

Through the Cracks

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Chapter One: Avenue of Change

I could feel a swell of optimism surge through me, as I stepped out onto the street. I walked tall, I strode with purpose, I held the secret of life in my hands. Nothing, and no one, could hold me back. The beautiful warm sun on my face whispered to me that only good things could happen that day. Negativity and endless soul-searching were not the order of the day. I would think only positive thoughts, and the world would fall at my feet. Positivity would create positivity. The day was mine. I could make of it what I wanted. The warming sun washed away the sea of endless doubts that had interrupted, yet again, my night's sleep. But the new dawn had brought with it a new faith. I was floating on a wave of elation, buoyed by the charm of the new day. Then I saw her. Her pain more than evident. My heart went out to her instantly. Her obvious sadness jarred me back to reality. I had never seen such a desperately mournful expression before, I had no choice but to stop, and ask if all was well. I had been strolling, with great lightness, up Dante street, my new street, towards the neighbourhood coffee shop, when I had seen her. She was sitting on a bench. Well, slumped on a bench, really, with an excruciating look of pain and sorrow in her eyes. She looked terribly in need of help. I couldn't bring myself to just pass her by. Her pain cried out to me, almost calling to me by name. I knew that I had to try to help her. I stopped beside her.

‘Are you alright? Do you need some help?’

She didn't even look up, or acknowledge my presence in any way. I refused to be deterred. I sat down next to her, and tried again.

‘Can I do anything for you? I would like to help you if I can.’

Her reply was mumbled, barely audible.

‘It's too late.’

‘What is? Maybe it's not too late. Do you want to talk about it?’

I probed gently. There was a slight pause.

‘No.’

The few words had come from her mouth, without any change in her expression, or posture. My carefree mood had no effect on her.

‘OK, fine, I will just sit here with you for a bit. If you change your mind, you will find that I am a very good listener.’

I sat down beside her, in silence. She didn’t say another word, so I didn’t push her further, and decided to leave her in peace. Upon looking at her a bit better, I could see that she was a very beautiful woman, probably in her mid 40’s. Her clothes would have been expensive when new, but by then they were slightly worn out. Her long, brown hair had the disheveled look of someone who no longer cared much about their appearance. Her face, although very beautiful, was contorted by her expression of torment. To look into her eyes was like looking into the deepest, darkest pits of despair. They seemed like the eyes of someone who had been to hell and back. Or maybe had still to make the return journey. I really would have liked to help her, but didn’t have any idea how to. She didn’t seem to even want my help. I felt slightly out of my depth. My sea of elation had been dashed emphatically on the rocks of despair. It was a lovely spring morning, with the Italian sun shining splendidly, so I sat there with her for a while, letting the sun flow through me. After what I deemed to have been a suitable amount of time to have shown my solidarity with her, I stood up.

‘I’m off for a coffee now, but I will always be around. I have moved in just down the street. My name is Nigel. If you ever feel like talking, I would love to listen. Bye, for now.’

She didn’t acknowledge my departure.

Slightly unsettled by the experience, I wandered with less conviction up the street to the coffee shop, which was about half way between my place and a park. It was just a local coffee shop, nothing very special, but clean, and well looked after. The interior was fairly much in the same state of repair as the outside, a bit dated, but generally in good condition. The inside walls were painted in a light brown colour, matching nicely the cream coloured ceramic tiles on the floor. The wooden counter was well crafted in what seemed to be mahogany, but stylewise, notwithstanding the great ability of its craftsmanship, it all really spoke to a previous generation. There were wooden tables and chairs lining the window, and a few tables also in the middle of the room. It was a very basic quality of furniture, well made

and solid, but very out of date. That almost seemed to epitomize the whole area. That was really the general impression of Dante street, itself. It was in an inner city suburb. A suburb which had been built well, in its day, but which was by then badly in need of renovation. However, in the coffee shop, the quality of the coffee, and food, as was always the case in Italy, was of the highest standard. They made a delightfully creamy cappuccino, and the brioche were very fresh, and tasty. I approached the delightfully looking woman working diligently at the coffee machine.

‘Morning, can I have a cappuccino, please. Also, a brioche with marmalade, if you have one.’

My carefree outlook on life had returned. It was a day for living each passing moment to its utmost prospect.

‘Sure. I saw you on the bench talking with Rosa, do you know her?’

The woman running the coffee shop was a very pleasant looking woman, of early middle age. Her long black hair, and stylish clothing, gave her an air of classic southern Italian beauty. She had a beautiful face, with very pronounced cheeks, and wore a constant, winning smile. Her tall body was trim, with shapely breasts, and she had a friendly demeanor about her. It was not my first time in the coffee shop, but we had never spoken, apart from the necessary chit-chat required when ordering, and paying the bill. I assumed that she would know all about the goings-on in the area, so I thought that I might be able to find out some information about the mysterious, sad woman, alone on her bench.

‘No, I just saw how pained she looked, and thought she might need some help. But she barely spoke to me. Do you know her? What’s her story?’

A sad, sorrowful expression came over her face.

‘Oh, it’s not a very good one, I’m afraid. Her only child, a son, died just over two years ago now, I think. Very tragic. Together with her husband, she had been running a pretty successful business, importing something or other. But, after their son’s death, it all just fell apart. The marriage went to pieces. They both completely gave up on the business, and then her husband left her, I think about a year ago. She’s been living here for the last 6 months, more or less.’

The explanation more than sufficiently explained her tormented state.

‘Oh, that’s terrible! How old was her son?’

‘I believe he was 18 years old. He had just gotten his motorbike licence. From what I heard he had a bad accident going home, late one night.’

I nodded my head with sage understanding. I had knowledge of such affairs.

‘Right. That’s always a dangerous age for getting out on the roads. Especially on a motorbike. When you are young, and inexperienced, motorbikes can be pretty dangerous. I had a bad accident with one, myself, when I was young. One day when I was riding past a friend’s place, I looked in to see if his car was there, and, just then, a car pulled out onto the road, right in front of me. I hadn’t been watching where I had been going, so I ploughed straight into it. Luckily, I came out of it alright. Just a few bumps and bruises, and a very sore ego. I guess some of us survive those things, while others don’t. There doesn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason to any of it. Just a roll of the dice. For those lucky enough, life just continues, much as before, but with a valuable lesson having been learnt. For those not so lucky, life comes to an abrupt stop, and things will never be the same again. Just a simple, tragic twist of fate. It’s scary really, how easily those things can happen. Does Rosa ever talk to anyone?’

‘For a while some of her old friends would come around. But I guess they are just all getting on with their lives, or maybe they find it too difficult to be with her. She never speaks with anyone. She usually just sits on that bench. It’s very sad. After the business collapsed, they lost their house, and everything. From having been part of a successful, happy family, she has come to this, in a very short period of time.’

As she spoke, she had a concerned expression on her face. Obviously, she was a person who cared for the plight of others. A genuine person living in a world generally possessed by indifference.

‘Well, it’s understandable that they lost interest in their business. After such a tragedy, I doubt that anyone would be able to carry on as before. There’s no coming back from an event like that. Poor thing, I’ve never seen such sadness before. Life can be very cruel, can’t it? It’s just a lottery, really, who survives, and who dies.’

She nodded in agreement, then raised her eyes, and looked at me with a lovely smile.

‘You’ve been in before, haven’t you? Have you moved into the area? Do

you like it here?’

My bleak mood dissipated, and my frame of mind returned upbeat.

‘Yes, I’ve just recently moved in. I love it here. It’s very close to the centre, but it’s nice and quiet. In the evening, I can sit out on my balcony with a glass of wine, and just relax.’

‘In the warm evenings, I put a couple of tables outside, so, if you like, you can have a glass of wine here. I have some nice wines from Sicily, that’s where I’m from.’

‘OK, I’ll do that. I’m Nigel, by the way.’

‘Nice to meet you, I’m Valentina.’

Her cheerful disposition brought a smile to my face.

‘I’ll see you tomorrow then, Valentina.’

‘I’ll be here, bye.’

Back out on the street, a sombre mood set in. Dark thoughts reappeared on my horizon. The weights I carried returned to crush my state of mind. I had gone through some changes myself. Nothing as dramatic as that of Rosa, but difficult enough, nonetheless. I had recently lost my job of many years, and had just moved into the area from another city not far away. I had on paper been made redundant, but in reality I had been kicked out of my job mercilessly, and had been replaced by someone younger, someone who cost the company less. I was a casualty of the modern economic system. The bottom line had been battered on my head, repeatedly, knocking me into oblivion. I had believed myself to have been an integral part of the company, only to discover that to them I was merely a number. A number easily replaced by another number, a smaller number. After many years of total stability, I had had the rug pulled out from under my feet. The solid footing beneath me had turned into a quagmire. I had needed to find a new, stable footing. That was why I found myself in that strange, new land, Dante street. I had decided that being in a new environment could only be good for me. A new beginning. A fresh start, distant from the unexpected extermination I had endured. New places, and new people. I had hoped it would be just the stimulus that I needed to regain a foothold. It was my belief that a strong wind of change would blow away the menacing clouds hovering over me.

If nothing else, I had picked the area well. Dante street was in an area

just outside the city centre, so I could easily walk into town, and the locality was well serviced with all the necessary amenities, like supermarkets, and so forth. The street was in a well established part of the city. The apartment blocks in the area were a bit dated, but each told a story of former glory. They had been built solidly, as was the way in those times, usually with around half a dozen flats in each building. Most of the buildings had three stories. Each flat had at least one balcony, to hang out the washing, and a place to be able to get some sunshine. There was a lot of space between the buildings, with many trees around, giving the area a nice green feel to it. The road was wide, with ample footpaths, and benches placed along the way. At one stage, in its heyday, it would have been a very sought after area. Time, however, had taken its inevitable toll. Its former magnificence long past. By then, people were moving further out, to live in houses with gardens, or to live in newer, more modern flats. The area still had many older residents, those who had lived there for many years. The rest were mostly transient people looking for a cheap flat, in a fairly central location. There was a mixture of single people, young couples, and a lot of foreigners. Most of the flats came furnished, so it was easy to move in, and move out. I assumed there was quite a constant flow of people, like me, coming and going as their situations changed. There were always many flats for rent in the area, opening up as the former residents moved further out, or died, leaving the properties to their children. All in all, it made for an interesting mixture of people. It was the melting pot of the city. Even the name of the street, Dante street, had a great allure. Dante Alighieri was one of Italy's most famous authors, probably the most famous. He wrote extensively about Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory. Mental states that, quite often, we bring upon ourselves. What would my mental state be there, on Dante street, my new home? Would I find Heaven, the harmony I markedly needed, and sought, or would it be Hell waiting to rain down its fires on me? Only the future would answer those questions. At that time I found myself to be existing in a sort of state of limbo. A halfway house. My own easier, less harrowing form, of Purgatory.

The next day, when I was going out for my breakfast, she was there again, on her bench. Something about her was starting to enter into my soul.

‘Hi Rosa, it’s me, Nigel. How are you? Can I offer you a coffee?’

I had decided that every time I would see her on that bench, I would stop, chat a bit, and spend some time with her. I hoped she would appreciate it, even though she rarely spoke.

‘No, but thank you.’

Her answer was so quiet it was barely audible. I sat down next to her.

‘I’m just going to sit here for a while, before going for a coffee. Don’t the trees look lovely at this time of year?’

She didn’t reply, but she half looked at me, with an expression of what I took to be gratitude. I was sure that she was starting to warm to our chats, that is, my chats. It was all fairly one way traffic. Anyway, I had decided that I wasn’t going to give up on her. Society tends to forget about those who have fallen through the cracks. Everyone is so busy working, raising their families, buying houses, and generally living life, that it is easy to never have time for, or even notice, those less fortunate than themselves. With the unexpected changes that had befallen me, I had been forced to re-evaluate my whole perspective on life, and that of other people. I, too, had fallen through those cracks. I, too, had found myself living on that other side of life. That darker, less comprehensible side. Really, it felt more like I had been pushed through those cracks, through no fault of my own. Probably that was the case for most people on the other side of life. Without a doubt no one would have willingly chosen to take that path. Like me, they had unwittingly found themselves to be on an alien terrain. In any case, as I found myself viewing life from those distant shores, I felt that I wanted to understand more about the other people in that strange, unfamiliar, place. What their predicaments were, how life had come to push them, too, through those cracks. Maybe through them, through their stories, I would find answers to my questions. Now that I, too, had strayed off the righteous path, I wanted to understand what had brought others to this new, unfamiliar, place. This new place, with new customs. This new place, where the goalposts had been removed, and the rules were hard to fathom. A mental state where the normal rules of society were no longer applicable. A place where everything that you had once accepted as being constant, had been taken from you forcibly, leaving you in an unfamiliar uncharted land. In this new life I would have to forge a new identity. In an odd way, it was almost

as if I had identified myself with, and had been identified by, the job I had been doing. It struck me as being incredibly strange how that happens. For some reason we are considered more for what we do, rather than for who we are, as a person. The old me was no more. That me had been made redundant. He had been demolished, destroyed by the need to increase profits. That version of me had been discarded with my old life, my previous job, and it was time for me to discover my new self. Who would I become? But anyway, wasn't I really still the same person? Definitely not by society's harsh standards. For those who had taken upon themselves the responsibility for deciding the fate of others, I had become an in-between me. In transition from my previous identity to that which would follow, whatever they may be. In one way it was an exciting prospect, although slightly daunting. To be reborn, to shed your old skin. After having been banished by society's rigorous decrees, I believed, hoped, that I could become whoever I, myself, wanted to be, without that simply being dictated purely by the confines of the job that I would do next. I probably needed to eventually find some work, but I wanted to be identified as being the person I was, not just by what I did. I wanted to discover who that person was. I wanted to discover myself. The true me. The possibilities open to me, in my new variant seemed almost endless. The pathway before me was wide open. There were no chains binding me, no binds holding me back. However, while definitely being somewhat exciting, in some ways it was almost like being faced with a gargantuan challenge, a test that I would have to overcome. A new me was out there somewhere, but would I have the firmness of character to find that new me? In some ways my newly found freedom came with a crushing burden. The task before me was not going to be easy. I looked at my watch. Enough time had passed, so I deemed it was time to get the day started.

