

3 *Short stories*

Two

“Of course it wasn’t as easy then. It wasn’t easy in those days.” He looked around the room without seeing and then looked back. “Although it’s not that long ago. Not really.”

“I...I didn’t know what they meant. I mean I knew she was ill. Hadn’t been out of bed for days. Maybe weeks looking back. I just remember people’s looks now. I didn’t know what they were. What those looks meant then. But I do now. I just heard words that I couldn’t piece together. What..?”

Oh I guess... I suppose I was nine. That fits. Of course I knew then but it’s all so long ago that I’m supposing I was nine. Or about nine. And it was just words. Words and looks. They all go together now, when I think back. I don’t remember them all going together for...for years maybe. But they fell into place. Fell into place on their own looking back. Fell into place over...over a few years I guess. I was...it was the times after that it was just... Well, after mum went it just seemed all one blur, all one...sort of period of time. I couldn’t understand of course. Not fully. You can’t at nine...nine or ten. But I think it was later. In the years that...that you start to add things up. Make some sort of sense of what happened. When you have...when you are starting to be an adult. Then you know. Then you realise what was going on. What had gone on. I mean I’ll never know. Never know really. But I can...

Those words. They’re burnt in now. Those looks. Almost clearer now than when they happened. When they were said. Although it wasn’t really looks. It was more looking away. And the words. “They don’t think...” I remember I wondered at the time, who were ‘they?’ ‘They don’t think she’ll last the night.’ Those were the words. Those words and others. I can see it now. I was looking up. Looking up at dad. At my father. Looking at him outside the gates. The school gates. And other people looking away. Not looking at me. Just a blur. I didn’t understand. Of course I didn’t understand. They were just words and looks. Non-looks.”

He gazed around at the dark wood room, tall window to his left and two grey, tall filing cabinets, one swayed slightly under its laden drawers. Third draw down now obviously refusing to close fully, straining on weary small rubber wheels. Wheels concealed within the carcass, not quite running true. Bookshelves stacked awry with spines upright and spines piled on their side, interrupted by loose sheaves of dishevelled papers. Yes it offended him. Offended his sense of order. Because everything had to

have an order to combat the disorder in what he was looking for.

‘Why am I telling this?’ he questioned himself. ‘Telling it to a stranger?’ A stranger with no interest other than supplying a photocopy of a piece of paper that might or might not exist. Supplying a photocopy with an apology: ‘I have to charge you understand. Diocese rules. All goes to the upkeep.’

Maybe he was just exacting his time for a fee of a few pounds which he felt affronted by, because a lack of upkeep was his overarching impression of this room with its dysfunctional filing cabinet and dyslexic bookshelves.

‘Well it should be fairly easy. Fairly easy if you have a year and – of course that should be easy, take nine from your age now and... But I can’t promise, because...well with you not being sure that your mother’s service was held at this...and your baptism here. But as you say. It’s the closest to where you lived and...’ The priest tailed off. ‘I...this is quite...quite common you know. The records aren’t all easy to find. It’s often more productive to do a little...a little ‘common sense’ searching. That’s...’

The priest sensed that this man was not there for two-way conversation. His manner almost distasteful in some way. Distasteful as he looked around the Parish Room. Although he knew that the decades had not eased the pain in this still young man. A pain brought about by uncertainty. Lack of knowledge. Maybe still a lack of understanding. And he knew that the story, however irrelevant, hadn’t finished.

‘I don’t know whether you...you understand what...what non-looks are?’

The priest settled back into his most comfortable chair and waited for more.

‘When people pity you...pity a child so much that they can’t look at you. Look into your face. I can see them now, me looking up at them. Looking up at them talking to dad, talking about me – I can’t remember what they said – but...but not looking at me.’

All he wanted to do was try and ease the filing cabinet drawer back into place. He was sure he could do it. Restore order to at least that little constituent of this room.

‘But she seemed to be...my dad’s...well in my mind she was there...around straightaway. Although I’m sure she wasn’t. It just seemed like it. There seemed... There didn’t seem to be a gap between my mum...and then she was there. And dad didn’t want me around. That’s how it seemed. I remember standing outside the front door. Standing outside. My dad had dropped me off across town. At my... I can’t remember exactly where. Somebody I knew. Maybe a friend. Or a relative. But I can remember standing there back outside our front door. Standing there early. Earlier than dad had... And not wanting to go in. So I just stood there, then I walked away and walked around for...it seemed like hours. Until it was the time dad had said I should be back. That’s what it was like. So I think it took me...until I was growing up to piece it all together.’

The priest settled a little further, if it was possible to do so. A vocation blighted almost by weariness. Weariness of other people’s stories.



Kevin took the photocopy from the envelope and placed it on the table. Thankfully it was an A4 envelope. He was glad that the priest hadn’t had the effrontery to fold it and slide it into an inferior size. He smoothed the photocopy flat, as though there were creases in it. Kevin looked at the name, looked at the date, looked at the meaningless ornate border and wondered why such a document needed any form of decoration. It was just a baptism certificate. And obtaining it didn’t have a real purpose, but it brought his collection of items to three. And that was an improvement.

The piece of paper helped to put things in order and was worth the journey, the wait, the twenty minutes in that dark room, the conversation which wasn’t really a conversation. Certainly worth the indignity of having to pay for a photocopy, although he judged that that was an insult to his mother, rather than to him. But he still didn’t know why he had had to find this piece of paper and add it to his collection. Maybe that, although he had some recollections of people in a small curved room, light flooding through tall windows onto a box which, he knew, contained his mother, maybe he just needed some form of confirmation after all these years. Just to be sure she was his mum. Had been his mum. Because the only other evidence he had was two once black and white photographs, their once white border now stained and receding. Their monochrome patina now just a little fading and crystalising into a hue of yellow

brown. How long, Kevin mused, would it take for the chemicals to fade to nothing? He turned and took three paces to the stripped pine chest of drawers, much older than the photographs but not in any danger of degenerating to nothing. Pulling open the drawer on the right by its curved front running along the top as a handle, he took out the plastic file, turned and placed it onto the table next to the photocopy. Turning back the cover he stared intently at the first photograph. A woman – his mother – a man – his father – smiling whilst she held a bunch of flowers which trailed almost to her knees in front of a long white dress. The man – his father – smiling broadly, as was the woman – his mother. Happy in sunshine which streamed shadows across their bodies onto the ground alongside the shadows cast by the cenotaph peaked war memorial in front of which they stood. But no clue, in their posed isolation, as to who else was there that day. Kevin had mused often on that question. There was no way now to find out, because there was no evidence. Just like there was no evidence other than this photograph and – as he turned to the next plastic wallet in the folder – this next, the only other photograph that existed. A small child, Kevin himself, less than a child. Maybe just over a year old sitting by his mother on an un-named beach. Fashion as well as the photograph itself relaying the decade.

