

# **The Living of a Life**

4 Short Stories  
&  
4 Poems

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To my dear friend  
Craig Duffy  
Thanks for the encouragement,  
and gentle nudge  
in the right direction.

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## **This State of Being**

There is nothing I love more than staring out of my window, and watching the changing effects of the seasons, on the beautiful garden below. Without a doubt, it is one of the most precious pleasures life has gifted me. I have positioned my work station right in front of a large window, here on the second floor, and the view is nothing short of fantastic. Every time I look out, I see something incredibly breathtaking. In the foreground, there are pathways weaving through the well manicured gardens, and across the back is a line of tall trees, ringing the entire garden area. Behind those trees, putting them almost in a picture frame, are Auckland's Waitakere Ranges. The overall picture is one of sheer beauty. A beauty my eyes never tire from. On the one hand, it could almost be called a distraction, to be constantly looking up from my work, and watching the garden below. Really though, it is the peace, and serenity, that the view gives me, that enables me to work so well. I find that when I am relaxed, I do my best work. The garden breathes life into me, and through me, into my work. The choice to work from home was such a life changer. Since my accident, I have made a lot of changes in my life. My new life barely even resembles that of my old one. When we travel through our lives, not aware of what the gift of life really means, it is so easy to get sidetracked by feeling the need, the pressure, to have all the latest gadgets, all the best clothes, and a home worthy of the best of afternoon television. All our decisions are influenced by what others think is best for us. The actual living of that life, gets lost somewhere. In our constant chase for all the things we are led to believe that we need, we forget about what would actually be good for us. The things in life, quite often free, which are the things that make life worth living. The essence of life itself. Far be it for me to judge. I myself was one of the worst, at not recognising these things. I was a go-getter from the start. I studied hard, and then, when I entered the workforce, I worked hard, climbing up the corporate ladder. I judged my progress by the amount of money I earned, by the quality of the goods I owned, but never even considered if any of it made me happy. I suppose it had been a result of the competitive nature of the school, and university, I had attended. At no time, in my learning years, did any teacher ever broach the subject of living a life you enjoyed. It was all focused on success. I suppose, in an abstract sort of way, it was just assumed that, with success, happiness would follow. I, myself, never even considered it. I was driven, along with my contemporaries, to attain the maximum. We all studied hard, worked hard, and tried for the best results possible. Sometimes I think back on those years, and wonder if people actually liked me. Through it all, was I a nice person? Were we even friends? Quite probably, I was so focused on succeeding, that little details, like friendship, were

put aside. They were people to compete with, people to try and beat, by attaining better results. How could that be the basis of friendship? In my drive for results, things like friendship, and nature's beauty, were never considered. Life had been all around me, but I hadn't noticed it. I had been so distracted by the living of my life, that I never really noticed life, itself. The beauty of life, the beauty of people, were things that I had never dwelt on. I feel a sadness when I think of that, of all those wasted years. Being constantly encircled by the beauty of life, and the beauty of people, but without even being aware of it's presence. Strangely, it took a bad accident to open my eyes to what had always been there, but which, I had never seen.

'It's such a lovely place here, Kevin. It's so peaceful.'

My mother's face always lit up when she looked over the garden below. Like me, now, she appreciated it's great serenity.

'Thanks, mum, I like it too. I've designed my work station around the fantastic view from the window. To be honest, it can be a bit distracting, but actually, it gives me the energy to get through all my projects.'

'I always look forward to coming here to see you, so much.'

I looked at my mother's face. For her age, approaching 60, she was still very beautiful, although she had a strange look of sadness. Dad's death, years ago, had hit her hard, and now with my accident on top of that, she seemed to have become permanently sad. I really worried about her. She had life's usual worry lines across her brow. No doubt they had increased drastically through the period of my accident, and rehabilitation.

'Mother, your visits always bring me a lot of pleasure.'

Really, mother's visits distracted me, a lot, from my work. However, the new person that I had become, didn't place work above all else. Now, finally, I valued life itself. People, the view from my window, and the actual living of life, were the things that I now valued, above all else. My mother was the most important person in my new life, especially after all she had done for me after my accident. I would never begrudge her any time she wanted.

'It wrenches out my heart, when I think of the accident you had. I was sure I had lost you, forever.'

Mum looked to be on the verge of crying, something she did a lot lately.

'Come on, mum, enough of that. Don't think about that anymore. Here we are, in a lovely place, together. What more could we ask for? Listen, if Mrs. Drummond is still around, I will get her to make us a cup of tea. Hopefully there will be some biscuits around, as well. What do you say?'

Mrs. Drummond came in a few hours a day, to do my cleaning, and prepare my meals for me. She was such a marvelous help, I don't know what I would do without her. Luckily, she was still on hand, and made us a cup of tea. I watched my mother as she drank her tea, and delicately chewed on a biscuit. I was so incredibly lucky, to have her in my life. The old me, the corporate, results driven me, had really taken her for granted.

We had never spoken about life, or gardens, things of that nature. Sure, I had kept her up to date with all my results, my promotions, and the money I was earning. I doubt that we had ever had a real conversation, about life, the beauty of life, or how to really live life, and appreciate the little things, like sitting here, and having a cup of tea together.

'In some ways, I'm glad your father wasn't still alive, when you had your accident. He just doted on you. Of course, he also loved your sister, don't get me wrong, but he really loved seeing how you excelled at everything. It would have just destroyed him.'

The sadness just seemed to consume her.

'Oh, come on, mum. You can't keep dwelling on the accident. If anything, I am happier now. Out of it all, I have discovered the true meaning of life. Instead of just appreciating money, position, and things like that, I now appreciate the little things in life. I feel that I am finally living the life I was meant to live.'

Of course, I could understand her. She had lived through what is probably the most traumatic event a mother could ever experience. In fact, she, no doubt, had experienced it more than me. Initially, I had been in a coma for a few days, barely clinging to life. Obviously, that had left a deep scar on her, and she had a difficult time forgetting it. I knew that I had to have a lot of patience with her, and give her all the support that I could. If anyone deserved that, it was mum. After all she had been through, that was the least I could do.

I don't remember the actual details of my accident, but, without a doubt, the wet, slippery road, and the dark of night, had all contributed to it. I don't remember anything until waking up in hospital, a few days later. Apparently, I had been trapped in the car for hours, and had to be cut free, with the so-called jaws of life. What followed for me, was months of hospital, and rehabilitation. All the drama that you could expect in a situation like that. My mother, my dearest mother, the woman who I have really only come to know so well since my accident, never left my side. Through all those months of hospital, she was my rock. It was only through her dedication, and constant love, that I managed to come through it all. Of that, I am sure. Even when I was still too damaged to talk, she would tell me all about what was going on, and what everyone was up to. When she held my hand in hers, I felt so connected to love, to life. Her voice was so soothing, and so peaceful. She always had a calming effect on me, and I knew that with her help, I could get through anything. She was my guardian angel, my pillar of strength. It was in those months, with the example of my mother's love, that I decided that my life needed to change, completely. I was never going back to living just as an automaton, living a life dictated by society. I wanted to live a real life. Listening to my mother describing simple things, such as how the sky looked, on a particular day, or how well the flowers were growing in her garden, woke up my urge to finally experience life itself. It was time for me to start my life, anew.

'Here's your lunch, now, Kevin. Come on, let's get you away from that window and get some food into you.'

I smiled, in reply. She was right, of course. Instead of working I had been gazing out of my window. Mrs. Drummond is such a help. She really fusses over me, and worries about whether I am eating enough. It is very sweet, really. Most people, in the modern age, don't care about others. It was so refreshing to have found someone with such old-school principles. She cleared away a spot on my work table, and placed my lunch there. To be honest, I hadn't really been able to get much work done that morning. Autumn had arrived in Auckland, and the colours in the garden below were just breathtaking. The new me, the person that I had become, now appreciated the power, and the beauty, of nature. I had spent most of the morning reflecting on the changes of the seasons. It was nature's way of renewing life. Without those changes, new growth couldn't come in the spring. It had occurred to me, that that is also true of the changes people need to go through. If we never change, we will never experience new things. If we are stuck in our ways, either out of convenience, or, perhaps habit, we will never experience different aspects of life. Our eyes will never be opened to new perspectives, new ways of looking at the same things. If you don't change the position you view things from, they will always appear the same. Everybody understands what it means for the seasons to change, but how many of us actually experience that change? Knowledge seems to be all about memorising things, rather than seeing them, or feeling them. We talk about things, without understanding their impact. We don't grasp the power of the things we talk about, because we don't actually live them. We tend to glide through life, and we forget to take notice of the really important things, things that don't enrich us economically, but which can enrich our souls. The things in life that can make our lives better, because, by experiencing them, we become better people.

Dr. McGuire looked up and saw Kevin's mother standing in the doorway of his office.

'Hello, Mrs. Wilson, what can I do for you?'

'Good morning doctor. If you don't mind, I was wondering if we could have a chat about Kevin's progress.'

'Certainly! Have a seat, please. From a medical point of view, nothing has really changed. I know our medical terminology can be difficult to understand, but, in Kevin's situation, as a result of the head trauma he suffered in his accident, we would say he is in a catatonic state, with minimal brain activity. That would...'

'Yes, thank you, I understand that. What I really wanted to know is, if he can hear me when I speak to him. Can he understand me?'

'From a purely medical point of view, that is extremely difficult to know. It differs from one case to another, but we really have no way of evaluating just how much a patient, in his condition, can comprehend. Listen, let me call in nurse Drummond, she has the most contact with Kevin. I'm sure she will be able to answer your questions, on a human level, better than me.'

Dr. McGuire picked up the phone, and spoke with his secretary. After a short wait,



nurse Drummond entered his office.

'Oh, hello there, Mrs. Wilson. I saw you visiting Kevin earlier. I'm sorry I didn't have time to get you a cup of tea today. It's been flat stick. Just one of those days!'

'Listen, Alice, Mrs. Wilson has some questions about Kevin's ability to comprehend his surroundings. Not from a medical point of view, but more from a mother's point of view. Do you have some time to have a talk with her?'

'Most certainly! Come on, let's head down to the cafeteria. We can have a cup of tea, and a bit of a chat.'

Mrs. Wilson followed nurse Drummond to the hospital's cafeteria. The two of them, after buying their teas, took a table by the window. The cafeteria was on the first floor of the institution, overlooking the garden. Mrs. Wilson looked at nurse Drummond anxiously.

