

THE INHERITANCE.

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My whole life was changed one Tuesday afternoon.

Kylie had just come home from school and was having a snack 'to keep her going' before dinner and I was finishing up a letter to my cousin in Australia. (Tuesday was my day off, because I work Saturdays) Then the front doorbell rang.

Now in our house, the front doorbell doesn't ring very often. Everyone knows to come in the back door, which is always unlocked - when there's someone in, that is - and we don't get a lot of door-to-door salespeople here. So, it was quite a surprise to hear the doorbell.

"I'll get it!" called Kylie. I heard her going to the front door in her wooden sandals and the key turning as she unlocked it. Then there was the indistinct sound of someone talking, followed by Kylie clattering along the hall and into the dining room where I was. "It's for you, Dad," she said. The man at the door will only talk to you."

Unable to figure out why on earth a stranger should be at the door and wanting to talk to me, I made my way along the hall to the front of the house. A man was standing there, but that was all I could make out through the patterned glass.

I opened the door, and said to the man, "Yes?"

The visitor replied, "Are you Stephen Charles Morton?"

"Yes, I am," I replied, "but who wants to know?"

"Excuse me for being formal," said the man, "but before we can proceed, I will need to see some proof of identity."

"Just what is all this about?" I asked. "I'm starting to get a bit annoyed."

"Well, if I could come in, then ..." he began.

"I'm not in the habit of inviting people who knock at my door and won't tell me their business into my house. Just what is your problem?" I demanded.

I suppose I should have been ready for the reply. The whole scene was playing out like a scene from a film. However, I hadn't seen it coming.

The stranger said, "I'm sorry, sir. I can't tell you anything more without proof of identity. I have been given strict instructions to be sure that I am talking to the correct person before I divulge the contents of this package I have for you."

There was nothing else for it. I left the stranger waiting on the front step again, while I went to find my passport. Fortunately, I am a tidy person, so it didn't take long. I presented it to the man at the door, who looked at it, returned it to me and said, "Thank you, Mr. Morton. I am now in the position of being able to deliver to you the package I have, along with a message. May I come in?"

I demurred at this, the man having told me nothing about himself or having shown me any identification. He then produced his passport, which identified him as Martin Jones, along with a visiting card, showing that he was with a respectable firm of solicitors in London. I wasn't completely convinced, but I let him in.

As we entered the lounge, Mr. Jones said, "This concerns your daughter, Kylie, as well. It is necessary for her to be present as well. I take it she was the one who answered the door."

Accordingly, I called Kylie to come in, then offered Mr. Jones a cup of tea, which he declined. "I'd like to get right down to business," he said. "I have come a long way to deliver this package to you today."

I looked at the packet in Mr. Jones' hand. It didn't seem unusual, but the solicitor's words seemed to imply that it was somehow valuable. I wondered what could possibly be in it.

"I'll come straight to the point, Mr. Morton," said Mr. Jones, interrupting my musing. "You are almost certainly unaware that you have, or rather had, an uncle in Sussex."

"I definitely didn't know anything of this uncle," I replied.

"As we thought. Your uncle had had no dealings with your father for almost twenty years; since he married your mother, that is. It was not a happy parting of the ways, I understand. However your uncle, who was the Honourable Charles Edward Morton, has now, unfortunately, passed away, leaving behind neither widow nor heir. The provisions of his will mean that the nearest blood relative on the male side will inherit all of Charles Morton's property."

The solicitor paused to clear his throat. He went on, "However, there are some conditions. The inheritor must take up residence within a year of Charles' demise; he must be married, and he must take up the responsibilities as Lord of the Manor of the village which comes as part of his estate. I understand that the reason for the estrangement between your father and your uncle was that he refused to take on the requisite burden, leaving the estate to your Uncle Charles."

"Didn't my uncle have any children?" I asked.

"Unfortunately not. They did have one son, but he passed away through meningitis when he was in his teens. Charles' wife herself passed away not much later; they say she had lost the will to live."

"And did my uncle not remarry?"

"No, he didn't."

"But what of the condition that he must be married?" I asked.

"The full condition is that, if the heir has not reached the age of majority, he must have a guardian until the age of 21 or until he marries, whichever is sooner. If he is an adult, he must be either already married, or marry within a year of taking up his responsibilities. Thereafter, if he divorces or his spouse passes away, before he has been fifteen years as Lord of the Manor, then he must remarry within the year."

"So, because my wife is no longer with us, if I wish to accept the inheritance, then I must be married again in the next twelve months. Is that correct?"

"In essence, that is correct," Mr. Jones replied.

"What would happen should I decline the inheritance?"

"Then, I am afraid, the Manor would in all probability be broken up. There are no other surviving male relatives of a close enough degree. I might add that there are several property developers who are at the moment rubbing their hands in the expectation of a forthcoming sale, so that they can buy up the land cheaply and make a lot of money building an expensive new housing estate, which would be devastating for the local community and, I fear, costly to the environment."

"You're asking a lot of me and my daughter," I said. "I've lived all my life in Northumberland. I've hardly ever been to London, and know nothing of the south-east."

I turned to Kylie, who had remained dutifully silent until then. "What do you think?" I asked her.

"Well, Dad, it sounds a bit scary, but also like a big adventure. I wouldn't mind going to live in a big country house, but I think I'd miss my friends at first. The biggest thing for me is this talk of you having to find another wife. I miss Mum, and don't know if anyone could replace her. On the other hand, I wouldn't mind the chance of having a little brother or sister. I don't know. It's for you to say, Dad."

I turned back to Mr. Jones. "How long have I got to make up my mind - and if I decide to say yes, by when do I have to be married?"

"There are no specific provisions on that score. No action will be taken towards breaking up the estate before a year from this date. However, you will need to leave enough time for all the legalities to be completed, so I would recommend that you come to a decision within nine months, one way or another. Now, I am to hand over to you this package, which contains copies of your uncle's will, the charter of the Manor, a brief history of the Estate, a personal letter to you from your uncle, written shortly before his demise, and a cheque for £10,000 which represents a special bequest from your uncle."

He handed the package over to me, and insisted I checked the contents, before having me sign a form to say that I had received it. Mr. Jones then gave me his business card and told me to be in touch as soon as I made my decision and was ready to meet the terms of the will. I promised to do so, and he took his leave, having once again declined any refreshment, saying that his train would leave in just 45 minutes, and he didn't want to miss it.

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Following the solicitor's visit, I took a deep breath - then we both dissolved into giggles. "Should I make a list of possible brides for you?" Kylie asked once we had calmed down. That set us off again, but before long, reality kicked in. I began to wonder just how and if I could find the right person to take the place of my lost bride in both mine and my daughter's lives.

Kylie and I had a serious talk after that, and we both agreed that we needed to be very careful just who we told about the incredible situation we found ourselves in. We decided to tell nobody for at least 24 hours, not even my mother, who lived nearby and would certainly have to be told - and who probably already knew something about the Manor in Sussex.

That night I had a dream, or more correctly, a nightmare. I was being pursued by a number of young women dressed in bridal gowns, all saying, "Take me, take me!" Just before I woke up, I tripped and fell, allowing these women to catch up with me. First one took hold of me, and said, "I've got you. You're mine!" Then another grabbed me, and another, until I was down on the ground, being smothered by the brides. I woke up to find myself completely tangled up in the bedclothes and covered in sweat.

In the morning, Kylie and I decided to tell my mother the news, that Kylie would tell only her best friend Amy, swearing her to secrecy, and I would tell my cousin in Australia and my closest colleague from work, Ron Fischer. He and I have been friends for years, and when I lost my Julia in the accident, his wife kept bringing round meals for us, and cleaned

the house - without being asked. Perhaps I should mention here that I work in a small factory as a Supervisor. It's the main employer in this small town, though, and so just about everyone knows me.

I had my opportunity to tell Ron during our lunch break. He was not surprisingly first sceptical then absolutely gob-smacked as the implications of the news sank in. "How are you going to find a woman who can take up the task of being lady of the Manor up here in the wilds of Northumberland - that's always supposing you take on the challenge?," he said.

"I don't know," I replied. In fact, I'm not sure whether I even want to start looking. I've got a good life here, Kylie and I are happy, so why disrupt things?"

"Well, there are a few good answers to that," said Ron. "For one thing, there's the chance of a lot of money and the opportunity to do something different. Then, there's the responsibility of keeping the community going. Also, think of the possibilities that will open up for Kylie - top schools, the chance to travel and see places..."

"Yes, I know all that," I said, cutting him off in mid-sentence. But would I be right to do this - and if I do take up the challenge, then how on earth could I know if any woman I choose as my potential wife is going along with me for the money, or for love? Also, in the back of my mind, it still feels like a betrayal of Julia."

"Only you can decide that, but you can't have too long to make your mind up. A year isn't a long time to meet the right woman, get to know her and for all of you to make the move down south. Personally, I don't want you to go, but I can also see you as being a very good Lord of the Manor. You're really good with people - like you were born to it, which I suppose in one way you were."

"That's another thing I keep thinking about," I said. Why did my dad decline what should have been his duty? Was he scared he'd fail, or was there something else? I expect my mum could shed some light on that mystery. Why did neither of them ever tell me about that part of their past?"

"Look, Stephen, I can't give you all the answers. Your mum may be able to fill in some gaps, but life is much different now from what it was when your dad was young. Remember, you're forty years old now. Your clock is ticking. I say, grab this opportunity."

"Thanks, Ron. I'm going round to mum's this evening, and then I'm going to try and get my head round all this."

"Just one more thing, before we finish," Ron added. "You could always try praying about it, and find out the Almighty's opinion!"

That was typical of Ron, one of the stalwarts of the local chapel. He never missed an opportunity to mention God - in a nice way, though.

When Kylie came home from school, I asked her how her friend Amy had reacted about the news. "She totally freaked," Kylie answered. "Amy said that was the weirdest news she'd ever heard and she'd absolutely got to text all her friends straight away and tell them. I nearly freaked at that, but I managed to stop her by telling her that this had to be a secret or my Dad could never find the right woman, and anyway, we hadn't decided whether to go for it or not. 'Oh, you absolutely *must*. I mean, being a Lord of the Manor and all that - it's just too way out not to do it,' she replied. I made her promise she wouldn't

tell anyone at all for at least two weeks - but I'm not sure she'll last that long. A secret this big is too much for her to keep to herself."

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After tea, we both went round to my mum's. She was always complaining she didn't see enough of her granddaughter, and now I was going to tell her we might be moving somewhere a long way away. She wouldn't like *that* idea, I was sure. The thing I wanted from the evening was to find out if Mum knew anything about the Manor and why Dad had rejected his birthright.

Mum was on good form. She'd spent the day working in her garden, which was her pride and joy. She often said that if she hadn't had the garden, losing Dad would probably have been the end for her as well.

After some chit-chat and a crazy board-game, Mum made some drinks and a snack, and then I told her our news. Her jaw didn't actually drop, but you could see that she was taken aback by what I told her. She was silent for a while, then she spoke.

"So Charles has kicked the proverbial bucket," she said. "And now it comes around again."
"What do you mean, Mum? Tell us what happened all those years ago."

"Well, there's a lot I could say, but I'd rather just give you the short version. You see, I wasn't brought up to life in the Manor like your father. I was from the village, just a peasant in the eyes of the high and mighty. However, Bill, your Dad, went to the local Grammar School rather than a public school. His parents thought they were being more egalitarian that way. I also passed my eleven plus and went to the Grammar School, so we travelled together. We didn't really notice each other until one day I tripped as I was getting off the bus, and sprained my ankle. Bill came to the rescue, and helped me get home. He didn't let on who he was, but my parents knew, and after he'd gone, they told me to have nothing more to do with that stuck-up lot at the Manor.

Of course, being a teenager, that was exactly what I *didn't* do.

"We grew closer, and often helped each other with homework, and talked about getting married, although we realised that would be impossible. Then, when Bill was 17, his father died suddenly, and that changed everything. I'd already left school - there was no question of staying on to the sixth form - but up to that point Bill was heading for University. After his father's death, however, the pressure was on for him to find a suitable wife and take up his destined role as Lord of the Manor. However archaic that sounds, that was his family's attitude, and from what you've told me, it still is.

"This story is getting a bit longer than I expected, but believe me, this *is* the short, or shorter, version. Anyway, Bill said that he wouldn't marry anyone but me, but his family, most of all his mother, wouldn't or couldn't accept that. Then the lawyers got involved. You've heard the conditions. Bill had a year from his eighteenth birthday to either marry 'appropriately' or give up his rightful inheritance. I'm happy to say, he chose me, and we moved as far away from his family as we could. From then on, just about the only contact we had with our respective families was Christmas and birthday cards.

"Now, as they say, 'What goes around comes around' and you have to make your choice. For me, I wouldn't touch it with a bargepole. It's like a poisoned chalice, in my view. But now we're in the 21st century, and things may change, or be already changing. Maybe you

have the opportunity to do some good. But remember, Stephen, you're already past forty. Finding the right wife won't be easy, and then, adjusting to a new role would be a huge challenge, one which you might regret taking up. "

Mum took a deep breath at that point, and seemed on the point of tears. Eventually, she continued, "However, it may be your destiny. It was certainly your father's right. And for me, the chance to visit my childhood haunts would be nice, but I've lived here a long time now, and here is where I belong, so even if you went, I'd stay here.."

After Kylie and I got home, and she had gone to bed, I decided to take Ron's advice and pray. "If nothing else, it may help sort out my confused mind," I thought.

It must have helped, because I slept peacefully, and almost didn't wake up when my alarm went off.

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I got Kylie's and my lunches ready, we had breakfast and then left the house together, as usual. We parted at the bus stop, where Kylie waited for the school bus, and I continued on the short distance to the factory.

At lunchtime, I was sitting on my own in the staff canteen, when I was joined by Kay. She was working in the payroll section, and we'd passed the time of day a few times. "Do you mind if I join you?" she asked.

"Sure, go ahead," I replied. I was a bit surprised by her request, and wondered if she was just needing company or if there was anything else going on in her mind. I soon found out. We chatted a little, and then Kay asked me, "There's a ceilidh in Bamburgh this Saturday, and some friends of mine are borrowing a mini-bus to go there. I was wondering if you'd like to go there with me. I haven't been out to a dance for ages, and I really could do with a partner. I know you can dance - I've seen you before..."

I interrupted her flow of words. "I'd love to go to the ceilidh," I said. "I, too, haven't been out in ages - and I'm really flattered you should think of me to invite."

"That's great," she said. "Sorry I rabbited on. I was just so nervous about asking you."

We arranged to meet outside the pub near the factory at 6 on Saturday. I started to feel excited. Could this be an answer to prayer? - or was I just wanting to wrap things up too quickly.? I told myself to slow down. There's a long way to go yet.

Still, the rest of the day passed with me hardly concentrating on what I was doing. When I told Kylie, she was thrilled for me. "It's about time, Dad. Have a great time on Saturday. I expect you'll ask Grandma to baby-sit - or maybe I could stay the night there and leave you free to do what you want?"

"Cheeky!" I replied. You ring Grandma, then, and let her decide what's best for you. All right?"

As I expected, Mum was only too pleased to have Kylie stay the night with her, so that was arranged. Time then seemed to drag until 6 o'clock on Saturday. I barely had time to change out of my work clothes before going out again to get on the mini-bus. Kay had told me there'd be plenty to eat, so I didn't bother with dinner.

The evening was a great success. I hadn't enjoyed myself so much for ages. As well as there being plenty of food, there was also an abundance of beer, and I'm afraid I indulged rather too freely of that. Kay was a good dancer, and she had bags of energy. At the end

of the evening, the band played a slow dance, and Kay and I danced, hugged together, happy in each others' arms.

On the way home, I thought about inviting her in, but I just couldn't do it. Kay looked a bit disappointed when I said nothing, but we parted with a long smoochy kiss.

I woke up late on Sunday, with a rather sore head. I skipped breakfast and pottered round the garden for the rest of the morning. Mum came over for Sunday dinner, rather she came over to *do* Sunday dinner, and of course she brought Kylie back.

We were just about to sit down to eat when the phone rang. It was Ron. "We missed you at chapel this morning. Are you all right?" he said.

I told him I'd had a late night and just slept in. Ron seemed satisfied with that explanation and he rang off, but not before saying, "See you this evening then."

Not having eaten anything until then and having recovered from my Saturday night excesses, I put away a good roast dinner and we went out together for a stroll a bit later. I put in an appearance at evening chapel, and heard a rousing sermon on "Don't be anxious about tomorrow. Today's troubles are enough"

On Monday, I met Kay at lunch, and the rest of the week we spent a lot of time together. One day, I went over to her place for dinner, and Kylie came too. We really seemed to enjoy each others' company, and I began to think I might have hit the jackpot first time. However, pride comes before a fall, as they say, and great was the fall on Saturday.

Kylie and I were having a late breakfast when the door opened and in stormed Kay. Without any hello, she shoved a copy of the local weekly paper under my nose, and said. "Take a look at that and tell me it's not true!."

I looked at the paper. The banner headline on the front page read "WINDFALL - FACTORY FOREMAN'S FORTUNE." I looked at the article underneath. There were the basic facts of my inheritance, but nothing about the circumstances or conditions except for this: "There's one snag - our inheritor has to get married before he can lay hands on the property, so watch out all you eligible ladies."

I was furious after reading the article. Someone had given this information to the newspaper and they hadn't had the courtesy to get in contact with me before going to press. Not that there was legally anything I could do - there was no libel, just enough to screw up my prospects of finding the right woman.

I turned to Kay. "It's essentially true, but it's not complete. There's a complicated situation, which I didn't want to get round everywhere, partly because of the marriage condition."

"And just *when* were you going to get round to telling me? Before or after proposing marriage?" Kay replied angrily.

"Now hold on. You came to me, remember. Please calm down, and I'll tell you everything. then you can walk out if you want."

Kay calmed down and accepted a cup of tea from Kylie, which she sipped as I told her the events of the previous week. "So you see, we didn't think we should tell anyone, especially as we haven't decided whether to accept the inheritance yet," I concluded.

For the next couple of minutes, Kay just sat there, saying nothing, then she spoke. "I can see your dilemma, but I'm still angry. I don't know what to say to colleagues at work. They all know we've been together a lot this week, and I'd bet some of them are already getting

going with the gossip. I think it's best if we put things on hold for a time. I was becoming quite fond of you as well." She sniffed back a tear as she said this.

Reluctantly, I agreed with Kay, but I added, "When you sat beside me in the staff canteen, I wondered if it was an answer to prayer. Right now, it doesn't feel like it, but I can't be sure we're not meant for each other. I really like you, and I'm glad everything's now out in the open. We'll give each other some space." I kissed her then, and we agreed to talk again in about a month.

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A week later, the schools broke up for their summer holiday. For the first time ever, Kylie and I were having holidays in different places. Kylie was going with Amy and her family for a week in the Canary Islands. Amy's family always went away the first week of the summer holidays, and this year Amy had persuaded her Mum and Dad to let her bring Kylie. Amy, like Kylie, was an only child, and as she told her parents, "It's really boring sitting with adults all evening while they get drunk and go dancing."

So, Kylie went off early on Saturday morning and I waved goodbye to her from my bedroom window.

My plans were a bit different. I planned to walk the route of Hadrian's Wall in my week away. I'd booked the Youth Hostels, and got all my maps together. I packed my rucksack, had breakfast, locked the house up and caught the bus to the nearest railway station, Alnmouth. Then I went by train to Newcastle to start my walk.

I fell in with a group of hikers about my own age who were also setting out to walk the Wall. They were happy for me to join them, and I was glad of the company. The first day, we took things quite easily, to get our legs and lungs used to the walking and we had a relaxed evening together. One of the group was a woman called Martine. She told me her mother was French and her father was English, and that this was also her first time on Hadrian's Wall. I told her something of my life as well.

We got on well, and after that we mostly walked together. Martine didn't seem especially close to anyone else in the group. The others were regular walking club members. Martine had only joined through seeing an advert in the Post Office. Like me, she walked a lot, and she had long wanted to do the walk, but had hesitated because she wondered if she was up to it.

Anyway, we didn't disgrace ourselves, and kept up with the others until, about half way through the week, Martine slipped and sprained her ankle. I helped her hobble as far as the Youth Hostel where we got some medical advice, which was to pack it with ice and rest up for 24 hours. That left us in a dilemma. The rest of the group were eager to press on and complete the walk, so I volunteered to stay behind. Martine decided that was really noble of me, and she gave me a very affectionate kiss.

The next day we rested up, and saw a big improvement to Martine's ankle. We did a lot of talking and told each other a lot about our lives. I learned that Martine's grandmother had come from Morocco, which accounted for her dark complexion.

In the morning, Martine decided she could manage to walk, so we set off. We took things slowly, and we knew that we couldn't now finish the walk within the week, but we both

wanted to do as much as possible. I helped Martine in all the difficult places, so we had a lot of physical contact. In the evening, we seemed to draw closer together, and we indulged in some kissing and cuddling.

By the time I went to bed, I was getting quite confused. Was I falling for Martine? Was she the one, or should I keep faith with Kay, or...?

On the last day of walking, I found myself telling her all about my inheritance. Martine was a good listener and asked the right questions to help me fill in the details. When I'd finished, she said, "That's quite a big problem you've got there. You know, I felt a lot of tension in you, which didn't leave you, even though walking is very good for helping you to relax. I also now understand your hesitation when we kissed. You are very unsure of yourself and your future, but if you become this big Lord of the Manor, you will need to be very strong and know who you are and be very certain of your position. I know, because my French uncle has a similar estate. My mother says she was very glad to be born a girl and that it was her younger brother who had to take on the burden of responsibility.

That left me thinking and wondering whether or not I could actually cope with taking up the inheritance.

When the week was up, we had only reached Haltwhistle, but we both had to stop. We exchanged e-mail addresses and phone numbers and promised to keep in touch.

I got home in time to greet Kylie on her return. She said she'd had a great time - but she'd missed me and it was nice to be home again. I slept really well back in my own bed and was woken up by Kylie. She shouted through the bedroom door, "Dad, wake up! You've got to see this!"

I leapt out of bed, put my dressing-gown on and opened the door. There was Kylie with the Sunday Mirror in her hand. The paper was open at the centre pages. The headline read: WANTED: WOMAN TO SHARE WINDFALL! Underneath was a photograph of me in the garden. I didn't have any idea when that was taken, but then I'm not a particularly observant person.

The article after that was substantially the same as our local paper had printed, so it was easy to understand the source. Unfortunately, the article also named our town, so by the end of the day we had two local television crews prowling round. I was beyond anger - I just wanted them all to go away, and I refused to give an interview. That didn't stop some of my neighbours from talking to the reporters, and the item appeared on the local evening news.

As I got myself ready for bed that night, I thought to myself, "Now everyone in the country knows about this inheritance, how can I possibly come to a proper decision?" I prayed again, more earnestly this time, for wisdom and the right wife.

In the course of the next two weeks, I received quite a few letters. Although neither the newspaper nor the television had disclosed exactly where I lived, in our part of the world, letters even with quite incomplete addresses are often delivered. A name and the place are enough.

Maybe I was foolish, maybe not, but anyway I was curious enough to open the letters. Yes, I looked at every one. Some were just your standard begging letter. One example read like this:

“Dear Mr. Morton, I congratulate you on your good fortune in inheriting a most valuable piece of real estate. I, like you, live in this county, and I have fallen on hard times. I wonder if you could see your way to sharing with me just a small piece of your luck, and make a fellow Northumbrian happier with his lot in life.”

Other letters were from people who hate the aristocracy. “How can you even contemplate joining the ranks of the oppressors, when you have been brought up as a worker?” questioned one correspondent.

By far the majority, however, were marriage proposals, often including a photograph, sometimes in what may at best be classed as provocative, but more correctly termed pornographic poses. Most of these women totally ignored the fact that I had a daughter, a fact which had been mentioned both in print and on the television.