Kevin carefully took the un-creased certificate and slid it into the third plastic wallet in the folder. Evidence, but another seventeen plastic wallets empty behind the evidence gathered so far. He turned and placed the folder back into its place and closed the drawer, satisfied.

Worth the day off work to find the evidence. He had deserted his quest for so long, although it had hardly been a quest. Just a lot of thought. Constant thought. As he had said to the priest, those years between loss and realisation were just a blur. As all years between childhood and just about manhood are. His mind occupied by growing up, carrying on. Yes with a sadness that would never leave, but was easy to cover up. He had found that that was the way. The way to stop the non-looks. Or at least when the looks came, they seemed to come with the words ‘coping well.’ To Kevin ‘coping well’ was filling his time with what young boys do, but most of all being out of the house now that another woman usurped there. Another woman who tolerated him but was, he was sure, happier when he wasn’t there. So he made sure that she was happy as much of the time as possible. Not for her, for him.

Although his dad and the woman professed only good for him and for his future and

for his education. But he could never understand why the woman had left so shortly after he did. There was never an explanation from his dad. Just that when he returned from university at the end of the first term she wasn’t there. She would have, he had thought, been much happier with him gone. He never found out why she had gone, because he never asked and his dad didn’t volunteer to tell. It was a pact of silence but in some way, Kevin had preferred to leave with his dad having at least the company of the woman, without the distraction of the unwelcome guest.

That made him saddest. Well almost.

The call that said his father had died. Had been found by a friend, concerned that he couldn’t be contacted. No hint of anything wrong with him and found sitting in a chair, of course alone. Of course no knowledge of whether he had been sitting in the chair during the day, or during the night, when his heart failed it seemed, very gently. Or how long he had been there, other than the coroner said it was less than two days. Two days. Thank goodness somebody had been concerned enough to check, otherwise, Kevin recoiled, otherwise it may have been the end of the next university term when he had returned home and he had found his father. Because he had, as many do, slipped from keeping in touch.

Somehow it seemed a burden had been lifted from his shoulders. Or maybe it was that Kevin perceived it as a burden being lifted from his father’s shoulders. Or maybe burdens. Just a handful of people at the service, less at the crematorium, nobody to question, nobody familiar, certainly no family – there was none. Family seemed to have disappeared with his mother, when he was nine.

But it left no ties and university was good, with no reason now to return, as of duty, to his doubtful roots. A university where he found new roots in literature studies and was fond of quoting Chekhov: ‘Why are you wearing black?’ ‘Because I am in mourning for the rest of my life.’ For Kevin the quote was a misnomer. Because he was a joker.



“Why, just tell me why, just for once in your life you can’t take things seriously?”

Kevin grinned as he always did, looking back at Miriam pacing the room. A slow pace

of frustration not anger. “This is the most important thing in the world to me, to us. Nine...nearly nine years now and all I want...I thought that all we really wanted was our own family. Just...”

“It’s so undignified.”

“What? What is?”

“Well you know. Not being able to...”

“How in hell’s name can you call this undignified? Your ‘dignity’ (she sneered), or is it that you don’t think that you’re man enough to...”

“To what?” Kevin’s grin disappeared as a flicker of anger tensed his senses.

“I don’t mean...it’s not your fault. It’s not...it’s not anybody’s fault. Not mine or... Sometimes these things just don’t work out. You know that and...and maybe it is one of us...”

“One of us what? One of us can’t manage it. Isn’t good enough, Can’t...can’t perform. We don’t have any problems with that. With...so maybe it’s just what we have and we have to live with it.”

“It’s not living with it, it’s living without...without what we both want. Both need...”

“Need? Need? So we’re not good enough on our own. Just the two of us. That’s what we have, what...what our destiny is maybe. Not destiny...just what life has for us. And maybe...maybe sometimes it’s better to be just the two of us. Because...”

“Because you can’t think of anything else apart from your life, your...your destiny. If that’s what you mean. Just because your family...I know that it was tragic...I understand that, but that doesn’t mean that everything works out badly. Sadly. And I know how sad you are. Still are. But you were a little boy and some people...most people have a happy life, family life. And I don’t understand how that affects me...us wanting to do whatever it takes to start a family. Just try...try whatever we have to. I know, I know what you think, that I’m obsessed. Well I’m not. It’s just...just the way I

feel. Instinct. A mother’s instinct. To be a...to be a mother. You can’t go through life thinking that the same things will happen to you. To us. I know we’ve talked about it. But...but it isn’t going to happen. Happen naturally I mean. You know what they said and you know that we can try this. Try this treatment. How can you say that it’s undignified? You’re obsessed. Obsessed with your...”

“It’s you. You’re obsessed Miriam.”

Miriam stopped her pacing and wheeled around to look directly at Kevin. She took one step forward, hands clenched by her sides. “Me? Me obsessed?” It was almost a growl. “Just try, try for once in your life to think of something else. Something else rather than your mum. It was twenty years ago. Twenty...more than twenty and you can’t let go. That’s all you do. Just everything’s a joke to you. A joke. Everything. And the only thing you don’t joke about is your obsession. Obsession about a woman who died twenty years ago.”

Miriam stopped short. Knew that this would be too much. That she had said too much. She knew that Kevin’s constant search had been unhealthy. Was unhealthy. But then what did she know? Because she hadn’t been through what he had. So young. On the days – the good days – that he had talked about things she thought that she understood the anguish. But how could she understand? She understood grief. Maybe not grief this intense, but she understood grief. Had experienced grief, but then, not grief at losing your mother so young. And she knew that it was the lack of understanding, of knowledge that he found most difficult to deal with. Yes his joking, constant come backs to everything was a mask. She understood that. Wished sometimes – like now – that he could tackle life, issues, anything without a grin and a comeback. But she knew that what she had said was wrong, just her own frustration.

