatic character rested against the wall behind him. No sooner had I fixed my gaze on the brass eagle's head atop his walking stick than, with eyes remaining firmly focussed on his iPad, he muttered in a tone of mild disgust that I was, in fact, late. What for, I wondered. I was about to find out.

Postscript

Nearly twenty years have passed since Dad's sudden and unexpected death. Having spent the latter part of his childhood assisting in the raising of his siblings the desire for an easy life became his holy grail. Ironically, his single-minded pursuit of love from one with an equally overwhelming need and similar incapability of giving it ensured his perpetual nonfulfillment. Taking into account what I've gleaned from their lives prior to and since my birth my parents clearly lacked the kind of emotional maturity and unselfishness required for responsible and stable parenting. Alas, their incapability of overcoming the ills of their own respective childhoods made placing the emotional needs of their children before their own unlikely. However, no matter what caused Mum and Dad's characters to be fixed in such a manner, above all else their primary responsibility as parents remained the emotional stability and development of their children.

While I'd long since recognised the unusual and disrupted nature of my childhood, not until such time as I entered into romantic relationships of my own did its negative impact begin to emerge. Repeating the mistakes of my parents, in my own need for love I found myself embarking on a series of failed relationships without any regard to compatibility. To the first person who came along and showed me the slightest interest I whimsically pledged the rest of my life. However, my own misguided belief in what love actually consisted of ensured that such relationships were of relatively short duration. Having mistaken love as something exemplified by the intermittent giving of a gift or as a reward and not an unconditionally constant and nurturing emotion I struggled to accept more wholesome representations. Ironically, I began to reject those fundamental elements of love such as support, protection and encouragement intended to bring about the very sense of stability

and security my childhood had essentially lacked. Not until reaching a sufficient level of emotional maturity have I been able to truly make sense of the past and its long term influence on my character.

During a recent conversation with Dee I asked her whether as a child she felt loved. To my surprise she responded that in respect of Dad she did indeed feel loved by him. When I enquired further and asked what Dad had done to effect her belief she cited as evidence our irregular trips to the park. Buttressing her assertions Dee maintained that on account of the odd day trip as a family our childhood wasn't all bad. By presenting such poor and isolated examples in mitigation Dee confirmed how our childhood has fostered a perception of love as a series of random acts rather than something of greater depth and substance. While I'm in no way decrying the importance of spontaneous expressions of love and affection, such gestures ought to be an accompaniment to love's fundamental and perpetual aspects and not an alternative to them. Contradicting her former gratitude Dee expressed her belief in Malta's fortuitous occurrence by stating that ours was a childhood which needed to end. With these sentiments I couldn't agree more. Although we were left to remain in a situation in which we should never have been placed, Dee and I did a considerably better job of raising ourselves than our parents had done despite our lack of emotional maturity.

Another unfortunate legacy to consistently bedevil me was an inability to put down roots while harbouring a conflicting desire to belong. Having adopted Mum's wilful and somewhat self-deceiving belief that happiness lay elsewhere I drifted from one location to another not realising that I was in truth far less content with myself and events of the past than with my current surroundings. As for Dee she would also experience a prolonged period of rootlessness. After the breakdown in 1991 of her marriage to Joe she embarked

on a succession of house moves which encompassed Cornwall, Norfolk and Manchester. Coincidentally, in her mid thirties Dee would also come to enjoy a similar sense of stability and settlement.

Among the most significant experiences which crystallised thoughts regarding my childhood were those I had while working with children themselves. As a residential social worker in a children's home I became one of a small number of guardians for children taken into local authority care. Despite various differences in their respective histories the neglectful behaviour of their parents resulted in them having almost complete control over their own lives. Having enjoyed a taste of freedom and a life lacking either boundaries or structure they learnt to fend for themselves while no longer identifying as children. Unsurprisingly, upon arrival into an environment where they were forced to relinquish control to their carers they rejected, often violently, their new surroundings. Furthermore they showed similar disregard for those who attempted, with compassion and understanding, to neutralise the effects of their abusive past. While my own circumstances differed slightly from my young charges there were also similarities with which I could identify. Knowing how difficult it would be for a child whose parent had deserted them to continue toeing the line and accepting the authority of the returning parent without question is somewhat unrealistic. Of course I refer specifically to my mother's apparent dismay after returning from her extra marital affairs, not to mention the advent of our Maltese venture, to find me less respectful as a child than before her successive departures. Similarly, with her consistent thievery, dishonesty, adultery and neglect she behaved in a manner unlikely to inspire respect and, consequently, our perpetual compliance. In the absence of any positive conduct to reinforce them, overused expressions such as "Do as I say and not as I do" and "I'm the parent here" were never going to ensure enduring deference. Therefore, with a lack of appreciation for its profound importance, I am no longer left

