

One Year of Life

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1. When paths cross

It felt good to be out on the town with his best friend. He watched, and smiled, as his friend chatted away about all and sundry, pretending to be interested in all the latest happenings. Dave was in fine fettle, waving his arms around as he relayed the latest developments in his life, and life in general. James's part in the conversation was minimal. Dave would talk enough for the two of them. That was their way. That was the way it had been since time eternal. Not that James minded at all, anyway he was well used to being Dave's sounding board. When Dave was in top form he needed an audience, rather than a conversation partner. Dave was the showman, amazing his band of faithful spectators with all the finery of his stagecraft. James was this evenings guest of honour, with a special show all for himself. Really, for James, it was just nice to be with his friend, to have someone he could count on in this, his new life. His attempt at a new life. A life trying to repress the demons that had haunted him for so long, had been very difficult to discover. For the most part it had involved refinding himself. Trying to determine if he still existed, if he could still exist. He wouldn't interrupt Dave with such heavy thoughts. Dave's theatrical performance was at it's high point. He would just continue, happily, in his role as Dave's congregation. He would get T-shirts made up: 'Dave, my Lord and Master, forever shall I follow thy lead'

'Maureen is really upset about her accident. Hey, I told her, don't worry, it's really on a few dents and scratches. We'll sort it out.'

'Uh huh.'

James already knew all the details of the accident, Dave had related it all to him previously on the phone, but he let Dave have full rein. As if he could ever have stopped him anyway. He mumbled some banal response.

'Well, the main thing is that she's alright. The rest is just life's little inconveniences.'

'Well, that's what I told her. She walked away from it. The rest is just insurance claims.'

James sat back and listened, as his friend went through all the story again. His mind drifted. He thought of the drastic changes in his life over the last year, or so. It hadn't been easy starting over, recreating himself. After many years of marriage, and the suffering they had endured, it had been hard to finally accept that the best thing for both of them was that he had to have the courage to leave her, and get started on a new path. He had done it for her as much as for himself. Together they would never have been at peace. Each reminded the other constantly of the burden they carried. Alone perhaps they

would each be able to find a pathway through the desolation. A pathway towards the possibility of finding, if not happiness, at least a bit of solace. A pathway taking them to where they could find an easier pathway to travel. At 36 years old James had hoped that he was still young enough to reconstruct himself. To discover a new James. It had taken determination, and a lot of bad days, but he had made it through. Almost. He felt that he was at the other end of the tunnel, or maybe to put it better, he could see the light at the end of the tunnel. A beacon guiding him towards a possible future. One of the best things about his new life was, without a doubt, his new job. It was at the same time relatively interesting, but also just easy enough that James was able to effortlessly pass the day, impress his bosses, and all without having to push himself very hard at all. Not that he was lazy, far from it. He had just felt that he had needed to slow it all down, and start again, from the beginning. He had wanted to find himself, who he was, rather than just be identified by the job he performed. A new town, a new flat, and a new job. Big changes. Luckily he still had Dave to help him through it all. And that was no small thing.

‘Are there any decent looking women at this new job of yours? You know you should really get back out there dating again, Jimmy.’

‘No, they are all men.’

James knew where Dave was going, so he tried to brush him off with a bit of a lie, but anyway, Dave, with a new head of steam, continued on with his favourite rant about how it was time to get back in the saddle. If you crashed your bike into a brick wall, destroying your bike, and causing grave injury to yourself, the answer was simple. Get a new new bike. Avoid brick walls. James politely listened to him, nodding occasionally, in the appropriate places. He thought about the transformation his life had undertaken. A total transformation that had taken a lot of effort. Without any doubt, in the end it had been really the only possible solution. Months after the separation he had come to the realisation that he needed to get away from all the memories that surrounded him, the memories that haunted him. Living in the same town, seeing the same people, had made him feel as if there was always a weight he constantly carried with him. It was a weight he would always carry, but through distancing himself the burden he carried was slightly less present. The memories weighing heavily, had dragged him down psychologically, keeping him in the mindset of their tragedy. It had taken a lot of courage on his part, to break away, and James had worried that at 36 years old he may have been too old to restart afresh. Surprisingly, though, from a purely practical point of view, it had all gone fairly well. Better than he had been expecting. He was now at a point where he really felt that the worst was over, and ahead he had the possibility of good things to come. It was a nice feeling. Life was out there, just waiting for him, almost within his grasp. He could sense it’s presence, even if he couldn’t quite see it yet. He felt that he was on the verge of something good. Life. Life may well be possible. Not that he would ever forget Charlie, or what had happened. Charlie would be with him forever. James just wanted to be able to live, as well as remember, and staying in his marriage had made that seem almost

impossible. He had had no other choice than to leave, leave it all behind. Without a doubt, his best friend Dave, had helped him a lot in the transition. He had been with him all the way. He owed him a lot. It was a debt that could never be repaid.

‘Listen, Jimmy, the one on the right has been checking you out, my man. When are you going to make a move?’

‘What’s that Dave?’

James hadn’t really been listening to his friend, he had just been enjoying being out with him, breathing in the air. Breathing in life.

‘At the next table, brother. The blonde. She is just waiting for you, my man.’

As usual, Dave was trying to push his friend to get back into life, in the form of a relationship. Dave’s philosophy was that when you fell off a bicycle you should immediately get back on it, and start pedaling, with no time for licking your wounds. Dave’s pragmatic approach allowed no room for introspection, or retrospection. There was only one way. Forward. At a great pace of knots. It was a lovely spring evening, and the two friends were sitting at an outside table of a bar in the town where James now lived. The bar was a hive of activity, people chatting and laughing, as they ate and drank. The town centre was alive with lots of noise, and the smells of many different types of food. You could smell the scent of life in the air. You could hear the sounds of life being lived. It had been a lovely warm day, and the streets were full of people, of all ages, out enjoying themselves. The curse of winter had been lifted, and life was flourishing anew. At the next table there was a group of three women, roughly the same age as the two of them, around their mid 30’s. The girls had been looking over, and one, a very good looking blonde, had been looking, discretely, but very intently, at James. Her glances hadn’t gone unnoticed, not even by James.

‘I know, she looks good, but I just don’t think I’m ready to jump back in yet.’

‘Hey, you’ve been separated for over a year, now. The time is right, and she is really looking good! Come on boy, get a move on!’

Dave had only one view of life. Live it. Love it. Lap it up.

‘Don’t think I don’t appreciate your help, Dave, I probably couldn’t have made it through the separation, and everything else, without your help, but, well, I just don’t think I am ready to go through all of that again. Not yet, anyway.’

James never mentioned Charlie’s name to Dave. He knew that Dave just couldn’t face talking about what had happened. It was too much for him.

‘All of that? What? Jimmy, I’m not saying you have to fall in love, marry her, and live happily ever after! Just have some fun, loosen up a bit. Man, you are wound so tight. A few dates, see what happens. Get her into bed, have a bit of a romp. Some sex would be good for you. Relax you a bit.’

James smiled. How could you possibly face the twists and turns of life, without a Dave by your side? Everybody needed a Dave. A guide, a pathfinder, to keep you on the right track. The thought occurred to him to open up a business renting out Daves to

people facing troubling situations. Is your life getting to be too much for you? Are you finding it hard to cope? In just two to three months one of our Daves will help you find the way through your hardships, and back to the life you have always wanted. Our Daves are only of the highest quality. Money back guarantee. They will get you back on your bike in no time at all.

‘Listen, Dave, when I feel that I’m ready I will get back out there. There’s no hurry. I just need time.’

As usual, when Dave had an idea in his head, there was no holding him back. He was a great friend, but he never took on board anyone else’s opinions. He knew the right thing to do, and he would push you until you did it. With his longish brown hair, and his rugged, rugby player look, you couldn’t really call him handsome, but he was definitely a person who didn’t go unnoticed. He had decided that he knew exactly what was best for his friend, and even the hand of God would have been hard pressed to rein him in. With his brash personality, and total disregard for what James wanted, he threw himself into his mission. He turned his attention to the three women at the next table.

‘Good evening ladies, how are things? This is a great spot, isn’t it? What more could you want on a Friday evening? Good company, good drink, the pleasures of life!’

Dave had been turned up, by a hidden remote control, to his highest setting. Uncontrollable. The women looked over, and all three smiled in response. One of them, a slightly plump woman, with short dark hair, cut in a page boy style, took up the invitation.

‘Yes, it really is. The three of us usually meet her every Friday, for a few drinks, and a bit of a chat. I’ve never noticed you guys here before. Mind you, it does get crowded, especially in the good weather.’

‘No, it’s our first time, well, mine anyway. I don’t know if Jimmy has been here before. I live about an hour’s drive away, and I’ve just popped over to see my mate. He’s only been living here for a few months. Hey, my name is Dave, and this is Jimmy, James really, but I always call him Jimmy.’

‘Hi, I’m Emma, and this is Vicky, and Lucy.’

Lucy, the one who had been looking at Dave, smiled, and with a bit of a blush on her cheeks, greeted them.

‘Hello, it’s nice to meet you.’

‘Hi guys,’ said Vicky, ‘it’s a pleasure to meet you.’

Vicky with her long, curly brown hair was a lot more attractive than Emma, who, with her short plump figure, really didn’t look particularly attractive, especially with her hair cut so short. It accentuated the chubbiness of her face. The best looking one, of the three, was definitely the blonde, Lucy. The one who had been checking out James. She was beautiful, with long blonde hair, and a trim figure. In some difficult way to explain she had a sort of mysterious air of reticence about her. She didn’t seem as unrestrained as her friends, she appeared to be a bit more reserved. A bit more guarded. She certainly

was pretty. James was a bit flustered, it hadn't been his intention to get chatting with the women, as he thought he had explained, thoroughly, to Dave, but he knew that he had better say something. Dave had thrown him under the bus. He had been sacrificed at Dave's altar of total disregard for all others. He was like a baby who had been thrown into the deep end of the swimming pool, and had to either sink or swim.

'Hi, actually I have been here once before, for lunch.'

He was slightly annoyed at his friend, even though he knew that Dave had just been mistakenly trying to help him. He couldn't really hold it against him. He never could. That was just how Dave was. That was how his Dave was programmed.

Lucy, as if sensing his hesitancy, smiled at James, and said;

'Yes, they really do a nice lunch here. A lot of office workers come here for lunch. I've had lunch here a few times as well.'

Vicky, who was very good looking with her long curly brown hair, tall, well proportioned figure, and sweet smile, looked over at the two friends.

'Me and Emma only really get out here for our Friday drinks. Normally we are on kids duty, but our lovely husbands let us have at least one night off. So nice of them! We really are so terribly grateful to them! Obviously, that comes at a price, of course. Saturday nights we are in, and they go off, and do whatever they want to. Lucky Lucy, on the other hand, can always just go out whenever she wants to, being single.'

James almost squirmed in his seat. It seemed almost as if the lot of them were conspiring to get him, and Lucy, together. It didn't take long for Dave to run with the ball. He wasn't going to let an opportunity like that get past him. He would take advantage of any slight opening. He would put both his hands through the crack, and rip open a doorway. He threw himself in.

'Hey, I know what you mean. I have that sort of a deal with my wife as well. My mate Jimmy, on the other hand, is living the good life. He's a single man, does whatever he wants, whenever he wants.'

James could see Lucy perk up at that news. She really was beautiful. Her face was almost glowing, caught radiantly in the light from the overhead lamps. Her figure was slim, and her smile was so genuine that James almost had to catch his breath. Her long blonde hair cascaded on her shoulders, and brushed the sides of her cheeks. Lucy was dressed casually, but with tight fitting clothes that really showed off her beautiful, trim figure. She was at the same time very sensual, but she also had a sort of wholesome simplicity. There was no denying that he was very attracted to her, but James worried that if he started something with her, it could end up blooming rapidly into something big. Something that at this point in his life he just didn't feel he was ready for, quite apart from what the rest of the group seemed to think. He would casually ignore the plottings of Dave and Lucy's friends. Lucy obviously had a couple of the female versions of Dave in her life as well.

'Sorry to break up the party,' said Emma, 'but it's time for my curfew. It's been

lovely to meet the two of you. We are usually here on a Friday evening, from around 8 o'clock to 10. Hopefully we will see you here another time?'

As the three women were getting ready to go, Dave just couldn't help himself. He couldn't let an invitation like that go begging.

'For sure. If I can't make it over, I'm sure Jimmy will.'

The two groups of friends said their goodbyes, and the three women went off down the street, giggling, and chatting among themselves.

'Well, that went well! That Lucy is just perfect for you, my friend. You can't deny that.'

Dave slapped James on his shoulder. His face bore a massive grin, running from ear to ear. He looked like an athlete who had just made the score of the season. He had scored the winning try in the rugby season final.

'No, she definitely is a lovely person, that's for sure. But, listen, I'm just not ready yet, Dave. Hey, I told you that, man. Come on, I'll walk you back to your car.'

The two friends walked back to the carpark where Dave had left his car. James felt so indebted to his friend. His separation, after seven years of marriage, and the tragedy that had fallen to them, had been hard on him. As a couple they had had other couples as friends, but in the breakup it had all been a bit unsure just where the mutual friends lay. The terrain underfoot had become unsteady. Solid footpaths had turned into muddy, slippery tracks. Pathways on which it was difficult to find your footing. Some had taken his wife's side in the separation, others were unsure which side, if any, to take. James knew, and understood, that none of them could possibly know how the tragedy that they had earlier faced had affected them as a couple. It was the sort of thing you had to live through to understand. All in all, it had left a sort of slight awkwardness when they would meet, making for difficult evenings out, with stilted, guarded, conversation. Dave, on the other hand, had been his friend since they had been at university together. There had never been any doubts where his loyalties laid. He was the only real friend that James knew he could rely on, and he had really needed that friendship to help him through the tempestuous storms he had encountered. His loyal guide hadn't let him down. He had found his Dave.

'Here you go Dave. Drive carefully, I know you always do. Thanks for everything, man. I'm sorry I moved away, but I just couldn't stay there anymore. Everywhere, and everyone, well, it just all reminded me of everything. I just had to get away. Start somewhere fresh.'

Dave, as usual, avoided talking about the pain that had afflicted James. Dave just couldn't bring himself to talk about it.

'What? Are you kidding me? It's only about a 45 minute drive. That's not going to get in our way. I think you've done the right thing, moving somewhere new. It's taking control, brother, it's getting back into life on your own terms. It was a good move, Jimmy. I will be with you all the way, you know that, don't you? Anyway, think about

Lucy, will you? Just go back to that bar, next week, and see what happens.'

Dave smiled, gave his friend a slap on the shoulders, and got into his car. As he pulled out of the carpark he tooted the horn, and waved his arm out the window, smiling broadly. Jimmy waved back. Even if they didn't see each other as much anymore, they spoke very often on the phone. It was good to have someone to be able to pour out all of your thoughts with. From the carpark it was only about a ten minute walk back to his flat. James enjoyed walking. It gave him time to slow down, and reflect on things. Dave was right, the move to a new town really had done him a lot of good. He felt a freeness that enveloped him. In all honesty, it was even pretty promising to have met someone like Lucy. Just knowing that life could go on gave him a happy feeling. For a long while he hadn't really been sure if he would have survived the suffering that had crashed down on him. All in all, he was feeling quite positive, even though he knew he wasn't going to return to that bar the next Friday. He needed time. He still needed time. James had never been as light, and, well, slightly flippant as his friend. Dave was one of those people who could just breeze through life, seemingly never affected by the deep emotional feelings that most people felt, and that almost plagued James. Everything seemed to feel so intense to James, friendships lost, new ones gained, but for Dave it all just flowed over him effortlessly. For that, James really envied his friend. The lightness with which he approached life was a wonder to see. James, himself, had a tendency to feel everything so acutely. When he got involved in something, or with someone, he ended up going all the way. Emotionally he just wasn't ready for that. It was too soon. He was still damaged goods. When he would be ready, he knew that a woman like Lucy would be exactly the sort of person he would look for. Apart from her great beauty, she really seemed like a genuine, honest person, almost a rare breed in the modern age. He could never imagine himself with a female version of Dave, someone just cruising through life, without feeling it's depths. A female version of Dave? The thought of that made him smile to himself. Pity the poor man who ended up with her! Also, another thing he liked about Lucy was that she seemed to be a fairly reserved person, like himself, and that definitely was the sort of woman he would like to be with. Her two friends were much more loquacious, slightly loud. Dave's type of girls. James smiled at the recollection of how Dave had so effortlessly reeled them all in. He was a fisherman of people. He had used the right bait, and had hooked his catch. Somehow or other, he could just enter into other people's lives, with a casualness that seemed almost to disarm his prey. They would be temporarily stunned, leaving them easy fodder as he pulled them in, in his net. Lucy, though, well she seemed different. All in all, Lucy definitely was the sort of woman he could eventually go out with, but he just didn't feel that he could deal with such a commitment at this stage of his life. He had only just managed to set up his new life, and it was running smoothly. He had a new job, in a new town, and he was trying to come to terms with his painful past. He was moving forwards. Moving forwards, holding onto Charlie. Charlie would always be a part of his life. Tears formed in his eyes as he thought

of Charlie. As he walked towards his new flat, tears flowed freely down his cheeks.

It was a lovely evening, and Lucy, as usual, had been looking forward to it all week. Her Friday evening out with her two best friends was the highlight of her week. To be honest, it was just about the only thing she enjoyed about the week. It was the only time she would ever go out. In fact, if one or the other of her friends canceled, she would feel that the whole week had been ruined. Her evening out with her two best friends, her only real friends, was just about all she had to look forward to in her life. Being single, without children, in her mid 30's, made her feel like an absolute failure. Life's smile hadn't shined on her. She quite liked her job, it was a pleasant enough way to pass the day, but she didn't really bond with her colleagues. They were mostly all much older than her. She felt sort of estranged from them, and for the most part, also from much of society in general. She didn't really seem to be able to fit in anywhere. She could only really open up with her two best friends. Both of them, however, seemed to have such busy, full lives, with not much time for going out, barely even for an occasional coffee. Lucy understood that they had their husbands, and children, and elderly parents to look after, but it all left her feeling very lonely. It was almost as if she lived in a void, a state of flux, waiting to be pulled out for her once a week moment of living, before being returned to her state of nowhere. She was a person who existed briefly. She tried to avoid thinking of herself as being a sad, lonely person, but really, deep down, she knew that she was. She never let her friends know how she felt, she didn't want to make them feel sorry for her, or feel they had to see her more often. When she was with them she would pretend to have a good life, to be happy, which, when she was with them, she was. She would pretend to be busy with all her hobbies, and work, and everything, just like them. Just like normal people. The reality was that time passed very slowly for her. Both of her parents had died when she was barely 18, in a freak car accident caused by bad weather. Since then she had been alone. Lucy had had a very tight bond with her mother, and still thought about her, and missed her, almost every day. All she had left of her family was an aunty. And, in all honesty, she wasn't really much in the way of what Lucy perceived as real family. She only saw her irregularly, and when they did meet up they got along well enough, but there was no special connection between them. There was something missing between them. It was almost as if they had the title deeds saying they were family, but the paper work had been mixed up somewhere along the way, and they were really just two strangers who had been mistakenly placed together. They were officially family, but in reality they had no idea who each other was, or why they continued to see each other. It was all a case of mistaken identity. In any case, she would really prefer to meet people her own age, with interests similar to hers, so she wasn't really bothered about the odd relationship she had with her aunt. That was just the way it was. Friday evening seemed to be just about all she had to look forward to in her life. As she approached the bar where she usually met her friends, she was really looking forward to seeing them. With

them she could chat freely. She could let herself go, something which, at work, she never did. As usual, she was the first to arrive at the bar, she was always a bit early. She found a nice table outside, and waited patiently for her friends. Before too long she saw them approaching. She stood up to greet them as they entered the patio area of the bar.

‘Hey, you two, how are things?’

Emma and Vicky danced over to her table, singing, and clicking their fingers. They were always happy to fool around when they didn’t have kids, and husbands, to look after.

‘Hello, lovely lady,’ said Emma, ‘you look so radiant tonight! What’s the big occasion? Is there someone coming we don’t know anything about?’

The two of them sat down, giggling like school girls. They really loved their evening off from family duties. ‘Friday Freedom’, as they called it. The two of them were so full of life. Lucy really envied their happiness, and the fulfillment of their lives. They had it all. Everything that she didn’t.

‘Don’t be silly, just my special girls. I’ll get some drinks in. The usual?’

Vicky jumped up. She had a triumphant air about her.

‘My shout! And we are having doubles! I have some big news, Abigail seems to have finally accepted that she has to go to school. She almost enjoys it.’

She threw her head back, and raised the back of her hand up against her forehead in a dramatic flourish.

‘My God! What a relief!’

As Vicky headed off for the drinks, Emma smiled, knowingly.

‘My two boys loved going to school straight away. For them it was an adventure. Poor little Abigail! Six years old and having to leave her mommy! Oh, how sad!’

‘Don’t be so cruel.’ chastised Lucy. ‘It really is harder for a little girl.’

As usual, Lucy knew that most of the discussion would be about the children of her friends, but she was used to that, even though she would really have preferred to talk about other things, like they used to in the old days. Still, now that was the central thing in their lives, so she accepted it. She had avoided, as much as possible, being dragged into the role of aunty to their children. Seeing her friends, being with them, and with their children, really drove it home to her just how empty her life was. At her age, 35, she was virtually the only woman she knew who wasn’t married, with children. She had had the occasional romance long ago in the past, but had never found the right person for her. Love, and happiness, had eluded her. She was sure it existed, but just not in the same dimension as her. Lucy was quite introverted, and all the men she had met seemed to be so loud, and pushy. That was something she just couldn’t stand. Probably she had set her standards too high, but anyway, here she found herself, left on the shelf. Unwanted, and past her sell by date. Thrown out with life’s rubbish. Ahead of her just a life of emptiness, sadness, and regret. Eventually she knew she would have to surrender totally, and get a cat. That would be the final sign of her desolation. That would mark the end of

everything. She was almost looking forward to it. Then there would be no doubt. It was over. She would be able to post funny pictures of her cat on the internet, just like all the other women who had finished living in the real world.

‘Get these into you girls. You just will not believe the change in Abigail.’

Lucy listened to all the chatter about their children. She really was happy for her friends. She fought back the sadness, and threw herself into the chatter. After all, she really was so happy to be out with them. None of them were really big drinkers but, with a couple of drinks in them the talk finally got off family matters. Vicky turned to Lucy with a sparkle in her eyes.

‘Mike is doing a barbecue on Sunday, for some of his rugby mates. I think some of them will be bringing their wives. Why don’t you come, Lucy? Some of them are single. What do you say?’

Vicky, and Emma, were always trying to find someone for Lucy, but their social circles were now so diminished by family matters, that by then Lucy knew all the men on offer, and wasn’t interested in any of them. Lucy knew that Vicky’s intentions were good, but at those barbecues she always ended up being hit on by all of Vicky’s husband’s friends, single and married. They were all heavy drinkers, and when the drink flowed heavily they would all look around for an available woman. Who better than her? The spinster friend of Mike’s wife. The sad and lonely one. In all probability, they no doubt felt like they would be doing her a favour. Perk her up with a quickie out in the back seat of their car. That would be just what she needed to bring a smile to her face. In the past she had suffered the indignity of a couple of those barbecues, and there was no way could she bring herself to ever go through all that again. It all just served to reinforce how lonely, and desperate, she must appear to everyone. Lonely she was, but not that desperate. Well, not yet anyway. When she had her cat she would reconsider her position on that.

‘Oh, I can’t. I promised my aunt that I would go and see her Sunday. Thanks anyway.’

It was more a half-truth rather than a lie, but she really couldn’t handle the thought of an afternoon of uncouth drunks, all trying to have sex with her. She would far prefer the oddness of her relationship with her aunt, rather than the sordidness of those drunken affairs.

‘Hey, watch up!’ whispered Emma. ‘Look at these two, at the next table! My God! Lucy! The one with the short hair isn’t wearing a wedding ring. He looks absolutely divine!’

Here we go again, thought Lucy, as she looked over. Usually her friends would try and set her up with anyone, as long as he was single, and breathing. With a bit of a startle, she realised that the one Emma meant, really was good looking. He had a lovely face, with a sort of pronounced chin. He was quite athletic looking, like someone who looked after himself, and exercised regularly. He had short dark hair, and a pleasant

demeanour about him, like someone who was comfortable in himself, but without feeling like he had to show off in front of others. Lucy was immediately taken by him. He had a softness to his face, with a look of quiet strength. His friend, someone who reminded Lucy of Emma's husband Jerry, not at all her type of person, was doing all the talking, and the good looking one was politely listening, for the most part. He seemed so handsome. His face was that of what Lucy thought to be a kind, gentle person. As she stole glances at him, she couldn't help thinking how that was the sort of man she could really fall for. Her two friends were in total delirium. They were concocting their moves. Plans were afoot. Strategies were being formulated. Maps were being laid out, and preparations were being made for the final assault. The troops were all in position on the border, just waiting for the order to attack. Vicky leaned across the table, in a conspiratorial way.

'Lucy, shall I invite them over? The other guy has a wedding ring on, but we can run interference with him. We'll keep him busy, and you get talking with the handsome one. What do you say?'

'No, Vicky, please, don't embarrass me.'

Emma, too, was on the warpath.

'Hey, we can't let this opportunity go, Lucy. This is big. Come on, you, get in the game!'

Lucy really wanted to meet her attractive man, but she knew that her friends would go overboard with the whole thing, and she would end up feeling very flustered. However Vicky wasn't going to let an opportunity like this pass. She turned to Emma.

'How can we play this?'

Emma wasn't going to let the occasion pass either. Their friend needed a bit of back-up. Lucy really was just so shy, both her friends knew she needed a hand with the introductions, and a gentle nudge in the right direction. Emma seemed on the point of saying something, but, in the event, it was the friend of the good looking one who got the ball rolling. He started in with a typical chat up line. He was the sort of guy that Lucy didn't really like, a bit like Mike's rugby friends, but in this situation she was happy to have someone like that to break the ice. She wanted to reply, but couldn't think of anything to say. Not so Emma, she was right into the banter. Before Lucy knew it, they were all introducing themselves, well, Emma and the pushy one were taking care of that. James was the name of the handsome one. What a lovely name. Feeling a bit embarrassed she said hello. Before she knew what was going on, she was chatting with James about the lunches they laid on at the bar they were in. It all felt so natural. He was so easy to talk to. Vicky made sure that James knew she was single, and it appeared that his friend, Dave, made sure she knew that James was single, too. It almost felt like it was all happening in a dream for Lucy. She had never felt like that before. She pictured herself in James's arms. She could almost feel the touch of his lips on her cheek. Totally flustered, she couldn't even speak. Somehow or other, the two groups of friends arranged to meet

back there the next week, and she soon found herself walking down the road with Vicky and Emma. With her friends she could always open up.

‘My goodness, James is just such a nice man. Handsome, and so softly spoken. I really like him.’

‘Lucy, you have to speak more.’ Vicky admonished her. ‘Why didn’t you let him know you were interested?’

Emma jumped in, and defended Lucy.

‘Leave her alone, Vicky, you and Dave pretty much organised things for the two of them anyway.’

‘With your help, Emma. You are the one who invited them back next week.’

Emma and Vicky laughed, together. They were obviously pleased with the way it had all gone. They were always worried about their dear friend. A little push in the right direction would never go astray. Vicky adopted a joking tone of voice.

‘So, Lucy, where will we be going next Friday? Shall we go and see a film?’

All three of them laughed at Vicky’s crack. Lucy felt so giddy. Could it be possible that she had finally met the right man for her? Is this what it feels like when you meet Mr. Right? She felt so lightheaded, she was almost floating along the road. She couldn’t wait to go to bed where she could quietly think over the evenings events. Lucy had never met anyone with whom she had felt such an attraction, such an affinity. Could it be possible that her life was finally going to change? After such a long time alone, could it be possible that she had met the right man for her?

2. Misplaced faith

The light shining through the white lace curtains illuminated the photo of Jean, sitting on the bed stand. A photo of long ago, from good times, innocent times. Jean's smile always brought happiness into Claire's cold, dead heart. It was a smile of optimism, of good things to come. A smile of hope. A smile from a time when good things were expected, and life's prospects were full of wonder. How could life have changed so much? How was it possible that everything after that smile would turn so horribly wrong? Claire knew that it wasn't fair to blame Lucy for what her father had done. What was that expression? The sins of our fathers? However every time she saw her, it brought all the memories flooding back. She played the role of the aunt as well as she could, if not quite the doting aunt, at least she forced herself to be some sort of a presence in Lucy's life. Albeit, a minimum one. She just couldn't do anymore. It was too much for her. Too many memories, too much pain. As usual when she knew that Lucy was going to pay her a visit, she had set up her position out in the garden. All the tools were strewn around, and, with the gardening clothes she wore, she hoped that the general air was that of a person who was busy working away in her garden, as usual. Lucy seemed to buy into the act. It all made it a lot easier for her to get through Lucy's visits. It was a way to keep their dialogue to a minimum, and more importantly, a way for Claire to not have to sit there constantly seeing Lucy's father's face staring back at her. From her bedroom window she had a good view of the approach road, and the driveway into her house. As usual as soon as she would see Lucy's car approaching, she would rush out into the garden, and assume her position. Gardening, her great passion, or so the cover story went anyway. In reality it was hard to always find something to do out there. Anyway, Lucy would find her pottering away in her garden, as she always did, as she had come to accept as the norm. Claire looked at her watch. It was early. As usual she had prepared things far too early, but that was her way. Lucy was always very punctual, but it was better to be safe than sorry. With a sigh, Claire went through to the kitchen, and poured herself another gin with just a dash of tonic water. She would need a few of them to get through the afternoon. Gin in hand, she returned to the bedroom, and sat back down in her waiting position. Lucy's visits always brought the memories flooding back, not that they were ever far from the surface. She could remember it all with such clarity, even though so many years had gone by. A secret bottled up inside her, killing her slowly. With hindsight she knew that it would have been better to have told someone what had happened, probably even Jean herself, but at the time she hadn't known how to cope with it all, the fear, and the shame, and with the passage of time it had eventually just seemed too late to talk about it. And

anyway, with who would she talk about it, after Jean had died?

Claire had always been very close to Jean, her only sister, so she had thought nothing unusual about the phone call that evening, from her husband, Albert. A phone call that would change everything, forever. She could even remember the lightness with which she picked up the receiver.

‘Sorry to bother you, Claire, have I caught you at a bad time?’

Albert’s voice was his usual chipper self. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Actually it was nice to hear from him. She was wanting an update on Lucy’s condition. Little did she realise where that phone call would lead her. To the gates of hell itself. And back? No, she had never made it back. That phone call had been a one way ticket.

‘Not at all. How’s Lucy? Does she still have a temperature? Poor thing, she must be suffering so much.’

‘Actually, that’s what I’m calling about. She’s still running a high temperature, and can’t sleep, so it’s all a bit of a fuss over here at the moment. Jean’s been called back into the hospital, double shift coming up I’m afraid, and I was wondering if you would be able to pop over, and give me a hand with Lucy. It’s been such a...’

‘Of course! Listen it’s no bother at all. You hold down the fort, and I will be over as soon as I can.’

‘Thanks so much, Claire, you really are the best.’

Claire, as usual, was only too happy to give a helping hand. She doted on her only niece, and as she and Warren didn’t have any children, she focused a lot of her attention on Lucy. Also, time was no problem. Warren was in the merchant navy, so, as was almost always the case, he was off somewhere on a cargo ship, carrying goods across the open seas. She threw on her shoes, and in a flash was in her car, and off to her sister’s house, only a short drive away. Claire had been terribly worried about Lucy, it must have been so hard on her at only ten years old to have to suffer such a bad case of the flu, with such a very high temperature. At that age it probably felt like the end of the world. When you get older you know that those moments will eventually pass, but at her age it probably seemed so devastating. Poor little thing. Within minutes she was at Jean and Alberts’ house, and she could see Albert waiting for her out on the front steps. Poor fellow, he was no doubt beside himself, what with Jean having been called back into the hospital.

‘Hi Albert, how’s our poor little patient going?’

‘Shhh, let’s keep our voices down. Come in Claire, I think she might have finally drifted off to sleep. I gave her some cough syrup half an hour ago, and it’s effects might have finally kicked in.’

‘Oh, that’s good news!’

In a quiet voice Albert ushered Claire through to the lounge room.

‘Come on in, I’m sorry that I called you now, it seems like the panic is over. I guess I should have waited a bit longer.’

‘Goodness me, don’t worry about that. I’ve been terribly worried about Lucy all day, so I’m more than happy to pop over.’

Claire could smell whiskey on Albert’s breath. He was a bit of a drinker, too much of a drinker, according to Jean, but, what with Lucy’s flu and all, he probably needed a bit of sustenance.

‘Would you like a drink, Claire?’

‘Oh, no thanks. Can I have a look in on Lucy? Just to see how she is?’

‘Of course, come on through. I’ve put her in our bed, so she will be more comfy.’

Albert lead her down the hallway, past Lucy’s room, and the spare bedroom, to the main bedroom. He opened the door, and motioned for Claire to enter. It took a few moments for Claire’s eyes to adjust to the darkness, but when they did, she could see that the bed was empty.

‘But where’s...’

In a flash Albert’s hand was crushing her neck, making it almost impossible for her to breathe. He closed the door, and forced her down onto the bed. His voice was full of rage.

‘You think you’re so high and fucking mighty don’t you? You’ve never liked the fact that Jean married me, have you? You dirty slut!’

Albert’s face was a contortion of hate. Claire was frightened out of her wits. Her heart was pounding. She had never seen Albert like that before. She had never had anything against his marriage to Jean, so she couldn’t understand what he was talking about. Her state of ignorance didn’t last long. With his free hand, Albert pulled down her slacks, and ripped off her underwear. As Claire lay there fighting with all her might just for barely enough air to survive, Albert unzipped his pants, and lay down on top of her. With one hand still gripping her throat, his other hand forced apart Claire’s legs, and he penetrated her, violently.

‘You slut! You fucking slut! This will sort you out, you bitch! You high and mighty slut!’

He repeatedly penetrated her with unimaginable violence. The brutality of the rape was matched only by the viciousness of his hate filled comments to her. Claire couldn’t even cry out, she was fighting to just breathe. Then she must have passed out. She never knew for how long she had lost consciousness, but when she finally came around, Albert was standing over her, as she lay on the bed.

‘Pull up your pants, you dirty slut, and get the hell out of here!’

Shaking with terror, Claire pulled her slacks up, and got up, heading for the door. Before she reached it, Albert’s hand again grabbed her by the throat.

‘You say one word of this to Jean, and I will kill the both of you. You understand me? Slut!’

The menace in his voice was palpable. Claire was too terrorised to reply, even if she had wanted to. His grip on her throat made sure of that. He pushed her towards the door.

‘Get the hell out of my house, you dirty slut!’

Claire looked at her shaking hands, and looked at the time. She had time for another gin. She went through to the kitchen, and poured herself out a strong one. This time she didn't bother to add any tonic water. She returned to her spot in the bedroom, overlooking the approach road to her house. She knew that none of it was Lucy's fault, but maybe the fact that Albert had used her illness as an excuse to entice her over to his house had made her blame Lucy a bit. Which was totally ridiculous, she realised. Why had she never told anyone? Why had she never told Jean? Then, eight years later when Jean and Albert had died in that car accident, it had brought in one way a sense of ending, but also a sense that the whole situation could never be really resolved. It had left everything in a state of uncompleted limbo. In her nightmares she could still see Albert's hate filled face, and would feel that she was suffocating. She would wake up holding her throat, and gasping for air. Claire knew that Albert had been drinking heavily the evening of the accident, but the police hadn't made an issue of it. Probably because no one else had been injured in the accident, and they probably thought it was already a big enough weight on the shoulders of their only surviving daughter, without telling her that it had all been her father's fault. It had been a wet evening, with poor visibility, so they had blamed it on that, trying to alleviate as much as possible their daughter's suffering. With a start, Claire heard a car out on the road, and looked out the window to see Lucy's car approaching her driveway. She gulped down the remaining contents of the gin, and ran out to her prepared position in the garden. Let the comedy begin.

Every now and then Lucy would fulfil her sense of family obligation, and head out to visit her aunty. The visits brought her little pleasure, as the two of them weren't very close, but the alternative had been to go to Vicky's for one of her husband's drunken barbecue debacles. She had been caught between a rock and a hard place. She had been caught between boredom and debauchery. She had chosen the lesser of two evils. She had chosen a cup of tea, rather than drunken hands trying to grope her. Lucy's aunty Claire had a little cottage out along the coast. The drive up there was always pleasant enough, although nothing spectacular. The back of the cottage had a small patio area, opening onto a small, well maintained garden. Claire's passion was her garden. Even though it was rather small she somehow always found some work to do in it. Tending the flowers, or planting something or other, for the next season. Claire was a small, robust woman, full of energy, always bustling around. She was the sort of person who would never sit still, there was always some task that needed to be done, and it needed to be done urgently. She had been alone for many years, her husband had died at a relatively young age, and she had learnt to fill the void by keeping herself constantly on the move. The television was always on in the lounge room, and a radio was always playing in the kitchen, even when Claire was out in her garden. She was the extreme version of a multi-tasker, needing to have at least two or three things on the go at any given moment. Lucy

sat on a chair in the patio, a small area with brick paving, covered by a wooden pergola. Across the top of the pergola her aunty had grown an evergreen ivy, which provided a pleasant shady area in the summer. From where she was seated she could easily chat with her aunty while she tended to her garden. Lucy felt so at peace with the world. She had never felt such a feeling of tranquility in her life.

‘I’ve always loved the view from here, Aunty. It is just absolutely stunning.’

Her aunty looked up, and smiled.

‘That was what convinced your uncle to buy this place. He always loved it.’

‘I remember. When we would come out on the weekend he was always so proud of it.’

From the back of the house you could see the sea coming into a beautiful bay, surrounded by green rolling hills. The bay was only around a kilometre from Claire’s place, and because her house was slightly up on a hill, you could see it all very clearly. The beauty of the view was breathtaking. The deep blue of the sea, the different shades of green on the hills all around, with light fluffy clouds floating by, and a warm sun shining. Lucy closed her eyes, and breathed in deeply. In such a peaceful place she could always manage to slow down, and ponder on her life with a feeling of great serenity. She wouldn’t tell her aunty that she had met someone. They had never been very close, so Lucy didn’t really open up about her private life with her. Not like she did with Vicky and Emma. In any case, her aunt always seemed to be so tied up in her own life, rushing around like a cat with it’s tail on fire, that she never really asked Lucy much about her private life. It was a bit strange to Lucy how two people, family, could know each other for so long, yet never really understand each other. They were almost like strangers who had been told that they must see each other regularly, for some obscure, unknown reason. They had been thrust together merely for genetical reasons. When Lucy’s parents had had their accident her aunty had always been there for her, helping out all she could. She had performed her duties as the ‘good aunt’ should, perfectly but perfunctory. Somehow the two of them had never really formed a close bond. It was sort of taken for granted that they would see each other for occasional lunches and so forth, as families do, but in real terms they were like two people who didn’t really know, or comprehend each other. People who, for some unknown reason, had decided to see each other frequently. The bond of family gripped them, it encircled them, but it had never made them close. The two of them had very little in common, and really just discussed things quite superficially. Lucy felt the family obligation to see her aunt, but really her life would be little different even if she never saw her. It was odd how two people could know each other for so long, yet have formed such a weak bond. Lucy realised that it was probably mostly her fault, she just didn’t know how to open up to people. She was so awkward in all types of social situations. That was why she had so few close friends in her life. Not that her aunty had ever made much of an effort. She had always maintained a very stand-offish attitude. The two of them eyed each other diffidently from behind their barricades.

Anyway, none of that really mattered anymore. Things had developed. Lucy's heart fluttered at the thought of James. She felt that finally her life was on the verge of change. Real change. She wouldn't even mention having met him to her aunt. She would play it all very casual. That, in any case, was the nature of their rapport. Lucy watched her aunty at work in the garden. God only knew how she could spend so many hours tending to such a small garden, but anyway, it kept her busy, so it was probably a good thing. It occurred to Lucy that maybe she should have developed hobbies, to combat her loneliness. The answer to not feeling so alone was right there in front of her eyes. Keep busy, television on, radio on, rushing around from one insignificant thing to the next. Although Lucy knew that that sort of frenetic hiding from yourself would never have worked for her. She was the sort of person who analysed herself far too much. She would have been acutely aware that it was all just a ploy to take her mind off her loneliness, and it would have probably ended up making her feel even worse. Scurrying around, keeping busy with endless tasks of triviality would never have been a solution for her. Her heightened sense of awareness had always been hard on her. She felt things too deeply. It was hard for her to remember if she had always been like that, or if it was a result of the pain she had been through when her parents had died. She had been so young, just having started at university. It was hard to remember feelings from so long ago. Sitting there, feeling so calm, shaded from the sun, and taking in the breathtaking view, she could effortlessly reflect, with a clear perspective, on the right approach to follow in the life she felt was opening up before her. Lucy was sure that her meeting with James would be the start of a whole new chapter in her life. Finally a happy chapter. The alternative was definitely not enticing. In no way did she want to end up with the sort of life her aunty led. She would never be able to hide from the reality of things, no matter how much running around she did. She had never had any luck with men, not like her two best friends. They both had fulfilled lives. Now, though, it was her turn. The beauty of life had finally smiled on her. Through the dark clouds the sun was now shining.

'Put the kettle on, will you Lucy? Let's have a nice cup of tea, and a slice of cake.'

'Lovely idea. You carry on with your gardening, aunty. I'll bring it out here when it's ready.'