Kevin’s expression gave nothing away. Hurt yes, but this conversation had to be turned around and he too knew that he should be able to listen and to talk about what was most important – at least at this time – to Miriam.

“I...I’m not obsessed. I just want to know. Just find out that’s all.”

His mind turning instantly to pages in that plastic file. More complete now, but still with blank pages. Page one a wedding picture of his mum and dad. Page two a picture

of his mum and him on a beach. Page three a photocopy of his baptism certificate. Valued only, he thought – had thought since the years he had found it – for his mother’s signature. His father’s somehow an affront to his mother’s, because surely her memory to him, her ‘value’ had been forgotten too easily to another woman. Subsequent pages partly filled with the results of so many years of collecting what he could, mementos he ascribed as tokens of disparate conversations which he had had with people who somehow had known his mother. Often just scraps of paper to match scraps of memories.

Miriam knew that she had stepped too far and took two paces to where he sat on the white, two-seater sofa that, like everything around him, had to be arranged perfectly, never daring to offend by being even a little out of position, or disturb by carrying even a sign of normal day-to-day grime. Always, always a sense of order and cleanliness vital to his necessities.

She sat slowly beside him and, placing her left hand on his knee, just let her head bow slightly as her own, silent apology.

“It’s not the sperm test that’s undignified,” he said a moment or two later. As she looked up he said, “It’s wanking in a pot.” Miriam tried to stop her smile.



“Yes son. That’s really all I’ve got.”

Kevin glanced sideways at Stephen as his boy flicked through the pages of the plastic file. Stephen turned the pages slowly, absorbing what little there was in there.

‘And...and nothing about Grandad?’

“Just their wedding picture.” Although he knew that he had never really looked, never sleuthed for anything about his dad, which would have been much easier. His own dad, whose information and life would have been much more accessible, much more easily found. But that – he thought – was irrelevant. Yes he had spent more years with his father, although of course those early years had been stained with ‘another woman.’ Even she had now gone from Kevin’s clear memory, her face erased. Those years up to

him going to university had been blank. Not just teenage years, although he guessed that a lot of teenage years for a lot of teenagers were blank. He wasn’t even sure now how long she had been around, couldn’t quantify it. A pang of guilt hit him sharply. Mainly guilt at his lack of grief for the death of his father. But then she had been around far too soon after his mum had died. ‘Don’t feel sorry for him. Don’t.’

“But you’ve never talked about it before dad. Never really said anything. Well not properly. Not...not detail.”

“I know Stephen. I mean, you always knew that your grandma and grandad were... well, they’ve never been around have they? Not in your lifetime. I’ve never...I didn’t hide anything or...”

“No, I know. But...but you’ve never told me about looking for...for clues before.”

“Clues? Sounds like a detective novel. Or something.”

“No I didn’t mean clues, just well looking for information. Detail.”

“It’s just that I don’t really remember her. Well I do of course. But it’s all so fuzzy. You know. Things do when you get to my age...”

“Yeah, nearly fifty, nearly over the hill.”

“Thanks a lot.”

Stephen looked across at his father, grinned momentarily and then looked down at the file again. He went back to the second plastic file, the one with the baptism certificate in it.

“Why have they got different names? Different surnames? Your mum and dad.”

“That’s how it’s done. Was done. Apparently it’s so you can check if they are the same person as on their birth certificate. Or something like that. All a bit strange though I guess. They were married. It looks a bit like they weren’t.”

“And...and these other things. Where did you find them?”

“Oh there’s just a few bits. I still can’t believe that somebody can live...live a life and so little...that you can’t find anything about them. I guess when she died the rest of the family just drifted away. And I was so young I can’t really remember. And...”

Kevin had wondered so much about this. About how so few people had kept in touch with him. Well, with his father and so with him too. He had always supposed that it was their own disapproval, as with his own naïve disapproval, of the woman coming into his father’s life so soon after the death of his mother. But still there must have been people in his life, vague recollections now. All seemed to go, over the short time before he was old enough to question. And so the questions had never happened.

“Just one or two friends I guess. Not mine, friends of your grandma’s that I’ve managed to find. Find in different ways. Just asking. Just people I’ve met. Just bumped into. Mostly near where they lived. Where I lived then. I must admit I’ve sat around there. Near there. Just sat in my car. Not recently. I mean, before you were born, for a couple of years after. Just watched people and...and when somebody seemed about the same age as my mum would be now – and my dad I guess – I asked...just asked if I could have a word and if they knew her. Knew him. Mostly they didn’t. Of course. It’s...well it’s a long time ago. Of course. Of course. Not so long a time ago when I used to...”

But still, just one or two people said that they remember her. Them. I couldn’t get much out of them. One or two even said that they remembered me. But mainly when I was a...was in my teens. After... They remember it being...being sad. A sad time. And grandad. Well that was sad too. They remember it. But don’t remember much. See here...this is a copy of a church magazine. Well just one page. A photocopy. Somebody lent it to me. Honestly, you would have thought it was valuable. Really valuable with the promises I had to make to take it back when...when I’d copied this page. It’s a bit blurred. Well a lot really. But one old lady said that she had been at school with my mum and this was a photograph of an Easter visit to the church from the school. She told me that she thought that this was my mum...here at the end of the second row. But...but you can’t tell really and anyway I can barely remember her now. What she looked like. The only real thing I have is this wedding photograph and this one of me and her. So that’s how I remember....

But the old lady was pretty sure that my mum was this one on the photograph. Here. The end of the second row... Well that’s good enough for me. Just to have this and know she’s on it. Somewhere at least. I tried to find the school records but...but...”

“So how do you feel about this now? This invitation?”

“Not sure really. I don’t know how they’ve managed to find so many people, so many... Well I don’t think that they’re all relatives. I don’t even know how they are relatives. Or whether they are even relatives. And...and I don’t think that I’d even bother going – us all going – if it wasn’t that I might find out something, something more about my mum. About her. They might know something. Other than that, I don’t really want to know. Not really. They’re strangers. That’s all. I don’t know how they can call it a reunion when I don’t even know them in the first place. But there might be somebody there who...”

“Beats me how they’ve found everybody dad. Everybody when you’ve searched so much.”