One or two of these letters possibly merited further attention, so I put them to one side, while destroying the rest. I did let Kylie see some of the more ridiculous letters, and she enjoyed the moments of fame she attracted at school by reading them out to her friends and classmates. I did make sure that there were no names or identifying details in the letters I let Kylie have.

The best things that happened to me in that period concerned Kay and Martine. First Kay told me how sorry she was about all the fuss the media had made, and then she told me that she may have overreacted when she found out about the inheritance. “Maybe we could try again soon,” she said.

A couple of days later, there was a phone call from Martine. “I couldn’t believe it when almost the first thing I saw on television when I arrived home was the item about you,” she said. “Those reporters have behaved abominably. They should not broadcast such stories. I hope that you were not too inconvenienced by their behaviour.”

I assured her that I had managed to cope without getting too angry, and that now my daughter and I were able to laugh about things. “It makes it harder for me to know what to do, however,” I said.

“Well, if you need to escape for a day or two, I’m not that far away, just the other side of Newcastle,” she reminded me.

I thanked her, and said that I may just go and see her some time soon.

Now I was even more confused. There were two lovely women who were both concerned for my welfare. I was attracted to both of them. I was aware that no commitment had been made or even implied, and I still didn’t know if either of them was the right one for me and a future in Sussex. Furthermore, I didn’t really desire to string anyone along, and raise false hopes. I prefer to be honest, but it seemed to me that my actions could be construed as deceitful. Whom could I consult for advice?

Ron invited Kylie and me to dinner the following Sunday. His younger daughter is only two years older than Kylie and they enjoy each others’ company, but I suspected the main reason behind the invitation was to have another chat with me about the future.

Accordingly, we both got up early on Sunday and attended the morning service at the chapel. I can remember the text that the minister used. It was, “Seek ye first the Kingdom

of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you.” That’s from Matthew’s gospel, Chapter 6. It’s one of the minister’s favourite texts, and he always quotes it in the old King James Version.

However, that Sunday, the words struck me. Later, after dinner, I asked Ron about it. “Does that text tell us that if we focus on doing God’s will, then He’ll sort things out for us?” “In essence, yes,” Ron answered, “but that doesn’t mean that we abdicate all responsibility for our lives. The main importance here is focus. Put God’s Kingdom first, and then trust Him for our daily bread. I suppose that you’re worrying about your own situation. Well, you will still have to make some decisions, but I believe that God will help you focus and decide in the right way. Now, let’s see if you can focus on a game of chess. Last time we played, you defeated me. I’m looking for revenge!”

Ron beat me easily. I wasn’t properly concentrating on the game, and he took full advantage. “Now you see how the right focus can affect the outcome,” he said, once the game was over.

The rest of the afternoon was relaxing for me, joining in with the family, sometimes serious, sometimes crazy. To see Ron and his wife Mary together with their children made me realise again how much I missed Julia, but also how much I’d like not to be a single parent for much longer.

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Two weeks after this, I took the Saturday off work and Kylie and I went to visit Martine for the weekend.

She made us feel very comfortable, and we had a really good time there. Kylie got on well with Martine. They did some shopping together while I watched sport on the television, and we had a meal out together on Saturday evening. Sunday was a day for walking. The weather was perfect and Kylie joined in without too much protest. We drove through Condett and Castleside and parked in a small place called Healeyfield. We then went up Cross Rigg. The weather was kind and the views were magnificent. After an early start, we were really ready for our packed lunch. We refrained from overeating, however, because we still had some more walking to do afterwards.

While we were walking, Martine said, “If you’ve enjoyed today, then maybe you’d like to join me on another walk. On August Bank Holiday weekend, they’re organising a Dark Peak Walk - that’s a kind of taster or preparation for the Pennine Way. It’s supposed to be very beautiful, and it can be done in three days, but it’s 42 miles. Are you interested?”

Kylie was the first to respond. “You can count me out of that one,” she said. “I’m okay with just the three of us together and doing a stroll like today, but I don’t want to be with a big group of ‘serious’ hikers.”

I said that I’d love to go - after all I didn’t manage to complete my previous ‘serious’ walk, and I hadn’t done it before. I told Kylie that she didn’t have to come, that maybe she could do something with her friends that weekend. “Think about it. There’s plenty of time to make some arrangements,” I told her.

We arrived back home quite late on Sunday evening. On the drive back, I kept thinking about asking Kylie what she thought of Martine, but I just couldn't bring myself to formulate the right question. In the end, I didn't have to.

When we'd unpacked the car, and were bringing the last things into the house, Kylie said suddenly, "It's all right, Dad. I really like Martine. She's fun to be with and she seems to understand me, although she hasn't got any children of her own. I know you're anxious about whether or not we get on well together, and I can tell you've been dying to ask me, but honestly, I really do think she's nice. But there's no need to get worked up about me. I'm sure that whoever you marry I'll be happy with. We've both missed Mum a lot, and I know no-one can ever take her place, but it would be good to have a mother around again. So cheer up. I won't make your life a misery telling you that I won't let you marry again because it wouldn't be fair to Mum's memory. I've read lots of books where that happens and the children hate their cruel stepmother, but I'm sure that reality isn't like that. I love you and trust you, Dad."

That was a very long speech for Kylie, and I had tears in my eyes when she finished, but I really appreciated what she'd said and told her so. I also gave her a hug, which she wriggled out of as soon as she could. "Okay, Dad. Let's not get emotional," she said, and went off to her room.

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Two days later, on the afternoon of my day off, there was a ring at the door. On the doorstep stood a woman dressed in a strangely mismatched set of clothes. She wore a woollen knitted purple hat - unusual for the middle of summer - a long denim skirt, flat sandals, a bright yellow blouse and a red cape. She was also wearing glasses. Her handbag was made of cloth with a wooden handle, like a knitting bag.

When she saw me, she gave a wide smile. "Oh, here you are. I've found you at last," she said. "It's taken me a while, but now I've tracked you down."

I didn't know how to respond to this woman, but I didn't want all the neighbours watching, so I said, "You'd better come in, and tell me your tale."

Once the woman was inside the house, she came towards me and tried to draw me to her by linking her hands round the back of my neck, but I didn't allow her to complete the manoeuvre.

"Please, none of that," I said. "Just sit down here and tell me who you are and what this is all about." I indicated one of the kitchen chairs, and sat down myself on the far side of the table, facing her.

For a few seconds, she stood, irresolute, then she gave a sigh and sat. "Don't you feel it?" she said. "Who am I? I'm your soul-mate, destined from the beginning of time. I felt this the moment I saw you on the television. As I heard your story and then saw your face, I saw us linked together once more. Oh yes, we've been together in past lives too. Now it's time to be with each other once again. I couldn't come straight away, although I saw the invitation in your eyes, for I didn't know where you lived. But with the help of the spirit powers I found you, and here I am."

"Just where did you find my address?" I asked.

“You’re listed in the telephone directory,” said the woman, “I had to look at several before finding the right one.”

At that point, I was feeling quite angry about this invasion of my privacy, so I stood up and was about to order this woman out of my house. However, I controlled myself and asked her again what her name was.

“Charlotte,” she replied. “I’m Charlotte Vaughan, and I come from Manchester.”

“Well, Charlotte, I’m sorry to tell you that you have had a wasted journey. I am completely sure that you are not my soul-mate, and anyway, I don’t believe in all that horse dung about eternal soul-mates and psychic recognition.”

“Oh, but you must,” Charlotte insisted. “My guru James agrees with me. In fact, he has told me that together you and I are going to set up a psychic research centre and your wealth will be used to bring people together in peace and harmony.”

“And, don’t tell me. The director of the centre will be James,” I said.

“Yes!” cried Charlotte, excitedly. “You see, I was right. You do have a psychic connection with us.”

I began to wonder just how I was going to be rid of this woman, when Kylie walked in through the door. She’d been out on her bicycle. At that point, Charlotte jumped up, looking rather frightened. “What’s this?” she asked. “There shouldn’t be a child. You and I never had a child in our past lives,” she said. “Something is wrong.”

“Yes, you are,” I told her. “This is my daughter, and if she doesn’t fit in with your scheme, then obviously you must be mistaken, for I will not, cannot, give up my daughter. I opened the front door and gestured for Charlotte to leave. She jumped up, burst into tears and almost ran out of the house and down the road.

“What was that all about?” Kylie asked me, so I told her. “This will be a good story to tell my classmates,” she said. “It’s a pity it’s the summer holidays, but I think the story will still get around if I start with my friends here. Tell me again, Dad - every little detail.”

So I told her, and we had a good laugh about the weird Charlotte, but I wondered how many more problems there were going to be before our future became clear.

The story of my strange visitor spread rapidly around the community. When Kay got to hear of it, she paid me an evening visit at my house. She wanted to hear from my own lips what had happened, so I told her. At the end of my tale, she came over and kissed me. “You poor thing,” she said. “Fancy having to cope with someone like that.” Then she kissed me again. We began to get quite amorous, but then I remembered that Kylie was upstairs, probably playing games on the internet, so we cooled things down. When Kylie came down for a drink and to say goodnight we were both in the kitchen getting ourselves some supper. After supper, Kay felt it was time for her to leave, but as she left, she gave me a very sexy hug and kiss. By the evening’s events, I understood that, as far as Kay was concerned, she and I were ‘back on’.

That night, I couldn’t get to sleep. My mind was confused. Kay was young and vivacious, just 25 years old. Martine was also younger than me, but she was over 30. I liked both of them, and was flattered that Kay found me attractive, but there was quite a gulf between us intellectually. This wasn’t the case with Martine and myself. Although I hadn’t been to university, that was my choice, and I didn’t think myself inferior to any graduate. Martine

had studied economics at Leeds University, and she was working for a company with trade links to France.

Besides intellectual compatibility, there was our interests. Martine was, like me, interested in walking, while Kay shared my interest in gardening. Both of them were good with Kylie. Kay was rather more like an older sister, but Martine was like an aunt.

My mind ran on. Which of them would be better in Sussex? Or, maybe, more objectively, which one would be more of an asset? On that score, I felt that Martine would cope better with the responsibilities, but that the fact that she was dark-skinned might cause some prejudice. Then there was the big question. Would either of them marry me and who should I ask?

Underlying all this was the discomfort I felt about even having this dilemma. Wasn't I morally wrong to have two girls on the go at once? I tried rationalising that by arguing to myself that neither actually had the status of 'girlfriend', but I didn't believe that. I still had the intent to marry one of them.

These thoughts went round and round in my head until finally, at some time after three o'clock, I finally fell asleep. The next thing I knew was Kylie shaking me awake. "Dad, you've overslept! It's time to go to work," she said.

With difficulty, I aroused myself, accepted a cup of tea from my daughter, then went to the bathroom and got dressed. All the day I had difficulty in concentrating on my work, until Ron called for me. "You're no use here today," he told me. "Go home early and get a good night's sleep. And don't forget to pray!"

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On my next day off, I took Kylie to Newcastle to do some shopping and to take her to the cinema. I suppose it was an excuse really, to make time together when we could talk about the future, but she really did need some new clothes. Unlike most fathers, I had to be aware of when my daughter was growing out of things and how her tastes changed as she got older.

We had a good time together, and finished up at a fast food establishment for our evening meal. I hesitate to call it a restaurant, because to my mind, the words 'fast food' and 'restaurant' don't go together, but anyway, we were eating together and I asked Kylie, "By the way, have you thought any more about possibly moving to Sussex?"

"I was waiting for that question," she replied. "You've been so attentive all day, I thought you wanted to talk about the future."

"When did you get so wise?" I asked her.

"Come on, Dad," she said, "I've been able to read you for a long time. All kids can read their parents like a book."

"All right, wise guy, can you answer my question now?"

"I've thought about it a lot, of course," Kylie answered. "There's a lot of things to sort out aren't there? I've got some good friends here, like Amy, but I can easily keep up with them on the internet. I'm not studying yet for any important exams, so that's good. I wouldn't want to move schools in the middle of getting ready for GCSE's. I'd probably feel a bit lonely at first in a new place, and I don't know how I'd get on with a new lot of boys and

girls. Plus, I've read some books where the local children hate the son or daughter of the Lord of the Manor, so that scares me a bit, but then I really *love* the idea of living somewhere historical. And it feels like a big adventure. Anyway, I want to be where you are. That's the most important bit. But please make your mind up soon, Dad. And before you ask, I don't mind if you marry Kay or Martine. I love them both. Now, can I get on with my chicken bits?"

After that long speech, I barely restrained myself from hugging my daughter, but I knew that hugs in public were one of her pet hates, so I managed to stop myself. Of course, her answer didn't solve anything for me, but it was good to know that she would be happy with whatever I chose.

After Kylie had gone to bed, I thought a bit more about what she had said. While I was pleased with my daughter's perception and level-headedness, unfortunately I wasn't any further forward in solving the dilemma, or, rather more accurately, the series of dilemmas then faced me.

I decided to take Ron's advice, and prayed - again - for wisdom and some solutions. Praying seemed to help, because I slept a lot better that night.

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Over the rest of the school summer holiday, Kay and I spent a lot of time with each other, and we seemed to be getting closer and closer together. I wondered; was this the guidance I sought? We were comfortable with each other, we did a lot of things together, and we did a deal of kissing and cuddling, but I don't remember if either of us said those three words, "I love you."

Decision time was coming closer. I'd told myself that I really needed to make my mind up, or was it that I needed to be certain of my heart? August Bank Holiday was looming near, and I was looking forward to the Dark Peak walk, but also in a way dreading it. This wasn't the most romantic of venues, specially as there had been quite a bit of rain, meaning that we would probably end each day of the walk mud-spattered and not looking too attractive. Kylie went to stay with my mother on Friday evening, because I had an early start in the morning. I drove into Newcastle and met up with Martine and the rest of the walkers at the station. We changed trains at Sheffield, and decamped at Hathersage. There, everyone checked their equipment and we set off. The weather was kind to us, and we had magnificent views all day. By the evening, we were all tired. I was aching all over. "You haven't done enough training for this walk, have you?" said Martine. "I've been building up my muscles for the past three weeks, walking on the fells."

I admitted that I'd neglected my preparations, but I told her that I'd manage to keep up. That night, I was asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow, in spite of my aches and pains. In the morning, I was a bit stiff to start with, but I soon loosened up. We made really good progress to start with, then the weather closed in. Low cloud reduced visibility considerably, and we made sure that none of us walked alone.

Despite the cloud, we still made good progress, and none of us got lost. As often happens, the clouds dispersed in the late afternoon, and the last couple of miles we were bathed in

evening sunshine. I was feeling better than I had the evening before, but Martine was complaining of backache, so I helped her with some massage.

We completed the walk in good time on the Monday, and we all felt a sense of achievement. "It was really good to finish this one, after last time," said Martine. I agreed with her, and we jumped around together, hugging each other.

On the way back up north, Martine invited me to stay over at her house that night.

I wasn't sure if I should accept or not, but by the time the train arrived at Newcastle, I wasn't feeling up to the drive home, so I accepted Martine's offer. I phoned Mum to tell her where I was, and I could almost see her raised eyebrow as she replied, "I see!"

"It's nothing like that, Mum," I said, to which she replied, "Says you!"

After a shower and a quick bite to eat, we both went to bed - in separate bedrooms. (Both of us are a bit old-fashioned, and I certainly couldn't just go to bed with someone I wasn't married to, due to my faith.)

In the morning, we really should have talked about what we felt for each other, but we didn't. I was still too confused, and I think Martine was just too shy. We had breakfast, hugged, and kissed goodbye, then I was off home.

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The next Monday, Kylie started her new year at school. She said she felt quite strange, seeing that she would probably be a few hundred miles away from there by the end of the year. "Make your mind up soon," she told me, as she set off for the bus.

On Wednesday, Kay came up to me at work. "Can I come round and see you this evening?" she asked.

"Yes, of course," I replied. "What time?"

"I'll be there about eight," she said. "Is that all right?"

I was a bit puzzled at Kay's behaviour. She didn't normally ask like that about coming round. When she came, I realised why.

"I think it's time we had a serious talk," she began.

That sounded ominous. "Shouldn't that sentence be coming from my lips?" I thought.

As I answered, I tried to sound casual. "Oh yes, what about?" I asked.

"You know full well - you and me - do we have a future or not?"

I didn't answer straight away, because I didn't really know what to say. Unsure of my own feelings, I was also unsure of Kay's mind, especially about the inheritance.

Kay read a lot into my hesitation. "I see," she said. "Could it be that you're wondering if I would fit in down south? Maybe this northern lass isn't quite sophisticated for them."

"Nothing of the kind," I replied. "I just haven't been able to make my own mind up, let alone tell you what I'm planning."

I realised that my answer could seem rather lame, and I wasn't being entirely straight with Kay, part of my confusion coming from my relationship with Martine, which I didn't really want to discuss with her.

"Well, I have - made my own mind up, that is," Kay told me. "This is where I stand. I've been doing a lot of thinking and a lot of heart searching. I really like you. In fact, I think I love you. However, I just couldn't pack up and leave this place. It's my home, it's where I

belong. If I went down to Sussex, I'd be like a fish out of water. I don't know how to hob-nob with the landed gentry, and I certainly couldn't tell a bottle of fine wine from a bottle of plonk. I couldn't order servants about and I just don't think I could play the role of Lady of the Manor, having the peasants tip their hats to me and such like."

After that speech, I realised just how much Kay felt squeezed by the time pressure I was under about the inheritance, and how inadequate she felt she was to fit the role she would need to play if she married me and moved to Sussex. Now, I was going to have to let her down, because the one thing I had decided, I now saw, was that I wanted to accept the challenge of being Lord of the Manor, as it were, and so there would be no long-term future in my relationship with Kay, at least not in the way she wanted. What should I say?

"I think I love you too," I began, "which makes it all the harder to say what I have to say now. I hadn't realised it, but I have already made up my mind to take up the inheritance, partly for the challenge it represents, partly because I feel that it should have been my birthright, and partly because I want to be a different kind of landowner. I don't like the centuries-old system of big estates, with the workers bound to work in the Lord of the Manor's fields, and I'm not sure how much of a difference I could make, but I'd really love the opportunity to try. There's also my daughter's position to think of, and I want the best for her, which I think will come about by heading south. I'd like you to come too, but..."

Kay interrupted me. "So, you'll have me if I come with you, but not if I don't," she said, bluntly. "Well, good luck to you. I made my position perfectly clear, and now I understand where you are..."

At that, she broke down, put her head on my shoulder, and began to sob, her chest heaving. I wanted to comfort her, but I knew that any words I could say would only wound further, so I just held her. After a while, she grew calmer and stopped crying. Then she dried her eyes and said, "I really could do with a strong cup of tea," and she picked up the kettle.

Once we'd had our tea, we talked a bit more. Just before she left, Kay said, "Well, I'm still young enough to be able to keep looking for the right man, but I did think you were him. Let me know if you change your mind about going south."

As Kay left, I thought, "You'll be over me before too long - I hope."

-12-

The interview with Kay and the break-up that it produced left me feeling down and rather vulnerable. I began to wonder if I had burned my bridges, and now there would be no-one wanting to marry me. I wasn't discounting Martine, but although we were comfortable with each other and found each other fun, our relationship was very much on the 'just friends' side of the coin, or so it seemed to me, despite the kissing and cuddling we sometimes indulged in.

The question of what to do next kept on going round and round in my head. It affected my work, so that Ron asked me to step into his office for a minute.

"You're wool-gathering again, when you should be working, Stephen. I'm sure it's to do with this inheritance again, and believe me, I understand how it's eating you. But we can't have you working with only half of your concentration. Let me remind you again to share

your burden with the Lord. As it says in the Bible, 'Cast all your cares on Him, for He cares for you'. Take a few minutes out now to pray, then get on with the job."

I thanked Ron and did as he told me. I didn't expect much from it, but to my surprise, I was able to concentrate fully on my work for the rest of the day.

In the evening, I went round to my Mum, and told her of the recent goings on. She wasn't surprised about Kay, but she did sympathise with my feeling down. "You always did get depressed when you broke off a relationship," she said, "but then a few days later you were your old self again."

"Yes, but there's so much more at stake this time," I said.

"No, not really. The most important thing is to find the right woman. If the inheritance gets in the way, then give it up. Your Dad knew that very well. Follow the leanings of your heart, and be satisfied with what you have."

Mum's advice was good, but my difficulty was that I wasn't sure of my own heart's feelings. I decided that I really needed more time with Martine to get to know her better, so I called her and asked if I could see her on Saturday evening after work.

She was delighted by my unexpected call, and said that she had almost called me once or twice in the week. "Stay over on Sunday as well," she said. I told her I'd have to arrange for Kylie to stay with Mum, but that there shouldn't be a problem there.

As I prepared to make the journey to Newcastle on Saturday evening, I started to feel excited, as though something big was about to happen. I told myself to calm down, but I couldn't help it. I felt rather like a teenager again.

Martine welcomed me warmly, and we had dinner together, sharing a bottle of wine. I found myself telling her more and more of my life story, including the death of my Julia from meningitis. It had happened so quickly that there was no time to adjust before she was gone. In telling Martine, I relived some of the emotions I had felt at the time. By the end, I was so worked up that I just started sobbing, grieving for my loss. Martine just held me, stroking me and kissing my tears away. Afterwards, I felt foolish at having poured out my grief over my ex-wife to the woman who might be taking her place, but I also felt cleansed.

We lay together on the settee for a time, quietly, with our arms wrapped around each other. Then, very softly, Martine said, "I love you, Stephen. Be mine."

At this I started crying again, but these were tears of happiness. "I love you too," I eventually said. "Does that mean you'll marry me?"

"That depends on whether or not you ask me properly," Martine replied, with a smile on her face. I got up from the settee and Martine sat up. Then I went down on one knee and said, "Martine, I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?"

"Yes, yes, yes. I will!" came the immediate answer.

That night, we just about managed to restrain ourselves and sleep in separate bedrooms. The desire for sex had been mostly dormant since Julia passed away, but that night my urge was very powerful. Martine told me that she was still a virgin, unusual in this day and age. Had she not shown restraint and said, "I've waited this long for the right man in my life, I think I can manage to wait a little longer," I might have succumbed, but in the morning I felt glad that we had resisted.

We spent most of the day making plans; talking about what we should do and when. I realised that most people in my town hadn't even heard of Martine, let alone met her. We decided to keep them in the dark for a little longer. It didn't feel right to come back after a weekend away, having only just broken up with Kay and announce that I was going to marry someone else. Mum, of course, had to know, as well as Kylie, and probably Ron, but the rest of the town were going to have to wait.

Not that we would be idle. Both Martine and I had our jobs, and there was a wedding to arrange, along with all the usual questions of who to invite, where and when to get married, what to do for a honeymoon, etc. However, on top of that was the move south, and all of the arrangements concerning that.

We decided first that we really should take a trip to Sussex in the very near future, to see the place we were about to make our home (or to abandon the idea of living there if we felt it wouldn't work). Then, we would have to meet with the solicitor and notify him of our intent, and arrange things so that we could take up residence.

We expected that there would be an awful lot more bureaucracy that we would have to endure, but that the solicitor would have all that organised.

In the afternoon, we decided to drive over to Mum's place and tell her the news.

Mum was delighted when we told her. I could tell by the twinkle in her eye, but she still insisted on quizzing us about our decision. "Are you sure it's what you want to do?" she asked us. "After all, you've only known each other for a short time."

"Mum," I replied, half in jest, "surely you can trust me to know my own mind by now. After all, I'm not a spotty teenager any more, as I'm sure you've noticed.

"Yes, but once a mother, always a mother, as I trust Martine will learn before too long," Mum quipped.

"Hey, don't rush us. We're just telling you about our engagement - and by the way, you're the very first to know, which should count for something - and you're already wishing children on us," I said.

"Don't worry," Martine put in. "My own mother's just the same. In fact, I expect she'll probably be worse. I can hear her telling me that my biological clock is ticking, and that I'm not getting any younger. I'm her only daughter, you see, and although she's already got two grandchildren through Timothy, my older brother, she really wants me to present her with a son or daughter, so she can spoil him or her rotten. Of course, she's not going to be very happy about us moving south - but I expect she'll want to move and be near us."