Lucy passed through the lounge room, with the television blasting, and into the kitchen, with the radio on, blaring out a talkback station. As she put on the kettle, she realised, with horror, that this would have been her future, if she hadn't met James. This was the nightmare she had been hurtling towards. It was quite obviously working for her aunty, but it definitely would not work for her. It felt a bit like a vision of a future hell to Lucy. Living a life which was not really a life, merely an existence. Hiding yourself from your reality, by endlessly running in circles. Blocking out your thoughts, with blaring televisions, and radios. An empty existence, filled with endless tasks of irrelevance. By God, she could not end up living a life like this, pretending to not feel anything, pretending all was well when obviously nothing was. Pretending to not feel lonely by

keeping busy, and avoiding the circling clouds of reality. How could her aunty cope with living like this? Lucy's hands were trembling as she prepared the tea. She felt like she had been transported to the future, and had been shown a version of how her life could end up. A version straight out of hell.

Sometimes Emma found herself to be at breaking point, and that evening was coming in pretty high on the list of those moments.

'But mum, just ten minutes more pleeeeeease!'

'Listen here Sonny Jim, that's what you said ten minutes ago, and I let you continue. Now get up into that bathroom, brush your teeth, and it's straight to bed. Do you hear me? Move it!'

Something about her voice convinced William to leave his game, and follow his mother's instructions. He disappeared up the stairs. Emma knew that as the oldest, it was always going to be William who pushed the limits. The psychology degree that they award you automatically when you become the mother of two boys had warned her of that, but sometimes the frustration still boiled over. Luckily Michael, two years younger than his brother, at eight years old, still listened to his mother, and he was already in bed. Emma wondered how long that would last. Would he be content to let his big brother be the trailblazer, or would he soon decide to start acting out in his own right? She could barely cope with just one of them pushing the limits, if the other one started as well she would soon find herself pushed way over her limits. It was a terrifying thought. Things could actually get worse. Would she then look back on these as having been the good old days? The worst of times would be looked back on as having been the best of times. She could barely keep things together as it was, what would she be like if that happened? Sometimes she thought of the stress free life that Lucy lived, and felt envious. Lucy had no one to worry about other than herself. How nice that must be. Free to do whatever you wanted to, instead of being everybody's slave. The unpaid help. The woman who came in to do the cooking and cleaning. The one who everybody just assumed would always sort everything out. Lucy had no idea of how lucky she was. Emma couldn't even remember how life had been before the onslaught. She felt like someone who had lived through so many years of war that she couldn't remember how things had been back in the days of peace, before the first bombs had rained down. She shuddered as she thought about how many more years of it all she had ahead of her. Would she be able to survive it? Would she be one of the war's casualties? She already felt like she was suffering from shell shock. Emma finished cleaning up the various plates, and cups that had been left strewn around the battlefield, and with a heavy head headed up to prepare herself for bed. As she passed the bathroom William was just coming out of the bathroom, dressed in his pyjamas.

'Look, mum, clean teeth.'

William opened his mouth using the fingers of both hands, to show his mum what a

good boy he had been. A pang of guilt passed through Emma. She realised that she just couldn't imagine life without her two lovely boys. She gave William a big smile.

'Well done! Come on now, off to bed, and lights out straight away, OK?'

'Where's dad? When's he getting home?'

'He'll be home soon, he's out for the evening with the guys from his running group.' she lied, 'He'll see you at breakfast. Now hop it!'

'I thought he went out on Thursdays with them?'

'Well, you can ask him that in the morning, now will you please go to bed, William?'

'Night, mum.'

With a sickening feeling in her stomach Emma realised that even a ten year old could see through Jerry's lies. Why did she just keep on putting up with it? Why did she just accept his infidelities? The answer wasn't far in coming. When she had put on her nightgown, and was brushing her teeth, the answer was staring back at her in the mirror. She was fat, and ugly. Eight years on from having given birth, and she still carried around all the extra weight she had put on during the pregnancy. How could she have let herself go so much, barely in her mid-thirties? No wonder Jerry didn't want to have sex with her anymore, and was off with who knows who. She hated him for it, but knew that really she only had herself to blame. She hated herself even more. She could barely stand to look at herself in the mirror, and actually avoided looking in mirrors as much as possible. How could she expect Jerry to find her attractive when even she knew that she wasn't? She had tried all the diets, but always ended up back at the same weight, if not worse. For some reason cake had become her safe place. When she was stressed with the kids, or from running around from one office to another, as a secretarial temp, or with Jerry's infidelities, what would she do? She would bury her face in as much cake as possible. The sweeter the better. The bigger the better. It was almost beyond her control. How was that possible? Why couldn't she just stop eating cakes? The answer seemed so simple, yet something, well, a lot of things really, just kept driving her back. It was her form of heroin, although probably heroin would have been a better choice. At least heroin addicts always seemed to be slim. Emma turned off the lights, and got into bed. She looked at the time, just gone ten o'clock. Jerry wouldn't be back until late, as usual, when he was out with one of his floozies. Her mind went through the usual set of options open to her, for when he returned. Pretend to be asleep? Casually ask him how the evening went? Ask him if he had had a good fuck, and would be wanting a bigger breakfast than usual in the morning, to replenish all that spent energy? Her left hand squeezed the rolls of fat on her stomach. She hated herself so much. She was so tired. Tired of it all. She would so love to get out of it all, and start life anew. However she knew that she would never have the courage to leave Jerry. Probably he knew that, too. No doubt that was why he was so obvious about his womanising. He knew he was risking nothing. They had their informal trade off, he lived in a hotel where all the mundane aspects of life were sorted out by her,

and she had the financial security that living in a family unit brought. The kids? Well, who knew where they fitted in to it all. Maybe they were just collateral damage? Or bargaining chips to ensure that no one stepped out of line. In the quiet of the night, Emma heard the front door open. She had decided. She would pretend to be asleep.

3. A chat with Charlie

On Wednesday afternoon James knocked off work a bit early. It was just such a lovely sunny day that he had decided to head down to the beach, and have a walk along the sand. In his new life work played it's part, obviously, but he no longer wanted to sacrifice the living of his life just to be successful in his job. He felt that he wanted to spend more time experiencing life. Touching it. Feeling it on his skin. Now he wanted to dedicate himself to the living of life, not to just view it from an office. He wanted to return to the land of the living. He wanted to hold life in his arms, and embrace it. The magnificent spring sun was reflecting off the tranquil water of the sea. The sky was cloudless, and so blue it seemed to have been painted on. It was almost like the inspiration behind the painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Quite simply, Michelangelo had probably just walked outside, and looked to the sky for his inspiration. The beautiful sky was the Chapel of life. Walking along the seashore always made James feel relaxed. That was where he felt free from the chain's of life. There he did his best thinking, about his personal affairs, but also when he was stuck with a project at work. There was just something about the majesty of the ocean, it's immensity, the power it radiated. It always helped him put his problems into a better perspective. Things seemed to be easier to understand, and accept. He could reflect with some degree of detachment on life, and death. The golden sand underfoot felt soothing. He had removed his shoes, and the massaging effect of the sand on his feet was nice. As it was still too early in the season for swimming, he was almost alone there, something he preferred. He loved the enticing smells which wafted in on the afternoon breeze. He really was where he wanted to be. After all the tumult in his life in recent times, it was hard to believe he had finally achieved such a feeling of, if not tranquility, then ease. He was in a good place. He sat on the sand, and reflected on how his life was going. The days passed easily for James. He was quite happy in his new job. In any case, compared to the stress of his previous job this one was really quite easy. It was true he earned a lot less money, but living the simple life he now lived, on his own, his needs were few, and he got by well. Probably better than before. It certainly had been difficult, far more so than he had imagined. In the first few months after the separation, still living in the same town, things had been very grueling. It hadn't taken him long to come to the conclusion that in order to make that sort of change it really meant that he needed to make a total change. A complete break from all of it. That was when things started to come right. Now, just over one year on, and a few months into his new living space, he was feeling a sense of peace. At work, as an architect, he was now just designing relatively simple buildings. Suburban housing,

shopping malls, and the like. In his previous job he had been working on cutting edge architecture. Modernism that had always needed to make a statement. There had been endless conferences with clients who always needed something more elite, something more outstanding. Always more. More, more, and more. The designs that he, and the team he had worked with, had proposed, never seemed to have been quite good enough. Even when one of their projects was accepted, and built, it was hard to look at the completed structure without remembering the difficult road it had taken towards completion. The satisfaction of having made a good design was always tinged by the arduous process by which it had arrived at completion. When friends would compliment him on the beauty of one of his designs he would always feel a slight niggle, remembering the hard work, and endless complicated discussions that had gone into its fulfillment. On countless occasions he had needed to work late, to get a project in on time. Without a doubt It had been very satisfying when a project was accepted, and built, but the price to pay had been high. The personal price. Now, in his new job, the main concern was keeping costs down to a minimum, so in practical terms it was just a case of designing pretty basic buildings. Usually he would throw in some little details to sparkle up the designs, but it was definitely easy going. Easy going was good. Quite possibly he had been suffering from burn out in his job. Being a high flying, cutting edge architect sounded good on paper, but the reality had become something else. The pressure had been constantly on him to come up with brilliant ideas, never repeating the same design, always something new, and exciting. It had taken a toll. Quite possibly he had run out of new ideas. Without a doubt, his problems on the home front had affected his work and, on the other hand, the pressure at work had affected his private life. No doubt each had had an effect on the other, creating a time bomb which had exploded, blowing all aspects of his former life to pieces. Whatever had been the root cause of it all, he really couldn't have been more at ease than he was, with his new job. He felt a sense of freedom, a feeling of weightlessness. Heavy loads had been lifted from his shoulders. He could now walk upright, instead of bowed over under the heavy weight. At some stage he would, in his own time, get back to designing more interesting, challenging, modern structures, but that would be in the future. For now he was content to just cruise along, let all the built up stress release from his body, and just enjoy the little things in life. Like reading. One of his great passions had always been reading, especially about history. For years he had hardly had any time to pick up a book, now he was literally devouring them. In the evenings he would hardly ever watch television, he would just keep up with the news. His evenings were almost totally dedicated to losing himself in some ancient culture, or reading about the complicated reasons behind famous historical events. In books he could get involved in the little details of history, rather than just the broad interpretations, which was what most people were only aware of. In some ways his love of the little details of history carried through into his work. Designing structures was really all about getting involved in the details. The little details, that was where life got interesting. After a

pleasant afternoon of reflection, and having his spirit recharged by the spring sun, James returned to his flat. As soon as he walked in the door the phone started ringing. With a sense of foreboding he recognised Susan's number.

'Hello, Susan, how are you?'

His ex-wife wasn't in any mood for pleasantries.

'Just how long is it since you've been to Charlotte's grave? The only flowers I ever see there are the ones I take. Have you just wiped her from your life, like you did with me?'

Susan was in a rage. Her voice was loud, and full of anger.

'I don't care for myself, but she was your daughter too. You do remember her, don't you?'

James felt a knife cut deep into his stomach.

'You know that's not true. How can you say that? You know how much I loved Charlie.'

Susan's anger was palpable, and she was on a roll.

'Her name was Charlotte, not fucking Charlie! I've always hated it when you called her that. At least get her name right, you piece of shit! Four years on, and you have just totally forgotten about her. You asshole! How could you do that to her? How could you just forget her so easily?'

Susan was crying through her anger. James felt hurt, deeply hurt.

'You know that that's not true. She will always...'

'Oh, go to hell, you bastard!'

The line went dead. In a silent rage, James started to call Susan's number, but before the phone had even started ringing, he felt the anger that had been building inside him start to subside. He slammed the phone down. Although he was hurt and angry, he knew that Susan hadn't really meant any of that. She was just trying to find her way through the pain, same as he was. How could you find that path after losing your daughter so unexpectedly? Could you ever find that path? Charlie hadn't even been four years old when she had died. If nothing else, at least she had died peacefully, in her sleep. If there was any solace to be found, it was in that. She hadn't suffered. A congenital heart defect had taken her away, in the middle of the night. In the quiet of the darkness, angels had descended, and had lifted her on high. All that had been left in her wake was two people silently passing each other, in empty, quiet corridors. Two ghostly figures living in the same space, but almost never seeing each other. Each one seemingly living in a different dimension. Dimensions created by the void that Charlie had left. A black hole that had sucked all the life out of the two of them, and left them lifeless, incapable of communication. Oddly enough, thought James, this had been the most they had talked, really talked, in years. After Charlie's death they had gone through the motions, continuing with life as best they could, pretending to still be alive. They would go shopping for new curtains, and the like, as if new curtains would somehow make a

difference in the emptiness of their house, the emptiness of their souls. James had hated that. It had all seemed so pointless. So futile. He didn't even know if the curtains in his new flat were nice or not, and he didn't care. They would remain as they were. Life had to have more significance than just changing curtains. Somehow, or other, the two of them had managed to carry on their empty, barren marriage for a few years after Charlie's death. Probably just out of habit. Eventually James had come to the realisation that the life they were living wasn't a life, and that the life they had wanted was nowhere to be found, nor would it ever be. Without the magical presence of Charlie, the square pegs just didn't fit into the round holes anymore. The only logical solution, for both of them, had been to separate, and to try to find a way ahead, without the constant reminder of the loss that each of them had on the other. Together they would never be able to find that path. Alone, it would be hard enough, if it was even possible.

Luckily, considering the mood Susan had put him in, later on that evening Dave called him. It was just what he needed.

'Hey, Jimmy boy, how are things? Is your week going well? I am just up to my neck in it. Penny has come down with the flu, so Maureen is just out of her head with worry. She's already taken her to the doctor, and she's consulted just about every website she could find. At one stage she was convinced that Penny had the bubonic plague, or some such thing. Man, she really goes crazy when Penny has something.'

It was just the medicine James had required. A dose of Dave. As usual, when he most had need of his friend, Dave was there. His pillar, helping him to bear life's heavy burdens.

'I'm sorry to hear....'

'Do you remember when we were kids? Having the flu wasn't even a good enough reason for not going to school. If you weren't at death's door you wouldn't even see a doctor. Now, as soon as some kid sneezes the whole school is on lock down. It's a crazy world, my friend.'

As usual, talking with Dave was more about listening, rather than actually talking. James was used to that, and always enjoyed Dave's humorous take on life. He loved chatting with his friend.

'I tried to remind Maureen how it was with all of us, her included, but there's no way of getting through to her. What was that you were telling me once about the immune system? How it needs to be stimulated, or something?'

Thank God, thought James. Thank Dave. His mood returned to the place he had found that afternoon.

'Yes, that's right, countless studies have shown that getting sick when you are young is actually a natural way of building up your body's natural defences. The sickness triggers the growth of antibodies, and that makes you more resistant in the future.'

'Good one, Jimmy, I'm going to get some websites ready along those lines, and see if I can't reason with the mother of all mothers. Hopefully she won't be able to dispute

science. But I wouldn't bet on it.'

'Hey, you know what? There's a very interesting fact along those lines. Actually getting worms when you are a child is probably the most important trigger of all, for your body's immune system. We always used to play out in the fields, so just through contact with the dirt we all had them, at one point or another. Apparently you should make sure your child gets worms. It's considered very important for their future resistance. Almost indispensable.'

James could hear his friend chuckling over the phone.

'Jimmy, now you're killing me. If you think Maureen is going to buy into that one, you are living on another planet. Penny will never be in contact with dirt, or any other germ bearing, bacteria laden substance, in her life. Not if my wife has anything to do with it, anyway. Actually, I remember having worms as well. No one thought any big deal about it back then. It was just part of the normal process of growing up. So you really reckon that's important? I'm going to look that up, and maybe try and get Penny out at risk of worms, when the guardian of all things Penny isn't on surveillance duty. I would have to sneak Penny out of her sterile jail cell while the guards are sleeping, but if you reckon it's that important?'

'Yeah, they do say it's a big one, for the immune system. Any form of contact with dirt, playing games or whatever, should do it. Hey, you want a laugh? It was easy for me. My bloody big brother really took me for a ride, although, looking back on it, he probably did me a favour really, not that that was his intention, of course. When I was about six years old he told me that I should eat some dirt, every day, and then I would grow up to be a super hero, like Superman! Man, he used to really put me through the meat grinder that prick. Mind you, in the end, he probably wasn't totally wrong, even though that wasn't his aim! The bastard! He definitely got the worms into me, that one. Just do me a favour, will you? Don't tell Maureen that I'm behind this theory!'

Dave absolutely roared with laughter.

'Typical, when the going gets tough, the weak-kneed buckle. Hey, I thought I could rely on you, my man.'

'Dave, I would walk through fire for you, but taking on Maureen when she is on a Penelope crusade, well, that takes an amount of courage than no man possesses.'

They both laughed freely.

'Yes, I forgive you, brother. The man with that amount of courage hasn't been born yet. Anyway, onto more pressing things. Lucy!'

James had known from the start that they would eventually end up there. When Dave had something on his mind he was like a dog with a bone. He just couldn't let it go. Unless, that was, the other participant in the debate was his wife. Dave had long since learnt that he would never be able to get his way with her. Especially when it involved their only child, Penelope. With other people, including James, there was no stopping him.

‘Well, Jimmy, I’m afraid I won’t be able to make it over this Friday evening, what with Penny’s imminent death, and a couple of other things, I’m going to be stuck here. But you, take the bull by the horns, man, get out there. Are you going to go back to that bar, or are you going to whimp out?’

‘Come on, Dave, you know where I stand on this. Plus, it’s not whimpering out. I’m just not ready for another relationship.’

‘Yeah, no surprises there. I knew that if I didn’t make it over, and literally drag you by the ear, there would be no way you would go back. What is it with you? Who’s talking about a relationship? Go out for a few dates, take her to bed, have some sex, see how it all goes. You can decide whether to fly with it later. First you have to take a car for a test drive, before deciding if it’s the right one for you. Just because you go out for a few dates doesn’t mean you have to bloody marry her. Anyway, I will definitely get over the week after, and if I have to, I will drag you back there, kicking and screaming, you hear me?’

‘Loud and clear, boss. Anyway, we’ll talk about that next week.’

‘Good strategy, Jimmy, put me off, one week at a time! Yeah, what a surprise.’

This brought chuckles from them both. In point of fact, that actually had been James’s proposed strategy. He knew that he couldn’t take on Dave head on, so he would have to chip away at the edges. That was what James loved so much, about their friendship. They knew each other so well, that they both knew what the other was thinking. They were both very different types of people, but somehow or other, they ended up complementing each other. That which one lacked, the other would make up for, and vice versa. Dave really had been his rock, over the last years. He always liked listening to his advice, even though in the end he would always decide for himself, that which was the better path for him to follow. Nonetheless, it was great to have someone in your life to bounce around ideas with, even though in the end the final decision was your own. James knew where he was at in his life, and how he wanted to play it going forward.

When Friday evening rolled around, James picked up a pizza, and a couple of cans of cold beer, and drove over to Green Meadows cemetery. In the flush of spring, the whole place was bursting with new, green growth. Different shades of green surrounded the gravestones. It was a place of incredible beauty. It had become one of James’s favourite places. He sat on the grass in front of Charlie’s grave, and ate his cold pizza, all the time chatting with her. He loved telling her about his week, and how he was feeling. Charlie was really the only person he could really open up his soul to. With her he could talk about everything. As usual there were lovely fresh flowers adorning her grave. Susan’s flowers. They didn’t make him feel guilty, or as if in some way he wasn’t doing that which was expected of him. That was Susan’s way. His way was different.

‘Don’t worry, little angel, I’m not angry with mum. Sometimes we just need to find someone to blame, even when there is no one to blame. You were called away, I don’t know why. I guess other people needed you more than we did. Wherever you are I know

you are bringing joy into the hearts of everyone around you, just like you did with us. Don't let my tears make you sad, it's just that daddy misses you so much.'

James wiped the tears from his face, and looked at the sunny blue sky.

'You know, little angel, I think I will have my first swim of the season this weekend. The water will still be cold, but don't worry, I'm tough!'

Further tears flowed as James realised that he would never be able to teach his Charlie to swim. The path through his pain seemed endless. Would he ever be able to find his way back? Was there even any reason to look for that way back? James sat there in silence. His sense of loss was overwhelming.

Lucy was on a constant high. She felt so good. She felt a warmth in her body, and a sense of tranquility that she had never felt before, in her life. The days of the week seemed to just fly by for her. Even her colleagues at work, who usually didn't take much interest in her, noticed that something was going on with her. In answer to their comments that she seemed different, happier, she remained noncommittal. She didn't at all consider them to be friends, so she didn't have any intention of telling them about her meeting with James. In any case where she worked was a real hive of gossip mongers, so she didn't want to give them any information that could be misconstrued, churned over, or changed into something more than what it was. She enjoyed her job as a secretary for a private medical facility. On the negative side, the vast proportion of people working there were older females, and they had really established a sort of clique based on who could recount the most interesting gossip. Lucy knew that it was mostly all exaggerated, if not even totally invented, and she always tried to lessen her part in the ongoing rumours. No doubt there were already plenty of stories about her doing the rounds, but she was certainly not going to fuel the flames by giving away anything about how she felt about James. Since she had been there, she had always kept herself to herself, being as she was a very reserved person, and she had no intentions of changing that. As yet she hadn't even mentioned James to her aunty, not that she would have been terribly interested anyway. For now she would just keep her feelings to herself, and, of course, with her two best friends. She knew she could rely on Emma and Vicky to keep her private affairs to themselves. They weren't, by any means, reserved like her, but they understood how she felt about these things, and they could be trusted to keep her private matters out of the public domain. She doubted that they had even told their husbands, not that they would have cared much anyway. Lucy was so looking forward to Friday evening, and seeing James again. She knew she would have to open up a bit more, and had spent the week trying to prepare some discussion points. She knew that she wasn't really very good at talking with people, but she really wanted to engage James in some interesting discussions, so she had been planning what she could talk about with him. It all made her feel slightly nervous, but at the same time she was just absolutely filled with joy. She could see the two of them, sitting side by side, chatting away. Maybe he would touch her,

gently, on the shoulder, to emphasise some point in the discussion, and they would smile at each other. She could already see it all. Her two friends had, as usual, been very busy all week so, apart from exchanging some fairly casual messages, she hadn't had a chance to talk with them. Luckily, on Thursday evening, Vicky had time for a telephone chat.

'I can't tell you how much easier my life is now that Abigail is enjoying going to school. My God! All the drama we went through to get over that. I don't think she will ever be leaving home, that one. We might be stuck with her in the house forever!'

'Don't be silly, Vicky, it's a bit step for a little girl. Out into the big world, for the first time. Anyway, you never know how these things will turn out. She may end up being a really outgoing type, who will end up heading off to New York, or who knows where? Then you will be wishing she was more of a stay at home girl.'

Vicky laughed.

'Yes, you're right. I should be careful what I wish for. Anyway, I'm definitely free for tomorrow evening. So is Emma, I heard from her this afternoon. Hey, I really hope James turns up.'

Lucy felt a coldness pass through her body.

'What do you mean? I thought it was all arranged, that he was coming.'

'Well, not really. We sort of said we would be there, and invited them along. His friend Dave said that he might not be able to make it, but that James would. James himself, didn't really say anything, either way.'

A spear of sadness cut through Lucy. After all her dreams, and hopes, how could it be possible? He had seemed so right for her. Could it really be that, even now, after finally meeting the right person, her life was just going to continue on as empty, and lonely, as before? She just couldn't bear the thought of it.

'Lucy? Are you there?'

'Yes, of course. I'm sorry. It's just, I had thought that it was all arranged. I've been looking forward to seeing him all week. You think maybe he won't be coming?'

'Well, I'm not sure. I hope so. Oh Lucy, I'm so sorry. I thought you had understood. It was more of a loose commitment, rather than a definite plan. You really like him, don't you?'

'I've been thinking about him all week. He just seems like the right person for me. I've never met anyone who I have liked so much, straight away.'

'He really is lovely. You would definitely make a good match. Listen, Lucy, please don't get your hopes up too much. Anyway, tomorrow we will see if he turns up. Remember, Dave might not be coming so maybe James will wait until his friend is available. He might find it difficult to take on a pack of judgmental girls, like us, on his own. He might be afraid that we would cut him to pieces. Not many men can take on three women by themselves.'

Vicky tried to downplay expectations. She hadn't realised just how much her friend had her heart set on seeing James again. She knew that under her brave face Lucy was

really quite sad. They never spoke about it, but having known her for so long, she could just tell.

‘Besides, Lucy, if he doesn’t turn up tomorrow, he knows that we always go there. He may pop along another time. Maybe he doesn’t want to rush into things. Don’t get your hopes up too high. It doesn’t mean anything if he’s not there tomorrow.’

Vicky knew that she needed to put in an emergency call to Emma, to prime her for the next evening. Neither of them had understood just how much it had meant for Lucy to have met James. Besides, they hadn’t even really spoken to each other that much. If he was there, they would do back up, and help things along for their shy friend. If he wasn’t, they would go into support mode, and downplay the whole thing.

‘Sure,’ sighed Lucy, the sadness apparent in her voice, ‘anyway, I will see you tomorrow.’

As she hung up the phone, Lucy could feel the sense of desolation growing in her. How was it possible that things just never turned out right for her? What was wrong with her? After all her high expectations, she now found out that nothing had actually been planned, as she had thought. Part of her felt like crying, but another part of her refused to believe that James hadn’t felt the same as her. Surely he had felt the same chemistry? She just couldn’t have imagined that. Suddenly Friday evening was looming for her as a do or die situation. If James was there, her life would finally change for the better. She could end her life of loneliness and sorrow, and finally start to lead a happy, fulfilled life. If he wasn’t there, she just didn’t know what she would do. At her age she knew she was running out of time. The thought of growing old on her own, never feeling the warm embrace of someone who loved her, left her feeling so utterly sad. For how long could she carry on, pretending in front of the world that her life was fine? For how much longer could she hold it all together? Eventually she would reach breaking point, and then what would happen? Was she heading towards the life of her aunty? Would gardening shortly start to play a big role in her life? With televisions and radios blaring out in the background, blocking out the sounds of her quiet screams. The presence of a cat in her life was looming larger, and larger. Then she would put a sign over her door. ‘Single woman with cat. Don’t even think about it.’ Maybe she would talk to her cat, and the cat would look back at her, and wonder who she was, and what the hell she was talking about. Without a doubt, even her cat would eventually feel sorry for her, and wonder how it was that she had ended up with such a desolate life. Probably out of desperation her cat would eventually run away, and look for a happier family to be a part of. She went to bed early, and cried quietly to herself, until she finally fell asleep. The next day passed in a sort of daze for Lucy. She couldn’t concentrate on anything, and just seemed to drift through things. Friday evening had grown, in her mind, into a sort of date with destiny. It had seemed to have become an all or nothing scenario, a real turning point in her life. All, or nothing.

On Friday evening Lucy prepared herself cosmetically, and also tried to prepare

herself emotionally, for the evening out. She didn't know what to think anymore. The evening had taken on an air of being almost the final showdown of her life. Strangely, when Lucy arrived at the bar her friends were both already there. That never happened, she was always the first one to arrive. Lucy took that as yet another bad sign. She took that to mean that neither of them thought that James was going to show. Through the last working day of the week she had tried her best to stay optimistic. There was still a good chance that she would meet James that evening. She had tried to forced herself to remain positive. Even though the doubts were hovering above her head, waiting to come crashing down. Both her friends perked up when they saw her.

'Hey, you! You're looking lovely.' said Vicky.

Emma jumped up, and gave her a big hug.

'My sweet little friend, Vicky told me how much you are looking forward to seeing James tonight. Listen, either way you know how much we both love you, right? We will always be with you. Always! You know that, don't you?'

'I know. You two mean so much to me. You always will. It's just that I hadn't realised that the plans for this evening were really just so loose. I had understood that it was a certainty, that's all.'

'Well, I'll get some drinks in, and we will see what happens, OK?'

Emma headed off to the bar, and Lucy sat down to wait. Over the course of the evening her friends tried to engage her in conversation, but she was feeling so anxious, that she couldn't really concentrate on what they were chatting about. As the time passed it soon became obvious that James wasn't coming. Even though she was sitting with her two best friends, she had never felt so alone in her life. After having built up such high expectations, after having dreamt of the beautiful romance that was about to flourish between her and James, the reality of her dismal life was almost too much for her to bear. Nine o'clock came and went, and it was then definite that he wasn't coming. Vicky made a last ditch effort to cheer her up.

'Listen, Lucy, Mike is putting on a barbecue on Sunday, why don't you come along?'

Lucy burst into tears, and ran out of the bar, running towards her home. Her phone started ringing immediately, but she turned it off. She didn't want to talk to anyone. Maybe she should go to Mike's barbecue. Maybe she should let one of his boozy friends screw her. Maybe that was all she had left to look forward to. Drunken sex with an uncouth, stinking rugby player. Maybe that would now be the highest expectation she could permit herself? What luck to have found a drunken buffoon to fuck her emotionlessly, in the back seat of his car, all the while stinking of beer and cigarettes. Afterwards she could high five his friends, and try and catch a break with another one of them. She would hold hold off with the married ones until she had hit rock bottom, and that wouldn't be far away. How could life be so cruel to her? Why couldn't she ever meet anyone nice? It all seemed so easy for everyone else. Even people she knew that had

separated, soon found themselves another partner. It just all appeared so effortless for others. For her it was just impossible. Thirty five years old, and it felt like her life had already finished. Really it had never even started. All she had ever wanted, from when she was a little girl, was to find someone to love. Someone to hold her tight, someone to tell her how beautiful she was. To feel the warm embrace of a man who loved her. Now she would never have that. Her forlorn, dreary life would just carry on as before. A small spark of happiness when she spent a little time with her friends, and a mountain of sorrow the rest of the time. How could anyone live like that? For how much longer could she continue to lead such an empty life? Her sadness overwhelmed her.

4. A warm evening

‘This week, my friend, you are going to that bar, whether you like it or not.’

It was Thursday evening, and the two friends were chatting on the phone. James could tell by the tone of his friend’s voice that there would no getting out of this one. When Dave was on a mission, you had better get on board, because that train is leaving the station. There would be no stopping him. Anyway, he didn’t know anyone in his new town, and a bit of company wouldn’t be a bad thing. Maybe with Lucy, and her friends, he could just establish a friendship? Some people to have a few drinks with, and a bit of a talk about things. His new life was going well, but he did feel a bit lonely sometimes. He had cut his ties with his old friends, and didn’t really have much of a social life. Quite possibly it was time to get out, meet some people, casually, and have some people to chat with. He felt ready to get back out socially.

‘Sounds like a plan to me. Count me in.’

‘What? You’re folding so easily? I was expecting you to at least put up a bit of a fight. Where’s the fun in this? You bloody whimp. I had a massive arsenal of arrows to shoot at you, and you just give up before starting. I am formally disappointed. You could have at least tried to put up a fight. Although, I must say, I am slightly suspicious. This is all too easy.’

‘Well, when have I ever won an argument with you?’

‘Hmmm, good point. So I will see you there tomorrow evening, around 8? Really? You will be there?’

Dave didn’t sound totally convinced about his friend’s sincerity. It had all gone a little too smoothly. James could hear by the tone of his voice over the phone that his friend was a bit suspicious of the whole plan.

‘Yeah, sure, why not? They seem like good people. It would be nice to know some people over here.’

‘Good people? Dude, Lucy wants more than ‘good people’ from you. Didn’t you notice the way she was looking at you? She wants you in her bed, ‘good people’. What planet do you live on?’

‘Hey, let’s just see how things develop, OK? Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, here.’

‘Fair enough, ‘Mr. Good People’. I’ll leave you to live in your fantasy world, but tomorrow I want to see you there. Understood? I’m going to throw a length of chain into my car, and if you don’t turn up I will come to your place, and drag you there, tied to the back of my car. You, my friend will be at that bar, one way or another.’

‘Well I’m sure that that would be definitely a fine way to make a grand entrance, but

I think I'll just walk there. Not quite so dramatic, but a little less painful.'

The two of them laughed.

'Hey, listen Dave, I'm coming. Don't worry, it sounds like a good idea.'

'Yeah, to see some 'good people', right?'

Dave couldn't stop laughing at how little his friend had understood the reason for their going to the bar.

'Anyway, brother, if you need some good advice about how to chat up your 'good people', you can always come to the master.'

'Your advice, Dave? Indispensable. Hey, I could always tow them around, tied to the back of my car, right?'

The laughter was infectious. When Dave was in good form, which was just about always, he always managed to get James laughing. He was just that sort of guy.

'OK, brother, I'll see if I can trust you on this one. I'll see you there, then, Jimmy.'

Really, James was looking forward to meeting Lucy again. In any case, just having a chat, or even going out a couple of times, didn't have to mean that you were making a commitment. They could feel each other out, and see if there was anything to it. Maybe they were both up for something casual, something easy? Dave was right. Going out on a few dates didn't mean that it all had to lead anywhere serious. Besides, it would be nice to get out a bit. On his way home from work every day he passed an Italian restaurant, which looked like a nice place. Maybe he would see if she wanted to go there. Just because you go out for a meal doesn't mean you have to take things further. It's just a meal. He missed not having someone to eat out with. Someone who you could talk to, and relate the various comings and goings of the week. It had all become a bit strange with most of his former friends. He had been part of a couple, which had been friends with other couples. When you separate from that pairing the lines dividing those friendships become a bit hard to decipher. Where you once had had friendly conversations, you somehow seemed to find yourself in slightly awkward situations. No one quite sure of what to say. The easy flow of chatter had turned into guarded phrases, where no one wanted to commit either one way, or the other. Conversations were held in no man's land, far from the trenches of the opposing forces. Things said without proper reflection could then be hurled back at them as hand grenades from the enemy trenches at a later date. He understood that his, their, former friends didn't really know whose side, if any, they should take. James didn't blame them, they had found themselves in a difficult situation, and were for the most part unsure of how to conduct themselves. All in all, it had made a difficult situation even more difficult. Anyway, by moving away he had put an end to most of that. He was still in contact with a lot of them on social media, but, as is the nature of that beast, it was all pretty superficial stuff. Most people tend to hold back their real thoughts, when it is all out there for anyone to see, and just go for fairly mundane posts. Photos of their kids, videos of their cats, or selfies of faces at awkward angles giving awkward smiles. Generally people didn't want to give out too much of

themselves, when posting things that would be out there for all of eternity. Nothing that could be used against them at a future date. For James, that wasn't really true friendship, but it was a way to remain in casual contact, and pass a bit of time. He had decided to remain friends with most of them on social media, and slowly, over time, wind it back. He knew that they had been placed in a difficult situation, he wasn't blaming anyone, or expecting anything from anyone. He had just found himself constantly walking on eggshells with people with who he had once run freely. Now, with those same people, he would blandly comment on their posts, as if that was anything important. It meant little to him. In any case, James much preferred to be out in the real world, walking along the beach, or hiking along a forest track, rather than sitting in front of a computer watching people's cats doing funny things. It had really just been easier, less complicated, to pull away from his old life, and all it's related trappings. Easier for everyone, easier, definitely for himself.

The next evening, Friday, was another splendid spring evening. It had been unexpectedly warm that day, and the town centre was full of people coming out of their winter hibernation. The streets were full of life. The buzz in the air put James into a good mood. He was, as ever, looking forward to seeing his good friend Dave, and, well, why not, Lucy as well. As James approached the bar, he saw that Dave was already there, and was in rare form. He was wildly gesticulating, and recounting one of his many stories. Dave's stories were a bit like those films you would see that were 'based' on a true story, but were really 90% fiction. However, he told them well, and when he had an appreciative audience he would rise to the occasion, like a Maestro conducting his orchestra. James smiled automatically at the sight of him. In any social scene you really needed a Dave, someone who could put everyone at ease, and get the laughter flowing. He was the right man for the right job. The social conductor. He would get all the musical instruments playing in the right key. He would hold his audience captive, and take them where he wanted. And then James saw her. She was just so beautiful, sitting there in her pretty black skirt, and white top. Her long blonde hair cascading around her face. Lucy was laughing along at Dave's story. Her laughter lit up her whole face. She looked up, as he entered the patio area of the bar. When their eyes met, she waved to him. There was something about her, a sense of natural honesty. She really did seem like such a genuine person, in a world of people usually difficult for James to fathom. People who would normally tell you half truths, at best. Dave stood up, and threw his arms around in a grandiose welcoming gesture.

'Here he is, the man of the hour. Ladies and gentlemen, would you please give a round of applause to our honoured guest, Mr. James Jimmy Henderson.'

James laughed along with the three girls. He knew that he wouldn't have to worry about awkward introductions, or pregnant pauses in the conversation, with Dave on hand. Dave had no understanding of that sort of social unease, at all. Embarrassment was just not something he understood, or had ever felt. He would keep the tempo upbeat. He

would keep the music playing, like a DJ smoothly flowing from one song to the next, with no pause in between. James sat down at the table. Conveniently, or, more probably by design, the only vacant seat was right opposite Lucy.

‘Hello everyone, it’s nice to see you all again. How are you?’

The girls were all absolutely beaming, and appeared ecstatic to see him. James felt like a rock star visiting his fans. The concert was over, and he had come down from the stage to meet his adoring followers. God only knew what Dave had been telling them. In a wild flurry all the girls said their hellos. Lucy had a smile on her face, a mile wide.

‘According to Dave,’ said Emma, ‘you are something of a famous architect. That sounds terribly exciting.’

‘Be warned, never believe any of Dave’s stories. He makes them like a barman makes a cocktail. They are usually two parts exaggeration, one part total invention, with just a pinch of truth. He’s a good man, just don’t believe anything he says.’

The three women all laughed, along with Dave. James knew that his friend would never get offended by any banter of that nature. With his thick skin Dave could take it all, and laugh along with the rest of them. In fact, usually it was him dishing it out. And he definitely wasn’t about to let James put one over on him.

‘Well, we will see about that.’

There would be no holding Dave back. He had a job to do. He was going to paint his friend in the best light possible. Wild horses couldn’t hold him back, or chains tied to the back of cars.

‘Have any of you ever visited the Brooks Tower?’

‘Of course we have,’ replied Vicky, ‘the view from the top is absolutely spectacular. We all went up there a couple of years ago. Why?’

‘That was James’s masterpiece.’

‘Really,’ gasped Lucy, ‘you designed that?’

James knew he had to put the brakes on. His friend was getting way out of control. The car was careering down the hill at full speed, and was about to go over the cliff’s edge. It was time to activate the emergency brake. He needed to achieve the impossible, rein in Dave. A building like that was designed by a team, not just one person. He had only played his part.

‘Hold on a minute. The team I was on did. Something like that takes a lot of people to plan. It took a lot of people a lot of time. It was a massive project.’

While James applied the brakes, Dave pushed hard on the accelerator. No one was going to ruin his story.

‘Girls, you remember the triangular entranceway? The way it seems to flow you into the foyer, and towards the lifts? That was totally James’s plan. All by himself.’

‘The entrance to the tower is fantastic. Well done James, I am so impressed.’ Said Emma. ‘It’s so modernist, so futuristic. That’s really remarkable.’

Lucy was beside herself with joy.

‘I found the entrance to be the highlight of the building, James. It’s like something out of a science fiction film. You must be really proud of that. Of course the view is great, but as far as the actual building goes, it’s that entrance that sets it off. I am so impressed! Well done, what an absolutely marvelous achievement.’

James had nowhere to go on that one. He had, in fact, designed the entranceway. Dave’s face beamed with the cheer of the victor.

‘Thanks, yes, it did come out pretty well.’

While he enjoyed all their favourable comments, James really had mixed memories about that period of his life. True, that had probably been his best work, but he had been under massive pressure at work at that time. The owners of the building had really been difficult to work with, and had never seemed to be happy with any of his designs. All in all, it was hard to look back at that period, and feel good about any of it. Mind you, maybe it was time for him to just let go of the negative memories that still gripped him, and think more on the positive side. His work on that tower really had been good. Why not just accept the praise?

‘Have you seen the block of flats on Wilmore road, James?’ asked Emma. ‘It’s nothing compared to the work you have done, but it’s quite nice. Very modern looking. For our town, anyway.’

‘No, I haven’t. Where exactly is Wilmore road?’

‘Over towards Longsdale street, only about a ten minute walk from here. Lucy loves that building. Lucy, why don’t you take James over to have a look? That will give Vicky and me a chance to have a good chat with Dave. I love his stories.’

Dave, as could have been expected with an opportunity like that, picked up the ball, and went running towards the posts. Emma had burst through the defense line, and had set him up for an easy points earning situation. There was no way he was going to let an opening like that pass him by. He loved Emma’s plan, and he was going to put in his two cents’ worth.

‘Good idea! James loves looking at buildings. He loves walking. Plus, who knows? He might even enjoy Lucy’s company as well.’

While Dave, Emma, and Vicky laughed at that, both James and Lucy blushed a bit. Dave really didn’t have any filters. It just all came flowing out. There was definitely no level on which Dave would feel embarrassed, or ever realise when his words caused embarrassment to others. It just all poured out. To make matters even worse, he had back up. He had a team working in unison with him.

‘Well, off you go then.’ This from Vicky. ‘You’ll be back in time for the next round. It’s only just a short walk away.’

It seemed like none of the three of them was going to let this occasion go, so James realised that the easiest way out of the awkward situation was to just do it. Dave, and the other two, obviously weren’t going to take no for an answer. The opposing team had been stronger, and he had been beaten with ease. Anyway, he did like buildings, he enjoyed

walking, and, well, he quite liked Lucy. He acquiesced.

‘Sure, if you don’t mind, Lucy, I would love to have a look at it.’

Lucy was visibly flustered. She was obviously at the opposite end of the embarrassment spectrum to Dave. In reality, so was James, but after so many years of being placed in those sort of situations by his friend, he had become used to them. To help Lucy through the awkward situation their mutual friends had put them in, James stood up, ready to go. Lucy also got to her feet, and the two of them left the bar area. As soon as they were out on the street James thought he had better apologise for Dave’s extreme insensitivity.

‘I’m really sorry about Dave, Lucy, I know he can be a bit mortifying at times, but he means well. He’s just definitely not a particularly sensitive sort of guy.’