'Do you think it helps, when I talk to Kevin? Do you think he can understand me? Does he even know it's me? Oh, sorry, I shouldn't bombard you with my questions. Anyway, I'm sure you know what I mean.'

'Yes, of course. It's more guesswork, than science, to know just how much patients, in Kevin's state, can understand. The fact that he seems so much more tranquil, when he is in front of his window, makes me believe that he does have some awareness of his surroundings. Other patients don't change at all, no matter where they are placed. However Kevin, when he is seated in front of his window overlooking the garden, is definitely much more relaxed. I believe, in myself, that he is aware, to a certain extent, of things around him.'

Mrs. Wilson felt great relief. She hated to think that Kevin was totally absent. Her constant sadness abated slightly.

'What about when I talk to him? Do you think he understands what I am saying?'

'Many studies have shown that talking to patients in a catatonic state is helpful. Moreover, in Kevin's state, being aware, as I am sure he is, of his surroundings, I believe it would be very helpful for him. Just chat away, tell him all the family news.'

'Do you think he knows that I am his mother?'

Nurse Drummond took Mrs. Wilson's hand in hers, and looked kindly, in her eyes.

'You just have to believe, that that is the case. The only proof you will find of that, is in your heart.'

Kevin's mother had tears streaming down her cheeks. Tears of a sad elation. She half wiped them away, and smiled at the nurse.

'I think he does! In fact, I'm sure of it! Oh, thank you! Thank you so much. I'm so happy to have Kevin here, where you look after him so well.'

'I'm sorry, Mrs. Wilson, but I really must be getting on now.'

'Of course. Goodbye, and thank you.'

As nurse Drummond left, Mrs. Wilson looked out on the garden, Kevin's garden, and cried quietly to herself. It was so hard seeing Kevin in that state. He had been so full of

life, so full of promise. He had achieved so much. To have that all taken away from him was devastating. She finished her tea, and headed out towards the carpark. She always took the long way to the carpark, passing along one of the pathways through the garden. As usual, she stopped to look up at Kevin's room. There he was, sitting impassively, and immobile, at his window. Expectantly, she waved up at him, but, as ever, he didn't move. Putting her handkerchief to her eyes, to dry the last of her tears, she headed to the carpark. She took a last look at the beautiful garden. This peaceful place, that brought her such sadness. A place of great beauty, that always wrenched out her heart.

Mother visited again today. It's always such a great pleasure for me when she drops by. Since my accident, we have really become so close. I am more than happy to set aside my projects, and devote my time to her. My work now, is no more than a means to an end. The old me was tied down, by my mindset, to a lifestyle which can only be described as being totally self indulgent. Now, I spend more time pondering life, and people. It is really the people in our lives, that bring us the happiness we desire, the joy our hearts yearn for. We will only find fulfillment through our relationships with those closest to us. Sometimes the most important things in our lives are right there, but we don't see them. Now, after having made it through such a life changing event, my eyes have been opened. I have finally understood what life is really about. Life is about people. Life is about appreciating nature's beauty. I am thankful for having had my accident. I know that seems like a strange thing to say, but my real life has only just begun, since my accident. It took the effects of such a traumatic event, to wake me from my self-serving stupor. I now feel like I am experiencing life, for the first time. Out of my window I see my mother, the love of my life, walking along the pathway, through the garden. With a surge of joy that passes through me, I smile, and wave to her. She looks up, radiant and happy, and waves back. I am so blessed in my life. I now have everything that I could ever have asked for. Life has been incredibly generous to me.

## **An Instinctive Affair**

I first time I set my eyes on her I was completely blown away. My thoughts turned, quite rapidly, to those of a sexual nature. Rather fortunately for me, that never eventuated. Maybe I had better explain that. It was back in the spring of two years ago. I had decided to get away for five days to Kos, one of the Greek islands. Things had been going fairly badly for me at work, back home in Christchurch, and I really needed to get away. Take a break. I jumped a cheap flight from Bournemouth over to Kos, and there I was, with beautiful sunshine, incredible beaches, and tasty food. Everything I didn't have back home. It was just what I needed. The only thing missing from that list was a lovely woman, and that was where I thought she might fit in. On my first day there I had discovered, by chance, what I thought to be the most beautiful beach I had ever seen. I had been walking around, taking in the sights, when I came across it. Just a kilometre or so out from the centre of the Kos town centre, heading north. I never did find out if that beach had a name, but for the rest of my stay, that was my home base. Beautiful golden sand leading into the bluest, cleanest, water that I had ever seen. The sun's reflections off the water gave it all an almost surreal vision of grace. When you find a beach like that, you look no further. Being on my own I was a bit penalised, in that I had to rent two sunbeds, with an umbrella. In any case, the cost was so ridiculously cheap, that I didn't mind. Each day I would try to get there early, before the flood of Germans arrived, so I could get a good spot on the sea front. The spring sunshine was so nice. The view was absolutely stunning. Straight out in front, over the shimmering water, you could see quite clearly, the Turkish mainland. The water was crystal clear, and always calm. Surrounded, as it was, by other Greek islands, and Turkey, the sea was never rough, even when the wind came up. I would just float in the cool water for ages. I forgot about my problems, back home, and concentrated on relaxing. I let the stress flow from my body. When the heat got too much for me, I would call over Dimitri, the guy running the place, and order a nice cool drink from the bar. That was the life for me. It certainly didn't hurt that many of the women there would sunbathe topless. That just added to the pleasure. Right there, in my favourite spot in the whole world, was where I met her, for the first time. My holiday was coming to an end, it was my last full day. It was the day before flying back home. Home, where I would have to return to the misery that was my job. I tried not to think about that, and just enjoy my last day at the beach. As usual, I had paid for a double spot. There was no other way. All the spots came with two sunbeds, and an umbrella in the middle, giving shade to both of them. Everywhere was geared up for couples. When you are single you really get stitched up, wherever you go. Hotels, beaches, everywhere.

Everything comes with a penalty payment for singles. It was society's way of letting you know that they don't want you single. You must be coupled up, preferably creating another generation, who would then get coupled up, in their turn, and keep the cycle going. A society of single people would soon lead to a gradual extinction of the human race. Who would be there to keep the fires lit? Who would be there to ensure that everything was in place for the next generation, if there was to be no next generation? Being single was not only to be frowned upon. It was to be penalised. You needed to get the message. Society requires you to play your part, in perpetuating society. Find someone, procreate, play the game. Do your share. If not, you will be punished. Enjoy your single life, briefly, and then do that which society expects of you. Your role is not to enjoy your life, but to ensure that life itself continues. Society only functions with continuous growth, one generation following the other, with an endless stream of inconsequential people concentrated solely on creating the next generation..... of inconsequential people. The cycle must continue. Any deviation from your role in that cycle, and you will be punished. Penalised.

'Hey, mate, sorry to bother you.'

Roused from my musings, I looked up, to see Dimitri. Something of a Greek God, was Dimitri. Tall, very suntanned, with a beautiful face, and athletic body to go with it. I'm sure there is a bronze statue dedicated to him somewhere. He was standing over me, in all his glory.

'What's up, my friend?'

'Listen, you don't have to, it's just that all the sunbeds are taken, and this person was wondering if she could use your extra one.'

I turned to look behind Dimitri, and there she was. My God, she looked so beautiful. She was like a vision from another world. Tall, wearing a light semi see through beach shawl over her bikini, and a straw hat. Her face was stunning, caught in the Greek sunlight. This never happened to me. This was the stuff of films. Or dreams. Trying to sound casual, I replied to Dimitri. As usual, I made a right mess of it, in my state of excitement.

'Sure, my friend, no worries. She is welcome to the other sunbed. Hey, one is enough for me, what would I do with two anyway? It's not as if....'

As if sensing my flustered state, the beautiful woman intervened.

'I will pay you half the cost,' she said.

'Sure, that's alright, don't worry.'

She put down her bag, and slowly took off her shawl, revealing her bikini clad body. At the sight of her sensual body, a surge of excitement went through me. I could feel things stirring down below. Things could get embarrassing, very fast. I knew I had to get control.

'I'm going in for a swim. Make yourself at home.'

I took off my sunglasses and rushed into the water. The cool water did the trick, and

I managed to get things under control. Hopefully she, or no one else, had noticed the bulge growing in my swimming trunks. Thank God I never wore speedos! Looking back at the beach, I couldn't believe what had just happened. Normally it was hard work for me to meet women. Now, one had been presented to me on a plate. Without having to do anything, a beautiful woman was now lying on a sunbed next to mine. In that situation, conversation was unavoidable. She was mine. I knew I would have to play it cool. I would be very casual, not really standoffish, but definitely cool. I needed to be on top form. I walked out of the water, feeling good. I had just turned 35 years old, and my body was in good shape. After these days on the beach I had a good tan, I was cooking. I could do this.

'Hey, the water is fantastic. A bit cool, but with this scorching sun, it's really refreshing.'

'I don't really swim much, but I probably will go in later.'

'I'm Nick, by the way.'

'Hello Nick, my name is Lianne. I just got in from Bournemouth yesterday. What about you, where are you from?'

'Hey, guess what? I flew in from there, too. I live in Christchurch.'

'Really? Actually I live in Poole, out the other side of Bournemouth from you. How long are you here for?'

'Unfortunately, I am off back home tomorrow. Just been here for five days, all up. How long are you here for?'

'A week.'

I couldn't help being a bit dismayed at the bad timing, although back home, we were only living about 20 kilometres from each other. If things worked out well, we would be able to continue it all back there. I realised that nothing would be happening in Kos, the timing just wasn't right, but I could definitely set something up for the future. I had something to work towards. I had a project. She lay back and started reading a book. I wouldn't interrupt her. I was playing it cool. I took my book out of my bag, and pretended to read it. Really, I was sneaking glances at her, as she lay there. Lianne had a nice body, not really brilliant, but incredibly sensual. Some of the other women around me looked better. Plus, some of them were topless. On the other hand, Lianne was here with me, the others weren't. I would work with what I had. I thought back on my excitement, at first seeing her. Why is it that in a flash I had gotten so excited? What had I been expecting to happen? It's not as if we were going to make love there and then. Where does this instant, unstoppable desire come from? Maybe it's not just society that wants us all to be coupled up, and permanently procreating. Quite probably, it is built right into our genetic make up. Survival of the species is dependent on us getting together, having sex, and creating another generation. Over the centuries it must have become built into our DNA. Seemingly it is something we have very little control over. We are going about our day to day business, thinking of nothing but the task in hand, when, out of the blue, with no

more prompting than that of seeing a sexy woman, we can think of nothing but sex. There was definitely something primitive about the whole process. Something very basic. However, stealing glances at Lianne, I still did want to have sex with her, no matter whether that was just my DNA talking, or some primeval instinct rooted deep in me. It just wasn't going to be as immediate as my body had first imagined. I could still feel stirrings down there, the controlling instinct definitely hadn't forgotten his objective. Now it was up to me to control those primeval urges, letting them loose only at the appropriate time.