"What about your father, Martine?" Mum asked her.

"Well, he's still around, but he and Mum divorced some time ago. He goes abroad a lot on business - that's how he met Mum - and he just couldn't cope with being tied down. He did manage - just - to stay together with her until I finished school, but then he decided that we could manage without him and he took off again. He still comes to visit on occasion, and I expect that he'll want to come to the wedding, but we lost our intimacy some time ago."

Mention of the wedding started Mum off into her organising mode once again. She began thinking of who to invite, how many guests, where to hold the reception and sundry other considerations.

With difficulty, I got her to hold off on those considerations, but only by dint of sidetracking her onto thinking about our engagement party. I agreed to take a back seat in those

arrangements, and to allow my mother and my wife-to-be to take charge. I knew that they would have several happy hours together. My mother has always been a meticulous planner, and from what I had learned of Martine, she knew a thing or two on the subject as well.

The one input I had into the arrangements was the date. I proposed to hold it on October 16th, which was Martine's birthday. Mum was delighted with that idea, Martine somewhat less so, but she agreed without too much demurring.

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The next morning at work, Ron Fischer caught up with me. "We missed you at chapel yesterday," he said. "Is there anything the matter?"

"No, no, quite the contrary," I replied, "Everything's really going well."

"Would you care to enlighten me?" Ron asked. "Or is it a secret?"

"Yes to both questions," I said, "but I'd rather have a chat about it in private. Can it wait until lunchtime?"

Ron agreed to that, but I knew that he'd want me to be completely honest about things. Ron has a way of bringing out thoughts I didn't even know I had.

Anyway, when it came time for our chat, I found it quite easy telling Ron most of what had been happening. The only place I felt really uncomfortable was when I recounted how Kay and I had broken up, and then, only a few days later, Martine and I had decided that we were in love and wanted to get married.

"Why do you feel uncomfortable about that?" Ron asked.

"Well, to be truthful, I'd been feeling guilty for a while, in that it was like I was keeping two girlfriends on the go, with Kay knowing nothing about Martine. Now, I'm not sure how Kay will react when she hears the news."

"Mm," said Ron, "That's quite tough, but I see things a little differently from you. I think that all along, once you met Martine, really deep down inside you felt that she was the one for you, but you wouldn't admit it to yourself, and that you held back for the sake of Kay, who you didn't want to hurt. Once Kay had set you free, then your heart was able to acknowledge the truth. That still doesn't help you much about telling Kay the news of your engagement, but I hope it stops you feeling guilty about being happy with Martine. Now, thanks for telling me all that. I sensed something was different, and I'm really happy for you and Martine. I believe this is the Lord's choice. However, I promise that I won't tell anyone until you're ready - and you know I keep my promises."

I thanked Ron and gave him a warm handshake and promised to be in chapel the next Sunday.

That evening, I told my daughter Kylie about the weekend and my engagement.

"Congratulations, Dad" she said, and gave me a big hug and a kiss. "Actually, Gran already told me on the phone today when I got home from school. She said she wanted to be the first to tell me, so that if I was upset I could shout at her, not you, Dad. But I wasn't upset, not at all, and I'm very happy for you and us as a family. I know she can't take Mum's place, but she's fun to be with."

"Does that mean we're definitely going to move to Sussex?" she added.

I told her that that was the plan, but that there was a lot to sort out. "I've got to write a letter to Mr. Martin Jones, that's the solicitor who came, to tell him that we want to go ahead with the inheritance. I plan to do that this evening. Then we'll see how things unfold."

"Great!" said Kylie, and she gave me another big hug.

I warned her not to tell her mates for a few days about the engagement, because there were some things I wanted to do before the news got round, and she told me that Gran had already warned her about that, as well. Then she went upstairs to get on with her homework. I said a quick prayer of thanks for my wonderful understanding daughter.

Once Kylie was upstairs, I decided I may as well get on with the job of writing to the solicitor, so I sat down at the computer and wrote to Mr. Jones with the news of my forthcoming engagement along with the decision to comply with the terms of the will and accept the inheritance. Once I'd finished the letter, I read it over, added a paragraph about wanting to go there for a visit, made a couple of corrections, saved it, then printed it off. I decided not to print the address on the envelope as well, preferring to write that by hand. I signed the letter, then decided that a walk to the pillar box would be refreshing, so I put on my coat, shouted upstairs to Kylie that I was going out for a few minutes, and went out to post the letter. Once it had left my hand and I'd heard the letter hit the bottom of the box, I felt a sense of relief. I remembered a phrase I had learned from reading the 'Asterix' books - 'alea jacta est' - the die is cast, and thought, "There's no going back now."

Within a few days, the reply to my letter came through the letter-box. Everything, it appeared, was in order. Mr. Jones had even gone so far as to propose a suitable date for my visit. He suggested the last week in October. Knowing I had a daughter who was at school, he felt that it would be more convenient for us to visit during the half-term holiday, and that he would arrange accommodation at the Hall once we confirmed the dates. He opined that a three-day visit would give us more time to speak to people and to 'develop a feel for the place' as he expressed it.

I thought that very considerate of him, but I didn't write back immediately, as I had to consult with both Martine and Kylie before confirming the dates.. However, I did telephone Martine straight away. She was enthusiastic, and immediately said that there wouldn't be a problem, and what about taking my mother as well.

I wasn't so sure about that, but I promised to ask her.

I had to wait to tell my daughter until she came home from school, but I was delighted by her reaction. "Yeah! We're going to Sussex at half-term. Great! I can't wait to see the place," she said, jumping around.

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The next few weeks were busy for us all. Mum and Martine did most of the planning for the engagement party, and they ran up quite a sizeable telephone bill in the process. I had quite a correspondence with the solicitor, as he gave me information about the size of the Estate, as he insisted on calling it, left to me. There was also correspondence about all the taxes and duties to be paid on the Estate, but Mr. Jones assured me that there was enough capital available to pay them all. "This property has been well-managed for many generations," he informed me.

There were also some legal forms which I had to sign, couched in language which I had some difficulty in understanding. Of course, the final handing over of the inheritance would not be able to take place until after Martine and I were married, but now that the decision had been made to marry, the solicitor felt safe in sending me the documents.

Martine took a lot of interest in these documents. She had some experience in legal matters, I discovered, and she managed to decipher the most obscure passages. "There are a few clauses we need to be careful about," she told me, "but we can look at those later - they don't affect us at the moment."

As the time for our official engagement to begin came closer, I knew that I would have to bite the bullet and tell Kay about Martine, before she heard anything from others. So far, just a few of us were in on the secret, but we wouldn't be making a secret of the party.

So, I invited Kay over one Friday after work, to give her the news. I felt really nervous, and unsure as to what her reaction might be, but I needn't have been. Kay is far from stupid, and she had already divined the reason for my invitation.

"I take it this is a little more than a social occasion," she said. "I'll hazard a guess for the reason - you've found someone to marry."

I nodded my affirmation.

"I'm not surprised," she continued. "You had to find someone quite soon, and I had broken things off with you. But I'm glad that you decided to tell me, before the news got out round here. I assume that she's not from round here, or the secret would have been out before now."

"You're right. She lives in Newcastle, and I met her on one of my walks. She's called Martine, and she's half North-African French. She's a bit older than you, and I hope that we'll be able to remain good friends. Anyway, I wanted you to be the first to know, apart, that is, from Kylie and my mother. We're having an engagement party on October 16th, which is also Martine's birthday, and you're invited, although I'll perfectly understand if you don't want to come."

I offered her the invitation which bore her name.

"Thanks," she said, "and congratulations." Then she came over and gave me a hug and a kiss. "Just for the record, I'm not jealous, and I don't have any regrets about turning down the chance to be the Lady of the Manor. However, I'm not sure yet whether I could cope with an engagement party and congratulating someone else at preparing to become your bride. So I'll let you know about the party later."

We then had a drink together, and Kay also gave Kylie a hug, saying, "I'll miss you, kid. I'm right fond of you."

"Well, come and have a weekend with us in Sussex some time, then," said Kylie. "I'm going to miss you too."

There were tears in her eyes as Kay told Kylie that she'd think about it, then she left.

When the day for the party arrived, I was feeling quite nervous. I'd taken the day off, as had Martine, but she would be arriving with friends and family from Newcastle, in a hired mini-bus. Thus, the burden of getting everything ready for the engagement party fell on me

- well, not only on me, because Mum and Kylie helped a lot. Kylie could only assist after school, but she joined in enthusiastically. We cleared the furniture from the lounge and arranged cushions on the floor for people to sit on when they wanted. There is a hatch between the lounge and the kitchen, so the drinks were to be served from there, and the snacks went on the dining table, which we placed in the sun lounge. We left a couple of chairs there as well, in case anybody didn't want to bend down so much to sit on a cushion. Kylie was enthusiastic about hanging the decorations, but she needed a little help from me sometimes to reach the right place.

The house isn't very big, so we couldn't invite too many guests. Anyway, we wanted this engagement party to be for family and close friends only. I would have forgotten to eat anything in my excitement, if Mum hadn't thrust a well-stacked plate of sandwiches under my nose at lunch time.

The mini-bus from Newcastle managed to arrive before any local guests, and Martine even had time to 'freshen-up' as the ladies say.

Mum had excelled herself in preparing the snacks, although it must be said that a few of them came out of packets. Some of the guests brought engagement presents with them, which we hadn't expected. Martine and I had a swift consultation about this and decided to open them in front of everyone at around ten o'clock, shortly before the party was due to end.

I was a little disappointed that Kay didn't make it, although I could easily understand her reasons. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves, and the tee-totallers managed to mix well with those who were freely drinking wine and beer.

Most of the presents were ordinary, but a few are worth mentioning. One of Martine's friends, Rachael, is a talented artist, and she had drawn a cartoon of me as the slave-driving Lord, cracking my whip over the labouring peasants, and Martine as an idle Lady, with her servants (or slaves) manicuring her nails, doing her hair and fitting her for a new ball gown. We both really loved that cartoon, and realised that a lot of thought and effort had gone into creating it. "This will take pride of place in our bedroom," said Martine. "It will remind us of just what we don't want to resemble. Thank you Rachael."

Another witty friend had bought us a warming-pan. "I've heard those large bedrooms can be very draughty and cold," he said.

The other gift of note for me was from Ron. It was a book all about Northumberland, with full-page photographs. "That's to remind you of what you're missing," he said.

All in all, everyone had a good time. There was just one incident which marred the proceedings, however. As Martine and the group going back to Newcastle were just about to set off, Martine gave me a goodbye hug and kiss. Just then, there was the flash of a camera from the opposite side of the road. A reporter must have been waiting for the opportunity for a photograph - and we had thought that all the fuss about the inheritance had died down. Sure enough, the next Sunday, there was an item about the engagement, along with the photograph of the kiss. The headline was: FOREMAN FINDS FIANCÉE TO SHARE FORTUNE. Underneath was a re-hash of the salient points from the previous article. We hoped that we wouldn't have any more reporters hanging around.

The next big event for us was the trip down south to see what we were coming into. Kylie was really looking forward to it, but as the day grew nearer, I became more and more nervous, so much so that on the night before we were due to make the journey south, I didn't sleep a wink. We had decided to travel by train and we were being met at the other end at Hayward's Heath, and taken on to the Hall.

We made an early start. I drove as far as Alnmouth, then Kylie and I boarded the train for Newcastle, where we met up with Martine. The next part of the journey was fast and comfortable. Kylie hadn't been on many long railway journeys before, and she enjoyed the ever-changing landscape, as well as the novel experience of having a meal on board. After breakfast, I fell asleep, leaving Kylie and Martine happy in each others' company.

The most awkward part of the journey was the transit through London, where we had to take the Underground. I have never liked the Tube, but it is the fastest way from King's Cross to Victoria. The only benefit for me was that we didn't get wet from the steady, grey rain that was falling in the capital.

It was well into the afternoon when we decamped at Hayward's Heath. Here the sun was peeking out from behind clouds that looked distinctly friendlier than those we had left behind in London. So, our first sight of the Hall was a benign one. The sun was out, and the birds were singing. Everything was freshly washed and the sun glinted from drops of water on the leaves.

The butler greeted us at the door. His manner was so much like those you see in films, that I barely repressed a laugh. As it was, Kylie let out a giggle, which she turned into a cough.

Our rooms were large and well-heated, but they weren't over-furnished. The butler explained that we couldn't use the master bedroom, because the lady and myself had "not yet been joined in holy matrimony" as he put it, so three guest bedrooms had been allocated to us. Kylie said that she was a little disappointed that her bed wasn't a four-poster.

After having been shown our rooms, and depositing our bags, the butler turned to me and asked, "Is everything to your satisfaction, sir?"

I told him that it was, and he then conducted us to a very comfortable lounge, which he called the Reading Room, and informed us that he would come and take us to dinner at 7 p.m.

Until then, the only large houses I'd been inside were those 'open to the public' and I think I had been expecting everything to be either old or valuable or both. But, apart from the ceilings being quite high and the rooms being larger than average, I found the atmosphere welcoming. Of course, everything was neat and tidy, but that was probably because the place hadn't been properly lived in for a while. The lounge had a top-of the range sound system, and there was a large collection of CD's, mostly classical, but with some jazz and some compilations of pop music. You know the kind of thing - "Greatest hits of the 60's," "The best of Abba" and the like.

I put on a Beatles' album and settled down to listen.

Dinner was good, but not the four or five course meal that you see in big houses on television serials. Afterwards, we were shown round the Hall, and learned something of its history.

We all slept well, and in the morning Martine and I had a long session with the housekeeper, Mrs. Bunyan “No relation to the famous John Bunyan, I’m afraid,” she quipped.

She told us all about how the house was organised, who worked there and what their roles were. “Everybody knows their job,” she said, “and I’m there to see that they all work efficiently, so there’s no need for you to worry yourselves about that. I have been housekeeper here for the past twenty-three years without a word of complaint, so I can honestly say that I know something about running a large house like this”

One of the domestic staff brought her daughter, Stephanie, to spend the day with Kylie. They seemed to click with each other right away, so we hardly saw them the rest of the day.

In the afternoon, Martin Jones came round and he showed us the village. “All these houses form part of the estate. You will be the landlord responsible for their upkeep, and you will receive the revenues from the leases. At the moment, there is an estate agent who is looking after this, but you will be free to change the arrangements. However, I would advise you not to be too precipitate about changes. I should wait until you are more familiar with the workings of the Estate, say at least six months, before contemplating anything like that,” he told us.

“The church is also part of the Estate. The current incumbent is the Reverend Widdowson, who had been here these past three years,” he said, as we went past the building.

“Neither my fiancée nor myself are Church of England,” I said. “My own background is non-conformist. How does that affect things?”

“Well, there is no formal obligation for you to attend the church, but it is expected that you show leadership and set a good example. The bare minimum would likely be attendance at Easter, Christmas and Harvest, but I, personally, would recommend rather more frequent attendance, maybe even becoming an Anglican.”

I told Mr. Jones that I would think about it, and make my own decision after praying. As I said that, I felt hypocritical, as my prayer-life was usually quite sporadic.

We weren’t formally introduced to any of the villagers, because Mr. Jones was of the opinion that such introductions should only happen after I had fulfilled all the conditions of the inheritance and taken up my new position. However, a few did greet us in passing, and they seemed friendly, except for one elderly woman, who spat at our feet as she went past. We didn’t know why, and nor did Martin shed any light on the incident.

I asked about the local schools, and Martin told me that the custom was for the children of the Hall should go to one of several good Independent schools in the area. “There’s no need to have to make do with under-funded state education,” he said.

Neither Martine nor I made any comment about this, but I suspect that we had the same thought; namely that we would rather give the local school a chance.

When we were finally alone in the evening, Martine told me that she felt Mrs. Bunyan was antagonistic towards her. “She was friendly enough to you, but curt with me. I wonder if it’s because of my dark skin?”

I tried to reassure her, but of course, I didn't know whether or not she was right in her feelings. Only time would tell.

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The following day, I was kept busy, as Martin Jones introduced me to the Estate Manager, a Col. Rowlinson, first thing after breakfast. The colonel told me that it would take all day just to show me around the Estate, and that a lot of walking would be involved.

I told him that walking a lot wouldn't be a problem; I was used to that, but I did express surprise that Martine wasn't to accompany us.

"Oh, no, no," was his reply. We don't want women to worry their heads about such matters. They have enough with their social matters and running the domestics."

I felt that his reply was rather old-fashioned, apart from being sexist, but I refrained from making any comment, as Martine and Kylie were already on their way to Brighton for the day.

The colonel was right about there being a lot of walking. The estate included farmland, woodland, two small lakes and a hunting-lodge, as well as the village we had already seen. He informed me that, in times past, people used to hunt deer in the woodland, foxes and pheasants on the open land, with duck-hunting on the lake. The deer-hunting was long gone, and the duck-hunting was now reduced to clay-pigeon shooting. With fox-hunting now banned, that left just the pheasants, he said, in a tone tinged with deep regret. When I asked him if the lodge was still in use, he replied, "Oh, yes. Under the last Lord of the Manor, the gentlemen of the district often gathered there, just as in the old days, for a spot of shooting, and, of course, the camaraderie and drinking afterwards. I expect they will all wish to gather together again once the new incumbent is established."

"We'll see about that," I thought, but out loud I just said, "Thanks for the information."

When I got back to the Hall, Kylie and Martine had already returned. They had enjoyed the trip to Brighton, although it hadn't been warm enough to spend a lot of time on the famous beach. Martine was impressed with the Pavilion, which she thought rather exotic.

The following day, there was less business to be done, so we were able to escape for a walk on the South Downs. We enjoyed having the time to ourselves, and for the first time, it began to feel, at least to me, as though we were a family. The weather was fairly typical for late October, with sunny intervals and periods of cloud, but it wasn't too cold, and thankfully it was dry. The views from the top were beautiful, but as Martine sighed, "It's not as spectacular as where I come from."

The morning after, we said our farewells and made our way back up north. There was a lot to think about, and we didn't talk a great deal. I was still overwhelmed by the thought of the responsibilities I would be taking on in a few short months, and wondering if I would be adequate for the task. I did say a little bit of this on the train, but Martine only replied, "Of course you will cope, darling. You're every bit as capable as those who are running things at the moment, and I dare say, you'll do it without feeling yourself some kind of superior being, put there with a divine right to tell people what to do."

Martine didn't talk about what was in her mind, but I guessed that she was still brooding about the housekeeper and one or two strange looks she had received in our time in Sussex.

By contrast, Kylie was full of excitement and enthusiasm. "I had a great time there," she said. "The house was awesome. I could invite a whole class of friends over and you'd never know they were there. And I loved the stables. I'd love to learn to ride. There was a young man there - I think he was called a groom - who told me he'd been riding since he was four years old., and that riding was as natural to him as walking. I've got lots of photos to show friends at school - I bet they'll be dead jealous. "

It was dark before we reached Newcastle, where Martine separated from us. "I'll call you in the morning," she told me.

I felt almost too tired to drive the last few miles back home, but I managed it without incident. I was really glad to be back in my own bed.

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Over the next few days, I think both Martine and I were mulling over our impressions and feelings following our visit to Sussex. We were both somewhat subdued, and we felt a bit awkward around each other for the first time in our relationship. I talked about this with my mother, and she told me not to worry. "Martine is going to have a lot of responsibility, running the household. She's also got uncertainties about how she'll fit in down there. Let her come to terms with things in her own way and time. Don't try and push her or get her to talk about it, if she doesn't want to," she said, wisely.

I took her advice. Anyway, I had matters of my own to think about. One of them was just what would I *do* every day on that great big Estate? I wasn't going to fill my time with hunting and fishing, and it seemed that the running of affairs would mostly go on smoothly without me. However, I managed to put those questions on the shelf, so to speak, telling myself that the solutions would come in time. Meantime, I began to dream at night about things I would do once I was Lord of the Manor.

There was one thing I just had to talk about, and so one Sunday after chapel I asked Ron Fischer if I could talk to him. "It should only take a few minutes," I said. He agreed to have a chat, and I told him about my position vis-à-vis the church belonging to the Estate. "What do you think? Should I convert, or find a local fellowship of our church?" I asked.

"Well, " Ron began. "There aren't any rules about this as far as you're concerned. You're free to worship in any church, chapel or fellowship you like. In terms of doctrine, there's not a lot to choose between ourselves and the Anglicans, and it's not difficult to join them. But, I think you should wait a bit until you get to know the area and your responsibilities a bit better. Also, don't forget that every church, chapel and fellowship is a bit different from the others, and you may feel more at home somewhere else. Remember my motto: "Pray, pray, and if you're in doubt, pray a bit more!"

I thanked him for his advice, but I was still undecided.

Martine seemed back to herself after a week, and we started making plans for our wedding. The biggest decision we had to make was "when."

We decided that probably the best time to move south would be the Easter holidays, which would, we hoped minimise the disruption to Kylie's schooling (although we still had to decide which school she would go to). That meant a wedding some time between January and April - not exactly the best time to get married in these parts. We almost agreed on March 15th, then Martine made a jokey comment about, "Beware the Ides of March," and although both of us say we're not superstitious, we still no longer felt happy with that date. So, we decided on March 8th, and said that we'd have to pray for a nice day. The plan was for a wedding in the chapel - the background is great for taking photos - followed by a reception in Newcastle, paid for by Martine's parents. To get the best of the weather, we plumped for a 2 o'clock nuptial.

Once setting the date was out of the way, each of us separately began to worry. I worried about whether I would cope with my new responsibilities. Then, just as I had more or less resolved those doubts, I started thinking about Julia. Would I be dishonouring her memory by remarrying? Would I always be comparing Martine with Julia? Was it possible to truly love twice in one's lifetime? Then I started thinking about sex. I was experienced, Martine wasn't. How would we sort that problem out? I was afraid of taking things too fast, or taking Martine for granted.

This was one problem I didn't feel able to talk over with Ron, so I invited my Mum over one evening and talked to her after Kylie had gone to bed.

She soon put me straight with her down-to-earth manner and simple logic. "Any fool can see that you're truly in love with Martine. If you weren't, do you think I'd have let you get engaged? As for sex, just take things as they come. If I remember rightly, my first experience with your father once we were a married couple wasn't exactly earth-shattering, but it didn't take us long to find out how to please one another. I'm sure it was the same for you and Julia, and it won't be much different with Martine. Just remember to be aware of each other and not just your own desires. You're a loving, sensitive man, and I'm not just saying that because I'm your mother, so stop worrying."

Martine's main worries were concerned with managing the house, once we moved to the other end of the country, as well as wondering how she would go about making new friends. When she talked to me about this, she began, "Really, the main problem is that I'm not sure how I'll get on with Mrs. Bunyan. As I said, I don't think she likes me, and I'm not sure if I can trust her to listen to me, rather than just carry on as she is used to doing. It's not that I think things are done badly, it's just that I want to feel in charge, and not always having to work round someone else. I suppose it's partly my own insecurity, not being sure if I can be authoritarian enough to make sure *my* wishes are obeyed."

I agreed with her that this might be a problem, but I advised her to take things slowly. After all, Mrs. Bunyan had a lot of experience and local knowledge, so tapping in to that, by asking her advice about things like shopping, could help their relationship develop. "Of course, if you two can't get along, there's no question of which one of you would have to go - your ultimate sanction is sending her packing, but I'm sure neither of you will let it get to that situation," I told Martine.

In December, Martine and I went fell-walking in the Lake District for a day; something the flyer advertising the event described as "Not for the Nervous". I swapped my day off that

week to make Saturday available and we joined the group from Martine's walking club for what would be our last chance for a long walk in these parts for a good while.