‘Actually I was going to apologise to you, for my friends.’

They both laughed. They had both been thinking the same thing. Lucy had such a sweet smile. James really felt at ease with her. Walking along the street in her company felt good.

‘Yes, in some ways the three of them are a good match. Actually, you know Lucy, there was something I wanted to ask you. Do you like Italian food? There’s an Italian restaurant I pass going to work, and I’ve always wanted to try it.’

‘I love Italian food! Which restaurant do you mean, there are a couple of Italian places around?’

‘The one just along from that big shopping mall, Vittorio’s it’s called.’

‘Oh, yes, it’s nice there. Actually you would probably like the interior decor, being an architect. It’s really been designed well. Not that I’m an expert, like you. But I really like it.’

‘Brilliant. Would you like to come with me?’

‘James, that would be so nice. I would love to.’

James wasn’t worried about getting in too deep. For now he felt good in Lucy’s company. Maybe Dave was right. You just go out together a bit, get to know each other, and see how it goes. Eating out together, having a chat, didn’t necessarily mean you had to take things to the next level. He was feeling good about it all. Lucy was very nice. Why not get to know her a bit better? What harm could come from that?

It was late Sunday morning, and Lucy and Vicky were chatting, on the phone, about how Lucy’s dinner date had gone with James. Lucy just couldn’t control herself. She felt so light. So free. She had never felt so good in her life. The previous evening with James had been like a dream to her. Everything had been perfect. A lovely meal, a little wine, neither of them were big drinkers, but a couple of glasses of lovely Italian wine had helped the mood along. After the meal they had gone for a walk, and sat on a bench in a park for a while, and just talked. The conversation had flowed freely, talking about everything, and nothing. Normally she was socially inept, but with James it had all

seemed so natural that she had found her voice. If there was any such thing as a dream date, that had been it. Without a doubt it had been the most romantic evening of her life. She knew that in James she had found the man she had always been looking for.

‘Vicky, it was just so fantastic! We had a lovely meal, and he is just so interesting to talk to. Afterwards we went for a walk. I feel so good with him. I’m sure he feels the same way too. We really are made for each other. It was the best evening I’ve ever had, it was incredible. Oh Vicky, I think I’m falling in love with him!’

Vicky intervened, quite firmly.

‘Lucy, listen to me! Slow down! Whatever you do, don’t say anything like that to James. You will scare him off. Lucy, dial it back! Lucy! Are you listening to me? Hold yourself back, for God’s sake. Don’t let James know that you feel like that. You’ve got to play this cool.’

Vicky was obviously annoyed with how far Lucy had already taken everything. She didn’t like it one little bit.

‘I know. I didn’t say anything to him. But this is how I feel. Vicky, I’ve never felt so good in my life. I feel so good with him. I’m positive he feels it too. What’s wrong with that? I thought you would be happy for me. Finally my life is coming together. I’ve finally found someone, someone to love, someone to love me.’

Lucy ran her hand over her shoulder, and imagined how it would be to feel James’s hand caressing her. That was what had been missing in her life. Finally, after waiting so long, she had found her true love. Her eyes watered up with tears. Tears of joy.

Vicky knew she had some serious explaining to do. Lucy needed advice, a lot of advice, on how to handle her burgeoning romance. Lucy needed a serious wake up call.

‘Lucy, I am happy for you. Really, but just listen here, you. While you two love birds were off having your architectural tour on Friday evening, Emma and me got the low down from Dave. Now you listen, this is important. James is still in a bit of a fragile state, after his separation. But that’s not even the half of it. About four years ago his daughter died. She was only barely three years old, and she died of some unforeseen heart defect. He’s been thrown into a dark place. That’s something you don’t get over. Ever.’

Lucy came out of her dream state. Her feet landed solidly on the ground. The news her friend was relaying came as a bit of a shock to her.

‘I didn’t know that. He told me about the separation from his wife, but he never mentioned his daughter.’

‘According to Dave he never speaks about it to anyone. It’s just too hard for him. That’s why he didn’t come to the bar the week before. He likes you, for sure, but he really wants to take things slowly. Slowly, Lucy! If you push him, if you let him know how much you like him, you will just end up pushing him away.’

Vicky’s voice had a ring of insistence to it. Lucy knew she should listen to her friend’s advice. After all, she knew that Vicky was more experienced in these matters. Which, to be honest, wouldn’t be that hard, considering her own dismal track record with

men. She doubted anyone could know less about these things than her.

‘OK, I understand. That makes sense. No, you are right. Anyway, I’m just telling this to you. I won’t say it to him, I promise. I will take it easy with him, but I’m not going to pretend that it’s just a casual thing for me. I don’t think he’s the sort of person to go for something casual, either. He’s such a genuine person. That wouldn’t be his style.’

Vicky knew it was time to set up the rules of the game. Her friend was new to this sport, and didn’t fully understand the rules. It was time for a team huddle.

‘Right, here’s the plan, and Emma will be calling you through the week to make sure you understand it, too. I will see to that. You continue to see him, without pushing him. Let him come to you. let him decide when he wants to go out, not you. Wait for him to take things to the next level, when he’s ready. You don’t bombard him with messages on social media. You exchange little bits and pieces, but hold yourself back! Don’t go crazy with the messages! That can really freak a guy out. Plus James is actually quite a reserved guy, submerging him with messages would just end up scaring him off. Are you getting any of this? Lucy, is any of this getting through?’

Lucy could tell from the tone of her friend’s voice that she was worried about how Lucy was handling the situation. She would follow her friend’s advice. She welcomed it really. Actually she needed it. Like a good team needed a coach. What she needed was to have a relationship coach. Someone who could see the bigger picture. Someone who knew the rules, and regulations, of the dating game. She would follow her coach’s instructions. This was a game she wanted to win, and she had a good coach to see her through to the finish line. Two of them, really.

‘I understand, really I do. I really appreciate your advice, God knows how little I know about dating, and relationships. I will follow your advice, I promise. I just want you and Emma to know how I feel. James is the man I have been waiting for, all my life. I will never, ever, find another man like him. But don’t worry, I will do as you say, to the letter. Actually, I really appreciate your advice. I’ve been waiting so long for a relationship like this, but now that it has arrived I realise just how little I really know about these things. I really do need your help. I don’t want to ruin things, before they even start.’

On hearing that her advice was getting through, Vicky’s tone of voice softened.

‘Well, don’t you worry, we are both here for you. We will help you navigate your way through the minefields of a relationship. Emma and me have become experts at that, after all our years of marriage. Just because you are married doesn’t mean that you don’t accidentally walk into a minefield every now and then. Plus I have added Dave as a friend on social media, so I will be able to get the low down on how James is feeling, through the back channels. Dave is really keen on this all working out, too.’

‘Can we meet up, the three of us, through the week? I would really appreciate some advice on the sexual side. I haven’t been to bed with a man for such a long time. I’m scared I will do it all wrong.’

Vicky laughed.

‘Oh, Lucy, you’re such a hopeless case, really! No, not at all. We will not tell you what to do in bed! Listen, we don’t tell you what we do in bed, that’s private stuff that remains between the couple. When it happens you will be fine. My God, you are a bag of nerves aren’t you? Believe me, sex hasn’t changed since you last did it. The equipment you use is still the same old stuff. When the time is right it will all just come naturally. Don’t worry about that. But even there, let him be the one who initiates things. Wait until he’s ready.’

Lucy knew that that would not be a problem for her. She had never initiated a sexual encounter in her life. She didn’t even know how to. She would definitely be happy to leave that up to James.

‘Have you heard from him yet, this morning?’

‘No, but he did say he was going to go for a run, out at the beach. He keeps himself in good shape.’

‘OK, if you don’t hear from him by lunchtime, you can send him off a message. Something like...’ What a lovely evening we had last night. Thanks, so much. Enjoy your Sunday’...and that’s all, you understand? Casual, keep it casual!’

‘Alright, I will. Don’t worry I won’t push him. I’m sure you are right.’

Lucy knew that her friend’s advice was sound. She would follow it to the letter. She definitely didn’t want to ruin this relationship by pushing too fast, too soon. This would be her last chance ever at finding her one true love. There was no need to rush it, and she certainly didn’t want to scare James off. She would follow the relationship rules laid down by her friends. She would study those rules, and practise them, as if she was back at school, trying out for the school hockey team. Those rules would become her ‘Ten Commandments’ by which she lived. She would start a religion based around those ten commandments, well, thinking about it there actually already was one, but she would start her own, personal version. She would write a book on the subject: ‘The Rules of Dating: As Dictated by Vicky and Emma - An insider’s view.’ Inside her heart Lucy knew that her life would never be the same again. Her loneliness, her sadness, was now a thing of the past. From now on her life would be full of love and joy. She had waited so long. She had suffered so much. Now, finally, she knew it had all been worth it. She had found the love of her life.

5. The flux of life

Vicky's day, as usual, started early. She was always the first to get up. In all honesty, if she didn't she was pretty sure that everyone else would just stay in bed all day. Sometimes she was tempted to put that idea to the test. She would pretend she overslept, and watch the catastrophic results. Maybe then people would realise just how important she was to the punctual running of the household, instead of just taking her for granted. Maybe then they would realise that breakfast didn't just materialise on the kitchen table, and the day's clothes didn't jump out of the cupboard all by themselves, and conveniently lay down on the bed, ready to be worn. With a sigh, she slipped out from under the sheets. That would be for another time. That day would have to wait. She had a really busy day ahead of her, and couldn't afford to get behind schedule, before even starting. Apart from getting Mike up and out to work, she had to get the kids, Terrence and Abigail, ready for school. Then she would have to fly off to do a four hour shift at the supermarket, on the till. She already had a headache just thinking about that. Rows of faceless, rude people all with something to complain about. Did they really think that she, on the cash register, was responsible for the correct labeling of the products? Could she really know if next week the bananas would be on special offer, because someone had read on the internet that there was a worldwide glut of bananas? How in God's name would she be able to tell if a watermelon was ripe, or not? Years of studying at university to end up doing a job that an 18 year old junky could easily perform. Actually the effects of the drugs would probably make the day pass easier. Just what did you answer to some idiot knocking on a watermelon, asking you:

'Do you think this sounds like a good one?'

Sometimes she would fantasise that a voice from inside the watermelon would answer:

'Hey, you wanna stop knocking already, you're giving me a headache.'

Who would have thought that such an easy job could be such hard work? Anyway, now that thankfully Abigail had started school things seemed to be improving, slowly. She didn't need to ask her mother to look after Abigail so often. For some reason that always seemed to end in an argument. Weren't grandparents supposed to dote on their grandchildren? Wasn't it supposed to be a great pleasure for them to see their grandkids as much as possible? That certainly didn't seem to be the case with Vicky's mum. It always seemed to be more of an intrusion, than anything else. In any case Abigail was now in school, and so she had a bit more free time. Maybe, just maybe, she could start to think about the possibility of looking for a better job. At least that thought made it easier

for her as she prepared the day for everyone. She wanted to have everything ready for them all before waking them from their slumbers, and ruining their pleasant dreams with the reality of just another day to get through. First on the list was always Mike. She gently shook him awake.

‘Up you get, Mike. You don’t want to be late.’

‘What? Already? I’ve only just gone to bed. Are you sure it’s not Sunday today?’

‘Come on, move it!’

‘Hey, come here, you.’

He would always give her a little cuddle in the morning, before ignoring her completely. Mike, as usual, was the easiest one of all. He was Mr. Last Minute Man. He would fly through eating some toast with marmalade, drink his coffee, and do his bathroom routine all in a flash. Before you knew it he would be dressed, and out the door, off for another day in the office, where he worked as an accountant. The same could definitely not be said for the kids. Each morning was almost like a rerun of the second world war, except with the commanding officer, Mike, absent. It was left to the lower ranks, those with far less authority, to sort out all the battle plans, and try and coerce the troops into position. Vicky had worked out a routine of promises, threats, and lies, all played when, and where, necessary. Anything to get through the difficult morning skirmishes. It brought her almost a sense of victory when she would have finally dropped the two of them off at their schools, even though really, that was only the start of her day. Sometimes she wondered where she got the energy from, and for how long she would be able to maintain that high level of stamina. For how many more years would her life be so thankless? Mind you, she thought, slowly slowly change was happening. Now that Abigail was going to school it meant that she had less fights with her mother about looking after her, while she worked. Still she quite often needed to ask her to pick up Abigail from school in the afternoon, which, rather than a fight, was now really only a minor argument, so maybe in a few decades she would actually have a life of her own? Probably not, but at least it was a thought that brought her comfort in the middle of her chaotic, tempestuous life. She looked at her watch. Right on schedule. She loved that. Vicky was sure she deserved an award for being able to pull off all the minor miracles that she managed to achieve, although, in reality, a little thank you probably wouldn’t go astray every now and then. She parked the car outside the coffee shop where she had arranged to meet Dave. She really wanted to sort out things for Lucy, and felt that it would be better to talk to Dave in person. The two of them had exchanged messages, but they were so limiting, and impersonal. Lucy had quite obviously fallen in love with James, who was anything but ready for something like that, after all that he had been through. Vicky hoped that Dave and her would be able to guide the two of them through the difficult passages ahead. As she entered the coffee shop she saw Dave already sitting at a table, waiting for her. She gave him a wave, as she walked over to the table. In reply Dave looked her up and down, starting from her legs, and stopping briefly at her breasts,

before looking at her face. With a slight sense of embarrassment Vicky felt her nipples harden. My God, she thought, how long has it been since anyone had shown sexual interest in me?

‘Hi Dave, I’m glad you could make it. Can I get you a coffee?’

‘Hey, you sit down. I’ll get them in.’

Vicky sat down, and watched Dave as he went to the serving area to order the coffees. He really was a good looking man. It was nice to meet someone new. Plus, with their shared interest in the Lucy/James affair they had plenty to talk about. Not that she thought for a moment that Dave would ever be stuck for words. He was a real chatterbox. Plus his stories were always really funny. He told them well. He had perfected the art of the expert raconteur. Dave returned with their coffees.

‘Here you are. You know what Vicky, that dress really suits you. It shows of your body perfectly. You really do have great taste in clothes.’

‘Thanks for noticing! It’s not new but I really do like the fit.’

In the car she had the smock she would have to change into for her supermarket duty. Thank goodness she hadn’t worn that! Mind you, with the many hats she wore through her day, she was used to quick changes from one outfit to another as the various phases of her day demanded. Vicky felt good. The mood was pleasant.

‘How nice to start the day with a relaxing coffee. You know, I couldn’t tell you the last time I did that. Definitely a couple of kids ago!’

‘Yeah, Vicky, I know what you mean there. Having kids really changes everything, doesn’t it? It’s like your own life gets put on hold, and their lives take over everything. It’s almost like we get cryogenically frozen, only to be thawed out when they are grown up, and out on their own.’

Vicky laughed in delight.

‘Yes, that’s exactly right! Well, I suppose in a way it’s our fault really for letting that happen. We should still be able to carve out a little time for ourselves. Like this, this is nice.’

Dave gave her the sweetest of smiles.

‘Yes, it is nice.’

The streets were crowded with people out doing some shopping, or, like James and Lucy, sightseeing. On such a beautifully sunny spring morning no one wanted to stay inside. The old town was looking splendid in the morning sun. The cobbled streets invoking thoughts of times gone by, people, long since gone, who had once walked these very same streets. Lucy smiled at her James.

‘I love hearing your inside knowledge on the construction of these marvelous places. I’ve always loved looking at old buildings like churches, castles, and just old houses like these ones, but I’ve never really thought about the people who designed them, and built them. If you had been around a couple of hundred years ago that would have been your

job.'

'Actually when I look at them, that's really the main thing that I focus on. The way they were designed, and the techniques used in the construction process. Quite often, in my mind, I try and imagine the step by step process. It must have been a lot harder back then, drawing out all the plans by hand, I'm pretty glad I wasn't working as an architect in those days.'

Lucy gently squeezed his hand.

'I'm glad you weren't too, or you would be long dead by now.'

James laughed along with Lucy, he enjoyed her company a lot. They had a lot of fun together. He was really pleased about how she never put pressure on him to push things along. Obviously she was just taking it easy too, to see how it would all go. They had been out together a few times, and, apart from a little kiss on the cheek when they would part at the end of the evening, there hadn't been any move towards taking the relationship to the next level. He liked that about her. They both seemed to have the same feeling about that. Take it easy, and see what, if anything, develops. They were almost like the best of friends. No insistence, no pressure. Just good company.

'The one big advantage, back then, was the abundance of cheap labour. A lot of cathedrals were actually built in stages, over a hundred years, or even more. Quite often generations of the same family would work on them as stonemasons, or carpenters. These days, with labour costs, that would be just out of the question.'

'How strange, to spend your whole life working on a building that you never saw completed.'

Lucy always followed his conversation with interest. When it came to architecture he could talk all day. Not many people were really interested in the nuts and bolts of the building process, they were usually just happy to look at the completed article. James had a real passion for the little details, the minutiae of construction, and design.

'Well, not really, it wasn't really like that. They would usually complete a part of a cathedral, which would be then used. Then they would add a wing, after which they would build the wing on the other side. Then they would work on the side altars. Quite often the actual main altar area would be the last part built. So actually each generation of workers would see their part of it completed, and put into use, although definitely at a slow pace. The original designers would never see it completed. Hey, what can I tell you, it's a hard life being an architect! People don't realise the cross we have to carry! We sacrifice our lives in the creation of beauty for future generations.'

The laughter flowed freely, as it always did between the two of them.

'It really is fascinating to think about that side of these old buildings. It really is incredible to think how much of a long term plan they would follow.'

'That has definitely changed. These days most modern skyscrapers really only have a commercial lifespan of at most 30 years. We have gone from one extreme to the other.'

'True enough! Well, James, sorry to break the mood, but I'm starting to get hungry.'

Where do you want to have lunch? There are some lovely restaurants tucked away along these old streets.'

'It's too nice a day to have lunch inside some dark, dank building, built by people long since dead.'

They both laughed. The mood was good.

'I think we should just let their ghosts rest in peace.'

'Well then James, what do you propose?'

'Why don't we pick up some stuff from a supermarket, and have a picnic out at the beach?'

'Fantastic! Oh, what a lovely idea. Actually, there was a little minimarket back near where you parked your car. They probably have most of what we need. What do you say to some bread, ham, cheese, olives, things like that?'

'I say let's do it.'

As they walked back towards the shop, James was tempted to hold Lucy's hand. He resisted the temptation, but it felt to him like he could develop something with Lucy. Something casual. It felt right. Also, with her relaxed attitude, he was sure that it would all go nice and slowly. Just an easy-going relationship. She seemed to be on the same page as him as far as that went.

As Lucy had predicted, they found just what they were looking for at the minimarket, and left for the beach. James knew just the right spot. He would take Lucy to his bench, at a fairly isolated beach where he loved going. It was the place he would always go to think things through, and let his mind relax, and just drift where it wanted. It was a lovely spot, surrounded by lush green vegetation. All you could see around you was the sea, and the surrounding woods, with not a house, new or old, in sight. There were benches placed here and there along the beachfront on lush green, well maintained grass. He was sure she would love it. Lost in their friendly chatter, it didn't take them long to drive there.

'Here you go, look, you can see the ocean just around this corner.'

'Oh, how lovely. I haven't been out here for years. It's such a lovely spot. Is this where you come for your famous runs along the beach?'

'One of the places, yes. I spread myself around. There are too many nice places to just limit yourself to one. This is where I come to have a swim.'

After parking the car they set themselves up on a bench, James's favourite bench.

'I can't believe you have already been in for a swim. The water must be so cold. I can barely get in in the middle of summer.'

'What can I tell you, it's good for the circulation!'

'You're crazy!'

They spread out their bounty, and started eating. The food was nice, the surroundings were fantastic, and the company was good. James looked at Lucy, as she ate. She looked so delicate. So beautiful. In that moment the thought came to him that he was ready to

make love with her. It was time for life to continue, even in that department. He couldn't put his life on hold permanently, just because things hadn't worked out in the past. Dave was right, not that he would ever admit that to him. The thought of his crowing would never let James do that, but, really, it was true. Life had to go on. He couldn't remain blocked by things out of his control. He knew that Lucy liked him, and that she was definitely a nice person. What more could he look for? There would never be any guarantees, with anyone. He certainly didn't fancy the idea of being forever single. So maybe it was time? Maybe with Lucy he could get back out there, get his feet wet again. In any case, if it didn't work out, he could call it quits. If he realised that it wasn't going the way he wanted, he could just end things. Nicely. Without having to hurt anyone. Plus, she seemed to be looking for something casual, as well. With the two of them looking for the same easy thing it could all work out quite well. Lost in his thoughts, and in Lucy's lovely company, he hadn't noticed the change in the weather. Dark clouds had rolled in, the day had changed. The mood was good, but the day had turned sombre. All of a sudden a massive downpour rained down upon them, out of nowhere.

'Come on Lucy, run for the car!'

'Wait, we can't just leave our rubbish here.'

Lucy threw all the leftovers into a shopping bag, before running to the car. By the time they got into the car they were both soaking wet, and cold.

'Where the hell did that come from?' James asked, still in a bit of a daze.

'James, head to my place, quick! It's closer. We've got to get out of these wet clothes before we freeze to death!'

James turned the heater up to maximum, and drove as fast as he could. Even he felt really cold, and he knew he was a lot more resistant to the cold than Lucy. It was only about a twenty minute drive, but he could see poor Lucy shivering, beside him.

'I'm so sorry, Lucy!'

'What for? Do you control the weather?'

'I didn't realise that the weather was changing, I was so distracted by the food, and the lovely spot, and everything.'

'Hey, me too, James. Don't worry, we will survive..... maybe. That's if we don't get pneumonia, or something, and die choking, and spluttering. Death by picnic.'

Even in this state, they could joke about things, that was one of the aspects of Lucy's personality that James really liked.

'I'm glad you can see the lighter side of things. I really feel rather guilty. It was my idea to go there.'

She reached over, and put her hand briefly on his shoulder. Even in his wet, cold state, the feel of her hand felt nice.

'It was a lovely idea. There was nothing in the weather forecast about rain, I checked this morning. It's not your fault, God! You aren't responsible for these things.'

'Wet, cold, and laughing. Careful, you will make me crash the car!' In no time at all

they arrived at her place. He parked outside Lucy's house, and they both ran to the door. It was still raining cats and dogs, but by this time it didn't make much difference. They were already both completely soaking wet.

'Sorry, James, but I'm having the first shower.'

'Of course, don't worry about me. I'll just wait here dying slowly, freezing to death.'

James was just kidding around. Of course Lucy would have the first shower. He was worried about how cold she was.

'Very funny. Listen, in the meantime take off your wet clothes, and put on this dressing gown. I know it will be a bit small for you, but it's all I've got.'

Lucy gave him a flannel dressing gown, and disappeared into the bathroom. James took off his soaking clothes, and put on the dressing gown. It was way too small for him, but at least it covered up the necessary parts. It would do. After what seemed like barely a minute Lucy came out of the bathroom, wearing a sort of silky Japanese kimono.

'That was fast. Are you sure you have warmed up enough?'

'Of course, silly. Now get in the shower, and warm up. I will put your clothes in the dryer. Move it!'

James didn't need much prompting. Within seconds he was under a hot spray of water. The hot water cascading over him felt good. Actually Lucy was right. After just a minute, or so, he was back to his normal self. The cold just a memory. He dried himself off with a fresh scented towel, and put on his bathrobe. Lucy's bathroom was very orderly. She was obviously a very neat and tidy person, not like most women that James had known. Usually a woman's bathroom was more like a junkyard, with objects strewn everywhere. Half empty little bottles of who knew what would normally be found lying where they had been casually discarded. But that was definitely not the case with Lucy. The two of them had a lot of similarities. Living on your own it could be easy to give in to the temptation to let things go. For James it was important to be clean, and tidy. Orderly was good. He finished drying his hair, and left the bathroom. Lucy was waiting for him in the kitchen. As ever, she had a lovely smile on her face.

'I've put your clothes in the dryer, and put on the kettle. How about a nice cup of tea?'

Seeing her there, dressed just in her skimpy kimono, knowing that she was naked underneath, was just too much for James. He could feel the blood rushing to his penis. The excitement built in him. The moment had come. He wanted her. He wanted to make love with her. He moved towards her, and took her in his arms. She put her arms around him, and they kissed.

The hot shower had felt so good. Lucy really hated the rain, and so, as always, had checked the weather forecast before leaving in the morning, to go sightseeing with James. The forecast had been for no rain, so she had gone out without an umbrella, or raincoat. It was supposed to have been a lovely spring day. Lucy was a bit annoyed with herself for

having been so trusting of the weather forecast. She should have been more prepared. The rain had ruined what had been an absolutely marvelous day. Anyway, they had made it home, without too much damage. The next time she would make sure that she was better organised, and maybe a bit less trusting of the weather forecasters. She would start to think of them in the same way as used car salesmen, and keep a wary eye on them. Lucy could have stayed under the cascading hot water for hours, but she felt a bit guilty about James waiting, soaking wet. She knew he would be feeling very cold, and needed to warm up. She quickly finished her shower, dried off, and left the bathroom, but not before tidying up a little. She was a very neat and tidy person, and didn't want James to see the bathroom in a mess. With few words James headed in for a hot shower, and Lucy set about putting his wet clothes in the dryer. She was absolutely dying for a nice hot cup of tea. She put the kettle on, and prepared a couple of cups. Without a doubt James would love one, too. That was just what you needed after getting caught in a downpour. Before the water had boiled James came into the kitchen. He looked so funny in that tight dressing gown.

'I've put your clothes in the dryer, and put on the kettle. How about a nice cup of tea?'

Lucy smiled at James. He looked so cute in the dressing gown. Then, with a great surprise, she saw the bulge growing rapidly in the dressing gown. The blood rushed to her head, as she realised that James was getting an erection. The moment she had been waiting for had arrived, but she was so flustered she didn't know what she should do. She was frozen to the spot. The moment she had been waiting for had come, but she didn't know how to react to it. James came towards her, took her in his strong arms, and they kissed. It was the most beautiful thing that Lucy had ever experienced in her life. With her arms wrapped around his body she felt so light, and free. The intimacy that she had been waiting for for so long had finally arrived. She could feel his erection pressed up against her body. The thought of being desired by James was almost too much for her emotions to handle. They kissed passionately, but slowly. James was so delicate, so gentle. He took control of the situation. He led her to the bedroom, where they kissed some more. James's hands explored her body, slipping underneath her kimono. His hands brushed over her back, and down across her buttocks. The feel of his hands was so sensual. So soft. One of his hands slid down her thigh, and turned in, coming to a stop just before reaching her vagina. Lucy was breathless with the pleasure she felt. James untied her kimono, and slid it over her shoulders, onto the floor. Without having noticed it happen, she saw that James was also naked. He bent down and kissed her breasts, delicately pulling at her nipples with his lips. His hand brushed along her inner thigh, and slowly lingered across her vagina. Lucy felt like she was in a dream. She didn't have much experience at making love, and had never been very forward about it. But that was then, now she was with the love of her life. It felt so natural to her, so easy. She slid her hand down across his stomach, and took his penis in her hand. James gave a little groan

of delight as her hand caressed his erection. James moved her onto the bed, and lay down on top of her. Lucy opened her legs for him, and guided him inside her. It all felt so instinctive, as if it was preordained. As his penis entered her Lucy wanted to scream out;

‘James. I love you. I love you so much. You are the love of my life. I will always love you!’

But she didn’t.

Instead she bit into her lip, and said nothing. Lucy could hear the words of advice from her friends ringing in her ears. She knew that they were right. She desperately needed to control herself. She had to pretend to take things slowly. She knew it was far too early in their relationship to say those sort of things. Emma had told her that it would be best to wait until James said that first. She had to keep a calm exterior. In any case, there was no hurry. Time was on her side. She was exactly where she wanted to be, where she had desired to be almost all her life. Her beautiful man was slowly, delicately, making love to her. She wrapped her arms around him, as he repeatedly penetrated her. Lucy knew, in that moment, that her life was just beginning. The man she loved dearly was now her lover, officially. From that point on, they would be a couple. It didn’t matter that she couldn’t tell him how much she loved him. Having him with her, holding him, being with him, that was what mattered. She would love him, she would hold him in her heart, waiting for him to be the one to express their love for the first time. She just absolutely knew that he felt the same way she did. The only difference was that James was more cautious, he wanted to arrive at that point a bit more slowly, but she knew in her heart that they were meant for each other. In all probability he was right. Without a doubt both Emma and Vicky were right. Probably these things were best taken slowly. The important thing was that they were now with each other. Finally, she had found her true love, she wouldn’t ruin things by overreacting, or expressing her love before James was ready for that. She wouldn’t push him too fast. Her heart was so full of love. Her life had become that which she had always dreamed of, even though she had almost totally given up any chance of ever finding it. Together with her one true love, they would build a beautiful life. Lucy finally had it all. The feel of her lover inside her was the most beautiful pleasure she had ever experienced. She would hold her man, she would love her man. James would be her life, her reason for living. She had never known that such happiness was possible. As she buried her head in his strong neck, tears of joy trickled down her face.

6. Unexpected surprises

The spring days had slowly turned to early summer. The mornings were still a bit cool, but generally the afternoons were bathed in beautiful rays of warming sun. The warmth of the days seemed to have electrified James. He and Lucy had been seeing each other for around two months, and James was feeling pretty good. Even his job was going well. Just quietly he had been slipping some innovative features into his designs, and the architectural company he worked for had been winning more, and more, contracts. It hadn't gone unnoticed by his bosses. He was considered a bit of a rising star at the firm, something which made him laugh really. Compared to the level of designs he had previously been working on, at his old job, in his old life, it was all pretty tame. He thought of the work he was doing as being 'low budget, with a bit of a flourish.' Still, he enjoyed it. It felt good to be experimenting with design again. He had always enjoyed being creative. The more he thought about it, the more he realised that creativity shouldn't be pushed, as it had been at his previous job. Creativity need to be nurtured, cultivated with care and attention, not expected as being the norm. At his old job nothing had ever seemed to be good enough. Something more exiting, more audacious had always been expected. Innovation had become the standard, almost the mundane. Now he could work at a slower pace, without all that pressure on him, and his little design flourishes were greatly admired, and appreciated. He enjoyed his work again. He enjoyed being creative, but at his own pace. It really was like starting his career all over again. His whole life, really. His relationship with Lucy was going well, also without pressure. She, like him, was happy to take things easy, and see where the road led them. It was a fairly casual affair for both of them. Each enjoying the other's company, but without being fixated on where it would lead them. To a certain extent it was almost like two really good friends, who also slept together. It felt so good to James to live his life free from expectations. He had never really believed all the talk about people suffering from stress. James had always considered the idea of stress to be a bit of a modern invention, to cover a lot of different problems. Now, though, he firmly believed that he himself had been suffering badly from stress. Stress at home, and burnout at work. Being a very private, reserved person, he didn't like talking about those sorts of things much, but with Dave he discussed it all freely. He knew he could rely on Dave to keep their discussions private, and it was good, almost therapeutic, to talk to someone about it all. The two friends were sitting in Dave's garden, soaking up the pleasant sunshine, and drinking some beer. James was relaxing in the afternoon's warmth, and sharing his thoughts with his good friend.

‘I hate to say ‘I told you so’, but.... hey, listen to me, my friend! The Master!’

‘To be honest, Dave, I think you actually love to say that. I’ve lost track of how many times you have said it so far.’

‘When you are right, you are right. I told you, Lucy would be good for you. Was I right, or was I right?’

‘What about this? How about being right, and humble! Why don’t you try that for a change?’

‘Sorry, man, not my style. When I’m right, which happens quite frequently, I might add, I expect the world to know it. Anyway, you know I am just joking, more or less. Really I couldn’t be happier for you. You have really changed. You seem so happy, so relaxed. You are more like the old Jimmy, from our old days back at university. It’s good to see you like this, man, really good. You know, I had always been so proud of you, of your winning designs, and the buildings you had worked on, that I had never realised the price it had cost you. You never spoke of the pressure cooker you were working in.’

James took a drink from his bottle of beer, and reflected on what Dave had said.

‘You know why? I hadn’t even realised it myself. It had just sort of grown, developed slowly over the years. At first that had been a dream job, but over time it had started to weigh heavy on me, without me even realising it. It wasn’t until I got out, and into an easier work environment, that I understood it myself. I guess when you are too close to something it’s hard to get perspective.’

James looked around Dave’s back yard, with its nicely kept lawn, well trimmed hedges, and a well organised play area for Penelope.

‘You know, Dave, you really have it all. A beautiful family, and a really nice house. Not many people can say they have it all so good. It’s just great being out here in your garden.’

Dave furtively looked around, towards the back door of his house.

‘Actually, you know, I’ve got a bit of something new on myself. I’ve been waiting for the right time to tell you.’

Dave’s demeanor had gone instantly serious, something which told James that what his friend had to tell him was big, very big. Dave never acted seriously. It just wasn’t his style. James was instantly worried.

‘Hey, what’s up Dave? What’s going on?’

James was apprehensive, for Dave to drop his jocular style, it meant something important was weighing on his mind.

‘Well, I’m pretty sure that you won’t approve, but just hear me out. I’ve met someone...’

James felt the blood rush to his head. He fairly exploded with rage.

‘Dave, are you bloody crazy! What the hell are you doing?’

‘Just listen, will you James? It didn’t start like that. We just got in touch, talking about things. Nothing was ever planned, it just sort of happened.’

James couldn't believe what he was hearing. Dave and Maureen were the tightest couple he had ever known. They were fantastic together. They had developed a tremendous relationship based on Dave's lightness, and Maureen's more sturdy, pragmatic approach to life. A combination that worked really well.

'Dave, don't be a bloody idiot! You have such a good person in your life. Maureen is such a rock. You just couldn't find a better companion to journey through life with. And what about Penelope? Are you really prepared to risk all that? This is bloody crazy! You do realise what you are doing here, don't you?'

James was both shocked, and very irate with his friend. What Dave had was something most people could never even dream of having.

'It didn't really go like that. We just became friends, dealing with some stuff we have in common, and then it all just happened. None of it was planned, James, it just sort of came about. One day our friendship sort of turned physical. Plus, you know how it is, after many years of married life, the flame starts to burn lower. I love Maureen, you know that, but sexually to have someone new, well, it's pretty exciting.'

'Shit, man, I don't like this at all. You are really playing with fire here, you know?'

'Yeah, I know. Remember though, you separated. Things do change. Sometimes life pops it's head up, when you are least expecting it to.'

'Hey, I understand, but you are 'Dave and Maureen'. I always thought of you two as being the most solid couple I have ever known. Be careful, Dave, be very careful. This could really explode in your face.'

'Yeah, I know, I know. Can I count of your support?'

James let go of his anger. His friend was asking for his help. He punched his friend, playfully, on his arm.

'Always, Dave, always. Whatever happens, I will always be there for you. You know that. Like you have always been there for me. It's just that I'm worried for you. You have so much. Do you really want to put everything you have on the line? Who is she, anyway? Do I know her?'

'No, you don't know her. And anyway, I'm not telling you who she is. That's neither here nor there. I just wanted you to know what's going on with me.'

'Well, OK Dave, I just hope you know what you are doing. You're really going out on a limb here.'

'Come on, tell me how it's all going with Lucy!'

'Good idea, let's change the subject. Who would have expected that from you?'

James knew all of Dave's tricks, but to be honest he felt a bit strange talking about Dave playing around on Maureen, so he was actually quite happy to drop that topic. They would come back to it another day. Of that he had no doubt.

'Yeah, well, it's going really well. Incredibly she doesn't put any pressure on me to bump it up to another level. She seems to be happy with the way things are. It's all really casual. She doesn't even send me a lot of messages. She answers mine, and throws in a

few of hers, but actually she sort of leaves me in peace most of the time. I think it's all a bit new for her, too, and she's just letting the cards fall where they will, and waiting to see if things develop further. No pressure, no expectations. We're both just in a pretty casual place.'

'That sounds sort of how you feel too, no? It looks like you are both on the same page there. I'm happy to hear that. You know what? I bump into all the old crowd here and there, but I don't tell them anything much about you. I just tell them your job is going well, and that you are so busy we don't get to see each other much. I know you want to keep things private, but you know, they care for you, man. I don't think you should have cut them all out like that. There's some good people there.'

'Yeah, I know. It's just that it all got so complicated. They sort of got caught up in the middle, and I really didn't know how to handle it all.'

'Cutting and running wasn't much of a game plan.'

Dave was being Dave again. James was pleased to have him back.

'Admittedly I probably could have handled it all better, but that was a really hard period for me. To be honest I'm just glad I managed to get through it all in one piece. Now I don't really feel like going back to any of that. I'm just going to focus on moving forward.'

'Yeah, I hear you. I know how hard it was on you. I'm just saying, there are some good people out there who care for you.'

The back door of the house opened, and the two guys turned to see Maureen poking her head out.

'You two cohorts ready for another beer?'

Dave turned towards her, and called out a reply.

'Yeah, hon. Keep 'em coming. Never stop the flow of the beer!'

James's face broke into a smile. He just couldn't believe his friend. It was hard enough for him to handle one relationship at a time, and here was Dave acting as if all was normal, as he walked on his tightrope, with no safety net below. His smile broadened as he looked at his friend. He would make a fine juggler, keeping a number of balls up in the air at the same time. Probably while standing on just one leg. The thought struck him that you never stop learning about people, and what they can get up to. He thought he had known all of Dave's little quirks, and yet here he was, genuinely surprised by this new turn of events. Maureen arrived with a couple of bottles of beer.

'Here you go, guys. James, you're driving back, aren't you?'

'Yes, but don't worry Maureen, this is my last one. I'll be fine.'

Maureen was the picture of beauty, and efficiency combined. Her face was very pretty. She was slim, and very fit. She was a very energetic person, always rushing from one job to the next. She worked part time in an office, looked after the house, and was chief driver for Penelope, rushing her around to all those places that kids had to be. James felt a twinge of guilt as he took the bottle of beer from her. He almost would have

preferred to not have known about Dave's other woman. Maureen had become a great friend over the years. He really like her, a lot.

'Right, you two, I'm off to see Beth for a cup of coffee, and then I'm going to pick up Penelope from her friend's party. You be careful with that drink there, mister, you hear me?'

James raised into the air his hand holding the bottle of beer.

'Loud and clear. Got it. No more than another three or four beers, right you are.'

James and Maureen laughed together. James was surprised to find how easy it was to carry on as normal, even when you knew such devastating information. Life really was an obstacle course. You just had to keep on going, jumping over each obstacle as you came to it. There was no rule book, or set of instructions to follow. You just had to be prepared for whatever was hurled in your path. And those hurdles just never seemed to stop coming.

'Give me a hug, you. You will probably be gone by the time I get back. I really miss seeing you.'

James stood up and hugged Maureen. She was such a great person, Dave was really being an idiot to risk losing someone like her.

'See you soon, Maureen. Take care.'

'You too, bye.'

In a flash, she was gone.

In her wake she left a poignant silence. James turned to Dave.

'Bloody hell, Dave!'

'Yeah, I know, I know.'

The two of them sat there in silence, something rather unusual for Dave. Probably even he realised the enormity of what he had gotten involved in, and what he was risking.

The drive up to Woodside Hill was extremely pleasant. Lucy and James had decided to avoid the motorway, and to take the scenic route, it was a lot longer but took them through some absolutely beautiful green, lush countryside. In the heat of the midsummer sun the green pastures looked incredibly pretty, and fertile. Lucy had a constant smile on her face, and was absolutely beaming with joy.

'What about stopping for lunch in a nice country pub?'

'Good idea, Lucy. Then by around mid afternoon we should be at the monastery, or at least, what remains of it. The heat will be off a bit by then, so it will be nicer for looking around.'

The two of them were on a long weekend away, visiting some sites that weren't that well known, but were of great historical, and architectural interest. Architecture, always of great interest to James, was now also something that Lucy enjoyed as well. They would be spending a couple of nights together, in some B&Bs that they had booked online. By this point it was quite normal for them to sleep over at one, or the other's

place, but this would be the first time they would be together, constantly, for a few days. James was slightly uncertain about the whole idea. He was hoping that they would be able to maintain the casualness of their relationship, even under that sort of pressure. Lucy, on the other hand, saw it as a dream weekend away, leading them along their well lit path towards a life of bliss together. A path lightly sprinkled with flower petals, and illuminated by scented candles. She had been patient, and had followed the well intentioned advice of her two best friends. She wasn't going to do anything to risk losing what she had found. Everything was proceeding well, there was absolutely no reason to push James too far, too fast. Time was on her side.

'Look, James, what a lovely place. Let's stop here. It's not a pub, but it looks like an absolutely fantastic spot.'

'Sure, without a doubt they will have an outdoor eating area. Well spotted.'

James parked in the carpark of the roadside cafe and tearooms. The place was set just off the road, surrounded by a pleasant garden, and slightly hidden by some tall trees. Next to the entrance there was a chalkboard with the day's lunchtime specials.

'Homemade lasagna, that will do me.' said James.

'I am definitely going to try some of that, if you will let me, but I'm going for the chicken salad mix.'

'Listen, you. You want lasagna, you buy lasagna. Hands off my plate.'

Lucy just took his arm, and laughed. She knew that he would end up offering her more than she could even eat of his dish. That was just the generous sort of person he was.

'No beer for you, my good fellow, I want a sober driver, please.'

'So that's why you let me drive? Clever!'

'Never underestimate a woman who loves her wine!'

By this stage they had formed an easy going banter between them. The banter of good friendship, at least according to James. They found a table out on the deck, overlooking some green fields, with a small, wooded hill in the background. You couldn't want for a nicer setting for lunch. An energetic, middle aged woman took their order with great efficiency, and speed, and then dashed off in the direction of the kitchen.