'Lianne, do you want to go out for dinner, this evening?' I blurted out.

Damn! So much for playing it cool. A wave of panic came over me, as I realised that I had really played a big card. A refusal here, and it was game over. There would be no meeting up, or having sex, back home. Why had I said that? Roused from her book, she looked over, at me.

'That sounds lovely. I must say, it seems like there are a lot of places to choose from.'

A feeling of relief flowed through me. I had really risked the lot there. Why was I so inept at these things? She was sitting right there, there was no hurry. I had plenty of time to work up to the big question. Anyway, with a lot of luck, it had gone well.

'That's for sure. The town is full of them, and from what I have seen so far, they are all pretty nice. I love Greek food. What about you?'

'Actually, I haven't eaten it much. Maybe you can advise on what to get?'

'Hey, sure. I'm your man. To be honest, it's pretty hard to go wrong. It's all pretty good. Where is your hotel?'

'Just two streets back from here. This was the first beach I came to.'

'Wow, you really picked a good hotel. I think this is the best beach on Kos. I have to walk for about 15 minutes to get here. Not that I mind, I always do plenty of exercise, so I just consider it part of my workout.'

She looked so sexy, laying back with her sunglasses on, and her straw hat. As I stole glances at her, I could definitely feel that my body hadn't lost interest in her. My primordial instincts were still ensuring that the game would continue. Part of me felt like a puppet, controlled by other hands. It struck me just how basic our primal instincts really were. Shelter, food, and procreation. A hotel room, a good meal out in the centre of Kos, and going to bed with Lianne. Life in a nutshell. Still, I had to admit, it all sounded pretty good to me. Obviously those are the instincts that have been driving us for thousands of years, but, all things considered, it didn't really seem that bad. Maybe mankind's instincts were well founded? We dressed it all up a lot, especially in our affluent age, but at the end of the day, that has been what we have been doing since the time we lived in caves. We were really just cavemen with cellphones. Our caves had become houses, our hunting was now done in the supermarket, and our procreation was decided over dinner, with a nice glass of wine. With all our progress, and new technology, we were still driven in the same way our forebears had been. We were still guided by the exact same instincts. But,

on the other hand, why not? They seemed to be working. Eventually, the afternoon came to a end. People were starting to pack up, and leave the beach. It was time to head back to our hotels.

'Bye, Lianne. I'll see you at 8 o'clock, then.'

'Ok, I'll see you on the quay.'

We had both packed up our things, and we then headed off to our hotels. We had arranged to meet in the centre, on the quay, to go out for dinner. On my walk home I couldn't stop smiling. What a score! I had just been lying there, when Lianne was brought to me. There had been no hard pick up lines, no weird internet dating sites, in fact, no work at all on my part. This was going to work well. Back at my hotel I got myself cleaned up, and put on the best clothes I had brought with me. I wanted to look good. Would this be our first date, or our second? It didn't really matter anyway, no action would be happening here, in Kos. That would have to wait for when we were both back home. I headed into town early, and found a bench down on the main quay, where the tourist charter boats were. The boats had all returned from the day's trips, and the harbour looked spectacular. The centre of the town opened out onto this sheltered harbour, really presenting a beautiful sight, with all the boats at their moorings. The evening sun reflected off the water, creating the most beautiful mediterranean postcard sight. The centre was full of tourists, coming and going. Everyone seemed to be happily enjoying themselves. Easily done, in such a beautiful place. In the surrounding streets, which were very narrow, and mostly closed to traffic, there were dozens of restaurants, and bars. It was all very Greek looking, and just such a pretty picture. To make it look even better, there she was, walking down the quay towards me, and waving. What a beautiful sight!

'Hi there, Nick! You look nice, all cleaned up.'

'Thanks, Lianne. You look stunning!'

She was wearing a white dress, very light and delicate, swishing around as she walked. Her shoulders, and legs, were uncovered, showing off her smooth skin.

'Thank you, that's very nice of you.'

'Let's wander up here. There are plenty of places to choose from.'

I put my hand on her arm, and guided her across the street. At the touch of her skin, I felt a wave of excitement flow through me. I would have loved to kiss her, there and then. However, I knew I had to slow things down. I didn't want to ruin things by moving too fast. That was a bit of a bad habit of mine, throwing myself in at the deep end, only to find I had misread the situation, or maybe ruining things by pushing things along too quickly. This time I was going to be Mr. Cool. The patient man.

'Oh Nick, this place looks lovely, what do you think?'

'Yeah, it sure does. Let's do it!'

The place was a Greek Taverna, one of the many, decked out in traditional colours, with a lot of beachy paraphernalia hanging on the walls. The wooden tables and chairs spilled right out onto the street, where they were covered by a light wooden structure,

from which hung small Greek flags. It did look nice. From my limited experience on the island, anywhere would have been fine. The food was brilliant everywhere. The locals were also incredibly friendly. We found a table, and sat down.

'What do you recommend, Mr. Kos expert?'

'Absolutely everything! Let's order one of everything on the menu. That way we won't miss out on anything.'

Lianne laughed, and gave me an incredibly cute smile. Her lips were perfectly shaped, and incredibly erotic.

'It's a shame you are leaving tomorrow. You could have been my guide here. It's all so easy with someone who knows their way around.'

'Yes, it is. It really is a shame. Hey, why don't we meet up, back in Bournemouth? I know it's not the same, but I know a few good places back there as well.'

'That would be lovely. I would like that.'

I tried to look cool, as a wave of delight passed through me, lingering in my loins. I felt like jumping up and yelling:

'Yes!'

However, I remained composed, and just gave her a little smile.

'The food will definitely not be as good, though. Let's eat!'

We ordered various plates of Greek delights, and had a wonderful meal. Her shoulder length, brown hair, really set off her face well. Her green eyes sparkled as she talked, and smiled. She looked so pretty, sitting there in that Greek Taverna. Certain moments in life are really special. A photo never gives them the credit they deserve. Maybe it was also because of the fact that my work life, back home, was in a total state of shambles. Maybe it was just the effect of being in Kos. Whatever the reason, that dinner with Lianne, in that Taverna, was just such a special evening. The memory of it will linger with me forever. Sitting there with her, I had the feeling that anything was possible. Happiness could invade my soul. I could return to Christchurch, confront all my problems at work, and break out of the unhappy situation that had been dogging me. With a good woman, like Lianne, at my side, everything was possible. We chatted until late. The time had just flown by. Eventually, we knew we would have to call it a night, even though neither of us wanted to. We walked back down to the quay, to say goodnight. My mind was racing. How would I play this. I knew a kiss was called for, but how big a kiss? I didn't want to overplay my hand, but on the other hand, I wanted to show how much I liked her. In the end, it was Lianne who took control. She leaned in, and kissed me, lightly, on my cheek.

'Bye Nick, see you back at home.'

'See you, Lianne. It has been so nice to meet you.'

She wandered off, with me staring after her. My Greek break had really come up trumps. I was refreshed, relaxed, and had found Lianne. I was ready to go home. I could face whatever life threw at me.



Back in Christchurch, the days passed incredibly slowly. I couldn't wait to see Lianne again. Since I had been back, it had rained every day. It was so bleak, and miserable. And cold, really cold. My problems at work just seemed to be the same as before my holiday. Then I wondered if maybe I should just quit, and start all over again, in another office. Probably, there was no fixing the bad relationship I had with my colleagues. All things considered, it was probably for the best to just start again. Why not? At the end of the day, it probably wouldn't even be that hard to find another job. Maybe even with better pay? Actually, just the fact of coming to that conclusion really helped me feel better. In the end it hadn't even been that difficult. The problem was easily fixed. Was this the Kos effect? Or was it the Lianne effect? In any case, my holiday in Kos had brought me good counsel. It had given me time to reflect on what I should do to fix my dismal situation. Having accepted the idea of quitting, and starting a new job, I felt free of all the disquiet that I had been holding onto. Now, this was the Lianne effect, of that I was sure. It was funny how office politics worked. People pairing off, to attack a third person, or grouping together, to ravage the others. Even though we were all dressed well, and working in a modern environment, the behaviour we followed was really quite basic. The dominant ones feeling they owned the place, and had the right to denigrate others. For no other reason, seemingly, than the fact that they could. Probably that attitude would have made sense when we were all fighting each other, for a limited supply of food, and shelter. In a primitive setting, it would have been a necessary instinct for survival. When, however, you worked in an office, shuffling bits of paper, what was the need of this primeval beating of the chest? Did man still need to show how strong he was, even when he was wearing a white shirt, and a blue tie? What sense did it make? What was the gain in it all? Man's progression just seemed to be one of having an easier life, with all modern comforts, but, deep down in our souls, we were still just primitive beings, acting in the way of our ancestors. Modern society had been thrust upon primordial man. The hunter and collector now worked in an office. Instead of hunting prey to eat, necessary for survival, the hunting was now of a malicious, sadistic, kind. The prey was those presumed to be weaker, or not part of the dominant group. To a certain extent, the noble instinct of hunting for survival had been debased. It had been turned into an unnecessary bloodlust, for no other reason than that of showing the dominance of the strongest, at the expense of the weakest. I would no longer play their game. I would no longer be primordial man's victim. As soon as I could, I would find another job, hopefully with nicer people. Just arriving at this conclusion brought me a sense of relief. Knowing that I would be leaving, that I would no longer be the brunt of primitive man's bullying, made me feel like my old self again. A holiday in Kos, and meeting Lianne, had helped me reflect clearly on my work situation. It felt like I was getting my life back on track. I was letting go of the grip of unhappiness, and planning my future. At the end of the day, it had really been me who had allowed primitive man to dominate me, by my acquiescence. Without my submission, primitive man really had no