“You know Stephen, sometimes I think – have thought – that everything was just, well just wiped out when my mum died. Almost like nobody wanted to tell me anything when I started looking. Started trying to find out so many years later. It was...it was only about ten years I guess. Ten years after my mum died, because I hadn’t been back from university for long. Only just met your mum. But like there was nothing left. Nobody to talk to. Nobody wanted... But maybe I’ll find out a bit more. At the reunion. None of them will have ever met your mum, or you of course. So we’ll see. We’ll just see.”



Kevin, Miriam and Stephen walked into the room, crowded – or so it seemed – with chattering people not of their generation. Although Kevin thought that he may have imagined it, the babble subsided into glances and pauses of assessment. Nothing tangible, just an impression of those changes of mode and mood.

Kevin’s assurance, albeit an outward assurance, wavered, trying to decode whether those changes were real or imagined. Pausing for lack of direction the trio

stood framed in the doorway of the bland room, furnished safely in the way that hotel function rooms adopt so as not to offend.

Through the turned faces one emerged, face lined by the decades, the woman in her seventies Kevin surmised.

“Kevin? Young Kevin?” The woman’s questioned misnomer broke Kevin’s own undercurrent of questioning and he smiled as a hand extended and, before making contact with his, diverted to both arms wrapped around his neck and shoulders, reaching up.

“Kevin. Oh I can’t believe it. You were just a boy, a little boy... I’m Rose. I’m Rose, your mum’s cousin. Rose. I know you won’t remember me but...so glad that you came. After all these years. So glad. And...and this must be your wife and...your young boy too.”

The crowd watched the encounter, change of mode still in action, or so it seemed to Kevin. Glances and quiet words from dipped heads seemed to dominate.

“So good to see you. Please, please come and meet...meet some people. We’re all so glad that you could make it. We all...well you know that we all lost touch when... But it’s so good to see you and...”

Rose released her grip and looked over Kevin’s right shoulder to where Miriam and Stephen hesitated.

“My wife Miriam...Rose...and my son Stephen. So...so glad to meet you. To see you again. So glad.”

Rose ushered the trio further into the bland hotel function room and began introductions of first one and then another stranger to Kevin. Amidst the smiles and other generation faces, still, Kevin perceived, looks of questioning. Looks of questioning which filled Kevin with unease beyond anything he could quantify. An unease which lasted through hours that he had anticipated would be discovery, but which seemed, indefinably to produce reluctance.

‘Yes we remember her well. Your dad too.’

‘She was always cheerful. Always joking.’

‘So sad. It was such a tragedy. So young. And your dad...’

‘You’ve done so well. Despite such... Yes you’ve done so well. And your wife is lovely. Your boy too. Such...such looks. But you look just like your mum did. Same features. Eyes.’

But every salutation from lined faces ended with a question mark that confirmed Kevin’s unease as he and Miriam and his son circulated. Pleasantries. But questions? Part of the puzzle, the finding out? Everything switched aside. In a way that Kevin couldn’t counter and eventually eroded his attempts to probe. Find out. Just for memories sake. Simple words that he had waited so long to hear. Not words of great importance, maybe just words to paint a picture which had evaded him.

And sideways glances at Stephen that he noted, once the individual introductions and conversations had run their course and fresh recipients had been found.

‘So like your mum Kevin. So like her.’ Over and over again, each with a sideways glance at Stephen. ‘So like your mum. Same eyes. Always joking. Always making fun of things. It was all so sad. Amazing how you remind me of her so much.’ But nothing else volunteered, no information however much he tried to lead in that direction.

Always, always, every conversation however short, family likeness. To his mother. And sideways glances at his son.

Kevin found no response, no more answers and, as the trio left he walked uneasily back to their car, driving home in disappointed and unaccustomed silence.

“What’s up Kev? You seem down.”

Kevin shrugged.

“Just...just strange that’s all. Guess it was always going to be, but... Don’t know, just

felt uneasy. Like there was something people weren't saying. But hey, a very odd family reunion. That's all it was. Glad we went. Everybody seemed pleased to see us, but no bloody idea who they all were. None at all really. Good that they could meet Stephen – and you, you of course too. Next generation. Good to meet them Stephen, don't you think?" as he glanced in the mirror, "Probably won't get another chance once you're off to uni. Probably lose touch with your old mum and dad too then. Eh?"

Stephen's reflected, returned smile made Kevin uneasy. But he didn't know why.



Kevin climbed out of bed carefully, easing the covers back and feeling his footsteps shuffle across the carpet in the dark. He eased the bedroom door open and felt around the door casement for the landing light, pressing the switch slowly to avoid a sudden click.

Downstairs he stepped towards the stripped pine chest of drawers and took out the plastic file, turning it slightly towards the stairway lighting to examine the cover. Lifting the top corner with his fingers he turned the cover and smoothed it back with his right hand, frown imperceptible in the half-light. There, his mum and dad on their wedding day. He concentrated, focus intensifying the frown. Trying to perceive what he had heard so many times that evening. That his look was that of his mother's.

Carefully and studiously he turned another leaf. And there, on a beach somewhere, five decades before, he was – maybe twelve months old – with his mother. Both smiling, both looking into the camera. A photograph taken - he now began to think likely - not by his father, but by one of those photographers who frequented seaside towns those decades ago, snapping unsolicited photographs to be paid for and collected at a booth later.

Yes, even so young their eyes matched in perfect likeness.

Turning the page of the file further into the light, Kevin's focus changed to the figure of a man, a young man. Grown but still young, maybe a little older than Stephen, four or five years older maybe. A young man standing just behind and to the side of him and his mother. The man too looking into the camera, but not smiling. But standing

too close to be a bystander. Just too close.

He had never sensed this figure in the photograph before. It seemed that the man had never been there before. Kevin, in hours of looking at the fading, slightly yellowing black and white photograph had never seen or questioned the man's presence before. But he had always been there. Of course he had. Always.

And as Kevin's focus changed to perception he saw the eyes, the face, the posture of his son Stephen reflected almost perfectly in the man. Now, it seemed, staring back at him. Staring with his own, mute question. "Haven't you ever noticed me before? I've always been here. Yes I'm your dad. Yes it's me. Not the man you called dad."