'It was nice to see you today Rosa. Bye for now. I'll see you soon.'

Rosa half glanced at me as I stood up to leave. Little as that may seem, I took it to be a sign of great progress in our rapport.

It was time for my tasty Italian breakfast. I had been living in Italy for so long by then that my habits were more like those of my new country, rather than those of my native England. I headed up to Valentina's coffee shop, and ordered my usual breakfast. While working my way through a delicious brioche, and sipping my frothy, creamy, cappuccino, I noticed a rather large

man sitting over at a table with a glass of wine. Wine for breakfast? I wondered if my habits would ever change that much? Alcohol in the early morning? Mind you, it was also something I had seen on my travels through Germany, and other European countries. Workers, from all walks of life, would quite often stop for a beer on their way to work. I had never been able to work out the reason for that. Maybe it was a bit of a cure for a hangover, or possibly it was just a pleasant way for them to start the day. In any case, I decided that I would stick to my cappuccino, for the time being anyway. Who knew? Maybe that was waiting for me, further down the line? In my new life, a life without boundaries, anything was possible. Nothing could be discounted.

‘Lovely cappuccino, Valentina, you are the best!’

‘Thanks, you have a good day now.’

She always had such a lovely smile. It made me feel like she really had consideration for others, a dying value in the modern dog-eat-dog society.

‘OK, bye.’

I felt so free. A sense of euphoria invaded my thoughts. A new day, in my new life. And what a fantastic way to start the day. Italians really lived with great style. It had been a breakfast fit for kings.

I left the bar with great content, and wandered up to the park. It was pretty quiet, being a school day, with just a few mums, with very young kids, enjoying the sunny spring morning. It was just a small suburban park, with a few of the usual things for kids to play on, and some benches for the rest of us to sit on, and watch them, and the day, go by. There were some lovely tall trees around, giving good shade for when the summer heat kicked in, and the surrounding grass was richly green, and well maintained. It was a very peaceful spot to sit, and ponder one’s situation. I sat on a bench next to what I assumed to be a muslim family, by their looks.

‘Morning, lovely day isn’t it?’

‘Good morning. Yes it is.’ answered the husband. Both he, and his wife, smiled at me in welcome.

‘We’re very lucky to have such a nice park here. Do you come here often?’

‘Oh yes, we bring Ariane here all the time. She loves it.’

Their daughter looked at me with a contagious grin on her face.

‘That’s a very pretty name! A pretty name for a pretty little girl!’

Ariane giggled at me, and ran off to the swings.

‘She’s lovely. How old is she?’

The wife smiled at me, and replied:

‘Thank you, she’s 8 years old. We chose that name because even though it is a Lebanese name, it also sounds a bit Italian. My name is Jana, and this is my husband Nassim.’

‘Pleased to met you. I’m Nigel.’

They were all dressed in normal Italian clothes, with the only exception that Jana wore a light, colourful scarf, covering her hair. Her face was young and pretty, and she had a very welcoming smile. Physically, she was very petite. Ariane, a cute little girl with dark brown, curly hair, was running around, back and forth from the swings, to her parents. Nassim was tall, strong looking, and had a full beard. His face, while friendly, carried a serious expression. He looked like someone who was aware of his responsibilities, someone who could be relied upon to shoulder any and all burdens.

‘I don’t mean to be nosy, Nassim, but shouldn’t Ariane be in school today?’

‘Yes, you are right. This morning she said she didn’t feel well, so we kept her at home. I even took the morning off from work to take her to the doctor, but there really doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with her. I think sometimes she gets laughed at, at school, for being dark skinned, and a muslim. It can be very hard for kids, being different from everyone else.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that. Actually, kids can be very mean. Especially with someone who is different. It’s really just in their nature, although I don’t think that they really understand just how hurtful that can be to others. Surely there are other muslim children in her school?’

‘Yes, there are. But not many, and I think they all get picked on a bit. We don’t want to complain about it. We know it’s just kids being kids. She will have to get used to it. This is where we live now.’

‘Jana, was Ariane born here, or in Lebanon?’

‘Here! I was six months pregnant when we arrived.’

‘That’s fantastic. A little Italian girl, then! She’s very lovely.’ I stood up

to leave. 'Well, It's time for me to be off. It has been very nice to meet you all. I'm sure we'll see each other again. I'm always in here, I love this park too. Bye, for now.'

Jana smiled her sweet smile at me.

'Bye, Nigel. It was nice to meet you.'

Nassim gave me a little wave, and called out:

'See you later!'

I walked slowly back down Dante street, towards home. Home... my new home. Everything was different for me now. The place, the people I was meeting. It struck me that I hadn't really fully comprehended just how much different everything would be for me, in my new life. Before I had made my move, I had assumed that life would have been much the same as it had been before, I would just be living in another, smaller city. In reality, everything was totally different. Not in as radical a way as that of Rosa, or Nassim and his family, but everything had now completely changed for me as well. A variation in one part of your life can really have a big chain reaction on your whole life. It can lead to a total transformation. A metamorphosis. Our lives are probably like one big house of cards, and when you pull out one of those cards, the whole house comes tumbling down. Then, when you reassemble it, you find that it has taken on a mutated, unexpected, aspect. It wasn't that I disliked my new life, I just hadn't really understood that the change would be so all encompassing. I almost felt like I was living someone else's life, someone unknown to me. It was going to take a bit of getting used to. On the other hand, I had the perfect opportunity to make some positive changes in my life. The sort of changes that when you are stuck in a rut, repeating the same old routine, day in and day out, you don't seem to be able to make. I could reinvent myself. I could become whoever I wanted to be. Through all the upheaval that life was throwing at me, at least in one area I felt pretty secure. I had been paying into a private pension fund for many years, and that had matured, so I didn't have to worry too much about the financial side of things. Probably I would eventually need to pick up some work, maybe just something part-time, but in the meantime I had plenty of money, and time, to explore my new life. My new life on that foreign landscape known as Dante street.

Chapter Two: Fractures

After passing a restless night, I awoke early. I had vague memories of strange dreams that I couldn't really bring into focus. Dreams that had left me feeling out of sorts. I felt disoriented. I had spent the previous evening out for dinner with some friends, old friends from my former work-place. It would be hard to imagine a more difficult evening. Laying in bed, I was thinking about how strained it had all been. Where once hearty conversation had flowed easily, the exchanges had become static, hard work. The evening had been punctuated by awkward silences, and pregnant pauses. We had all been friends for many years, work friendships that had blossomed into general friendships, but, after I had been made redundant, things just wasn't the same anymore. Those friendships, if indeed that's what they had been, had all started to unravel. Some of my former colleagues stuck by me, displeased with how I had been treated by the company after many years of faithful service. Most, however, seemed to feel that I had become somehow tainted, and that association with me could in some way give a bad impression of them to management. I could be contagious. People I had thought of as having been friends of many years had become unknown entities, people that were difficult to interact with. Had we ever actually been real friends? Or had they all just been friendships of convenience, people who had had something in common, for a certain period? Like ships moored next to each other in a port, before sailing off to other ports. It had almost felt like everyone had just been going through the motions. As if they had felt duty-bound to keep up the pretense of friendship. Probably as time passed, invitations would come with less frequency, my acceptances of any such invitations certainly would be in serious doubt. Maybe that is how it should be? When change is thrust on you, when your life is dismembered, maybe you need to start afresh, in a new place, with new people? It all left me feeling a bit sad, and emotionally drained. I had a shower, hoping that the hot water cascading over me would wash away the discordant feelings

that had taken root in my mind. Feelings that could not easily be rinsed away.

It was uplifting to shake of my despondency, and to get outside, on Dante street, where no one knew my background story, and where no one felt the need to take sides. On Dante street I wasn't a dividing force. I was in a place where a new me could be sown, and hopefully prosper. The spring sunshine on my face filled me with great expectation. After the arduous conversations of the previous evening, I was more than ever convinced that I had made the right move. Renovation, renewal, rebirth. A new, improved version of me would rise from the ashes of my former charred life. A life that had been burnt to the ground around me. A life that had been destroyed effortlessly, without a trace of compassion, simply by the stroke of a pen.

With little surprise I noted that Rosa, as usual, was already on her bench. Did she ever sleep at all? After the strained, painful conversations of the evening prior, it felt good to jump into a jocular frame of mind. I would not be held back. The restraints that had been placed on me in my former life had no validity in my place of resurrection. I could move in only one direction. Forward.

'Hi Rosa, what a lovely day. I really love your shoes. You have great style. I'm afraid I just get whichever ones are the most comfortable. Maybe you could be my style consultant? You could come shopping with me, and help me pick out some trendy new stuff, what do you say?'

She looked up at me, and smiled, briefly. It was a better than expected result. I decided to nudge her, with more force, back into life. She, too, deserved a second possibility. Really, far more than myself.

'Come on, come with me. Let's get a coffee and a brioche into you.'

I half picked her up, she was so thin and light that it didn't take much effort. At first she resisted me, but then she relented, and stood up. With her hand holding onto my arm, we headed up the road to have some breakfast. I felt a power rush through me. I was the defender of the downtrodden, the saviour of the forgotten. Valentina beamed with joy when we entered her coffee shop.

'Rosa, it's so good to see you! Sit down over here, both of you.'

She showed us to a table, by the window.

'The usual for you, Nigel? What about you Rosa? A coffee and a

bricoche?’

Rosa had her head bowed, so I answered for her.

‘Yeah, that sounds good, Valentina, thanks.’

Out on the street there was the usual hustle and bustle of the daytime traffic. Dante street led up to some other roads, all full of flats, and houses. During the day it was quite busy, with residents, and workers, coming and going. At night the street was very quiet, when everyone had returned to their homes.

‘Rosa, I know there’s nothing I can say or do, to make you feel any better, but it would be lovely to have a coffee together, every now and then. Just to have a chat. Hey, I know! We could have afternoon tea. I’m a big tea drinker, and Valentina has a good selection of teas here. Let’s do it. Let’s organise an afternoon tea. When you feel like it, anyway.’

I prattled on with a lot of relentless drivel, just trying to take her mind off things for a while. I would come out with everything and anything, just to avoid any difficult silences. I spoke for both of us. A two sided conversation, coming from just one side. She merely sat there with her head down, or looking out the window, at the passing traffic. She did drink her coffee, but didn’t touch her brioche. After a while, she stood up to leave. She glanced briefly at me, barely making eye contact.

‘Thanks, Nigel.’

As I watched her walking back to her bench, I felt good, empowered. I wasn’t really sure why. Was it because I had done a good deed for someone, or, rather, was it good for me in that difficult phase to see someone who was worse off than me? When we are troubled, with things not going according to plan, is it comforting to see people who are in an even worse situation? The thought of that was somewhat vexing. I mused for a while about how we were dealt cards, randomly, and just had to take whatever life threw at us. I was sure that Rosa, just a few short years previously, would never have imagined that her life would have come to that. Without a doubt her days would have been full, working, planning for her future, and for that of her family. I couldn’t help thinking how unfair it all seemed. I couldn’t help thinking how tenuous life really was. Everything we had, everything we took for granted, was really just hanging by a thread. A thread that could snap, or be cut, in a flash. I was thinking thoughts you don’t have, when life is

proceeding according to plan. I was thinking thoughts that came, when you had fallen through the cracks. I was considering things from a place where people don't usually go, questioning everything from beneath life's thin veneer. I wondered what I would have made of Rosa in my former incarnation. Would I have just passed her by, oblivious to her plight, mindless of those who had fallen through the cracks, in a hurry to fulfil all the needless tasks society required of me?

'Well done, Nigel. That was nice of you.'

Valentina roused me from my deep thoughts.

'I just wish I could do more for her. She really does seem like such a nice person, underneath her sadness. Hey, Valentina, who's that big guy in the corner? He's always here in the morning drinking wine.'

'His name's Robbie. He's new to the area. In the morning he drinks wine, in the afternoon he starts on whiskey. I've never seen him drunk, though. He can really pack it away.'

'No doubt from years of doing so. I used to be a bit of a drinker myself, but now I get wobbly after just a couple of glasses of wine. Maybe I need a bit more practice? Maybe I need to get in the habit of drinking more, too? Can you recommend some nice wine for me to drink in the morning?'

I was in good form. The stage was mine. Valentina laughed, and smiled her beautiful smile at me. She really was something.

'I think you should leave that to Robbie. He drinks enough for the both of you.'

I smiled at her.

'OK, good advice. You're probably right. I'll see you later, Valentina.'

'Bye.'

I headed up to the park. My flat was a mess, I needed to do cleaning, washing, and ironing. The fridge was empty. The only food I had in the cupboard was for McGinty, my cat. I made sure that at least he never ran out. I knew I would have to eventually get organised, and get onto all that backlog of things to sort out, but in that moment all I wanted to do was to sit quietly, and relax in the sun. I sat on a bench, warmed by the delightful rays of the spring sunshine, and wondered where everything I was going through would lead me. In my late 50's could I really begin again? Was it too late for

me to build another life? Or was I just a foolish dreamer? My head was full of questions, but the answers were elusive. Maybe, with time, they would come into view, I would have better focus. I knew that I had to be resistant, it was all going to take time, a lot of time. Such a radical change in my life was going to require a lot of patience. I was fairly hopeful that, eventually, things would come right. If things proceeded well, I was cautiously optimistic that I could rebuild a life, a nice life. Probably not as complete as my former life, but something satisfactory. I was reasonably sure that it would still be possible for me to carve out a niche for myself. While I was at that time more in a holding pattern, a place of transition, I was confident that in the future I would be able to find myself somewhere good. I was feeling positive, not excessively so, but just enough.