The weather turned out beautiful. We set off for the Lake District in the dark, and it was really cold and frosty. However, on the way, the sun rose behind us and lit up the landscape. The sight of frosted meadows and hills was really beautiful. It stayed sunny all through the day, something quite unusual for the time of year. We had an energetic walk, and we had to be careful, as the ground was sometimes icy or frosty, and sometimes it seemed hard on the surface, but then our feet sank down into mud. However, that's all part of the fun and challenge of going walking. We ate our packed lunches at the top of the fell before we began our descent. The shadows were lengthening by the time we returned to civilisation, and we were glad to warm ourselves up in a pub.

Christmas was rather strange. It was full of 'firsts' and 'lasts' - the first one celebrated with Martine; the last one together in Mum's house, the one Julia and I had bought for her; the last Christmas carol service for me in the chapel, the last time choosing a turkey from the farm, as well as the first Boxing Day (and probably the last for me) spent in Newcastle.

We did enjoy ourselves, but I was so full of different emotions that I'm afraid I wasn't as capable of really celebrating as usual. Mum noticed, of course, gave me a hug and said, "I understand."

After the New Year, which we celebrated in traditional style, all our attention naturally turned to the wedding. I didn't remember such a lot of fuss when I got married to Julia, but then, I wasn't involved very much in the planning then. That had mostly been in her mother's hands, hardly surprising as she was in the catering business.

I usually tried to disappear when discussions took place about what to wear and how to decorate the chapel, but of course I had to be there when it was my turn to be measured for my wedding suit. I felt the manner of the high-class tailor in Newcastle rather condescending, which was a bit rich, considering that my status was soon to be elevated considerably. However, I managed to put up with his rather snooty attitude for the sake of good relations with the soon-to-be in-laws. Kylie, I must say, was a lot more tolerant of all the fuss and bother than I was. In fact, she seemed to revel in it. "I've never had so many people wanting to make me as pretty as I can be," she remarked.

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When the big day came, I have to confess I had some lingering doubts - not, I hasten to add, about marrying Martine. If I was sure of one thing, it was that marrying Martine was the right thing to do. Our love for each other had grown enormously over the last few busy months, and I had really come to appreciate and rely on having her around. No, my doubts were still about whether or not to accept the inheritance. Everything had been provisionally arranged, but nothing would be certain until after I was officially of 'married' status again, and we moved down to Sussex.

Part of me didn't want to leave this beautiful but rather wild part of England where I was born and grew up. Another part didn't want the challenge or responsibility of running an estate and being seen as 'boss', or maybe even 'Lord and Master' by the people there. Alongside these, there was the thought of leaving Mum behind. She was adamant that she

wanted to stay up north, but I felt that I was being remiss in my responsibility to her as her son to be able to be by her side as she grew older. However, she had by then become firm friends with Martine's parents, and they said they're looking out for each other.

Would you believe that it's started snowing, just before the wedding was due to happen? There hadn't been a lot of snow in the winter, and it seemed that suddenly we might have a 'white wedding' of a different kind.

I hoped it wouldn't make driving too difficult for Martine and her family' who were on their way from Newcastle at that time. The snow began falling faster, and I must admit it looked beautiful, but my anxiety increased. I thought perhaps I'd better pray.

I decided to walk over to the chapel, and see if Ron was there. "Hello, Ron. It looks like we might have a little problem with the weather," I said when I found him.

"That's no problem," he replied, but I suggested we pray about it anyway. No sooner said than done; Ron prayed immediately, "Lord, we thank you for this beautiful snow, but we would ask for safe travelling for those on the way here, and please don't let the snow get too deep to give us any problems."

Ron's really direct when he prays. When I hear him, I'm completely convinced that God is listening to him and answering. I felt really calm and reassured.

The reassurance lasted about five minutes. Soon, I was on edge again. Then my mobile phone rang. It was Martine. "What's happened? Have they had a crash?" I wondered as I answered it. "Hello!"

"Hello. Are you nervous?"

"What do **you** think? Of course I am. Now quickly, tell me the worst. Where are you. Was anyone injured? How late are you going to..."

"Stop chattering for a minute, anxious groom. Nothing's wrong. Nobody's hurt. I knew you wouldn't be able to stay calm, so I phoned you."

"Yes, but it's time."

"Shut up or I might not say 'I will'. You are a bag of nerves. Now, we'll be there in about five minutes, so GET READY!"

Martine didn't give me time to answer, so, I thought I'd just better get on with it.

"Positions, everyone. They're almost here!"

I walked as slowly as my nerves would allow me towards the front of the church. Almost as soon as I got there, the wedding march started up. I turned, and there was my bride, resplendent, on her father's arm, walking up the aisle towards me. I felt a sudden warmth in my face. I realised I was blushing. Then she was there, by my side, and I felt like an adolescent schoolboy, not a forty-something man.

The rest of the service went past almost like a dream, from which I woke up at the words, "Stephen Charles Morton, do you take Martine Evangeline Steadman as your wedded wife, to have and to hold... (Yes, yes, get on with it) ... until death do you part . "**I do.**"

My heart was racing as I waited for Martine's answer. She gave a firm, "I do," and smiled at me. I almost dropped the ring when it was time to put it on Martine's finger. Then I heard nothing else until, "You may now kiss the bride." I took Martine in my arms and kissed her. Everyone clapped. I felt ready for anything.

The honeymoon was wonderful, but I must admit that I found myself thinking about Julia at times, still feeling a little unfaithful to her memory.

Martine and I had two weeks in Tenerife; two weeks when we learned a great deal more about each other and had a lot of fun. My worries about sex proved groundless. We took things slowly and carefully the first time, but soon we each found ourselves fulfilled as we gave ourselves to each other.

We loved wandering around the island, as well as going swimming. The time went quickly, and reluctantly we returned to England. There were more adjustments to make there. Inevitably, I found myself comparing Martine with Julia as she took on the role of wife and mother in Julia's place. Sharing the bed I'd shared with Julia with Martine proved the biggest hurdle, but we managed to overcome that.

Kylie seemed to have no difficulty in accepting Martine as her new mum, but she still called her Martine most of the time, having got used to that over the previous weeks.

Martine had put her place in Newcastle on the market before the wedding, and it sold remarkably quickly, probably because she was ready to sell at quite a low price. It was only a week after our return from honeymoon that she agreed terms with the buyer.

It seemed almost no time at all before we were concentrating on preparing for the move down south. Getting ready for it took a lot of planning, even though we weren't taking too many things with us, at least, not initially. We decided not to sell the house for the time being, but even so, we filled both cars with things we couldn't leave behind, and that was after putting some of Martine's things in my house.

We moved in the Easter holidays. They threw a party for me at the factory on Maundy Thursday, my last day of work there. We celebrated Good Friday and Easter Sunday at the chapel as usual. I found the crucifixion narrative incredibly moving. I think it was because I was thinking of my imminent departure for another place. The resurrection celebration on the Sunday was for me tinged with sadness as I looked round at familiar faces, many of them good friends, and knew I would miss them, even though we would be back for visits.

Easter Monday was our last outing with Martine's walking club. It was advertised as a Bank Holiday Family Whitby Walk, so naturally we took Kylie with us. She had recently become interested in tales of vampires, and she was curious to visit Whitby, the Gothic capital, as it were.

The morning was unpromising. It rained all the way down there, and it was still drizzling when we set off for our walk. However, after an early lunch - there's nothing like damp weather for making you want to cheer up by opening your packed lunch, I find - we set off again and the sun came out, rather watery at first, but quite strong by mid-afternoon.

As we made our way back up the A1 on our last leg home in Mum's car, which we'd borrowed for the day, we agreed that it had been a good day out, although Kylie was feeling a little sore from sunburn. As she commented, "Who would have thought I'd get sunburned on a day that started like this one did?"

Wednesday was moving day. Mum was coming with us to help us settle in, and to see our new home. We set off early, because we had a very long drive ahead of us. We had several stops, to keep us alert, so it was evening before we arrived at the Hall.

We telephoned on the mobile to give Mrs. Bunyan notice of when to expect us, and she had supper waiting for us. She had got everything ready for us, so we didn't have to do anything apart from wash and freshen up before eating, then retire to bed. While we ate, the domestic staff saw to the transfer of our overnight cases to our respective bedrooms and the parking of the cars in the garage. The rest of the unpacking could wait, we told Mrs. Bunyan.

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It felt really strange at first. In our first few days, we understood so little of the running of the establishment that we just relaxed and let things happen, all the time observing and making mental, or sometimes written, notes. Kylie kept coming to one or both of us to tell us of something she had discovered. I'm sure she had explored every inch of the house by the end of Saturday. She certainly knew the number of rooms, and who slept where, which of the servants were live-in and which came in part-time. Kylie also spent some time outside exploring, but sadly the weather wasn't very good, so her and our opportunities for walks around the estate were limited.

On Sunday, we decided to go to the church which was on our property. We were rather surprised when we were greeted at the door and escorted to a boxed pew at the front of the church, which we were told was the family pew. I made an attempt to sit elsewhere, but I was told firmly, "This is your place, sir. No-one else has the right to sit in this pew. Everyone expects you to sit here. They might feel insulted were you to sit in a different place."

So, we sat there, literally in the box seat. The church was full, and I sensed that some were there more out of curiosity to see the new Lord of the Manor than out of a desire to worship God. The service wasn't as lively as I was used to, and the vicar seemed to be rather nervous, whether through our presence or not I don't know. Anyway, he lost his way in his sermon notes once or twice as he preached on the parable of the Prodigal Son. I did wonder if there was some oblique reference to my father's declining of the inheritance which I'd just taken up, but I let it pass.

The first sign of trouble came on Monday morning. Kylie and I were about to set off for her new school, when Mrs. Bunyan came up to us. She asked us where we were going, and when I told her, she looked at me horrified.

"But Mr. Morton," she said, "It is simply not done to allow the children of the Lord of the Manor to associate with the children in the village. It is against all propriety."

"Why do you say that?" I asked. "They're all children, aren't they?"

"True, sir, but one has to keep up one's status. To do that, we at the Manor must keep our social distance from those in the village. To do otherwise would begin to erode centuries of culture and refinement."

I didn't let her say any more after that. "Well, I'm sorry you feel like that, Mrs. Bunyan, but I have a rather different stance on such matters. This morning, Kylie is going to the ordinary day school and she will mix socially with the local children, as she has been brought up to do. We haven't yet made up our minds about what to do from September, but right now, the head teacher is expecting Kylie and myself. If I don't set off now, I'll be late. Good morning."

I went to the car, got in, started it, stopped to pick up Kyle and went off, leaving a rather irate Mrs. Bunyan standing outside the door of the Hall.

There was no secondary school actually in the village, so we had to go to the nearest town. The school looked in good shape physically and the pupils appeared quite orderly as they came in. One asked us if we needed any help, and hearing that Kylie was a new pupil, showed us to the Head's office. Ms. Lawton, the acting head, invited us in, gave us a little pep talk about the school and handed Kylie a file which contained a plan of the school, a list of teachers and their responsibilities, the school rules and information on the discipline policy along with a PSE booklet. Actually, it was quite a thick booklet, containing as it did the outline of study for each Personal and Social Education period of the school year. "You will have to do a bit of extra homework for a time," she told Kylie. "We take PSE very seriously here, and there is a lot of material which you will have missed. Your class teacher can give copies of the worksheets for each topic."

Then Ms. Lawton put out her hand and when Kylie reciprocated, she grasped Kylie's hand firmly, shook it and said, "Welcome to the school."

We were dismissed then, because preparations were in progress for the morning assembly, and Kylie had to go and find her form room. She told me not to go any further with her. "I don't want anyone thinking I'm over-protected," she told me. "I can find my way around. Bye, Dad."

With that, she was off, and I went back to the car and drove home.

Mrs. Bunyan was rather starchy for the rest of the day, but she made no further reference about the impropriety of going to the local school.

Martine brought Kylie home from school. She'd had a good first day and her first impressions were favourable. She had also met up again with Stephanie, who she had spent time with on our initial visit to the Hall "I think I'll like it there," she said.

Over the next few weeks, I was kept very busy learning about the management of the estate. Most of the income was from local leases and rents, but some of the land was farmed directly. Money also came in from some properties in London belonging to the estate, and there were some grants from the E.U.

Most of the outgoings went on upkeep of property, the single most expensive item being, of course, the hall itself. Staff wages also totalled to a surprisingly large amount. The highest paid staff were the Estate Manager and the Housekeeper.

However, there was, as we had been assured, a substantial surplus, as well as a tidy amount in the bank, along with sundry stocks and shares. The Portfolio, we were told, was managed by a highly respected firm of stockbrokers in the City.

Martine and I made the effort to walk every bit of our new property. There were fields with crops growing, meadows with cattle grazing, a small river running along one boundary, woods, a small fishing lake, an old stone quarry, now disused, and some hilly areas, mostly with access to the public via footpaths.

Mrs. Bunyan didn't bring up the matter of Kylie's schooling again for some time, but she hadn't forgotten it. One morning, in the post, a prospectus for one of the nearby public

schools arrived in the post, along with an accompanying letter which began, "Dear Mr. Morton, We understand that you have recently moved into this area, and that you are looking for suitable schooling for your daughter. We have pleasure in sending you the enclosed prospectus, which will introduce you to our school...."

Later on in the letter was an invitation to an open day in early June. When Martine saw the letter and prospectus, she was livid. "That interfering busybody," she said. "She thinks she knows everything and wants to rule our lives."

I counselled her to keep her voice down, as we never knew just when Mrs. Bunyan might walk in on some pretext.

When Kylie saw the prospectus, however, her reaction surprised us. "It may be worth a look. I quite like the local school, but maybe this one could be better. We haven't made a commitment, and it's not as if you can't afford it. We could look at some other schools as well."

As it was nearly time to take Kylie to school, we left things there for the time being, but promised to talk about it in the evening.

After dinner we talked about schools. Martine was vehemently opposed to sending Kylie to what she referred to as an 'elitist establishment'. I tried to remain open-minded, but I was also in favour of Kylie staying at the local school, not least because I didn't want to be seen bowing to Mrs. Bunyan's will.

In the end, Kylie had her way. As she pointed out, visiting a school doesn't commit us to anything, and common-sense says that we should consider other options. So, we decided to look up other fee-paying schools in the area and find out information about them.

The following morning, Martine took Kylie to school, and then drove to Beachy Head, and had quite a long walk on her own. She said she needed it for two reasons, firstly, to see and smell the sea, and secondly, to be able to put things in their proper perspective.

Having been allowed to settle in, invitations to dinner started arriving. The local gentry were curious to meet their new 'neighbours.' Sometimes Kylie was included, sometimes not, particularly when Martine and I weren't the only guests.

It took a while to get used to the lavish dinners which were laid on. Mostly they consisted of the usual English style dinner, but on one memorable occasion we had an Indian meal, where our host was a veteran from the days of the Raj, having served in Calcutta before India became independent. He was almost ninety years old, but he was still vigorous, as was his wife. They put down their good health to regularly eating spicy food.

When it came to our turn to reciprocate, we had to negotiate everything with Mrs. Bunyan. Both Martine and I found it really difficult to keep calm when she continually vetoed our ideas for a menu. "You have no experience in these matters," she said. "Nor do you need to. I have always handled such matters, and I have never had a single complaint. Trust me, I know what people will enjoy, and what dishes will complement each other."

She allowed us to make some changes, but the final menu always bore her hallmark. After one clash, Martine told me, "She'll have to go. I'm getting to the point where I can't stand the sight of her. As soon as I see her, my blood starts to boil. And I'm quite sure now that she doesn't like my dark skin. It probably wouldn't be a problem to her if I just worked here, but for me to be the Lady of the Manor seems to be an affront to her sense of what should and should not be."

I told Martine that I understood her problem, but that there wasn't much we could do. We needed her experience and skills, and besides, we had no real grounds to dismiss her. "Probably the best way to tackle this problem is to be polite but firm with her, not taking 'no' for an answer. Maybe if we assert ourselves enough she will take umbrage and leave," I said.

I didn't take up the offers to go shooting, as I have never handled any kind of firearm, but I did take up the invitation to join a shooting party one day. I found things really strange. There was a lot of waiting around and swapping anecdotes, as well as drinking from hip-flasks. When there was action, things were hectic, but it was soon over, and we moved forward to the next location. I also caught a cold that day, so I declined the next offer as gracefully as I could.

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One thing that Martine did enjoy was the garden. There were three gardeners looking after the house and grounds. Matt was in charge, and he and Martine very quickly hit it off. They both had similar views on organic gardening, and Matt was always ready to listen to Martine's suggestions. Often they were found to be working side by side either on the herbaceous borders or in the walled kitchen garden.

We found out later, by overhearing two of the girls who came in from the village to clean, discussing how annoyed Mrs. Bunyan had been at seeing Martine - sorry, Mrs. Morton - on her knees doing some weeding alongside the gardener, that our housekeeper also disapproved of that working relationship.

From that moment on, Martine was looking for any opportunity she could find to have grounds for dismissal of Mrs. Bunyan. I told her that she was letting things get to her too much, which she agreed with, but countered, "Why *should* I have to put up with the rudeness and bigotry of someone I'm employing?"

We attended the open day at the public school as planned. The facilities at the school were outstanding, with a state-of-the-art computer suite, well-equipped laboratories, excellent sports facilities, especially if you enjoyed rugby or lacrosse, and a well-stocked library.

The interview with the deputy head teacher, Ms. Dovenby, was a little less promising. "Normally," she began, "this Open Day is for pupils intending to join us in September the following year, so that parents can make the best provision for their offspring. However, on receiving Ms. Bunyan's letter, outlining your circumstances and your lack of familiarity with the area, the Headmaster and I decided to supply you with this opportunity to view our facilities. However, I must point out that we have only a few vacancies for the next academic year, and so we can only give a place to pupils of excellent merit. If your daughter would like to join our bursar, Mr. Smith-Collins, he will escort her to the examination room, where the other candidates are already waiting. Meanwhile, if you and your good wife would like to have a cup of tea and a chat?"

I quickly realised that Martine and I were the ones being interviewed. No doubt the school felt they could mould anyone who came from the right stock, so to speak.

Our 'chat' was pleasant enough, but we were the recipients of several casually couched probing questions from Ms. Dovenby. I declined to be drawn on my political views, but Martine wasn't ashamed to declare herself a socialist. As she was already aware of our financial position, there were no questions about our circumstances, but we were questioned about our ambitions for Kylie. Martine stated that she left that answer to me. I temporised, saying that it was too early to push my daughter down any particular paths, but that there were a number of areas where she had shown promise.

The deputy head's reply to that was to say that children need firm guidance in the matter of careers, and that it is both the parents' and the teachers' duty to seek out aptitudes and see that the child develops his or her potential to the full. "That is what we, at this school, succeed in '*par excellence*,'" she concluded.

Once more outside in the school grounds, we had another look round, noting the well-manicured lawns, orderly flower borders and such quietness that you could hear the birds singing. It didn't feel like a school. The ringing of a bell interrupted our wanderings. That was the signal that the exam had finished, and we were to collect our offspring. When I asked Kylie how the test had gone, she didn't say much, which was normal for her. "It wasn't too bad, but there were a few difficult questions. There was one section I couldn't do, though. It was a section on Latin."

I mentally sighed at that. "Why haven't we grown out of our obsession with a long-dead language?" I thought.

The only comment Kylie made about the school was. "It was all right, I suppose."

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We continued to attend the village church, but we all longed for something less formal and more lively. As we had suspected on our initial visit to the church, normal attendance wasn't very large, and most of the congregation sat near the back, leaving my family and me in splendid isolation in our family pew.

We looked around for alternative places of worship and discovered a group that described itself as an independent charismatic fellowship, only a few miles from the hall. So, one Sunday afternoon (the worship began at 3 p.m.), we made the short journey over there.

The service was certainly lively, maybe a bit *too* lively for me, but Kylie and Martine really enjoyed being there. After the service, there was coffee and biscuits, and several people came over to us, wanting to get to know us. To our surprise, there was also a face we knew. Tina, one of the housekeeping staff, came over to us quite shyly and asked if we had enjoyed the worship. We said that we had, and asked if she was a regular attender. She told us that she was, and that her whole family was also there. Tina hesitated, then asked if we'd like to meet her family. We said yes, and followed her to where her parents, younger brother and much younger sister were. We had a pleasant chat together. It felt a little bit awkward at first because of the employer-employee relationship. Martine was the most natural of us, and gradually we all relaxed.

Our chat ended when one of the elders of the church came over to us to ask if we'd enjoyed the service and if we planned to come again. Martine and Kylie answered together, "Yes," and so the die was cast.

On the way home, we speculated as to what Mrs. Bunyan would think if she knew we'd been hob-nobbing with the domestic class!

The following day, a letter arrived from the school we'd visited for the open day. It was addressed to me, so, despite desperately wanting to know what it said, Martine and Kylie waited for me to get downstairs to open it. I should tell you that I'm a very slow dresser (my mother always told me off for daydreaming instead of putting my tie on), so the 'girls' are always ready and waiting for breakfast a good ten to fifteen minutes before I arrive.

Anyway, I opened the letter and read out what it said:

Dear Mr. Morton,

We are pleased to inform you that your daughter, Kylie, achieved a high score in her Entrance Examination, and so we are writing to you to offer her a place at our school for the next academic year, starting in September.

There is, however, one point of concern. While your daughter's scores on most of the test were nearly perfect, it was quite apparent that her knowledge of Latin is almost non-existent. Therefore, a condition of her taking up a place at this school would be that she attends a remedial course in Latin, which will take place in the month of August.

I look forward to hearing from you, *blah, blah, blah*.

"Ha!" was Kylie's comment.

When I asked her what she meant by that remark, she said, "If that's their attitude, they can keep their place. Remedial Latin! What they need is a remedy for their Latin disease!"

We all laughed at that comment, but we were no nearer to deciding what she should do for schooling in the autumn. It looked more and more likely that Kylie would stay at the comprehensive school. She was happy there, and so far we hadn't come up with a more suitable option. I suppose that having plenty of money was beginning to change me, because the thought crossed my mind that if my daughter was as bright as she seemed, then it was my duty as her father to give her the best education I could afford.

Later, when Martine and I were alone together, I told her of my thoughts, and she soon put me right. "Anyone who's as bright as Kylie is will do well, if the school is only half-way decent. Your daughter has a good head on her shoulders and she's using it well, so let her have the final say about school. Don't forget, she's still got a few years of school to go, and it's important that she continues to enjoy it."

I conceded that she was right, except for one point. "Kylie is now *our* daughter, not just mine, so I'm really glad you're thinking of her future, too."

At the end of the school summer term, we stopped and looked back over what we had achieved since moving south. By then, we had decided that Kylie would stay at the same school, where she had made some genuine friends. She would sometimes spend the evening at one of their homes, and occasionally she succeeded in inviting some of them over to the Hall. However, they didn't feel particularly at home in our house, mainly because of the sheer size of the place, The one exception was Stephanie, who was in an anomalous position, being the daughter of an employee, but a friend of the Lord of the Manor's daughter. This didn't seem to bother either her or Kylie, but there were one or two

awkward moments. There was one additional hazard for Kylie's friends when staying with us, and that was Mrs. Bunyan. She was firmly of the old school - 'Children should be seen but not heard' - while Kylie's friends were ebullient and loved to make noise, particularly in the echoey corridors. Mrs. Bunyan didn't remonstrate with the young people personally; rather, she came to either Martine or myself asking us with icy politeness if we could speak to these unruly youths who were causing her to have a bad headache.

Three days into the summer holiday, Ron and Grace Fischer arrived for a surprise visit - well, not exactly a surprise visit, as they did let us know the day before that they were coming, and we had been expecting a visit some time in the summer. Ron apologised for the short notice, but it was only at the last minute that he'd been sure of getting leave.

It was great to see them both, even though we were planning a trip up north later in the holidays. On the first day, we just showed them around and let them make their own impressions of the place, but Ron soon spotted the tension between ourselves and the housekeeper. Martine and I tried to avoid talking about it, but Ron has always been plain-speaking with me, and we needed someone to give us some advice, so it all came out on the Friday evening.

Ron and Grace were silent for a while, then Grace was the first one to speak, which surprised me. "Obviously, something's got to change," she said. "You can't keep on going like this. I doubt that it would do any good if either Ron or I spoke to her, so the best thing is to pray about it."