Kevin slipped the fading photograph from its plastic wallet. He drew it closer to his face, frown now hurting his eyes as he focused even more tightly on the man. He turned the photograph over and stared at the date. Just the year scribbled on the back, nothing else. Three years after the year scribbled on the back of the first photograph in his plastic file.

Kevin placed the file back onto the top of the stripped pine chest of drawers and slowly tore the photograph, jagged white edge appearing out of the yellowing paper, carefully from top to bottom. Half remained with him and his father, the other half with just his mother.

Kevin slipped the half photograph back into its plastic wallet and placed the file back into the drawer, before easing it shut slowly and carefully.

The half with his mother on he tore again, once, twice, three times and let the pieces fall through his fingers.



Domestic

Maybe it is me. Not sure really.

That's what everybody says. Everybody says about things like this. They all say it's like 'walking on eggshells.' Guess it is. I can't think of any other way to describe things.

But it's quiet now. For the time being anyway. But won't be soon. Be like 'walking on eggshells' soon. Or maybe not. I never know really.

It's all...well not small things. Just that they are all separate. I suppose they're not good on their own. Separate. Not good at all. A lot worse when they're joined up though. But maybe it's just me joining them up. Making something that isn't there. But it is. I know it is. So many small things. But they're not small, they're just...

Even the shouting, the...the abuse. I never know when that will start. Or end for that matter. When I say that I never know when it will start I mean that sometimes – most times I guess – it just comes out of the blue. Not really connected to anything. At least it doesn't seem so to me. And it's usually about something from a long time ago. Not a very long time ago...although sometimes it is things from a very long time ago. I mean what I'm trying to say is that it doesn't seem connected to what's happening at the time. Right at that moment.

Things can seem OK. OK and then... Everything just explodes. From a standing start. No warning. Usually I don't know what it's about. I have to figure out what the screaming is about. Screaming in my face. Yes it frightens me. Of course it does. Mostly at the start when I don't know what it's about. And when I do figure out what it's about I don't understand why. Because...because it's not true. Most of it anyway. Well I guess that some of it is things that I've done that haven't been...haven't been right. But then most of the time it's things I haven't done. It's...it's like I've been found out. Found out for being...for lying, saying that I've been somewhere when I haven't. Or...usually I guess been somewhere with somebody else. When I haven't. I haven't. Honestly I haven't.

Or done something. Not even now or recently. It can be a long time in the past. So long in the past that I can't even remember what I was doing then. Can't remember to say no, no I couldn't have been, because I was... But when...when the things you are accused of, blamed for, are so long ago, it's difficult to argue. To prove. But then even

if I can prove it...prove it with...with facts and...and the truth, that doesn't even seem to count either. Then it leads to more screaming, more screaming in my face.

I think...maybe I've got used to the screaming. I'm not sure. Maybe I can just ignore it, put it to one side, just try and get on with things. Because I know it'll pass. Just put up with it. After all it's just a few minutes. Usually. Maybe longer sometimes. But then it passes and it's...it's like it's not happened. Two people. It's like two people. Two people in one. That change about. Because sometimes it's nice, it's good. But that's usually after it's been bad. That two people thing, they call it schizophrenia don't they? Two people in one, that swap about. Maybe that's it. Maybe...

But then sometimes it doesn't stop. No, it's not usually me. It's usually something... something that's just there. Something to just pick up and throw, or smash. Sometimes smash against a wall. Or the floor. That's the usual thing. But sometimes it's me. Me that gets things smashed on them. Not always smashed. Sometimes thrown. Thrown at me. Usually after the screaming. It just seems the only way to end the screaming. To smash things. Even then it doesn't end things sometimes. Doesn't end things most times. The worst...the worst I guess was the glass. I mean it was thrown at me, but then afterwards I thought, well, if it had been smashed on my back, not just thrown at my back, then it might have been worse. Well I mean it could have been like a knife I guess. It could have.... But usually the things – the glass or whatever – are thrown... smashed on a wall or just the floor. Then I have to clean up, because it's my fault. Probably my fault. Maybe it is.

Mostly it's better when something is smashed. Because sometimes it's not something it's me. Not smashed properly. No it never goes that far. Not yet. Just pushing and sort of stupid wrestling, trying to make me fall over. But I don't. I just wrestle back. Just stop myself falling over. Because I don't know what would happen if I fell over. I never have done. Fallen over. I just wonder what might happen if I did. But anyway that usually stops it, when I wrestle, when I don't fall over. Usually. Not always. Sometimes it makes it worse. I must admit, those times are the worst. When I'm on the floor. When I can't keep...keep standing up. Just about standing up. Though usually it stops then. Not always. The screaming in my face doesn't stop. That usually carries on. Even when I'm on the floor.

Then there's times – and I think these are the worst – times when nothing's said.

Everything's silent. But then I'll try to walk through a door. Walk into another room. And my way is blocked. Just standing there. Nothing said. Just standing there. I have to give up. Otherwise I'd just stand there forever. It doesn't work to say, 'excuse me,' or 'can I get through.' Because it stays blocked. The door. Just standing there blocking it. And I know why. Oh yes I know why. Because one touch, one movement to try and get through, just a...just a little touch from my hand and then things will explode again. I guess it's a game. Touch me, even one tiny touch to get through here and I'll scream at you. Or worse. The doorways – when it happens – are the worst. Worse than everything else, because I'm helpless. Can't go where I want to. Can't just walk through a door in my own house. Most of the time I can. But when...when the doorway's blocked, blocked by just standing there, right in the middle, I know that I have to give up then. Just not walk through until it passes. Otherwise...

But then I've not tried. I've not tried to push my way through. I know better. Though maybe I'm just imagining it. Maybe nothing would happen. I don't know. Can't be sure. I think I'm going mad you know. Making this all up in my head. Maybe...maybe it's me. Laughable really. I'm sure that those schizophrenic people don't know that they're two people. Maybe I am two people. In my head. I'm sure it seems really normal to them. Like there's just one person. Maybe it is me. That's what I'm always told. 'It's you. You make me like this with your ways. It's your fault.' That's what I'm told. Maybe it is my fault. Though I don't think so.

But everything just goes round and round in my head here. In the quiet. Waiting. I like the quiet though. I'm not complaining. It's better than the quiet when there are two of us here. It's better than the screaming when there are two of us here. Much better.