'It's so beautiful here.' said Lucy. 'I would really love to end up living somewhere in the country. Somewhere like Aunty Claire's place. A beautiful spot, but not too far from all the conveniences of the city. What about you? Could you ever see yourself leaving the urban sprawl?'

'To be honest I have never really thought about it, but as you say, somewhere still handy to all the attractions of a town centre wouldn't be bad. Although, I don't really see your aunty heading into town very often. You could end up being a bit trapped in your beautiful prison.'

Lucy nodded her head in agreement.

'That's definitely her case. She never gets out. I hadn't really thought about it like

that. I guess when you just visit these lovely spots, briefly, you don't really think about the long term reality of living in a place like this, or Claire's. It's actually a bit of a horrible thought. Trapped in a beautiful cage. Surrounded by beauty, but losing all perspective of it, because it holds you there, never letting you free.'

'Yeah, well, drink your wine, and let's just enjoy the beauty of this place, without getting too philosophical about it all.'

Lucy laughed, and raised her glass.

'Cheers, my dear friend, enjoy your glass of water.'

They both laughed, as they sipped their respective drinks.

'I'm sorry that you will be missing the rugby this afternoon. I know you really wanted to watch it with Dave. It's just that with the long weekend I thought that it was a good opportunity to get away, and look at some of those nice historical remains you are always telling me about.'

'Oh, don't worry about that. Dave is away for the weekend, too. He's taken off to a mate's place, up north, for a bit of a rugby watching bonanza. Basically binge drinking, and binge watching rugby.'

'Really? Well that makes me feel a bit better. I guess everyone is taking advantage of the long weekend for a bit of a break. Vicky is away, too. Staying at a friends place.'

James's face lost its colour. He looked at Lucy, with a strange expression on his face. With hesitancy in his voice he asked;

'What? Vicky is away this weekend too?'

'Yes, she is catching up with an old friend. It's a bit funny really, I hadn't realised they were still that close.'

James put down his knife and fork, and looked across the fields, with an obviously worried demeanor.

'James? What's going on? Why are you looking like that?'

James tried to regain his composure, but was obviously upset by something.

'No, nothing. Sorry, I was just a bit distracted.'

'Out with it, mister, something is on your mind. What?'

'Really, it's nothing. I was just thinking of something. Don't worry.'

Lucy knew that something was up with James. With more insistence in her voice she continued to dig out the truth.

'James, please, I think we should be honest with each other. What has spooked you like that? I can tell that something is troubling you.'

James realised that he had been put on the spot, so he decided that he may as well come clean. He related to Lucy what he knew about Dave's affair with an unknown woman. An unknown woman who could quite possibly be Vicky, going by the sound of the latest developments. He told her what little Dave had said to him. Lucy listened to it all in a shocked silence.

'And now you think that the mystery woman could be Vicky? My God, that would

be terrible!’

‘Well, I don’t know. It’s just that with them both away for the same weekend, the suspicion is there. They did get to know each other through us, you know. I’m pretty sure they spoke a lot through the back channels.’

Lucy passed her hand across her chin, with a thoughtful expression on her face.

‘To be honest, both myself and Emma aren’t totally convinced with Vicky’s story for this weekend. The friend she is supposedly staying with is someone we haven’t really seen much of in years. I didn’t even think that they were still in touch. Emma found it a bit unusual as well. We thought that maybe she just needed a bit of time alone, away from the confusion of her busy life. You know, a break from the kids, and all that. My God, what if it’s true? Are we responsible for ruining their marriages?’

James could hear the alarmed tone on Lucy’s voice. He reached over the table, and placed his hand on hers.

‘Listen, whatever this is about, none of it is on us. We aren’t responsible for what other people get up to in their lives.’

Lucy was visibly upset. James just sat there musing, slightly dumbfounded. Of all the people Dave had to have an affair with, it had to be one of Lucy’s best friends. James tried to work through all the possible complications that this news could throw up. Lucy, too, was dwelling on the unwelcome news.

‘I’m going to phone Emma. I feel so responsible.’

Lucy went and sat at an empty table, then she got her phone out of her bag, and called her friend.

‘Hey, Em, how are you? Is this a good time?’

‘Hello, you. So how is the romantic weekend going? Off to a good start I hope? Oh, I’m so happy for you, both of you. Now don’t you go and....’

‘Listen, Em, sorry to interrupt you, but I’ve just heard something a little worrying. You know how we were both a little surprised at Vicky’s reason for heading off for the weekend? Well, I’ve just heard something a bit disquieting from James.’

Lucy could hear the demeanour of her friend’s voice change.

‘Hey, What’s going on? Tell me.’

‘Well, just recently Dave admitted to him that he has a lover. He refused to say who it is, but actually he has gone away for the long weekend too. I’m wondering if....’

Without letting Lucy finish her sentence, Emma interrupted her, with a highly animated tone to her voice.

‘Oh my God! You know, that almost makes sense. They talked a lot about you two, and I know they met for coffees a few times, to chat about the whole deal. In fact, I found that a bit surprising. They only really needed to talk about things over the phone, or through messages, there was really no need to meet up in person. Dear God, Vicky! What on earth are you doing! Lucy, you realise that she is risking everything over this? Mike is a great guy, but I doubt he would be able to get past something like this. If he found out,

he would almost certainly separate from her. What should we do?’

Emma’s voice conveyed the same sort of concern, almost panic, that Lucy felt.

‘If it’s true I don’t think there is much we can do. Probably we should keep a lid on it all, we don’t want to be responsible for getting the word out there. Do you think we should confront her with this, or just pretend we know nothing? My goodness, Em, I really don’t even know what to think. This is so big. I really hope it’s not true. Maybe it’s all just a coincidence?’

Lucy knew, even as she said the words, that she was clutching at straws, like a drowning man desperately hoping to stay afloat by clutching at nothing but a handful of air. Emma had no such illusions.

‘Good luck on that one.’

Emma was a very grounded person. She knew that two plus two always equaled four.

‘Listen, Lucy, with what we know, and Vicky’s strange behaviour, I think we may as well accept that it is true. What we should do, I’ve got no idea. I don’t even know if there is anything we can do. We are just going to have to play it by ear. What does James think about it all?’

‘He’s really cut up. He knows Dave’s wife really well. He’s known her for years, and they are good friends. Actually he’s on the phone now, probably with Dave. I’ll get back to you with any updates.’

Lucy said her goodbyes to Emma, and sat at the table reflecting on the intricacies of the situation. Also, she didn’t want to return to the table with James until he had finished his phone call, which was without a doubt with Dave.

James, meanwhile, back at his table, was also looking for clarification. He had phoned Dave.

‘James, my man, how are you? I bet you already wish you were going to be watching the rugby this afternoon, don’t you? Instead of being off galavanting around the place looking at the shattered wrecks of dead people’s lives.’

James was in no mood for Dave’s usual banter. An affair was one thing. Having it with one of Lucy’s best friends, well, that was just going too far.

‘Hey, you can cut the act. We have worked out what you are up to. You off watching rugby for the weekend, Vicky strangely looking up an old friend she hasn’t seen in years. Cut the crap, man, what the hell?’

Dave realised that the game was up, and went into defensive mode.

‘OK, OK, I know, at first glance it seems a bit over the top, but...’

‘Over the top? Shit man, she’s one of Lucy’s best friends, why the hell did you have to pick her? To not mention what it all means for Maureen, and Penelope. Just how many people’s lives are you planning on throwing to the wind here?’

James was really angry at his friend.

‘Hey, Jimmy, I didn’t go looking for any of this. Actually it all started as a favour for

you....’

‘Don’t give me any of that shit, now you’re doing this for me? That’s your excuse? You’re doing this as a favour to me?’

‘No, I didn’t mean that, just listen, I didn’t plan any of this. We talked a lot on the phone about you guys, then we started meeting up for coffees, and stuff. It just grew. One thing I can tell you, it’s not just a casual affair. We really love each other.’

My God, thought James, now they are in love. Where is this going to end? It just kept getting worse and worse.

‘Dave, you’re killing me! That’s supposed to make me feel better? It would be better if it was just a casual affair, and then, when it had run its course, you both went back to your normal lives. This only makes it even worse, don’t you see that? What’s the plan? Are you going to leave Maureen?’

‘Hey, we haven’t really thought about anything like that as yet. We are just taking it as it comes. I don’t know. But what I can tell you is that we are not going to stop. We really get on well together. She is just so right for me. It feels so good.’

The anger in James flamed lower, and he decided he needed some time to think about all the implications thrown up by the latest development. He decided to put an end to the conversation. He needed time to process it all.

‘Ok, Dave, let’s leave it at that for now. I really need to think about all of this. We’ll talk some more another time. Bye.’

James looked across at Lucy, who was looking at him with an expectant expression. In reply to her unspoken question, he just nodded his head. Lucy lowered her face into her hands. James looked at his watch. This really was going to be a long weekend. He barely had any desire to continue with their trip away. He almost wished he was back in his flat, alone, getting ready to watch the rugby.

After an afternoon passed in almost total silence, and a sort of going-through-the-ropes type of tourism on autopilot, the two of them checked into the B&B they had booked for the night. The atmosphere was strained. Both of them were distant, lost in their thoughts. James decided that there was no point in ruining their weekend totally, and tried to break the sullen mood.

‘Listen, Lucy, let’s try and get this weekend back on track. I know we are both pretty shaken with the news about our friends, but, at the end of the day, their lives are their own. We can only be responsible for us. Let’s just forget about them for now, at least for this weekend, and concentrate on our trip. When we get back home, we can look back into it all. Even though, that said, I don’t think that there is a lot we can do, anyway. What do you say?’

Lucy put her hand on his shoulder, and smiled at him. She gave him a little kiss on the cheek.

‘Of course, you are right, I’m so sorry. I’ve just been thinking about what would happen to poor little Abigail, and Terrence, if this was to all get really out of control. But

you are right, let's worry about that when we get home. You know, I hardly even noticed that Monastery. I'm sorry, I was just lost in my thoughts. I promise to return to planet earth, but only if we have a lovely dinner. Something special, what do you say?'

It was time for the two of them to put aside their preoccupations with the complicated lives of their friends, and return to dedicate their time to their own weekend away.

'Now, that's the spirit! Actually I might be able to organise that without even going too far. They do dinners here in the B&B. Tonight's special is roast pork, with apple sauce, and roast potatoes, all served with a nice selection of veggies. I haven't had a nice pork roast in ages. What do you say?'

'That sounds terrific. The last time I had roast pork was a long time ago, out at Auntie Claire's place, and let me tell you, she is definitely not a very good cook. It was terrible. Burnt offerings, to say the least. The pork was so overcooked it was as hard as leather. The potatoes were basically encased in charcoal. I had to pretend I had a bit of an upset tummy to get out of eating it. I would love a good plate of that to try and wipe that image from my memory. Mum used to make that really well when I was little.'

'Right, it's a deal. I'll pop down, and book a table for us.'

With great relief Lucy felt that their romantic getaway was back on track. She was still terribly worried about the Vicky situation, but as it was the first time she had spent a few days with James she decided that she wanted to make the most of it. It felt so good to be with him. She knew that they were made for each other. She would leave aside temporarily her friend's predicament, and get back into her special weekend away. After a lovely dinner, spent chatting and laughing about anything and everything, except of course the breaking news story which they both studiously avoided, they went up to their bedroom. Even though it wasn't the first time that they had spent the night together, somehow for Lucy this time it felt different. It felt to her like they were temporarily living together, even if it was only for a few days. It was a step in the right direction. A step towards their life together. She had packed the most romantic nightwear she had, and disappeared into the bathroom to prepare herself. James seemed ready to make love as well, because when she came out of the bathroom he was already in bed, waiting for her. She carefully slid into bed with him, and he embraced her immediately. It felt so good to be in his arms. As ever he delicately penetrated her, in such a lovingly soft manner. Most men were quite brutish about how they made love, but James was so delicate, so tender. Lucy felt herself transported to a loving place, where only the two of them existed. The outside world no longer mattered. His face was buried in her hair, kissing her neck, as she felt him ready to reach orgasm. The love she felt for him in that moment was total. It almost felt like they had become one entity, one being. James lightly groaned as he climaxed, and Lucy just couldn't hold in anymore how she felt for him. She felt so overwhelmed by the love she felt for him. She opened up her heart to him.

'James, I love you, I love you so much. You are the love of my life. I will always be

by your side. I will love you forever.’

She felt James tightly grip her, and kiss her lovingly on her neck. Nothing would ever separate them. They were in love, their future would be one of bliss, always together. Her life had finally started.

As soon as Lucy had come out of the bathroom James could see that she had prepared herself for sex. It was just what he needed. Something to take his mind off the mess Dave had gotten himself into. In truth, he had gotten a lot of people into a dark place. The effects of his liaison with Vicky would be felt all over the place, if it ever got out. It was like a bomb, with the timer quietly ticking away, waiting for that unexpected moment to go off, and destroy as many people’s lives as possible. The fallout would be immense if that bomb went off, with its affects felt far and wide. James wanted to take his mind off the consequences of that explosion, and some relaxing sex was just the ticket. He loved having sex with Lucy, she was so soft and cuddly. He loved penetrating her slowly, taking his time. He had never been a wham-bang-thank-you-ma’am sort of a guy, he had always preferred taking it slowly, delicately, feeling everything, rather than just racing towards the climax. He buried his face in her hair, and kissed her softly on her neck. Much as he tried to hold it off, he could feel his orgasm building, until he fairly exploded inside her. My God, he thought, what a release! He felt the tension that had been building up inside him leave his body. Then, out of the blue, Lucy had started telling him how much she loved him, and that they would be together forever. He was so surprised that he didn’t know how to react. He had been so sure that she had been on the same page as him. Just two people taking it easy, seeing where things headed, with no pressure. Something fairly casual. Nice, but casual. Luckily he had his face buried in her hair so she didn’t see the surprised look on his face. Not knowing what to do, or say, he just gripped her tightly, and kissed her neck. What the hell was he going to do after something like that? How was it that he had gotten things so terribly wrong with her? He had been sure that Lucy had felt the same way as him about their relationship. She had never behaved like that before, he would have noticed the warning signs, and acted appropriately. Where the hell had all of that come from? On top of the curve ball Dave had thrown his way, he now had to contend with another devastating bombshell. And this one had just exploded, right in his face. The long weekend was started to feel very long. There was a limit to the number of surprises he could take in one day. Could the weekend possibly get any worse? Somehow he still had to get through another couple of days of it. Well, one and a half, and a quick drive home. Whatever way you looked at it, it still seemed like an eternity. The nice life he had found for himself had been devastated by a storm of bombs falling out of the clear blue sky.

7. The way forward

Somehow or other James had managed to survive the weekend more or less in one piece. He had kept things flowing, without having to explain to Lucy how he felt, after her devastating declaration of love. To do so he had had to make sure he controlled totally the conversation, and the general flow of events. He had ensured that there had never been one of those intimate, touchy feely moments, where he could have been put on the spot. To do so he had kept the timeline of the weekend alive, running from one place to the next, babbling on about the history of the architectural sites they visited like a tourist guide, and commenting frequently on how lucky they had been with the weather. Even though it had actually rained a bit on the Sunday. Somehow he had managed to fit even that into his non-stop rant, pointing out the beauty of the greens the rain had exposed. He had been the expert historian, weatherman, and botanist. He had talked so much he had a sore throat. When he finally returned home from the hellish weekend away, he was totally exhausted. He threw himself down on his couch, and tried to understand what had happened. He really had not understood at all the way Lucy had felt, and she had obviously felt like that for some time. Was his radar not working? Had he been blinded by being with such a nice person, that he hadn't grasped the reality of where it had all been heading? For some reason he felt really angry with Dave, even though his situation with Lucy had nothing to do with Dave's aberrations. He had gotten himself in that fine mess all by himself. Still, he found it comforting to blame someone. He needed to blame someone, and Dave's face fitted. James just couldn't believe any of it. He had finally managed to get his life back on track after his separation. He hadn't wanted to get into a serious relationship, actually he hadn't really even wanted a casual relationship. Somehow he had been pushed into the whole Lucy mess, by unknown forces. Unknown forces controlled by Dave, the puppet master. Mind you, in the end he had gone in as a willing participant. He had enjoyed the company, and the sex. He should have realised that it had all been too good to be true. He had been blindsided by his own belief in the possibility of a casual relationship, aided and abetted by the apparent endorsement from Lucy. She certainly had never given any signs that it was anything other than a casual, enjoyable, easy going relationship. If she had he would have picked up on that, surely? James knew that he could not go forward with the relationship that Lucy now wanted, and thought they were in. To do so would be to live a lie. That wasn't the sort of person he was. He needed to get out of that unexpected mess. He needed a strategy. What he really needed was to see Dave, and yell at him a bit. He knew that that would make him feel better, even if it wouldn't resolve anything. At least he would have the satisfaction of

giving him a piece of his mind. Without giving away the reason behind it, he arranged with messages, to catch up with Dave at a pub, half way between their towns. Wednesday evening, after work he headed off to the appointment. The anger, and frustration, while not still boiling over, was definitely still simmering away in him. As he walked into the pub, he saw Dave sitting at a table close to the door. Without wasting any time on pleasantries James got down to business.

‘Some fine mess you have gotten me into there, man. Thanks a bloody lot!’

Dave being Dave, James’s barbs flew straight over his head.

‘Hey, hello to you too. What’s up? Didn’t the weekend go that well? Or are you still pissed about me and Vicky?’

Dave wasn’t going to make it easy for him.

‘Do you want to shut up and listen? Just for a change? You won’t believe this. You know, actually, maybe you will.’

Dave, rather than being admonished, was enjoying the situation immensely. He had a great smile on his face, in stark contrast to the annoyance that James felt, and that no doubt was reflected on his face.

‘Hey, come on, out with it, Jimmy. Let me have it. What’s going on, brother?’

James drew a breath, and went straight to the crux of the problem.

‘Saturday evening, in bed, Lucy started telling me how much she loves me, how I am the man of her dreams, and how she can’t live without me.’

Dave threw back his head, and roared with laughter.

‘You, my friend, need a drink. My shout, lover boy.’

Before James had time to further berate his friend, Dave had shot off in the direction of the bar. James watched his friend chatting up the barmaid while he waited for his two beers. The anger in him started to subside, and he smiled to himself. Dave really was a force of nature. You just couldn’t hold him back. No chains could bind him. No situation could fluster him. The two of them were so different, but Dave, just by being the way he was, somehow always managed to help James see things clearer. He had come to the pub angry, and frustrated, but already after just exchanging a few words with his friend, he could feel the tension relinquishing its hold on him. He started to feel less irritated. The Dave effect. Better than any pill. Dave returned to their table, with a couple of beers, his face beaming with his usual inimitable smile.

‘Here you go, cheers. To your good health.’

They both downed some beer, and Dave looked at James, with laughter in his eyes.

‘So she loves you? And why on earth would that surprise you? If she didn’t you should be worried.’

‘Hey, it’s not what I signed up for. You know that. I just wanted something carefree, something casual. I’m not ready for anything like this. I was sure that we both felt that it was just a pretty easy-going relationship. I hadn’t expected anything like this.’

‘Did you tell her you love her?’

‘No, of course not.’

‘Well done. Keep quiet on that. Listen, if it gets out of control just tell her you aren’t ready for a serious commitment, and break it off. In the meantime, enjoy it!’

Dave’s outlook on life was so light, and breezy. James knew he could never be like that.

‘To be honest I’m already at that point. I just can’t do this. It’s too soon. But how the hell do I get out of it? Hey, you are the expert. Give me the benefit of your great reservoir of advice. How do I do that?’

Dave held up his arms, as if in a sign of surrender.

‘Easily, just be honest. Pretty much tell her what you have just told me. You’re overthinking this. Just tell her, at the right moment, in the right place, that you aren’t ready for such a serious relationship, and that you hadn’t realised, quite honestly, that she was so serious about it all. Whatever you do, don’t do it just after making love. That would really piss her off.’

Dave waved his arm around the pub they were in, gesticulating at the mostly empty tables.

‘Look, Wednesday evening, not many people in, the perfect setting for a breakup. Say what you need to say, and once the tears start flowing, get the hell out of there.’

James smiled at the ease with which Dave would be able to handle such a scene.

‘Bloody hell, you are as cold as ice, Dave.’

James shook his head. He doubted whether he could pull off something like that. He felt the weight of things much more than his friend. Dave’s demeanour turned unusually serious.

‘That’s not true, and you know it. There just isn’t any easy way with breaking up. Dude, you’ve been together only, what, not even six months or so? These things happen. Plus, you are only being honest. You did nothing wrong. You just didn’t realise how she felt was so different to how you felt.’

James sipped his beer, and thought about what Dave had said. In reality, he was right. He would only really need to tell Lucy the truth. Hard as that would be for him, and for her. Looking around the bar he actually realised that somewhere like that probably would be a good place to do it. A nice quiet setting, where they couldn’t be overheard, but also public enough that Lucy wouldn’t be able to create a big dramatic scene out of it all. He just hated that sort of thing, but he didn’t want to continue living a lie, by letting Lucy think that they were in love. That wouldn’t be fair to her, and it certainly wouldn’t be any good for him. As much as he hated to admit it, Dave had come through for him. Yet again. The two friends sat there, drinking their beers in silence. Dave, realising the enormity of it all for James, let his friend reflect on his situation. James looked at his friend, and smiled, as if to say thanks. Sometimes the two of them didn’t even need words to understand each other. After another round of beers, and few more words exchanged, they said their goodbyes. As usual, they would keep each other updated by

phone calls, and messages. The rest of the week passed slowly for James. Time weighed heavily on him, and his thoughts. He was dreading seeing Lucy. He knew that Dave's plan was the right one. The honest one. Really it was the only way for him to go, it was just that he absolutely hated hurting people's feelings. He liked Lucy a lot. It was going to be a very difficult thing for him to do. Maybe he should send in Dave to do the dirty work? Dave wouldn't mind, and he would definitely do it well. Break up by proxy! Now there was a good idea! He would send in Dave with all the necessary authorised paperwork as his legal power of attorney. What the hell was he thinking? He needed to concentrate. This was something he had to do. Maybe he should suggest that they just maintain a friendship? As soon as he thought that he realised how stupid that would sound. No, he just had to work up the courage, and tell her straight out how he felt. As Dave had pointed out it would only be the truth. He really hadn't realised just how involved Lucy had become. Luckily Lucy had something on at her work on Friday evening, so he wouldn't have to see her until Saturday. He could put it off for another day, not that that would change much. Maybe on Saturday afternoon he should take her to a quiet country pub? No, that wouldn't work, they both needed to go with separate cars, otherwise the drive back would be hell. This would be one of the most difficult things he had ever had to do, but, in all honesty, he just had to somehow find the courage to do it, and get back on track with his life. In the end it would be better for Lucy as well. She needed to know the truth. Letting her think their relationship was something that it wasn't would not be fair on her. He still couldn't understand where it had all come from. They had gone from a casual, slow thing, to being deeply in love in two short steps. Wasn't there a Country and Western song that went something along those lines? Probably there were a few of them. Friday evening, before the big day, he couldn't manage to sleep so he sat up late watching old films on television. Sometime towards midnight, as he was starting to doze off on the couch, his phone rang. It was Lucy.

'Hi Lucy, are you back from your do?'

'James, there's something wrong. I can't stop vomiting. And there's some blood in the vomit as well. James, I'm really worried!'

James could tell by the panicky tone of Lucy's voice that she was in a desperate state.

'Listen, I'm coming over. If it doesn't pass I will take you in to the hospital. Just relax, I will be there as soon as possible.'

'OK, please hurry!'

James quickly got dressed, and headed off to Lucy's place. She wasn't really a big drinker, and no doubt she had had a few too many wines at her work party. James knew only too well that it was hard not to overdo it at those things. For some reason when you get drinking with colleagues that you usually don't go out with, it always turns into a bit of a frenzy. He had had a few nights like that himself. Also the fact that it was a free bar didn't help either. When the drink is free there is a bit of a tendency to hoof it down, no

holds barred. The bosses are paying so you want to get as much free booze in as possible. The unofficial Christmas bonus. The only time he had cheated on his wife had been at a work Christmas party. After copious amounts of drink he had found himself kissing and cuddling, with one of the junior architects. Before he knew it they were outside in the back seat of his car making love. It had all been a bit of a sordid affair, leaving them both feeling pretty embarrassed about it all in the weeks following. He had felt really guilty about the whole thing, for a long time. Mind you, back then he still had the dream life, the dream family, with his little Charlie. Life still had meaning, direction. Looking back on it, from a distance, none of it seemed to matter. It almost felt like he was looking back on someone else's life. The feelings, the sensations from those days were hard to remember. He had lived them, but now they belonged to the memory of someone else. It almost seemed to him like a film he had watched, rather than the life he had lived. So much had changed. So much had been lost. Within a short time he was at Lucy's street. He parked the car outside Lucy's place, and could see her waiting for him in the doorway.

'Can you take me to the hospital? Something is terribly wrong.'

'Are you sure you just didn't have too much to drink at the work do?'

'I didn't drink anything! I've been feeling queasy all day. In fact, if it wasn't for the work party, I wouldn't have gone in today. James, please!'

James realised by the tone of her voice that she was really worried, and that there was only one thing to do.

'Sure, jump in the car. Don't worry, I'm sure it won't be anything serious. It's probably just a bug that's going around.'

In silence James drove to the hospital. He could see that Lucy was really in pain. He hated to see her like this. If she needed help he would look after her over the weekend. The breakup conversation would definitely have to be delayed. Even Dave wouldn't break up with someone when they were sick. Or would he? James had to put a hand to his mouth to stifle the beginning of a laugh. Actually Dave probably would. And he would even be able to pull it off with ease. James could picture the scene in his mind. The woman would be lying in a hospital bed, Dave would casually take her hand, and say:

'Sorry Hon, I don't think this is going to work. You look after yourself now, you hear me?'

Wasn't there a Country and Western song that went along those lines? Luckily Lucy hadn't noticed his little aberration, she was holding her stomach with her eyes closed. He parked the car as close as possible to the hospital entrance, and helped Lucy out of the car, and into the hospital. Inside they made their way to the front desk.

'Hello, my friend has a terrible stomach pain, and has been vomiting blood. Can she see a doctor, please?'

As could be expected there was plenty of paper work to fill out, and a long time to wait. Being Friday night the place was packed with drunks who had had various types of

accidents, and people who had been in fights. It was really a pretty chaotic scene. James was quite surprised to see what was happening in an almost parallel universe to his own. While he would be normally tucked up in bed, this was the reality for a lot of other people. Drunkenness, shouting, lots of shouting. People holding bloodied faces while their friends just seemed to be shouting almost unintelligible phrases at all and sundry. Man, was he glad he hadn't gone into medicine. This was a side of life that he could do without being a part of, or even seeing. The fiction of TV was far more interesting than the reality of life. Well, this side of life, anyway. Quite interestingly he noted that Lucy and himself seemed to be the only ones waiting who weren't showing obvious signs of inebriation.

'I'm sure it won't be too long now, Lucy. How are you? Do you feel any better?'

'No, I feel so terrible. I've never had such a bad stomach ache in my life. I'm sure it's something really serious.'

'Don't talk like that. Let's just wait and see, before we hit the panic button, shall we?'

With so many people waiting, and with all the confusion of doctors and nurses running here and there, it wasn't until almost three in the morning that Lucy got called in to see a doctor. She explained her symptoms, and how she had been vomiting blood. The young doctor had an air of being somewhat swamped by the number of patients waiting for him, and barely seemed to listen to Lucy's explanation. He briefly wrote some notes on a clipboard in his hands.

'Listen, I am going to give you something to calm your stomach, and a very strong sedative. Take these two pills now, and then mix this powder with water when you get home. It will knock you out pretty quickly, so wait until you are ready for bed. Then take another two of these pills in the afternoon tomorrow. If it doesn't pass by Sunday morning, I want you to come back in. Otherwise, go and see your family doctor on Monday morning. Ok?'

'Yes, thank you, doctor.'

The doctor turned to James.

'Will you be able to look after her this weekend? She shouldn't be on her own after taking this sedative, it's really quite strong.'

'Of course. I will stay with her. Thanks for everything. Hopefully by tomorrow, or Sunday, she will be feeling better.'

'OK, bye now.'

With barely a flutter of his white cloak he was gone, off to the next patient, and the one after that. His night was nowhere near over. After such a long wait it really had been a very short amount of time spent with the doctor, but all in all, and with the medication he had given Lucy, he did seem to have understood the situation.

'Come on, let's get you out of this madhouse, and get you into bed.'

Lucy put her arm on James's shoulder. She looked at him with great concern in her

eyes.

‘Will you stay with me?’

James gave her a hug, and rubbed her back.

‘Of course I will, silly. You know I will. Come one, let’s get out of here.’

With great relief James helped Lucy out of the madhouse. Quite possibly Dante had gotten inspiration for his famous book ‘Inferno’, about a journey into hell, by visiting his local hospital on a Friday evening. If anything resembled hell on earth it was that hospital scene. James got Lucy home, and then they followed the doctor’s instructions with the powdered medicine. Within barely a couple of minutes Lucy was out like a light, and James settled in to keep an eye on her. He watched her as she slept. She really was a very special person, and he liked her a lot. But he didn’t love her. He didn’t feel that he could continue in the role that she had placed him in. He didn’t want it for him, and it wouldn’t be fair on her, to let her continue to believe that they were in love. He had no choice but to be honest with her, and tell her how he felt. It would be the best thing for both of them, no matter how much he did like her. James thought back to the near empty pub the previous Wednesday, when he had spoken with Dave. If Lucy was feeling better by the next week he just might invite her for a drink there, and see if he was able to break the bad news to her. As he looked at her, the idea filled him with dread, but he knew it was really the only thing to do. He couldn’t continue a relationship under such false pretenses. Probably he had been foolish to not have seen that Lucy felt like that, although she had never given any indication of how she really felt. My God, he thought, he should have just continued with his single life. Everything had been going just fine. Bloody Dave and his advice.

Lucy slept until well into Saturday evening. When she woke the first thing she saw was James sitting at her bedside. How lucky she had been to have found such a loving man! A burst of love rushed through her body. When she had needed someone, in a moment of great concern, he hadn’t let her down. She knew that she could count on him to be at her side, forever. Whatever life threw at them they would face it together. The two of them, united against it all. Their combined love could conquer all that was thrown against them. James stood up, and placed his hand on her cheek.

‘Hey, good morning, you. Well, afternoon really. How do you feel, Lucy? Do you feel better?’

Lucy reached out, and squeezed his arm.

‘Hello, you too. Actually I feel pretty good. A bit woozy from the drugs they gave me, but the pain in my tummy has gone. Thank God.’

‘Here, you still need to take another two of these pills, remember?’

James handed her two pills, and a glass of water to wash them down.

‘Sure, I had better follow doctor’s orders, even though I think I’m fine now.’

Lucy swallowed the pills, with a drink of the water.

‘I’m really sorry to have caused you all this trouble, James. I just felt so terrible, I thought it was something really bad. Did you get any sleep at all?’

‘Don’t worry. You did the right thing calling me. I’ll catch up on my sleep tonight. Tomorrow is Sunday so I can have a good lie in. Hey listen, Emma and Vicky are both really anxiously waiting to hear from you. I have kept them updated on it all, but you had better phone them. Do you want something to eat? I could make you something light, some rice and chicken maybe?’

Lucy got out of bed, and hugged James tightly.

‘Look you, you have been so wonderful. Don’t worry, I’m not really hungry, maybe I will eat a yoghurt later on. Why don’t you head home, and get some sleep, you must be exhausted. I can’t thank you enough for the help you gave me. I was really feeling so desperate.’

Lucy rubbed James’s arm, and smiled at him.

‘You know how dramatic us girls get. Thank goodness that in the end I was just overreacting. Mind you, I really was in such pain. Really I’m not sure what was going on. Listen you, we’ll talk tomorrow. Now I better get in touch with the girls, they will probably be worried sick. And all for nothing.’

‘OK, if you are sure. Actually I wouldn’t mind catching an early night. If you need anything phone whenever you want, OK? I will pop in, and check on you tomorrow. I think you should stay close to home tomorrow, just to let all those medications leave your system. They really gave you some strong stuff. You were absolutely knocked out.’

‘You’re right, of course. Tomorrow I will just relax here at home. I probably just picked up one of those 24 hour viruses that are going around. Thanks so much for everything, it’s so lovely to have you in my life. Now you get out of here! Go and get some rest. In any case, I better get in touch with the girls. I can imagine how worried they are. Go on, hop it, mister!’

James hugged her, and kissed her on her cheek. He put on his jacket, and, with a wave, headed out of the door. Lucy watched James leave with a feeling of total love burning in her heart. Men like James just didn’t exist, or not that she had ever met anyway, that was for sure. She had only ever met the neanderthal type of chest thumping, beer drinking, feelingless kind. The sort of men who thought that buying wine for the ‘little wimmin’ was about as sensitive as you needed to go, while secretly thinking that they should really be drinking beer. She sent a message to her friends, both of whom answered immediately that they were on their way over. While she waited for them she made herself a cup of herbal tea, which she would drink only when it had cooled down. She didn’t really want to eat anything, even though she was a bit hungry. She was worried that eating something might aggravate her stomach again. Lucy opened the window to let in some fresh air, and looked out on the world. A world that had always seemed so foreign to her, but which she now felt a part of. A world in which she had taken her place. Through finding love she had discovered that she too could be a part of

the fabric of life. She could barely remember her lonely existence, prior to meeting James. It all seemed so long ago. She had waited so long, but finally the most fantastic person had come along, and was now in love with her. Looking out of the window at her new world, she had lost track of time, until the doorbell rang. Both of her friends had arrived at the same time.

‘Hey, you two, come on in.’

‘What the hell happened?’ asked Vicky. ‘Are you alright?’

Emma, too, had a very worried expression on her face.

‘We were so worried, luckily James kept us up to date on it all. You should have phoned from the hospital. How are you feeling?’

‘Don’t worry, I’m fine now. I don’t really know what it was. I felt such a pain in my stomach. I was really worried, but they gave me something for it, and now it seems to be back to normal. I think I slept for over 12 hours. Boy, they really gave me something to knock me out.’

‘Yes, we know. James kept sending us messages through it all. In fact we didn’t want to come over until you woke up.’ said Emma.

‘We told him to tell you to send us a message as soon as you got up.’

Lucy felt absolutely fantastic about how James had taken care of everything. He had been there for her, and had made sure that her friends were kept up to speed on the whole situation. She couldn’t have found a nicer person. He was all she could ever have hoped for.

‘He was such a love. I can’t begin to tell you how much he helped me through it all. I’m pretty sure that he hasn’t had any sleep at all since yesterday. I just sent him home a little while ago. It’s just so nice to have someone who loves me so much. I couldn’t have gotten through it all without him. He really was my rock.’

Emma and Vicky exchanged glances.

‘When you say he loves you so much,’ started Emma, slightly hesitantly, ‘did he tell you that? Have you told him you love him? Something has changed with you. Come on, out with the details. What’s this all about?’

‘Well, last weekend on our trip away I couldn’t help myself. I couldn’t hold it all in anymore, and I told him how much I love him. It was a night I will never forget. It was just the most romantic weekend away imaginable.’

Lucy smiled at the memory of their special weekend away.

‘And what did he say? Did he tell you that he loved you, too?’ asked Vicky, throwing a glance at Emma.

‘He didn’t have to. He just held me so tight, I could feel it. It was one of those moments when words weren’t needed. I will never forget that evening, no matter how long I live.’

Lucy smiled, and felt a warmth go through her, with the memory of that evening.

Emma had a slightly worried look about her.

‘You know, we told you to wait for him to say that first, remember? You were supposed to take things slowly. Are you sure about all this?’

‘Of course I’m sure. Don’t worry, you two. We are in love. I’ve never been so happy in all my life.’

‘Well, OK,’ said Vicky, ‘I hope you are right about this. I think you should have waited, you know. We did tell you to slow it down, and let him dictate the pace. You should really have followed our advice, Lucy. I hope you know what you are doing. Anyway, back to the current situation. What did the doctors say? Do you need some follow up treatment?’

‘To be honest it was all a bit fast. Ironically really, after waiting so many hours, the actual time spent with the doctor was pretty minimal. Anyway, he seems to have sorted it all out. He told me to go back in on Sunday if I wasn’t feeling any better. I’m already feeling fine now, so let’s just forget about that, what do say?’

Lucy wanted to put her brief illness behind her, and get on with her new fantastic life. Her life with James.

‘Listen,’ said Vicky, ‘there is a really good private clinic where one of Mike’s friends works. They do all the usual tests, and don’t even cost that much. If you feel any upset in your stomach again I want to take you there. I know you wouldn’t want to do any tests where you work. Obviously you wouldn’t want to become a patient where you work. Plus then everyone there would know your personal details. Any little pain, and we are taking you in. Is that a deal? What you had seems worse than just a normal stomach virus.’

‘Oh, you really are so sweet. If it makes you feel better I will go, but only if the upset tummy returns. I really do feel fine now, really. Don’t worry.’

Emma stroked Lucy’s cheek.

‘We are just worried about you, that’s all. If any pain returns at all, we are taking you to that clinic, the one that Vicky knows, understood? Even if it’s not as bad as last night. To have a bit of a check up is never a bad thing. Are you listening to me?’

‘Of course. Don’t worry. Let’s not think about the negative side of things. I’m sure it was only an isolated incident. Listen you two, I’m actually still pretty sleepy, so why don’t the both of you get back to your families, and I will climb back into bed. We’ll talk again tomorrow.’

Emma hugged her friend tightly.

‘I was so worried about you. I love you so much. Don’t you ever scare me like that again, do you understand? I’ll be over in the morning. If you need me to pick up some food, or anything, send me a message with the list. I’ll pick it up on my way over.’

Vicky kissed Lucy on the cheek, and with tears in her eyes said, ‘You get some sleep, my lovely angel, and give me a call when you wake up tomorrow. I was so worried about you. I’ll come over in the afternoon, that way we will both be able to keep an eye on you. To make sure you are alright.’

‘Thanks you two. Thanks for being such good friends. My life just wouldn’t be the same without the two of you. I love you both heaps.’

8. The cruel wind of change

The traffic had been less than she had expected, so instead of getting to the party a bit late, she was right on time. Not that she would have minded. As the designated driver of little missy princess she was well used to arriving late. It just went with the job description. Maureen pulled up outside the house of Penelope's friend.

'Here you go, then. You make sure that you enjoy yourself today, my little princess, OK?'

'OK, mummy.'

Maureen got out of the car, and opened the back door. She released the buckle mechanism that kept Penelope safe in her child's seat, and lifted her out of the car.

'Take my hand, come on.'

Maureen accompanied her daughter to the front door, and rang the doorbell. Within seconds the door opened, and an elderly woman welcomed them.

'Hello,' she bent down to welcome Penelope, 'don't you look lovely, all dressed up for the party. Come on in, they are all out in the back garden. Come with me.'

The elderly woman held out a hand for Penelope to take hold of. Penelope looked hesitant, and turned her head up towards her mother.

'It's alright, Penelope, this is Jennifer's grandmother. She will take you to see your friends.'

Maureen turned her attention to the woman.

'I'm sorry, she's awfully shy with people she doesn't know. When she sees her friends she will be just fine.'

The elderly woman smiled at Penelope.

'Don't you worry now. I'm not going to bite!'

Still looking very unconvinced Penelope went into the house with the elderly woman.

'I'll be back in a couple of hours to pick you up. Wish Jennifer Happy Birthday for me! See you!'

Maureen walked back to her car. Her day was long, and tiring, but she wouldn't have had it any other way. She wore her tiredness almost as a badge of accomplishment. It was to her the sort of tiredness that came with having achieved good things. It was the tiredness of triumph. Her life was just where she wanted it to be, even if that did sometimes take a toll on her. Occasionally feelings of impatience grew in her, but she would push them down. Tiredness and impatience just came with the territory when you had a seven year old child. It was written right there in the manual they gave you when

you had a child. ‘Chapter one: See you in 18 years.’ She smiled as she thought about how busy little children had become. When she had been Penelope’s age, she would barely have got to leave the house, except to go to school, or the supermarket with her mother. Things had really changed. She sometimes thought of herself as Penelope’s personal assistant, the person she relied on to keep her day’s appointments running smoothly. PA to a seven year old. Now that was some career achievement! She had finally gotten the top job, personal assistant to the boss. That made her smile. In fact, she used humour, and positive thoughts, to combat her usual feelings of fatigue. Maureen wouldn’t let anything ruin the sense of great fulfillment she felt about her life. There would be time to rest later, and then she would look back on these as having been the good years, so it really made sense to enjoy them as she lived them. Just as she was about to start the car her phone rang. She saw that it was Beth calling.

‘Hi Beth, how are you?’

‘Listen Maureen, I really need to talk to you. Where are you?’

Something about Beth’s tone made Maureen sit up straighter in her seat.

‘What’s up Beth?’

‘Can we meet up for a coffee, please, then I will explain you everything. Are you far from McFlintlock’s?’

‘No, I’m about ten minutes away. OK, I’ll see you there.’

A queasy feeling developed in Maureen’s stomach. Something was up, and she was sure that no good would come from it. If it wasn’t anything serious Beth would just have told her over the phone. As she drove towards the coffee shop a feeling of anxiety grew in her. What was it that Beth didn’t want to tell her over the phone? Why this sudden urgency to meet for a coffee? Lost in her thoughts she soon found herself in front of McFlintlock’s, their favourite coffee shop. She found a parking place as close as she could, and went in. Beth, a beautiful woman with her fiery red, curly hair, was already sitting at one of the tables, and looked at her as she entered. Beth was usually a happy, smiling person, but this time her face was a mask of seriousness. Maureen sat down in front of her friend.

‘What’s going on, Beth? What’s happened?’

Beth looked down briefly, and then looked Maureen right in the eyes.