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed someone waving at me. It was Jana, sitting at a bench further around the park. I got up, and headed over to her.

‘Hey, Jana, I didn’t see you there. How are you?’

‘Hi Nigel, good thanks, and you?’

‘Pretty good. What’s that you are doing?’

Jana was sitting surrounded by file holders, and various sheets of paper. She sighed audibly, and a look of frustration came over her face.

‘Oh, it’s a real nightmare. Our residency permits expire soon, and I am trying to apply for further permission to stay here, on the grounds that we are the parents of an Italian citizen, Ariane. Luckily she was born here, otherwise it would be almost impossible for us.’

I nodded understandingly.

‘They always want a lot of paperwork here in Italy. It can be hard to navigate through it all.’

‘That’s for sure. Unfortunately, our case officer doesn’t seem to like us much. And that certainly doesn’t help.’

‘No? Why is that? What’s she like?’

‘She’s a single woman, in her late 40’s. She is always very well dressed, quite expensively, I would say. I think she has had a few cosmetic operations done. Definitely her breasts, they are enormous! Plus maybe a lifting. I get the idea she is trying desperately to hang onto her youth. Maybe she doesn’t like us because we are a bit younger, and already have an 8 year

old daughter. I don't think she has children of her own.'

'Possibly. She could also be a bit racist. A lot of wealthy Italians are. Ordinary people here are quite accepting of immigrants, but rich people seem to be a bit snobbish, and don't like the changes that are happening in Italy, well, all over Europe, really.'

'Anyway, I don't like to complain. It was our idea to come here, so we must accept things as they are. We are thankful for what this country has given us. I just hope we can manage to stay, and build a new life, for Ariane.'

'If you don't mind me asking, why did you decide to leave Lebanon?'

'No, not at all, Nigel. You are very kind, feel free to ask whatever you like. Where do I start? It's all a bit complicated, really. I come from a Shia family, and Nassim is from a Sunni family. At first, when we got together that didn't seem to be that much of a problem, but as time went on both our families became more and more bothered about it. In all of the middle east, that is the root cause of many wars, but, in Lebanon, people had always been more open to different religions, and ethnic backgrounds. That's changing now. Everywhere things seem to be getting more radicalised, the more time goes by. Anyway, when I got pregnant both families really went crazy. Each of our families was determined that our child would be brought up in their religion.'

I was stunned by the complexity of her story.

'Wow, what a complicated situation.'

'Yes, we couldn't really see a way out of the problem, so we decided to leave, and start a new life where there was more tolerance.'

'Do you think Italy is a tolerant country?'

'Oh, yes, for sure! We are treated very well here. Of course, there are some people who react badly to us, but that's the case in any country. People will always find a reason to dislike others. All in all, Italian people are fantastic. We really love it here, and hope to be able to stay, if we can sort out this residency minefield!'

'Isn't there someone who can help you with all that?'

'Yes, but the cost of preparing all the documentation is very high. We can't afford that on Nassim's wages. We will have to do it ourselves.'

'OK, I see. Well, I'm really sorry about all that. I hope you manage to

sort things out. Hey listen! Saturday afternoon why don't you all come to the coffee shop for afternoon tea? From what I remember Lebanon has a bit of a tradition of tea drinking, doesn't it?"

Jana threw back her head, and laughed.

'Nigel, you are such an Anglo Saxon! Yes, sure we would love to come. Really, Lebanese people are more coffee drinkers, but we do like tea. It's very nice of you to invite us.'

'Great! Lets say around 4pm. Well, it was nice bumping into you, but I must be off to get some things sorted out. Bye for now, Jana.'

Jana waved to me as I walked off.

I headed back to Valentina's coffee shop, to organise some little snacks for the Saturday afternoon tea party. Finding tasty food was not going to be a problem. I was in the right country for that, and Valentina kept up a good standard. As I was chatting with her, I noticed Robbie was still there, drinking his wine. After sorting out everything with Valentina, I thought I would introduce myself. I wandered over to his table.

'Hi there, how's things?'

'What's it to you?'

His abrasive answer was all that I needed to hear. I was feeling too upbeat to be assaulted by extreme negativity.

'Absolutely nothing. Hey, forget it.'

I turned to leave.

'Sorry, man, come on over. I'm really sorry, I'm usually a polite person, well, I used to be anyway. These days, probably not so much.'

His conciliatory tone made me change my mind.

'That's alright, we all have our good days, and bad days. I'm Nigel, you're Robbie, right?'

'Yeah, pleased to meet you.'

We shook hands, and I sat down. Looking at him a bit better, I saw that he was a big man, with the usual hefty belly, typical of the middle aged Italian male. They loved their food in Italy, although while the women somehow managed to stay in shape, the men tended to let themselves go. I glanced over at the slim, shapely body of Valentina. She caught my eye, and flashed me a smile. She really was incredibly beautiful. I turned my attention back to Robbie. His face was very lined, and he had massive bags under his

eyes. The classic look of someone who drank far too much, and slept far too little. His face carried a sullen expression. His shoulders were hunched forward, giving him the look, and posture, of someone who was not at all in great shape. It was pretty evident that he was not in a very good period of his life.

‘I’ve just moved into the area, just down the road here. Valentina tells me you are new here as well?’

‘Yeah, I just moved in around the corner, a few months ago.’

‘Listen, Saturday afternoon I am having afternoon tea with some friends from the area. You are welcome to join us, if you like.’

‘I’m not very good company these days, and I don’t drink a lot of tea.’

‘Well, you can drink whatever you like. In any case, we will be here around 4 pm. Feel free to join us.’

‘Maybe.’

I left him with his wine, and sullen mood. Valentina cheerfully said goodbye, with such a pleasant demeanour that I was starting to wonder if she fancied me. Or maybe she was just being pleasant to a good customer? Probably us men always imagine sexual undertones when a woman is just being nice to us. If Italy was the right place for good food, it was paradise for beautiful women. Valentina was definitely heading the charge in those stakes. Without a doubt she would have already passed 50, but with her slim body, long black hair, and beautiful face, she could still turn a lot of heads, mine especially. Knowing full well how my mind would dwell on things incessantly, I knew that because I had started to have those thoughts in my head, I would end up fantasizing about her continually, and blowing it all out of proportion, for days to come. That was my way. Probably that was the way of most of the male sector of the species. Ever hopeful, no matter how hopeless the possibilities really were. Probably, almost certainly, I was just imagining the whole thing. But if that wasn’t the case, life could definitely get very interesting very fast. I had started. I could feel it. My obsession was on. There would be no stopping me. Although, on the other hand, if I was seeing things clearly, I certainly didn’t want to miss out on an opportunity like that. She really seemed to be a very sensual person, I was sure a physical encounter with her would be nothing short of incredible. However, I needed to be sure of exactly where I stood with her. I decided the best

approach would be to let things develop, without sticking my head out too far, just in case I was wrong. I had already learnt the hard way just how complicated, and difficult to comprehend, relationships could be. For me, that is. Years earlier, when I had still been married, I had been the victim of some pretty bad incomprehension. My own.

I had always kept myself busy with physical exercise, and had liked keeping my mind active as well. To that end, I had signed up for an evening class, for adults, learning French. During that course I had met Monica. She was a petite little thing, with short, dark hair, cut in a sort of pageboy haircut. She was open, and friendly, with a great sense of humour. We had hit it off straight away, and had soon started meeting out of class, when time allowed, for coffees, and chats. At first it had just seemed to be a pleasant friendship, but it hadn't taken long for things to develop further. Then we ended up sleeping together. She was single, and had a place in town, so it was easy to organise our meetings, without arousing any suspicions with my wife. Monica was ten years younger than me, incredibly beautiful, and was a very sensual woman. She drove me crazy. She had the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen. When she would look at me with those enticing brown eyes, I would be transfixed. I absolutely loved just looking at her. I was mesmerised by her. I was like a spider trapped in her web. We would talk about anything, and everything. Looking back on it with the benefit of hindsight, I guess I probably lost my head mainly because of the novelty of it all. Anyway, in short order I fell madly in love with Monica. When I was with her, I felt like I was alive, the blood was wildly pumping through my veins. Life, as it had been in my youth, had once again become an inestimable commodity, a beauty to behold. I realised that time was too precious to waste. I felt that I wanted to enjoy every moment of life, and I wanted to enjoy those moments with her. She was all I could think about. I was consumed with thoughts of her. Thoughts of the two of us together. It seemed to me that she was the perfect companion for me, and I wanted to start a new life, together with her. After we had been seeing each other for a few months I decided that it was time to take things to the next level. Monica had never put me under any pressure to separate from my wife, but I was convinced that it was what she, too, wanted. Admittedly, without too

much planning, or even having discussed it at all with Monica, I put our plan, my plan, into action. One evening, over dinner, I casually told my wife about Monica, and the new life we wanted together. Her reply was very short, but rather succinct:

‘Get out!’

While I was obviously sorrowful about the end of my marriage, I couldn’t wait to get to Monica’s place, and tell her the good news. I quickly packed a bag, just with the bare essentials, and rapidly drove to see Monica. I was fairly bubbling over with uncontrollable joy when I arrived at her place. I told her that I had revealed all to my wife, and that I had left her. Our new beginning had started. Or so I had thought. Big mistake.

‘What? Are you fucking crazy? The reason I wanted an affair with a married man was because I don’t want to be in a relationship.’ She was fuming. ‘You decided all this, on your own? Without even asking me first? Listen, I like you, the sex is great, but I don’t want any strings attached. Didn’t you get that? Now you have ruined everything. Why couldn’t you just leave things as they were? Or, at the very least, discuss it with me first. What made you think you knew what I want? I’m sorry Nigel, but it’s over between us.’

In a daze of confusion, I shortly found myself sitting in my car, not knowing what to do, or where to go. Barely an hour prior I had been in two relationships, and then, in the blink of an eye, I didn’t even have one. I was on my own, with nowhere to go, and absolutely no idea about what to do. How could I have misunderstood it all so badly? How could I have misread the situation so completely? I had felt so alone. I loved Monica so much, I felt I couldn’t live without her. Admittedly, I realised that she was right, and that I should have discussed it all with her, before making such an important decision. That had been very foolish. I understood that. However, the deep love I had felt towards her had blinded me completely. I had completely misread the whole situation. How could I have gotten it all so badly wrong? I had been sure that Monica had felt the same way as me, and had acted accordingly. Then I had found myself completely alone. I felt sick to my stomach, and my head was pounding. The new life I had been expecting to live had vanished, without a trace, and I found myself alone, desolate, sitting in my car, not knowing what to do. It seemed as if my life, as I had known it,

had ended. I didn't have a clue about where to go, or what to do. It had been a terrible period for me, and it had taken a long time to eventually sort things out. If nothing else, I had learnt a valuable lesson. The hard way. I certainly didn't want to put myself through anything like that again. I was definitely going to play it cool with Valentina, given my lousy track record at understanding relationships. I decided that I would let her make the first move. And, probably, all the moves after that as well.

Chapter Three: The Nectar of Life

I was over the moon when Saturday afternoon made its long awaited appearance. I was really looking forward to meeting up with my new friends, and neighbours. I enjoyed finding out about their lives, and what had brought them to the place where they were. What had brought them to that place, which was an in-between place, a place which was neither here nor there, a place which was either a starting point, or an ending point, as seen from the point of view of the normality of most people. Those following life's golden pathway, society's meritorious advocates. Those who could do no wrong, those ignorant of the cracks just waiting for them to fall through. Also, I enjoyed the fact that my new friends knew nothing about me, or my past. I could render public whatever I wanted, and decide that which I preferred to keep to myself. Like, for example, the whole Monica blunder. That would definitely be kept under wraps. From everyone, forever. There would be no upside to having that story known. That was one of the great advantages of creating a new beginning. I felt like I could wipe the slate clean, start from scratch. I could become whoever I wanted to be. I would start my life anew, without the baggage that had been previously weighing me down. I would establish my life as I wanted it to be, not the version of me dictated by who I had formerly been, or by what job I had be doing beforehand. It was time to look to the future. It was time to leave the past behind, unburden myself from those heavy shackles, partially self-imposed, and focus on the next phase of my life. With the great anticipation that was building within me, I headed to the bar a little early. As usual, Valentina was looking fresh, and absolutely lovely.

‘Hi Nigel, you are looking handsome today!’

‘Hey, thanks Valentina. You look as beautiful as ever.’

We both smiled broadly at each other. It must be on! Surely, I wasn't reading it all wrongly, again? My powers of perception couldn't be that faulty. I was positive of it.

‘It looks like apart from Robbie, I’m the first one here. Anyway, I’m not sure if he wants to join us, really. He’s probably just here because he always is. Drinking away yet another afternoon.’

‘I don’t know much about him, he doesn’t open up at all with anyone. He’s not exactly rude, but he certainly is pretty gruff.’

‘Well, if he doesn’t open up with you, Valentina, he won’t be opening up with anyone. You have a way of making people feel really at ease.’

‘Thank you! That’s a very nice thing to say. What about Rosa? Will she be coming?’

‘I’ve already told her that when the others are here, I will go down and get her. I told her that if I have to, I will put her over my shoulder, and carry her here.’

Valentina laughed, and shook her head.

‘You’re so crazy!’

The door opened, and in walked Nassim and Jana.

‘Hi guys! Where’s Ariane?’

‘Hello Nigel,’ replied Nassim, ‘she has gone up to the park with our neighbour, and her kids. She’s too fidgety to sit still here with us.’

‘Sure, that makes sense. I will get Valentina to wrap a couple of little cakes for you, to take home for her.’