So I need to make the most of it. The quiet you know. The quiet and...and the safety. Make the most of it because she'll be home soon.



One hour

March 27th. 10.20am.

The building was impressive. Tall, steel and glass, daunting portico. A quiet queue contrasting to uniformed security staff, all in their day's work. Their chatter bounced off the line assembled, two sides, maybe a dozen on each side shuffling through each arch of grey plastic, metal and concealed workings that saw through intentions electronically. Bags sliding through in their own box of grey plastic, metal and concealed workings; a smaller contraption, but the same intention.

A progressive bag line as varied as the people queues; brown seasoned leather, slim and clipped with two brass catches. Slim enough to just accommodate the vital paper work. A brightly coloured Kath Kidston bag, rioting shapes and motifs, crumpled down to make the images unrecognisable. Another brown, seasoned leather. Bigger this time, more bulky. Enclosing, it's presumed, bulkier files, more detailed workings. Then a bigger, this time black case. In another place a shopping bag on wheels with an extendable handle and zipped top. Here – handle pushed in to retract with a slide and then click noise – stuffed with papers and files of great intensity. Too many, far too many to be packed neatly and succinctly into a business like brief case.

A non-descript plastic hand bag, another slim brief case, a JD Sports plastic duffle bag, a bulging Tesco carrier bag, maybe sandwiches for provision, two bottles of water for refreshment apparent as the sides gave way slightly and the bag eased itself partly over on one side as the load shifted. On and on quietly but efficiently. In between, grey trays with a smattering of mobile phones, keys and silver coins. All travelling alongside shuffling owners through their own portals.

Some murmurings between queuing people, but no outspoken chatter. Unlike the day-to-day people, for them it was ordinary.

Through and checked, the lines of people dispersed. Some small groups evidently used to the venue, knew where to go. Two in that direction, three in another. Stairs for the first floor, elevator for higher floors. Other small groups – because none were solitary – pausing to assess direction signs before choosing a route. Other small groups assembling just through security and looking back expectantly for colleagues or allies – or protagonists.

As groups dispersed, others took their place. This grand arrival would continue for the hours that business was done, sometimes the queues longer, sometimes just two or three on each side. Bags, electronics, nothing untoward throughout the day. Just precautions.

He stood and looked back. Everybody seemed to know somebody, raising a hand slightly in recognition, or was with somebody, accompanying. He would, he assumed, see other people he knew when he found the right place, although he only knew for sure one person would be there. No arrangements had been made, it just felt like a duty to be there. No, not a duty, a...a 'duty of care.' That's what they called it didn't they? 'Duty of care.' Maybe support was a better word. He didn't know. The situation, what had happened all those weeks before still seemed unimaginable. And that was what had led to him being there, at that time, in those circumstances. The other people too. The other people that he didn't know, but had assumed would come along. Although he had asked, questioned some whether they were going too. And been surprised that they weren't. After all, she was a friend and, he had presumed, would need support. 'Care. Duty of care.' Not that he wanted to be there, or even said that he would. It wasn't the kind of thing that he wanted to do and yes, whilst support was what he was there to offer, there was a curiosity in a circumstance that was exceptional. Sad, so indescribably sad, but exceptional. But he tried to obliterate even that curiosity from his mind, because – he thought – that was not an acceptable reason for being here, even if it was just a tiny part of the reason.

He had looked around as the dispersal around him continued. On the walls to right and left black boxes with shimmering, illuminated red type. Lists. But what would be on the list that he recognised? Nobody else there, at least at that moment, for the same reason as him. Nobody to confer with and ask opinion. What was he looking for in the red type that shimmered and then shuffled upwards as the time slots changed? He was in time, he had made sure of that. Through the doors with a few minutes to go. Not too early, of course not too late. That couldn't have been a possibility. Too late. Unforgivable.

Look at the black boxes with shimmering red type and look for a name that he recognised. No. No. No. Further down. Maybe the black boxes were different, had different names and so he glanced back at the one to his left and then back to the one on his right. Both the same. He scanned and saw the name. There in shimmering red

capital letters before it shuffled up the box as, he presumed, names were dealt with and replaced with the next at the top of the queue. Although some seemed to shift and change. Some names leapfrogged above others. The names seemed to shuffle and reorganise, but the name that he recognised was still there, with a time and destination beside it. That was it. He made his way to the elevator door and stood behind two people who were together, standing too close together each to be alone, but with heads slightly bowed, worn down and silent. He watched the numbers count down on the upside down illuminated triangle above the doors: 3,2, 1 and the doors slid open with a slick swoosh. Three out, three in. The two he accompanied still silent, exiting at floor two as he carried upwards to the next. The doors swooshed again and he stepped out, glancing along the length of a corridor, to the right a series of tall doors, to the left just glass, floor to ceiling framing the city roofs, punctuated by a scattering of buildings taller than the height of the building he was in. Time. He looked at his watch. Just seven minutes. Just right. Not too long to be a burden, not knowing what to say, just enough time to acknowledge his presence, his support. His care.

Groups of blocky chairs and sofas, upholstered in soft green fabric, facing inwards in conference. Square and rectangular shapes, some accommodating small groups, some empty. All quiet. So quiet. Just people talking in low tones, most leaning inwards conferring or conspiratorial. Traversing along the glass he sought her familiarity in unfamiliar surroundings. There, maybe five or six huddled groups along he saw her, back towards him, head down, unknown woman reaching across with one hand on her shoulder, conferring. He walked towards her group, five more people around the blocks of green leaning in silently towards her. He didn't recognise anybody but her. Paces counting, wondering what words to say, he glanced at his watch again. Yes, just right. Not too long, not too short. As he reached her side the unknown woman's hand slipped from Julia's shoulder and the five looked up at him, maybe an intruder.

"Julia."

She turned her head to the right and then ranged up to his face. A crooked forced smile of recognition and then he placed his hand, just momentarily, on the vacated shoulder. Julia, he felt in that moment, was shaking. Not visibly, more a vibration that he felt in a second or two's contact. She held his eyes for just a fraction, recognition flickering through a fog, before turning back and lowering her head again in silence.

Had he made a mistake in going there? No, he reasoned instantly. This was no time and no place and no circumstance to expect anything other than that moment of recognition. Julia could not greet him as a friend, because her world was not there. Julia's group looked at him, all synchronising that half smile of greeting and pity that arrives when words and situations don't allow for more. He sat on the vacant green square chair to Julia's right, facing her group.