‘There’s no easy way to say this, so I’m just going to tell it as it is. Believe me, I have checked, and double checked, the information before calling you. I’m afraid there’s no possibility that it’s not true.’

By this stage Maureen was beside herself with anxiety.

‘Well, tell me then.’

‘Rachel had stopped at the ATM of a bank up along Coastal drive, out towards Newport, when she saw two people come out of the hotel just next door to the bank. I’m afraid it was Dave, and a woman.’

Maureen’s blood turned to ice as she listened to her friend. Her mind zoned out. She

felt herself transported to another dimension. A dimension where life was upside down. A dimension where every thing was the opposite of what it should be. A dimension that she would never return from. Time was frozen in that moment. In her life there would be two states of being, before that moment, and after that moment. In the coldness of that strange mental state, she already knew with surety that life would never be the same again.

‘The two of them kissed, then got into their cars, and drove away. Rachel saw Dave clearly, and even recognised his car. I’m sorry Maureen, but there just isn’t any doubt. Rachel asked me to...’

Before Beth could finish her sentence, Maureen stood up and left the coffee shop. Somehow she found herself sitting in her car. She banged her hands on the steering wheel, in a blind rage. She could feel her heart pounding, as the rage grew in her. After all she had done for him! Everything she had given up. The betrayal cut through her, like a knife. Her mind drifted back to when she had first met Dave. Her family, and most of her friends, had never been very convinced about her choice. They had told her that he was far too superficial, and that she could find someone more suitable to her. Of course she had realised that he was nowhere near as serious as her, but she had thought that that could be a good thing. As long as they loved each other, with their differences they could compensate each other, they could complete each other, no matter what other people thought. Maureen had been convinced that behind his flippancy was the real Dave, someone you could rely on. A rock. A solid person. Someone you could build a life with. Someone you could trust. The anger grew.

‘You fucking asshole!’

She yelled and tooted the horn, furiously.

‘You fucking prick!’

She would never forgive him for this, never! How could he do this to her? After everything she had sacrificed for him. Her job, her life, everything put on hold to take care of Penelope. And what about Penelope? How could he do this to her? Everything they had built together came crashing down. Her world was in pieces. All her hopes and dreams lay shattered on the ground. In the end everybody had been right about Dave’s superficiality. She had been wrong. It was a mistake that she wouldn’t repeat. Maureen could feel her rage turning into cold steel decision. There would be no going back, no second chances. He had shown his true colours. He had made his choice. He had decided his future. What he had done was unforgivable. She would never, ever, be able to get passed this. Maureen knew that she would never be able to trust him again. The life she had known was over.

To a certain extent it wasn’t really that much of a surprise. In the back of his mind James had almost been dreading, but really expecting, this moment. There had been a sort of inevitability about it. When you play with fire, you get burnt. If you light a little fire,

you could easily end up burning down your house. Dave had pulled out a box of matches, and had lit them all at once. The flames had grown out of control, and had burnt down his house. It was Monday evening, and there on his doorstep was Dave, suitcase in hand. His face wore the saddest, most dismal, expression James had ever seen on him. He didn't need to ask Dave what was going on. It was obvious. He had gambled, and he had lost. He had gone all in, and now he was all out.

'I guess I don't need to ask you what this is all about. Come on, then, get in.'

James motioned for his friend to enter his flat. He felt disillusioned with his friend, but he would never turn his back on him, especially when he was in need of help.

'Thanks man.'

Dave slouched into James's flat, and threw himself down on the couch. He buried his face in his hands.

'I've got no idea how she found out. But you can believe me when I tell you that she did not take it well.'

'Hey, what a surprise, Dave. What were you expecting? How did you think she would take it? You bloody idiot. Shit, man, after all you and Maureen have been through together. She is such a good person. You could never have found anyone better than her. I just don't understand any of this. What the fuck were you thinking?'

James couldn't keep a slight touch of anger out of his voice.

'Yeah, well, I guess that makes two of us. I screwed up big time. Hey, don't think that I don't realise that. I can't even get an answer from Vicky. I don't know why.'

James sat down at the table, and replied, in a softer voice.

'Actually I do. Lucy had a bit of a health scare over the weekend. I took her into hospital Friday night with bad stomach pains.'

Dave sat up a bit straighter in his chair, with a look of concern on his face.

'Really? How is she now?'

'She seems to be fine. They gave her some pretty powerful sedatives, and she seems to have slept it off. No doubt Emma and Vicky are keeping a close eye on her. I spent just about the whole weekend at her place, while she slept it off, and that was after spending all night Friday at the hospital.'

An ironic tone crept into Dave's voice.

'I guess that explains why I didn't hear anything from you about how the breakup went.'

Even in this distraught state, Dave just couldn't help himself. He would always be Dave. James laughed.

'Yeah, the hospital environment wasn't really conducive to a breakup talk.'

Dave's strained face forced out a smile.

'No, I bet it wasn't.'

'How did Maureen find out about you and Vicky?'

'I don't know. She said that that is totally irrelevant. Which I guess is true. Anyway,

she found out, and really hit the roof. I'm not sure if she will ever forgive me for this one. Man, it was a pretty tough session. Poor Penny was in her bedroom listening to it all. I really hate myself for the effect it has had on her. And will have. Hey, can I crash here?'

'Of course you can. The couch bed is yours for as long as you need it.'

'Thanks, man. I knew I could rely on you.'

'So what happens now? Are you going to continue things with Vicky, or are you going to try and work it out with Maureen?'

Dave lay back on the couch, with the back of his right hand up on his forehead. He looked like a man who was trying to solve a difficult dilemma, but just didn't quite have the necessary mental acumen to work it through. He was stone age man trying to work out quantum physics.

'God knows. For now, I think I will leave them both to it, and just try and get through this week. Maybe some sort of illumination will hit me. With a bit of luck, in the form of a lightning strike.'

Even in his worst of moments, Dave couldn't relinquish his indomitable sense of humour.

James smiled at his friend.

'Welcome back. I'm glad to see you haven't completely lost your sense of humour. Even in your darkest hour. Come on, I will get the couch bed sorted out for you.'

'Actually, I would prefer a drink, if you have anything.'

'Yeah, why not? I've got some beers, or whiskey. What would you prefer?'

'Let's have some whiskey. The stronger the better.'

James disappeared into the kitchen, and returned with a couple of glasses, and then he got a bottle of whiskey out of the cabinet. He poured out a couple of glasses, one big one for his friend, and a smaller one for himself. Dave raised his glass.

'Women.'

'I'll drink to that,' replied James. 'To all the good, and all the bad they bring us.'

They both took a much needed sip of the whiskey.

'Where does all this leave you with Lucy?'

'I guess after this health scare I had better let a bit of time pass before I try to broach the break up. Maybe a week or two, I don't know. I don't want to leave it too long. I don't like carrying on like this, and it's also not fair on her to let her think that we are both in love. Shit, it really freaked me out when she told me how much she loved me. It was just so unexpected. I had really thought it was going so well. Just a casual thing for us both. Man, did I ever get that one wrong. I think women may actually be a different species to us, rather than just a different gender. I think they come from another planet. They speak the same language as us, but everything seems to have a different meaning. I'm never going to be able to understand them. Really, I just want to get back to my single life. Work is starting to get pretty enjoyable again. I'm working on some nice projects, but without all the pressure from the old job. If I can just get back to how I was

before meeting Lucy, I will be pretty happy. I really only want a nice quiet life.'

'Sorry, man, I guess that a lot of this is all on me. I thought I was doing you a favour. I really did. Now look where we are, the two of us. A right bloody mess.'

James could see that Dave already had a lot to contend with on his own front, without the need to take on the extra burden of his predicament, as well. He decided that he wouldn't put the boot in. Even though he was sorely tempted.

'Hey, listen Dave, my situation is all on me. It was me who decided in the end to go for it with Lucy. Your situation? Well, my friend, that is completely on you. And brother, did you really screw that up. Let me worry about the Lucy deal, you just concentrate on your problems, and how you want to solve them. You really need to come up with an idea of how you want to play this going forward.'

The two friends sat there for a while, in silence, looking into their whiskey glasses. Each dwelling on his own torments.

'I think you better fill these up again, Jimmy. I definitely need another one, quite possibly two.'

'Yes, my friend, I think we both do.'

The blare of the ambulance's siren thundered through the quiet of the night. The darkness of the streets was brought alive with the flare of the emergency lights. In the back of the ambulance Lucy was holding her stomach, and moaning in pain. In the background was the noise of the chatter on the radio. The emergency technician was trying to pacify Lucy, and get some readings of her condition. Other than taking her vital signs he wasn't really able to do much more. With her obvious internal pain they would need the medical equipment of the hospital to really find out what was wrong with the patient. Lucy had gone to bed Tuesday evening with a bit of an upset tummy, which she had just put down to all the drugs they had given her over the weekend. However when she awoke at around 2 am she knew something really bad was happening. She had felt such a sharp pain in her stomach that she was barely able to get to the phone to call an ambulance, and then only with great difficulty. While she had waited for the ambulance she had wanted to call James, but she could hardly move, and it was all she could do to get to the door to open it, ready for the ambulance crew when they arrived. She had lain there on the floor, waiting for them, knowing that the weekend's problem hadn't been an isolated incident, and that something really serious was happening to her. She was sobbing as she had been helped into the ambulance. The pain she felt was absolutely devastating. The drive to the hospital passed in a blur for her. All she could think about was the pain she felt. It engulfed her completely. Time, and place became fused together, in a foggy haze. Before she had realised it, she found herself in the hospital. The bright lights, and the strident sounds of the bustling hospital gave her a headache. People were asking her lots of questions, questions which she didn't have the strength to answer. The next few hours passed in a strange state of separation for her, and she could remember

little about them. She remembered hearing strange clicking noises that somehow seemed out of place, as if they belonged to another dimension. Distant voices echoed around her, but she wasn't able to distinguish the language they were speaking in. She was in a blurry world of blinding light, and harsh noises. The next thing she clearly remembered was when she woke up, in a hospital bed, surrounded by James, Vicky, and Emma. The looks she saw on their faces told her all she needed to know.

'Hello there,' said Emma, with tears in her eyes.

James moved to her side, and took her hand.

'What...? How did you know I was here?' Lucy said, confused to find all her friends at her bedside.

Vicky took her other hand.

'One of the nurses called the last number you had called, on your cell phone, which was mine. I called the others, and we all got down here.'

The pain in her stomach had subsided, it was now just a moderate pain, mixed in with a very nauseous feeling, as if she had eaten something rotten.

'What have they told you? Do they know what's wrong with me?'

Her three friends exchanged worried looks among themselves. Vicky slowly rubbed her hands together, and replied;

'Legally, as we are not family, they aren't allowed to tell us any specifics. But, I'm really sorry Lucy, it looks like it is something pretty serious.'

James gave Lucy a kiss on her brow, stood up, and said,

'I'll see if I can find your doctor, and tell him you are awake.'

As James left the room, Emma took his place, by Lucy's side, and took her hand in hers.

'Hey, you. Whatever happens, we are all in this together. You know that don't you?'

Lucy felt so scared. If her friends were this worried she knew it must be something really, really bad. Tears welled up in her eyes, as she looked at her two best friends. Her friends who had been with her all her life. She loved them so much, she had so much she wanted to tell them, but couldn't find the words to say anything. She gripped their hands tightly. With a bustle that only busy doctors have, a man in a white coat entered her room, followed closely by James.

'Good morning Miss Belmore, my name is Doctor Franks, I've been monitoring your situation since your arrival here. Listen, it's probably best if we ask your friends to leave, so we can have a good chat about your situation.'

The doctor had a rather stern face, with a sort of no nonsense expression, the sort of expression typical of people of his profession.

'Please, if it's possible, I would prefer them to stay. They are like family to me, and I'm really feeling rather confused, so if they can stay, they will probably be better able to understand the situation.'

Lucy knew that she would barely be able to understand what the doctor had to tell

her, she felt so distant, and strange. Like she wasn't even there, and it was all happening to her in a dream. A bad dream. A dream she couldn't wake up from.

'Yes, certainly, as you prefer. Well, I'm afraid it's not good news. Based on the condition you were in on your arrival, and the fact that you were here just a few days earlier, we sent you straight for a CAT scan. What the scan evidenced is a tumour in the lower part of your stomach. We won't really be sure until we get in there to have a good look, but at this stage it seems to not be totally localised. I would like to book you in for surgery as soon as possible. That way we can get to grips with the situation quickly, and see just how things are. Do you have any questions for me?'

Lucy looked at the doctor dumbfounded. The words had floated across her head, barely registering. She had understood the words tumour, and stomach, but little else. Her heart was racing. She felt like she had just been passed a death sentence, but without understanding what her crime had been. Her head was full of so many questions, but she just didn't know where to start. Seeing her confusion Emma jumped in.

'Doctor, when you say it doesn't appear totally localised, does that mean you think it has already spread to other parts of her body?'

'In the early stages of stomach cancer we usually see a small mass. Sort of like a marble shape, to put it in layman's terms. In this case it appears more spread out, but really, the best thing now is to schedule an operation, and take it out before we make too many assumptions. Listen, I would like to keep you in here, and get on with the operation as soon as possible. I would like to run some more tests today, and hopefully schedule you for tomorrow. How does that sound?'

Lucy had no idea what she was supposed to answer to that. Her world had come crashing down on her head. She was speechless. She had gone from a bad stomach bug to cancer, in the blink of an eye. Her world was on spin cycle.

'Of course, doctor, if that's what you think is best,' said Vicky, 'Lucy would obviously prefer to find out exactly what it is, as soon as possible. She will be ready as soon as you can organise the operation. It's definitely the best way forward.'

Lucy looked at Vicky, thanking her with her eyes. She couldn't speak. Waves of panic were washing over her. Was this really happening? Cancer?

'I'll go over to your place and get some things for you,' said Emma. 'Don't worry, I'll find everything. You just try and relax a bit. Hey James, why don't you come with me to the vending machine, and get some water for Lucy?'

'Of course.'

'I'll be right back, my dear friend.' Emma kissed Lucy on the forehead, and left the room, followed by James.

The two of them walked down the corridor in silence. When they reached the vending machine Emma turned to James. Her voice was soft, but determined.

'You were pretty quiet in there. You know, she really needs us now. What's going on? Where are you?'

James had a very unusual expression on his face.

‘No no, I understand. It’s just all a lot to take in.’

‘I heard that Dave is staying at your place, and all this business with Vicky and him has really blown up at the wrong time, but the priority here has to be Lucy. I know that you are worried about Dave, and his family, but really, this is bigger than all that. She really needs you now. You get that, right?’

‘Yes, of course. I’m here for her. Don’t worry, you go off and get her clothes, and things, I will get the water for her.’

Emma walked off along the spartan corridor of the hospital ward, leaving James by the vending machine. For some time he just leaned on the machine, with his eyes shut.

The rest of that day passed in a total state of confusion for James. He understood totally that he had to put aside his real feelings about his relationship with Lucy, and play his part. In any case, she would always be a dear friend, and at the moment his dear friend most definitely needed him. He tried to not think about the incredibly bad timing of it all, and how he was now placed in a role that wasn’t really his. Things were expected from him, things that he had never wanted, or expected, had been thrust upon him. The divine, malicious, hand of fate had dealt him a cruel blow. He found himself like an actor on stage who had forgotten his lines. Everyone was looking to him, and he just stood there speechless, in the spotlight’s glaring rays. It was a great relief when night finally arrived, and, as they had given Lucy a sedative, all her friends went home, to get some sleep before the big day. The day of her operation. If this day had been hard to get through, he could only imagine how hard the following day would be. When he got home Dave was waiting anxiously for some news.

‘Hey, James, finally. What’s going on? I had a couple of short messages from Vicky, but she didn’t really have time to call me. I called you, but you had your phone turned off. Hospital regulations I guessed. It sounds pretty bad. How are you holding up?’

Before replying James poured a couple of large whiskeys for the two of them. He sat down on the couch, and tried to focus.

‘Yeah, it’s bad alright. Cancer, and from what they think so far, it has already spread. They are going to do an operation on her tomorrow morning to take out what they can. Only then, when they get inside her, will they be able to see the full extent of things.’

Dave had listened intently to his friend. He sat back, and put his hands behind his head.

‘Listen, if they are already talking like that they must already suspect that it’s really bad. Normally they try and give you a bit of optimism. A lifeline to cling to. A bit of hope. They must already have an idea of just how much it has spread, or they wouldn’t be preparing her like this. It doesn’t sound like there will be any good news tomorrow. What about you? It must be really hard for you, especially given that you were on the brink of breaking up with her. How are you holding up?’

James threw his hands behind his head, sighed, and closed his eyes. He wished someone would wake him up, and tell him it had all just been a dream. A nightmare.

‘Badly, really badly. I feel so false. I mean, I really like her, but I sort of have to play the part of the loving boyfriend, which I’m not. Don’t get me wrong, I would be there for her anyway, but only in the role of a friend. Hey, a good friend. The whole thing is really killing me, which makes me feel even worse, considering what Lucy is going through. At a time when I should be concentrating on her well being, I just can’t help thinking about myself, and how I got caught up in this whole role. It all makes me feel like such a fraud.’

‘Sure, that’s what I thought. Hey, I feel for you, man. I understand, really I do. I was thinking of coming down to the hospital, but Vicky advised me against that. She reckons it would just throw a bit of a curve ball on the whole of the situation, what with everyone knowing about me and her. I’m sorry I can’t be there for you, my man, really sorry. This must be one of the most difficult things you’ve every had to face. And you are doing it on your own.’

James felt better talking with his friend. It certainly would be easier on him if he had his good friend with him during the whole hospital saga. With there being just him, and Lucy’s two faithful friends, her trusted Rottweilers, he really felt isolated, and almost as though he was under great scrutiny. However, there definitely was no doubt that Dave’s presence would really only add another layer of difficulty, to an already difficult situation.

‘Hey, don’t worry, I can handle it. Anyway, how are you doing with the whole Maureen-Vicky situation? Any new developments?’

James wanted to take his mind off the mess he had found himself in. The best way to do that was to delve into Dave’s mess. Between the two of them they were spoilt for choice.

‘Well, not really. Maureen won’t answer my calls, I don’t think she is going to forgive me for this, ever. Vicky, now with the whole Lucy deal, is playing it pretty tight as well. To be honest, I’m not sure just where I stand, at the moment.’

‘Yeah, I guess the timing isn’t that good for you as well.’

‘It looks like both our lives are going to be put on hold until Lucy is in a better place.’

James rubbed his forehead.

‘And that might not be anytime soon.’

9. Twists and turns

The day of the operation passed almost in a total blur for James. He couldn't manage to shake off a feeling of fogginess that had enveloped his mind. He had slept badly, and just couldn't seem to concentrate. He tried his best to do his bit, giving encouraging words, and keeping a sympathetic face on him, but he didn't really feel like he was a part of it all. He felt like he was outside of himself, and watching the proceedings from a distance. It was all happening to another person, in somebody else's life. He was a mere onlooking, not one of the main participants. There was a lot of sitting around in waiting rooms, and getting things from the vending machines, but it all seemed to him like it was someone else doing it. Maybe he had switched on the autopilot, and his body was going through the motions, without any need for commands from general headquarters? It felt like he was just drifting through the day, without really experiencing it. It wasn't until early evening when Lucy started to wake up, in the recovery ward, that James actually managed to focus his attention. Lucy hadn't wanted to tell her aunty about the cancer, James wasn't sure why, so there were just the three friends there. Well, two friends, and the love of her life, depending on how you looked at it.

'Hey there, can you hear me?' spoke Vicky, softly. 'We are all here with you, my darling girl, just relax, don't fight it. I know how hard it feels when you start to come out of the anesthetic.'

Lucy's eyes were opening and closing, and she was turning her head from side to side. James put his hand on the side of her head.

'Hi, Lucy, It's me. Hey, take it easy, you'll be fine. Just let yourself wake up slowly. Don't get agitated.'

The nurse who had been in the room left immediately, no doubt with the intention of getting the surgeon who had performed the operation.

'My God, I feel terrible. I've got such a bad headache. Have they told you anything?' Emma kissed Lucy's hand.

'No, they can't. We aren't family, so we have to wait until they tell you.'

The nurse came back into the room with the surgeon close on her heels.

'Welcome back, Miss Belmore, how do you feel?'

'Really terrible, doctor, I've got such a bad headache.'

The surgeon turned to the nurse, and nodded. She understood immediately what the doctor wanted, without the need of a spoken word, and quickly left the room.

'Well, alright, we can sort that out for you. Nurse will bring you something shortly. Do you feel up to discussing the operation? I know you approve of your friends being

present. Or would you prefer to wait until your headache has passed?’

As usual her specialist was a man of few words, and a great abundance of seriousness. This was a man who lived according to a strict code of conviction. This was a man who would make love with a look of grim determination on his face. He would follow all procedures correctly, and successfully bring to a conclusion the undertaking.

‘No, please, tell me how it went. I would rather know straight away.’

The nurse entered the room with a small plastic cup, half full of a liquid. She helped Lucy to sit up a bit, and held the cup to Lucy’s lips as she drank it.

‘Thank you, so much.’

The surgeon, as was his way, wore his very austere looking expression. It was without a doubt the only expression he had in his repertoire, but he certainly did it well. James felt a strong sense of foreboding. He was absolutely sure the news was going to be bad. He knew he had to concentrate, to force himself to be present. He would be called upon. His participation would be required.

‘Unfortunately when we operated we saw just how far the cancer has spread. We removed the main tumour, and as much of the infected tissue around it as we could, but we could see that it has spread right around into the pancreas as well. We went as far as we could from an operational point of view. From here on in the best course of action is to put you on a cycle of chemotherapy, and also some radiation therapy. I would like to start you on that as soon as you are up to it. Let’s wait a week, or so, for you to recover from the operation, and then we will get moving on the next phase. How does that sound to you? Do you have any questions?’

Lucy just looked at him with a stunned expression on her face. Emma gripped her hand tightly, and turned to the doctor.

‘Can I ask you, please give us a straight answer, how do you see the prognosis?’

‘Well, that depends a lot on how each individual reacts to the treatment schedule, everyone has a different result depending on many factors, however I can see that there definitely is a lot of room for optimism in this case. Let’s get the treatment started, and take it from there. What do you say?’

James wasn’t very satisfied with the vague phrases used by the doctor, but wasn’t really sure if he should press the issue. He knew he had to find out more. Chances were that they wouldn’t see this surgeon again. He pushed for a clearer understanding of Lucy’s eventual outcome.

‘In a case like Lucy’s how would the patient normally respond to that treatment? What would be the general expectation for someone in Lucy’s specific situation?’

‘Each case follows a different course, it’s very hard to specifically tell...’

‘Are we talking years, months, or weeks?’ interrupted Vicky loudly, sounding very frustrated with the noncommittal response of the surgeon. ‘Just tell us straight, please!’

The doctor stopped in his tracks for a few seconds, and he looked around the faces of Lucy’s friends. His erect posture softened slightly.

‘Months.’

The group made a collective gasp, as the reality of the situation set in. Lucy seemed lost in a fog of incomprehension. She looked at Emma, who was still gripping her hand tightly, and saw the tears flowing down her friend’s face. James moved closer to Lucy, and kissed her on the forehead. He felt so devastated by the news that he couldn’t speak. He buried his head in her hair, as their cheeks touched, and let the tears come. He had been expecting bad news, but nothing could have prepared him for this. Lucy had barely a few months to live. Silence reigned in the room, as no one could think of any words fitting for the situation. In fact, there were no words. It was one of those situations where words had lost all meaning, and their use would have been totally superfluous. The three friends all crowded around Lucy, and showed their love for her with their gestures, kisses, and hugs. The specialist, realising the gravity the news had had on them all, turned on his heels, and left the room. A deafening silence reverberated around the room.

The period following the operation had been very hard for Lucy. She cried a lot, by herself, and with her friends. She looked for a reason for it all, but soon realised that there was no reason. It had just happened. She had to accept it. Her life, that which remained, had to go on. Not that there were many other options available to her. It had been thrust on her, and she had to shoulder the burden, and continue as best she could. Within a few weeks of the operation Lucy had settled into her new routine. Her new life, her new reality. The reality of the condemned prisoner awaiting execution. Her crime? Nothing other than to have been chosen at random. Her number had come up in the way other people’s numbers came up when they won the lottery. She had won the negative version of the lottery. Life’s lottery. Her cycle’s of chemotherapy, interspersed with radiation therapy, had been ongoing for only about a week, so she didn’t yet feel the sickness that she knew would be coming, with the side effects of all the treatment. She was quite surprised at how easily she had adapted to her new life, that of a person waiting for death’s call. A person who’s life, and hopes, had been dashed forever. In reality she had never really fully recovered from the numbness that had descended on her as the death sentence had been read out. Her mind was constantly flooded with an array of different thoughts, all mingling together. She thought a lot about never seeing her two best friends again, and how hard it was going to be for them. Most of all, she was struck by the sheer irony of having found the love of her life, just in time to die, without having time to enjoy the future she had expected to have with him. Oddly absent was a feeling of sadness for herself. She felt as if her whole life, all the sadness, and the loneliness that she had suffered, had been preparing her for this moment. Nobody could have been better prepared than her, for a situation like this. Maybe that had been why she had been chosen? Maybe the selection process hadn’t been random at all? She had been selected because she had been in training for this moment all her life. She was like an athlete who had been preparing for the big event ever since she had been a child. Dedicating her life

to that one big finale. Even the fact that her parents had died when she was young seemed to fit into that theory. One of the stepping stones to her annihilation. Part of her preparation for the final goal. Sometimes she almost laughed out loud at the thought of having finally found happiness, just before it was all to end. A final, last blast of enjoyment, before losing everything. She was the condemned prisoner given the choice of her last meal, anything she wanted, before her execution. Lucy had chosen love, the one thing that had always eluded her. She couldn't really decide whether it was a cruel twist of fate, or whether it was actually a good thing. After all, it would definitely have been even worse to have died without ever really having known happiness, and feeling the love that was now in her. At least now she knew that she had lived, no matter how briefly. Before dying, she had lived. Sitting there, surveying the beautiful view from her aunty's patio, she found the peacefulness of the setting very conducive for analysing, with clarity, the situation she found herself in. She thought about her life, and her approaching death. She thought about everything, trying to make some sense of it all, if there was any sense to be made. Lucy had decided to pay a visit to her aunty before it was too obvious that she was sick. They didn't really see each other that often so this would buy her some time, without having to explain it all to her aunt. As usual, her aunty was pottering around in the garden, making sure everything was ready to survive the winter weather. She always had so much to do in that little garden, impossible as that always seemed. Looking at her aunty she was glad that she hadn't told her about her cancer. Their strange relationship was only based on the fact that they were relatives. They had never formed a real bond, or friendship. They had only the forced bond of family. They had been born with the obligation to be in each other's life, whether they wanted to, or not. Two people, chosen at random, who were expected to spend a lot of time in each other's company, for unknown reasons. Lucy knew that if she told Claire about her disease, her aunty would feel duty-bound to play her role, the role the Gods had determined for her, and that she would then feel obliged to make a fuss of helping her. Lucy didn't want someone helping her, or offering their sympathies, just because it was expected of them. That all seemed so false to her. She preferred to continue with their casual, breezy relationship, as long as she could manage to. Lucy smiled to herself as she remembered the fear she had felt at the thought of turning into her aunty. Running around, pretending not to be aware of how empty her life was. Filling her life with her constant gardening, and radio's blaring, with the television always booming forth. At least she now knew that she had escaped that destiny. Was that a good thing? It definitely wasn't a bad thing.

'Can I get you something, dear?'

Aunty Claire almost blurted out the words as she flew past Lucy, on her way into the house.

'No, thanks, I'm fine!.' Lucy had to call her answer into the house. Her aunty had always had that strange habit of just out of the blue flying into the house, to then reappear

after a couple of moments. Another odd habit that now didn't need to worry Lucy. It was really strange how cold, and almost unaffected she felt about her approaching death. Her whole life, probably since the death of her parents, had been preparing her for this moment. That moment had arrived. Her training was complete. The only part of it that really worried her was the fear of the pain she would have to suffer, when the end drew nearer. That did worry her, a lot. Also, it seemed to be so totally unnecessary. If it was all going to end anyway, why would she need to suffer so terribly? That was really going to be a problem. That part, alone, weighed heavily on her mind. As usual, within a couple of minutes aunty Claire was back in her garden, furiously poking at something or other.

'Actually, you know, aunty, I will have a cup of tea. I'll make it. Do you want one too?'

'Oh, that would be lovely, Lucy. Help yourself, you know your way around. There are some freshly made biscuits in the biscuit jar, on the sideboard.'

Lucy went through the lounge room, with the television blaring, and into the kitchen, only to find herself deafened by the radio. In fact, she could barely differentiate one from the other, with the deafening cacophony of noise, caused by the combination of the both of them. She had no interest in listening to the person at that time moaning about some annoying triviality in his life, so she turned the radio off, and filled up the kettle. By mistake, possibly because she was still in a state of confusion caused by all the insufferable noise, or more probably due to the deep reflections that had been dominating her thoughts, she opened the wrong cabinet door, looking for the tea cups. She was very surprised to be confronted by five full bottles of gin, and a half empty one. Lucy had always known that her aunty liked the occasional gin, or two, but hadn't really expected to find so many bottles stocked up. Maybe there had been a good discount on? But even during a sale, so many bottles seemed a bit excessive. She sneaked a look out of the window, and saw her aunty deeply immersed in whatever she was doing in the garden. Then, out of curiosity Lucy went to the rubbish bin, which was placed in a little alcove off to the side of the kitchen. As soon as she opened the lid a gasp came from her mouth. Among all the assorted rubbish, she could clearly see parts of three empty bottles of gin. She immediately burst out laughing. Talk about aunty's little secret! Oddly, she found that instead of being appalled by this discovery of her aunty Claire's secret life, she was surprisingly pleased about it. It was quite comforting to her to know that her aunty had at least some amount of enjoyment in her life, even if that was in the form of being a functioning alcoholic. Obviously she could control it, because her house was always clean, and she managed to keep all the plates spinning, and the cogs of her life turning. Lucy just couldn't believe the incredible discovery she had made. She was absolutely amazed. She would have never guessed that her aunty was an alcoholic. Never had she seen any signs of abnormal behaviour, well, apart from her obsession with the garden, but that obviously had nothing to do with excessive amounts of gin. Barely managing to hold back the laughter, she prepared the tea and biscuits for the two of them. She prepared

everything on a tray, and took it out to the garden table, under the patio. Even though it was early winter, it was a lovely sunny day, although slightly cool. Oddly Lucy felt a sort of elation. It was strange really, considering she had so little time left to live. It was almost as if she had only really discovered what life really was, with all its depths, its complexities, and its beauty. It felt good to be alive. After her deep musing on her situation, she had come to a conclusion on her best course of action. She was determined to live, and love, for every moment, every second that she had left.

‘I must say, you’re looking pretty happy today,’ said her aunty. ‘Does that have something to do with that young man you told me about?’

‘Yes, that’s right, aunty, we are actually getting on quite well together.’

‘I’m so happy for you, dear, how lovely. He certainly does seem like a nice chap.’

The two of them sat there, with their tea, and biscuits, both of them hiding their secrets from the other. They were like two strangers who had met on a train, exchanging cursory pleasantries. Lucy reflected on how lucky she had been to have found two great friends, like Emma, and Vicky. They were her real family, they always had been. Life, which she had always found hard to navigate, and had considered to have been hard on her, in the end had really been quite good to her. It was only with the executioner’s hands hovering over her that she had finally realised all that had been given to her. The approach of the Grim Reaper had dispersed the fog that had drifted endlessly through her thoughts, and now brought her such vivid clarity, that she could really appreciate the good things in life that she had. For many years she had wallowed in her sadness, and loneliness, when really she had been given the gift of the two best friends anyone could ever have wished for. She almost laughed at the thought of what it had taken for her to realise the good things that she actually had in her life. She spluttered out a bit of tea as she thought about how ironic it all was. She was finally understanding life, only because it was about to end.

‘Sorry Aunty, I think a bit of biscuit must have gone down the wrong way.’

Watching his friend packing his bags brought a wave of sadness over James. Everything around him was a total disaster zone. Everything was falling apart. How could life crash and burn, so quickly? Just a few short months prior everything had been going so well. In fact, it had been the best summer James had had for a long time. Now, everything had exploded in his face. Nothing was as it had been, and it seemed like those days were gone, permanently. Things would never be the same again. All of their lives had been turned upside down, shaken to pieces, and then thrown back on the ground in whatever form they found themselves in. How was it that so much could change, in such a short period of time?

‘When you are settled in I will pop over for a few drinks. A bit of a house warming, what do you say? We’ll baptise the new digs in a fitting manner.’

Dave looked up from his bag, and with a forced smile replied,

‘Sure, man, that would be good.’

Dave seemed so beaten, so crushed by the heavy weight that had descended on him. The weight that had descended on him really by his own hand. He had pulled on one string too many, and the hovering weight had dropped like a ton of bricks onto him. James had never seen his friend like this. Dave had always been strong, and funny. He had always placed himself at the centre of attention, and had always been ready with a witty remark to fire at all and sundry. Not so anymore. Now he had the demeanour of a dog that had been whipped into submission. In his eyes James could see the pain he was carrying inside.

‘How is the new place? Nice?’

‘Hey, nothing special. Just a small place. It’s pretty close to the old place, so I will be able to see Penny a lot. That’s the main thing.’

With the strain he was living under Dave seemed to have aged ten years. James didn’t really know what to say to him at this point, so he just kept up with their usual banter, trying to put some life back into his friend.

‘You know, I’m pretty sure that you and Maureen will be able to get past this. I reckon you will be able to sort something out. You both probably just need some time. Hey, work at it slowly, I’m sure she’ll come around.’

Dave slumped down on an armchair, and smiled wryly at his friend.

‘You’re a good lad, you know. What with everything you are going through with Lucy, you still have time for me. I really appreciate that, man. I know you want the best for me, for all of us, but this one isn’t going to get fixed. This time I really screwed up big time. Maureen will never forgive me. She will never take me back. She said as much, and she really means it. She still wants me to be a big part in Penny’s life, and will do everything necessary to make that happen, but between us it is finished. Kaput. End of story. I don’t know what the hell came over me, but I somehow managed to ruin my life in three easy steps.’

James knew perfectly well that what Dave was saying was true. Maureen wasn’t the sort of person to waver. He had really only been trying to give his friend a lifeline of hope. Something to cling to. Something to aim for, no matter how impossible that aim would be to realise. He decided to change tack.

‘What about the situation with Vicky? How’s that all going?’

‘I don’t know, man. I think we just both got carried away with the whole sexual side of things. It was all new and exciting, and we both went a bit off the rails. Anyway, even if she wanted to continue things, which it looks like she doesn’t, I really just want to try and sort myself out. The main thing for me now is Penny. She’s really confused about all these changes. I don’t think she has really understood what’s going on, and I want to see her as much as possible, to help her through all this. The main priority for me now is Penny. I don’t want to mess that up as well. I just couldn’t stand to lose her as well.’

James could see how much his friend was suffering. His heart really went out to him.

‘Don’t be silly, you will always be her dad. You’ve always been a great father, and you always will. Nothing is going to change there.’

Dave hung his head, and sighed.

‘I hope so. That’s why I got a place near them. I want her to come over to my place, and me to go there. I want us to be together as much as before, well, as much as possible anyway.’

Dave looked at James with almost imploring eyes.

‘Shit man, how the bloody hell did I manage this? What in the devil’s name came over me? Maureen, man, I had Maureen. How could I have been so bloody stupid?’

James didn’t have a reply for that one. Well he did, just not one that he would say to his friend. In fact, he remembered warning him about the possible consequences, not that he was going to bring that up. Dave had enough on his plate without him putting in the boot as well. He sat there watching as Dave returned to the job of packing up the last of his things. He wondered if he should try and talk to Maureen about it all. She probably knew that Dave had met Vicky sort of because of him. Would she blame him as well? Would she listen to him? Probably not. They had become good friends over the years, but not to the extent that they could talk out things on this level. Probably he would be better off just keeping his nose out of it all. In all honesty, Dave was probably right anyway. Maureen was a strong, determined woman. He doubted that she could accept something like this from a man she had loved, and had wanted to spend her life with. She would have expected more, much more. Dave really had ruined things, big time. James just couldn’t believe how tenuous life could be. Things could change so fast. One of the best summer’s of his life had somehow mutated into the worst winter of everyone’s lives. A nuclear bomb had gone off in his living room. The resulting nuclear winter had brought misery to just about everyone he knew, and cared for. The fall out had spread far and wide. Nobody had been spared. Life could be incredibly harsh. When change happened, it could just instantly wipe out everything you once knew. Everything that you had taken for granted could be demolished in the space of a few seconds. Things you had always expected to be there could just disappear in the blink of an eye.

‘What about you, man? Just as you were about to break things off with Lucy, that all got pretty crazy too. Are you still going to try and get out of that relationship, or what? The timing would make you look pretty bad, almost as bad as me, and that’s really saying something.’

‘No, no. Listen, Lucy is a fantastic girl. She really loves me, and she really needs me now. I’m in. I’m going to put aside all the thoughts of what I wanted, and I am going to be there for her. I didn’t realise what I was getting myself into, but I am going to go with it all the way. Even if I don’t really love her, she means a lot to me, and I am going to play the role that has been assigned to me. I’ll do what needs to be done. She really needs all the help she can get, to make it through this tragedy that has landed on her.’

James meant every word he had said. He would play the part that fate had dished out

to him, and he would do it well. Lucy deserved at least that much from him.

‘Good on you, James. You really are a sturdy guy. At least one of us has some decency in him.’

James would do exactly what he had said. He had somehow slipped into a relationship without realising it, but now that this evil thing had descended on Lucy, he would do his part. He would do the right thing. He would put aside his reservations, and help Lucy in her moment of need. No matter how hard that would be. And it would be hard. James knew that at the end of all this he would never recover. All of this would take an enormous toll on him. He had managed to get back on his feet after the devastation that had entered his previous life, but now this? This would be the end of him. After taking this to its inevitable conclusion, James knew that he would never be able to get back on his feet again. He knew he would come out the other end psychologically destroyed. There would be no coming back from this one. Once the nuclear bomb has exploded nothing would ever be the same again. There would be no survivors. Everybody’s lives would be devastated, changed permanently. The one thing he did know was that this would be the biggest test of his life. This situation, and how he dealt with it, would be the defining moment of his existence. How he navigated his way through these murky waters would define who he was, for the rest of his life. He would stand up, and be counted. He would be Lucy’s rock. He would be the strong shoulder for her to lean on, in her time of desperation. He would front up, and do that which was necessary, at whatever emotional cost to himself. When Charlie had died there had been no warning, nothing he could have done to prevent it, or help her through it. It had been so sudden. This time there was plenty of warning, time to help, time to do whatever was necessary, and then some. This time he would do whatever he could.

‘Bloody hell, Jimmy, you look like you need a drink.’

‘Yeah, and a bloody large one, at that.’

The two friends looked at each other, and smiled. Through both of their combined tragedies, they would lean on each other for support, as always. James got up, and headed towards the drinks cabinet

10. Surprising revelations

In that precise moment when she collapsed onto the bathroom floor, Lucy realised that something had to change. She knew that she couldn't continue like that. Things weren't working, and they needed to be put right. Barely six weeks into her cancer treatment, and there she was, vomiting again, at 4 in the morning. She had been following her treatment regime, as prescribed by her specialist, but all she did was vomit, have massive headaches, and see some of her hair come out each time she brushed it. The side effects of the treatment she was on were worse than the pain of the cancer. She was rapidly approaching the time when she needed to make a decision. A big decision. She had followed the doctor's advice on the best way to treat her cancer, even though she had never been really sure what, if anything, was the point of it all. There was no chance of a cure for her disease. Probably it had only been because of the ingrained mentality that most people have that the doctor knows best, and the patient, in his ignorance, should blindly follow the instructions given to him. The doctor was always right, he knew these things. We should listen to his words of wisdom. Well, thought Lucy, in this case the doctor had gotten it all wrong. Let him live like this, if he so wished. She raised herself to a sitting position on the cold tile floor, and knew, instinctively, that the time had come. The treatments, which may have prolonged her life by some minimal amount, were actually just ruining what little time she had left. The pain and suffering, from the side effects of the cancer treatment, were actually worse than that of the cancer itself. She would do no more. From that point on the treatments were finished. She was done. The only drugs she would take from then on would be drugs to relieve the pain, as much as possible. More than anything it was the pain that worried her. She had come to terms with the fact that she was dying, but to have to go through so much pain to get there really filled her with dread. Maybe she should just end it all? Why bother dragging it all out? Was there any point in going through so much suffering when the end result would be the same, just maybe a month or two further down the road? Lucy decided to talk to James about it. She knew she could never speak to the girls about something like this, they would appose it strongly, wanting her to fight to the end. They were scared of losing her, scared to say goodbye. Lucy could understand that, but she just didn't have the strength, or courage, to take on endless amounts of suffering, just for a few days more. A few days more filled with nothing but torture. No, she needed out. As she sat there on her bathroom floor, in the middle of the night, she realised that she needed to come up with a plan to commit suicide. She had to kill herself. How strange it was to think something like that? Really, the thought had been hovering in the back of her mind for some time, in

that deep part of the brain where people don't usually go. In truth she had felt it's presence, rather like that of a safety net for when all else fails, but this was the first time she had set it free. She needed to face her reality, head on. She had to take her own life.

'I need to kill myself.'

The words echoed around the bathroom. There, she had said it out loud. It was now a fact.

'I need to end this.'