No sooner said than done. Ron and Grace started praying there and then, and Martine and I also made our contribution.

Following this, Ron spoke up. "It seems that the best solution would be that Mrs. Bunyan herself decides to move on. You could retire her, because she's almost that age, or you might try and bring in an assistant, but I don't think she would accept either of those options from what you've told me. We just might have to wait for the Almighty to intervene, and meanwhile you will be able to learn some more patience!"

The next day, we took a trip to Brighton together. It was a beautiful sunny day, so we all enjoyed ourselves.

On the Sunday, the Fischers came to church with us. We had fallen into the habit of going to the village church for the 9:30 service, then going to the "New Wine" church, as it was called, in the afternoon. Ron and Grace seemed at home in both services, and they were happy to see us settled.

We talked and walked on Monday, and all too soon it was time for them to return up north.

Just a week later, Mrs. Bunyan came to the Estate office one morning as I was going over some figures with Col. Rowlinson and asked if she could have a word with me. I excused myself to the Colonel, and went outside to listen to Mrs. Bunyan. She told me that she had just received a letter from her sister, Janice, who was three years older than her. To be more accurate, the letter had been written by her sister's neighbour, telling her that Janice had had a stroke and that she now needed someone to look after her. There were no other close relatives; Janice had never married and Mrs. Bunyan's husband had been killed in

an accident before they had started a family. "So it appears that I must perform my duty to my older sister and care for dear Janice," said Mrs. Bunyan. It grieves me to think of leaving this house where I have worked for so many years, but filial duty must take precedence."

I asked her how much notice she wished to give, and said, somewhat hypocritically, that we would be sad to lose her.

Mrs. Bunyan answered that normally, one month would be required but, if I could allow her to leave in two weeks, she would be happier.

I told her that I would consider things and talk to her again in the evening.

When I told Martine the news, she was amazed. "Do you think this is the answer to our prayers?" she asked. "I know it seems like one person's misfortune is to our advantage, but I can't help feeling at least relieved, if not ecstatic! Then, as soon as I say something like that, I feel guilty."

"I know just how you feel," I replied, "but now we have to think about what needs to be done. We'll need a new housekeeper very quickly, and we need to decide how much to give Mrs. Bunyan as a bonus for long service, however hypocritical that feels."

"Can I make a suggestion?" asked Martine.

"Sure. Go ahead."

"Well, Mrs. Bunyan's assistant, Claire, is very good and she's much easier to work with. She's got a small child, so she may not be able to work extra-long hours, but I think she'll do the job very well. There's no husband around, so she could easily move in to the hall."

"That's a good idea. Then, we'd just have to look for an assistant, possibly promoting someone else. I'll just run all that by Col. Rowlinson, and get his views. If that's all right, we can call Claire in and offer her the position. What's her surname, by the way?"

"Oh, it's Taylor, I think, but you'd best check that."

I went to see the colonel, and explained the new situation to him. He said, "Ah, yes. I am already acquainted with the situation vis-à-vis Mrs. Bunyan, and had already thought about the possibility of promotion for Ms. Taylor. It would certainly be simpler to promote someone from within, rather than train up somebody from outside. If you would like to leave things with me, I can handle interviewing Ms. Taylor, and adjusting other positions among the domestic staff, as well as hiring a new maid or whatever is needed."

"Well, I *would* like to be present at the interview of Ms. Taylor," I said. "I'm perfectly happy to leave the other adjustments in your capable hands. Are we going to be able to manage it today?"

"I should think so, sir. The woman is already here, and she will be here for the rest of the afternoon."

"Good," I replied. "There's a delicate matter which we need to discuss."

"And what would that be, sir?"

"Well, it's the matter of a bon-service for Mrs. Bunyan. She has been running the household here efficiently for many years, I understand, and therefore we should reward her suitably."

"Ah, yes. I'm sure I can make a calculation and come up with a figure which will be acceptable to both parties. We can present this to Mrs. Bunyan at the end of her period of notice."

The transfer of power was completed with a minimum of fuss, and Claire Taylor took over almost seamlessly from the redoubtable Mrs. Bunyan. She wasn't moving far away, just as far as Hove, where her sister lived.

Once Claire was in charge, Martine and I felt more relaxed and really like the hall was *our* home.

We went up to Northumberland a bit later than originally planned because of the changes, but we were there for the last ten days of August. We spent a day walking part of Hadrian's Wall to remind us of the beginnings of our relationship. It was hard to believe that we'd only known each other for just over a year. As we sat watching the sun setting, Martine cuddled up close to me, and asked, "What would you say if I said we were having a baby?"

"What?" I asked. "Are you serious? Wow, I can't believe it. Of course, I'm delighted."

"Well, I'm not 100 per cent sure yet, but it seems rather likely. Are you really delighted?"

"Yes, of course, my love. It's great news, but let's make sure before we tell everyone."

"Of course, but I had to tell you first."

The following day, the news was confirmed, so we began to tell people. Yet another new chapter is about to be written in the story of our lives.

THE YOUNG MAN

-1-

The young man came down the road cautiously, looking right and left. Everything looked quiet and peaceful, but you never could be sure, not these days. He thought back to six months before. Then, he had been in college with a whole lot of options to look forward to. Life was looking good, but that was before, before The Accident.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of gunfire. It was a way off, but was it coming towards him? He didn't want any trouble, not today. He stopped and listened. The gunfire was more distant. He sighed with relief and carried on walking, still keeping his eyes and ears open for anything unusual.

His thoughts turned once more to The Accident. It had been a Friday lunchtime when it happened. A truck, driven by a Christian, came into the square out of control and crashed into the Moslem faithful, just as they were doing their noon prayers. He hadn't been there to see it, but some people had the presence of mind to film the action on their mobile phones. The footage was shown again and again on TV....

This time, the gunfire was louder, and it was definitely getting nearer. The young man prayed for it to go away as he looked for a good hiding place. His prayers, it seemed, were answered. The noise died away, and the young man started moving again.

The images on TV had been frightening. Eight people were killed and many others injured, but the most upsetting pictures were of the fate of the lorry driver. Following the accident, he was sitting in his cab with his head in his hands when enraged worshippers came over to the truck, opened the door and dragged him out.

The driver was heard to shout that it was an accident, his brakes failed, but nobody was really listening. He was dragged along the street and then beaten to death on the steps of the mosque.

The young man shuddered at the memory. The images were imprinted on his mind, and sometimes he saw them again in his dreams. To see fellow human beings treat others in that way had shocked him badly, but that had only been the start.

Now, there was the sound of running feet, and there was nowhere to hide, no escape. A group of ten or more men came into sight. They spotted the young man, who decided there was no point in trying to run away, so he just stood where he was.

The men ignored him, apart from one who called breathlessly, "Get out of here. They're chasing us. Twenty or thirty men. Run!" He started running, too.

Life had never returned to normal since The Accident. The Moslems said that the truck driver had run into the worshippers on purpose. The Christians said that it was a tragic accident and complained about the lynching of the driver, demanding judgement on his killers.

From then on, the violence had escalated until it wasn't safe for a Christian to be seen in the Moslem districts, or a Moslem in Christian areas. People who for many years had lived in peace with each other were now at odds. Gangs roamed the streets, looking for someone to fight.

The young man slowed to a walk, feeling safer now. Soon he would be seeing his fiancée. He thought about how they had met in college, how they had fallen in love heedless of anyone else's opinion and how, by the time the troubles started, their love transcended all barriers.

He turned the corner, and suddenly his way was blocked by half a dozen large men.

"Looks like a Moslem," said one.

"I don't know," said another.

A third man took hold of the young man. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Masih," replied the young man.

"Really? And are you a Christian?"

"Yes, I am," said Masih.

"Well, you say you're a Christian, but you don't *look* like a Christian."

"What does a Christian look like?" Masih thought, but he didn't say anything.

The first man said, "Well, he may be telling the truth, but there's one easy way to check. Pull his pants down."

The third man continued to hold Masih while the second undressed his lower half.

"Circumcised," the man pronounced. "Lying Moslem turd," he said, as he spat in Masih's face.

"He's condemned himself," said the first man. Let's rid the world of this scumbag."

Masih wanted to tell the that yes, his real name was Ahmet, but Masih was his new name.

He had become a Christian and he had been baptised. The reason he was out on the streets in the Christian area that day was that he was having a party to celebrate his engagement to a young Christian girl.

However, there was no opportunity to say any of this as the blows rained down on him from fists, feet and sticks. When the large men's work was done, they left Masih lying there in a pool of blood. Once more revenge and hatred had claimed a victim.

-2-

Ahmet / Masih's funeral procession began from his home. At the head were the Imam from the local mosque, and by his side, Masih's pastor, Yusuf.

Masih's father walked, head bowed, stoically silent, while his wife expressed her grief in crying and wailing, in the traditional manner.

Behind the cortege came a mixed group of Christians and Moslems. Some were from Masih's church. Some were relatives and close family friends. Other relatives had declined to come on the grounds that he was apostate, which had only made some of those attending more determined to show their support.

Little was said as the procession made its solemn way along the very route Ahmet had taken on that fateful day. They were flanked by armed guards, because of threats that had been made against the funeral.

They arrived at the square where Masih had met his death and paused there for a few moments to reflect on what had taken place. His mother redoubled her crying and became almost hysterical.

It was now only a short distance to the church with its small graveyard. The pastor was rehearsing the words he would say by the graveside, and he thought back to the events of the last two days. Had it really only been forty-eight hours since the young man's death? he wondered.

What a busy time that had been. No sooner had Masih been brutally beaten to death than a boy came and knocked on the pastor's door. "Come quickly," he said. "They are beating our new friend Masih."

This news had surprised and shocked Yusuf. He had been about to set off to go to the engagement party. He quickly threw on his coat and followed the boy to the square where Ahmet was. When he got there, he saw that nothing could be done to save Ahmet, but he did manage to retrieve his body and shame his killers as he rounded on them for their violence and stupidity.

Then there had been the sad, harrowing task of turning a party into a wake. He took Masih's body to the church, and called his wife to prepare it, while he made his way round to Meryem's house. Meryem was Masih's fiancée.

Everyone at the house was horrified by the news. Some wanted to go straight out and do something to Masih's killers, but Pastor Yusuf told them that was not the right way. Others couldn't believe what had happened. Meryem fainted from the shock.

However, Yusuf's hardest task was yet to come. Somehow, the news had to be conveyed back to Masih/Ahmet's family. In this, Meryem's older sister proved helpful, telling Yusuf of a professor at the university who was a Moslem, but who had a lot of Christian friends as well, and who had been helpful to both Ahmet and Meryem in their journey.

The professor took on himself the task of telling Ahmet's family what had happened, and was also influential in arranging matters for the funeral. There were still official hurdles to clear. Would the young man be buried as a Muslim or a Christian? His identity card still showed him as a Muslim, but his mother especially insisted that his body should be laid to rest alongside Christians, even though she herself was a devout Muslim.

The professor was again helpful here. He knew the right people in the right places to have things arranged quickly and discreetly.

Some of Ahmet's family objected, saying that the young man was being denied his opportunity of paradise, but out of respect for the family they didn't raise a lot of fuss.

As arrangements were made, inevitably people from both communities came into contact with each other, and reconciliation took a few steps forward. However, there were threats made by some hotheads on both sides; from Muslims who wanted to prevent the burial in a Christian graveyard and from Christians who wanted to count Masih's conversion as a triumph for their side.

All these things went through Pastor Yusuf's mind as the procession made its slow way to the graveyard. He was glad that, so far, nothing had happened to interrupt proceedings, but he was still wary. He prayed once more for wisdom over his words, and for God's protection on the ceremony.

The coffin wasn't taken to the church, but everyone made straight for the cemetery. Ahmet/Masih's father and mother stood side by side, hand in hand, as Pastor Yusuf spoke.

“Today, we have come to bury a young man whose life was ended cruelly almost before it had properly begun,” he said. “In different times, he would still be here with us today. However, because of some men’s bigotry and unreasoning hatred, we are here today, grieving over our loss. We could be angry, we could demand revenge, but of what use are such thoughts at a time like this? Would more killing bring him back to us? No - that would only lead to more grief and suffering to more families. So today we are going to practise forgiveness, one of the most difficult yet most important things we can ever do. Jesus taught us, ‘Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.’ When he was on the cross, he cried out, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’ I ask you all today to do as Jesus taught us and forgive one another. Lose your hatred and learn to love those who have been your enemies. Make this day a day of triumph; triumph of love over hatred, triumph of forgiveness over the desire for revenge, triumph for living at peace with everyone. Just by being here together today, we have taken a big step towards reconciliation. I am really grateful for the presence here today of Imam Musa, and for the grace and forgiveness he has shown in this situation. Now, let us pray together in silence.”

The funeral continued without interruption, but just as everyone was starting to leave the graveyard, they heard the sound of shots. Two of the armed men raced off in the direction of the gunfire, while everyone else took shelter. They soon returned, with a teenage boy. “He’s no threat,” they said. “He was shooting pigeons.”

Everyone heaved a collective sigh of relief and there was even some laughter. The mood was lighter as they made their way back to Ahmet/Masih’s home together.

MORE FROM LIFE

-1-

"I said I'm not goin' to school today!"

Annie sighed in despair. This was the third time this month that Brett had refused to go to school. When he was like this, Annie couldn't make him go. She just had to make up an excuse and send Brett in with it the next day.

The truth was that Annie was tired - tired of being a single parent, tired of having the responsibility for two disturbed children, tired of having nobody next to her in bed, tired of having no-one to talk to. She was at her wits' end.

"I can't keep on giving in to Brett," she told herself. "If I let him win, I'll never be able to discipline him."

She tried one more time. "Brett, sweetie, you really need to go to school. And most of the time you like it, don't you?"

"No. Hate it."

"Why? What's wrong now?"

"It's bloody Leroy. He says I'm a wuss and a pansy. And he says I can't kick straight so I can't play football with him and his mates."

"But that's no reason not to go to school."

"Mum, you don't get it. Because of Leroy, nobody plays with me, and when we have games lessons he and his mates always kick me."

"Have you told the teacher?"

"What, and get kicked more? I wish I had a dad to teach me how to play football."

Annie was silenced by this last remark. It felt so unfair. After all, it had been Brett's dad who'd walked out on her after he got her pregnant. His excuse has been that it was no fun doing it with someone who was knocked up. After that she hadn't had any spare time or energy for another boyfriend. That pregnancy had been so awful. She'd spent a lot of it in bed, and her mum had been left to look after Alicia.

Once she had two kids, nobody wanted to take responsibility and so she was left to bring them up without a dad. Her mum wasn't a lot of help any more because she had bronchitis, and the doctor had told her to give up smoking, which made her really bad-tempered. Not that mum *had* given up. She'd tried a few times but now she was on about ten a day, and still wheezing all the time.

There had been the odd fling, when she managed to go out on her own, but when she brought a man home, it always seemed that either Alicia or Brett woke up and needed the toilet just as they were getting into things.

She was frustrated and so she was short with the kids, no matter how often she told herself to go easy on them, as it wasn't their fault.

Right now, though, she needed to sort Brett out.

“All right, you can stay with me today,” she told him. “I’ll write you a note for the teacher but you must go in tomorrow. All right?”

“All right, mum.”

“Now, d’you want the tele on?”

“I s’ppose.”

Annie turned on the TV and Brett settled down on the couch to watch it.

At lunchtime, her mother came round. As usual, she was full of complaints. “I went to the Co-op today and they didn’t have anything I wanted. I don’t know what they’re coming to. If they don’t buck their ideas up, they won’t have any customers left. After all, it’s not as if they’re the only supermarket around. Then, would you believe it, when I got to the checkout, they didn’t even have me usual cigarettes, so I had to make do with these.”

She thrust the cigarette she was smoking under Annie’s nose. Annie coughed, and was just about to speak when her mum carried on. “That’s a nasty tickle you’ve got there. You’d better do something about it. Now, what have you made for dinner?”

“I’ve not got round to making anything yet, Mum. Brett’s off sick again and I’ve been looking after him.”

Annie’s mother spotted Brett on the couch, put her hand to his forehead and pronounced, “There’s nothing wrong with him. You’re too soft on him. You should make him go. I always did with you, and you’ve survived.”

“Small thanks to you,” muttered Annie, under her breath.

“Now, you’d better start cooking something, me girl. I’m feeling hungry. I’ll just budge Brett up and sit next to him while you fix somethin’ up.”

She settled down on the couch and watched cartoons with Brett while Annie cooked.

“It’s ready,” Anne called. Come out into the kitchen and get it.”

“Aw, just fetch it us in here,” said her mum. We’re real comfy on this couch, and this is a good cartoon an’ all.”

Annie sighed and dumped two plates of food on the coffee table. Then she went back into the kitchen and poured out two glasses of cola. Just as she was about to return to the kitchen to get her own food, her mum thrust a full ashtray at her. “Go and empty this while you’re on you’re feet, will you?” she asked.

Annie reluctantly did as she was asked, barely resisting the temptation to accidentally-on-purpose trip and spill the ash all over her mother. By the time she got to eating her own food, it was distinctly unappetising, but she ate it anyway. Once her mother had eaten her fill, she left the plate on the coffee table, got up and dusted cigarette ash from her skirt on to the carpet and said, “Tara for now. I’ll pop in again later, after Alicia gets home from school. You really must sort Brett out, you know. You can’t let him dictate what he does.”

With that, she went out, shutting the back door loudly behind her.

Once her mother had gone, Annie breathed a sigh of relief. Although the weather was cold, she opened some windows to let some clean air in, and the smell of stale cigarettes out. “I suppose I ought to be thankful for one thing,” she thought to herself as she wafted

the bad air out. "If my mum hadn't smoked like a chimney when I was a kid, I might have started as well, and now I'd be poisoning my kids."

Since Brett was still glued to the box, Annie put some washing in the machine and then prepared the children's and her tea. She hung out the washing, hoping it wouldn't rain, and then got her coat on to fetch Alicia home. "I'll not be long," she told Brett. "Don't get up to anything while I'm out."

Fortunately, the school was quite close to her place, so it was less than half an hour later that she returned home, having hurried Alicia along, just in case Brett had got up to something.

However, she needn't have worried. Brett was still slumped in front of the television, taking up most of the couch. As soon as she'd taken her coat off and hung it up, Alicia pushed her brother along to make room for her.

"Oi! Watch who you're shoving," said Brett." Alicia made no reply, but she picked up the remote and changed the channel.

"Hey! I was watching that," Brett squealed.

"Well, now I'm watching *this*."

"I want Cartoon Network. Give us the remote."

"No!"

"Muum! Alicia's changed the channel and she won't change it back."

Annie came in from the kitchen. She tried to be reasonable. "Now look, Brett. Annie's been in school all day, and you've watched a lot of tele. It must be her turn now."

"But she didn't ask. She just took it!"

"Alicia, say sorry to Brett for snatching the remote."

"Soz," was Alicia's perfunctory apology.

"That wasn't 'sorry'" wailed Brett.

"That's all you're getting," his sister said.

Annie got annoyed. "Both of you, cut your arguing out, or I'll switch the tele off."

Both children considered carrying on the fight, but looking at their mum, they both thought better of it. Annie pressed home her advantage. "And if I hear you bickering any more, I'll pack you both off upstairs. Now keep quiet so I can make your tea."

By the time the children had eaten their tea of microwaved frozen asagne, Annie was tired out, but she still had to decide who should have the computer and for how long before she could put her own feet up with a cup of tea and watch her favourite soap for an hour until the children's bed time.

She was interrupted by the telephone ringing. It was Steve, her current boyfriend, although he could hardly be called that, she thought, as they hadn't been to bed together yet. He wanted to know if she was free to come to the pub. Annie considered her options. She could call her mum and ask her to baby-sit, but that would come with strings, or she could risk putting the children to bed and then going out, leaving them locked in. or she could invite Steve round, with the inevitable assumption on his part of sex, and the night in her

bed. Or she could put him off, which is what she did. "I'm sorry, Stevie baby," she said. "I've been so busy today that I've got no energy left for pubbing. Let's leave it for tonight." "I could come round to your place," was Steve's reply. "I can be there in twenty minutes." "Sorry, I can't do that. The kids are still up, and as soon as they're in bed., I'm turning in as well."

"I could come round after..."

Annie interrupted with, "Look, I said I was done in. I need some sleep. Another time. Try Saturday."

"All right, but don't keep me dangling for ever."

The children had another argument before bedtime. This time it was about who was going to go to bed first. Brett protested he wasn't tired, so Alicia should go first, but Alicia said she was older, so Brett needed to go first. "Anyway, you're only not tired 'cos you didn't get up for school," she said..

That was enough for Annie. She made Alicia go to bed there and then, and gave Brett five minutes to be ready to go to the bathroom and do his teeth. Neither dared argue. They had seen the warning signs in their mum's face. Once they were in bed, Annie went downstairs, shut the door and put the T.V. back on. She fell asleep in the film, and woke with a crick in her neck. She made herself a cup of drinking chocolate and got ready for bed. She checked that Brett and Alicia were both asleep and got wearily into bed herself.

-2-

That night, she had a dream.

In the dream, she was with her first boyfriend, Rob, on her first date with him. As in real life, he had borrowed his brother's car and taken her to the cinema, where they watched a romantic film, and she allowed him to feel her up. Then, after the film, again, just like in reality, Rob took her for a drive round. Most of the time, one hand was on her knee, but it sometimes wandered higher. Eventually, they stopped in a lay-by. Rob turned to Annie, and said, "How about doing it ? I know you want to. Annie felt the familiar tingle of desire mixed with disappointment. In the dream, she replied, "Not here, not like this I don't. I want my first time to be something to treasure, something worth remembering, not in the back of a car." On hearing this, Rob started the car, put it in gear and drove her home without another word. When they got to her parents' house, he just opened the car door and she got out. When she reached her bedroom, she started to cry.

At this point in her dream, she woke up, to find she really had been crying, but not because she missed Rob. How she wished now that she *had* said no that first time. After that first time, she just kept on doing whatever Rob wanted, and inside felt herself diminishing and unfulfilled. She blamed herself. "If only I had been a bit stronger, or maybe if I'd loved myself a bit more..." she thought.

Then, she tried to pull herself together. "As mum keeps telling me, 'You made your own bed and you must lie on it'," she thought. "I've got to do my best now. But I wish there was somebody who really cared for me and wanted to help me through things."

It was quite a while before she fell asleep again, and she was bleary-eyed when the alarm woke her, and she had to get the children ready for school.

Fortunately, Brett made no fuss about going to school that morning, so she was able to take them both and drop them off, leaving the prospect of a couple of hours to herself. She decided that a bit of window-shopping therapy was called for. She didn't have any money to buy all the fancy clothes and accessories that she coveted, but there was no harm in dreaming, she told herself. Annie even made the bold move of going into one shop and trying on a dress marked at over a hundred pounds. For a few moments, as she looked at herself in the mirror, she felt worth something. Even the shop assistant commented on how well the dress suited her. Maybe she was just doing her job, or maybe she was being genuine. Annie couldn't tell, and it didn't matter. She just felt good.

Reluctantly, she changed back into her own clothes, muttered something to the assistant about the waistline being too high, and left the shop. She thought about having a coffee in Starbucks, but she settled for a cup of tea from the caravan in the square. The man in the caravan was feeling chatty and there wasn't much business, so they talked for a while. Annie found herself telling Mick - that was the vendor's name - all about her kids and her mum, and then, as he listened sympathetically, about her need for a boyfriend. Mick said the right words to her. "Just have a bit of patience. You might have to wait a while, but God's got the right man for you somewhere."

"D'you believe in God, then? I've just about given up on Him. He seems to hate me, if He's there at all."

"Well, yes I do, and I believe in angels. But I'm not trying to preach at you or anything. Just give God another chance. Don't write Him off yet. Would you like some more tea? Refill's on the house."