dominance. He could only play his part, if I, too, played mine. The thought of that brought me some relief. If I wasn't exactly happy yet, I was on the verge of happiness. Happiness was now a possibility. Now I was ready to move ahead with my life, and my plans involving Lianne. I could see a pleasant future coming to bloom. Finally the long week passed, and Lianne returned home to Poole. I had been practising my phone call to her for a few days. I wanted to get the right combination of letting her know how interested I was in her, but without going overboard, as I often did. I needed to retain a certain amount of detachment. We arranged to meet, on the banks of the river Avon, just down from Christchurch Castle. My idea was to have a pleasant walk along the river, and then pop into a restaurant, maybe a Greek one. All along very romantic lines, I thought. I was sure she would fall at my feet, after such an enjoyable evening. Saturday evening rolled around. I was looking forward to seeing her again. It didn't really matter that it was raining, although it certainly put the dampers on my 'walk along the banks of the river Avon' plans. Instead, after sending a couple of messages backwards and forwards, we arranged to meet in a pub, The Kings Arms. It all put me in a bit of a fuddle, to be honest. I had planned the outdoors meeting, to facilitate the greeting kiss. On the river bank, two lovers meeting, and exchanging a kiss, seemed like a smooth way to work in the kiss. It was the right thing to do, in that romantic setting. In the noisy interior of an inner city pub, on open display to all and sundry, such a show of affection might be out of place, and put one or the other in a bit of an embarrassed state. Possibly even both of us. Walking to the pub, under my umbrella, it all seemed to be slipping away, somewhat. Under the Kos sun, it had all gone so agreeably. In the heat, wearing light clothes, and being in the holiday mood, everything seemed to flow better. Conversation had come easily, desire had been ever present, and the pathway to the bedroom had seemed to be lit by invisible candles. Now, here, heavily bundled up against the cold and rain, meeting in the incredibly unromantic environs of an English pub, that pathway seemed to be lined with thorn bushes. Still unsure about how I would handle the opening greeting; kiss, or no kiss, I entered the pub. Lianne was already there. Or, at least, it looked like her. Without her skimpy white dress, she looked different. At first glance, sitting there in a heavy set of clothes, she somehow didn't look anywhere near as attractive as she had, in the semi nudity of Kos. Luckily, she was at a wide table, so the kiss dilemma was pretty much off the menu. It would be too far to reach over the table for a kiss. At least that problem was solved.

'Hi there, Lianne! How are you? You look pretty tanned.'

'Hello, Nick. Good thanks, how are you?'

My God! She looked so miserable. I sat down, and looked carefully at her face. She really wasn't a great beauty at all. Had I ever really looked at her face before? Or had I been so aware of her body, that I hadn't really noticed her face? Now that her body was heavily covered, against the cold English weather, I felt like I was seeing Lianne for the first time. Without the constant feeling of desire, dictated by my body, I was now judging

her with the thoughtfulness of my mind. How could someone seem so different, in two different settings? Did we evaluate people based on where we met them, and then re-evaluate them in another situation? Was it purely that my sexual desire had taken control in Kos, and I had seen Lianne solely based on how good her body was? Now that I didn't have her almost naked body to contend with, I viewed her from a different perspective. I'm afraid to admit that she came up a bit lacking, in that regard. Her face was quite ordinary, and, coupled with her unhappy expression, she didn't look terribly attractive at all.

'I'll get some drinks in. What would you like, Lianne?'

'Gin and tonic, please.'

I fought my way to the crowded bar, and got some drinks in, just a beer for me. Then we got down to chatting. I really couldn't believe it was the same person that I had met in Kos. Maybe if I were to see her naked, the former flame of attraction would burn again. With no urgent desirous messages emanating from the lower parts of my body, it was just up to my mind to evaluate her. In all honesty, the opinion my mind was formulating was not very complimentary to Lianne, at all. She was prattling on about when she was a kid, but I could hardly concentrate, being so immersed, as I was, in my comparisons of the two Liannes. The before, and the after.

'Why? What happened?' I asked, trying to focus on what she was talking about.

'My stupid mother. She was so unfair to me, when I was young. It was always my sister that got all the attention.'

'When you were a kid?'

What the hell was she on about? When she was a kid?

'Yes, Stacey always got the best gifts, and all mums attention.'

'Is she younger than you?'

'Yes, five years.'

'Actually, Lianne, that's pretty normal. It happened to me, too, growing up. The youngest in the family is just about always spoilt. I have a sister, six years younger than me, and she was always daddy's little girl. His little princess. He never did anything with me, or my brothers, but he always had time for her. That's just the way it goes. It's always like that with the youngest child.'

Who was this person? Where had Lianne, my Lianne, disappeared to?

'I remember a time when I was ten years old, mum gave a necklace to Stacey, but she didn't give me anything. It just wasn't fair. She was always the special one.'

Her eyes were burning with rage. Just recollecting this memory brought back floods of anger to her. Her face was contorted with anger towards her mother, and, probably, jealousy towards her sister. A necklace? I doubted that it had been part of the crown jewels. No doubt it was really just some cheap trinket, of no more value than a couple of pounds, at the most. Who was this person? How could anyone hold onto such anger, over such a trivial thing, for so long?

'It hadn't even been her birthday, or anything. Just out of the blue mum gave her that necklace. She is still mum's favourite, even now. Everything she does is just so perfect.'

'How is Stacey going now?'

'She's married, and just had her second child, a little girl.'

It was all starting to make sense. Obviously, their mother would be doting on her sister's children, like any good grandmother. When they were kids, Stacey had had more attention, because she was the youngest, and again now, because she has given her mother two grandchildren. It didn't really seem like a big deal to me. The fact that the younger sister had achieved so much, whilst Lianne was still single, I could maybe understand a bit of jealousy towards her sister. A bit of envy over her sister, now having a full family was understandable, but holding onto anger from some slight from when she was ten years old? This person was crazy. I just couldn't get over the intensity in her eyes, as she recounted the story about the necklace. Her eyes had been burning with anger. To feel such intense rage over something that had happened over twenty years ago, bloody hell, that was holding onto anger! At that moment I realised that I would never be giving in to my body's desire towards Lianne. She was just so flaky, that I didn't want to get embroiled in any of her rubbish. I was in the process of sorting out my problems at work, and I really didn't want to get enmeshed in a relationship with someone this screwed up. I needed to have a period of tranquility in my life, and that wouldn't happen if I got involved with Lianne, no matter how much my body was attracted to hers. Primordial man, with his basic urges, and desires, would have to give way to modern, evolved man, and his good common sense. I felt something akin to a wave of satisfaction go through me. It felt good to be so sensible. Maybe I had evolved? It crossed my mind how fortunate I had been to have met her, in Kos, on my last day there. If we had been on that island together any longer, there was no doubt in my mind that we would already be in a relationship. Obviously these things can be ended, but I was never any good at even starting relationships, let alone ending them. All I had to do now was draw back, and end things, before they started. I had to get out of there, and get Lianne out of my life. This was not going to work for me.

'Hey, it's been great meeting up, again. Wouldn't it be fantastic to always be on holiday? Somewhere like Kos, eh? Anyway, look, I have to get off to a family dinner. Let's keep in touch. Bye, for now.'

I got up, and headed for the door, without giving her a chance to say anything more than a quick goodbye. She must have got the message, because I never heard from Lianne again. I certainly wasn't going to instigate any more contact with her. My primordial urges had almost gotten me into a relationship with a total lunatic, but I had dodged the bullet, and proceeded with getting my life back on track.

That had all happened two years ago, and since then I haven't heard anything about Lianne, until I read this morning's paper. As I read the article, I had a feeling of pins and needles come over me. How fortunate I had been with the timing of our meeting, in Kos.

How fortunate I had been with the cold English weather, when we met up again in Christchurch. It wasn't a particularly long article, but all the relevant facts were there. Lianne had stabbed her husband, of six months, in a fit of rage. It appeared he would live, the knife had broken a couple of ribs, and punctured one of his lungs. The article related how it was all quite a mystery why she had done it. Nobody could understand what had driven her to that. Actually, it all made sense to me. I knew exactly what was behind it. Apparently the two of them had been invited to Lianne's sister's house for dinner, to celebrate Stacey's thirtieth birthday. As a surprise birthday present for her, Lianne's husband had bought Stacey a gift, a necklace.

## The Suffering of Life

As the early light streamed in through her window, Nikoletta struggled to get out of bed. Her body ached. Sadness flooded through her. The thought of another day to get through filled her with dread. She couldn't remember a time when she had been happy. She knew that, once, she had been, but now it just seemed like a distant memory. As she put on her dressing gown, she looked at herself in the mirror. Her deeply lined face showed more than her 70 years. Her short, unbrushed hair was completely gray. Her sad looking eyes had very pronounced bags below them. All things considered, after all the hardships she had had to endure, she was surprised she didn't look even worse. She tried to stand up straight, but her body now seemed to be bent over permanently. Ahead of her was another hard day's work, digging up potatoes from her garden. Potatoes. She didn't even like potatoes. When her Anastasios was still alive, they had never even eaten potatoes. Now with the economic crisis in Greece, her pension had been cut, twice. She didn't get anywhere enough money to live on, so she had had to adapt to a new way of living. Her new way of survival. Without a good supply of potatoes, to get her through the winter, she wouldn't be able to afford to eat, and pay for her bills, especially the heating cost. She lived a couple of kilometres outside of the village of Kodris, in the mountains of central Greece. It was a very isolated, cold area. The temperature in winter was always well below zero overnight, and barely reached 12 degrees during the day. She prepared her frugal breakfast of coffee, and a few dried biscuits. At the thought of another day to struggle through, Nikoletta broke down in tears. At 70 years old, she felt that her life was already over. Really, for her, it had ended six years earlier. Giorgios, her son, had moved his family to England, to start a new life. There he hoped they would have the promise of a better future for them all. Nikoletta knew that it had been a wise thing to do, God knows they would have had no future in Greece. But she felt unbearable sadness at the thought of not seeing her grandson grow up. When she had last seen Andreas, he had been just two years old, now he would be eight. She had missed out on seeing him grow, and being a part of his life. She cried most mornings. Waking up to another lonely day was totally devastating for her. The quietness, and solitude, would echo around the rooms of her house. Her empty house reminded her of just how empty her life now was. When Giorgios first moved away, he would phone her regularly, but as the years went by, the calls became less frequent. When he did phone, she had to speak to Andreas in English. He hadn't learned to speak Greek. Luckily, Nikoletta could speak English fairly well, not perfectly, but enough to get by. It always felt strange to her, speaking to her grandson in a different language. He no longer even like being called