A wave of relief came over her. There was a way out of the pain. She didn't need to suffer. She could end it all, with dignity, without having to torment herself with endless misery. Time was on her side. If she stopped taking the incredibly invasive cancer treatments, she knew she would feel less pain, at least in the short term. She would have time to plan everything, and to quietly say her goodbyes. That was important. Lucy knew that she would have to handle her two lovely angels with kids' gloves. They would both need to have said their goodbyes, even if at the time they hadn't realised the finality of the moment, to give them a sense of closure when she was gone. Tears streaked down her face as she felt the love within her for her two friends, and for her lovely James. How many people were really so blessed with so much love in their lives? The combined effect of the love she felt, and the decision she had taken, right there, at that ungodly hour, brought Lucy a feeling of great comfort. She could feel the strength returning to her body, and a feeling of courage grew in her mind. She would take control. It would be her that decided things from that point on. She would decide the path to follow. Not the doctors. It wasn't them that had to go through it all. It was her, and it would be her decision. Lucy struggled to her feet, and went into the kitchen to make a cup of tea. Hopefully she would be able to hold it down, without having to rush to vomit again. It would be pointless returning to bed, she knew she wouldn't get back to sleep that night. She wanted to sit quietly with a cup of tea, and plan how she would bring up the subject with James. He would need to know. She would need his help. Lucy hoped that he would understand how she felt, and that this would be the only way for her to alleviate the heavy load she was under. Through the pain she smiled as she thought of her lovely James. Without him to help her through all of the heavy burden she was carrying, she would have been totally lost. Even in this terribly bad situation, there was something positive, a shining light. Something wonderful shone through the darkness of the blight that had descended on her. Through the dense fog that had covered her life, a beacon could be seen, shining in the distance, showing her the way. A beacon of love that had mercifully been sent to her. She had James.

They were words that had a strangeness about them. In a way they were words that frightened him. They were words from an unknown place. Words that shouldn't be spoken out loud. James just couldn't believe what he was hearing.

'Absolutely not. How can you even think that? You have to fight this!'

Lucy was talking openly about committing suicide. How could she even think that?

‘James, I’m dying anyway. I don’t mean I have to do it now, but when the pain gets too much, I want to be free. I don’t want to put my friends through all that, and I don’t want to put myself through it either. I want you, Emma, and Vicky to remember me, the real me, not some screaming mass of pain clinging desperately to a life not worth living. The last images of someone you love are the ones that haunt your memories forever. That is the image of a loved one that you always hold in your mind. I don’t want your memories of me to be like that, and what’s more I really don’t want, or need, a few extra weeks of life, if they are just going to be a torture.’

James had been asked by Lucy to go over to her place for a chat. He had gone there in a carefree frame of mind, not realising the deep conversation that Lucy had prepared for him. He had been unprepared for that which awaited him. The world as he knew it was changing. Everything that James had always known was now totally different. The signposts in his life were now written in symbols that he didn’t understand. Now he was confronted with a new, unclear version of Lucy. James could barely recognise her. She had always been so quiet, and rather timid. This new version of her seemed like a totally different person. This new blunt, outspoken version of her really took him by surprise. Her sickness had changed her. She seemed so much stronger, much more sure of herself than before. He didn’t really know how to react. Without a doubt he had known that the sentence of death that had been passed down on her would have changed her, but this, this was completely unexpected.

‘But Lucy, the doctor said that with the course of treatment you are following there could be some...’

‘James! You were in the room!’

Lucy’s outburst was loud, almost angry. Then her voice softened, and she took his hand.

‘James, I am heading towards the end. Those drugs they put me on just made me feel even worse. They were destroying what time I have left. I’ve stopped taking them. Now I will just take medicine for pain relief. I want to spend the last time I have feeling as good as I can, with the people I love, and when the pain gets too much I want to have the courage to say it’s time to quit. I’m not going to tell the girls about this, but I want you to know, and I want to ask you for your help. I don’t think I can carry it out on my own. Will you help me? Please, I need you with me on this. I need your strength to help me through this. This is something I have to do. Please try to understand.’

James’s world had been turned on its head. He felt like he was in a dream where nothing is as it seems, and all the people were playing roles alien to them. He had trouble fitting all the pieces together. He didn’t want to let Lucy down, but how could he help her kill herself? She was asking too much from him.

‘You know how much you mean to me, and how much I want to help you, but this is something... this is something I had never really expected to have to deal with, from you,

or from anyone else, for that matter. It's really confusing for me. Please, give me some time to think this through. In any case you said it's not something you have to do now. Can I have time to reflect on it, and then we will talk again? This is just so unexpected. I just don't know what to say.'

Lucy saw the pain, and incomprehension on James's face. She took his face in her hands, and kissed him lightly on the lips. As she pulled away James saw such a sweet smile on her face. In that moment a surge of love for her swept over him. She was so strong, and so at peace with all that she had to confront. It was her who was comforting him, instead of the other way around. Right there, and then, in that moment, he realised that he had fallen in love with her. A strong feeling of love invaded his heart. A warmth flowed through him. He loved her. As the words she had said took meaning within him, he realised that she was right. She had thought this through, and was at peace with her decision. It was her burden to carry, and she had the right to decide how she would carry that burden. She had the right to decide when it was time to release that burden. Of course he would help her. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he looked at her. With all her strength, and beauty, how could he not have realised that she was the right person for him? Why had it taken something like this for him to understand that they were made for each other? In that moment, a moment of profound realisation for James, he knew that Lucy was absolutely right, and that he would give her all the support that he could. James lightly placed his hand on Lucy's knee. He felt like he could hardly speak.

'I will do whatever you need. You can count on me.'

James's voice was broken, and he stuttered slightly as he spoke through his tears. As they sat there on the couch together Lucy rested her head on his shoulder, and put her arms around him.

'Hey,' she whispered in his ear, 'I know I can my darling love.'

Lucy rubbed her hand across his back as James quietly cried.

'Let's not talk about it anymore today. You lovely man. You will be my strength. You will be my angel of mercy. You will be my guiding force. My one true love. I know that God brought you to me for a reason. How could I ever have faced all this without your help, without your strength? We will help each other through this. The two of us together. Two people as one.'

James couldn't speak. He held onto her, and cried. He was being asked things that had never been asked of him before in his life. He was being called upon to do momentous things. Things he wasn't sure he could do. The only thing he knew with certainty was that he wouldn't let Lucy down. Wherever this took him, he would go. Whatever he had to do, he would do. He wouldn't let her down, in her time of need. He would be at her side, helping her with whatever she decided.

The logs burning in the massive hearth gave the room a feel of an old log cabin, somewhere up in the mountains, rather than that of a pub in the middle of the town. The

low lighting only added to the mystique of days gone by. The atmosphere was intimate, and cosy. The distance between tables gave the place a spacious feel, each group secluded in their privacy. The three friends had found a table close to the fire, the warmth radiated through them, and brought further alive their always animated conversation. Emma leaned forward, and put her hand on Lucy's knee. With a kindness in her voice, and the sweetest of looks on her face, she asked,

'How are you, my dear friend?'

Lucy, with a broad grin on her face, lifted Emma's hand from her knee. With a great firmness in her voice, she spoke her mind, addressing both of them.

'That, my darling friends, will be the only reference to my 'condition'. Here we are, in great company, in an absolutely marvelous place, I might add, out to have a good chat about all and sundry. All, that is, apart from my..... well, you know what I mean. Let's just have an ordinary night out, like we always used to. Let's talk about everything, and anything, except me. Please! Let's have a night off.'

Emma placed her hand back on Lucy's knee, and with a cheekiness to her voice replied.

'How right you are, lovely lady, and that which you desire shall be that which will transpire.'

All three of the friends laughed freely at Emma's banter.

'I am with you all the way, Lucy,' said Vicky, 'Why don't we talk about those guys sitting over by the bar?'

Emma sat back, looking slightly annoyed.

'Maybe we should avoid talking about men, don't you think? I mean, can we bring up the you, and you-know-who situation? Or is that topic off the table?'

Vicky's face took on a serious look. Her tone of voice reflected that seriousness.

'Actually I really would like to explain all that to the two of you. I was very stupid, I can't really explain what happened, but somehow I found myself in the middle of a crazy illicit affair with Dave. I never went looking for something like that, but just talking with someone new, being with someone who wanted me for sex, and who complimented me on my body, instead of only expecting dinner on the table, and a clean house, well... it all just somehow went to my head. I sort of lost control of myself. Hey, temporary sexual insanity, I guess. That's my defense plea. Pathetic as it may be. Anyway, I really want to apologise to the both of you. I should never have done that. The whole thing was a massive mistake.'

Lucy was so relieved that the discussion wasn't about her, for a change. Even though she had taken a couple of extra pain relief tablets before the evening out, she was feeling really sick. She always felt sick. Her feeling of sickness had become her companion, forever at her side. However she was happy to not be at the centre of the discussion. Being, as she was, almost an expert on the repercussions of the Vicky-Dave story, she took advantage of the opportunity to jump right in.

‘Listen, you, there’s nothing you need to apologise to us about, you understand? I must say you are pretty lucky Mike never got wind of the whole thing. That whole situation really blew up in Dave’s face. His life is changed, forever. From what James has told me his wife will never take him back. It’s something she will never be able to get over.’

A dark shadow seemed to pass over Vicky’s face, and her expression became the most serious that Lucy had ever seen from her.

‘Actually, that’s exactly why I got out of that affair. One evening, just sitting at home watching the news on television, of all things, I realised just how much I was risking. Abby was sitting, dozing away in Mike’s lap, and Terry was sitting next to me prattling on about one of his toys, when it all came home to me. It just hit me like a lightning strike out of the blue. What I had come to consider boring, and relentlessly repetitive, was actually the most beautiful life I could have ever imagined. In that moment there was nowhere I would rather have been. No one I would rather have been with. I knew that when we went to bed there would be no sex, that has dried up for a long time now, but I also realised that the life that I have been blessed with goes far beyond the pleasure of some casual physical attraction. Even though,’ she laughed, ‘I must admit, the sex with Dave was actually pretty good. Sorry! But I thought I would just pop that bit of information in there. Seriously though, probably I was attracted to him mostly because it was something new, and vibrant, but oddly enough, I must say, for a bit of a neanderthal man, he was pretty good in bed.’

Emma had a disapproving look on her face.

‘Actually, you can spare us the details, thanks very much. We’ve got the idea.’

Lucy was surprised about how candid her friend was being. In their friendship none of them had ever really opened up about the nitty gritty of their sex lives. It had always been a bit of a taboo subject. Something they steered clear of. In fact most people in general never really talk about what goes on in the bedroom. She found it quite eye opening, if not a little bit embarrassing. For some reason she didn’t really feel she needed to know all the details, but there was no holding Vicky back. She had decided to let it all out.

‘I know that sex with Mike will never be anything exciting ever again. Probably after so many years together that’s just the way it is. Also the kids are always there, and we are usually both worn out by the evening, so I guess I just have to accept that, and concentrate on what I have. What I have though, is actually quite a lot. I have the most beautiful family. I am never going to risk losing that again, ever. I know I have probably let you both down, and have been a disappointment for you, but it just happened. I never went looking for anything like that.’

Lucy was at a bit of a loss. She really couldn’t think of anything to say, although she knew she should say something. In part because Vicky had met Dave as a result of her, but also because her friend had been very open about her feelings, and deserved to have

her support. As it turned out though, the surprises hadn't finished quite yet. Now it was Emma's turn. She sighed.

'Well, if I was to be really honest I can understand exactly what you mean. Especially about the sexual side of it all.'

My God, thought Lucy, where on earth is Emma going with this? Things were getting out of hand.

'You certainly don't owe anyone an apology. To be frank, if I had your courage I would probably have done the same thing.'

Lucy was beside herself, by this point. Not Emma as well?

'Emma! What the hell are you talking about?'

'No, listen will you please? I have never been unfaithful to Jerry, but without a doubt I have thought about it, a lot. There's a guy at work, he's married too, and he has been trying it on with me for a long time. I've never given in to him, but I have always played along with the sexual banter, with part of me wanting to sleep with him so much, but another part of me, the coward, scared to risk it. Really for the same reasons that you have said, Vicky, everything that I have to lose, if I got caught out. If I knew that I could have gotten away with it, I would probably have given into him a long time ago. You certainly don't need to justify, or excuse, your actions with me. If I had had half your courage I would have done the same thing. In fact if I ever found myself out drinking with Craig, I have no doubt we would end up in bed. There really is a strange sort of chemistry between us. A real connection. Luckily, I guess, we only see each other at work, so that has never come about. But I have really thought about it a lot, especially when I am lying in bed with your royal highness snoring away beside me. I can't remember the last time he kissed my breasts, or did anything for me. In bed nothing happens anymore other than just the occasional quicky before he rolls over to go to sleep.'

Lucy's mind was in a spin. She had thought that she had known her best friends so well. Obviously not. So many secrets. So many things never spoken about. All those years that she had spent so envious of her friends, and the love and fulfillment they had found. All of it just seemed to evaporate before her eyes. In the end she had become the only truly happy one of the three, and she was dying! How strange it all seemed. How odd that they had never broached this subject before. Mind you, she could understand that the dark secrets of the bedroom were possibly a bit of a discussion too far. Such raw intimacy was definitely very private. Anyway, she probably would never even have wanted to have known this side of her friends' lives. And she never would have, if the affair with Dave hadn't taken centre stage. Vicky, on the other hand, seemed very relieved about Emma's confession.

'Thanks, Emma, thanks for saying that. It means a lot to me. If I can give you any advice, concentrate on what you have, not on what is missing. Jerry and the boys are fantastic. Don't do anything to put that in danger. Sex is just sex. A family, your children,

that just can't be replaced. Learn from my mistake, even though, luckily, I seem to have gotten away with it. I am so thankful Mike never found out, and I wish now that I had never gotten involved with Dave. It really was the biggest mistake of my life. The most stupid thing I have ever done, believe me, you are missing out on nothing, but would be risking everything you have built up over the years. It just isn't worth it.'

The three of them fell into an uneasy silence. Emma looked away, she had opened up enough, she wasn't going to tell the full story. She couldn't. She couldn't put into words how cold, and unloving the bedroom had become. She couldn't bring herself to talk about the betrayal. That was too personal, and too painful for her. Lucy, for her part, had a lot to reflect on. On the one hand she had learnt more than she ever wanted to know about her friends' sexual lives, but on the other hand, she realised that looking in from the outside at other people's lives you could never really see the total reality. She had always been so sad in her life that she had imagined everyone else to have had the perfect life, while she, and only she, had suffered with what was missing. She now realised that that hadn't been the case, and that even her best friends had been fighting with their demons, and hidden secrets. Probably most people carried some sort of secret in the deepest recesses of their minds. Mind you, she thought, talking about secrets. Here she was feeling at odds with the sexual secrets of her friends, and how they had never spoken to her about all of that, when she herself was sitting on the biggest of all secrets. There she was, actively planning to take her life, the biggest of all acts, the biggest of all secrets, and she wasn't telling them anything about it. How could she hold it against her friends for not sharing their feelings about sex with her, when she was holding back with something much more important? Obviously even the best of friends have parts of their lives which are too private, too intimate, to share with others, even with their greatest friends. Lucy glanced at her two friends, both lost in their own thoughts, and wondered how they would ever be able to cope with her death. Would it be worse for them knowing that she had taken her own life? Or would they understand that she had just been anticipating the inevitable? In either case, she knew that it would be one of the hardest things that either of them would ever have to face. Although, in the end it probably wouldn't make much difference how it happened, there was no doubt that it was going to happen, sooner or later. Hopefully with the help of their husbands, and children, they would be able to get through it all. She knew it would be devastating for them. They would have each other, and the solidarity of their families to fall back on. It dawned on her that, strangely enough, her part would really be the easiest. She would just end. She would just disappear. Gone. Hopefully she would be able to do that in a nice peaceful way, that was definitely the part she still really needed to work out. However, they would be left for years trying to make sense of it all, and trying to carry on, without her. She felt such sadness at the thought of the pain her two most cherished friends would suffer. Lucy looked at her drink, and realised that she couldn't think like that. She couldn't take the weight of the whole world on her shoulders. It was really enough, actually too much, that

which she already had to cope with. It would be up to them, in their own ways, in their own time, to pick up the pieces, and to deal with their loss. She had faith in them that they would be able to understand, perhaps with time, that she had had the right to decide how, and when, she would end her suffering. Initially they would quite possibly be angry with her, that they had been excluded from her final moments. No doubt the both of them would have been expecting the usual scene that you see in the movies. The moving scene where family, and friends surround the bed of the dying loved one, and hold her hand as life seeps from her body. The tearful finale. Perhaps they would have better closure after such an experience. Perhaps that would be more helpful to them, to experience that, on their journey towards accepting her loss. Even if that were the case, Lucy knew she didn't want any of that, neither for herself, nor for the others. She wanted to end it all before the pain got unbearable, and on her terms. She wanted a nice loving, peaceful end, in the arms of her beloved James. She smiled at the thought of him. She had her James.

'Well, you seem to have taken all this fairly well,' piped up Emma, 'it's nice to see you smile. I rather thought I would have surprised you with my secret sexual fantasies.'

The three of them broke into laughter. The sullen mood was broken.

'Are you kidding? Of course I was surprised! I had always thought you had, well, both of you really, such happy, contented lives. Now that I think about it, I realise that life holds a lot of surprises for all of us. We just have to do the best we can, and try and make the best decisions possible. I'm just really, really glad that you both have managed to keep your marriages in one piece. Poor old Dave! You have no idea! I get the inside story about him from James. He really is a mess. His life is destroyed.'

Vicky let out a loud sigh, and lowered her head towards the table.

'Hey you,' said Lucy, 'this is not on you. What has happened, has happened. There is no use dwelling on it. Thank your lucky stars that all is well with you, and your family, and go on from there.'

Vicky jumped to her feet, with a massive smile on her face, and hugged Lucy where she sat. She kissed her delicately on her cheek.

'How wise my beautiful little angel is!'

Tears flowed freely down Vicky's cheeks. All three of them, now standing, hugged each other as the tears flowed. The unspoken topic firmly in all of their thoughts. Lucy wanted to say something to her friends, but no words came. In any case, in that moment words were superfluous. Their tears spoke for them. Their tears spoke volumes.

11. Strange ways

Jerry raised his arm over her eyes. The light directly above him seemed to burn into his eyes. The stark light of a barren, soulless hotel room. A place of blandness, and uniformity. A place where everybody was the same. A place where everybody was nobody. He felt contrasting emotions. At the same time he felt both physically satisfied, but also mentally exhausted. Tired, tired of it all. The sex had been just sex. A mere mechanical function, like eating. He liked Melanie, but for some reason the sex just seemed to be something he had to do. No, something he needed to do. It seemed odd to him to have been so unmoved by the sex. So emotionally drained. She was very attractive, funny, and with a hot body. Why did he always feel so distant from the sexual act? With a start Jerry realised the answer. He was having revenge sex. He furtively looked across at Melanie as she was getting dressed, hoping his thoughts weren't reflected in his face. How was it that he hadn't realised that before? Melanie finished fluffing up her hair, while looking in the mirror of the hotel room. She really was beautiful, with her tall thin body, and long curly brown hair. She was always happy, a smile always lingering around the corners of her mouth.

'I really don't know why you don't just come to my place, Jerry. It all seems so furtive, and a bit sordid, this hotel side of things. My neighbours don't know you, and they wouldn't care anyway. What is it with you and hotel rooms?'

Melanie sat on the side of the bed, where he lay, still naked. She ran her hand through his hair. Her voice turned sexy.

'Does it turn you on, bringing your lover to a hotel room? Does it get you hot?'

She laughed as she looked at the intense, thoughtful expression on his face.

'Don't freak out! I'm only kidding. If you prefer to do it in hotels, that's fine by me. It just seems like a waste of money, that's all. Anyway, sorry Jerry, love you to pieces but I really have to go. I've got an early start in the morning, and I really have to sleep off all that wine. We'll chat tomorrow.'

Melanie leaned down, and kissed Jerry on the lips. Without another word she crossed the room to the door, turned and gave him a sweet smile, and a little wave, then left. Jerry looked at his watch. He could wait another half an hour before having to face the coldness of the marital bed that awaited him at home. He rubbed his face with both of his hands. Revenge sex? He was a guy having revenge sex. For some reason the title, the name, the realisation, made him feel strange. Of course he had always known that he was playing around only because Emma had done so first, but actually to call it by that rather ignoble name made him feel somehow small. He was taking the low road. He was being

vindictive, and spiteful. He had become someone he had never dreamed of becoming. The sort of person he had always disliked, almost despised. All he had ever wanted had been a family. A couple of kids, and a loving wife. A nice house, in a safe suburb. He worked hard, but that had never bothered him. He had always just wanted to be part of something, something good. He had even been lucky enough to have had two boys, not that he would have minded having a daughter, but he had always wanted boys. He would be able to share sports interests with them, take them camping. Man stuff. He had had it all, well so he had thought, anyway. Then it had all come crashing down. When he had heard of Emma's relationship with her colleague he hadn't believed it at first. He had refused to accept it, but his sources were unambiguous. A friend of a friend worked in the same office as them, and there could be no doubt. Jerry's first instinct had been to find out all about the guy, Craig Patterson, and jump him one dark night, and beat the living crap out of him. The more he had thought that through, the more he had realised that he would have been the prime suspect. The jilted husband seeking revenge on his wife's lover. He wouldn't have minded for himself, but the fallout would have had devastating consequences on the boys, so he had reluctantly decided against that. His main priority had to be to look out for his boys. They were all he had left. Emma had left him emotionally anyway, for that Craig bastard. Now he just had the kids. He couldn't afford to do anything to damage that relationship as well. As a way of dealing with his anger he had looked for relationships, sex, as a way of evening up the playing field. For a while it had made him feel better. Two could play at that game. If that was the sort of marriage she wanted, so be it. But now that this revelation had come to him, this description, this phrase, 'revenge sex', he felt petty, a lesser person. He had taken the cowards route. Maybe if he had just talked it over with Emma, they could have worked something out? But how could he have? To be cheated on made him feel so angry. To have put it into words would have taken him to a place from which there would have been no coming back. If he had talked about it with her, put his feelings into words, he knew that the conversation would have snowballed, and would have inevitably led to the end of their marriage, the end of the family unit. He couldn't do that to his boys. They couldn't be the ones to suffer for the problems of their parents. For their inadequacies. He looked at his watch. It was time to go. The chill, and emptiness of the marital bed was waiting for him. Hopefully she would be asleep by the time he got in. Each of them turned away from the other, lost in a place of darkness, and cold. Each of them with their sordid secrets. In sadness he got dressed, and prepared himself for his degrading return home. The small man returns.

James's hands were still cold, even as he rubbed them together trying to get the circulation going. The moment seemed frozen in time, not because of his cold hands, but because of that which he was hearing from Lucy. He could barely recognise her as the person he had known for so long. It was as if a stranger had entered her body, and spoke

through her. It looked like her, sounded like her, but that definitely wasn't the Lucy he had come to know, and finally, love. The words coming out of her mouth just didn't make any sense to him. It was like she was speaking in a language that he didn't understand. He had barely sat down at Lucy's table, when she had started to outline a well thought out plan. A plan to kill herself. A plan for her death, by her own hands. He felt so disoriented, so confused that he couldn't take any of it in.

'Slow down will you. I can't understand any of this. Will you take a breath, please? What pills?'

Lucy fell silent, for a moment, as she looked at him.

'Sorry, my darling, it's just that I have been up most of the night thinking this through. At work today I could hardly concentrate on anything else. Let me slow down, and explain it to you. Hold on a second, I'll put on the kettle, and make us a lovely hot cup of tea. What do you say? You look so cold.'

Cold, thought James, there she was talking about a plan to kill herself, and she could actually ask him if he was feeling cold? Yes, let's have a lovely cup of tea. That will sort it all out. Maybe some biscuits as well, as we talk about her plan for suicide. James felt a sort of brain freeze in his head. Sure, they had touched on the idea, as a way out of her suffering, but he hadn't expected anything like this. This was a sort of grocery list of things to do when you want to kill yourself. Tick all the boxes, and then die. Mind you, to be honest with himself, James realised that he had really tried to not think about the subject. Maybe he had thought that by avoiding the subject, it would have all gone away? Lucy disappeared into the kitchen, leaving James alone with his thoughts. Not that he could concentrate on anything much. It all seemed so surreal. How could you politely discuss your suicide over a lovely cup of tea? Besides, she was nowhere near that point yet. Why did they need to talk about that now? She would have months, maybe years, to come. This was something they could think about a long time into the future. In the very moment that James thought that, he realised how much of an idiot he was being. He had been there when the death penalty had been passed down on her. He had been in court when the judge had passed down the verdict. He had heard the sentence being passed. She had been sentenced to death. And what's more she didn't have years. She barely had months, and probably not many of them. There was no doubt that she was right. She needed to confront this, face up to it, and work out a strategy. This was happening, and it was happening to her. She was showing her strength, the strength that her illness had bestowed on her. Her new strength born of her suffering. James realised that he needed to get his head together, accept the reality of the situation, and concentrate on what she was saying. He needed to focus without being distracted by the total surrealness of it all. He needed to get his head in the game. He had to be a part of all this. Lucy needed his support, and he wanted to be there for her. This was a discussion they needed to have. Lucy returned from the kitchen.

'Here you are, Just what we both need.'

With a smile Lucy placed the two mugs of tea on the table. With a smile. James's heart almost broke apart upon seeing that serene, lovely smile. The smile of a person happy with life. The smile of someone who has all that she desires in her life. Yet at the same time, the smile of someone who is detailing the last moments that she will ever live. How could she smile through this? Where could she find the courage to smile? In what inner place, that she could find, was any of this to be smiled about?

'Well, what do you think of....'The Plan'?'

Lucy laughed as she said the words, as if it was the title of a film they had seen together, or the title of a new book, just out. James forced himself to return into the moment. He had to shake off the mist that was obscuring his capacity to think clearly.

'Listen, I haven't really understood what the plan is. What pills?'

'I'm sorry, my lovely man, it's just that I have been over it all so often in my head, I know it all so well, that without a doubt I haven't explained it very clearly to you.'

Lucy took a sip from her cup, and smiled at James. James had never felt love so strongly, as he did in that moment. Pure love. The love you feel for the person you want to spend the rest of your life with. The love for a person who is detailing her plans for suicide.

'Here's the thing. If you are seen to help me in any way with my suicide, even though for the most part society, and my friends, would understand that you did it for me, the long arm of the law would prosecute you, either for murder, or aiding and assisting a..... well I don't know what specifically. But, without a doubt, the authorities would hold you to blame, in some measure. I don't want that for you. I have come up with a plan to leave a trail that they will be able to follow, when all is done and dusted, and you will come out of it totally blameless. That's important to me, you know?'

'Really, Lucy, now's not the time for looking ahead so far. I will deal with things as they turn up. That's not really the priority. You can't be worried for me at a time like this.'

Lucy put down her cup of tea, and reached over to place her hand on James's arm. With the sweetest of smiles she looked at the man she loved.

'That's exactly where you are wrong. I can't leave you, leave this world, and rest in peace, if I know that you will be held to account for helping me. This is really important to me. It really is. It's very sweet that you don't care about that, but, believe me, it's an important issue. I can't leave you to face the recriminations for my actions, and the help that you will have given me. Soooo....., are you ready?'

James felt so disorientated. It almost seemed like Lucy was waiting for a drumroll before wheeling out her plan. In his bewildered state he almost expected a troupe of clowns to walk through the room, banging on weird musical instruments. Or maybe one of those late night comedy show hosts would come on the TV, and say:

'Well, here it is folks. The moment you have all been waiting for. I give you....The Plan!'

Was he ready to hear the plan? Her plan to kill herself. In such a bizarre situation he really had trouble comprehending anything. He absolutely knew that he needed to focus. He forced himself back into the moment.

‘Sure I’m ready. What is.... the plan?’

‘I will stockpile the necessary pills, and when....’

‘What pills?’

‘Listen, that’s not the point. The necessary pills, don’t get sidetracked. When the time comes, and hopefully that won’t be for a long while yet, I will set up a couple of meetings, for coffees and a chat. I will organise to meet aunty here in town, and while I am with her I will take a handful of pills, quite openly. When she asks me about them I will tell her that I have a massive headache, and that I had better head off home to bed. Actually I will go to another meeting, after that, with the girls, where I will do the same thing. They will notice, they notice everything, and will remember that when the police piece together my last hours. The authorities will be able to track them all down by checking my messages on social media. I will leave a good trail for them to follow. For good luck, I will order a taxi through an app, and ask the driver for some water, to wash down some more pills. By the time I get to your place I will have taken them all, and you will be none the wiser about my plan. You will be blameless. But the best part is, I get to die, peacefully, in your arms. What do you think?’

Lucy looked as pleased as punch with her plan. James hung his head down, and he just looked at the floor. Tears welled up in his eyes, and streamed down his cheeks. What could he reply? Yeah, good plan, man. Good way to take yourself out. Now that there, that’s a good way to kill yourself. No doubt about it. He had no answer. There wasn’t any answer. He couldn’t speak. Lucy affectionately put her hand on his, and spoke softly.

‘James, please, don’t be like that, I’m just being realistic. Anyway, we’re not there yet, but I need to be ready. It’s just the way I am. I need to be prepared for this. This is happening. It’s happening to me. I can’t avoid this. I would really value your opinion. Put aside your emotions, and think about it from a practicable aspect. What do you think? Is it workable?’

James rubbed his forearm across his eyes, to wipe away the tears, and tried to shake off his state of languor. He thought about what Lucy had told him. He tried to block out his emotions, and analyse the idea from a purely practical point of view, as he would a project at work. He focused in on the little details. His speciality.

‘There’s one little problem, that I can see.’

‘Really, what?’

Lucy seemed almost excited at his having found a problem with her plan.

‘By the time you get through your various coffee meetings, the drugs will be affecting you. Possibly very strongly. You might not be in a clear headed enough state to make it to me.’

‘Right, that’s true. I’m not sure what I can do about that one.’

‘Actually I think I have a solution for that.’

Lucy’s face lit up, in expectation.

‘That’s why I wanted to talk to you about this, I knew that you would be able to help me. You can always see things so clearly. Out with it, come on, what’s your idea?’

Lucy seemed so enthusiastic about the whole plan, that it really made James uncomfortable. Although, at the end of the day it was her having to live through the cancer. It was she who had to deal with the pain, and prepare herself for the inevitable end. In that moment James could see, and understand, what was driving Lucy, with her preparations for her suicide. She was the one suffering this devastating disease. She was the one who had to deal with it’s regime of terror, and pain. Lucy was right, she really did need to plan for that which was awaiting her. He was blocked, with his head hidden in the sand. Avoiding seeing, or talking about the issue would not make it go away, or change it in any way. Lucy really had the correct approach to the whole situation. She was right. He needed to help her with this.

‘Well, are you going to tell me how I can overcome the fast acting nature of the pills, or not?’

James looked at her beautiful face, and smiled. He reached across, and stroked her cheek. Yes, he realised, they could still smile, even while talking about such an important issue.

‘Timing. That’s the answer, timing.’

‘Timing? Do tell. Elaborate.’

‘Well, you organise the coffee date with your aunty, and the girls, in two different coffee shops, near each other, at exactly the same time. That way you can fly from one to the other in a matter of minutes, before the pills take effect. You can book the taxi for five minutes after the meeting time, so that you will be at my place before it all kicks in, or, at the very least, shortly after.’

‘That’s really good. I see what you mean. I will see aunty first. That meeting I can fly through, we aren’t really very close. It’s really a bit of a way to say goodbye, but just as importantly, to set her up as a witness for the pill taking. With the girls I will need to take a bit more time. That will be the last time they will see me. I would like to make them feel good about that last day. They will reflect on that moment for a long time to come. I need to..... I want to do that well. They really deserve that, my best of friends, but If I feel the pills kicking in I will shoot out of there, I promise. As you say, I will book the taxi for the same time, and will let the driver know, through the app, that I am running a bit late, and to keep the meter running. The plan is good.’

Lucy paused, and looked inquisitively at James.

‘Do you understand why I need to be ready, James?’

Lucy was waiting for an answer from him. In response James stood up, and put his arms around her, as she sat at the table. He embraced her, and kissed her delicately, on the side of her head. He answered her with his actions. They had no need of words.

Words couldn't express the point they had come to. Finally they were at one. James had come to realise exactly where Lucy was at, and why she had to think ahead, as she was doing. He would be at her side. He would always be at her side, from there on in. When she had need of him most, he wouldn't let her down.

'Hey, are you listening to me, man?'

'Sure, Dave, of course I am.' lied James.

To be honest he hadn't really heard a word his friend had said. He was still mulling over Lucy's plan, all the little details, and how he would play his part in it all. It virtually consumed his thoughts in that period, even at work. With all the balls he seemed to be juggling at the same time, he was in thought overload. It almost felt like he had so much on his plate that he barely had time to fit in his friend's problems, as well. But he knew that he would make room for them. He would always find time for Dave. Dave had come over to James's place with the usual excuse of watching a game of rugby on the television, but really that had always just been a way for the two of them to get together, and have a good talk about the various things were going on in their lives.

'So, what do you reckon, Jimmy? Should I go for it? She seems pretty nice.'

'Who?'

'Bloody hell, man, what's wrong with you today? Are you here or what? Where's your head at, brother?'

James would have loved nothing more than to tell his best friend all the comings and goings of the suicide pact with Lucy, if for no other reason than that he would really have welcomed a bit of moral support, and advice, from his friend on the whole issue. But he knew that he couldn't. It was just too personal, and too important to Lucy. He would have to deal with that all by himself.

'Sorry, Dave, I'm in a bit of a state with a project at work. Bit of a crucial point, you know, the usual stuff. Schedules to respect, timelines to follow. So, who is this? What's going on?'

Dave had a cheeky smirk on his face, just like the good old Dave, before the destruction of everything. Before the nuclear winter had set in. Before the Doomsday Clock had struck midnight, and everything had been destroyed.

'You have never seen such a hot body, I'm telling you. She is a beauty! I'm thinking about taking it to the next level. What do you think? I know I've only known her a week, or so, but it really is working for me. Even in the cold weather she always has on a skirt, or something sexy. You've got to see her legs, man, they are looking good.'

James was pleased to see his friend in such a good frame of mind. To be honest a hot babe in a sexy skirt was never going to have any possibility of coming anywhere near being able to replace what his friend had lost with Maureen, but if it brought a smile to his face, what could be wrong with it? Dave was moving on with his life, even if that meant moving down. He was now in the bargain basement. He had been a high flying

executive on Wall street, and now he a homeless bum, living under a bridge. Eating whatever scraps he could find in the rubbish bins. But he seemed happy.

‘Is this the girl you met at the gym? What’s her name?’

‘You should see the gear she wears when she’s working out. Basically the whole gym comes to a standstill, with all the guys watching her. And she loves it! She really thrives on all the attention. Man, are those shorts tight! They really show off her butt well!’

As Dave continued with his description of his new conquest, James was a bit overcome with a feeling of sorrow. He kept a smile on his face as his friend recounted the new girl’s comings and goings, but inside he felt quite sad for his friend. It almost seemed as if he had replaced the woman of all ages, the spiritual centre of life itself, with, basically, the town slut. He knew he couldn’t, and wouldn’t, ever say anything along those lines. He could never hurt Dave like that. Probably even Dave, in the deep recesses of his mind, realised that he had traded down pretty radically. But, all things considered, there was no going back. Maureen had made that very clear. So really, if it was shaking him out of the sullen mood he had fallen into, it must be a good thing. Anyway, Dave had always had a bit of a superficiality about him. Maybe those hot shorts were just the thing for him now? A good butt? Why not?

‘I’m with you, Dave, she sounds pretty hot. Kick it up, brother, keep it moving along. It sounds like you have found yourself a good one there.’

James felt incredibly false with the advice he was giving Dave, but it was just so good to see his friend upbeat again. Anyway, once Dave got back in the game again he could always trade up for a better model. It was just good for him to get back out there. This time it was Dave’s turn to get back on that bicycle. He had, and he seemed to be pedaling furiously.

‘She was going out with some loser, but that seems to be over. The new boy is in town, and he is walking tall!’

As James laughed along with his friend, the feeling of sadness in him just grew. This was the replacement for Maureen? Was he listening to himself? He thought that maybe he should test the waters there. Maybe if Dave really worked at it, he might, with time, be able to get Maureen back in his life.

‘How are things with Maureen, and Penny?’

‘Penny is in and out of my place all the time. It really was a good move getting some digs close to the old place. We are really getting on well, maybe even better than before. She comes over to my place to do her drawings for school, and is always asking me what colours I prefer. It’s really great.’

‘And with you and Maureen?’

For a moment a dark shadow passed over Dave’s face. The fire that had been burning dimmed somewhat. His mood turned morose.

‘Hey, she’s not for bending, man. That bird has flown from the coop, and she ain’t

coming back.'

James realised that he had stuck a knife into an open wound, and was twisting it around. In fact, he realised that he should never even have brought up that idea. The Maureen he knew would never be able pass over something as destructive to a relationship as what Dave, with great superficiality, had done. He knew he had to move the conversation out of the quicksand, and back onto a more stable footing. He had to get the conversation back into a frivolous mood. He had to focus Dave's mind back on that hot butt.

'Just how many times do you go to the gym, now?'

Dave, as if controlled remotely by unseen forces, sprung back into his new, revitalised self.

'Well, it was every couple of days or so, until I met Cindy, but this week I have been going every day. Her too. We've only been out for drinks a couple of times, but last night I cracked it! After a few drinks I smoothly talked her into coming back to my place. What a night! Man, is she hot! You wouldn't believe how good she is in bed. Tonight we are getting in a pizza at my place, with a few drinks. I'll send you a photo of her.'

James laughed at the thought of his friend stopping during sex to snap a selfie of them to send him. Without a doubt Cindy wouldn't mind at all, from what James could understand of her from his friend. James realised that he had to put aside his anguish at Dave's split with Maureen, and throw himself, headlong, into Dave's brave new world. It was obvious that even Dave realised the total ridiculousness of his new situation, but also that he was trying to let his inbred optimism have free rein. His personality was that of a person who needed to be in a good place, even when that good place was really a bit of a shit hole.

'Ok, but when you both have your clothes still on.'

Dave threw his head back, and roared with laughter.

'Now what would be the fun of that? You've got see her butt, man, it's hot. I'll sneak a shot of her while....'

'Hey, you want to take it easy here? Do not do that, you understand?'

Dave absolutely split his sides laughing.

'Now you are just egging me on. Now, I really will send you a hot shot. I was actually just kidding, but now I'll do it for sure.'

The two friends laughed together. Whatever trade down Dave had made, whatever mess he had caused for himself, it was so good for James to see his friend this happy. Dave's life would never be the same again, but then, neither would his. With what he was going through with Lucy he knew that a different version of him would come out the other end. That new version of him would be in serious need of support from his good friend, so it was only fitting that he should help Dave through his rough patch. Both of them were going through the devastating fallout of the nuclear winter that had descended on them. Things would never be the same, and the two of them quite simply had to adapt

to the new mutated versions of themselves that would emerge. Whatever changes that affected one, or the other, or both, James loved the thought that the two of them had each other for support. You just couldn't buy that. You really needed a Dave in your life.

'Hey, you know what? Send me a photo of her butt.'

The two of them laughed together.

'Come on, brother, out with the beers! We've got some celebrating to do.'

'For sure, Dave. It's good to see you back.'

12. The coming storm

The cold wind cut through Lucy, as she and James hurried along the boardwalk towards the restaurant they had decided to eat in. It had been a bit of a crazy idea from the start, but that was what she loved about James. He didn't follow society's rules, he was his own man, thinking out of the box. No doubt that was a special capability that had had a lot to do with his success as an architect. Still, a seaside holiday in winter? You've got to be crazy! She laughed to herself as they hurried along. Her pain, which never left her, had abated to a level she could just about cope with. With the determination that had grown in her, she wasn't going to focus on how bad she felt, rather, she was going to appreciate the good things in her life. Things like this mad weekend away. This was living. This was life. She even loved being sprayed with the mist in the air from the breaking waves. The ocean was wild with great flurries of white water, and the ferocious waves which broke violently against the sea wall. Really, with winter coming towards its end, they could have hoped for slightly better weather, but Lucy loved it just as it was. Wild and savage. Nature at its best. Forces untamed by man. In any case, the rain had stopped so who cared about a bit of wind? Well, while it was not quite hurricane strength, probably calling it just a bit of wind was probably going a bit too far. In any case, she wouldn't have had it any other way. She felt alive.

'Come on Lucy, hurry up!'

James was holding open the door to the restaurant, but she couldn't resist taking another look at the wildness of the ocean, before darkness took it from view. What strength! What a force nature, and life, was. Life was such a precious thing. In moments like that Lucy could really appreciate all that life, nature, and love, had to offer. She felt like throwing up her arms, and yelling with glee, into the frigid wind.

'Hey, they are going to kick us out before we even get in, if I don't get this door shut.'

Lucy turned to her James, and placed the palm of her hand on his cheek.

'Don't get flustered, my lovely angel. I was just admiring the good work God has done creating the seasons, the oceans, and everything. It's so lovely here James, what a lovely idea it was to come for a few days. You really know how to treat a lady!'

They both laughed, as they took their seats at a table by the window.

'That's for sure. Any bloke can take his girl to a sunny seaside resort, swimming, eating fresh fish, and sunbathing. It takes someone super special to take his girl to the ocean in winter, with a storm raging. Only a fool like me, and those crazy storm chasers that you see on television, could have come up with such an insane plan.'

Lucy had the giggles, she felt like she had when she had been back in school, and with her friends everything always had a funny side. When did the laughter stop, she wondered? What is it with life? Everyone starts off so happy, and carefree, only to end up embroiled in a life of work, bills to pay, and surrounded by all the flotsam and jetsam that life throws in your path. At some point the laughter just stops, and seriousness sets in. It seemed to be like that for everyone, laughter ends up becoming a part-time thing, something you do only on the weekend, when the boring part of the week is over. Why is that? Lucy could only think that maybe it had just been the innocence of youth, that had kept them laughing permanently. It was almost a sad thought. The thought of that innocence lost. If that were the case, maybe childish innocence is better than the reality of life, experienced as an adult.