Annie accepted a refill, and then made her way home. She spent the rest of the day on the washing, except for lunchtime, when her mum came round as usual for a 'chinwag and a bite to eat.'

The washing was still out on the line when she went to pick up the children, and on the way back, there was a sudden, sharp shower. "Now the washing will need spinning again," she said to herself. "Give God a chance? Huh! First chance He has He makes me more work!"

On Friday, it was time to change the sheets. First, Annie went into Alicia's room. She changed the sheets and tidied the room. Before she left she made sure that two special items were in their proper place. Firstly, Emily had to be tucked up in bed. Emily was a special doll, given to her by her father, Rob. This was when Annie and Rob were still

together. Rob had bought it for Alicia's first Christmas. Emily was one of those dolls with zips and buttons, and hair that could be brushed and even, at a pinch, plaited, but when she first had her, Alicia was too young to do any of those things, so she used to suck her foot. She was now quite dilapidated, but any attempt to get rid of her resulted in tears and tantrums. Annie had now given up trying to throw Emily away, and was waiting for Alicia to be ready to part with her. She still sucked her foot when she was feeling upset.

The other precious object was a book, "The Hungry Caterpillar." This book had been mended several times and had lots of dirty marks and smudges, especially round the holes to put your finger through. Well before she could read, she knew the whole story, and she learned to count up to five with that book. It was another reminder of her dad, and looking at it now, Annie remembered just how good Rob had been with Alicia, at least, until he had tired of the role of father, and having a girlfriend who was constantly tired and didn't want to go out, even at the weekend.

Annie thought about his departure, and wondered if there was anything she could have done to prevent it. "But I couldn't go down to the pub and leave my baby behind, and Mum wouldn't give up her evening out to babysit more than once in a blue moon, and Rob insisted he needed his 'down time' after working all week, and any other girl was going to look more attractive than me when I was frazzled by looking after my daughter," she argued to herself. "Once he met Jade, there was no stopping him. But Alicia was heartbroken when he left. Maybe if I hadn't confronted him about sleeping with Jade he wouldn't have lost his temper and walked out..."

Her thoughts trailed off as she began to cry. She didn't often feel sorry for herself, but right now, she felt a deep need of someone to put his arms round her and tell her he loved her. After a while, she stood up, shook herself, and got on with changing Brett's sheets. His room was, as usual, in a mess, but Annie didn't feel up to sorting it all out. She just stripped the bed, thankful to see that Brett hadn't wet it, put the clean sheets on and placed Brett's favourite Transformer on the pillow.

The next morning, her phone rang. It was Steve. "D'you want to come with me to the flicks tonight?"

"What's on?"

"Well, there's the latest Pirates of the Caribbean movie, or there's the new 3-D animation fantasy, or there's a new romantic movie..."

"I could do with a night out, but it's a problem getting a babysitter."

"I've got an answer to that all worked out. Me kid sister, Samantha wants to see her fella, but Mum and Dad won't let her out. She's only 14, you see. Anyway, they do let her out babysitting. 'N she's a good babysitter. Won't stand no nonsense. How about it?"

Annie thought about this proposal a little, then replied, "All right then. Let's give it a go. But no hanky-panky in front of the kids. And I meet Samantha half an hour before we go out."

"Fine. See you at seven o'clock then. Film starts at 8."

"Wait a minute. I haven't said which one I want yet."

"Betcha I know which film you want to see."

“How can you know? Especially since I haven’t chosen yet.”

“Well, make your mind up.”

“All right. Let’s go for the 3-D fantasy.”

”I knew it. You loved Avatar, so I thought you’d go for this one.”

“All right, know-all. See you at 7 o’clock.”

Once she had put the phone down, Annie began to have misgivings about having Samantha and boyfriend babysit. “If her parents don’t want them to be alone together, is it right for me to let her go behind their back?” she thought. Then immediately, she dismissed it. “I can’t change things now, and I know what I was like at that age, so I can’t really object, can I?”

However, there was still a lingering nagging doubt in her mind, but she had to get on with the rest of the day.

The children were happy in front of the television for a while, so she did the washing-up. No sooner had she finished and put the kettle on than her mother came in. “I see you’re making a brew,” she said. “Make us one as well will you, there’s a love. Oh, and a couple of biccies would do nicely, as well.”

She went into the lounge and sat down in the armchair, putting her feet up on the coffee table.

Annie marvelled at her mother’s timing. It was uncanny, almost as if she was watching on a hidden camera. She made the tea, and asked the children if they wanted a drink. Both opted for cola, and they happily accepted the offer of chocolate biscuits.

The evening out with Steve couldn’t be said to be an unqualified success. They got good seats, and Steve bought some popcorn, which they finished before the film proper started. Then, almost as soon as the film began, Steve put his hand on Annie’s breast and started undoing her blouse buttons. She gently stopped him, but it wasn’t long before his hand started wandering again. More firmly this time, she removed it again. When it happened a third time, she pinched his wrist as she took his hand away. Steve’s response was, “You’re spoiling the fun. What’s the point of going to the flicks if you can’t have a cuddle and a feel in the dark?” After that, Annie turned her body away, presenting her shoulder to Steve. However, she relented later, after the interval, and Steve’s hand spent most of the second half under Annie’s clothes.

When they got back to Annie’s home, Steve expected to be invited in, but Annie made the excuse that the bright screen and the 3-D glasses had given her a headache, so she left him on the doorstep.

To Annie’s relief, nothing seemed untoward in the house. Samantha and her boyfriend were cuddled up together watching a film on the television, but they were both fully clothed. She thanked them and got out her purse to pay them, but Samantha said that they didn’t want anything. It was enough to have somewhere warm to be together.

Monday proved a difficult day for Annie. First, Brett didn't want to go to school, but she managed to persuade him. Then Alicia spilt her tea down her dress, and had to change. That put her in a really sullen mood, because the dress she now had to put on was faded and a bit too small for her. "I'm not going to school today if I have to wear that old thing," she shouted. Annie tried to persuade her, but it was no good. In the end, Annie sponged down the dress Alicia had spilt tea on. and then ironed it dry. Next, Alicia's sandwiches weren't right. "There's too much ketchup," she said. Scraping some off wasn't good enough, so Annie had to make some more, and put the other ones in the fridge for her own lunch.

Annie had only just got back from taking the children to school, and she was in the act of filling the kettle, when her mum came in. "Oh, ta. You're putting the kettle on to make us some tea, I see, " she said, and sat down on the couch. "Oh, and don't forget the biscuits," she added.

Annie bit back the remarks she wanted to make to her mother, and got on with making the tea. "There's only digestives," she said. "I haven't been shopping yet."

"Well, I suppose beggars can't be choosers," came the reply. "I dare say I could eat a couple of them."

They had just finished their tea when the telephone rang. Annie picked up the receiver.

"Who is it?" asked her mum.

It was the school secretary. "Is that Ms. Spencer?"

"Yes, it is."

"I wonder if you could come down to the school. There's been a bit of an incident involving your son, Brett."

"What do you mean? What's he done?"

"I'd rather not go into explanations on the telephone, but your son isn't in trouble, but he is upset and we think you should come to the school. How soon can you be here?"

Annie replied that she could be there in ten minutes. Her mother, on hearing the news, insisted on coming with her, so they went together. When they arrived at the school, the secretary showed them into the deputy head's room, which was quite small and cluttered. Annie was surprised not to see her son there as well as the deputy head, Mr. Marston.

"Where's my son? What's happened to him?" she blurted out.

Mr. Marston replied, "Please keep calm. Everything's under control. We've had a little incident between your son and another boy in the school. It appears that your son Brett assaulted this other boy, who then retaliated, giving your son a bloody nose. Now.."

Annie stood up and interrupted the deputy head. "Don't you know what's going on in your own school? This boy has been tormenting my son for weeks. He's been teased and punched and kicked and you've done nothing. He hasn't wanted to go to school and now, when for the first time he tries to defend himself, you say he started it. You'd better sort yourselves out. You've no bloody idea about children if you think my son started something."

“Please calm down, Ms. Spencer. You’re making a lot of assumptions here. Firstly, you don’t know the name of the boy your son attacked..”

Annie cut him off again. Oh, don’t I? Is his name Leroy by some chance? And has he got a group of friends and isn’t my son left out?”

“I really don’t know these things. I don’t teach year two. However, you are correct as to the name of the boy your son hit. I will investigate these allegations that you have made.”

“And you’d better do it properly, or I’ll be calling Social Services to tell them your school isn’t protecting my son from a bully.”

“That’s a very serious charge to make. If I were you, I would think very hard before making such a complaint.”

“Well, I won’t need to if you do things properly and stop seeing bloody Leroy as the victim and understand he’d been making my Brett’s life hell. Now, I want to see my son, and I’m going to keep him off school until I hear that you’ve done something about that bully and his gang. Where is my Brett?”

“I don’t advise you to keep your son off school. You have a legal obligation to see that he attends. I assure you that we will make a full investigation of the circumstances behind this incident. Now, your son is with the school nurse. I’ll take you there.”

Annie was only partly mollified by the deputy head’s assurances, as she followed him along the corridor to the sick room. She was shocked when she saw Brett. His nose was swollen up, and he had blood-soaked cotton wool protruding from his nostrils. His school shirt was also rather bloodstained. On seeing his mother, Brett ran up to her, and Annie took him in her arms. The deputy head coughed and made his excuses. Once he had gone, the nurse spoke sympathetically to Annie. “That Leroy is a nasty piece of work. He’s a bully, and his friends are bullies too. Brett needs to keep out of his way. Look, I have an idea. If Brett needs somewhere to go in the lunchtime, he can come here. I’ve got to be on duty at that time, so it’s no skin off my nose. What do you think?”

“Thanks for the offer. When Brett’s recovered, I’ll ask him what *he* thinks about the idea. Now, can I take him home now?”

“I think the bleeding’s stopped. Just let me clean his face up as much as possible, then you can have him. “

Annie cuddled Brett close by her side all the way home. She was still steaming about the deputy head’s attitude, but her main thought was to get the bullying stopped.

She kept Brett off school on Tuesday, and decided to ask for an interview with his class teacher when she took him in on Wednesday. The school secretary told her that they don’t, as a rule, make appointments with teachers at the parent’s request, but she would see what could be done. “Of course, any meeting has to first be approved by the head teacher or her deputy,” she finished.

Two days later, Annie had a phone call. “This is the secretary from Leighton Primary School. Am I speaking to the mother of Brett Spencer?”

Annie replied that she was. The secretary continued. “I’m happy to tell you that your request for an interview with Ms. Evans has been approved. If you could call at the school

office at the end of school on Monday, we will make sure that your children are looked after while you talk with your son Brett's teacher."

Annie thanked the secretary, and started planning what she wanted to say to Ms. Evans. Her thoughts were interrupted by her mother coming in. "Are you there?" she called. "Put the kettle on will you? I'm parched."

Annie, as usual, did what her mother asked, but she resented the assumption that she would always pander to her mother's wishes. Annie waited for her mother to ask after Brett, but she didn't. She was too full of her own world. Annie wasn't really listening, and she was startled by her mother raising her voice. "What's there to eat today? I asked you. Didn't you hear me?"

Annie lost her temper. "Mum! I'm trying to raise two children here. Brett has only just gone back to school after having his nose blooded. I'm trying to think of what to say to his teacher, so I'm not interested in planning what to eat. You cook something, if you want," she replied in anger.

"I won't let you speak to me like that. D'you think I had an easy time raising you after your no-good drunken father walked out one Monday morning and never came back? Now you're grown up it's your turn to look after me - or it should be, you ungrateful girl!"

With that, she turned round and went out, slamming the door behind her. Annie sat down, put her head in her hands and began to cry. She felt like she used to do when she was a teenager, and her mum had expected her to do just about all the housework, while she went out with boyfriends.

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At the end of school on Monday, Annie went to the secretary's office and asked to see Ms. Evans. The secretary asked her to wait a moment while she checked the arrangements, then she escorted her to Brett's classroom. Ms. Evans got up from her chair when she saw Annie, and extended her hand, to shake Annie's. "Good afternoon," she said, in a cultured voice. "I'm Samantha Evans, Brett's class teacher. Please sit down. Would you like some coffee or tea?"

"Tea sounds good," Annie replied as she sat down. "My throat's gone dry just thinking about this meeting."

They exchanged pleasantries while the secretary brought a tray with two cups of tea and a plate of biscuits. As Annie began to drink her tea, Samantha started to talk. "I'm sorry for the trouble about Brett. I'm not only his teacher, but Leroy's as well, so I know both lads. I'm not going to say a lot about Leroy, but he has some problems at home, which affect his behaviour. Your Brett, on the other hand, is a very sensitive young man. Don't get me wrong about this, but he behaves more like a girl than a boy sometimes. Maybe that's because he hasn't had a father at home as a role-model. Brett gets emotional easily, which makes him an easy target for anyone who wants to tease or taunt him."

"I know that," replied Annie, "but there's not a lot I can do for him. His own father didn't want to know about it when I got pregnant, so there's never been a man in the house for him. And I've not lived with any man since he was born, 'cos I haven't found a man I can trust with my kids. So what can I do? I'm stuffed both ways."

"Well, I think that we may be able to offer you some help there."

"Oh, yeah! How?" was Annie's cynical reply.

"Well, we have some volunteer classroom assistants in this school, and some have also offered to give time to the children after school as well, especially in cases like yours, where there is only one parent at home."

"What do they get out of this?"

"Nothing, except a sense of satisfaction that they're helping people."

"Nobody does something for nothing round here."

"Well, I know some of these people and I think their motives are good. I'm sure that your Brett will benefit, if you give us permission to link with one of our volunteer assistants."

"What would they do? I don't want any perverts."

"I'm sure they aren't perverts. They have to be properly checked out before they come into school. Anyway, there's a big advantage for Brett, that some of these people are men, who can help him in things like playing football and building up his confidence."

"Well, I s'ppose I've got nothing to lose. What does Brett think?"

"I haven't talked to him about the out of school side of things, but I have introduced him to one of our volunteers, who has already started working with him in class, and he seems really happy about this."

"Why wasn't this done before? Are these volunteers new or something?"

"No, but really the incident with Leroy was needed to give me the opportunity to set something up for Brett. Until then, there was nothing on his record to show he had any special needs. Now, we can begin doing something to help, with your co-operation."

Annie was still a bit wary about the help, but she knew she needed something to change in her life, so she agreed to meet the man who was working with Brett at the end of school the following Monday.

As she left, having collected her children, she found her mood lightening. For the first time since Brett was born, she felt that she wasn't the only one taking an interest in him.

The week that followed was no easier than the last few had been, but something had changed inside Annie. For the first time in a long while, she felt that somebody else was interested in her and her children. She even found her mother less irritating, and began to see that she hadn't exactly had an easy time of it when *she* was a mum, abandoned by her husband, having to bring her kids up on their own. "I expect she feels she has a right to let me do some of the looking after her, as pay-back for those years when she had no time for herself," she thought. "I'll try and be nicer to her."

However, the first time she tried this, her mother said, "Why are you being so friendly. Are you trying to get summat out of me. If so, hard luck. I'm broke."

No matter how hard Annie tried to persuade her mother that she had no ulterior motive, she didn't believe her. That left Annie feeling upset and disappointed, so she muttered to herself, "That's the last time I try and be nice to *her*."

The next day, she decided she needed to get out of the house again, so she went into town, and found her steps taking her to the caravan in the square.

When she got there, she had to wait while Mick served three or four customers. When he saw her, he smiled. "Hello, Annie. Nice to see you again. What'll it be? D'you want tea, or maybe some hot chocolate. Its good for you if you're feeling low."

Annie decided to go for the hot chocolate, and she stood there sipping it while Mick served more customers. When there was a lull, she said, "You're right, Mick. I do feel better. Now. I suppose I'd better be off home."

"Look, why don't you come into the caravan for a few minutes. It's time I had my break. I'll put the 'Back in 10 minutes' sign up and you can come in out of the cold."

Annie took Mick up on his offer, and once she was inside, she found herself opening up to Mick again. He was a sympathetic listener. "Well, it seems like you're starting to get some help," he said. "I said that praying would be useful, didn't I?"

Annie then told him about the rain falling on her washing after she had prayed, and how she had got annoyed with God. "But you might be right. At least Brett's class teacher is trying to help him."

Mick's break was all too short for Annie, but she went home in a lighter mood, and managed to stop Brett and Alicia fighting about what to watch on TV without losing her temper.

Steve didn't invite her to the cinema that weekend; in fact, he didn't even bother to phone her. "Has he found someone else?" she thought. "Someone who will take her knickers off for him? Well, if he has, then good riddance to bad rubbish."

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Annie went to Brett's school on Monday afternoon, feeling quite optimistic. Her mother even came with her, so she could take Alicia home. The secretary again escorted her to Ms. Evan's classroom, where she found Brett, his teacher and a man who looked about 40 years old, wearing a faded blue sweater and jeans - not the image she had conjured up for herself!

"Ms Spencer, this is Mr Wharton. He's the volunteer I told you about, who's working with your son Brett," said Ms. Evans.

"You can call me Bob," said the man. Now, what would you like to know?"

"What d'you want to tell me? What makes you think you can help my Brett?"

"Well, let me tell you a bit about myself first. I'm an ex-army officer. I served in Iraq, where I got wounded, so I was invalided out. My left leg is a bit dickey now, but I get around pretty well. I've got a stick, but I rarely need it. Anyway, I've got my army pension, so I don't have to work, but I do work part-time as a security consultant. I feel grateful to God

that I survived, so I want to help other people, especially boys and young men. I saw so many young people when I was in the army who had had problems as children and joined up to escape. So I want to help others like them develop and find ways to overcome their problems. I'm married, and my wife supports me in my aims. Like me, she's glad I came back from Iraq more or less in one piece. My wife is an accountant, so you can see we're pretty well off. I've got two sons who are both in secondary school, and they both say there's no way they will join up!"

"So what have you seen about my Brett, and how d'you think you can help?"

"Well, how I can help depends on Brett - and you. What the problem is I think you know already. He's physically uncoordinated and he's also not very strong. He doesn't make friends easily, partly because of his lack of self-confidence. He also reacts very quickly to teasing and negative remarks - this increases the fun for anyone who wants to tease or bully him."

"You make my son sound like a right wimp. He's not like that at home. He doesn't let his sister get the better of him, and he doesn't start bawling when I tell him off. So what's different at school?"

"It's a different ball-game. He's safe with you and your daughter, but he probably doesn't feel protected at school. Once things start going downhill, everything looks worse."

"You're sounding like a psychiatrist. I thought you were an army man."

"When you're in the army you learn to read people. I had to know how everyone in my patrol was likely to act in any situation. You are part of a team, and a team is only as strong as its weakest member. And we learned how to support one another. That's how I think I can help Brett."

"Okay, so what are you going to do?"

"Well, there's two things that need addressing. Firstly, there's his co-ordination. We can make progress on that with various exercises - throwing and catching, running and jumping, exercises to help him be aware of his body. Also practice in motor control and hand-eye co-ordination."

"Wait, you've lost me. What do you mean?"

"I want to help Brett to be able to kick a ball straight and run properly. There are some exercises which will help him - but we won't see results straight away, and Brett may not want to keep on with them when he finds them difficult."

"So there's no quick fix, right?"

"Right. But once he's physically stronger and fitter, his confidence will grow. The other part of what I want to do is to help him not to over-react to teasing et cetera. I'm not quite sure of the best way to do that - partly, the problem will go away when he feels better about himself."

"Now, I've just got one more question for you. Are you in this for the long haul, or is it just a few weeks trial, and if it doesn't work, then goodbye? Brett's already had too many men in his life like that. He needs someone he can trust to stick around. Well?..."

“I don’t give up easily. I promise you that I’ll keep on going. I saw a lot of problems when I was in Iraq, and I was one of those who saw early on that we needed to rebuild relations and trust among the Iraqis, and not just blast the fighters and bombers to smithereens. I’d still be there now but for this leg. I saw a lot of children who had lost their childhood, and that was one reason for wanting to help in a school.”

“Well, I’m afraid I need to be off now, “ said Ms. Evans. “Have you made a decision?”

“All right. Let’s give it a go,” said Annie.

“Just one more thing,” added Bob. “If this is going to work, I’d like to spend time with Brett out of school as well. Is that alright?”

Annie thought a little, before replying “Let’s see how it goes for a week or two, then we’ll decide about that? All right?”

“Okay.”

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The same week, on Wednesday, Alicia was in trouble. It happened when the class was outside in a games lesson. They were playing football, when one of the other team accidentally kicked Alicia in the leg. She lost her temper, shouted at the teacher, then gave the offender a really hard kick, just below the knee, which sent the girl screaming and shouting as well. By the time things were calm, the girl’s leg had swollen alarmingly, so an ambulance was called, and she was taken to hospital.

The first Annie knew about it was when she received a phone call from the secretary, asking her to come into school - right away, if possible. When she asked what it was about, all the secretary said was that it was concerning her daughter, and that she wasn’t hurt, but there was a problem. Annie’s mother was there at the time, so as soon as Annie had put the phone down, she wanted to know what was happening, and although Annie didn’t want her to come with her to the school, she didn’t have any choice. Her mother just put her coat on and came, in spite of her protests. “I’m her grandmother, and you can’t stop me. I’ve a right to know what’s going on as well,” she said.

When they arrived at the school, the secretary this time ushered Annie and her mother into the head teacher’s office.

He offered them both a seat, and then began to speak. “I’m afraid there has been a rather serious incident with your daughter, which means that we will have to take some disciplinary action. A girl has had to be taken to hospital because of your daughter Alicia’s actions. To make matters worse, she has refused to apologise for her actions.”

“What’s she done?” replied Annie. “And where is she now?”

The head teacher outlined the incident, and told Annie that Alicia was at that moment with the deputy head, who was trying to show her how wrong her action had been.

“So, someone kicks my Alicia, and when she reacts, she’s punished, but not the girl who kicked her. The other day, it was my Brett in trouble for hitting Leroy, who had been bullying her. Looks like you’ve got it in for my kids.”

“Ms. Spencer, please don’t misunderstand me. The kick your daughter received was accidental. When children of this age play football, they don’t always manage to kick the ball. Your daughter was not injured, but the kick she gave in reply was vicious, and *has* caused injury.”

“How do you know Alicia meant to hurt the girl?”

“Well, she admitted this, in fact. Now, we still don’t know what damage has been done to the other girl. We hope it’s not serious. However, there is another problem.”

“What’s that?”

“Your daughter is quite unrepentant of her actions. She claims the other girl kicked her, so she had a right to kick her back.”

“Well, isn’t that what everyone says? It’s the law of the playground. It was like that when I was a kid, and it still is.”

“That may be true, but in school, we try and teach our pupils consideration for each other. The ‘law of the playground’ isn’t a good one, as it just leads to more hurt. Anyway, this didn’t happen in the playground. It happened in a lesson, and it’s not up to your daughter to take the law into her own hands. The teacher is in charge, and in a football game, you have to learn that the referee has the final say - even when you think you have been fouled.

“Now, I have decided to exclude Alicia for two days because of this incident, and I hope that you will be able to persuade her to say sorry to the other girl, so that we can see regret for her action.”

“You mean, you’re kicking Alicia out of school for two days over this?” butted in Annie’s mother. “It was just a kick in a football game, for God’s sake. The other girl must be a right wimp.”

Annie was now annoyed with her mother as well as the head, so she got up, said ‘Come on, we’re not staying here,’ to her mother, and walked out of the head teacher’s office, slamming the door behind her. She then went to the deputy head’s room, and walked in without knocking.

“Come on, Alicia, we’re out of here,” she said, taking her daughter by the hand, before the deputy head could react. Alicia paused momentarily to pick up her bag, then they were on their way.

Once they got home, Annie ordered Alicia up to her room, and didn’t let her answer back.

“I’m coming up in a few minutes, and you’d better not give me any lip!” she said.

Annie then put the kettle on. “I’m going to mash some tea. I think we both need a cuppa. C’n you find us some biscuits?” she said to her mother.