Jana looked at me and smiled.

‘That’s very nice of you.’ she said.

‘Come on, let’s sit over here.’

I guided them over to a couple of tables that Valentina had joined together for us.

‘Robbie, do you care to join us?’

‘Maybe later.’ was his curt reply.

‘OK, anyway, this is Nassim and Jana. Guys, that’s Robbie.’

My two muslim friends greeted Robbie warmly. He initially just grunted something at them, but, then, as if realising his rudeness, stood up, and shook their hands, with a bit more of a polite demeanour.

‘Please, Robbie,’ said Jana with her soft, sweet voice, ‘why don’t you sit down here, next to me?’

Robbie looked on the point of blurting out one of his typically blunt replies, but then, for some reason his body language seemed to soften.

‘Well, alright, as long as you don’t object to me drinking whiskey. I’m not in a very cup-of-tea drinking period of my life, at the moment.’

‘We have no objections at all.’ replied Nassim. ‘As muslims, we don’t drink alcohol, but we respect other people’s choices.’

Jana looked at Robbie, and said;

‘That’s one of the things we like about living in Italy. The freedom you have to choose your own path. In our homeland, Lebanon, we didn’t always have that choice. We respect the decisions of others, and hope that they, too, respect ours.’

Robbie seemed to be almost stunned, bewildered. He looked at Jana with a surprising expression of admiration. He had been won over by her intelligent, well stated, rational point of view. He almost fumbled, searching for a reply.

‘Right, I guess we just take those things for granted, living here.’

That was quite possibly the longest string of words to have come out of his mouth, for a very long time. Jana had penetrated his tough, outer shell, and had seemingly touched a chord, hidden somewhere deep inside him. He sat in the chair next to her, and even managed to force out a slight smile. The group was nearly complete.

‘I’m going to go and get my friend Rosa. I’ll be back in a minute.’

I left the coffee shop, and walked down to Rosa’s bench. I felt like a million dollars. Everything was falling into place. When I got to her bench, she seemed to be waiting for me, and it looked like she had even made a bit of an effort with her appearance, for the big occasion.

‘Rosa, you look fabulous! Are you coming up?’

‘Yes.’

She stood up, gave me a little smile, and started walking with me towards the coffee shop.

‘Listen, Rosa, you don’t need to speak any more than you want to. Just having your company will be a great pleasure for me.’

In response, she lightly touched my arm, in the Italian way of communicating, without words. It felt so good. We were connecting. In that difficult period of my life, it felt nice to be able to help someone else, someone in a worse place than me. When we walked in, Valentina was putting some little cakes on the table. She put the plate down, and rushed

over to Rosa, and lightly kissed her on both cheeks.

‘You look so lovely, Rosa! Come over and sit here, next to Nigel.’

As she guided Rosa to her chair, she looked at me and smiled warmly.

‘You too, Nigel! Sit down here.’

‘Sure, lovely lady. OK, tea for everyone, please! Oh, and bring Robbie another of whatever he is drinking. My friends, this is Rosa, from across the street. Rosa, this is Nassim, Jana, and Robbie.’

Everyone greeted Rosa warmly, even Robbie. She, however, didn’t reply. Rosa sat down in her chair, without making eye contact with anyone. However, she did seem a bit more perky than usual. Instead of her habitual, drooped type of posture, she sat up straight. Looking at the others, I realised that, oddly, in my brief absence, Jana had managed to get Robbie involved in a conversation. Never say never.

‘Robbie,’ continued Jana, ‘you were saying that you are a commercial lawyer. Would you be able to recommend anyone to us, someone who would be able to help us prepare our residency continuance? I realise that it’s a different field than yours, but maybe one of your contacts from the legal profession knows something about that.’

‘Well, I’m not actually working at the moment, but any lawyer would be capable of preparing something like that. From a purely legal point of view it’s fairly standard.’

‘For us, it’s very difficult. Also, if we get it wrong, we will have to leave Italy, so it is incredibly important to us.’

Robbie looked at Jana, with an expression unusual for him. An expression of seemingly caring about something. A novelty for him, in the state he was in.

‘Let me look at the paperwork you have. I’ll see what I can do.’

Jana and Nassim were over the moon. Both thanked him warmly. The whole afternoon tea party was working out incredibly well. Not only was Rosa getting to take her mind off her sorrows, but also Nassim and Jana were going to be helped by Robbie, with their residency application. As Valentina served our teas, and Robbie his whiskey, I reflected on how easy life could actually be. If only we would communicate with others, our problems could be eased. Each man is an island unto himself, but if those islands were to be connected with bridges, we could help each other resolve

our individual dilemmas. I felt an immense sense of pride, at what I had achieved with my new friends. Rosa, while saying nothing at all, actually seemed to be following the conversation. She didn't eat anything, nor did she drink her tea, but I felt that it was good for her to be in our company. Maybe, with small steps, we could help her return, if not to her former self, at least to a slightly better place than where she had found herself to be. We drank our tea, and exchanged small talk in our cheery little group.

'Jana, I was sure that Lebanon had a tradition of tea drinking. That's not the case then?'

'Well, some people drink tea, of course, but it isn't one of our traditions. It's more something that has been introduced by foreigners coming to Lebanon. I like tea, anyway. Coffee is very strong. After a cup or two you have to stop, whereas with tea, being a lot milder, you can drink as much as you like.'

I had an idea. Why not make our tea meeting a regular event?

'Let's start a new tradition, here on Dante street. Saturday afternoon tea, when we have time. What do you all say?'

'Well, you lot can drink whatever you want. I'm all for Saturday afternoon whiskey!' said Robbie, smiling.

We all laughed. Robbie was cracking jokes. What a change. I looked over to see if Valentina had noticed. She was following our conversation closely, and gave me the thumbs up sign.

'Sorry to break up the party, but we better go, and save our neighbour from Ariane.'

'Sure Nassim, thanks for coming. Both of you. Rosa, do you want me to accompany you down the road?'

We all stood up to leave, except Robbie. He was already where he needed to be.

'Valentina, I'll be back in a minute. I'll just take Rosa back.'

'Sure, no hurry. Jana, here are some little cakes, for Ariane.'

Valentina gave Jana a little packet of cakes, neatly wrapped.

Jana was flushed with delight.

'Thank you so much!'

The four of us said our goodbyes outside the door, well, three of us really, Rosa didn't say anything. I walked with Rosa down to her bench. It

felt so good to have been of some little help to her, in her desperately sad state.

‘That was pleasant, don’t you think, Rosa?’

Rosa briefly looked at me in the eyes.

‘Yes, thanks.’

That was all I could have expected from her, but actually it was a lot. She usually didn’t even say that much. I waved to her, and walked back to Valentina’s place, feeling immense joy about the whole afternoon. Valentina, as usual, had a great welcoming smile for me.

‘That was so good of you, Nigel. You are a very nice person. Very sweet.’

‘Thanks. Hey, I enjoyed it too. I think everyone should have afternoon tea with cakes. The world would be a better place for it.’

‘That’s for sure.’

Robbie waved me over to his table. His mood, strangely, seemed almost upbeat.

‘Have a seat, Nigel.’

‘Sure, what’s up?’

‘Hey, listen, I know I have been pretty obnoxious to you. You have just been trying to be friendly, and I was a real prick.’

‘Hey, don’t worry. Anyway, you weren’t rude at all. Maybe a bit abrupt, but absolutely nothing to have to apologize for.’

Robbie was in the mood for opening up with someone. Had it been the effect of the afternoon tea party, or was it just because of all the booze he had by then consumed?

‘You see, Nigel, I’m really in a bad way. My life is just shit. I guess I may as well admit the obvious. I’m an alcoholic. Looking back over the years, I realise now that I really treated my wife, and son, badly. I think she only put up with me because of the good pay packet I brought in.’

‘Hey, don’t say that. Life is complicated for us all. I’m sure there where plenty of good times in there, as well.’

‘I don’t know, maybe. Anyway, when I lost my job, basically for drinking at work, she threw me out. Now she won’t even let me see my son, Paolo. To be honest, I don’t blame her. I still don’t understand how it all

came to this.'

The success of the afternoon had put me in a philosophic mood. I had all the answers to everyone's obstacles. I felt like the Dante street problem solver.

'Alcohol is very insidious. It has a way of creeping up on you over the course of many years. You go from just enjoying a few social drinks, to needing those drinks. Then it's a slippery slope, downhill. I've seen quite a bit of that. I grew up in a very drink based society. Every social occasion would involve alcohol, and lots of it. A few of my mates are alcoholics.'

That tweaked Robbie's interest. He looked at me sharply.

'Have they managed to get out?'

'To be honest with you, one friend died because of it, a few years ago. So it can definitely end badly. But, others have managed to turn their lives around. One old mate hasn't had a drink now, for over ten years. His life, with his family, is really going well.'

'If I was to kick the booze, do you think I could patch things up with my wife?'

It was a tough question, and while I wanted to be encouraging, I didn't want to give him false hope.

'Well, let's put it this way, if you don't the chances are zero, so, in any case, it's definitely worth trying. But as much as anything, it would be positive for yourself as well, you know. Think about how you want to live. There must be more things you want to do with your life than just this?'

He looked at me pensively, and nodded.

'Yeah, that's true, too. Hey, you know what? I've never really spoken with muslims before. They are nice people, those two. That Jana is really nice, so honest. Full of life, and so full of dreams. My impression of muslims has mainly been influenced by what you see on the news, but those two are nothing like that. Nassim seems like a steady worker, a solid person, putting his family first. I was really impressed with them both.'

'Yeah, they really are nice people, both of them. You could really help them out with that residency request, you know. They are really up against it. Plus it seems that their case worker, at the immigration office, is a real arsehole. It seems like she has really got it in for them. They could end up getting kicked out of Italy, if they get their application denied.'

An expression of grim determination crossed his face as he looked at me.

‘Listen, Nigel, I am on this. I give you my word. I will do all I can for them. I’m going to make this my project. I will sort it out for them.’

‘Good on you. I’m sure it will be good for you, as well, to have something to focus on. That’s probably just what you need. Hey listen, I’ll catch you later, my friend. I’ve got things to do.’

‘OK, bye, and thanks again. Thanks for everything.’

I was feeling on top of the world, all that I touched turned to gold. There was nothing I couldn’t achieve. No restraints could hold me back. I decided that I should tackle the backlog of jobs that had been building up back at my place. Flushed with my considerable success with helping others, I resolved to spend a bit of that endless energy on sorting out my own inadequacies. It was time to spend some time on me. I went to the supermarket and stocked up on food for me, and McGinty. Instead of my usual ready made, easy meals, I would devote myself to cooking wholesome, healthy food. I was living in the right country for that. I was finally going to get to grips with doing some good cooking. Something I had been putting off relentlessly. I would download some good recipes, and become if not exactly an Italian wonder chef, at least someone who could cook some good, basic, healthy, fare. Mind you, by the time I had done the supermarket run, and put everything away, it was getting late, so I couldn’t really be bothered cooking. I ordered in a Pizza. The new, healthy start wouldn’t be canceled, just slightly delayed.

After a relatively good night’s sleep, I continued with my mission to sort out things on the home front. Sunday was spent cleaning the flat, washing all my dirty clothes, which was just about all of them, and generally getting down to business. Valentina’s place was shut on Sunday, so I had no excuse for wasting time. By the afternoon, I had a stack of dry clothes that needed ironing. I was getting serious. The time had come for me to start making a bit more of an effort, in my new life. It was all very well helping others, but I also needed to buckle down, and take control of my own life. My thoughts kept returning to Valentina. Was I right there? Did she like me, in the way I liked her? Was the physical attraction mutual? After the whole mess with Monica, I wasn’t sure about anything, anymore. My self confidence in the

relationship stakes had really taken a nose dive. I decided that the best approach would be to keep the pressure on, but without going out on a limb. That way, if I was wrong, yet again, I wouldn't make an idiot out of myself, yet again. If, on the other hand, I was right, surely she would let me know, in some way. At some point she would inevitably give me a sign, an indication. I would keep on at it, pushing gently, and see how things developed. My God, the thought of making love with her was driving me crazy. She was so beautiful. Maybe I should lightly increase the pressure? To see what would happen. Yes, I definitely needed to know just how things were, between us. I would up the ante, just a bit.

When the Monday morning sunshine woke me, shimmering through my curtains, I was feeling the best I had felt for a long time. My flat was clean, and in good shape. I had a good feeling about Valentina, and I was making good progress with Rosa. I felt like I could achieve anything I set my mind to. Optimism was flowing in my veins. Sure, I had made plenty of mistakes in the past, and some things hadn't turned out as I had hoped, but surely that was the same for everyone. You just have to go with the flow. In any case, I could see that things were getting better. My new life was starting to bloom. A new place, with new friends. I felt that bit by bit, things were all starting to come together. Robbie was starting to open up, and Nassim and Jana were going to get the help they badly needed with their residency application. It seemed like things were beginning to go well for everyone. The situation between me and Valentina was definitely heading in the right direction, of that I was sure. After cleaning myself up, I headed off up the street, to Rosa, and then to Valentina's. I had such a spring in my step that I felt like I could almost fly, if I put my mind to it. Life's boundaries barely constrained me. I had been unleashed, and nothing could hold me back. Incredibly, Rosa seemed to be waiting for me. As I approached her bench, she stood up.

'Good morning, Rosa. How are you, today? Are you coming up for breakfast?'

She smiled at me in a way that almost flooded my heart with joy.

'Yes, that would be nice.'

What a change! And really it had all taken such little effort.

'Terrific! I'm so pleased.'

Her eyes smiled at me as we walked up the street to the coffee shop. Her obviously tranquil state filled me with an immense pleasure. A warmth flowed through me. After all her pain and suffering, she was finally returning to more of an acceptable place. With such a small effort on my behalf, Rosa was coming out of her pain ridden shell. Valentina must have seen us coming up the street, as she was waiting for us at the door.