‘You know, we really have no choice.’

Lucy gave a slight start. James had interrupted her thoughts with a pretty fitting interjection. He was definitely right. You really didn’t have a choice, that was just the way life was. You take what you get thrown at you, and do the best you can with it. It seemed to her that James could now read her thoughts.

‘What do you mean?’

‘We definitely have to eat the fish. We can’t come all this way, to the ocean, and not eat fish.’

Lucy giggled with delight, and reached across the small table, placing her right hand on James’s hand.

‘Absolutely!’

‘That is, of course, if some fisherman was brave enough, or foolish enough, to go out in this weather, just for us.’

James seemed so happy. Lucy could feel her heart almost bursting with joy. She knew how ironic the whole situation was. To have found her one true love, just on the cusp of life’s end. But then, luckily, she had found him. Finally, she had found the man of her dreams. God’s endless wondrous creations included also this. Being with her James, and having the happiness, and giggles, of her youth restored to her. She wouldn’t have missed out on feeling like this for anything. Probably the total amount of love she would had felt in this brief period was more than the love most people would feel over the course of their entire lifetimes. She was determined to never reflect on what she would be losing, just on what she had gained, and that was a lot. Lucy was going to face what was coming with joy, and love, beating off all other contenders. In the same way that James lived his life not following society’s rules, and being imaginative about his creations, she would face life’s completion on her own terms. She had found her love, and had always been in the company of the two most beautiful, loving friends anyone could ever have hoped to have. Before leaving this life, she had experienced all it had to offer. And then some. In the end, life had smiled on her. She had been blessed with more than anyone could ever have hoped for.

‘Tomorrow, if the storm passes, I would love to head up the coast to a little fishing village, only about 40 kilometres away. From what I’ve read about it, the whole town is made up of old wooden structures, mostly around 100 to a 150 years old. Apparently each house, and shop, has quite a unique design. Usually old towns have the same sort of construction themes running through them. This place sounds really interesting.’

‘That sounds lovely, James. Let’s check out of our hotel in the morning, and find a place there for the night? If we can’t find anything, we can always head back here. I doubt if this place is going to suddenly fill up. Not in this weather, anyway.’

James smiled broadly.

‘Let’s hope a group of nutcases like us don’t show up, and book the town out.’

The dinner went along in that vein, chatting, giggling, and laughing together. Lucy barely ate anything, but after a couple of glasses of wine, she felt so light, and free. She could almost have floated away on a cloud of serenity. Who knew? Who knew that life could be so wonderful? Lucy wondered if her life had only really started now, with the death sentence passed over her. No, she thought, that’s not true, it was only that now she had learned to appreciate, and understand fully, the real significance of life. It had always been there. She had always been surrounded with wonderful things, which she hadn’t been able to fully appreciate. It was as if she had been drifting through a series of events, oblivious to the real sense of what had been all around her. How strange, when all was to be taken away, that she had finally grasped the importance of what had always been there. Or maybe not? Maybe a lot of people, quite possibly most people, go through life’s daily motions not really cherishing everything they had. Just taking the wonder of life for granted, without appreciating what a marvelous gift they had been given. Lucy felt happy to have finally felt the warm embrace of life’s wonder. How sad it would be to live a long life, but never to have been really aware of the beautiful intricacies that had always surrounded you. Even if she would live only a little longer, she would grasp, and hold tight, to every fraction of every moment. She would experience the emotions of a hundred years of life, in what little time that was left to her. She would leave this earth having lived a full life, only in a shorter period than most people. However, she would have lived, and experienced, more of life than most people could ever have dreamt of.

As they walked down the street James realised that the day was going to be easy for him to get through. He was in his element.

‘Just look at this old shop front, will you? It’s a classic wooden structure from around the end of the 1800’s. See the ornate facade that makes up the second floor? Behind that there is nothing, it’s mainly there for show, but it’s also used as a support to hold up the overhanging structure, giving shade, and shelter from the rain.’

The morning was sunny, and a really splendid day had come out, especially considering the storm of the previous day. The two of them had had breakfast early, and had got the day going to a flying start. James was happy with his idea of the architectural

tour of the coastal village he had discovered for them. He was really in an easy place. His speciality. Here he could blather on with all his usual display of plates spinning, and interesting anecdotes, while effortlessly masking his real thoughts. He could hide behind an endless stream of banal architectural facts. Facts of which he had an endless supply, keeping his thoughts to himself. It had been four months since Lucy's diagnosis. You could almost say that she was already living on borrowed time. James had become almost a total nervous wreck, although he made sure no one, and really no one, would ever notice that. He hid it well, for her sake. Lucy was actually in surprisingly good form. She had bounced back well after having stopped the incredibly invasive treatment she had been on. That had only ever made her feel worse. However, even in this better phase for her James could hear the constant ticking of the clock. Or was it a time bomb he could hear? The bomb mechanism was so complex that even the bomb disposal squad couldn't render it harmless. Somehow, at least, they seemed to have been able to fiddle with the clock, giving them more time. Time which Lucy seemed to be making the most of. She never spoke of her pain, never complained about life's cruel trick. However, James, with the inevitable dancing around them constantly, could barely think of anything else. Luckily, here in his element, he could recount all his old interesting yarns, almost in his sleep, while hiding the dark thoughts, and the brooding worry, growing deep inside him.

'Well I think it's just lovely, James. It exudes a sort of old-world charm. The whole village does, really. It's such a lovely place.'

Lucy was holding James's arm, as they wandered around, looking at the various sights. With her free hand she rubbed his hand.

'What a great idea to come here, James, thank you so much!'

James smiled back at Lucy, there was so much he wanted to say, real things, his innermost thoughts, but he knew that if he started down that road he would end up bawling his eyes out, and ruining the whole day. With great ease, he fell back on the old effortless phrases. The tourist guide. He really needed to get this stuff on a TV show. He would call it: 'Take your mind off life with incessant babbling'.

'Yes, it doesn't appeal only to designers, it really has a great historical fascination for everyone. Well, everyone with good taste, that is.'

Lucy giggled at his little joke, making him feel only worse. It was beyond James's understanding how Lucy could be so strong through what she was facing. In fact, he had never seen her so outwardly happy. She was always giggling, and laughing, or at the very least smiling. He realised that it was much better that way, rather than having her lying in bed, full of pain, awaiting the arrival of the end of everything. However, it was just so strange for him, so surreal. Sometimes in his thoughts he almost couldn't wait for it to all be over, it was such a stressful time for him, but then he would feel incredibly guilty, and ashamed of himself. How could he think that? Wanting her to hurry up and die, because then it would all be so much easier for him. Plus, who did he think he was kidding? It would all be over? None of this was ever going to be over. This whole experience would

no doubt shape the rest of his life. He would never be free from the pain, and anxiety of it all. Never would his life return to the beginnings of normality he had started to experience before. James was in a total state of constant confusion. Thoughts interfering with other thoughts, keeping his mind in a constant state of agitation. God only knew how he managed to hide it all from Lucy. Well, actually he did, with incessant babbling.

‘James, what an absolutely lovely day! Spring can’t be far off. The sun feels quite warm today. I just feel so good!’

Lucy shook her whole body, with a feeling of glee.

‘How wonderful it all is. Just look at those cute little fishing boats! I could just dive into the water, and swim across the harbour.’

‘Not on my watch you won’t. The water is really cold, and the cleanliness of the water where the boats moor.....’

‘Oh, shut up you!’

Lucy laughed at him, and hit him lightly on his arm.

James somehow found it in him to laugh.

‘Sorry, Mr. Far-too-practical here. You’re right, let’s have a swim!’

‘You, and those fish, mister. I’m not going anywhere near that cold, dirty water!’

Lucy’s laughter was so contagious that James found himself laughing along with her. My God! She really was a force of nature. The strength of woman personified. The worst of situations had brought out the best in her. The cruel hand of adversity had given her more strength than anyone he had ever known in his life. Lucy gripped his arm tightly.

‘Is there somewhere I can sit?’

‘You, my dear, can sit wherever you want.’ replied James, laughingly.

‘Please, James, hold me, I think I am going to faint.’

Only then did James realise that she was no longer joking, and that the situation had become instantly serious. Before James could find somewhere for her to sit, before he could really even understand what was going on, Lucy had collapsed in his arms. In a blind panic James lowered her to the footpath, and screamed to anyone who could hear to call an ambulance. The blood rushed to his head, leaving him incapable of thinking clearly. People were crowding around, voices were saying strange things. In the background he heard the distant sound of a siren. What followed passed in a state of great agitation, and panic for James. He felt, rather than experienced, the ride in the ambulance to the hospital. Blathering more like the village idiot, rather than the precise, coordinated person he usually was, he somehow managed to explain Lucy’s condition to the medical staff. At some stage through the mental fog that had enveloped him, he understood that the doctors had made contact with Lucy’s primary health carers, back home in the hospital where she had been diagnosed, and was being treated. This went some way to allaying the fear, and dread, that had overtaken James. Knowing that more capable people than he, had taken over the role of explaining Lucy’s condition, in a more precise, understandable manner. After more competent hands than his had relieved him of his

duties, James spent what seemed like hours sitting, and pacing, in the waiting room. He tried to focus on what was going on. Was it all his fault? Was his stupid idea of a few days away to blame for all this? But how? What had they really done that could have worsened things? All he had was questions, and doubts. The answers to those questions eluded him, leaving him in an apprehensive state. After what seemed like an eternity, a nurse came for him, and guided him to a doctor's office. Where was Lucy?

'Come in Mr. Henderson. Please, take a seat.'

The doctor was very polite, with a soothing manner, and soft, relaxing way of talking. Even in his befuddled state James knew that the Gods had been watching over them. On a day of such great adversity they had been very lucky to have found such a sharp, focused doctor on call.

'How is Lucy? Please doctor, can I see her?'

'Of course you can. I would just like to take a few minutes to bring you up to speed on Miss Belmore's condition.'

'Will she be alright, will she.....?'

'She's fine. She's resting now. We have given her a sedative. As you well know her condition will only worsen, so episodes like this are only to be expected.'

The doctor's kind face, and graceful way of speaking helped James to calm down. But he needed answers.

'Was it my fault? Did I aggravate things by taking her away on holiday?'

The kind doctor smiled at him. His voice was soft, and soothing.

'No, not at all. You did everything right. Please, don't blame yourself, episodes like this are now to be expected, and, unfortunately, will only become more frequent. I understand Miss Belmore has decided to stop taking her treatment regime. In all honesty, I would probably have done exactly the same thing myself.'

The friendly doctor, a fairly tall man, seemingly in his mid to late fifties, stood and took James by the arm.

'Come on. I'll take you to her. She should be waking up soon. When she does, she should be feeling fine. Don't worry,' he smiled, 'but it would probably be best if you took her home, back to where she feels at ease. That's what she needs now, a bit of rest where she feels comfortable.'

The compassionate words of the doctor had set James's mind a bit more at ease.

'Of course.'

The doctor led him along various corridors, until they came to the room where Lucy was. The kindly doctor patted him on his back, and beckoned him to go into the room. As soon as James saw Lucy's sleeping face, tears started to stream down his cheeks. She seemed so angelic, lying there in that hospital bed, surrounded by all things white, and shiny. An angel, waiting for God's call.

The green flowing hills, and the occasional sight of the sea when there was a break in

the vegetation, absolutely took Lucy's breath away. The scenery was just so mystical. It fairly transported her mind to a delightful, almost divine, place. She had always enjoyed the drive out to her Aunty Claire's place, but this time she felt like she was seeing it for the first time. At the thought of that she almost laughed out loud. It was more likely that she was seeing it for the last time! Quite possibly for that reason she was so tuned in to the beauty of it all. When you know something will always be there quite probably there is a tendency to take it for granted, and not really see it. When, on the other hand, change is in the air, radical change, you notice more the little details that had previously eluded you. You see the minutiae of life, in all its fine detail. Or maybe you just appreciate things more when you know that they will only be a part of your life for that small amount of time that you have left? Lucy didn't really know the reason, but whatever it was, Lucy felt totally at ease, and carefree. Her mind was free, and she was seeing, and taking notice of, all that surrounded her. The scare of her brief hospitalisation on that weekend away with James was well behind her, and she refused to dwell on it. It had merely been a bump in the road. A blip on the radar screen. Nothing at all to worry about. Rather helpfully, the increased medication she was taking, for pain relief, left her feeling a bit detached from things, almost a bit high. The pain was ever present, but the lightheadedness that the drugs gave her made it all a lot easier to cope with. She had never understood how people got addicted to pain medication, and continued to take it even after the pain had passed. That was, not until she had experienced it herself. After feeling the quite pleasant effects of her pain medication she could really understand the reason. Even with the underlying pain, and nausea, she actually enjoyed the sensation the drugs gave her. They allowed her to dissociate herself from the reality of the day to day ramifications of her disease, and let her mind drift where it wanted. Or quite possibly it was a combination of the drugs, and her new awakened state. Whatever the reason was she felt that she could really understand things better. She appreciated things, and people, in a way that she had never before. Lucy was more aware, and understanding, of life. Something that had previously been an enigma to her. Something that had previously been a thing other people had participated in, but not her. She was even looking forward to seeing her aunty, something that in the past she had always thought of as being somewhat of an obligation, something that she had done only because she had felt that she had to. A thing she would do as seldom as she possibly could. However, at the end of the day, her aunty was the only family she had. Probably she should have taken that more into consideration over the years. Not that her aunty had ever made much of an effort. She, also, had never done more than play the part of the obligatory aunty. The role decreed to her by rite of birth. Lucy sighed. How strange it all was. People's relationships. She had never really been able to understand people that well, she had always felt like an outsider, looking in at life through a window that someone had left open. Never understanding the rules that governed that strange land. Too late to worry about any of that now. Now she merely had to follow the path laid out for her by the

unforeseen forces of fate. Lucy glanced at her reflection in the rear view mirror. Her face had a thinned out appearance. That of someone who was not at all well. Her body too, was not looking good, she had lost a lot of weight. She knew that she didn't look at all healthy. What on earth would she tell her aunty? She definitely didn't want to tell her the truth. She couldn't be bothered explaining it all, and putting her aunt in the position of having to play the role of the worried family member. Secrets. She smiled to herself. Everybody, including now herself, had their secrets. The thought crossed her mind that she had finally become like everyone else. Maybe she had finally come to understand life? The keeping of secrets. Life was all about the keeping of secrets. Life was all about hiding the truth behind a pretty facade. Quite ironic really, she thought, to have finally understand things, just in time to not have any reason to do so. Anyway, as she put aside those thoughts Lucy realised she would need a cover story for her aunt. Something to justify the weight loss, and general look of an unwell person. What on earth could she tell her? Maybe she could go with back problems? Something to do with bad vertebrae, and squashed disks? That was a common problem people faced. That would be more than believable. But would that really have caused such a thin haggard look for her? Probably not. Then it occurred to her. The best lies are those that have a bit of truth to them. She would go with a terrible virus, no, better still, a chronic gastritis. That would justify the weight loss, and she could throw in a bit of pain as well. She was getting good at lying, just like real people! Lucy smiled to herself as she pulled the car into her aunty's driveway. What a life! If nothing else she was certainly enjoying the time that she had left. The thought of that made her feel good. There could be nothing sadder than leaving life without having ever enjoyed it. Without having tasted it, without having felt it on your skin. Without having experienced it fully. She parked her car down the side of her aunty's house. As usual her aunty was pottering around in her garden. The garden of endless servitude. My God! What the hell could she always find to do out there? As she got out of her car, her aunty stood up, and stumbled slightly as she came towards her. Probably she had tripped over a garden tool, or an uneven surface. Actually, more likely still, she had already knocked back a couple of gins. And why not, on such a lovely day?

'Hi aunty, how are you? My, your garden looks spectacular.'

'Hello dear. Goodness gracious, Lucy, you look terrible. What on earth is the matter with you? You're all skin and bones. Are you not eating? Do you feel alright?'

Aunty Claire had an extremely worried expression on her face, as she saw the physical difference in her niece. It was time to bring out the big ones, thought Lucy. Let the show begin. Ladies and gentlemen, take your seats. Showtime! She had to fight hard to suppress a smile.

'No, nothing to worry about. Well, nothing too serious, anyway. I've come down with some sort of a virulent gastritis. It seems to be immune to the standard treatment, so they are filling me up with all sorts of medicines trying to find the right one for this particular strain. I've really lost my appetite, and have an awful stomach ache. Especially

at night.'

She was getting good at this. The lies flowed freely from her lips. She had become an accomplished liar, just like everyone else.

'Oh, that's terrible, Lucy. How absolutely dreadful. I know what you mean about feeling it all more at night. You always do feel any sort of aches and pain much more at night. When you are out and about, during the day you have other things to think about. They take your mind off the pain. At night, in the quiet of your bed, those pains seem to intensify. It can be really hard to get a good night's sleep. I do hope they find the right medicine for you. Goodness gracious, you have lost so much weight. Would you like something to eat? Maybe something light?'

It was all Lucy could do to not burst out laughing. How easy it had been to lie. The story had been sold perfectly. Somewhere in the deep recesses of her mind she knew that it probably wasn't very nice to lie to her aunty, but because of their fairly superficial relationship she just didn't really want to tell her the truth. She knew that if she did then her aunty would feel duty bound to play the role of the worried aunt, always dotting around, and bringing her soup, and whatnot. More out of a sense of obligation, than anything else. It was better for everyone this way. Easier. In any case it was more of a white lie, one that was better for both sides. Lucy was sure that her aunt could do without all that hassle as well. She was happy enough with her gin, and her garden.

'Oh, no thanks, aunty, but I would like a cup of tea. Why don't you finish off over there in the garden and I will make us a pot. It's still a bit chilly, but with that lovely sun shining it would be so nice to sit out here looking at your lovely view.'

'Ok, dear, you know where everything is. When the tea is ready, so am I. I just have to finish preparing this flower bed. I'm so looking forward to the lovely colours of my flowers in the spring.'

Lucy smiled as she looked at her aunt. If they didn't have her garden what else would they have ever found to talk about?

'Yes, you really do have a lovely garden. Would you like some biscuits with your tea, aunty?'

'Oh, why not, let's indulge ourselves.'

Her aunty bustled back to her omnipresent garden, the garden of never ending toil, and Lucy went into the house. As usual she entered through the patio door, into the lounge room and through to the kitchen. As soon as she entered the house she burst out laughing. As ever the television was on, blaring out some repeat of an old cooking show, and even from there she could hear the radio blasting forth in the kitchen. As she entered the kitchen she got deafened by some irate person moaning about something or other, on a radio talkback channel. It was difficult to understand what he was so angry about because she could still hear the recipe for some exotic dish blaring in from the lounge room. Could someone really live like this? Lucy put on the kettle, and got out the cups. After discretely checking her aunty's progress in the garden, she sneaked a look in the

cupboard, the one where she had previously discovered her aunty's little secret. There were only three bottles of gin, and one was half empty. Aunty Claire would definitely be making a run to resupply soon, before things got out of hand. After another quick glance out the window to check on her aunt, she dashed over to the alcove with the rubbish bin. On lifting the lid she could clearly count, in various positions in the assorted rubbish, four empty gin bottles. One which looked like it had just been put there. She smiled to herself. Her aunty was obviously in party mode these days. Well, why not? On a whim, Lucy returned to the cupboard of hidden secrets, and took down the already opened bottle. She unscrewed the top, and was seriously considering taking a swig. Gin time! At this stage what would it matter? Why shouldn't she? Although, on reflection she knew that strong alcohol didn't really agree with her, plus mixing it with the cocktail of medicines she was on could lead to disastrous results, especially with the long drive back to town ahead of her. Reluctantly she returned the bottle to the cupboard. Best to stick to a nice cup of tea. She would leave the strong stuff to the experts, those who knew about those things. Lucy wondered how much gin her aunty had already consumed that morning. Quite probably she didn't even feel it's affects anymore. In fact, she no doubt needed a bit just to get her engine running. To kick the day off to a good start. In that moment Lucy both understood, but also surprisingly, envied her aunt. There she was pottering around in the lovely garden of her lovely house, with just the right amount of gin swilling around in her stomach. What could be better than that? What had previously seemed to her to be an absolutely desolate, sad life, actually didn't seem to be that bad after all. Everyone had to find what worked for them, and this was her aunty's solution. This was the life that worked for her. With a slight turn of her head Lucy thought to herself that actually it wasn't at all a bad life. Lucy could imagine her aunty sitting out on the patio at sunset, looking out over the beautiful bay below, throwing back a good amount of gin. My God, she thought, who wouldn't like that? That was living. And if you needed more you could also follow the latest events blaring out through the patio door from the television. Then if all of that still wasn't enough for you, you could always open the kitchen window, and get in touch with the things that are annoying your fellow man. Even with the excruciating pain in her stomach, Lucy laughed out loud. Mind you, with all the drugs she was on, she had her own little version of a gin party going. Both her, and her aunty, had found their inebriants of choice. By that stage Lucy was bent over double laughing about the intricacies of both of their anomalous situations.

'What on earth are you laughing about?

He aunty's unexpected arrival in the kitchen only made Lucy laugh even more. Well, it wasn't as if she would have been able to hear her approaching, what with the combined affects of the television, and the blaring radio, blocking out all other sound.

'Oh, excuse me aunty, I didn't see you there.'

Time to think on her feet. Time to bring out yet another lie. She was getting good at that. Was that a bad thing?

‘Yesterday evening I went out for a drink with Emma, and Vicky. You remember them, don’t you? They are such a couple of characters. We really had such a marvelous evening. They really know how to make me laugh.’

A smile returned to her aunty’s face.

‘Yes, of course I remember them. Such good friends to you. They always have been. How lovely of them to try and take your mind off your terrible gastritis. How’s that tea coming along? I’m just going to wash my hands, and I’m all yours.’

‘Great, I’m ready here. I will just pop it all on a tray, and see you out at the patio table.’

Lucy carried the tray of tea and biscuits out to the patio. Each time she saw the beauty of the sea flowing in down below in the bay she just felt such wonder. What a delightful setting. It was just such a magical place. With a slight glance backwards at the kitchen window, Lucy was almost tempted to sneak a look in. She just knew that her aunty would be delving into her cupboard of hidden secrets, before coming out for her tea. But then again, why shouldn’t she? After labouring in her garden, and before sitting down to view the fruits of her labour, not to mention the absolute beauty of the bay below, who wouldn’t want a nice shot of gin? Or maybe two?

13. The perfect shoe

For James, it was so good to see Dave with that sparkle back in his eye, and that little wry smile that always used to hang around the side of his lips. Dave had come over to James's flat to watch a game of rugby together, on television, but really, as usual, that was just an excuse for having a good chat. More accurately, it was Dave doing most of the talking, just like his old self, with James nodding, and laughing at the appropriate places. The world was back on its axis. The spin cycle had been completed, and things were back in their correct positions. For James, it was good to see his friend back in good form. Although, oddly, Dave seemed somehow less inhibited than he normally had been, almost less mature. The two of them were in their mid thirties, but Dave was acting like he had when they were much younger, back in their university days. James wondered if quite possibly the slight amount of maturity he had gained over the years had been through Maureen's influence over him? As soon as James thought that a wave of regret came over him. That really wasn't a nice thing to think about his friend. In any case, what was Dave supposed to do? He had ruined his family life, it was just good enough that he had been able to pick up the pieces, and put himself back together, in any formation possible. Obviously he was just in a phase of enjoying himself, letting himself go, after all the tough times he had been through with his separation. Things appeared to be going well for him with Cindy. Cindy certainly wouldn't be putting too much of an intellectual strain on him, that was for sure. Although probably someone superficial, and easy going, was just what Dave needed at the moment. Someone uncomplicated who would be able to let him find his way through this period of transition. Hopefully he would eventually wake up to how flippant Cindy was, and wouldn't go too far with the relationship. He could definitely do better than Cindy. But maybe he needed to start the relationship game from the beginning? He had landed on the wrong square on the monopoly board, lost everything, and had to start all over again. Cindy was square one. When you lost everything you had to return to the start, Cindy, and then try and move along the board again.

'Hey Jimmy, how did you like the photo of her butt? Pretty hot little number, eh?'

'Listen Dave, I canceled it as soon as it arrived. Don't send me photos like that. Apart from the fact that I wouldn't like Lucy to see something like that on my phone, it's not very respectful to Cindy.'

'Hey, you told me to send it, man.'

'As you realised fully well, I was only joking, you bloody idiot.'

'Well, she didn't know, but she probably wouldn't have minded that much anyway.'

She's really proud of her figure, and her backside in particular. You've got to admit, that's some pretty hot arse!

James laughed along with him at that. He just couldn't help it. There was just no holding back Dave when he was in good form. He was like a river in full flood. He was a tidal wave bringing happiness, rather than the usual destruction. He was a tsunami of jubilation. While he didn't really like the subject matter, James was happy to see his friend in such good form. James didn't really like Cindy, even though he had only met her once, briefly, in a coffee shop with Dave. All she had spoken about was the clothes she wanted to buy, her number of friends on social media, and all the superficial trappings of modern day life. Not that she was the only one caught up in all that, of course. In the smart phone digital age, a lot of people seemed to be like her. Not that long ago you had a small group of friends who you would see regularly, and chat about things affecting your day to day life, along with things you had read about that you found interesting. Now, in this new, improved age, everybody was in contact with just about everybody else, and the level of conversation had suffered as a result. It was impossible to have so many friends, and maintain an interesting level of conversation with them all. More, in this case, definitely meant less. Virtually every time people would make a cup of tea, or have lunch out, they would feel the need to share that with the whole world. James had an almost non-existent footprint on social media. Sure he used messaging apps to keep in touch with his friends, but that was about as far as he went in the new, improved, modern era. He knew he shouldn't really blame Cindy for getting swept up in these new times, but just how many selfies did you really need to take?

'What say the four of us go out for dinner?'

James felt something akin to a knife piercing his stomach. He wasn't enthralled in the very least at the idea of a dinner out with Cindy. Plus putting together Cindy and Lucy?. He just knew that Lucy would hate Cindy, especially with all the very serious things she was going through in her life. To be out with someone so shallow and uninteresting, and well, let's be honest, totally absorbed with herself, would be without a doubt incredibly annoying for Lucy. That was not going to happen. James was about to go vague on the whole idea, put in on the back burner, but then Dave pulled out the big one. He went all in.

'Come on, man, I was there for you after your separation. In fact, it was me who pushed you into going out with Lucy. Do this for me, will you. Hey, it's just dinner.'

What could James answer? He had been backed into a corner. Dave was playing a pretty big card. He was calling in all favours owed. James really had nowhere to go. To say no at this stage would really hurt Dave's feelings, especially as he had laid out all the cards in his hand. James folded. There was going to be no getting out of this one. He had been successfully outplayed.

'Sure, why not. I will see when Lucy is free, and we will organise things. What sort of food does Cindy like?'

‘She really loves that sushi place over in Newport, why don’t we go there?’

God, how typical, thought James. What a surprise. Just by chance Cindy loves a place which is trendy, and new. Who knew? Who could have seen that one coming? Probably she didn’t really even like the food there, but it was the place to be seen, and to say you had eaten at. He could almost see the barrage of selfies that would shortly thereafter appear on Cindy’s social media. He almost burst out laughing. Cindy had lived up to all expectations. Cindy would never let you down.

‘Hey, fine. I’ll see if Lucy is up for it. I don’t really like raw fish, but I know they have plenty of alternatives there. Sounds good, brother.’

‘Thanks, man, that would mean a lot to me. Funnily enough, Cindy has a big following on social media, but she doesn’t really have many friends, you know, the ones you go to eat out with. That sort of thing.’

At the sound of that James felt a bit ashamed of himself, and the thoughts he had had for Cindy. Maybe Dave saw something in her, deeper than the superficial farce she showed to the world. James remembered having read an article about people who were really quite sad, and lonely, who would desperately try and fit in by following all the latest trends. They usually ended up with lots of the ridiculous, trivial friendships of the modern digital age, but they were virtually without any meaningful friendships in their lives. Possibly Cindy fitted into that category, not that she was doing herself any favours by carrying on in such a shallow manner. The way she acted she would definitely be shunned by anyone looking for depth of personality. Obviously Dave wasn’t looking for anything of that nature. Well, not at this stage of his life anyway. In this period a hot butt seemed to be among his highest priorities. James let out a clearly audible sigh.

‘What’s up, man?’

James had no intention of sharing his thoughts on Dave’s relationship with Cindy.

‘This is just such a pathetic game of rugby. What planet is that ref on?’

Lucy was absolutely stunned with how ridiculous Cindy looked. She was well past thirty, but dressed, and acted like, well, almost a teenager. There was no denying the fact that she was pretty, with her shoulder length, straightened, light brown hair, and she definitely had a good body, but you could easily tell her age. Equally obvious was the fact that she must have spent a lot of money trying, almost desperately thought Lucy, to maintain those good looks, and that youthful appearance. Lucy had always disliked people who tried to seem younger than what they actually were. People who despairingly needed to hang onto their former, younger self. The glory version of their youth. Why not just be who you are? James had done his best to prepare her for what she had been in store for, but the reality of Cindy was over and above anything she could have expected. James kept shooting worried glances in her direction. She knew that he hadn’t really wanted for the four of them to go out together, and that Dave had talked him into it. She knew how persuasive Dave could be. The same Dave who had somehow managed to

convince Vicky to gamble with her whole life. The same Dave who had gambled with, and lost, his own life. My God, she thought, what did all these people see in him? Although, in reality, in Vicky's case, there was not that much of a difference between Dave and Vicky's husband Mike. Mike was also pretty shallow, and superficial. No, that probably wasn't very fair. It would be nicer to say that they were both people who lived the lighter side of life. You would never expect any great depth of conversation from either of them. Rugby and beer would always be the high point of their conversations. You could never aspire to any greater heights of intellectual stimulation than whether the player had indeed been offside or not. In fact Lucy had never bonded with Mike much. Truth be told, she didn't really like him much at all, and she really hated his boozing, uncouth friends. His drunken friends who, before meeting James, had almost come to seem like the only possible relationships she would ever have been able to strive for. Quick drunken sex in the back seat of a car, before hurrying back to the barbecue to get some more beer, and high five their mates, who would themselves be waiting in turn. Then she had met James. Her lovely James. Dave was not at all like James. In fact, she couldn't really understand how it had come to be that the two of them were such good friends. They were so different, with such totally different perspectives on life. They seemingly had very little in common. Without a doubt when they had met they had been in a similar place, both young, and out discovering life. Since then they had both gone in vastly different intellectual directions. Lucy guessed that those bonds formed in their younger, formative years had somehow connected them together, even though they were now very different types of people. But Cindy? You've got to be kidding. With all the pain Lucy felt in her stomach, it was almost too much to have to listen to all of her drivel. However, on the other hand, Lucy didn't want to be the one that ruined the evening, so she thought she should make a bit of an effort. In any case, maybe by throwing herself into the conversation it would take her mind of her constant pain. If nothing else it would definitely be appreciated by her lovely James.

'What job do you do, Cindy?' Lucy asked.

'I work at 'Not Just Shoes', do you know it? It's really the best place for shoes in the whole area. We have all the newest models out, from all the major brands. I really love it there. When we get a new shipment in, we are all so excited to see the new designs. You know the colours really change fast. You can buy a pair of shoes, and find yourself out of date almost in a flash.'

Lucy instantly regretted the question she had asked. She had just been trying to be polite, she certainly hadn't expected a lecture on the latest styles of footwear. Who the devil cared about something so trite? Now, after Lucy's great show of interest, Cindy was on a roll. There would be no stopping her. She stuck out one of her feet, out the side of the table, to show them all her footwear.

'You see these? They are sort of boots, but quite low cut, so they could really be considered high shoes, or low boots. That way you can wear them with completely

different outfits. Don't they look absolutely fabulous?'

Lucy didn't really know what to answer. She was totally flabbergasted. Her simple, polite question had unleashed a stream of banality. She had always bought shoes based more on how comfortable they were. High shoes, low boots? She wanted to be civil, but just couldn't really think of anything to say. Luckily Dave jumped into the breach.

'They look just fabulous. Plus they really show off your legs to perfection. They look like they were designed specifically for you.'

'Do you really think so? I just love them. They are a bit uncomfortable to walk in, but I absolutely love the style. I had to buy a new bag to go with them of course, they are so unusual that you really need to get your accessories matched.'

Lucy could see that James had a terribly worried expression on his face, poor thing. She knew that he would be worried about how she would hold up in the face of Cindy's desultory conversation. Actually though, she had to admit to herself that was starting to enjoy the evening. The lightness of it all. The slightly surreal contrast of on the one hand facing her terrible cancer, and on the other hand discussing the merits of high shoes, and low boots. Really it was just what she needed. It was good to leave behind the seriousness of what she was facing in her life, and talk about shoes. Yes, shoes. When had that ever happened? It took her mind off the pain in her stomach, and she really enjoyed the irony of it all. She decided to go all the way. She would become a shoes person.

'You know Cindy, I really need some new shoes. Why don't we keep in touch, and when you are on shift I would love to come over, and get some advice from you. I'm such a disaster at buying shoes. I could really use your help. You are obviously an expert in the art of the perfect shoe.'

Lucy could see James's body physically relax. Without a doubt he knew what she was up to, and was thankful to her for her politeness. Dave, on the other hand, had absolutely no idea, and thought she was being serious.

'You couldn't do better, Lucy. Cindy really knows her stuff. She will get you decked out in something fantastic. No doubt about it. Plus, with her staff discount, you'll save a fortune.'

Cindy absolutely squealed with delight.

'You, mister, are just such a nice man. You really understand me. It's so nice to have finally met someone who appreciates me so much. Most people just don't realise what goes into looking your best. You really have to work at it.'

The evening was starting to get absolutely comical, no doubt helped along the way by the strong pain killers Lucy was on. She burst out laughing. She realised instantly that that wasn't good. Everyone looked at her, expecting an explanation. She knew she had to justify that laugh really fast. That wouldn't be a problem. As she had recently discovered, she had become quite adept at lying, just like normal people. She had mastered the art of being a normal person.

'How wonderful this evening is! Isn't it just great to be out in such good company?'

James, the only other person present who had understood the real reason for her laugh, dived in to back her up.

‘Yes, it is. We must do this more often.’

Lucy and James exchanged knowing glances. Both of them knew with absolute conviction that that would never happen. As much as they both knew that Lucy would never be going to buy those shoes.

It was a lazy Sunday morning, and Cindy and Dave were sitting up in bed, at Dave’s place. Cindy had so many things to work out for the following week, but Dave kept on interrupting her thoughts with his usual stream of idiotic small talk. If only she could get him interested in more important issues.

‘The dinner went well, didn’t it Honeybun?’

Oh yes, that went soooo well, thought Cindy. What a boring tedious conversation she had had to listen to.

‘Yes, Teddy Bear, it was wonderful.’

Cindy looked at her toenails poking out of the end of the messed up sheets. She like the crimson red colour she had used on them, but really she wanted to go with something a bit more exciting. She wanted to liven things up. Do something that would really draw people’s attention.

‘I’m sure you will be able to find Lucy the perfect pair of shoes.’

What the hell was he talking about now? Shoes for Lucy? Then she remembered. Of course. Plain Jane Lucy wanted to come to the shop to get some new shoes. Good luck with that one.

‘Of course I will.’

Plain Jane needed far more than just shoes. She needed to go on a makeover show, and get a total transformation. She had no dress sense at all, and her hair just hung there as if it had barely been brushed. Dressing her with modern, fashionable shoes, without changing everything else would just be a total waste of time. And Cindy did not want to waste her time on such a pointless exercise. Then, in a flash, it came to her. Looking at her feet she had a spark of genius. She would colour each toenail with a different colour, but use the same silver highlights across all of them. They would look fantastic! Meanwhile, as usual Dave was prattling on about something or other. Could he never just shut up?

‘What’s that Teddy Bear?’

‘You know, with what she’s going through.’

With what who’s going through? Then she remembered. Lucy had some sort of medical problem, quite apart from her dress sense disability. She couldn’t remember what it was. Bad headaches, or something. She hadn’t really been listening.

‘Yes, that’s right.’

Although, having seen Lucy’s terrible hairstyle made Cindy wonder. Was it time for

her to spice up her hair a bit? Maybe it was time to put some streaks of highlights through her hair. It was something she regularly did, but you had to keep changing. You couldn't stay with the same style. People would get used to you then. You needed to always stand out. Yes, she thought, it was time for some highlights. She had so much to organise for the week ahead. It would all be like a mini makeover. She felt so excited at the thought of everything she had to do. Dave, in the background was still yapping on and on.

'Sorry, Teddy Bear, what do you mean?'

'Dinner. We really should do that again, don't you think?'

The thought of going through another evening like that filled Cindy with dread. But Dave just wouldn't stop going on about it.

'Maybe we could go for a pizza?'

My God, she thought, Dave was just so far out of date. She half wondered if he could even be saved. If it wasn't for the fact that he was so good in bed she would have probably ditched him already. Nobody, but nobody, eats pizza anymore. Cindy knew she really had to teach Dave everything. You had to go to places at the cutting edge. New places, following the latest trends. Pizza? That was for families, and well, Dave's friends. They were definitely Pizza people. Boring, ordinary, Pizza people. She couldn't take any more of his monotonous chatter. He was driving her crazy. She needed to shut Dave up, and luckily she knew just how. She slid a hand across his thigh, and stroked his penis, which immediately reacted. Within seconds it was fully erect. Dave was a very sexual man, and was very easily stimulated. He was always ready for sex, and in fact he was one of the best lovers she had ever had.

'Oh, look at Mr. Pinky!'

Dave was on fire, he threw the sheets off, and climbed on top of Cindy. There would be no more talk about his boring friends, or Pizzas.

The two of them sat there in silence. Ostensibly because they were enjoying the lovely early spring sunshine, before having their picnic lunch, but really the air was imbued with the subject they were both studiously trying to avoid. They were sitting at their favourite bench, at their favourite beach. The bench they had been sitting at when they had been interrupted by a torrential downpour the year before. It all seemed like such a long time ago to Lucy. So much had happened, so much had changed since then. She smiled as she remembered that day. They had made a wild dash to the car, and then raced to her place to change out of their wet clothes, and to have a hot shower. After their showers, when they were both dressed in bathrobes, they had ended up making love for the first time. How wonderful that day had been, rain included! What beautiful memories this beach, and this bench, had for her. She hoped that when it was all over James would be able to come out to this place, their special place, for a run, or a swim, and that he would be able to find her there. Hopefully the sadness that he would feel at her loss would be partially alleviated by the happy memories that this special place held for them.

This was their place. He would always be able to find her here, not in some cemetery plot where her empty vessel would be deposited. There he would find nothing. But here. Here he would be able to find her soul, and remember her how she had been, alive, and full of love for him. Lucy was incredibly worried about how James would be affected by her death. Her part, in the end, would be the easy part. It would be fast. Others would have to pick up the pieces, and live with the repercussions of her death. She closed her eyes, and felt the warm sunshine on her face. It was such a glorious day. It was the sort of day when optimism bloomed, along with the spring growth of the vegetation. All around them was a circle of different shades of green, beautifully contrasting with the deep blue of the sea. The cycle of life had been reborn, with a beauty, and pleasure, that all people felt. Nearly all people. Lucy sneaked glances at her love, making sure she didn't catch his eye. She couldn't bring herself to say the words that both of them dreaded, yet at the same time knew were inevitable. Her pain was excruciating, and the drugs she was taking for it weren't working very well anymore. She had lost so much weight that she was merely a skeleton. She was ready for the final act, but she knew that James wasn't. He never would be. The time was rapidly approaching when she would have to put her plan, their plan, into action. Lucy felt sorrow, but not for herself. She felt sad at how James, Vicky, and Emma, would be left to deal with the aftermath. She knew it would be hard for all of them, especially for James. In some ways she almost wished she had never met him, that she had never brought this pain into his life. Without a doubt his life would have been better if he had never met her, if he had never had to go through all this. On a purely selfish level she was glad she had, because of the love he had brought into her life. The love that she had never felt before meeting him. The love that had made everything seem alright, even this. Also on a practical level, she was glad she had him by her side. She needed him. She would be lost facing this terrible disease without him. She would never have had the courage to decide to end her life with the dignity she desired, without having him by her side, giving her the strength that she lacked. Alone she would have been terrified. Lucy was suffering, a lot, but it was physical suffering. Psychologically she was in a place of acceptance. It had happened to her, uninvited, yet unavoidable. She had found the strength to face her fate, to look it in the eye, and to understand that it could not be evaded, but must be faced up to. The love she had found with James had given her not only the strength to do that, but also the wisdom to understand that this was exactly the way things needed to go. She wanted to die at a time of her choosing, with dignity, and grace. She couldn't bear the thought of wasting away in a hospital bed, going in and out of a coma, surrounded by her loved ones, who would always remember her in that way. She wanted to be remembered for what she had been, not as some shriveled mass of ugliness wasting away, speechless, in a hospital bed, surrounded by the sights and sounds of death approaching. Her choice was without any doubt a way for her to avoid suffering the pain of the last stages of her cancer, but also she was determined to not leave that memory to those that she loved. Those left behind. She watched as James

went in for his first swim of the season. In typical James style, he showed no fear of the still very cold water. He was just that kind of person. He was her pillar of fortitude. He was her backbone, the tenacity that would help her to end her suffering in an acceptable way. The backbone that she lacked, she would take from him. James was sturdiness personified. Lucy prepared a sandwich for him. She knew he would want a hot cup of coffee from the thermos flask, and something to eat after getting out of the cold water. She watched as James swam further out, sometimes diving under the water. How graceful he looked. How beautiful it all seemed. It was the most lovely of sunny spring days. The water was crystal blue, and the surrounding picture frame was one of delightful green. Lucy was overcome with the wonder of life. Tears flowed down her cheeks. Luckily James was too far out in the water to notice. She didn't want to cry in front of him. She wanted her last moments with him to be full of happiness, pleasant memories for him to cherish.