A quarter of an hour later, when Annie felt a bit calmer, she went up to have a talk with her daughter.

The first thing Alicia said was, “She kicked me first!”

“None of that. You lost your cool and kicked out. You just wanted to hurt her. Where’s the bruise from her kick?”

Alicia rolled her sock down and showed her mum a small red patch just above the ankle.

“Mm,” said Annie. “It doesn’t look much. Does it hurt now?”

Alicia shook her head.

“And for that you put someone in hospital! You’re dangerous, girl. You’ve got to learn to keep your temper. Haven’t I told you to count to ten before thinking about hitting back? Now, what am I going to do to you? Should I take your mobile away, or stop television for a week, or what?”

“Dunno.”

“You need to say sorry, and if you don’t, I will take your phone away and maybe other things as well. So you just think on it, girl. You’ve got to say sorry to me, your teacher and the girl - and you’d better mean it as well. And I don’t want this kind of thing happening again.”

Annie turned round and walked out, shutting the door behind her, without giving her daughter the chance to reply.

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The next two days, Alicia was somewhat subdued. She said sorry to her mother, and wrote apologies to the girl she’d kicked as well as to the head teacher. Annie took them in to school, and enquired about the girl. “She’ll be off school for a couple of days, but nothing’s broken. It’ll be a big bruise when it comes out,” said the secretary.

Annie was relieved at that response, and she went home in a better frame of mind. Her mother soon changed that, however. “You’ve been too soft on that girl. Just because you feel guilty about getting pregnant from a one-night’s stand with Brett’s dad and then puking up every morning, so Alicia didn’t get enough attention from you, you’ve let her have too much of her own way. You’ve got to let her know who’s boss.”

“Oh, yeah, just like you did with me - by making me go to bed hungry and taking away my toys, and all those other cruel things you did. I vowed I wouldn’t be like that - and I won’t. So if I’m too soft, I’ll just have to lump it, won’t I?”

After that row, Annie’s mum didn’t come over on Friday, so Annie spent some time with her daughter. On Saturday, Annie decided to try and do something with both her children, but the weather seemed to be against her. It was stormy, which meant that doing anything out of doors was impossible, and going anywhere indoors would involve getting wet. When she talked to her children, they weren’t at all keen on going out, so that was that.

Annie was feeling pretty gloomy, when Steve turned up. She was, for once, really happy to see him, and so were Brett and Alicia. As she watched them interacting, Annie thought to herself, “You know, Steve is good with the kids. Maybe I should spend more time with him.”

Steve stayed for tea. Annie’s mum was still annoyed with her, so she didn’t set foot in the house all day. After tea, Steve suggested to Annie that they could go out to the cinema together, but Annie pointed out to him both the lack of a babysitter and the rain, which was

now stronger. So Steve offered to go down to the nearest shop and pick up some beer - or a bottle of wine - so they could relax in front of the T.V.

Annie settled for beer, and Steve got completely soaked on his dash to the shop. "You should have gone in your car," Annie said, when he returned.

"I know that *now*," Steve replied, "but I thought it wasn't worth taking the car such a short way."

Steve's clothes were so wet that Annie made him strip off down to his underwear, and she found him a man's shirt which she sometimes wore, a pair of shorts which one of her boyfriends had left behind, and offered him the choice of her dressing gown or her winter coat. Steve chose the coat. "It looks less like women's clothes," he said.

Annie then gave Steve's clothes a spin in the washing machine and put them near a radiator to dry. They all sat in front of the T.V. The children had cola, while Steve and Annie downed beer.

After the children had gone to bed, Annie had to make a decision. Should she offer Steve to stay the night, or should she make him go home in damp clothes?

She felt his clothes. They were still too wet to be comfortable to wear, so she said, "You can stay the night, if you want."

"I was hoping you'd say that," Steve replied. "Ta!"

A seed of suspicion entered Annie's mind at that point. She began to wonder if getting wet was a planned move on Steve's part. But she had some more beer, and forgot her suspicions.

Steve and Annie spent the night together, and fortunately they weren't interrupted by either of the children, but Annie made him leave before the children got up. His clothes were now dry, and the storm had passed, "So there's no excuse to stay here any longer," Annie said. That day, Annie's mother came over for Sunday lunch, and she behaved like everything was normal. "It's lovely to see me grandchildren," she announced, as she came in. Then she added, "What's for lunch?"

"Nothing special," her daughter replied. "I'm doing toad-in-the-hole with mushy peas.

"And what's for afters?"

"There's an apple pie from the frozen food shop, and I'm doing some custard. I expect there'll be enough for you, too."

Without another word, Annie's mum went into the lounge and sat between Alicia and Brett on the couch. They were watching cartoons, and they didn't take their eyes off the box while their grandmother settled herself comfortably.

Annie continued in the kitchen, washing up the breakfast dishes, fuming to herself. "She ignores us for a few days, and then she comes waltzing in to have Sunday lunch. She always does just what suits her," Annie thought.

When she called the children to help her lay the table, it was her mother who objected.

"Oh, leave them be. It's not a lot of work for you to do, is it?"

"I'll crown her one of these days," Annie muttered under her breath.

Once dinner was over, Annie's mother announced, "Well, I'm off to the pub now." She gave each of her grandchildren a hug, and left.

On Monday, when she went to collect the children from school, Brett told her, "Ms. Evans would like to have a little chat with you. Can you go to her classroom?"

Alicia wasn't happy to have to wait, but she had no choice in the matter. Annie was eager to hear what Brett's teacher had to say.

When they got to the classroom, Mr. Wharton was there as well as Ms. Evans.

"So, how's it going?" Annie asked.

"Well, it's early days yet, but we've made a good start, I think. Haven't we, Brett?" Bob Wharton replied.

Brett seemed a bit overwhelmed, and he just answered, "I s'ppose so."

"We've been working on some body exercises this last week," said Bob, "and I can definitely say there's been some improvement. I've also had a chance to chat with Brett, and he's told me a lot about the kind of things that go on in the school at break times. I promised I wouldn't tell his teacher, and Ms. Evans knows that I have to keep some things confidential. This week, we're going to start some co-ordination exercises, with running, throwing and catching."

"That sounds good," Annie replied. "How often d'you want me to come to tell me how Brett's getting on?"

"I'm not sure. What I'd really like to do is to see Brett on Saturdays and take him to a gym run by a friend of mine - actually, my ex-C.O. Then you could have weekly reports and maybe even come over and see what's going on. How about it?"

"It seems a bit too early for that to me. Brett, what d'you think?"

Brett thought a bit before replying, "I'd kind of like to try. It's diff'rent and kind of fun and scary at the same time."

"O.K., then. We'll try it next Saturday. How do we get there?" Annie said.

"Well, I thought I'd come and pick Brett up from home, if you don't mind," Bob replied.

"Mm. I'd like to come with Brett, some time, but maybe not for the first week or two. Come and have a cup of tea when you drop him off."

Having sorted out the arrangements, Bob offered to take Annie and her children home.

"That way, I'll learn how to get there," he said.

Alicia demanded to sit in the front, and be the one to give directions, and Annie gave in to her. As they parted at Annie's front door, she suddenly remembered that they hadn't set a time. "When are you coming on Saturday?" she called.

"Ten o'clock!" was the reply.

On Wednesday, after a morning spent changing the beds and washing sheets, Annie felt the need of a change of air, so she went into town. After wandering round the shops for a while, and picking up a couple of things at the Pound Shop, she found her legs taking her,

automatically it seemed, to the square and Mick's caravan. When she got there, Mick was busy serving customers, so she bought a coffee and drank it slowly while she waited for Mick to have a few moments for a chat. She'd just about finished it when the stream of customers dried up, and Mick asked her, "Would you like a refill - on the house?"

Annie agreed to that. As Mick handed her the refill, he asked, "What gives? You look like you want to talk."

Mick was a good listener, and Annie found herself telling him about the recent events, apart from Steve spending the night. "It looks like you're making progress with one kid and going backwards with the other one," he commented.

"Yeah, I know - and I wish me mum was more helpful. She seems to want payback for having done things for me when I was a kid, and now I owe her something," Annie replied.

"What do you think will help Alicia?" Mick asked.

"I think she wants a dad around. She's very friendly with Steve - sometimes. And she talks about how the dads of other children in her class take them out to places. Of course, she's not the only single-parent kid, but she's jealous of those with both a mum and dad."

"Well, there's not too much you can do about that problem at the moment. I don't think anyone can properly be both mum and dad to their children, but you don't want the wrong person coming and making things worse."

"Don't I know that! I've made too many bad choices - an' I blame myself for messing up me kids. But I just can't find the right man. I know Steve's not the right person, but he's the only choice at the moment."

"Well, keep on looking and doing your best for your children. And I'll pray for you, that you find the right man."

Annie was a bit surprised by the last statement, and she didn't know how to respond to it. So she just said, "Thanks. I'll see you again soon. Tara!"

As she walked across the square, she looked back and thought to herself, "Now why didn't I find a nice understanding man like that before?"

On Saturday morning, Brett was up early - unusually for him. He got his own breakfast - a bowl of cereal, and then waited for his mother and sister to stir. When the doorbell rang, neither of them had yet appeared, so Brett answered it. As he opened the door to let Bob Wharton in, his mother came to the top of the stairs in her nightie. When Annie saw Bob, she immediately retreated back to her bedroom, calling, "Give me a minute to get some clothes on."

Brett offered Bob a chair, and asked him, "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"No, thanks," was the reply. "I haven't got time. We need to be on our way very soon."

Annie came down the stairs, this time properly dressed, although she hadn't put a comb through her hair. "Excuse me not being up - but we're used to a lie-in on Saturdays, and I didn't set the alarm clock," she said.

"No problem," Bob replied. "Brett's up and ready to go out, so if you're happy, we'll get going."

Annie had no objections, so Brett and Bob went out. Just as they were about to drive off, Annie ran up to the car. "When will you be back?" she asked.

"Oh, about half past twelve," came the reply, as Bob put the car into gear. "Bye!"

Annie spent the morning doing housework, while her daughter watched cartoons by herself. She couldn't help her thoughts from drifting on to how Brett was getting on. She dreaded the thought that some of the other children would laugh at or tease him. So, when it was time for her son to arrive home, she got everything ready for a cup of tea, and made sure she hid the ironing out of sight.

The front doorbell rang, and she was about to go and answer it when she heard her mother calling, "It's only me. Thought I'd pop round and see how things are. Is the kettle on?"

Annie frowned to herself, then called back, "It's already on, Mum, but you'll have to wait a tick. Brett's coming back soon, and I want to talk to Mr. Wharton, to find out how things went."

"Who's Mr. Wharton? ... Oh, I get it. He's the ex-army bloke who thinks he can make an athlete out of Brett. Well, good luck to him, but our family have always been cack-handed."

"Mum, he's only trying to help Brett to feel more confident and to be less awkward. I think it's worth a try."

Just at that moment, the door bell rang again. Annie's mother was nearest, so she opened it, said hello to Brett, and invited Mr. Wharton in."

"Come in and sit on the settee, Mr. Wharton, please," added Annie.

"Call me Bob, would you. I find using my surname too formal. It reminds me too much of my army days, when first I was 89356 Private Wharton, then Corporal, and so on. So I got rather fed up of being referred to by my surname. Now, everyone calls me Bob, except for my Uncle Len who calls me 'Tanner'. He says I'm getting old so now I'm only worth half as much as I was when I was younger."

"Bob, what's a tanner?" Brett asked.

"It's old money. We used to have twenty shillings, or twenty bob to the pound, and sixpence, or a 'tanner' was worth half a shilling. It's much simpler now with decimal money."

"Who'd like some tea?" broke in Annie. "Brett, go get the biscuits and pass them round, will you." She just stopped herself from saying, "And try not to drop any."

Both Bob and Annie's mother spoke at the same time. "Yes, please."

Annie put the kettle back on to make sure the tea would be piping hot, and Brett took the plate of biscuits round.

"Alicia, please put the T.V. off, now, will you. We've got visitors, said Annie.

"But mum..." began Alicia, then she thought better of 'making a scene' as she knew her mother would call it. She switched the set off then asked, "Can I have some tea as well?"

As everyone drank their tea, Annie asked Bob how things had gone that morning."

Bob outlined the exercises they had done, and said that they would gradually get harder, and that soon they would add in work with a tennis ball and a football.

“Did you enjoy it?” Annie asked Brett.

“Yeah. I liked the stretching exercises best, and I really want to have a go on the bike,” Brett answered.

“But you can’t ride,” said his mum.

“This is an exercise bike,” Bob explained. “It’s good for building muscles, and will help him when he does learn to ride one properly.”

A few minutes later, Bob said that he had to go, and left.

The rest of the day went much as usual, with the children sometimes happily occupied, sometimes squabbling, usually over what to watch on the television.

At about half past nine in the evening, the doorbell rang. “Who can it be at this time of night?” Annie asked herself. “Maybe something’s happened to Mum!”

When she opened the front door, she found Steve standing there. “What are you doing here?” she demanded.

“It’s Saturday night, and I’m coming to carry on what we started last Saturday,” Steve said.

Annie was so astonished that she let Steve come in, and shut the door behind him. Then Steve gave her a box of chocolates he’d been hiding behind his back, and she felt somewhat better, but still confused. Did she really want to sleep with Steve again that night, and was she ready for what it might lead to?

They snuggled together on the couch, and watched a film on the television. By then, Annie was feeling relaxed, having had a couple of cans of beer, and eaten a number of the chocolates, so when Steve suggested they go to bed, she didn’t demur.

-10-

The next week was half-term. Annie didn’t like half-term holidays, because they disrupted routine and meant she had the kids around her all the time; more chances of arguments and complaints and getting on each others’ nerves - especially in the autumn, when the weather was getting colder and they didn’t want to be outside as much.

Unfortunately, the weather seemed to be conspiring against her, as on the first Saturday and Sunday it rained hard, and doing anything outdoors was impossible. Steve didn’t even turn up on Saturday evening, but her mother did arrive on Sunday morning, in a rather grumpy mood. Nothing Ann did was right, and the children were squabbling over which cartoons to watch, when Ann just lost it. She marched over to the television, switched it off and for good measure unplugged it, ordered Brett and Alicia upstairs, and finally turned to her mother and said, “If you can’t do anything helpful, then it would be best if you were grumpy in your own house!”

Her mother looked astonished, then, unexpectedly, she started crying. Annie was at a loss as to how to deal with this situation. She didn’t remember ever seeing her mother cry before. She went to the kitchen, filled the kettle and put it on. “Let’s have a comforting cup of tea,” she said, but her mother made no response.

“Come on, Mum, there’s no need to be upset. I didn’t mean you should go home. I know you like coming round here, and the kids like you here.”

On hearing that, her mother stopped crying and replied, “I know that, but do *you* want me around? I feel like you hate the fact that I’m always here. That you’d rather I was dead.”

“No, Mum, you know that’s not true. It’s just that I wish you’d be a bit less wrapped up in yourself and help me a bit with the kids.”

“But that’s just the problem. I feel such a failure with you and your brothers. I never hear from them. One’s in jail and the other’s in Canada, and they both hate me. I’ve got no-one but you and Alicia and Brett.”

Annie went over to her mother and, somewhat awkwardly, put her arms round her, something she had rarely done before. Her mother put her head on Annie’s shoulder and started crying again. When she calmed down, she said, “I haven’t tried to do much to help you cos’ you didn’t seem to want it, but I can’t keep away from you and my grandkids. If you want, I’ll start doing more to help.”

“Thanks, Mum, I appreciate that - but try not to be bossy, because I can’t stand that.”

After that, Annie and her mother prepared dinner together. When Alicia and Brett were allowed downstairs again, they both said sorry without being told. The rest of the day passed much more pleasantly.

However, the weather stayed cold and wet for the rest of the half-term, and the Halloween celebrations in the neighbourhood were muted for that reason. Brett didn’t like going out ‘trick or treat’ing anyway, but Alicia, who usually enjoyed the fun, went out with one of her friends, accompanied by her friend’s dad, but only stayed out for about an hour, and came back cold and wet through. By the end of the week everyone was rather fractious, so Annie welcomed a phone call from Bob on Friday evening, to tell her that he’d be round in the morning to take Brett to the gym.

When Annie told her son that he was going to the gym in the morning, he reacted enthusiastically, “Great, I need something else to do.”

Bob came as promised, and afterwards Annie invited him in. While the gym session had been going on, she had been to the shops and bought some chocolate biscuits, as a treat. Over drinks, she learned that Brett was gaining in confidence on the apparatus, and he was improving his co-ordination. “Still, there’s a long way to go,” warned Bob. “Will you be ready to come and watch soon? It’ll give Brett a chance to show you how he’s doing.”

Annie gave a non-committal reply to this, but later, as she was saying goodbye to Bob, she said, “If you think it’s all right, I’d like to come over to the gym for a few minutes next Saturday.”

Annie was feeling more cheerful about things the rest of the day, not least because the half-term break was nearly over. She had put the children to bed and settled down in front of the television, watching a Bruce Willis film, when the doorbell rang. She groaned inwardly, but put a smile on her face to welcome Steve. He breezed past her and said, “Put the kettle on, will you. I’m parched.”

Annie bristled at this attitude, but went into the kitchen and did as she had been asked. When she came back into the lounge, she saw that Steve had changed the channel, and now there was a game show on. "Hey, I was watching that film," she protested.

"It was an old one. It'll be on again," Steve replied. "Anyway, I want to watch this show."

Annie resigned herself to fitting in with Steve's choice, and cuddled up next to him. He started fondling her, but she told him she wasn't really in the mood. "I don't like being felt up when half your mind is on the half-naked bimbo helping the contestants," she told him. "Wait until we're in bed."

Steve grumbled at that, but he had no choice but to wait, since Annie got up and went into the kitchen. "I may as well wash the pots," she said to herself. "It'll save me time in the morning." Once the washing-up was done, she pottered around doing some tidying up.

After the game show, Steve came out into the kitchen. "Put the kettle on, luv, and lets have a cup of tea. There's a late-night vampire film on next, so we can watch it together."

Annie wasn't especially fond of vampire films, but she made some tea and they watched the film together. By half-way through, she was asleep with Steve's arm around her. When the film finished, Steve carried her to the bedroom, but she woke up enough to take herself to the bathroom.

Some time later, when they were getting intimate with each other, the bedroom door opened, and in walked Alicia. Neither Steve nor Annie noticed her until she jumped on the bed and tried to force them apart. "Get out of my Mum's bed," she screamed at Steve, trying to push him out. Now Steve was annoyed. He raised his hand and was about to hit Alicia when Annie grabbed it and said, "You won't hit my daughter.... and I think for everyone's sake that you should leave - now!"

"I'm not going anywhere. You just calm your brat down and we can carry on," was Steve's reply. Then he looked at Annie and saw just how annoyed she was with the situation, so he added, "All right, I'll take myself off, but don't expect me back round here in a hurry."

With that, he grabbed his clothes, remembered to pick up his shoes at the last moment, and clattered downstairs. A short time later, Annie heard him slam the front door as he left. She didn't have any spare energy to think about Steve, as she was fully occupied with trying to calm Alicia down. "I don't want him in your bedroom. He's not my dad," said the distraught girl.

Annie held her daughter in her arms and stroked her hair. "I'm sorry, my pet," she said, soothingly. "I promise you it won't happen again." Inwardly, she was full of mixed emotions; love and concern for her daughter, contempt for Steve, who, she felt, had shown himself on his true colours that night, and sadness and despair for herself, as she now felt more alone again, and wondered if Alicia would ever accept another man in place of the father who had abandoned her.

Alicia spent the rest of the night in Annie's bed, and by the morning she was back to her normal self, but Annie didn't sleep well and throughout Sunday she had difficulty in concentrating on anything.

When it came to Monday morning, Annie wondered how her children would feel about going back to school, but she needn't have worried. Both of them seemed happy to go. Alicia said she was looking forward to seeing her classmates again, and Brett even said that he was looking forward to school.

The next two weeks went relatively well for Annie. Brett seemed to be really gaining in self-confidence, and he went to school willingly every day. There were no more incidents at school with Alicia, but she did seem to be less co-operative at home.

Bonfire night was a treat for everyone. Unlike the previous week, the weather for the November 5th celebrations was mild and dry. Annie took the children to the council fireworks display in the local park, and they ate hot dogs from the stand while watching the display. They went home happily, with linked arms

That week, Annie's mum found a new boyfriend, so she didn't come round to the house as often, which suited Annie. She chatted a couple of times with Mick at his caravan in the square, and he mentioned that she seemed more settled. Steve didn't come over, and Annie told herself that she was glad he'd gone. However, in spite of the positive developments, Annie found herself dreaming of better things to come. "I want something more in my life than kids and school and casual sex," she thought.

Annie had become quite friendly with Bob, and she now trusted him completely. The change in her son was remarkable, and she loved how thoughtful Bob was. She wondered if she was falling for him. She decided to invite Bob to stay over for the rest of the day on the following Saturday, telling him she wanted to cook dinner for him since he was doing so much for her family, so, on Friday evening, she telephoned him.

Annie was rather nervous as to what Bob's reaction would be, but she needn't have been. Bob cordially accepted her invitation, saying he'd love to come, but adding that he wouldn't be able to stay too long as he had some business later in the day.

On Saturday morning, Annie went through the house, madly cleaning everything and trying to make sure it looked as good as possible for her visitor, notwithstanding the fact that he'd already seen the house in its usual state of untidiness. She also took special care with the dinner - not that she was a cordon bleu chef, or anywhere near it. She made toad-in-the-hole, which she knew both children always enjoyed, and for a change, she also cooked some fresh vegetables to go with it. For pudding, she bought a ready-made trifle from the Co-op.

When Bob brought Brett home, Annie was in the middle of getting changed, so Alicia opened the door. She said to Bob, "Mum says she'll be down in a minute. She's just tarting herself up for you."

Bob didn't know what to reply to Alicia, but he thought that her remark was in bad taste. However, he refrained from comment, and waited for an opportunity to say something quietly to Annie.

Dinner went well, and the children were on their best behaviour. Annie knew that the situation wouldn't last, so, as soon as the trifle had been eaten, she told Alicia and Brett that they could get down and not bother with the dishes - she'd take care of them.

The children scooted off upstairs, leaving Annie and Bob to clear the table and do the washing up. Bob used this opportunity to talk about Alicia's use of vocabulary, to which Annie replied that she knew Alicia's language was sometimes inappropriate, but that what she really needed was better role-models. "I'll have a word with her later," she said.

Annie and Bob then talked about the progress Brett was making. "He's a lot more confident," Annie said, "but I'm just afraid that any little thing could set him back."

"I understand - this self-confidence is still rather fragile," Bob replied, "so we'll just have to pray it doesn't get a big knock before he's ready to cope."

"Why are you talking about praying?"

"Well, I believe in God and that He answers our prayers."

"What, even someone like me, who's slept around and done everything wrong?"

"Yes - and maybe if you start praying you'll get a nice surprise when God answers!"

"Nah! I'll believe it when I see it."

Bob had to go soon after that, but the conversation kept on playing in Annie's mind for the rest of the afternoon.

-11-

The following day, Annie's mum came round at breakfast time, which was, to say the least, unusual for her. Annie was already up, and so were the children, but they hadn't yet breakfasted. Brett and Alicia were watching cartoons on the television.

Annie was grateful for that when she saw her mother. Her face was tear-stained, with her make-up smudged, and she was dressed like she had gone out for the evening. She hadn't even taken her coat off.

She threw herself into her daughter's arms and started sobbing.

When she had calmed down somewhat, Annie asked her what was wrong. With a lot of interruptions for sobs and reaching for a tissue, the explanation came out.