‘Well, hello, you two! What a pleasant surprise! Here, sit down at this table, by the window.’

Valentina was wearing a light coloured, tight fitting dress. It was time to start pushing the boundaries.

‘Thanks, Valentina. I love that dress, it makes you look very pretty.’

‘Thank you, kind sir! What can I get you? The usual for you, Nigel, what about you, Rosa? Coffee and a brioche?’

‘Just a coffee, please.’

Rosa hadn’t spoken so much in months. What a big day!

‘Coming right up.’

Valentina left to get our order. Rosa seemed so different, so calm. She seemed like a changed person, someone at peace with herself. The difference in her was remarkable. It was so nice to see. She looked at me again, and smiled.

‘I wanted to thank you, Nigel, for everything you’ve done for me. You are a very kind person. You have helped me a lot. I like your friends, too. They all seem to be extremely nice people.’

‘It’s been my pleasure. It’s so good to see you this way, Rosa. You seem so calm.’

‘Yes, I am. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking. About everything, really, but especially about my little angel.’

‘Do you have a photo of your son? I don’t even know his name.’

‘Yes, here, look.’

From her pocket she took out a photo of her son, when he was in his early teens, I would have guessed.

‘His name is Angelo, my little angel.’

‘What a good looking fellow! Oh, Rosa, he is very handsome. He looks a lot like you. Especially the eyes.’

‘Thanks, a lot of people said that. My little boy, my life, my everything.’

Her face was glowing, as she spoke of her son. It was so good for her to have those memories to hold onto. To help her in her difficult moments.

‘Can I have a look?’

Valentina was at our table with our breakfast. I handed her the photo.

‘Oh, how sweet. What a lovely young man. Rosa, he is so good looking!’

‘Thank you. He will always be with me, in my heart. We will always be together. Nothing will ever separate us. You have both been very kind to me. I really want to thank you, sincerely.’

‘You don’t need to thank us, Rosa, it has been our great pleasure.’ replied Valentina, ‘It’s so good to see you here, having a chat with us.’

Without even drinking her coffee, Rosa stood up to go.

‘Well, I have to be going now. Thank you both. You are two very kindhearted people.’

Rosa walked towards the door. When she got to the door she stopped and turned, gave us a little wave, then she left Valentina’s coffee shop.

‘Nigel, I can’t believe it, how fantastic! What a change!’

Valentina’s excitement was uncontainable. As was mine.

‘I know, isn’t it great to see? What a transformation in her. All it took was a few kind words, here and there. Not much at all. I really hope she is on the road to getting some form of a life back. Hopefully, she will get in touch with some of her old friends.’

‘You really were so nice to her. You are such a considerate person.’

‘Thanks, so are you. In fact, we make a good team! Hey, by the way, no Robbie this morning? What’s going on?’

‘Yes, another surprise, today seems to be full of them. It’s the first time in ages that he hasn’t been in here having his glass, or two, of wine. I expect he will be back, though. You don’t kick a habit like that overnight.’

‘Yeah, I guess you’re right. You know, you really look radiant today.’

She looked at me with a cheeky grin on her face.

‘Aren’t you just full of compliments today?’

We both laughed. There really was some good chemistry growing between us. I could feel the physical attraction increasing. One of us was going to have to make a move soon, very soon. There seemed to be no doubt that I was seeing things correctly. My senses were back on track. Life was

starting to look good for me. I was back in the driving seat.

‘Bye, Valentina, I’ll see you later.’

‘Bye, you.’

I strolled back down the street feeling almost light headed. Things with Valentina were coming along nicely. Rosa was finally returning to a good place. It felt so good to have been able to help her, especially after having done so little, really. It hadn’t taken much effort on my behalf. Maybe it wasn’t really that difficult to help those who had fallen through life’s cracks. Maybe if people were just a bit more attentive, we could easily raise up those less advantaged than us. Unfortunately most people were just so wrapped up in their own day to day activities, that they didn’t seem to have time for others. Or maybe they just didn’t really care? In any case, I cared, and I had found the time to help. It made me feel incredibly satisfied. I approached the new week with an extreme lightness. I had a fairly busy day ahead of me. The car was booked in for a tune-up, plus I wanted to take McGinty to the vet, for his yearly vaccine shot, and a bit of a general check up. I also still had some last household chores to finish. I wanted the flat to be in perfect condition, so I had a full day ahead of me. I was on a bit of a high all day long, I almost floated through the day, as I completed my list of duties. I absolutely couldn’t believe the progress I had made with Rosa. It really filled me with joy, to see her so changed, so uplifted. So at peace. I couldn’t wait for the following morning, to have breakfast with her, and to see if I could get her to open up some more. I would ask her some questions about her son’s childhood, to try and keep his memory alive for her. I glided through the day’s activities with a smile on my face, and a great feeling of fulfillment within. It made me feel very satisfied with myself, helping others. It really was a win win situation. Everyone gained from it, including myself. That night I slept the best that I had slept in ages. Ever since my redundancy I had been sleeping rather badly, really. I quite often woke up during the night, and would have trouble getting back to sleep. Not that night, though. That night I fell asleep with a great sense of contentment.

Chapter Four: The Red of Roses

The next morning found me totally refreshed, and in rather high spirits. I couldn't wait to see Rosa, and Valentina. My life was moving in a positive direction, at last. I quickly prepared myself for the lovely start to the day opening up before me. Then I left my flat, and headed up the road. Rosa wasn't on her bench. With great pleasure I realised that most probably she was already waiting for me at the coffee shop. How fantastic was that? The new Rosa. I wandered up, cheerfully, to the coffee shop. As soon as I entered, Valentina approached me, looking slightly apprehensive.

'Have you seen Rosa?'

'No, I thought she might already be up here, ready for breakfast.'

'I haven't seen her since yesterday morning. She wasn't on her bench all day after that, at all. And now, not this morning either. With such nice weather, she should be there. I'm worried about her, Nigel!'

Her voice sounded rather anxious. I felt disorientated.

'I don't think... I don't know... where could she be?'

A wave of confusion rolled over me. Looking at Valentina, a chill came over my body. What was going on? Something was not quite right, but I couldn't understand what it was. Valentina gripped my arm.

'Nigel, you don't think that maybe yesterday was her way of saying goodbye to us?'

My body stiffened, and my turmoil grew. A wave of anxiety flooded through me.

'My God, Valentina, don't say that! That can't be right!'

Valentina was obviously extremely worried.

'Please go and check at her place. I'll phone the owner, he lives in the same building, in a flat downstairs. Wait.'

Valentina went back behind the counter, and pulled out the phone book. She found the number she wanted, and called someone. My head was spinning. What was happening? What did Valentina mean that it may have

been Rosa's way of saying goodbye to us? That couldn't be right. It just couldn't be. Things had been going so well. Just the day before Rosa had seemed to be so at peace.

'He's waiting for you over there, number 14. His name is Luigi. Hurry, Nigel!'

In my bewildered state, I rushed over the road. An elderly man was waiting for me outside apartment block number 14.

'Are you Valentina's friend?'

I nodded.

'Come on, I will let you in. She's on the second floor.'

We entered the block of flats, and walked up the stairs in silence. Luigi knocked on Rosa's door, but no one came. He unlocked the door for me, and beckoned for me to enter. In a state of great apprehension, I entered her dark, closed flat.

'Rosa, are you there? Rosa, it's me, Nigel. Are you alright?'

Behind me, Luigi turned on the light. The lounge room was in a mess, but there was no sign of Rosa. I walked into her bedroom, and turned on the light. The bed was unmade, and again, the room was very messy.

'Rosa, are you there?'

I continued along the corridor, opened the bathroom door, and turned on the light. That was where I found her. In the harshness of the blinding naked light bulb I saw her. She was lying in the blood red water of the bath, with both her wrists slashed. She was still wearing the same clothes she had worn the previous morning, in the coffee shop. On the floor next to the bath I could see an empty pill bottle. My head was spinning, I felt sick. My legs felt like they were buckling beneath me. I gripped onto the door frame, to stop myself from falling over.

'Oh dear God!' I heard from behind me.

I knew I should get out of there. Every instinct in me told me to leave, but I couldn't. I was drawn to her. I couldn't take my eyes off her. I was somehow hypnotised by the sight of her, the way she looked. Rosa's face was so serene. She looked so peaceful, lying there surrounded by the bloody bath water. I had never seen her face look so relaxed. It almost looked like she was smiling. The realisation flooded over me why she had been so calm the previous morning. She had already made her decision. She had decided

to join her son. A decision that had brought peace to her troubled soul. In that moment, an awareness struck me. In that moment I understood why people committed suicide. Her pain had ended. She was now with her son, her little Angelo. Forever. Never to be separated. Contrary to everything I had always been taught, maybe suicide wasn't such a bad thing? Society condemned it as an act of failure. The church condemned it as a sin. Maybe it was neither. Just possibly, it was sometimes a courageous act. A necessary act. An act of freedom. As I stood there captivated by her face, my heart was beating furiously, my mind was racing, but I couldn't move. I just stood there, leaning against the door frame, and continued to look at Rosa. I have never seen anyone look so beautiful, so angelic, as her, in that moment. My whole being was transfixed by her beauty, and serenity. She had found the comfort of angels. Surrounded by the blood red water, she had found the place she had so long craved. She was with her son. Never again to be apart. After a time, I don't remember how long, people started arriving. Someone took me by the arm, and accompanied me outside. There were people in uniforms, lights flashing. There was a great commotion everywhere. People were asking me questions. I couldn't understand the words. I could barely stand. My head was pounding. Nausea was growing in my stomach. My body was shaking. I couldn't understand what was happening. Everything was blurry. My mind couldn't focus. My recollection of the following events is vague. Somehow I found myself back at my place, and I was lying on the couch. I couldn't concentrate. How was any of that possible? I had thought that Rosa had been getting better. She had even started speaking. It had seemed like the worst was behind her. None of it made any sense to me. How was it possible that just the day before, she had seemed to be so at peace? Had her sense of peace been caused by the fact that she had decided to join her son? Could the thought of death really be so alluring? Can death really be the answer to your problems? I couldn't understand any of it. My mind was invaded with waves of indecipherable thoughts. How could I find the answers if I couldn't even understand the questions? I turned on the television, trying to drown out the clamour in my mind. The new life I thought I had created, suddenly seemed like a farce. Who was I to think I could have any effect on the lives of others? I could barely help myself, who was I kidding? I lay there for hours, trying to not think about it all, but at the

same time, I could think of nothing else. I was at the centre of yet another failure, in a life of failures. Just when I had thought that my life was turning a corner, that my life had new meaning, something always happened to remind me how futile it all was. Nothing was getting better, if anything, it was just getting worse. Everything I put my hand to was doomed to fail. My mind was being bombarded with all sorts of undesirable thoughts. I needed to escape the constant images of the blood red water flashing through my mind. I had to get out. I had to see Valentina. She seemed to be all that I had left in my life. I knew that seeing her would help me escape the confusion. I quickly cleaned myself up, and went back out, onto Dante street. I had to see my Valentina.

Incredibly, out on the street, there was an eerie silence. There was no noticeable sign of what had happened there, just a short time before. All the officials, and their vehicles, had gone. Life had returned to normal. Death, and the fear it carried with it, had been swept under the rug, out of sight. Out of mind, out of sight. Death had been hidden from view. Normal people could go about their normal lives, unconcerned about other people's suffering. Death was not supposed to be noticed. Its existence was unwanted, causing nothing but disruption to the living. It was to be hidden away, not seen. Death, the knowledge of death, was not to be allowed to linger in everyday life. The industry of death had taken away all signs that it had even been present. People could return to their homes, after their day's work, unhindered by the passing of Rosa. Untroubled by the fact that someone had died on their street. Most probably wouldn't even know it had happened, the rest probably wouldn't even care. There was just one person less living on Dante street. A flat would soon be vacant. A new face would soon appear. Life would carry on. Death was kept unseen, hidden. The sight of death was unwanted. Its presence intrusive. Nobody wanted to be reminded that, one way or another, death was waiting for us all. Hovering, patiently waiting, knowing full well that nobody would be escaping its clutches. How would we all be able to continue with our everyday lives, if we were constantly reminded that it would all be for nothing? Everything we did was futile. We would leave no trace. After a few hours of our death, all signs of our having even existed, would have been washed away. Death, the

perception of death, was an unwelcome sight. If we were reminded regularly of its lurking presence, if we were surrounded by it, repeatedly mindful of it, could we really continue with our lives as usual? Could we carry on planning, buying, carrying out all the tedious tasks that go to make up the day? If we were constantly aware of our slowly approaching death, could we really continue with our mundane existences as usual? As if it all meant something? Or would society grind to a halt, people no longer bothered about all the goods they thought they had needed. Would society break down, if people were conscious of where we were all headed? That is why the industry of death exists, to quickly whisk away all signs of death, and keep us all following the path society has laid down for us, oblivious to where that pathway will eventually lead us.

As soon as I entered the coffee shop, Valentina raced to me, and hugged me tightly. Her taut body felt so good. I buried my face in her hair, I wrapped my arms around her. Her hair smelt so nice. Holding her felt so liberating. I could feel the tension leaving my body. She released me, and looked at me with a very worried expression.

‘Nigel, how are you? Are you alright? No one could have known. You can’t blame yourself.’

Blame myself? What for? Why would I blame myself? I didn’t understand her. I had only tried to help Rosa. What blame could I have had? Then the realisation hit me. Maybe I had pushed Rosa too far, too fast? Would it have been better to have let her find her own way back to life, in her own time?

‘Do you think I pushed her too much?’