Andreas, now they called him Andrew. Nikoletta couldn't bear the thought of not seeing him, not watching him grow, and being a part of his life. He will never really know her. She cried quietly to herself. How could life have been so unkind to her? Her husband died many years ago, of a heart attack. Her other child, Alexandra, died when she was just ten years old, she had drowned in a nearby lake. Nikoletta has had to shoulder so much pain, in her life. She didn't know from where she got the strength to carry on. She couldn't understand what was even the point of carrying on. If she would just die, it would be so much better. The thought of living, as she did, the constant struggle, just filled her with sadness. The solitude, the emptiness of her life, was just unbearable. She dried the tears from her eyes. The mornings were already quite cold, being early autumn, but Nikoletta wouldn't put on the heating until she really needed to. Before starting work on the potatoes, she had to feed the chickens. The eggs they gave her were an essential part of her diet. She used them to make pasta, something she greatly preferred to potatoes. She put on heavy work clothes, and went outside. One side of her property was bordered by the road from Kodris going up, further into the mountains. The house itself was a small, solid, well built structure. It was showing it's age, but Nikoletta kept it well maintained, both inside, and out. Behind the house, she had a very large garden, running back along the road for around fifty metres. She tried to grow as much food as she could, and followed the growing seasons. After feeding her chickens, and taking the eggs inside, she got out her garden fork. With a heavy heart she walked over to the potato field. The ground was cold, and hard. It was such back breaking work, for her, to dig up the potatoes. She worked slowly, trying to minimise the pain on her back. All she knew, in those days, was pain. Both physical, and emotional. She struggled along the row of potatoes. When, by accident, she stepped on a potato, she slipped to the ground, landing heavily on her side. Angrily, she grabbed the potato, and threw it as far as she could. She sat there, on the cold dirt, and cried quietly. This wasn't living. It just all seemed like some kind of punishment to her. How had her life come to this? Was this all she could look forward to? The only thing that got her through the day was knowing that she would visit her Alexandra, and Anastasios, in the afternoon. The cemetery was about a two kilometre walk from her house, but she didn't mind that one bit. Each step would take her closer to her loved ones. The day, as all other days, just never seemed to pass. The work was endless, and hard. At least by concentrating on her work, she tried to forget her sadness for a while. Each time she would have a basket of potatoes ready, she would then have to carry it over to the house, and down into her cellar. In the dark, cool air of the cellar, the potatoes would last longer. Even though she used a small basket, it was heavy work, and she proceeded slowly. By the time lunchtime came around, Nikoletta was almost too exhausted to eat. She rested a while, trying to relieve the pain in her back, before making something to eat. Her lunch, as ever, was a simple affair. Pasta salad, with a couple of hard-boiled eggs. The best part of her day was getting closer. Before leaving for the cemetery, she cleaned the house a bit. She hated the thought of having a disorderly

house. Nikoletta tried to keep up the appearance, in front of other people, of a normal life. She tried to give no signs of just how overwhelmed with despair she always felt. She tried to keep her pain hidden from others. Soon, she would be with her loved ones. In autumn, the walk to the cemetery was very pleasant. A lot of the trees were changing colours, and the array of different colours was absolutely beautiful. The sadness in her started to subside. The afternoon weather was warm, and the surrounding hills had a lovely green colour to them. The road wended around the hills, following the valley. Along the road she saw no one. The only houses she passed had long since been abandoned, with their owners looking for a better, easier life, elsewhere. The cemetery itself was Nikoletta's favourite place. It was a relatively small cemetery, but very well maintained. It rested on the side of a gently sloping hill, so you could see the headstones from the road as you approached. The gravestones were surrounded by lovely trees of different types, and colours, putting the cemetery in a very pretty setting. In death her family lay in the middle of great beauty, and peace. As usual, as soon as she rounded the last corner, and the cemetery came into view, she would wave, and call out:

'Here I am! Did you miss me, my loves?'

She hurried to their grave. When Alexandra had died, they had made her a very large grave plot. So luckily, when her husband had died, she had been able to bury him next to Alexandra. Nikoletta loved the fact that they were together. In death now, no one could separate them. She couldn't wait until she, too, was with them. She wished she could just lie down and join them. The unbearable sadness that consumed her would be gone. It would all be so much better. She tidied up the already perfectly maintained grave.

'Anastasios, it's all just so hard! How can I live like this? Please, take me with you!'

She lay on the grave of her loved ones, and wept. She lay there, weeping, until she had no more tears to cry. The afternoon sun was edging ever closer to the horizon, so she knew she had better start off for home, before it got dark. This was the part she hated the most. Leaving Anastasios, and Alexandra. The only people who brought joy into her miserable life.

'I'll be back tomorrow, my dears! I'll never forget you. I'll never abandon you! Goodbye, my darlings, I love you both so much!'

The walk home, as usual, was cruel. Her heart remained back at the cemetery. Physically, by this time of the day, it was very difficult for her to walk the two kilometres. Going to the cemetery always felt easy, with the anticipation of seeing her loved ones, but returning home, on the other hand, was always incredibly hard on her. It was on the return journey, after leaving her loved ones, that she would always think about how lonely she was. She hardly ever saw anyone from Kodris, she didn't live that far from the town, but she had no form of transport. Her few friends were always busy looking after their grandchildren, and cleaning their children's houses. That was something Nikoletta would love to be doing as well. That's what you were supposed to be doing at her age. Not struggling, endlessly, on your own. As she took step, after step, she



wondered how long she could continue in this way. Was there any point to her going on? Was a life of pain, and solitude, worth living? She served no purpose to anyone. What was the point of her existence? She had no role in society. As far back as she could remember, she had been a wife, a mother, she had things to do, and people to look after. Her role, now, should be like that of her friends. She should be looking after her grandson, helping her son. Her role in life should be, as it always had been, to be part of the family, not just visiting dead loved ones in the cemetery. Living on her own, with no one to help, just seemed to her to be a pointless existence. It was a life passing, leaving behind no trace. A life serving no purpose to anyone. It was a needless life, filled only with loneliness, and despair. As darkness fell, she arrived at her house. She could hear the phone ringing, so she hurried inside, to answer.

'Hello?'

'Hi mum! How are you? It's good to hear you.'

'Giorgios! Oh, Giorgios, it's so good to hear from you. How is Andreas, and Eleni?'

'We are all fine, mum. What about you? How are things with you?'

'Oh, just the usual, nothing new here. Everything is fine. Is Andreas there?'

'Sorry, mum, he's off playing soccer. He's getting to be a pretty good player, you would be proud of him. I'll make sure he is here, the next time I call.'

'Do you think you will be able to visit soon?'

'I'm not sure, mum. Money is pretty tight, these days. My job doesn't pay much, and Helen just works part-time. It's all very expensive here. You wouldn't believe what I just spent for a new pair of soccer boots, for Andy. Hopefully next year, mum.'

'I understand. Well, I will tell your father, and Alexandra, that you called. They always love hearing about you.'

'Ok, mum, I'll call again soon, I promise. Bye!'

'Bye, my dear!'

Nikoletta hung up the phone, and collapsed on a chair, weeping. She felt like she would never see any of them again. She didn't even know who they were, anymore. Helen, and Andy? They now had new names. She felt like she had lost everyone. She had no one in her life anymore. Her life was totally empty. All she had was her suffering. Her life felt so meaningless, so grueling. How could she go on like this? She felt the heavy weight of solitude descend on her. Sometimes her total isolation made her feel even physically ill. After a light dinner she went to bed early, hoping to block out her pain by sleeping. At least when she slept, she didn't suffer.

When the next morning came, Nikoletta woke up to the emptiness of her house, and her life. She knew she had to get out of bed, but she just lay there, and cried, for a bit. She felt the burden of yet another day ahead of her. Her back ached from the previous day's potato digging, so she decided she would have to leave the potatoes for another day. She just couldn't manage it, with such a painful back. It was crucial for Nikoletta to harvest those potatoes. Over the winter months she would be able to swap some of her potatoes,

with other people from Kodris. She would barter her potatoes for other food items, such as olives, or pickled fish. A lot of people, in Greece's new economy, stocked up on whatever they could get, in abundance, in order to swap with others, for other types of food. People would grow different things, preserve them, and then swap them for other goods. What was unheard of just a few short years ago, was now common practise. When you didn't have much money, you needed to invent other ways of getting by. A new economy, based on trading, had grown rapidly. While potatoes weren't really a traditional Greek food, in the harsh winter people would trade for whatever vegetables they could get. In this way, she would be able to afford to both eat, and pay all her bills, or at least, that was what she hoped. When you are living on such a small pension, it doesn't take much to throw out your balance. One small extra cost could be disastrous to her monthly budget. Painfully, Nikoletta got out of bed, and prepared herself for the new day. At least she would see her friend Elektra that morning. She was going to bring her out some groceries, and if she had time, stop in for a cup of coffee. Before Elektra's visit, Nikoletta wanted to make sure the house was tidy. She had always prided herself on keeping a clean house, and even though her life felt so empty, she didn't want to let things go. In the back of her mind she knew that if she started to let things slide, they would soon fall apart completely. Even though she didn't know why she bothered to keep the house in good shape, or for who, the thought of becoming a slovenly person terrorised her. It felt like she was on a precipice, and, with just one little step, she could slip into the abyss. Above all else, she wanted to hold onto the semblance of normality. If things started to slip, she would soon find herself not being able to get out of bed in the mornings. It seemed odd to her, that in her empty, sad world, she still cared what others thought about her. Or, maybe, she did it for the memory of her Anastasios? She didn't really understand why, but she knew it was important to maintain a dignified front, and to carry on with what little strength she could muster. Nikoletta didn't want people to realise how sad she was. She kept her desperation hidden, and maintained a false facade. For as long as she could, she would dig out whatever strength she could, and she would pretend to be living a worthwhile life. She would pretend that her life had some purpose. Shortly after 10 o'clock she heard a car pull up outside her house. She rushed outside to greet her friend.

'Hello, Elektra, what a cold morning it was today! How are you?'

'You wouldn't believe it! I've never been so busy in my life! At my age! Those two grandkids are running me off my feet. You don't know how lucky you are to have such peace and quiet, I'll tell you.'

They both entered the house, and Elektra put a cardboard box, full of groceries, on the kitchen table. Elektra was a solid looking woman, around the same age as Nikoletta, with an ever present smile. Her face showed some lines of age, but her skin was smooth. With her long, straight hair dyed black, and her nice clothes, she looked many years younger than her friend. Quite probably, because life had been kinder to her.

'Was the hundred Euros enough?' asked Nikoletta.

'Yes, here's your change. It was plenty.'

She put the leftover money on the table, next to the groceries.

'I'll put the coffee on, if you have time.'

'Thanks, Niky, that would be lovely. I am so tired! Those little rascals are killing me. Have you heard from Giorgios?'