"Just a friend." He said. "Just here to...to support Julia." His explanation silently accepted. He glanced at his watch again. Along the half corridor – half glass and half doors – he saw that each door had an attendant. Grey. The women in grey skirts and jackets, the men in grey suits. A grey not too dark to impose. Mid-grey he reasoned. All perfectly co-ordinated. All with a lanyard and a rectangle of information hanging over the grey. All with a clip-board. Some examined their boards, other stood with boards loosely at their sides, lightly gripped in left or right hands. Some conferred imperceptibly with their neighbours, passing small information or maybe just passing their working time of day with small talk. Julia's group had no small talk. He sought for words, just a few to break the moment. But realised that the group he had joined had exhausted whatever small talk they could before his arrival. How long had they been there he asked himself silently? Who had brought Julia? Should he have offered to bring her? No. Not a friend close enough for that. Just a friend showing support. Care. But, he mused, there were others who should have been here. But then would Julia want them there? Did she want *him* there? A situation, circumstances beyond anything that any of them had known before. No experience to make judgements on whether to be there, whether to say anything, what to do. No. No experience to base anything on.

Julia vibrated almost imperceptibly amongst her group. Support group.

The grey figures stood, or moved, or conferred, gliding towards or away from each other as the minutes eased through their appointed hour. Just a few murmured words between Julia's assembled group.

Julia looked up. Looked up too sharply for her circumstances and her group snapped small frowns and looks back.

"How long? It's..."

"I...I'll try and find out," he said, momentarily chastising himself as the newcomer to the group and the one volunteering. But then this would break the silence, give him a chance to escape for a few seconds. Give him a chance to prove his support. He stood and walked towards the grey suit guarding door number 11. The allotted door. He murmured to the grey suit, who raised his clipboard, flicked over the top sheet to the next and leant conspiratorially towards him, providing the answer. Returning to his green upholstered seat he reported, "Maybe another ten minutes Julia. The usher said that he knew that 10.30 was the time, but...but things are running behind a little. Just a few minutes."

Julia nodded and looked down again, the group bounced their glances around, engaging in silent, visual Chinese whispers one to the next.

"Just a few minutes Julia," one of the group said. He didn't know their names. His arrival wasn't the time or circumstance for introductions. Just support. Group support. "Just a few minutes."

Along the wall, doors opened sporadically, exhuming small groups of people. A disordered rabble, so distinct from the ordered entrance three floors below. Most groups anxious to put that place behind them, heading to stairs down rather than waiting those seconds for elevators. All conferring hurriedly in contrast to the silence of waiting. Julia's group looked up and watched the departures, but none through door number 11. The few minutes passed.

Who was to be the next enquirer? An unanswered question of silent Chinese whispers. Futile, they knew. The time would come and nothing could hurry things. But the seconds and minutes were massing. 'How long now?' deserved to be asked, however futile, but as the massing grew to question time, door number 11 opened and spewed its own rabble towards the stairs. Julia and her support group looked at the grey suit guarding door number 11. "Next in," he mouthed, and then a raised hand with five digits. His mouth formed, "Five minutes," with no sound and Julia's group began their stirring, gathering bags, pushing empty paper cups into an orderly arrangement on the table between them and shuffling forward in their green upholstered seats.

Those minutes passed and the grey suit traversed the space, clicking the top of his pen to engage and then scribing a tick onto the clipboard sheet.

“Could you come this way now please?”

Julia’s group stood. The silent and visual Chinese whispers instantly conveyed with a round of glances. Do they stand back and let Julia lead the way, do they lead Julia through the door? Who should step forward and make this decision? All questions with no definable answer. He looked around for an answer that could not come, before barely touching Julia’s left elbow with his right hand and beginning the process. Surely all these people, this group, were closer to Julia than him. Surely they should lead the way in this decision. But who of them had been in this situation before? The moment was decided and his touch grew into a firmer contact, ushering Julia forward to lead the group through door number 11. The grey suit held the door open with a sweeping right arm and they filed in line, Julia at their head. Inside another grey suit gestured to the left, towards a row of leather benches, studded with brass tacks. Benches that reminisced of history, but bore no marks of wear in a building that blazed modernity across the skyline and through its glass walls and contemporary furnishings.

Julia sat, then shuffled to her left a little, as her group vied gently for seating space. She raised her head now to look around. Oak panelled walls, rows of leather benches. A high, double-tiered construction at the head of the court-room and to her right a glass box, clear panels from the wooden wainscot to the ceiling, ventilated by slim vertical gaps. She watched as, to the right of the glass box, another group shuffled to their allotted positions, separated by circumstances, loyalty, friendship and family from Julia’s group. Support groups. Both loyal, one in deep-rooted sorrow, one in deep rooted separation. His group. Charlie’s group.

Silence in trepidation.

From within the glass box a movement carried every eye. Emerging upwards around a cranked staircase from below, the heads appeared, two upright, heads strong and purposed above dark blue, almost black uniforms punctuated by silver buttons in a disciplined line. Between the two a head dipped, thinning blonde hair above a face picking its way carefully up the steps, not daring to see ahead. The uniforms steered the man to a seat at the front of the glass box and with one hand on each shoulder encouraged him to sit, before taking their own seats behind him. Charlie lifted his head and looked through the ventilated box towards his group, his family, before dipping his head again, sitting passively.

A man in a long black gown stood in front of the double-tiered construction, sheaf of papers in hand and said, “All rise.” From the door on the left of the construction the Judge entered. Four, maybe five steps towards the middle chair of three – all reminiscently upholstered – and looked momentarily at the vista from one group, across the glass to the other group. He placed a handful of papers onto the bench in front of him, purposefully placed a pen on top of the papers and nodded almost imperceptibly before sitting. The man in the long black gown reciprocated the almost imperceptible nod towards the court. The groups sat. Charlie sat.

Black gown: “Charles Arthur Wilkinson has pleaded guilty to the unlawful killing of Laura Carol Julia Powell on Friday, January 16th this year. The purpose of this court is to hear evidence and forensic evidence appertaining to this act and for the Lord Justice Harper to judge and pronounce sentence for this act.” He sat.