‘No! Not at all! You were only trying to help her. I just think there was nothing to be done. She just couldn’t go on without her lovely boy. We all saw how she was, sitting forever on that bench. You did all you could. You did a lot. You really tried. You should be proud of that. You cared enough, to try and help her. Unfortunately, there was no way back for her. She was carrying a pain which could not be erased.’

‘Maybe I should just have stayed out of her life. I probably just made things worse.’

‘Don’t say that! It’s not true! You were very kind to her. She really

appreciated that. What you did for Rosa was a good thing. Let them say what they like!’

My God, so that was what people thought. They were blaming me for having pushed her over the edge. Maybe it was true. Maybe it was all my fault, or at least partly. In that moment I felt so pathetic. I felt as if I just couldn’t get anything right. For some reason, everything I set out to do, just seemed to turn out in the worst of ways. Everything went wrong. If I tried to achieve one thing, it turned out the complete opposite. It seemed like I just couldn’t understand anything, anymore. All my life I had considered myself to be someone who really had a good handle on things. Someone who could instinctively understand people, and where they were coming from, almost immediately. I had prided myself on my ability to sum up people, and situations, with very little effort. The vast majority of the time, I had been proved to have been right. But in my new life, the new version of me, the opposite was true. It seemed like I just couldn’t get it right at all. What had happened to me? Had the blow to my previous stable existence shattered that ability to pieces? Or, possibly, when I had been following life’s standard pathway, the pathway of normality, it had all been easier to understand. When you are with people living standard lives, all doing the same things, there weren’t that many surprises out there. After all, knowing the script everyone was following, understanding the rule book, made it all easier to decipher. Average people, living average lives, doing average things. Who could get that wrong? Now that I lived among those who, like me, had fallen through the cracks, maybe it all wasn’t as easy to understand, as it once had been? Once a person had been stripped of his normality, his facade, the real person inside would emerge, for better or for worse. The complexities that had been hidden deeply within would bubble to the surface, changing everything. This new person, a person not following the old rule book, would be much more complicated, more problematic to comprehend. The codes had been changed. People who had fallen through the cracks needed to be interpreted with different ciphers.

‘Are you sure you are alright, Nigel?’

Valentina’s voice shook me back to reality. I needed to find a place to think.

‘Yeah, I just need some air. I will see you tomorrow.’

‘OK, but don’t blame yourself for this, please!’

I walked down to Rosa’s bench, and sat down. Rosa’s bench. Maybe it was my bench now? I jumped up, frightened at the prospect. Would I be the next Rosa on Dante street? Would this be my bench, until I, following Rosa’s example, decided to end it all? I was gripped by anxiety. After the industry of death had cleared away any sign of me ever having been present, would I be remembered? Had I successfully destroyed any ties to people who would have remembered me? And what about McGinty? Who would take care of him? Would he starve to death, slowly, before my body was eventually found? I had to organise things to save McGinty. But, what was I thinking? I didn’t want to kill myself. Or would that be better? My mind was racing, I felt hot and sweaty. I hurried home, and locked myself in. Then it struck me that maybe it would be better not to lock the door. That way it would be easier for them to find me. I unlocked the door. Then, in a burst of anger, I locked it again. I was not Rosa! I had to stop thinking like that. I turned on the television, and threw myself on the couch. My mind was in a state of total confusion. I tried to concentrate on the program I was watching, one of the many banal cooking shows. Anything, just to stop my mind from dwelling on the dark thoughts that were descending on me. There was a darkness that was enveloping me. I had never had those thoughts before in my stock, standard life. But, after falling through the cracks, there were no borders, there were no limits, no safety nets, anything was possible. I found myself to be terrified of my new life. I desperately wanted to return to my old life. A life with stability, with no surprises. A life where the only choices you had to make were based around what you would watch on TV, or what colour you would paint the bathroom. Suddenly, I craved the predictability, and security, of my former life. The simplicity of knowing what each day would bring, because it would only bring more of the same. No surprises. A continuous repetition of all the previous days. A loop of ordinariness, easy to understand. Out there, in life’s wasteland, nothing was conventional, nothing was easy to fathom, no one was safe. After having fallen through life’s cracks, anything could happen. The rules governing that tangled maze were written in a language impossible to interpret. Could I survive out there? I felt so tired.

Chapter Five: The Bells Will Ring

The next morning I felt terrible, disorientated. McGinty had woken me early. He was hungry. In my distraught state I had forgotten to fill his food bowl the previous evening. I had slept on the couch, badly, fully clothed. I shook my head, in frustration, trying to shake off the aberrant thoughts that had invaded my mind. What the hell had come over me? Where had those strange thoughts of the day before come from? That wasn't me. That wasn't where I was at. I was enjoying my new life. I didn't want to kill myself. I couldn't believe I had been thinking like that. I liked my new flat, and my new life. Seeking answers to explain it all, I put it down to the fact that probably I had just been shaken by Rosa's death. That had been her choice. Not mine. I wasn't in that place. I wasn't the next Rosa on Dante street. My God! Where had all that come from? That was her, not me. I was living the life I had chosen for myself. Also, I still had my new friends, and, of course, Valentina. My life was slowing coming together. I was doing well, reasonably well, anyway. I realised that I needed to clean myself up. I was in a real mess. My clothes smelt of stale sweat, and my mind was still rather jittery. Before going out for breakfast, I cleaned myself up, and tidied up the flat. Stability, that was what I needed. Composure, and self-control. Cleanliness, of my person, and my surroundings. There were no problems in my life. Everything was in order. Everything was exactly as it should be.

As I headed up the road, I refused to even look at Rosa's bench. Partly because I wanted to keep my life focused on moving forward, but also partly because I was slightly apprehensive of the thoughts that it might evoke. I managed to pass it by without incident. Little as that may seem, at the time it was something of a relief. It felt good to enter into Valentina's coffee shop. I felt like I was returning home.

'Hi, Nigel! How're things?'

She looked even more beautiful than ever. Tight jeans, showing off her slim, long legs, and a tight fitting T-shirt, clinging to her body, like glue. Her

breasts looked so enticing.

‘Hi there. Yeah, better today, thanks. I felt pretty shaken yesterday, but I feel like I’m getting back to normal today.’

‘I’m so pleased to hear that. Guess who’s back this morning?’

She nodded towards the table in the corner. Robbie was seated there, back in his usual spot.

‘Ahah! That didn’t last long!’

Valentina shook her finger at me.

‘Well, don’t be so hasty. He’s drinking coffee! He seems like a different person. A much nicer person.’

Robbie saw me looking over.

‘Hey, Nigel,’ he called, ‘come and join me for breakfast!’

‘Sure.’ I called back to him. ‘I’ll have the usual, please Valentina.’

‘You got it.’

I walked over to Robbie. There he sat, beaming. His face looked ten years younger. Even his posture had changed. He had his shoulders pushed back. He looked good.

‘Hey, you see this? Coffee! Are you surprised?’

‘Very glad to see it, my friend. Well done. Hey, it’s a day by day process. Today you are winning.’

‘I’m going to be winning every day, Nigel. I just can’t do that shit anymore. Hey listen, I was sorry to hear about Rosa. I didn’t really know her, but I know you were close.’

‘Yeah, thanks. It really shook me. It was so totally unexpected. But, anyway, look at you. You are all dressed up. What’s the deal?’

‘This morning I have an appointment with the immigration case officer of Nassim and Jana. On Sunday they gave me their paperwork, and I found some irregularities. Something is not right there. I want some answers.’

‘You know, they told me she seemed to really have it in for them. She sounds like a real asshole.’

Robbie shrugged his shoulders.

‘Bureaucrat, my friend. Just another bureaucrat.’

A smile came to my face at the thought of a lawyer turning up instead of Nassim and Jana, for the appointment.

‘She is gonna freak out when a lawyer walks in! Good on you! They are

really nice people. This country needs people like them. Anyway, little Ariane was born here. She's Italian. There must be a way to sort it all out.'

'Oh, don't you worry. I've already told Jana and Nassim. It's a done deal. I will sort this out quick smart. Listen, breakfast is on me, my friend. You take your time, but I have places to be, and people to see.'

He paid for breakfast, and left, with his briefcase in his hand. Valentina brought my breakfast over.

'Hey, Valentina, who is that guy? What happened to our old Robbie? Wow, what a change! I bet he was a pretty successful lawyer, before the booze kicked in.'

She smiled, and nodded.

'Yes, it's good to see. Listen, I spoke with Father Thomas, from St. Mary's church. There will be rosary prayers for Rosa, this evening, at 7 pm. Her funeral will be held tomorrow morning, at 10. Apparently, her ex-husband has stepped forward, and has organised it all.'

Thank God for Valentina! In my unsettled state I hadn't given any thoughts about all the practicalities necessary following Rosa's death.

'That's good to hear. Thanks for finding all that out. I haven't been in much of a state to look into all that, but I really want to be there for Rosa. I wonder if any of her old friends will turn up?'

'I doubt it. She had really fallen off everyone's radar. Unfortunately, when problems kick in, the people you thought were your friends soon disappear.'

'Yes, life can be cruel when things do wrong, that's for sure.'

I had my breakfast in a pensive state. After leaving Valentina's, I returned to my flat. The rest of the day was spent virtually just waiting for the church service that evening. I was trying to not think about things too much. I didn't want to spin out of control again. I busied myself with practical tasks, taking care of things in the flat, and sorting out some paperwork. Anything, as long as it kept my mind away from those dark thoughts that always seemed to be hovering, menacingly, above my head.

I had organised for some flowers to be delivered to the church, so I headed up there a bit early, to see if all was in order. I was pleasantly surprised to see a few flower bouquets, at least someone still thought of

Rosa. Inside the church everything looked very nice. It was just a small local church, which in Italy made it just one of the many. In any other country, it would have been considered a national treasure. The altar, all handcrafted in marble, dated from 1661. There were side altars, dedicated to various saints. One to St. Francis, another, the main one, to Mary, the mother of Jesus. I was always amazed at just how many antiquities Italy had, every little church was an historic wonder. Each one, a place to discover. I heard the door open, and turned to see Nassim, Jana, and Ariane walk in. I was a bit surprised, really. Could muslims participate in a catholic ceremony? Did that mean I could just wander into a mosque?

‘Hi, Nigel.’ said Jana. ‘How are you? I know it must have hit you hard. Especially with you being the one who found her. That must have been a terrible shock.’

‘Hey, thanks for coming. Yeah, it really overwhelmed me, alright. Anyway, I’m feeling a bit better now.’

A few other people entered. Some I didn’t know, plus Robbie, and Valentina. We all found places to sit, with Valentina coming to sit next to me. She took my hand in hers, and gave me a smile. It felt so good to be there, with her. Without her in my life, it would all have seemed so meaningless. The ceremony of the rosary was a fairly brief affair, albeit heavy with emotion. Before too long we all found ourselves outside the church. The few people I didn’t know left without saying a word. I assumed that one of them would have been her ex-husband.

‘It was good of you all to come.’

‘Of course we came, Nigel,’ said Nassim, ‘Unfortunately I won’t be able to come to the funeral tomorrow, I have to go to work, but Jana will be there.’

Valentina touched my arm, lightly.

‘Sorry, but tomorrow I have to open the coffee shop, so I can’t make it, either.’

‘That’s OK, Valentina, you came this evening. That was good of you. Rosa would have appreciated that.’

Robbie shook my hand, and we all all wandered off in silence. Each consumed with his own thoughts. Although, really, I was trying to think as little as possible about it all. My mind still seemed to be in a rather delicate

state.

To be honest, I was sort of dreading the funeral. I find funerals to be incredibly exacting, so definitive. It's almost like they take away any last little possibility of it all having been just a bad dream. They made the reality of it all absolutely unavoidable. If I could have, I would have preferred to have abstained from going. However, in all truth, I had to be there. I felt like I had been Rosa's closest friend, in her last days. Even though I had known her for such a short period of time, it had been an extremely intense experience. I wondered if we could have been friends in our former lives? In our lives before we had both fallen through the cracks. It's funny how in different phases of our lives, we bond with different people. Maybe we should change our friends with the same frequency with which we change our cars, or our televisions? The newer version, for the newer period we are living in. Just how real is friendship anyway? I'm sure that when Rosa was on top of her world, she would have had many friends, or people who she considered to be friends. Now, where were they? They had moved on to other friends, and other cars, and televisions. Rosa had been forgotten by them. It struck me that most friendships were actually very superficial, and transitory. Just people, in a similar phase as each other, passing a bit of time together. They were fulfilling some sort of need to have others around, but without really having any genuinely deep attachment to them. Probably they felt the same emotional attachment that they had towards their cars, and televisions. We enjoyed our friends, for a while, and then, as our situations alter, we changed them. To a certain extent, there was a sort of logic behind that. As our way of living changes, as our hobbies change, we probably feel the need to surround ourselves with new people. People who also share that new lifestyle. People who share those choices. People who would fill a temporary need, until they, too, would be replaced with others. A continual cycle of superficiality. In reality that had been the way it had been with me, and my so-called friends from my previous job. While the job had given us a communal thread, a common bond, we had been the best of friends. When that common thread had been cut, those friendships had unraveled.