'Yes! He phoned last night. They are all doing well. Apparently, Andreas is becoming a good soccer player, I'm so proud of him.'

Nikoletta poured out two cups of coffee.

'You are very lucky. You must be so happy, knowing that they are building a new future for themselves. Things are just getting worse, and worse here. None of us has a future! Greece is ruined. We will never get out from under this crisis.'

Nikoletta smiled at her friend.

'Yes, Giorgios has done a good thing, especially for Andreas.'

As she said it, she felt a stab of pain through her heart. While it was devastating for her, she knew that, in fact, it was the only way to guarantee a bright future for Andreas. For Andreas to prosper, she had to endure this painful existence.

'You know, they call him Andrew, now.'

Elektra laughed.

'Andrew! Well, I guess they have to adapt to their new country. Andrew! Who would have thought, when we were young, that it would all have come to this. That goddamn Euro! That's what ruined us, joining the rich man's club, when we weren't rich. Before we changed to the Euro, we could all afford to live well. Wages were never very high, but everyone had more than enough to live on. People were happy, do you remember? Now, all people talk about is how bad things are, and how much worse they are going to get. I don't know where we are going.'

The two of them finished drinking their coffees, in silence. Each to her own thoughts. Nikoletta sighed.

'Yes, they are definitely better off, the hell out of here.'

After seeing her friend off, Nikoletta slumped in a chair. She couldn't deny it. Giorgios had done a good thing. There really hadn't been any other options open to him. Tears started streaming down her face. She lowered her face into her hands, and sobbed, quietly. After crying for a while, she pulled herself together. She looked at the photo of Alexandra, hanging on the wall. Her beautiful little girl. If she hadn't died she would be 42 years old. Probably she would have had a family, and a full life of her own. However, for Nikoletta, she would always be ten years old. Her little girl. Her beautiful little girl. None of it was fair, but she just didn't know who to blame. Both her children were far away from her. She knew she must never give up, she had to remain strong through it all. Teetering on the edge, as she was, she knew that if she didn't hold herself together, the cracks in her life would grow, and rip her apart. It felt to her as if it would only take a small push, and she would fall over the edge. If that happened, she knew there would be

no coming back. She barely had the strength to carry on as it was. If she fell over the edge, her life would disintegrate. She thought about her friend. How ironic life could be. Elektra seemed to envy her peaceful life, and the fact that Giorgios had managed to start a new life with his family, in a better place. Nikoletta, on the other hand, envied her, with her grandchildren to look after, and her children living nearby. It seemed to her to be one of the great ironies of life. Her friend, who had it all, envied her, who had nothing. As she prepared her frugal lunch, she thought about how much her life had changed, as a direct result of her country's failed economy. The politicians, and bankers, seemed to be still living the good life. The real burden of Greece's failure was borne on the shoulders of the common people. People like her. People who had had no part in deciding their countries path, were now bearing the full brunt of the failure, caused by those decisions. None of it seemed fair to her. Nikoletta had stopped watching the television news shows completely. Everything they said just made her feel angry. Everyone was blaming everyone else, for Greece's failure, but no one had any real solutions. While they were just talking, endlessly, Greece just went from bad to worse. She couldn't stand to listen to them any more. She knew that there would be no solutions in what remained of her lifetime.

That afternoon, Nikoletta decided to walk to Lake Klistas, where her beautiful Alexandra had drowned, all those years before. It was about three kilometres from her house, further up the road towards the mountains. She didn't really like going there, but she knew that occasionally she should, to keep the memory of her once happy family alive. As she walked along the road, towards the lake, she thought of how much she hated seeing the great beauty of the lake, which had brought her such pain. The lake was small, shaped like a basin, and on three sides it was surrounded by tall hills covered in trees. The beauty of the place was beyond description. Nikoletta could never understand how such great beauty could have caused such great pain. Anastasios used to take all the family there, through the summer months, for picnics, and swimming. Before Alexandra's tragic death, it had been a place of great joy to all the family. Now it just evoked memories of great heartbreak. When Nikoletta arrived at the carpark, she was surprised to see a car there. The lake was usually well frequented through the summer months, but by autumn, with the colder weather, and frigid water, there was usually no one there. As she walked out towards the lake front, she saw what looked like a young man, standing looking at the lake. Virtually as soon as he came into her view, he started walking, fully dressed, into the cold water. At first Nikoletta didn't understand what was happening, but, as the young man went deeper, and deeper, into the water, a realisation dawned over her. He was committing suicide. A rush of anger went through her body. She couldn't stand the thought of someone willingly wanting to die, in the lake that had taken her sweet little angel. It felt to her like he was desecrating a sacred place. The anger gave her strength, and she rushed into the cold water. By the time she reached the young man, he had already disappeared, under the water. She dove under the water, where she had last seen him, grabbed him, by his clothes, and pulled him back up, out of the water. As he

surfaced he gasped, deeply, for breath. Neither spoke a word as Nikoletta dragged him back to the shoreline. They both collapsed on the pebbly beach. After a few moments of struggling to breathe regularly, the young man turned to Nikoletta and said, in English:

'Why did you stop me? You should have left me to die.'

The anger in Nikoletta had now passed, after the great physical effort she had made to pull the young man from the lake, she was now exhausted.

'My daughter drowned in this lake. I couldn't let anyone else die here. Not here.'

The young man looked at her, and started to cry. Nikoletta, now that her anger had passed, could see that he was in great pain. Something that she was rather an expert on. Her heart went out to him. She put her hand on his shoulder.

'Why do you want to kill yourself?'

'It's that....she left me. I just can't....I see her everywhere. I just can't take it. All I think about is her. It's too much. I just can't....'

He was sobbing uncontrollably. He looked so young, to feel such pain. He could only have been in his mid thirties. He was a slim man, with short, dark hair. With his blue eyes, he was a handsome looking man. Nikoletta put her arms around him, and held him tightly.

'Hey, come on. You're young. You will find someone else. You can't kill yourself for something like that.'

'I love her so much. I see her everywhere. I just can't take it. It's too much. She doesn't want to be with me.'

'Listen, you better drive us to my place, fast. We are both freezing. If we don't get warmed up, we will both get pneumonia. You don't want to kill me too, do you?'

The young man was not worried about his plight, but on hearing Nikoletta's words, he realised the danger he had put her in.

'No, of course not. You're right. I'm very sorry. Come on, let's go. I'll drive you home.'

They both stood up, and helped each other to his car. Their soaking wet clothes were freezing cold. Nikoletta's body almost felt numb with the cold. Nikoletta pointed out the direction, and in a short time, they were at her house. Nikoletta showed the young man to the bathroom.

'Get in the shower, warm yourself up, and I will bring you in some dry clothes.'

'No, you go first, really, you are such a nice person. What you did for me was very heroic. Please, I can wait.'

'Ok, but go into that bedroom, take off your wet things, and put this bathrobe on.'

Nikoletta had a quick shower, under the hot water. She didn't waste too much time. She didn't want the young man to suffer the cold for too long. She quickly finished, and showed him where everything was. While he was in the shower, Nikoletta found him some clothes that Giorgios had left there. After a short while, the two of them were sitting at the kitchen table, warmed up, and drinking a hot cup of tea.

'What was your daughter's name?'

'Alexandra. What about you? What's your name? I'm Nikoletta.'

'I'm very sorry about Alexandra. My name is Andrew.'

On hearing his name, Nikoletta laughed loudly. Then, as the last echo of her laughter faded away, she felt a strange feeling come over her. Had she just laughed? The sound of her laughter sounded almost foreign, reverberating around her house. It was a house where no laughter had been heard, for many years. Could she still laugh? Was that still possible? While Nikoletta dealt with the ramifications of having heard herself laugh, Andrew looked at her inquisitively.

'Oh, I'm sorry, Andrew, let me explain.'

Nikoletta explained to Andrew about her son's move to England, and the transformation of her grandson's name from Andreas, to Andrew.

'Maybe you should call me Andreas, then.'

That made them both laugh. Nikoletta felt very strange laughing, but, from deep inside her, she realised that it felt good. She couldn't understand where the urge to laugh was coming from. Maybe it was caused by a release of the tension, after the dramatic events that had taken place at the lake. In any case, she decided to just enjoy it.

'Listen, Andreas,' she said with a laugh, 'I will cook us up some hot dinner. Do you like potatoes?'

'Hey, I'm English, what do you think?'

They both burst out laughing, again. It seemed incredible to Nikoletta that, so shortly after an attempted suicide, they could be laughing so much. It felt so good, she decided not to question it. Strangely enough, she hadn't enjoyed herself so much, in years. Many years. Nikoletta turned on the heating in the house, and started to prepare dinner.

'Do you want to tell me about the woman who left you, Andrew?'

'Not really. Not yet, anyway. Maybe never. We'll see.'

'That's alright. If you want to, feel free to. If you don't want to, that's alright too. To be honest, I'm not sure how much advice an old Greek woman could give to you anyway.'

'Thanks Nikoletta. Listen, don't sell yourself short. You are a very nice person. Actually, I'm a bit surprised that you aren't angry with me, for having tried to kill myself.'

Nikoletta looked at Andrew. If anyone could understand suffering, it was her. As she prepared dinner, she told Andrew of the hardships she faced, and how sad her life was. She let it all out, as she had never done before, with anyone. It felt good to finally put into words, all the pain she had held inside. It was good to tell it all to someone. It felt very therapeutic. She had been holding onto it all for far too long. The pain had just kept on building up inside her, with no release. As she recounted all her hardships, she could begin to feel the sadness leaving her body. She felt a strange sensation come over her. She couldn't really understand what it was she was feeling. Then it hit her. She felt happy. As the realisation of feeling happy came to her, she almost felt guilty. It almost felt as if she no longer had the right to feel happy. Nikoletta hadn't felt so many differing

emotions for so long, she felt very confused. She looked at Andrew, and thought of him, floating dead, in the lake. She looked at the photo of Alexandra, on the wall. Alexandra looked down at her, smiling. It seemed to Nikoletta like Alexandra was thanking her for not letting another person drown in the lake. She burst into tears. Andrew jumped up, and put his arms around her.

'I can't begin to understand all you have been through, but I can certainly help you a bit around the house. I can dig up the rest of those potatoes for you, and prepare the garden for winter. It would be good for me, too, to have some purpose in life.'

Nikoletta wiped the tears from her eyes, and smiled at him.

'Thanks, that would be a big help, really. With my back, I just can't manage, anymore. I really need that potato crop, to get me through winter.'