wondering why my parents never showed me the kind of respect which, as a fellow human being, I should have been rightly afforded.

In a like manner, as a police officer I also came into contact with young offenders many of whom lacked a sense of recognition and belonging. Desperate for the kind of validation and fellowship absent from their own families they sought a sense of solidarity with similar young offenders. In the absence of loving and supportive relatives their peer group became essentially their surrogate family. While I cannot relate to their criminality my own experience has taught me the importance to a child of knowing they are loved and where they belong. My own consistent journeying between London and Malta was unmistakably due to my inability to determine where I belonged, representing a fundamental failure on the part of my parents. In regards to whether my parents loved me, I suspect they did in their own way although there's a difference between being loved and feeling loved.

As to the question of who is to blame, I've deliberated to some extent over how far down the line of ancestral descent it's reasonable to go. One thing I'm in absolutely no doubt of is my own lack of blame. Instead of being an abnormal child I was in fact a relatively normal child placed in particularly abnormal circumstances. As such, I feel justified in absolving myself of any responsibility and believe I'm no more to blame for how my mother raised me than she is to blame for her own mother's cruel parenting. Indeed, where I begin to attract responsibility is in respect of how I parent my own children. My mother recognised this fact. The proof of her understanding lay in the assertion that she would never raise her children the same way her mother raised her own children. My mother's declaration suggested an explicit awareness of the ills of her own childhood which renders ignorance an unsuitable defence.

Instead my mother, with whom I've not had a relationship for a number of years, has absolved herself of any responsibility and instead continues to emphasise my disruptive behaviour while contending that she did her best. Personally, I believe her to have been capable of far more had she taken her parental responsibility more seriously and put the needs of her children before her own. As for Dad, by virtue of his example I've learnt to avoid seeking love from those who are simply incapable of giving it. Consequently, I've been fortunate enough to find family among those I did choose to reciprocate love rather than those I didn't. Most importantly, I have experienced the unexpected contentment of knowing that, far from desiring a father figure, there lies most profoundly a father within me.

"JOHNNO'S STORY GRIPPED ME FROM THE FIRST PAGE — I COULDN'T PUT IT DOWN, LOSING HOURS (GLADLY) TO ITS MAGNETIC PULL. INTIMATE, COMPELLING, AND PACKED WITH ANECDOTES THAT SPARKLE... A REVELATION!" - VIV

"ONCE I STARTED READING JOHNNO'S STORY, I FOUND IT ADDICTIVE. I KEPT READING IT UNTIL THE SMALL HOURS OF MORNING. HE WRITES FLUENTLY. JOHNNO IS VERY HONEST AND FAIR. THROUGHOUT HIS STORY, HE ACKNOWLEDGES HIS MISTAKES AND SYMPATHISES WITH PEOPLE'S BEHAVIOUR AND LOOKS FROM THEIR PERSPECTIVES. I FIND HIS STORY VERY AMAZING/INTERESTING. I THINK JOHNNO IS A TALENTED WRITER AND AN EXCELLENT STORY TELLER". - FARRI

"I DEVoured IT IN ONE BREATHLESS SITTING, LEFT HUNGRY FOR MORE. A DANGEROUSLY ADDICTIVE PORTRAIT OF A LIFE THAT REFUSES TO BE ORDINARY"
- QUINN, TORBAY CHRONICLE

"THIS BIOGRAPHY ISN'T JUST A LIFE STORY: IT'S AN INTIMATE SEDUCTION. TRUST ME, I KNOW" - XXX