Annie's mum and her boyfriend, Sean, had been out clubbing on Saturday evening, and they'd both had a lot to drink. Then Sean disappeared to the toilet and came back looking really full of himself. He grabbed Annie's mum by the arm and told her they were off now, and no arguing. He called a cab, and they went to his house. Once they got there, Sean started slapping Annie's mum around, calling her a bitch and a slapper. She tried to escape, but he caught her and started to tear her top off her. He manhandled her and dragged her to bed, where he battered her around some more and then raped her, all the time calling her names like 'bitch' and 'whore.' Once he had finished, he pushed her off the bed and went to sleep. Annie's mum waited a long while to make sure he was deeply asleep, then she went and got her coat, put it on and left the house. She was still disorientated from the drink and the violence, and she just stopped, sat on the ground and cried for a time, then she started walking. She wandered aimlessly for a time, but eventually sobered up enough to decide to go to Annie's house. She had waited outside until she was certain somebody was up, then she had come in.

Annie enfolded her mother in her arms, and helped her up the stairs. She ran a bath and helped her mum get in. She also made her a cup of tea with some brandy in. "I'm going to call the police, Mum," she said. "That man deserves locking up."

"No... no police," Mum said. "They'll only say it was consensual sex, won't they? And anyway, I don't want some police doctor coming round and asking me all kinds of questions and taking all kinds of photos. No. Leave it be."

Annie wasn't happy with that, but she didn't push things. In her bedroom, she set out some of her own clothes that she thought her mum would be able to wear, then went back downstairs to see to breakfast.

Over breakfast, Annie explained to Alicia and Brett that their grandmother wasn't feeling very well, and that she was sleeping upstairs, so they shouldn't disturb her. "Try not to get into an argument with each other or play any loud games," she warned them.

Mum slept until lunchtime, then she called out for Annie, who immediately went up to the bedroom to see what her mother wanted.

"I'm feeling a lot better now," she said. "I'm still sore, but I'll mend. Does anything show on my face?"

"Well, you've got a swollen lip and your eyes are puffy. We can make the eyes look better with make-up, and I can put some antiseptic cream on your lip; that will help. I've told the children that you're ill, so they won't be surprised you don't look your best - but you really should rest up."

"I can't lie about in bed. I've got to get on my feet."

"Well, suit yourself. Now, are you sure you don't want the police, or at least a doctor?"

"No, I don't want them," Annie's mum said, vehemently. "Like I said, the police won't do anything, like as not, and anyway, now I've had a bath there's no evidence for them. And a doctor won't be able to do anything for me that you can't. I know there's no bones broken, so..."

Annie gave in, and promised not to mention the police or a doctor again. Her mum, however, hadn't finished. "Now, about these clothes," she said. "I can't wear them. They just wouldn't look right on me. Why don't you go round to my place and bring me some of mine. I'll write you a list of what I need."

Annie barely kept her temper in check. "And who's going to mind the kids while I go waltzing over to your place? Father Christmas?"

"They'll be all right for half an hour or so. I'm sure I can deal with any problems."

"What, dressed in one of my frilly nighties? No. If I'm going anywhere I'd better take Brett or Alicia with me, to stop them getting into mischief."

A few minutes later, Annie and Alicia got their coats on and set out. Brett was still happily watching the TV, and his grandmother was busy in the bathroom, trying to mask her injuries as best as possible.

It didn't take long for Annie to find the clothes her mother wanted, but she still resented the disruption to her Sunday regime. Now Sunday lunch would be late. When she and Alicia arrived back home, she determined not to show her mood, and be as cheery as possible.

She delivered the clothes to her mum, and got the meal under way. Before long, her mother came downstairs, and she heard her children asking their gran what was wrong. She didn't hear the answer, but it must have satisfied the children, as, when she went into the lounge, they were all happily in a heap, watching the box.

The rest of the day passed peacefully enough, and Annie's mother insisted on going home in the evening. Annie was at the same time relieved not to have her mother under her feet any more, but also anxious about leaving her on her own. In the end, she made the journey with her daughter for the second time that day, and made sure that her mother locked the doors before returning home.

On Monday, she checked up on her mother- she was recovering well - and offered to do some shopping for her, but she declined.

On Tuesday, Annie felt the need of someone to talk to, so she found her footsteps taking her to the caravan in the square.

There weren't many customers around mid-morning, and Mick remarked that she was early.

"Yes, I need someone to talk to," she replied.

"Well, you'd better come into the caravan," returned Mick. "It's a bit cold out there today to spend a long time chatting."

Over a cup of coffee, to which Mick added some biscuits "on the house," Annie explained about what had happened to her mum. She told him all about her resentment, and that she felt guilty for feeling resentful, too.

Mick said he understood her well. "It's almost like you've got three kids, isn't it? - Alicia, Brett and your mum!" he said. "Try and remember that your mother's lonely, and she needs to find friendship. You're the only reliable 'friend' she has, but you can't easily get past the fact that you're her daughter, and in same way you still need a mother to cuddle you, but the kind of relationship you have with her doesn't allow that."

"Wow, you're quite the psychiatrist today, Mick!"

"Well, I've seen a lot of things in my time and had some bad knocks, as well as making a mess of a few relationships. You could say I've learned the hard way."

With that, Mick changed the subject, not wanting to let Annie probe into his past.

By the following weekend, Annie's mum was, physically at least, fully recovered from her ordeal of the week before. She returned to her own home on Wednesday, much to Annie's relief, but she was still round every day, and gave the children a lot more hugs than usual.

-12-

Brett came home on Saturday after his session in the gym with some news. The next weekend there would be a test to see if the gymnastic training had been successful. "Bob says I've come along really well, and I'm ready. We'll get a certificate if we pass!" Brett told his mum excitedly.

"And you're invited to come to the gym at the end of the session," added Bob. "We'll be giving out certificates to the successful children."

“Right. I’ll be there, and I’ll try and drag Alicia along as well,” Annie replied. “D’you want to come in for a cup of tea?”

Bob took a look at his watch, hesitated for a moment, then accepted Annie’s invitation. Brett went upstairs to play. While they were drinking, Annie took the opportunity to ask Bob if the certificates were a real proof of achievement, or did they just give them to everyone.

“I don’t believe in pulling the wool over people’s eyes,” Bob answered. “It doesn’t help in the long run to pretend that someone has achieved a goal, only for them to find out, sooner or later, that it was all so much window-dressing. The let-down when they discover they haven’t really done anything important can put their confidence back further than it was before they started the training. You can be sure that anyone who gets a certificate signed by me has really done something well.

Annie was glad to receive the assurance from Bob, because she hoped, for her own sake as well as her son’s, that he was making solid progress.

In the evening, Annie’s mother came round. “I can’t bear to be in my house alone tonight,” she said. “I keep thinking about what happened last Saturday.”

So, Annie made them both some tea, and she put out a plate of biscuits. They then settled down to watch the Saturday night film on the television. At that moment, Annie felt closer to her mother than she had in a long time.

Unfortunately, the feeling didn’t last very long. Once that had finished their tea, Annie’s mum got out her cigarettes and started to light one. Annie thought about objecting, but decided to let it pass, contenting herself with the comment, “You’re taking years off your life like that.” This comment earned the retort., “It’s my life, and anyway, I need them to help calm my nerves, so don’t start.”

Annie kept quiet, although she wanted to scream at her mother, “Can’t you ever put anyone else first?”

Sunday was a day which tried everybody’s tempers. It rained heavily all day, and the clouds were so low it looked like late evening all the time. Brett and Alicia quarrelled about everything; which television programme to watch, where to sit, what to have for breakfast, and so on. Annie’s mother didn’t help. She sometimes joined in the argument, wanting to change the channel at a moment when, for once, the children were happy.

Eventually, after tea, the rain relented, and Annie announced that she was going for a walk to clear her head. Nobody replied, so she got her coat on and went out. She walked quite aimlessly, and as she walked, she started thinking about her future.

“Right now, I’m stuck with two kids and a semi-dependent mother. I’ve got no boyfriend, and even when I had one, they were only really interested in sex. I need to find me someone who will truly love me and look after me. I think I’m in love with Bob, but he’s married. He’s the kind of man I need. He’s strong, helpful, good with kids, reliable, resourceful. How can I find a man like that?”

Annie’s thoughts made her feel more depressed, but just then, for the first time that day, the setting sun showed beneath the clouds and lit up the sky with a warm, red glow. “That’s the kind of glow I need in my life,” Annie said to herself.

The weather continued wet and gloomy for most of the week, until Friday, which dawned bright and sunny, although with a distinct nip in the air. Annie changed the sheets and washed them. She then hung them outside, as if daring the weather to change for the worse. Annie made a sudden decision - to go into town, do some window-shopping and have a chat with Mick in the square.

When she arrived in the square, there was a queue of customers at the caravan, so Annie waited until Mick had served everyone before approaching.

He welcomed her happily, and served her a coffee, but told her that there wasn't time to chat just at the moment. "For some reason, I always get a lot of extra custom on Fridays, and especially today, when the weather has brightened up for the first time in days. If you like, you can come in the caravan and help me get the drinks for a while," he said.

Annie thought about the offer, and accepted. "Just for a half hour or so," she told him.

The next half hour was one of the happiest Annie had had for a while. She enjoyed what she was doing, serving drinks and bantering with the customers. One or two asked if she was Mick's girlfriend, and she answered with a smile, "No, just a friend."

Annie returned home in a really happy frame of mind, and not even Brett and Alicia's squabbles when they got home from school were enough to spoil this.

Saturday morning dawned bright and cold. While Alicia wanted to stay in bed, by contrast Brett was all eagerness to get on. So Annie let her daughter sleep a bit longer while she and Brett breakfasted. After Brett had gone, Annie decided to have a long bath. Afterwards, she dressed very carefully and put on some make-up. She wanted to look her best for the presentations.

When she reached the gym, with Alicia reluctantly in tow, she found that her timing had been perfect. She looked round for her son, and they caught each others' eyes. She looked at Brett enquiringly, and he responded with a smile and a 'thumbs up.'

Not everyone in the class had passed the test, so Annie was even prouder when Brett's name was read out and he came forward to receive his certificate. As soon as the ceremony was over, Annie went up to Bob, and gave him a big, spontaneous hug. "Thank you," she said, with a tear running down her face. "You've done a wonderful job." She almost added, "I love you," but decided instead to kiss him on the cheek.

At that point, Bob slipped an envelope into Annie's hand. "Go and treat your kids to a hamburger at MacDonald's or something," he said. "Brett deserves it for all the hard work he's put in."

"Thanks again," whispered Annie, as she turned away.

There was a photographer from the local newspaper at the presentation, and he made sure he took photos of all the proud certificate holders, both individually and as a group. "If you want copies of any of these photos, you can buy them at the Evening News office," he told the parents.

Annie asked Brett if he was ready to go, and he nodded. "Then, what are we waiting for? I'm taking you and your sister into town for lunch!"

For the first time that day, Alicia looked enthusiastic over something. Truth to tell, she'd been a bit jealous of the attention her younger brother had received. The bus came quickly, and on the way they decided where to go - and ended up at a Kentucky Fried Chicken place. Everyone enjoyed their lunch, and Annie was happy to find that the money in the envelope was enough for all of them to follow up with an ice-cream each.

Afterwards, they did a bit of window-shopping. Alicia saw a new mobile phone that she really wanted to have - "all my friends at school have one of these," she said. That was a gross exaggeration, as only two friends *had* one, but they all *wanted* one. Brett saw the latest Lego sets, and told his mum, "That's what I want f'r Christmas."

"We'll have to see," Annie replied to both her children's desires.

Next, Annie's footsteps seemingly without planning took her to the square. When Alicia asked, "What are we doing here?" she replied that there was someone she wanted them both to meet.

Being Saturday, Mick was busy, and Annie almost changed her mind, but then she had an idea. "Would you like a hand for a few minutes?" she asked.

Mick thought for a moment, then said, "Yes, please. I could do with someone to fill the urn. It's running low. You've watched me often enough. Come in."

Annie told Mick that she had her children with her, so he invited them in as well.

The next few minutes were busy. Annie helped serve the drinks, and her children helped with the clearing up.

There was a lull after about half an hour, and Mick gratefully sat down. "These are my children, Alicia and Brett," Annie said. "And we've got something to show you. Go on, Brett, show Mick your certificate."

Brett didn't need any second bidding. He held the certificate out for Mick to see. When he had read the it, Mick gave a big grin and said to Brett, "Well done, kiddo. I bet your mum's really proud of you. Have a biscuit - on the house!"

After another half hour, during which they helped serve more customers, Annie decided that it was time to go back home, so they said their goodbyes to Mick. Just as they were about to leave, Mick said, "Look, I could do with someone to help on Saturdays in the run up to Christmas. If you know anyone who can do this - and I'll pay them - then please let me know."

Annie told Mick that she would keep that in mind, and she told Mick she'd see him some time in the week.

On the way back home, Alicia asked, "Is Mick your new boyfriend, Mum? You seem real palsy with him."

"No, of course not," Annie replied, but not with as much conviction as she wanted.

"Pity," continued Alicia, "cos he's much nicer than Steve."

Mick's need of an assistant played on Annie's mind. She began to think of the extra things she could buy if she had some extra money, but then, there were the kids - who would look after them? She thought of her mother, and wondered what price she would have to pay in other ways if she agreed to babysit for several hours every Saturday. Finally, she came to a decision. She would tell her mother of the opening, and ask if she wanted to do it. Then, if her Mum declined, she could put a second proposition to her, and ask her to look after Annie and Brett while she did the job.

When she got round to talking to her mother late on Sunday afternoon, she was very hesitant, wondering what the reaction would be. However, she needn't have worried, as her mum was still uncertain of herself, and quite ready to let Annie take on a part-time job. "Of course I'll expect you to pay me for the babysitting," she quipped. "No, seriously, I'm happy to look after the beggars if you think you c'n trust me with 'em."

Annie could hardly wait to tell Mick the news, but there was still the rest of Sunday and probably half of Monday at least before she would be able to make the journey into town. As things turned out, it was Tuesday before she could get away, as Brett had a nosebleed on Monday morning, so she kept him off school.

There was no more problem with Brett's nose, so, on Tuesday, she went into town to talk to Mick.

When she told him she would take the job, Mick said, "Well, you'd better come into the caravan, and learn the ropes. There's not a lot of custom at the moment, so I'll be able to show you things, and you can get in a bit of practice. You'll need it. It'll be a lot more hectic come Saturday.

After Mick had explained and shown everything to Annie, she turned to him. "You know, I've never asked you how you came to be running this caravan café on the square. I imagine you more as some big-shot executive or a lawyer or something," she said.

Mick was silent for a while, then a customer came along and he served him. When he sat down again, he gave a long sigh, and said, "I'm not very good at opening up to people, and the other week I blocked you off, rather than allowing you to probe into my past. However, you've opened yourself up to me, and I hope I can count on you not to go blabbing about what I tell you."

Annie quickly reassured him that he could rely on her, and so Mick, taking a deep breath, launched himself into his tale.

"You are right. I was a hot-shot executive - with the emphasis on **was**. I had a big house, a beautiful wife and an eight-year-old daughter, who was the light of my life. Everything was going well for me, when suddenly, one spring morning, my life was turned upside-down. My wife was driving my daughter to school, when a drunken driver - he'd been drinking all night long - ran a red light and smashed into the car, instantly killing my daughter, and leaving my wife brain-dead, on a life-support machine. My life collapsed. I couldn't work. I barely even remembered to eat. If it hadn't been for my colleagues from work who kept on calling in, I might have just starved to death. The only comfort I could

take was that one day, after death, I would see them again in heaven. I still kept going to church, partly, I think, because it helped me keep up my hope.

When I'd been off work for three months, my boss delivered me an ultimatum - either come back to work, or lose the job. He couldn't carry on without replacing me. I sent in my resignation. I suppose I could have fought things out with my boss, but I didn't have the spare capacity for that.

Eventually, I agreed to have my wife's life-support turned off, and then I really went downhill. When the cheque for compensation came, I didn't even look at it, so one of my now ex-colleagues banked it for me. A little while after that, the same person - his name is Luke - came to visit me and said, "Mike (My friends all used to call me Mike) I've got a proposition for you that might suit you. You know the caravan in the square? Well, that's up for sale. It needs someone with a good business head to run it, and you've got enough money in the bank to buy it. What do you say?"

I gave Luke a non-committal reply, but he left the information with me. The following day, out of curiosity, I looked at it, and, for the first time in many months, felt myself interested in something. I examined the details closely, and decided it was a going concern. What's more, it was a completely different line of work from what I had been doing before. So, I took the plunge, and here I am. I'm my own boss, I meet lots of interesting people, and I'm now reasonably well adjusted to life again."

Just then, three customers came at the same time, so they had to break off. After that, Annie looked at her watch and realised that she'd have to get home quickly in order to fetch the kids from school, so she reluctantly said, "Thanks for telling me your story, Mick. It can't have been easy to tell me, but I've got to go and pick up the kids. I'll see you Saturday if not before."

As she turned to go, she decided to give Mick a kiss on the cheek, and she was gratified to see him blush in response.

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The rest of the week, Annie was in a really happy frame of mind. Not even the children's squabbles dented her happiness, until Friday evening when who should turn up but Steve. He stood at the door, and said, "Let us in, please. I know I've been rotten to you and all that, but I really do want you. Look! I've even brought a bottle of wine."

Annie hummed and hawed. Just as she was thinking she might let Steve in, Alicia caught sight of him and shouted "Get that tramp out of here. He's not good for us!"

Annie was shocked at her daughter's language, but quickly realised that her mother sometimes used similar words, and most neighbours did, too. She also realised that Alicia's resentment of Steve was still bubbling, so she turned back to look at her ex-boyfriend and said, "Sorry, I can't let you in - and you'd better not come round here any more."

Steve looked ready to break the bottle over Annie's head, but he thought better of it and turned away, angrily.

Alicia then came running up to her mum and said, "I don't like that Steve. He's a two-faced no-good sponger."

Annie nearly burst out laughing, hearing such words from her daughter, but she contained herself and said, "It's all right, pet, he's not coming in this house again. And thanks for defending me!"

She gave her daughter a cuddle, and sat back down, once more feeling anxious for the future.

Working at the caravan on Saturday was a good experience for Annie. Yes, it was tiring, but she also chatted friendlily with the customers, and enjoyed the banter between the regulars and Mick.

At the end of the day, Mick gave her the day's wages - cash in hand - and Annie was made up when she saw the money- more than she had expected. "Thank you," she said, and hugged him.

"You deserved the money, " Mick replied. "I wouldn't have managed without you today. Now, I've got an invitation for you and your family. Next Friday evening, we're having an Advent social at our church, and I thought you, Brett, Alicia and your Mum might like to come. There will be fun and games, dancing, and, of course, food. Please say you'll be there."

"I don't know what to say, " Annie replied. "I'll have to ask the others. If they say yes, then we'll come."

"But do you want to come?"

"Yes, of course. I don't get much social life, as you know, and I'd like to be there with you."

"That's good enough for me. Here's my phone number. Call me, or drop in at the caravan when you've decided. All right?"

"All right."

Mick dropped Annie off at her home, which was welcome for Annie, because she hadn't fancied waiting for the bus. "Now I know where you live, maybe I can pick you up next Saturday morning," said Mick. "It's really not far away from my house."

The following day was a real contrast for Annie. For one thing, her mother was in a complaining mood after taking care of Annie's kids for the day. "Not that I mind looking after them, but it's just so hard to keep up with them, owin' to me bronchitis," she whined. "Now I'm exhausted and I need to put me feet up. You don't mind, do you, Annie? Now, can you fetch me me fags?"

Annie felt like ramming one down her mother's throat as she gave her mother the packet of cigarettes, but she told herself that it was a small price to pay for some independence.

Alicia seemed at a loose end, and nothing Annie suggested was right, so in the end, she just left her to herself, and busied herself with the dirty dishes, which her mother hadn't bothered to wash.

The sun came out in the afternoon, which helped everyone to feel better, and the whole family went out for a walk in the park.

On Monday, when Annie went to fetch the children from school, Brett rushed up to her excitedly.

"I got that Leroy real good, today Mum," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we were in the playground and he came up to me and grabbed me and started hitting me, but I squirmed out of his hold and got away. He ran after me, and I did what Bob - I mean Mr. Wharton - what he told me."

"And what was that?"

"At the last moment, I twisted to one side, but left me foot there. He tripped over me and gave himself a real bloody nose!"

"But didn't you get into trouble?"

"No, and that's the best bit. The teacher on duty was Ms. Evans, my class teacher, and she saw everything. She told everyone that it was all Leroy's fault, and I didn't do anything. You see, mum, I didn't need to hit him or kick him. He did it all by himself!"

"Well done! I'm proud of you, Brett. But did that bully hurt you at all?"

"Oh, a few bruises, but they don't hurt a lot - really!"

"So, what's going to happen to Leroy?"

"Well, it's not the first time he's been in trouble, but it's the first time a teacher has seen everything, so I think his mum is gonna come in and Leroy will be out for a time."

Annie was really happy about the way her son had handled the attack by Leroy, but she decided she wanted to talk to Ms. Evans, so the next day she went to the school office, to be met by the secretary, who was just as officious as she had been before. The result was a promise to let Annie know when Ms. Evans would be free to see her.

The following day, Annie received two telephone calls from the school. The first was that she would be able to speak to Ms. Evans after school on Thursday after school; the second was that there had been an incident with Alicia, and could she come to the school as soon as possible.

When Annie got to the school, she was directed first to the school nurse. When she saw Alicia, she was shocked. One eye was puffed up and almost closed. The nurse told her that there was no damage, but it would be best to keep Alicia home for a few days until things healed. It turned out that Leroy's older sister was in the class above Alicia, and she had head-butted Alicia in morning break. "That's for what your kid brother did to my kid brother," she had said.

The result was that Leroy's older sister would also be out of school for a while.

Annie's interview with Ms. Evans was morale-boosting. She heard how much more confident her son had become, and how that was helping his academic achievement as

well. Ms. Evans also told Annie that Brett now had more friends in the class, although he was still something of a loner.

Annie was pleased to hear the good report about her son, and she went home happy.

By the time for the social came on Friday evening, Alicia's eye looked almost normal, and Annie covered the remaining damage with make-up. This was the first time she had allowed her daughter to put make-up on.

"But don't think you can start wearing it every day," she told Alicia. "You're still a bit too young for that."

They all enjoyed the social evening, and Annie was pleased that it wasn't heavily religious - just a prayer of thanks before the meal and a blessing at the end. While the food was ordinary, it was plentiful, and there were several games for both adults and children, which all the Spencers enjoyed.

Several people came up to Mick, who was sitting at the same table as Annie and her children, and, after chatting for a while, asked Mick, "Is this your new family then?" or similar questions. Mick made non-committal replies, but he seemed happy to be asked.

There were a few dances towards the end of the social, and Annie made the bold move of asking Mick to dance. At first, he hesitated, and then accepted. Annie really enjoyed that dance. Mick was a good dancer, and he made Annie feel special.

Annie's mum stayed over on Friday night, and neither she nor the children put in an appearance downstairs before Annie had to leave for work.

Business was slow at first, but it soon picked up. Even with both Mick and Annie working flat out, they were hard-pressed to keep up with the queue. By the end of the day, they could hardly stand up, and they had only had time for a couple of snacks, so Mick invited Annie to join him in a fast-food café for something a bit more substantial. Annie thought about declining, thinking of the children, but she really was almost dropping, so she accepted Mick's offer.

As they ate, Mick turned to Annie, "You know, last night I felt things that I haven't felt since I lost my family. I felt that I belonged with you and the children, and it was just so lovely."

He broke off to wipe a tear from his eye. "I thought I'd never feel like that again, but God is good, He heals the broken-hearted."

"Annie, I wonder if you're ready for a closer relationship? I think I am, but I'm still scared that it will all go badly wrong."

Annie didn't know what to say. She hadn't really thought romantically about Mick, but she reflected that she had got to know him quite well, and that her children liked him.

"Yes, why not?" she said, finally. "You'll certainly be the best-spoken man I've ever been out with."

They left the café arm in arm, and when they got to Annie's house, Mick got out and opened the passenger door for Annie. Just before Annie turned to go into the house, she put her arms round Mick and kissed him on the lips for the first time.

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