Nikoletta finished preparing dinner for them. They both ate in silence, each reflecting on the days events. After finishing dinner, Nikoletta washed the dishes. Andrew got up, and started to dry them.

'That's alright, don't worry, I will do it, Andrew.'

'No, really Nikoletta, let me help. I want to.'

'Fine. Where are you from, precisely?'

'I was born, and raised in Swindon, but after going to university in Oxford, I moved to Portsmouth, down on the coast.'

'Is it nice there? I've never been to England.'

'Yeah, it's not bad. I was working as a computer technician for the yacht racing. Really I had studied applied physics, but actually, out in the real world, there's not a lot of that around!'

'I don't think there's a lot of that in Kodris, either.'

They looked at each other, and smiled.

'Unfortunately, I soon realised that I had wasted a lot of my time.'

'Listen, Andrew, don't be so negative. It's a great achievement to have studied. You should be proud of that.'

'Yeah, I guess.'

Nikoletta felt very tired physically, after all the energy she had used to drag Andrew out of the water, and emotionally drained. After cleaning up, she prepared a bedroom for her guest, and they both had an early night.

Nikoletta slept the best she had in a long time, and woke up refreshed, and feeling unusually good. Normally she would feel miserable upon awakening, and usually she would cry, but that morning the tears didn't come. She quickly got up, and dressed, in a hurry to get breakfast on for Andrew. From the kitchen window she could see Andrew, sitting on a bench outside, with a blanket wrapped around him. She put on a heavy coat and went outside, to greet him.

'Good morning, Nikoletta. You really have a wonderful place here. It's just beautiful. Greece is such a beautiful country, and you have a very nice slice of it right here.'

'Good morning, to you. Yes, it is. Sometimes I forget how lovely it is here, and just see all the hard work it takes me to run the place.'

'Hey, let's shoot into town for some breakfast, my shout.'

'No, not me, I couldn't. I haven't had breakfast in a coffee shop for many years now. It's too expensive.'

'Listen, Nikoletta, I'm paying. I have quite a bit of money, and I would love us to have breakfast together. You can show me a good place for it. What do you say?'

Nikoletta felt a rush of excitement go through her. Breakfast in town? Why not?

'Ok, let's do it!'

'Don't worry, after breakfast I am going to get right onto those potatoes. Can I ask you a favour? Can you not tell everyone what I tried to do yesterday? I would feel pretty stupid.'

'Of course I won't. I will tell everyone that you used to work with my son, Giorgios, in England, and that when he heard that you were going to be traveling around Greece, he asked you to stop in, and help me harvest my potato crop.'

'Brilliant story. That will work well, thanks. Over breakfast you better fill me in on all the details about your son, in case someone asks me.'

They got ready, and drove into Kodris, in Andrew's car. Nikoletta showed Andrew where to park, and they went into one of the local coffee shops. While chatting over breakfast, Nikoletta looked around. To her, it seemed like such a big event, but really it was just two people having breakfast, in the same way most Greek people did. It occurred to her that her living in isolation, in her house, was probably not good for her. A lot of her sadness was probably due to her lack of contact with other people. She was always on her own, with no one to talk to. It felt good to be part of society again. She realised that she needed change in her life, big change. After their abundant breakfast, Andrew drove them home. True to his word, Andrew threw himself into his role as gardener. While he was working, Nikoletta sat nearby. She told him what to do, and where to store the potatoes. Andrew was young, and strong, making light work of what, for Nikoletta, had been such a hard, back breaking job.

'You know, Nikoletta, I would love to stay here for a while. I can pay my way. I sold my flat in Portsmouth, so I have plenty of money. I could help out with the heavy work, and pay my board, as well.'

'Well, I can't afford to say no to an offer like that. That way, I could afford to buy some better food for you.'

Nikoletta loved the idea of having someone around, not just to do the hard work, but also someone to talk to, and to look after. By lunchtime, he had achieved what Nikoletta would have taken a week to do. Obviously, Nikoletta had always been on hand to give him directions. She had played her part. They went back inside, and after Andrew cleaned himself up, Nikoletta served them up a simple lunch.

'Another few hours, this afternoon, and I will have finished.'



'Why don't you finish up tomorrow morning? This afternoon I would like to take you to see my Alexandra, and Anastasios. Would you like to come and see them?'

'I would be honoured.' said Andrew, with a rush of tears to his eyes.

Nikoletta washed up, with Andrew now firmly in his role of drying the dishes. They both put on their jackets, and Andrew reached for his car keys, sitting on a side cabinet. Nikoletta stopped him, with her hand.

'Let's just walk to the cemetery. It's a lovely, sunny day, and I enjoy walking there.'

'Sure, that sounds nice. I can take in this lovely Greek paradise.'

They set out, in the warm afternoon sun, for the two kilometre walk. To Nikoletta, the hills had never looked so beautiful. The autumn colours were stunning. She felt so good, her strength was coming back to her. When they came into view of the cemetery, she proudly showed it to Andrew.

'What do you think? It's lovely isn't it?'

'What a beautiful cemetery, Nikoletta. It's just so peaceful here. It really is nice.'

Andrew followed Nikoletta to her loved ones grave.

'Here they are, Andrew. Anastasio, and Alexandra.'

As they stood over her loved ones gravestone, Andrew broke into tears. Nikoletta could feel the tears welling up inside her as well, but she fought them off. She didn't want to cry anymore. She had cried enough. It was time for some happiness to enter her life. They both sat down on the grass, in the warm sunshine.

'Andrew, you can stay at my place, for as long as you like. I really appreciate your help, but I would also love some company. With my family partly here in the cemetery, and the rest far away, it is very lonely for me. You would be doing me a big favour. Maybe it would be good for you too, to get your life back on track. We could help each other.'

'I would love that. I have nowhere else to be. You know, something strange happened to me yesterday. I was thinking about it this morning, in the garden. I can't really explain it, but, it's almost like when you pulled me out of that cold water, I was reborn. I know that sounds ridiculous, but....well, I can't really explain it, because I don't really understand it myself. In any case, I feel good here. Maybe, just maybe, my life can start again. From here.'

'Well, if you noticed how that little hussy, in the coffee shop, was looking at you....'

'Really?'

Andrew smiled at the thought of that. Nikoletta loved to see him smile. This could really be good for the both of them.

'You stay away from her, she's nothing but trouble, that one!'

They both laughed. Nikoletta felt no guilt at laughing. She looked at her loved ones gravestone. Yes, she could laugh, even here. In fact, it felt good to laugh, in the presence of her Anastasio, and Alexandra.

## Becoming McGregor

'It's time to get up, Gregory. You don't want to be late for your first day, do you?'

I was already awake, and just dwelling on the coming days events. I had been too excited to sleep much, and couldn't wait for my new life to start. It felt very early, it was still dark outside, but I felt sure that mum could read a clock correctly. It was time.

'Right, mum, I'm awake!'

'Come on then, breakfast is ready.'

I got out of bed, and looked out of the window. My city was lit up by thousands of house lights. The city was awake, and getting ready for a new week. My week. The first day of my new life had arrived. I put on my dressing gown, and headed out to the kitchen, where mum had laid out the biggest breakfast assortment I had ever seen. I looked at her, and laughed.

'How many people are coming for breakfast, mum?'

She must have been in the kitchen preparing everything for hours. I wasn't even very hungry, but I knew that, at this point, I would have to make an effort.

'I wanted to make a good breakfast for you, on your first day. I'm so very proud of you.'

I could see the tears welling up in her eyes. Nothing new there, in fact it was really the norm now. Our new normal.

'Come on, mum, don't cry. You sit down, too, and we'll eat it together.'

She sat down, but she didn't eat anything. I hadn't really seen her eat anything much since dad had died, about four months before. Our house was a house of sadness. Where once happy people had lived, now there were only sorrowful ghosts. Mum used to be such a strong woman. She had been the rock of the house. The very foundations of the home had been built on her once strong, capable shoulders. Now those foundations were shaky, and felt like they could give way at any time. She used to walk around the house with such surety, now she would hesitate, as if she was unsure of her footing. The sturdy floorboards under her feet had given way to unpredictable surfaces, which were difficult to walk on. I hated to see her like this.

'I wish you could have continued with your studies. It's what your father wanted, too.'

'Mum, I'm seventeen now, it's time for me to contribute to the household. Anyway, I was sick of studying, I'm happy to get out into the world. I really am.'

That was very true. I had had no desire to continue studying. I never had. It was more my parents, especially dad, who wanted that. I was eager to get out into the world,

and make my way. I had long wanted to discover life, be a part of it. Now, I really had to. Mum didn't earn enough to pay for everything, and with dad gone, there was really no question about it. We needed more money coming in. I tried to make a dent in the breakfast buffet.

'To see you like this makes me very proud. Your father would be proud of you, too.'

As usual, her tears were never far away. Mum looked to me like a person who had set out on her way confidently, but who had been caught up in a dreadful fog, and had lost her bearings. She had trouble navigating even the easiest of things. Even the things which had been her responsibility before dad died, were now difficult for her. Her cloak of confidence had been ripped away, exposing deep rifts of uncertainty in her. It was frightening for me to see her like that. A son should never see his mother in that light. She had always been so strong, so dauntless. Her beautiful face, always previously made up just right, was now a mask of sorrow, with deep lines. She had always looked after her brown, shoulder length hair, but things like that just didn't have any importance to her anymore. Now she would barely brush her hair. Her once lovely brown eyes now looked like the eyes of a subdued dog, which had been beaten into submission. It was like she didn't feel that her life had meaning, without dad at her side. She had only existed as part of a couple. Alone she was nothing. She constantly spoke of him, with me, reminding me of what he had thought of things. I always felt a little uncomfortable talking about dad with her, because really, I felt like I hadn't known him that well. He had just been dad. He had always worked long hours, providing well for his family, but the two of us hadn't ever spent much time together. Most of the time he had been at work, and, when he was at home, I would probably have been in my room, listening to music, or surfing the net. I vowed to myself that I would never tell mum that. I would share her pain, and shoulder my part of the burden. No matter how fraudulent it sometimes made me feel.

'It was very nice of Roger to find this job for you. He was always such a good friend of your father. Do you remember the name of the man you have to ask for?'

'Yes, mum. I've got it all. Don't worry. I like the thought of doing landscape gardening. Working outside will be good for me. Ok, mum, I'm off to get washed up. It's just about time for the two of us to head off to work.'