The day of Rosa's funeral was a gloriously sunny, Italian spring day. It

seemed at odds with such a sad event. I suppose I would have preferred a cold, wet, overcast, and gloomy day. The sort of day more appropriate for a funeral. Depressing weather, to go hand in hand with the sadness of a final farewell. Being Italy, and being late spring, that wasn't the case. It was the sort of morning that would normally inspire optimism, an uplifting of the spirit. On a day like that you should be doing happy, positive things. Enjoying life, enjoying yourself. It almost seemed to be like the last cruel act in Rosa's painful life. The final betrayal. After having been abandoned by all her old friends, even the weather appeared to have abandoned her. At least the church service itself proved to be suitably sad, in that there were only three of us present. Myself, Jana, and a man who I took to be Rosa's ex-husband. On studying him closely, he didn't look like someone who had lost everything, as Rosa had. He looked much the same as everyone else. Just another face in the crowd. Maybe he was better at handling grief than Rosa, or maybe he had just accepted it, as much as was possible, and was getting on with his life as best he could. Some people have the ability to survive anything. The burning desire to live gives them the strength to go on, in the face of all kinds of adversity. It seems as if nothing can stop them. I wondered if it was because of an inner strength they had, or, perhaps, was it more to do with a lack of emotion? Were some of us wired to feel emotional pain more? While others had a higher tolerance to it? Without a doubt, we are all affected differently by devastating events. Almost certainly, we also all have different tolerance levels to physical pain, not just emotional suffering. In the Nazi death camps, many inmates simply refused to die, clinging on desperately as long as possible. Others, in their desolation and despair, had thrown themselves on the electrified wire fences, after having decided to put an end to their suffering. Probably, until they were face to face with such great suffering, people wouldn't know how they were going to react. I doubted that there was a right way, or a wrong way. Quite simply, each of us is wired differently, and therefore reacts differently. The way we react is the right way for each of us, in that situation. The way Rosa had reacted had been the right way for her. Without a doubt, she had been incapable of doing anything other than that which she had done. She had found the right path for her. She had found the peace of mind she craved.

When the funeral service was finished, we left the church, and followed

Rosa's coffin to the cemetery, where it was interred into a wall vault, in the Italian tradition. It was over. Rosa had been eradicated entirely from this world. Her presence was no more. The memory of her was already starting to fade. Maybe somewhere there were some photos of her, and her family, which would occasionally be looked at, before they, too, started to lose their colour, and fade. She had become just another vanishing memory. Jana and I started walking back towards Dante street.

'At least she is at peace now, Nigel.'

'Yeah, I know. She is with her son. You know, when I found her, she looked so happy, strangely. She even seemed to be smiling.'

'That really is lovely. She is where she wanted to be, we can't question that. It was her choice to make.'

'Yeah, that's true. It was nice of you to come, Jana. I know you didn't really know her that much.'

'Well, I had seen her many times, on that bench. Every time I passed her, my heart went out to her.'

'You really made a big impression on Robbie. I can see why. You are a very genuine person. Have you had any news from him, about your application?'

'Not yet, he doesn't have any definitive news for us. Although, he did say that Mrs. Bergonzi, our case officer, does seem to have been blocking us on purpose. So he is very positive. He is sure he can sort things out. We don't want to get our hopes up too much, but things are looking pretty good.'

'This has really given him a reason to get up in the morning, you know? He is such a changed man. You should see if some of your friends also have problems he could sort out for them. For their sakes, but also for Robbie's. This is good for him.'

Jana smiled at me.

'You really are a wonderful person, Nigel. You pay attention to people's needs. You really care.'

She stopped, and placed her hand on my shoulder. She looked at me directly in the eyes, with a sort of searching expression.

'Remember to look out for yourself, as well as others. You're important, too, you know? Don't forget that. Think of yourself, as well. OK, this is my

street. I will see you later. Take care of yourself, Nigel.'

'Bye, Jana, I will, don't worry.'

I had missed my breakfast at the coffee shop, so I thought I would pop in for a cappuccino, and to see Valentina. After that I wanted to head to the park. I needed to evaluate my current situation. The recent turmoil had left me in a strange mental place, and I wanted to figure out where I was through it all. When I entered the coffee shop I immediately saw Robbie, sitting at a table with a Romanian woman I knew vaguely from the area. On the table there was a scattering of documents, and various bits of paper. Valentina greeted me with her arms raised in theatrical poise.

'Welcome to Robbie's office! Would you like an appointment?'

Valentina was in top form, as was her way. She seemed extremely happy, with a great smile on her face.

'When did all this happen?'

'I knew that Olga was having problems with her Italian immigration status, so I asked Robbie to take a look.'

'From what Jana told me, it looks like he is going to be able to sort out their problems relatively easily. Maybe he has found his new calling?'

'I hope so. Olga is a very nice person. She does a lot of cleaning for the elderly in the area. She works very hard, and asks for very little money in return. She knows that they are all on the pension, and that money is tight for them. She even does some shopping for them.'

'Basically, she steps in where the state, and family, fail?'

Valentina laughed.

'Don't go getting too deep on me, Mr. Smarty-pants!'

Her face changed to a serious expression.

'How did the funeral go?'

I sighed deeply.

'Pretty depressing. Anyway, her pain is over. I guess she is where she wanted to be, so... '

Valentina interrupted me in a quiet, but firm voice.

'Hey, Nigel, let's leave it at that, what do you say? There's nothing to be gained by dwelling on it all. What's been done, is done.'

I looked at her, and nodded. She was definitely right.

‘Yeah, sure.’

In quiet reflection I had my cappuccino, and then headed up to the park. I was feeling a bit down with it all, so I thought it would be good for me to sit and think things through for a bit. I found a bench in the sun, and sat down. There were just a few other people there. Mainly mums with their babies, although, when I looked a bit closer at them, I realised that they were probably mostly nannies with the babies, while the mothers worked. In fact, a couple of them, deep in conversation, had the characteristic facial lineaments of woman from eastern Europe. Maybe Russia, or Romania. It crossed my mind that you would really need to trust someone a lot, to leave your baby with them. They could just walk out of the park, with those babies, and never be seen, or heard of, again. How would you be able to check someones background and credentials, if they came from somewhere like Russia? That decision was probably, as much as anything, just a leap of faith. Life came with a great element of blind faith attached to it. Faith that the people you trusted wouldn't let you down. Faith that things would continue, as usual, with nothing going wrong. Choices were made with little, or minimal, consideration, other than that of having faith in the goodness of people. It really was incredible, that we could hold so much trust in people we barely knew. Quite often, the people we know well were those who let us down the most, yet we gave so much trust to people we knew very little about, strangers really. People, I reasoned, are basically optimists, expecting things to always go in the right direction, as we expected that they should. It is probably for that reason, that blind faith given to people, that when things do go wrong, a lot people break down completely, their trust totally shattered. When that absolute expectancy that only good things would happen, is broken, when your faith in society is revealed to have been misplaced, there is really only one possible outcome. When that trust is broken, you too, will also break. Your life will be shattered, never to be the same again. You can try to rebuild a semblance of your former life, but it will never feel the same again. Without that blind faith to guide you, you will call into question everything, and everyone. A constant nagging doubt will replace that feeling of trust, doubt not only of others, but also of yourself, of your own judgement. The solid floor you had been walking on

with great surety, would then become unstable, difficult to navigate. Every step, once taken with lightness, with complete confidence, would be overshadowed by menace, a step into the unknown. Your place in society, once taken for granted, once accepted as being a given, would suddenly seem to be highly tenuous. That blind faith in good being ever present, would give way to constant uncertainty. Nothing, and no one, could ever be trusted again. Everything would have to be reconsidered. Nothing could again be accepted on face value alone. At what point in that whole scale of things was my life? Where was I? I had burnt my bridges with my ex-colleagues, my so-called friends, or, to put it better, those bridges had been burnt to a cinder around me. And Valentina? Was I expecting too much of her? Was it just me projecting my feelings onto her? Perhaps my need for her, or someone like her, was clouding my judgement. Did she really feel the same way about me? On reflection though, taking into account her actions, and her behaviour towards me, it did seem like she felt the same way for me, as I did for her. Maybe, for once, I had gotten it right? I knew I had been wrong, on some occasions, too many occasions, truth be told, but with Valentina, I was sure that I was judging the situation correctly. I could feel my confidence slowly returning. It was possible that I could still rebuild my life, even after yet another series of failures. I decided that the best game plan would be to return to my former strategy, that of taking things slowly with Valentina, not to rush her. I would just let things build between us, without pushing her, as I had done, wrongly in hindsight, with Monica. Not to mention Rosa. Optimism was cautiously creeping back in. The sun was shining, I felt uplifted by its golden rays. I felt like it was possible that the world could still be mine. Things were tentatively coming back into focus. I could achieve maybe not everything that I had hoped for, but enough. My faith in people, and society, was slowly being restored. I, too, trusted those Russian women, to not bring harm to those babies in their care. Look at Robbie. Look at his transformation. Hadn't I played a part in that? Wasn't I partly responsible for his return to the good path, resurrected from the depths of darkness? While Rosa had been, without a doubt, an unconditional failure on my behalf, Robbie was a success. Undoubtedly, when you are living on the darker side of life, out on its very edges, the path that you follow is less illuminated. You couldn't expect all things to finish well. Any successful

outcome was to be celebrated. Some failings were to be expected. Things couldn't be judged by the old standards, where everything had always been expected to flourish. In this life, this new life, out on the fringes of society, different parameters were needed, for judging outcomes. Different scales, to weigh different weights. Nothing was the same, and things couldn't be calculated by the old criteria. New benchmarks were needed to evaluate diverse results.

The rest of that day passed in a similar vein, that of quiet contemplation. Maybe finally I was beginning to understand the complexities of life? With my new found wisdom, and optimism, that night I slept well. The sleep of someone who is satisfied with where he is in life. Someone who is right where he wanted to be. Someone who after struggling copiously, had eventually found his way back onto his path.

Chapter Six: Where The Pieces Fall

With the coming of the new day, another upliftingly splendid sunny morning, I found myself to be in great spirits. I quickly rushed through all my morning routine, anxious to get up to the coffee shop. I got out into the brand-new day, and started on my way up to see my Valentina. As I walked past Rosa's bench, the bench, I paused for a moment. I studied it, looking for clues. Trying to discover its secrets. After some great scrutiny, I could discern nothing out of the ordinary. In the end it was just a bench. A bench like all the others. It hadn't been transformed by the fact that Rosa had selected it for her last stand. In any case, she had selected it purely for its convenient position. It was just over the road from where she had lived. It hadn't taken on extra duties. It hadn't been elevated to a higher calling by Rosa having chosen it. It was just a bench, where someone had sat, for a certain period. I was tempted to sit on it, but decided that, all things considered, given my recent fragile mental state, that might be tempting fate just a bit too much. I continued on my way.

I entered the coffee shop with great vigour, feeling like a king inspecting his realm. I felt like the world was mine for the taking. I could achieve anything I set my mind to. Valentina was mine. Our new life, together, was just starting. I was slowly, but surely, putting the Rosa tragedy behind me, and I was moving on. Only good things lay before me.

'Hey, good morning!'

Valentina beamed me one of her fantastic smiles. A smile that could uplift the dying, a smile that could warm the coldest, darkest of hearts.

'Hi there, Valentina, how are you?'

'Great. The usual?'

'You bet. I was thinking, you know... '

'Hey, Nigel, get over here!'

Robbie was in his corner, and beckoned me over.

'Join me for breakfast. Hey, come over here, and sit down!'

I was slightly annoyed to be interrupted, while I had been talking with Valentina, but nonetheless I went over and sat down. After all, he was now a good friend. He was bubbling over with enthusiasm. He looked so much younger than he had when I had first seen him. There was a sparkle in his eye. He looked like a man with a purpose, not a lost soul, brooding in his endless glass of despair.

‘Listen, my good man. I want to thank you. I really appreciate the way you pushed me, pushed me to get back out there. I was depressed about how I had lost my family, and didn’t want to participate in anything.’

‘That’s alright, I was just being friendly.’

‘Well, I’ve been thinking. I know I don’t deserve my family.’

‘Shit, come on, don’t say that!’

‘Hey, no, listen! Where I was, the state I was in, I didn’t deserve anything other than what I had. Before I can expect them even to want to talk to me, I have to become a better person. I have to prove to them that I am worthy of them. I think I have found that path. Guess what?’

I looked at him, and smiled.

‘I think I may have an idea.’

Valentina placed my breakfast on the table, in front of me. I flashed her a smile, and she smiled back.

‘I’m going to open a practice, specialising in aiding foreigners to navigate the endless red tape that is put in their way. Plus, I will do it charging very little, whatever they can afford. Even for free, if they don’t have any money. Jana is going to volunteer as my secretary. Actually, I will make sure I pay her what I can. You know, with the kid, and all. What do you think about that?’

His face was beaming.

‘I think it’s a great idea. But what about the practical side? Have you thought that through? What about an office, paying rent, and all that stuff?’

He waved that idea off disparagingly with his left hand.

‘It couldn’t be easier. Quite simply I won’t have one. Valentina said I can meet with people here in the mornings. Also, down at the community centre I can set up a desk a couple of times a week. The rest I can do from home. That way my overheads will be negligible.’

He was a man with a well thought out plan. A man with a calling.

‘I like it. It sounds like you are on a roll. Are you going to tell your wife about all this?’

His expression turned serious, and he shook his head.

‘No, not yet. When it’s all up and running I will show her what, who, I have become. She needs to see the proof. Words alone won’t cut it. She has heard it all before, too many times.’ He stopped talking, briefly, and pointed a finger at me. ‘Nigel, let me make you a promise. You will never see me drink again!’

‘I believe it, I really do. I’m very happy for you, Robbie. This is a good thing.’

We chatted for a while. Robbie was in incredibly good spirits. He had re-established himself. He had pulled himself out of the gutter, and was happy for it. His resurrection was well under way. I kept sneaking glances over at Valentina. She was busy making coffees for a steady flow of workers, getting their caffeine hit before starting the day’s work.

‘Hey, what about Jana’s case? Did you sort that out?’

‘Oh yes, it couldn’t have been easier.’

‘That woman, Bergonzi, what was her story? Was she racist, or what?’

Robbie looked at me, and shrugged his shoulders.