James hadn't really wanted to go out to that beach initially. It had always been a magical place for both of them. To go there in his current frame of mind seemed almost like sullyng the beautiful memories that that beach held for him. The memories of them. It had always been a place of happiness for them, he didn't want to ruin that. On the drive out there he had been quiet, slightly apprehensive. As if sensing his mood, Lucy had also been uncommunicative, lost in her thoughts. He had wondered if maybe she had felt the same way, that it was a mistake to go there. But then, it had been her idea to go for a picnic there. As James swam in the chilly spring water the sadness that had gripped him slowly began to dissipate. Maybe Lucy had made the right choice? Really, this was still their place, and it always would be. In sickness, and in health, this was where they would find each other. The realisation came to him that when Lucy was gone he would always be able to feel her presence in this wondrous place. In his darkest moments he would be able to come here looking for solace. Looking for her. And he would find her. As he swam he looked back at Lucy, preparing their lunch. Well, his lunch really, Lucy virtually couldn't eat anything anymore, without immediately vomiting it back up. How strong she looked. He couldn't understand where she got her strength from. How was it possible to be able to face your approaching death with such courage? With such fortitude? James felt so weak, and scared. He knew that he had to hide his fear from Lucy, and try and support her as much as possible. There would be time for tears later. James knew that there would be a lot of tears. Tears would flow like rivers. He would bring Emma and Vicky to this, their special place, and he had no doubt that they would all cry together. But through their tears they would find her, they would feel her presence. He doubted that he would ever recover from the pain that Lucy's death would cast on him. Yet strangely he would have it no other way. She had also brought light into his dark place, love into his emptiness. His life without having ever met her would have been a life unfulfilled. As he thought of living without her tears came to his eyes. Quickly he

dove below the water, as if to hide his tears from Lucy, even though she was too far away to see them. As his tears mixed with the sea water James was determined to never cry in front of her. She needed him. She needed his support. He would stay strong, stay focused on that which was important. Lucy. Afterwards he would share his pain with Dave, and Lucy's friends. He knew that Vicky and Emma, when all was over, would always be a part of his life. The love they had all felt for Lucy would bind them. They would help each other through the pain, and in the good moments they would share all their happy memories of her. They would cry, and they would laugh, as they would share their recollections of different periods, and different episodes, of Lucy's life. The good, and the bad. They would hold onto her. They would keep her alive. She would live through them. As James walked out of the cold water, Lucy was waiting for him with a towel in her hand, and the sweetest of smiles on her face.

'Dry yourself off, and then come and have a hot cup of coffee and something to eat. You'll be needing it after that cold water.'

The two of them walked back to their bench, as James dried himself.

'It looked like you were enjoying it out there. I don't know how you can do it. Goodness, the water must be so cold!'

In reply James smiled.

'Hey, you've got to be tough. No, really I just love being in the water. I always have, right from when I was a kid. You just can't keep me out.'

James pushed his fear, and pain, into a deep place. He locked them away, knowing he would be able to call on them at a later date. He would shoulder this burden. He delved deep to find great resolve, he knew what he had to do. He would do it to the best of his ability.

'So where's this coffee then? I'm bloody freezing!'

The two of them laughed, and embraced each other.

'Hey, get away from me, you.' joked Lucy, as she pushed James away. 'You're making me cold as well!'

The words that hadn't come to either of them earlier now flowed. They were somehow engulfed in the spell of their beautiful place, and in each other's company. James drank his coffee and smiled at his Lucy. He knew that he could do it, for her. He knew that he could put aside his worries, and fears, and concentrate on the job at hand. The job of helping Lucy to find her freedom. The job of helping Lucy to rid herself of her pain, and to find release.

'Those sandwiches look good, I'm starving. There's something about cold water and hunger. You have really done a good job here, Lucy. My God, that sunshine is so warm. What a lovely day!'

James helped himself to one of the sandwiches, knowing full well that he would be the only one eating them. Lucy could barely keep anything down at this stage. As he ate Lucy hugged him from behind, and kissed the back of his head. This day could not get

any better. For James this day would be burned into his memory. This was a beautiful day, at a beautiful place, with his beautiful Lucy. Nothing could ever be better than this.

14. A walk in the park

There wasn't anything favourable to say about that day right from the start. As soon as she had awoken she had known that nothing good would come from it. She had a strange sensation that enveloped her. Even though spring had arrived, it was a wet and dismal day, which actually combined quite well with Lucy's mood. Dark, and gloomy. She had trouble concentrating, it was almost as if an impenetrable fog had somehow seeped into her mind. Her thoughts were scattered, and incomplete. Her stomach pain had increased to the point where it completely dominated her life. She had trouble keeping down any but the lightest of fluids, and even then it was always touch and go. Lucy had asked James to accompany her to an appointment with her specialist, partly because she needed his support, but also because she generally found herself so confused, and distant, with her doctors that she would forget to ask the relevant questions. James was good like that, he would always keep on digging until he got the right answers. Although, truth be told, in this case, on that day, Lucy really had a pretty good idea of what to expect. Nothing good. She already knew exactly at what point she was. In a certain sense she was only going to go there to receive confirmation of that which she had already grasped. The end had arrived. More than anything she wanted James to hear that from her doctor. He, not her, was the one who needed convincing. James had come to pick her up, and in silence, reflecting her sombre mood, they had driven to the medical centre. Both of them aware that the news of the day would not be good. They sat there, in the waiting room, holding hands. The strength Lucy got from even such a little thing like that was enormous. She would be lost without James. She studied his face, he was always so resolute. He never showed fear, or uncertainty. He had never lived with all the doubts that had haunted her for most of her life. The doubts that had held her back from living life, even when she had always been surrounded by good things. Lucy squeezed his hand, and smiled at him. James smiled back, leaned over, and kissed her on her cheek.

'James, thanks so much for.....'

'Miss Belmore, doctor is ready for you. Follow me please.'

Lucy had been so caught up in her moment with James that she hadn't noticed the nurse coming towards them. The two of them followed her into the doctor's studio. As usual her specialist wore his serious, no nonsense, face. The only face he had. This was a man who took his job seriously, and was seen to do so. In that stark moment, curiously, Lucy wondered if that would also be the face he would wear at the dinner table, with his family. Would the family dinner also be a serious affair for him? With no nonsense allowed?

‘Hello Miss Belmore, how are you feeling lately? Are the pain meds still relieving your pain?’

‘Good morning Doctor. Actually they don’t seem to be able to help me much anymore. I’m living in constant pain. It’s really getting hard to cope with.’

‘Are you eating?’

‘Virtually everything I eat, or drink, I end up vomiting back out. If I drink very light things, like soup, I can sometimes manage to keep it down, but...’

Her voice trailed off in mid sentence. In her distant, detached, state of mind she found it demanding to explain how she was coping. The doctor needed no such explanation from her. He was a man of great experience in these things. He could see, and understand perfectly, exactly at what point she was with her cancer. Her brief explanation was sufficient for him.

‘I can see you have lost a lot of weight. You know, it’s not too late to put you back on a course of radiotherapy. That could help to stabilise you, for a while. That would really be the best course of action for you, at this point. You should definitely consider that as an option.’

‘Doctor, when you say it would stabilise me for a while, how long do you mean, exactly?’

Lucy had absolutely no intention of returning to that excruciating regime of torture, but more out of politeness than anything else, she inquired about it’s possible benefits.

‘That’s very hard to say. We would have to wait, and see how your body reacts to the treatment. Everyone has their own different response to the treatment.’

Lucy already knew what her response to the treatment would be. Agony. Quietly, but resolutely, she asked the specialist for a clear-cut answer.

‘Well, would we be talking weeks, or months? Please, be straight with me. You know that I have always wanted to know the truth, no matter how bad it is.’

The doctor raised his head to look her in the eyes, and nodded slightly.

‘I understand. Probably we would be talking the lower end of the spectrum. Unfortunately your cancer has spread extensively. Although this doesn’t mean you couldn’t have some good, quality time left.’

Lucy had understood all that she needed to. She had been polite. Now it was time to be resolute.

‘You know, I appreciate, and thank you, for everything you have done for me, I really do, but I know with surety that I do not want to go down that path. Not anymore. Not for so little gain. What about for my pain? Can you give me some stronger pain relief? I’m really feeling terrible.’

‘Yes I can, definitely. We can increase the dose of the meds you are on, and I will also prescribe something stronger for you. I respect your decision, Miss Belmore, I truly do. Everybody has the right to decide their own pathway through their illness. Each person’s decision is the right one for them. At this point there are no right, or wrong

decisions. Nobody else can decide for you. I greatly respect the decision you have taken.'

For a moment the doctor's usually severe look softened, and he even attempted a slight smile. Something he was obviously not very practised at. With his head bowed he wrote out a couple of prescription forms, which he then handed to Lucy.

'I hope these will help you, Miss Belmore. Please, feel free to phone me anytime you would like some advice.'

Lucy and James both stood, shook hands with the doctor, and headed towards the door. As James held the door open for her, Lucy looked back at her doctor, still standing, watching them leave.

'Thank you so much for everything, doctor. You have really been a great help, and comfort to me, through all of this. Goodbye.'

'Goodbye Lucy.'

For the first time since she had known him, her doctor had addressed her by her first name. Lucy realised that probably he had a good inkling that they would never meet again. As the two of them walked out of the medical facility, James again took her hand. Lucy stopped, and looked at him. She opened her mouth to speak. James quite calmly, and delicately, put a finger up to her lips, and said, quite simply;

'I know.'

It had been the strangest of days right from the start. Lucy knew that she should be terrified, that she should be feeling so many sensations of fear, and sadness. At the very least she should be feeling anxious, but she wasn't. She felt quite good, oddly. She felt a sensation of great serenity flowing through her. An end to her suffering was within sight. Soon her pain would be gone, forever. The first thing she did was to send a message to James, telling him she was awake, and that she was feeling at peace with everything that lay before her. Everything was as it should be. She had slept badly, as usual, but finally she had fallen into a deep sleep around four in the morning. When she had awoken there had been a glorious sunshine streaming into her bedroom. Her constant companion, pain, was, as ever, at her side. However, even through her pain, she felt so tranquil, so at peace with the world. The day had arrived. The day of days. The last of days. Everything she did, drinking a cup of tea, she didn't even bother trying to eat anymore, or brushing her teeth, had a strange poignancy about it. It was the last time she would ever do those things. Strangely, she made her bed. She couldn't really understand why, habit probably. In reality it was probably just easier to do everything as she would normally have done. By treating it as just another day it sort of made it all easier. Just another day. This day was just another day. Nonetheless, floating through her mind, there was an incredibly surreal feeling about everything. Lucy decided to take an extra few strong painkillers. If nothing else she would like to glide serenely through the coming proceedings with as little pain as possible. She wouldn't overdo it, that was for later. Just enough to ease her through the process. By lunchtime, well.... That wasn't something to reflect on. That was

for later. She had her coffee appointments organised for 10.30. Before that she would take one last walk through Riverside Park, a place that she had always loved. A place that had always brought harmony into her life. She had a shower, and dressed slowly, there was no hurry. She wanted to savour every minute of this day. She would live her life right up to the end. Moment by moment. Before leaving her flat, Lucy took one last look around her apartment. It was nice, she had lived well there, although a strong feeling of detachment that had overcome her. It almost seemed to her that she was looking at someone else's place. A place that was no longer hers. She was starting to feel distant from everything. That was probably good. It meant that she was ready. It was time to get out into the day, and follow her program. As she stepped out into the street, she could see that it was an absolutely glorious day. Beautiful spring sunshine warmed her as she walked towards the park. The warmth on her face calmed her, she had no feelings of doubt. Lucy made sure to keep James updated on her movements, she knew he would already be waiting anxiously for her. Lucy couldn't wait to be in his arms. She knew that everything would be fine as soon as she got to him, and he held her tightly. His strong arms would protect her, and bring her solace on her journey. It had been her idea to walk into town through the park, even though it was a longer walk, and would be somewhat tiring. For this one last time she wanted to view the beauty, and feel the tranquility it had always brought her. The park was absolutely bristling with all sorts of colours. Different hues, and different tones. The sound of the flowing water in the stream running through the park was like music to her ears. The music of angels. The angels were calling to her. She could hear their voices. They were telling her that everything was going to be alright. She could feel God's presence in the glory of this, his miraculous creation. She could feel the wonder of life all around her. This would be the happiest of days. This would be the day when she would become one with life. The effect of the extra pills Lucy had taken relieved her of much of her pain, although, as ever, she felt very nauseous. The long walk was tiring for her, but it was just so spectacular that she felt pleased with her idea to see the park, one last time. Occasionally she would stop and sit on a park bench, partly to rest, but also to take in the beauty of the world around her. Rather than feeling sad that she was leaving all of that behind, she felt blessed that she had been a part of it, that she had been a part of something so miraculous. Lucy kept checking her watch. She knew that she had to keep to the timeline. Everything was going perfectly to plan. With her soul brimming over with the exhilarating effect the park had given her, she headed towards the exit, and after a short walk she was already in the town centre. Destiny, and her friends were waiting for her. Lucy had plenty of time, she was slightly ahead of her schedule, so she ambled along the street and looked in the shop windows. She saw a pair of shoes that would be just perfect for her. She burst into uncontrollable laughter. Shoes! They were definitely not the sort of shoes that Cindy would have recommended for her, if she had ever gotten around to going to see her in her shop. She was struck by the peculiarity of people, and the different importance they gave to things in their lives. She

couldn't stop laughing. Passersby were looking at her as if she was crazy. It definitely wasn't normal behaviour. She realised that. Quite possibly she had taken a pill, or two, too many. Or maybe not. At this point what did it matter? Anyway, what did the world at large know about what this day meant to her? For everybody else it was just another day. For her it was a special day. Her day. She felt that it was good that she could laugh, especially on this of all days. Lucy wanted this to be a day of happiness, not a sad day of goodbyes, but a final day of living. She looked at her watch. It was time. It was time to get the show on the road. Lucy booked a taxi through an app on her phone, for the prearranged time. The schedule had been worked through carefully by her and James. Nothing had been left to chance. Then she walked down the street, and into the first of the two coffee shops she would be visiting that morning. As soon as she entered the shop her aunty waved to her from the table where she had been waiting. Lucy waved back, walked over, and sat down next to her aunty.

'Goodness gracious Lucy, you're so thin! Oh my poor girl, aren't you getting any better?'

Her aunty's face wore the look of concern expected from a relative in a situation like that. As ever, she was playing the part that had been preordained for her. Lucy felt a moment of sadness that the two of them had never been able to really solidify a true relationship. They were the only family that each of them had. How was it that a close rapport had never blossomed between them?

'No, it's a bit of a tough battle this one. Actually aunty, I have such a terrible headache. I'm sorry, but I think I will have to go home, and lie down a bit. I need to take some pills, hang on a second, I will go and get a glass of water.'

With that Lucy went to the serving counter, and asked for a glass of water. She didn't really want to spend too much time with her aunty, so she planned on getting out of there as fast as possible. The hard part was always going to be saying goodbye to her dear friends, who would be already waiting for her in a nearby coffee shop. As she sat back down at the table she pulled out a large plastic bottle of pills. Making sure that her aunty had a clear view of what she was doing, she tipped about ten of them into her hand, threw them into her mouth, and washed them down with a drink of water.

'Dear God. Lucy! How many of those pills are you supposed to take?'

Aunty Claire had a very worried expression on her face.

'Don't worry, aunty, these aren't that strong. Plus, if I take plenty of them, hopefully I will be able to sleep off this terrible headache. Look, I'm really sorry aunty, but I do have to head home. My head is just killing me.'

Lucy stood up, and then bent down, and kissed her aunty on the cheek. An intimacy that they weren't in the habit of doing.

'Bye aunty.' she said.

'You take care, Lucy, and please call me later on this evening. I'm terribly worried about you.'

Lucy stood there, and smiled sweetly at her aunt.

‘Don’t worry, everything is going to be just fine.’

With that Lucy turned on her heels, and left the coffee shop. It was just a two minute walk to the next coffee shop, so the pills didn’t have time to take effect. Although, in any case, she was still feeling the effect of the pills she had taken earlier. She felt like she was floating. Floating delicately towards her destiny, with a great sense of peace. She was at ease with that which awaited her. She looked at the sky with its fluffy white clouds. Everything was as it should be. The world was a marvelous place to be, and this was a marvelous day. Right then she received a message from the taxi driver saying that he was waiting. She replied that she was running a bit late, to keep the meter running, and that she would be there as soon as possible. He wouldn’t be worried because it was all paid through the app, so he would wait for her as long as she wanted. The schedule of the plan was running smoothly. Actually, the fact that Lucy had a timeline to follow, a schedule to keep to, really helped to make it all a lot easier for her. She could stop herself from dwelling on the greater significance of what was really happening, and just concentrate on keeping to the prearranged details of the program. She quickly sent James a message, letting him know where she was. As soon as she entered the second coffee shop she saw her two friends sitting at a table by the window. A smile found its way onto her face with ease as she approached them, but in her heart she felt a great sense of disquiet. This was not going to be easy. The two of them quickly stood, and hugged her affectionately.

‘How are you, Lucy?’ asked Emma, with tears already in her eyes. ‘You know you are all skin and bones. How are you coping?’

As they all sat down Lucy replied;

‘Well, I have good days, and not so good days. Today I have a monster headache. In fact, I don’t think I will be able to stay long. I probably should get back to bed, and try to sleep it off.’

Vicky rubbed Lucy’s shoulder, and gave her the sweetest of smiles.

‘My poor lovely angel, we are both so worried about you. What can we do for you? Whatever you need, you know we are here for you.’

Lucy reached over the table, and placed each hand on one of the shoulders of both of her friends.

‘You will never know what you have already done for me. Both of you, over all these years. My life would have been totally empty without the friendship, and love, that the two of you have shared with me. There are no words to thank you for that.’

Lucy smiled at each of them in turn, then stood up, and hugged them both affectionately, where they sat.

Emma started to cry. She could barely speak through her tears.

‘It’s us that should be thanking you. To see the strength and courage in you, what with everything you are going through. I love you so much.’

Emma’s body was shaking with the emotion she felt. Lucy, after having sat down

again, reached over and took Emma's hand in hers. She comforted her friend with a soothing voice.

'Don't cry, my darling friend. Here we are, all three of us together. What could be better than this? The two of you have filled my life, and my heart, for so many years. Let's make this a joyous day.'

Vicky had a strange look on her face. It was almost as if she could sense that something was going on.

'Lucy, is there something you aren't telling us? You know, you can tell us everything. We will be by your side through thick and thin. You know that, don't you?'

Lucy felt such love, being with her friends. How lucky she had been to have found such fantastic life companions to be at her side, through all those years. She smiled.

'Don't worry, Vicky, this is just a bit of a strange day for me. Tomorrow I'm sure I will be feeling better. Can you get me a glass of water, please?'

'Of course.'

Vicky stood, and before heading off to get the water for Lucy, bent down, and kissed Lucy on her head. Emma held a handkerchief to her eyes, drying her tears, and said to Lucy;

'I'm sorry, Lucy, I know you don't want to see us crying. It's just that I don't have your courage. You are so strong through all this. You are just so amazing. I wish I had half your strength.'

Vicky returned, and placed a glass of water in front of Lucy. Lucy would have loved to stay longer with her friends, for hours, and hours, but she could already feel the beginning of the effects of the pills she had swallowed taking hold. The pills she had taken with her aunty. She desperately wanted to be able to talk with James before she lost control totally. She took the bottle of pills out of her bag, tipped around a dozen of them into her hand, and threw them into her mouth, washing them down with a drink of water.

'My God, Lucy,' said Vicky, worried, 'that's a lot of pills! What are you doing?'

'Oh, don't worry. I will shoot home, and try and sleep off this headache. I'm really sorry my two darling loves, but I really do have to go.'

All three of them stood, and Lucy hugged, and kissed them both repeatedly. In the softest of voices she spoke her last words ever to them.

'Thank you, my dearest friends, thank you with all my heart. Thank you for all of the love you have always given me. Don't worry, everything will be just fine, I promise. It's all going to be okay. I love you both, so very, very much.'

Both of her friends were crying uncontrollably, but Lucy stayed strong. She had to. She needed to get back to James. There she would be able to let herself go. There she would be able to let herself be free. She walked towards the door, turning around to smile, and wave at her friends, her lovely, fantastic friends. They both waved back, through their tears, and with that Lucy was out of the door, and heading towards her taxi, waiting just down the road. She didn't even need to tell the driver where to go, it had all

been arranged through the app. Within minutes she would be with her love. James.

‘Excuse me, do you have some water? I need to take some pills?’

‘Sorry, love, I don’t.’ replied the driver.

‘Oh, that’s alright, I should be able to swallow them anyway.’

In clear view of his rear view mirror, Lucy took out her pills, and poured them straight from the bottle into her mouth, swallowing them two, or three, at a time, until the bottle was empty. As expected, it hadn’t gone unnoticed.

‘Hey, love, that’s a lot of pills you’re taking there. Is everything alright?’

‘Yes, of course, don’t worry, they are only vitamins.’

Lucy dropped the empty plastic pill bottle on the floor of the taxi. By that time they had arrived, and Lucy could see him waiting for her, out on the footpath. James. She was coming home. She wouldn’t have to stay strong anymore. She wouldn’t have to keep on holding firm. Now she would be able to let herself go. From that point on James would be her strength. Her part was over. The taxi pulled over, and stopped.

‘Thank you, driver.’ she said as she got out of the taxi, and fell into the arms of her James. They embraced each other for what seemed like forever. Then, without a word spoken James led her into his apartment.

James had had a sleepless night, not that he had expected anything else. In the early hours he had gotten out of bed, and started pacing around his apartment. He even did a bit of cleaning, anything, just to occupy his mind. Anything to block out the endless thoughts of the coming day. He was such a nervous wreck. He kept looking at his watch, knowing, as he did, how ridiculous that was. He felt a sense of relief when, finally, the sun came up. The day had officially begun. Now he could at least put aside any thoughts of sleep, and concentrate on that which was to come. The day ahead. Was he doing the right thing? Was this really the best option for Lucy? His mind was constantly bombarded with thoughts, and doubts. Stupid ones. He had been over it all so many times that it was really a waste of time repeatedly going through it all. In his heart he knew that Lucy had chosen the right path for her. The only path. She was wasting away, and living in constant pain. Life was slowly abandoning her. At the very most she would have a few weeks, maybe a month, probably not more, of endless agony before the end. And the approaching end would be very inglorious, eventually being forced to be hospitalised and ending her life lying in pain in a hospital bed. James knew how much Lucy wanted to avoid being in that piteous state. However, knowing that didn’t stop the endless thoughts, and doubts, from creeping in. Today he would be saying goodbye to the woman he loved. How could he do that? As if reading his thoughts, and his state of consternation, in that precise moment he received a message from Lucy, telling him that she was up, and that she was feeling at peace with what lay ahead. That helped him a bit to block out the endless stream of reflections, of doubts. The constant thoughts of apprehension that dogged him. This was the only way. Well, at least, it was the best way. The best option of a bad choice of

options. It was the way that Lucy had decided was right for her. As her doctor had said to them, there was no right or wrong way, each person had to choose the right path for themselves. He had to respect that. He was being called on to help her through this most terrible of days. He was being requested to help Lucy to find a joyful place. A place where she could live free of her suffering. A place where she could be at peace. He had a shower, and got dressed. Something to eat was out of the question, he was far too agitated for that, but he made himself a cup of coffee. Now he just had to wait. How hard that was. James desperately wanted something to do, to be with Lucy, something, anything rather than this. Waiting was so difficult. Time refused to pass. Luckily he was getting regular messages from Lucy, telling him where she was, and how she was feeling. Lucy sent him a lovely photo of the park. How lovely the colours of spring were. Lucy wrote that she felt such a sense of well-being there. With a start, James saw the time the photo had been sent. 10.05. My God!, he thought. This was happening. He started pacing around his flat again, endlessly looking at his watch. By the time 10.30 came around he was already out on the street waiting. He made a conscious decision to stop looking at his watch, and to try and put his mind at ease. He needed to find a calmful state of being. He needed to be ready for what was coming. Lucy would expect that from him. He closed his eyes, and felt the warm sunshine on his face. He felt the beauty of the day. The warmth of the sun gave him the energy he needed. James was determined to remain strong. This one last time, he would try to pull out any hidden depths of strength he could find. For Lucy. He would do it for Lucy. He forced the doubts, and constant nagging thoughts from his mind, and concentrated on what he had to do. What he had to do was probably the most important, and the most difficult thing he had ever been called on to do in his life. He would not fail her. James heard a car pull into his street. He could immediately see Lucy, sitting in the back of the car, looking for him. His love had arrived. As soon as she got out of the car they hugged each other. In that moment neither of them spoke. Words were no longer necessary. They both knew, and felt, all they needed to. Calmly James put his arm around Lucy, and led her into his flat. James could feel that Lucy was unsteady on her feet, obviously the drugs she had taken were unleashing their effects. Without letting her go, he led Lucy to his couch, where they both sat down. Lucy's phone was ringing, although Lucy seemed to be totally unaware of that. James took her phone out of her bag, and saw that it was Vicky calling. He put the phone on silent mode. He would call her later. He would call everyone later. That time would come. For now he had only one thing to do. To be with Lucy.

‘James, I’m so happy that I am finally here with you. James, I feel so blessed. I feel so free. I love you so much. Hold me, James, please hold me tight, and never let me go. Hold me forever.’

James's heart was bursting with the love he felt for Lucy.

‘I’m here, my dearest girl. I’m here with you, and you will always be here with me. I will hold you tightly in my arms, I will hold you tightly in my heart, forever.’

‘Please, James, be a good friend to Emma and Vicky. Give them the strength that you have given me. They will really need that.’

What an incredible person she was, James thought. Even now, at this point, she was thinking of others, and how they would be affected by her death. How could anyone have such courage? How could anyone have such fortitude?

‘Of course I will. Really I will need them more than they will need me. We will keep you alive. You will be with us forever. You will always be a part of us, and our lives. We will all help each other. Really, they will be the ones helping me. Don’t worry about that now. Now you are here with me.’

James kissed her on her lips. Lucy kissed him back, but James could feel that she was getting weaker. Her strength, her life, was slowly leaving her body. Her soul was being called to another place. A place where she would find serenity. A place where she would be able to live free of her suffering. A place of peace. Her voice was getting weaker.

‘I love you so much James. I love you so much.’

James held her tightly.

‘I love you too, with all my heart Lucy. Meeting you, being with you, has been the best thing life has ever given me. Being here with you now is a precious gift. A gift I will hold onto and treasure forever.’

‘James, I...’

Lucy’s voice trailed off.

‘I know, my love, it’s alright, I am here with you. You don’t need to fight anymore. You can let yourself go now, here in my arms. I have you now.’

James could see that Lucy’s eyes were closed. She was falling asleep. She was drifting towards the peacefulness that she longed for, and deserved. She was taking her place at the table of the angels.

‘I’m here with you, my darling girl. You will always be with me. You will always be in my heart.’

James kissed her on her cheek, and on her lips. He held her tightly, as he could feel life leaving her. He stroked her hair, and kissed her repeatedly on her cheek, as his tears flowed.

‘Sleep now, my darling love, sleep. I will watch over you, as you will watch over me, for the rest of my life. We will always be one. The two of us united in my heart. In my heart we will always be together. This love that binds us will never end. We will be together always.’

15. In the shade of trees

The day itself was an extremely beautiful, sunny day, completely at odds with the sombre events being played out. The laying to rest of a dear, loved one. The bright sunshine should have evoked thoughts of optimism, happiness, and grace. Instead it brought only sadness, and pain. It would have been far more fitting if it had been an overcast, grey, gloomy day. The sort of day when pain and suffering were palpable, when you could almost reach out and touch them, grasp them in your hand. For some reason, the Gods, in their inexplicable wisdom, had decided to send Lucy off in a blaze of delightful sunlight. Almost as if it was the birth of something good, instead of the last farewell to a treasured soul. All through the funeral service Claire had wept quietly to herself. The late morning sunlight shone through the stained glass windows, seemingly illuminating the figure of baby Jesus. That only seemed to add more pain to the suffering which she already felt. It almost accentuated the fact that she had betrayed Lucy, God, and herself. The only person she had had left of her family was now gone. Although, as Claire well knew, she had really turned her back on Lucy all those years ago. For twenty five years she had tried to avoid her as much as possible. For twenty five years she had in some way held Lucy to blame for her role in the vicious attack on her by her father. How was it possible to have been so stupid? Lucy had been ten years old, and had had the flu. She could not have been more innocent. She had played no role whatsoever in what had happened. Her father, Albert, had used her illness, along with the fact that Jean had been called back to the hospital to do a double shift, merely as a pretext for getting Claire to go to their house that evening. In a drunken rage he had used Lucy as bait, and Claire had walked into the trap. She hadn't really blamed Lucy for the rape, but because of the role she had played in it she had distanced herself from her, as if by distancing herself from Lucy she would have been able to distance herself from the brutality of that night. As the years had passed that distance had only grown. And all the while neither Lucy, nor, when she was still alive, Jean, had known anything about it. For some reason, out of fear, or perhaps shame, she had obeyed Albert, and had told no one what he had done to her. Not even after his death. The worst thing was that the distance she had put between herself and Lucy hadn't achieved anything anyway. The memory of that night had remained with her, fixed in her mind, in all its minimal details. If anything, the loneliness, and pain of her life had always just grown, the memories evermore vivid, forcing her to rely more and more on booze to get her through the day. Maybe if she had chosen to speak to someone, anyone, about it, she could have found a valve to release the built up pressure? Maybe if she had chosen to get closer to Lucy she would have had less need to prop

herself up with the bottle? Maybe by building a close relationship with Lucy it would have actually helped her to get over the trauma from that night? Now she would never know. Now it was all far too late. The stupidity of her actions would haunt her for the rest of her life. Twenty five years of holding a grudge against a ten year old child who's only fault was that her father had used her illness to bait a trap. And now she was gone. The sweetest most lovable person was gone, and she had pushed her from her life so long ago, for such a ridiculous reason. Now she was completely alone, her only company the bottle. And she knew that she would be needing that more and more. Claire had needed a few shots of gin to even face the church service. After the service was over, she couldn't bear the thought of watching her dear Lucy being buried, disappearing definitively from her life under six feet of soil. She felt such a sense of shame for how she had treated Lucy, so she decided to leave early. The only friend she had left was calling her, her gin bottle was crying out to her.

To say that James was distraught would have been the understatement of the century. He had barely spoken a word all day. It was all he could do to try and maintain some semblance of composure. He desperately wanted to be strong for this day, this most important day of final farewells. Luckily he had Dave to help him through it. Dave hadn't left his side for a moment, taking care of him, propping him up when James seemed on the verge of collapse. Mercifully the church service had been brief, but James had always known that the hardest part would have been watching Lucy's coffin being lowered into the ground. In fact he had closed his eyes, and leaned heavily on Dave at that moment, it was just too unbearable. His legs had almost given out on him. It was only with Dave's support that he could remain standing.

'I've got you brother, just lean on me. I'll get you through.'

Words of strength, words of support. Much needed words. James had wanted to thank Dave, but no words would come. Some people had spoken at the cemetery, but he hadn't been able to focus enough to know who, or what they had said. In some moments, in his confusion, he thought he was again at Charlie's funeral. Both losses almost seemed to blend into one, insurmountable loss. A loss that would stay with him forever, a loss that would define, and condition his life from then on. But that would be for other days, for now, all he wanted to do was to be able to get through this day. This despairing day. After Lucy's body had been laid to rest in the place she would spend eternity, people started to leave the cemetery, some to go home, others to go to the wake that Lucy's friends had organised in the church hall. James wasn't sure whether he would have been able to handle the wake. The confusion of all the people around made him feel like he was suffocating.

'Dave, can we stay here for a while?'

'Of course we can.'

Dave helped his friend over towards the now empty chairs that had been set up in

rows in front of Lucy's grave. He helped his friend to sit down under the shade of a tree, and let him lean on him, supporting his weight. James looked around at the beauty of Lucy's final resting place. The cemetery was overflowing with green, well kept lawns, and magnificent trees were everywhere. For such a tragic, sad place, it was a scene of great beauty, and tranquility. Lucy would have loved it there. It was like being buried in a wonderful park. In this graceful place Lucy could really rest in peace. She had found the place she had been looking for. She had found serenity.

Someone sat down next to him. It was Susan. She took his hand in hers, and looked at him with a bittersweet smile.

'You'd think we would be experts on these things by now, wouldn't you? But really the pain is always just as hard to bear. It never gets easier. I'm so terribly sorry about your loss, James. Lucy seems to have been such a nice person. I'm glad you found happiness in your life, no matter how briefly.'

James squeezed her hand. There was so much he wanted to say to her, so many things the two of them had never said, so many things that they should have said. But that would have to wait for another time. This day wasn't a day of words for him.

'You know, you did the right thing leaving. It was the best thing to do for both of us. We... I, had fallen into a cycle of... well, I don't really know how to explain it. It wasn't that I blamed you for Charlotte's death, Charlie's death, but for some reason I took my pain, and anger out on you. Instead of being brought closer to you, I felt myself almost despising you. Because you were still alive, and she was gone. I don't know why, I can't really understand it myself. She was ours, we should have shared her even in death. I was wrong, James, so wrong. I really can't apologise enough to you for the way I treated you. Anything I can do for you now, in this terrible time for you, you can count on me. Anything. I will be here you now, like I wasn't back then, after Charlie was taken from us.'

Tears were streaming down Susan's face.

'Can I ask something of you, James? Can we do now what we should have done after Charlie's death? Can we keep her alive by talking about her, by remembering her, all the good things. Can we try to become friends, friends who will hold Charlotte tightly, and never let her go?'

James squeezed Susan's hand.

'That would be lovely.'

'I'll leave you now. I'll leave you to get through this most difficult day. I'm really so sorry for your loss, James.'

Susan raised James's hand to her lips, and kissed him. She smiled, and without a further word got up, and walked away. Dave had been following the conversation closely.

'Jimmy, that was really nice of her. You know, she is a great person. It would be good for the both of you to talk. I know I have really failed you in that department. I have never been able to bring myself to talk about Charlie's death with you. She was just

slightly younger than Penny, and I just couldn't imagine the pain you must have felt after losing her. I just couldn't face it. I'm going to change, James, I'm going to be a better person, a better friend. What say, when you are ready, the two of us take some flowers to her grave, and talk, really talk?'

James looked at his friend, and put an arm around his shoulders.

'You've never let me down, Dave, never. You've always been the best friend I could have ever hoped for. Listen, Dave, I don't think I can handle being around people anymore today. What say you take me home, then you can come back to the wake? I just can't take anymore.'

'Sure, man, I'll take you home, and then I'll stay with you there. I'm not leaving you alone for a minute today, not this day.'

Dave helped James to his feet, and the two friends walked across the well tended lawns towards the carpark. With all the combined suffering, and losses the two of them had endured, their friendship would only become ever stronger. They had each other, and that was no little thing.

If ever there was a day that she needed some wine, this was it. The second glass really hit the spot for Emma. She had cried her eyes out at the church service, and all through the burial of her much loved friend. She had had enough of crying. She felt that she could cry no more, and didn't want to, even if she could. Sitting next to her was Vicky, staring into space, as she fiddled with the stem of the empty wine glass in her hand. The church hall which had been decked out for the wake, was almost empty. The people who had felt obliged to go to Lucy's funeral had gone off home, leaving only her few, real friends. Apart from Emma and Vicky's families there was just a splattering of people, and they were probably only there for the free food and drink.

'Vicky, that was absolutely beautiful, what you said at the funeral. I'm sorry I left it all up to you, but I just couldn't bring myself to speak, without breaking into tears. Come on Vicky, get another one into you. The time for tears is over. Now we have to remember her how she was, the good times, the good person she was, and try and plan for how we will keep her alive in our thoughts, and hearts.'

Vicky's only answer was to glance fleetingly at her friend, before returning to her busy fidgeting. Emma went to the table that had been set up as a bar, and poured out two glasses of white wine. She had half finished her glass by the time she got back to where Vicky was sitting, desultorily and despondent. Emma handed her a glass.

'Come on Vicks, drink this medicine, and let's get chatting about Lucy.'

Vicky reached over with her hand, and took the glass. She took a long drink of wine.

'Yeah, I know you're right, I'm just finding this day too hard to take. Really we've known for months that it was coming, but now it's here, it's just so overwhelming. I think you're right. The answer is definitely alcohol.'

She finished the contents of the wine glass, and stood up.

‘I need another one of these.’

Without another word she headed across to the temporary bar, and returned with two more glasses of wine.

‘Come on then, you, finish that drink, and get started on this one.’

Emma threw down the last of the wine in her glass, and reached for the fresh drink being offered her.

‘You know, I’ve been really thinking about how much courage Lucy had. The way she dealt with her cancer, and the strength she showed in her decision to die with dignity, at a time of her choosing. That was so brave of her. I wish I had half her courage.’

Vicky took Emma’s hand in hers.

‘You do! What are you saying? You’ve always been strong. We can get through this, together. We have to.’

‘Actually, Vicks, there’s something I have never told you about. Something big. Now’s not the time, but one of these days we will need to have a good natter.’

Vicky’s face turned to a contortion of pain.

‘No, Emma, not you too! Please, don’t tell me...’

‘No no, calm down, I’m not sick, or anything like that, but it’s something I need to sort out. When the time is right we’ll talk.’

‘OK, whenever you are ready I will be here for you. When you are ready, let me know. You know something that really annoyed me, Em? Lucy’s aunt turned up at the church service, made a big show of sobbing, and what have you, but she couldn’t even be bothered going to the cemetery to say her final farewells. I know they weren’t really that close, but I would have expected a bit more from her than that. That really annoyed me.’

‘Yes, I noticed that myself. Family ties can be very tenuous. Anyway, she had us, and we had her. Vicky, we were her family.’

Emma smiled at her friend, and gave her a hug, as the two of them sat there, drinking their wines.

‘She always had us, and she always will.’

Vicky forced out a smile.

‘Yes, it will always be the three of us, forever. Oh, and we must remember to include James in our plans, he will need our help through this, and I know that that is what Lucy would have wanted.’

‘That’s for sure. I saw Dave taking him home after the burial. Poor old James could barely walk on his own. He looked absolutely devastated. I know you and Dave have your shared ‘thing’, but we have to look past that, for James.’

Vicky pulled a slightly bitter looking expression.

‘Don’t worry. That is all dead in the water. We will be able to see each other, without that poking it’s ugly head up, don’t worry about that.’

At that moment Jerry wandered over, a half empty glass of whiskey in his hand.

‘Hi there, you two.’ he said, as he glanced at his watch.

A fire of rage burned through Emma. The sadness in her turned into uncontrollable fury.

‘Is there somewhere you need to be, Jerry?’

The anger in her voice grew.

‘Are we boring you with the funeral of our best friend?’

Jerry was taken aback, with the violent reaction of his wife. Vicky looked at her friend in great surprise. She couldn’t understand what had set Emma off. Jerry tried to placate Emma.

‘Of course not, I.....’

‘When I get home I want you gone. Get out of here, pick up whatever you need, and fuck off out of my life! Is that clear?’

The rage in Emma had reached breaking point.

‘Go and stay with whichever slut you are currently screwing. She can cook for you, and clean your clothes for you. The hotel is shut. Your booking is canceled. Get the fuck out of my house, and out of my life, you two-timing asshole!’

Jerry just stood there, transfixed with surprise.

‘Go, now!’

Jerry somehow found his voice, through his surprise.

‘But what about you, you and Craig?’

‘Craig what? You fucking idiot. Get out of here, you bastard! Any of your stuff that is still in the house when I get back, I will burn it all! Get out of my sight!’

Jerry finally realised that there was nothing he could say to Emma, especially in the mood she was in, and turned quickly and left. The anger in Emma turned to pain, and she started crying. Vicky embraced her, as they sat side by side, and kissed her on the side of her head.

‘Why didn’t you tell us this was going on? Emma, why did you keep all this bottled up? We could have helped you.’

Vicky placed her hand on Emma’s jaw, and gently raised her face so that they could look at each other in the eyes.

‘Why didn’t you tell us?’

Emma wiped the tears from her eyes, and looked for an explanation to give to her friend.

‘I felt so ashamed, embarrassed I suppose. But you know what? After seeing all the courage Lucy had through her final months, I realise now that I have to stop being a mouse. The doormat he cleans his shoes on when he comes home from his sluts. If Lucy could find that strength, to get through what she had to, well, I think I can do this. I’m sick of being treated as his housemaid. I guess I was scared to face life by myself, bringing up two boys, all on my own. But I was wrong. Lucy showed me that. I can do it. I have to do it.’

Vicky’s face showed a mixture of sadness, and resolve, all mixed together.

‘Of course you can! And don’t you worry, I will be with you all the way. It’s just the two of us now. If we help each other we can get through whatever shit the world throws at us.’

Vicky put her arms around Emma, who had started sobbing again.

‘We can do anything. Lucy showed us that. She showed us that when you need to find that inner strength, somehow, you can dig it out. You’ll get through this, and you’ll come out of it stronger than ever.’

Emma looked up at Vicky. She smiled through her tears.

‘I know I will. Actually I’m not even scared about having to face it all without Jerry. I know I can do it. One thing, though. You know, you are wrong. It’s not just the two of us now. It will always be the three of us. Lucy will always be with us. She will be the force that helps us through anything, and everything. Whatever obstacle life throws in our way. When we need it, we will be able to call on her firmness, and resolve. She will be with us all the way. She will be the light that guides us, giving us the strength to find the right path.’