It felt so good to say that. I was about to enter the workforce. I was going to get out there, into the world. A whole new part of life was about to open up before me. School was over, work waited for me. I felt a great sense of excitement, tinged with a lot of nervousness.

Mum dropped me off outside the address they had given us, just off the Great North Road. It was in a fairly well to do suburb, with lovely, large houses. I would have to get the bus home, but it was just a short distance, so that would be no problem. Looking over the fence, I could see a flurry of activity going on, even at this early hour. I had the name of the foreman in my pocket, but on entering the gate, there was no doubt as to who that would be. There he was, standing there, in all his glory, yelling orders to all and sundry,

throwing his arms around in all directions. He was a monster of a man, with a shock of red hair, wild and unkempt. There could be no doubt that he was the man I was looking for, the foreman, Ron Campbell. I walked up to him, with a bit of apprehension.

'Excuse me, sir, my name is Gregory Finch. I was told to report to you.'

He sized me up in a flash.

'Right you are, lad. Pick up that shovel, and start bringing in some sand for the boys laying the cobblestones.'

He certainly wasn't the sort of person who wasted time in small talk. With his loud, booming voice, and strong Scottish accent, he sounded like a colonel barking orders to his troops, before sending them into battle. I picked up the shovel, threw it over my shoulder like a rifle, and headed over to the pile of sand. I had no sooner started to fill up a wheelbarrow with the sand, when he yelled at me.

'Come on, McGregor, get that sand flying! The boys are relying on you. Don't let them down!'

I looked over at him, and laughed. He looked at me, and laughed as well. In that moment, still feeling a bit nervous about starting my new job, and my new life, I knew that things were going to be alright. I was out in the world, where I wanted to be, and it was all going to work out. From that point on, my name for everyone on the site was McGregor. I loved it. It made me feel like a scottish infantryman, under the command of my rambunctious colonel. It made me feel like I was part of the squad. All that first week, Colonel Campbell led his troops bravely, against all they could throw at us. We, his loyal infantrymen, would follow him anywhere. We would not let our courageous leader down. I learned a lot about my new job, and how to do battle bravely. I would throw myself into every attack, as if the lives of my fellow infantrymen depended on me. I followed all the instructions to the letter, determined to do my best. By the end of the week I was physically tired, but intensely pleased. I knew that there was a place for me out in the world. I would be able to make my way. I could survive out there. I knew that I would be able to contribute to help mum run the house, and have some money left over for me. It felt good. My life, my real life, had just started. On Friday afternoon, the colonel came up to me, and thumped me on the shoulder, with one of his gigantic hands.

'Well done, McGregor. You're a good lad. You're going to fit in well with the other boys. Now, be off home with you, get some rest, because next week we will be doing it all again.'

The colonel wasn't one to give credit lightly, so I knew he really meant it. It gave me a feeling of great satisfaction. I had played my part well. I had gone into battle, and I had given it my all. As I walked out of the gate, I looked back, and admired the results of our week's work. We had laid a cobblestone driveway, with a pathway leading around one side of the house. On the other side of the house we had put in a retaining wall, made with pine trunks. The following week we would plant small shrubs, and flowers across the top of it. The foundations for putting in a small fountain had been laid. We were

creating beauty, where there had been ugliness. Over the roof of the house I could see the Waitakere Ranges, gleaming splendidly in the late afternoon sun. The job I was learning would further embellish my already beautiful city. I was to be paid for adding beauty to beauty. One week into my new career, and I knew that I had found that which I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I would study as well as I could, under the directions of the colonel, both for him, and for myself. I returned home feeling very satisfied with myself. That weekend I wanted to be there as much as possible for mum. I wanted to show off to her my new found skills. On Saturday morning I got stuck into the man's work around the house. I cut the lawn, and cleaned out the gutters. All the while I could hear the colonel's voice ringing in my ears.

'Move it, McGregor! Get those damn gutters unblocked!'

I understood that now I was the man of the house, not just some little kid studying in his room, or downloading music. I had to step up, and do that which was expected of me. Mum would wander out occasionally, to follow my progress, and I could see that she was very proud of me. That really made me feel good.

'I've made us an apple pie, your favourite. Have a break, Gregory. Come on, let's have a slice of pie, and a cup of tea.'

'Ok, mum, I'll just put the ladder away, and I will be right in.'

After putting away my weapons of war, I washed my hands, and joined mum in the kitchen. She was beaming with joy. Although, as usual, I could see that she had been crying. Hopefully, this time they had been tears of joy. Well, that's what I wanted to think, anyway. Her tears of sadness were being washed away with tears of joy.

'You know, you don't need to do all that work. You must be tired after your week with Mr. Campbell. I can call someone to help with those jobs around the house.'

She looked at me, slightly expectantly.

'No, mum. I will be doing these jobs from now on. I'm no longer a schoolboy, I'm a man now. It's time for me to help out around the house. Besides, it's all good training for me. I love working with my hands, and I think I'm pretty good at it. The colonel is teaching me a lot.'

'The colonel?'

'I mean Mr. Campbell. I call him the colonel.'

She looked at me inquisitively. Probably for the first time ever she saw that I had things going on that she knew nothing about. On the one hand I wanted to tell her all about my battle training, but, on the other hand, I quite liked the idea of having things that were mine. It made me feel more grown up. More independent. I had my own life going on.

'You know, mum, we are going to be alright. With the money I'm now earning, we can cover all our costs, and live pretty well. You don't need to worry about things. We are going to get through this.'

Mum looked at me and smiled. How long had it been since I had seen her smile? I

could tell that she was surprised at the new me. The new confident me. The new Scottish infantryman, who was going to take care of everything.

'Your father would be so proud of you.'

The tears, never far from her eyes, streaked down her cheeks. I felt like crying too, but I didn't. Those days were over. Our new life had started, we would forge ahead, together, towards as good a life as we could make.

'Listen, Gregory, don't you worry about me. You need to get on with your own life. I'll be alright.'

'No, mum. We are in this together. I will always be here for you. I'm not going anywhere. It's the two of us, mum, we can do this.'

I think we both realised that eventually I would get on with my life, away from mum. Eventually I would start my own family, but that would be far in the future. For now McGregor was going to stick with his people. My main mission in life would be to look after mum, and see her through this difficult time. I could see that mum was surprised at the new me. To be honest, I was pretty surprised myself. I had never spoken to her like that before. Previously I had been just a teenager, doing things, and behaving like all teenagers do. Now, I was acting like a man. I couldn't really understand what had happened, to bring on this radical change in me. Was it because I had started working? Was it because of the transformation from schoolboy to working man? Maybe it was because I had become McGregor, a fighter led by his courageous leader. I couldn't really tell. What I did know was that now I was the man of the house, and I would perform that role to the best of my abilities. Mum had looked after me up until this point. She had been the rock in my life. She had worked for me, and loved me. All that she had done for me, while I was growing up, had made me the man I now was. Now that she needed me, I would be there for her. The roles were now reversed, and it was time for me to be the strong one, helping her through this difficult time. I vowed to myself that I wouldn't let her down. I would be the strong shoulders that would carry the two of us ahead. Now I was McGregor, and McGregor would never let his people down.

## The Living of a Life

The weight of the past  
    A heavy load  
His only friend, his knife  
    A mystic bond  
The stream of his thoughts  
    His only conversation  
Where once kindness flourished  
    Now lived distrust  
The sacred vow broken  
    His only fault  
A distant life, borne only in memories  
    Fragments clinging  
Through everything he still walked tall  
    Survival his only victory  
He longed for a sense of freedom  
    A release  
No more could he be saved  
    The voices silenced  
With difficult measure he advanced  
    Lost in uncertainty  
No way forward, or back  
    An everlasting present  
Condemned to this existence  
    This unkind life

## When Evil Descends

You who were different, your face didn't match,  
Someone was needed, to take the blame.  
On the streets of hate, you were chosen,  
Chased down, herded and beaten,  
    the trains were filled.  
The savagery of man, unleashed on fellow man.  
The crying of children, screams eternal,  
    the presence of fear.  
Orders were barked, the dogs of war rabid,  
The sign over the gates, those gates of work,  
    the work of death.  
Thundering noise filled the air, confusion and dread.  
The fires ablaze, black smoke billowed wild,  
Spirits set free, flew back to their grace.  
Those unchosen, doomed to yet worse,  
    to die too easy.  
People no longer people, numbers not names,  
Written in ink, etched on your arm.  
The cruelty of man, the inglorious became kings,  
    kings born from hate.  
The power in their hands, a weapon of war.  
When all was finished, nobody had known,  
What had been done in their name.  
"This was not us, nor had we seen",  
    the blameless,  
Hiding behind walls of shame.



## A Life Fades

Colours flooded his senses, smells of places long since lost.  
The ocean's waves crashing on the rocks,  
Wild currents swirled in his mind.

    The face in the mirror,  
        a person unknown,

Outlines of shapes, he reached out to touch.  
Her face, blurred, lost to time,  
The shape of her cheeks, her smile, her lips.  
Where was she now, where had she gone?

    This strange life,  
        this unknown existence,

Someone's life he found himself in.  
The strange feel of objects, foreign in his hands,  
Shapes invoking smells, forcing memories.  
Rules he didn't understand governed his day,

    His dreams,  
        his escape.

In his dreams she was there, smiling, welcoming.  
The wind blew through his thoughts,  
He could smell the sand.

    Looking at the ground,  
        far below,

He saw his freedom.  
As he flew through the sky, he could see her,  
    Waiting, sitting on the beach,  
        her arms outstretched.

## A Journey Home

The small boat danced across the waves,  
white and sleek.  
Lost in serenity, the sweetness of the sun,  
His mind adrift as the waves cut by.  
Enticing smells enveloped him, thoughts of far off places,  
A sense of peaceful beauty,  
the crux of life.  
Lost in his thoughts he had not seen,  
The burgeoning wind, the threat from the sky.  
A violent crash of the waves,  
his languor broke,  
The fury had him in its hold, a grip of fear.  
Savage waves crashed over the hull,  
Consumed with panic, he sought escape.  
Convulsed by the immensity,  
he knew he was lost.  
The rain slashed his face,  
Thoughts of his life, all not yet done.  
Smashing glass cut his body,  
his death written.  
Devoured by the tumult, the boat succumbed.  
Thrown by the waves he resisted no more,  
he let his body free.  
A warmth entered him, the fear released,  
The sea was his home, if die he must,  
there was no better way.  
Consumed by the depths, a smile grew on his face,  
His life merged with the water,  
he had come home.

With my thanks  
I hope I have given you some pleasure