‘It’s hard to say. Quite possibly. It’s equally possible that she just doesn’t like her job, or is totally incompetent. In any event, when faced with a lawyer holding all the correct documentation, she had no choice but to follow protocols, to the letter. Something she would appear to do very infrequently, I would say. Anyway, the incredible thing is that I can help these people, just by my mere presence. When that type of paperwork is filed by a lawyer, it is taken a lot more seriously.’

‘Jan and Nassim must be thrilled. They were really worried about getting thrown out of Italy.’

‘That’s for sure. I know she wants to thank you, for having put us together. Your afternoon tea party really kicked off a big thing. Who would have guessed? And, unfortunately, I was such an arsehole about the whole thing.’

‘I remember though that you were really impressed with Jana.’

‘I was, indeed. She has a great strength of character. She really fascinated me.’

I stood up, ready to leave.

‘Well, Robbie, I’m glad it’s all working out for you. No doubt I will see you soon.’

‘Pop into my office whenever you want.’

We both laughed. The new Robbie, the reinstated Robbie, had a good sense of humour. I could see that Valentina was too busy for a chat, so I said goodbye to Robbie, paid my bill and headed out, into the sunshine. I was disappointed that I hadn’t been able to talk with Valentina, so I decided that I would go back to the coffee shop that evening. After all, it was Friday, so a couple of glasses of wine on a Friday evening sounded like just the ticket. Hopefully Valentina would have time for a chat. Maybe the time had come to let her know how I felt about her? Maybe it was time to take it all to another level? Maybe I should pull out all the stops, really go for it. After my period of deep reflections, I was positive that she felt the same way about me. It was time to formalise the situation. Get it out in the open.

I wanted to look my best for her, so that afternoon I went to the centre, to look for some new clothes. Valentina always dressed very well, so I assumed that for her it would be important to be with someone who also looked stylish. Most of my clothes were more of a functional kind, having been chosen more by their practical nature, rather than their appearance. I needed to get a new look. A more fashionable look. Something that would make me look upscale, when I would take Valentina out for dinner. To be honest, I had never been much of a shopper. It was something I usually did with great dread. Going from shop to shop, trying on different clothes, was really like hard work for me. I had no idea how people could enjoy that. It really just seemed to give me a massive headache. However, to impress Valentina it needed to be done. Finally, after much effort, I managed to find a couple of new shirts, some nice trousers, and a light jacket. I knew I could really do with some new shoes, but by that stage I was too burnt out to look any further. Anyway, by my standards, that had been a very successful expedition. I had fought my way through the shopping jungle, beaten back the surrounding hordes of maniacal consumers, tirelessly seeking out the hidden treasure, otherwise known as some new clothes. It hadn’t been easy. I was absolutely worn out, but rather satisfied. I hurried home, had a shower,

and tried out my new apparel. I admired myself in the mirror. How could Valentina resist me now? I was looking good. The new me, now had a new look. Things were just getting better and better.

It was time. I gave myself one last check over in the mirror, and left my flat. I hurried up the street, then, thinking about it, I slowed down my pace. I would take it easy, and just stroll along. It was just another evening. Don't let your excitement get the better of you. Just act naturally. The casual man. I sauntered into the coffee shop, there were already a few people scattered around, having drinks. Valentina was at the counter, pouring out a couple of glasses of wine. She saw me, and looked me up and down.

'Well, well, well. What have we here? A new look Nigel? You are looking good, my fellow.'

'Thanks, I thought it was about time to adapt to the Italian way. You people have style in your blood. I've never really bothered much about how I look, but I decided that the time had come.'

'I think you have done extremely well. You have good taste. Hey, do you want to try some Sicilian wine? Do you like red wine?'

'Yeah, I love it. Let's try some.'

'Good, find yourself a table, and I will bring it over.'

She carried the glasses of wine she had poured to a couple, sitting by the window. I sat down at a table in the middle of the room. Shortly, she brought over my wine, and sat down.

'Oh, I'm exhausted. I've been on my feet all day. By this time of the evening I'm a wreck.'

'Maybe you need some wine yourself?'

She threw back her head and laughed.

'Don't tempt me! If I start down that path, I will never stop. It really is a long day running this place. If I could afford it, I would get in some help. But, with only the local trade, I don't make enough to be able to do that, unfortunately.'

'You really do work hard. Maybe, you could... '

'Oh, sorry, duty calls!'

Off she went, to serve someone else. It had been so nice to have her confide in me. To share all her worries. It felt so good, to bond with her like that. Our connection was just getting stronger, and stronger. Then, looking

across at her, a realisation came over me. I had fallen completely in love with her. I had never loved anyone as much as I loved Valentina, in that moment. Sure, I had been in love with Monica, but, in truth, that had really been more of a sexual attraction, rather than actual love. With Valentina it was real love. I could feel it warming every part of my body. I wanted to stand up and yell out how I felt about her. Not that I would, of course. I was far too restrained a person for anything quite so exuberant. Also, without a doubt, in front of her clients, that would really embarrass her. I would play it cool, waiting for the right moment. Maybe when we were out for dinner? I would have to plan it carefully, make an effort, get some flowers, and do it all right. My heart felt so full of love for her. It was hard for me to sit still. I wanted to grab her, as she walked past my table, and kiss her, long, and hard. Finally, after so many difficulties, I had found something good in my life. I had found the right woman for me. In that moment, a sense of understanding came over me. I realised why my life had taken so many difficult twists, and turns. I had been on a path, a torturous, twisting, path, but a path that had been leading me to that place, in that time, to meet my Valentina. There had been a reason behind it all. It hadn't just been a haphazard string of events. There had been a hand guiding my every move. Guiding me, leading me towards my destiny. Taking me to where I needed to be. Right there, in that moment. There, with my true love. It felt so good. The wine was warming my body, my love for Valentina was warming my heart. I was feeling exuberant. I called out to her.

‘Hey, Valentina, I love this wine. I’ll have another glass, when you have time.’

She looked across at me and smiled.

‘OK, I’ll be right there.’

She finished cleaning some glasses, and poured me another glass of wine. She came over to my table, but didn't sit down. Probably she just didn't have enough time. After all, she was really busy.

‘I’m glad you like it. They make this wine just a few kilometres from where I grew up. The family that makes it are old friends of my family. I come from a very traditional background, you know. I really miss Sicily.’

She went off about her business. Then the obvious plan struck me, I would take her on a trip to Sicily! What a brilliant idea. Plus, what a

romantic destination. We would be lying on beautiful beaches, just the two of us. She could relax, and I would just look at her. I would admire her great beauty. I would be happy, just being with her. We would be happy, just being together. She would introduce me to her family. We would eat traditional Sicilian food, and drink local wine. I felt on top of the world. I had never been happier in my life, as I was in that moment. I had never felt so fulfilled. I realised that the wine was started to make my head spin slightly. I wasn't a big drinker, and it was pretty strong wine. I decided that I had better get out of there, before the wine made me do something foolish. Something that I would later regret. I went up to the counter, to pay for the wine.

'I'm so glad you came, Nigel. I'm sorry we didn't have time for a good chat. Will you be in for breakfast tomorrow morning?'

'You bet. I'll see you then. Goodnight Valentina.'

'Bye, Nigel. Thanks.'

I don't think my feet even touched the ground on the way home. I was floating on a cloud of exquisiteness. I felt on top of the world. My former aberrations were by then far below me, and lost somewhere in the distant past. I was already looking forward to seeing Valentina in the morning. The following day was Saturday. I knew that I would have to devise a plan for Sunday, when the coffee shop was shut, and Valentina had the day off. I would ask her to go with me somewhere. But where? In the morning, with a clearer head, I would come up with a suitable idea. I would think of somewhere interesting to take her. Maybe out for lunch? Or a picnic in the park? I was too ecstatic to think clearly, and the wine had knocked me off my game a bit, as well. I would have to watch that. I needed to be very decisive, it was a particularly delicate period. I knew that I had better slow down on the drinking, probably just one glass at a time. When I got into bed, I lay there thinking about Valentina, imagining holding her in my arms. I would be kissing her, cuddling her. I loved her so much. She was all I wanted, all I desired. After a somewhat arduous, difficult journey, life, and destiny had, in the end, been good to me.

Saturday's arrival was somewhat bittersweet. I awoke with a bit of a headache. That strong Sicilian wine had really knocked me around. Maybe

Valentina's family's friends weren't really that good at making wine? Not that I was going to tell her that, of course. Next time I would ask for some Sicilian white wine, which would hopefully have been made by someone else. I sorted out McGinty's breakfast, and cleaned out his litter box. I kept an eye on the clock, waiting for a suitable time to head off to see my lovely lady. It had taken a while, a long while, but, finally, life had really come through for me. Especially after such a difficult period. I hadn't had an easy time of it for quite a long while, but I was back in the game. Things were looking up for me. For me and Valentina. I felt incredibly lucky. I showered, dressed myself in my latest finery, and casually sauntered up to the coffee shop. My heart was in my mouth as I opened the door, and walked in. There she was. As usual looking as fresh as a daisy. How did she do that? After working late the previous evening she looked so refreshed. How did she manage to always look so good? Instead of her usual jeans and a top, she was wearing a short yellow dress. Her legs looked fantastic. Did she have that dress on especially for me? She looked up, and smiled at me. I was home. I was where I needed to be. I had found my place to be. My life was starting, right there, right then.

'Morning Nigel. How are you? Did you sleep well?'

'Hi there. Yes, I sure did.'

I thought it best not to mention the hangover from what I considered to be not very good wine. That would lead me down a dark road. Instead, I chose the better lit way, and decided to go for complimenting her on her looks. It was time. Time to get our feelings out in the open. It was time to express our feelings for each other.

'My God, Valentina, you look stunning today. You look so lovely in that dress. What beautiful legs you have!'

'Thank you, so much! You are always so kind. I wish my boyfriend was as attentive as you.'

The ground collapsed from beneath my feet. A chasm opened beneath me, swallowing me whole. Boyfriend... ? Valentina had a boyfriend? I felt like I had received a thundering blow to my head. I could barely stand. In my stupefied state, I tried to walk, but stumbled against something. How could this be happening to me? I had been sure that we had been made for each other. Couldn't she have seen that? Through a blurry haze, I could see

that Valentina was talking, but I couldn't hear the words. I had a loud ringing in my ears. My head was thumping, I could hardly breathe. I tried to find the door, I had to get out. Maybe outside I would be able to breathe. Somehow I found myself out on the footpath. Why was this happening to me? I stumbled around. I heard a car horn tooting. I tried to focus, but my brain had ceased to be under my control. My heart was pounding, my hands were shaking, my legs seemed to belong to someone else's body. I had no control of my movements. Everything around me was out of focus. I couldn't concentrate enough to see things clearly. I looked at my hands. They were shaking uncontrollably. They didn't even look like my hands. They looked so strange. I rubbed my eyes, but still couldn't see clearly. What was happening to me? Was I having a heart attack? I had read about people suffering panic attacks, but what I was feeling was far too strong to be just one of those. Something far more serious was happening to me. I tried walking, but the ground kept moving out of control under my feet. Everything was fluid, nothing seemed to be as it should. Even the buildings around me had taken on a strange menacing form. They were overpowering me, suffocating me. I was dying, there could be no doubt. Something had happened to me, and I was dying. I wanted to call for help, but when I opened my mouth, no words came out. The power of speech had been ripped from me. Stumbling along, not understanding where I was, I came to a bench, and collapsed down on it. I tried to sit up straight, but wasn't able to. I had no power over my body. With my head resting on the armrest of the bench I tried to understand what was happening to me. The last thing I remembered was Valentina telling me she had a boyfriend. Had the shock of that been too much for my heart? Was I suffering a heart attack? My stomach was in a knot. My ears were constantly ringing. I looked again at my hands, they were sweaty, and still shaking. I knew that I would die there. Whatever was happening to me was obviously fatal. No one could recover from that, whatever it was. I tried to grip the armrest of the bench. I tried to hold myself steady. My muscles didn't seem to be able to support my weight. All my strength had been drained from me. My life was finished. It would soon all be over. I looked at the sky, seeking some form of equilibrium. The clouds had a strange dreamlike aspect to them. They didn't seem real. Nothing seemed real. My world, as I had known it, had crumbled,

and everything around me had disintegrated with it. My whole body was shaking, I could hear my heartbeat pounding. I knew that shortly my heart would buckle under the strain. It couldn't sustain that amount of pressure for much longer. The thought of dying there, in that moment, became almost welcoming. It brought me a sense of comfort, release. I couldn't go on. I couldn't take any of it anymore. I had lost everything I had ever wanted. My life was over. I couldn't start over again. The new beginning that I had thought I had discovered had only given me groundless hope. It had been nothing but a false dawn. There could be no new beginnings. The cracks in my life had become gigantic crevices, that swallowed me whole. It was too late for me. Breathing was becoming more difficult. The end was not far off. I had obliterated everything I had ever touched. I deserved to die. I wanted to die. I had nothing, nobody, to live for. The hope of rebuilding my life, there on Dante street, had just been a lie. It had been doomed to fail right from the start. My old stable life had been ripped from me, all my certainties had been shattered, and it was too late for me to find a new way. None of it had been my doing, but fate had decided to stack the cards against me. My head was pounding, my body was sweaty. Had I really asked for so much? Why had life held so little in store for me? I had tried my utmost best, and had failed. And now I was about to die.

'Mister, are you alright?'

The words rang in my ears faintly, as if they came from a faraway place. Through the fog that had enveloped me I could tell that it was a woman's voice. I tried to look up, but wasn't able to move my head, which still lay resting on the armrest.

'Do you need some help? Has something happened to you? Can I help you in some way?'

In a last, brief, moment of clarity, I realised that I had come full circle. From being the one wishing to help others, I was now the one needing help. My deconstruction had been completed. I had hit rock bottom. From there, I could fall no further. There was only one possible outcome remaining for me. The thought of my approaching death brought a welcome feeling of relief.