Judge Harper lifted the sheets of paper before him and slid his glasses part way down his nose to read the notes. He tilted his head back to an exaggerated degree to peer at Charlie in his glass box.

“Mr. Wilkinson. You have pleaded guilty to the worst of all crimes. That namely you brutally murdered Laura Powell in the home that you shared. Whilst you have admitted guilt, it must also be considered that, after brutally murdering Miss Powell you did not immediately report or confess to the crime and that you did indeed conceal her in the boot of her own car. It can only be guessed at the state of your mind – which in no way mitigates your actions – in that you drove the car away from the home that you shared, but within a short distance lost control of the car and struck several trees in nearby country lanes. Your car – Miss Powell’s car – was so badly damaged that it was un-driveable and – in the early hours of January the seventeenth – you were apprehended by two traffic officers who attended the scene after reports were made.

Nor have you ever made clear what your intentions were. Had you not tried, in some way, to initially avoid detection, the circumstances and your actions might – I repeat might – have had a slight mitigation in this most terrible of crimes. As it stands the court can only presume that you were, in some way, planning to avoid detection or hide the outcome of your actions.”

“However...,” The Judge ranged his view from one group, to the other and then returned his gaze to the glass box. “You must accept the sentencing of this court – and again I remind you that this is a sentencing hearing as you – eventually – pleaded guilty...you must accept the sentence which will be handed down to you as punishment for such a dreadful crime.”

Charlie lowered his head, hands clenched on his lap.

“But first we must assess the crime and the circumstances of this crime. However painful that might be to some here in attendance.” The Judge pushed his glasses back up his nose to see more clearly into the court-room and looked straight at Julia. “We will first hear forensic evidence which will demonstrate the course of events, not the cause. I trust that there will be no attempt to mitigate Mr. Graham?” Charlie’s barrister shook his head almost imperceptibly in agreement.

“Good, then we will call an independent forensic witness appearing on behalf of the police. Mr. Suddell will you take the stand please.”

He took Julia’s hand and tried to give a reassuring squeeze, feeling the vibration. But he knew that what was coming would be devastating beyond any reassurance. Julia pulled the hand away, then patted that hand twice in retrospect. Reassurance given back, though not appropriate.

“Mr. Suddell, will you introduce yourself please.”

“Yes your honour. Thank you. My name is George Peter Suddell and I work as an independent expert on forensic matters for the police force. I was, in fact, employed for almost twenty years in the police force but now operate independently. As a consultant.” He looked around the court and then at the Judge.

“I was called to examine the scene of the murder of Laura – Laura Powell – on January 17th at approximately 6am. I believe that the police had arrested Mr. Wilkinson some hours earlier. I...normally when I arrive at a scene – scene of crime – there is...there is a body.”

He glanced towards Julia momentarily.

“But...but in this case I was merely given a report, photographs of...of Miss Powell’s injuries...”

Again a glance at Julia.

“And...and asked to examine the scene of what Mr. Wilkinson had described as a ‘fight.’ A ‘fight’ between him and Miss Powell. Now...now I can’t...can’t make any comment on the nature of that fight, if indeed that was the case, but I examined the scene thoroughly and...and took samples and there was only one blood type at that scene.”

“Miss Powell’s, Mr. Suddell?”

“Yes. Yes your honour. Just Miss Powell’s. Furthermore there was considerable... considerable evidence of a sustained...a sustained attack.”

“How could you determine that Mr. Suddell?”

“Well...well I have photographs of...of the evidence if I could show them to you and to...to the court?”

He felt Julia tense against his side.

“By all means Mr. Suddell.”

Mr. Suddell pulled two large photographic boards from beside where he was standing. He held them outstretched but facing him, before selecting one and putting the other back beside him, blank side facing outwards. He rested the edge of the remaining board on the edge of the witness stand, facing the court.

“Here,” he said, making a sweep of his hand upwards and outwards towards the top corner of the board. “...here you can see the blood pattern. These shapes here...” He swept his fingers along the red spattered lines. “These shapes are not...not splashes of blood from impact. Impact of the implement. These are from the implement being... being drawn back and essentially flying off backwards and up the wall off...off the implement.”

“The hammer Mr. Suddell?”

“Yes the hammer which...which the police also found in...in the boot of the crashed car. Miss Powell’s blood was also on that hammer. So...so the hammer was used in a violent downward manner...”

The forensic expert picked up the second board and turned it reluctantly towards the court-room.

“Here you can see large quantities...quantities of blood around...around where Miss Powell’s head was.... It was on the floor when the blows were sustained.”

A half sob from Julia, he placed his hand on hers again, but this time there was no withdrawing.

Mr. Suddell returned to his first board. “But here you can see the...the blood has flicked up the wall as it was being violently raised – thrown – back to strike again. As... as you can see there are at least six...at least half a dozen lines – strings of splatters...” He traced the lines with his finger.

“And so...and so in your opinion the attack was sustained, not a sudden and single blow to Miss Powell’s head.”

“No your honour. No most certainly not. I would estimate – as I have said, judging by these traces, these lines, that at least... That Miss Powell was struck on the head by the hammer at least six times and with such force that as the defendant...the...as Mr. Wilkinson struck he flung his hand back with such intention as to gather more force for the next blow.”

Julia sobbed an intake of breath beside him again.

“Thank you Mr. Suddell. I think that your evidence, your comments are sufficient for me to take a view on Mr. Wilkinson’s claims that the...the incident was a matter of a fight between the two parties. You may step down.”

The forensic expert gathered his boards and then paused, before putting them down

again, blank sides facing the court and nodded once before taking a seat on the benches in front of the Judge.

“Mr. Graham. Would you like to speak on behalf of...of Mr. Wilkinson?”

The barrister stood, looked at his client, then his client’s group. He half turned and half nodded in acquiescence, maybe a silent request for forgiveness to Julia.

“Your honour. Sir. As has been mentioned...stated by my client...Mr. Wilkinson freely admits and confesses to the...the killing of Miss Powell. As to why he didn’t immediately report the incident, call for medical assistance or take any other course of action he does not know. Nor why he transferred Miss Powell’s body to the car.”

“Mr. Graham, may I point out to you...again...that Miss Powell was still alive when she was transferred to the car. That death occurred in the car according to forensic studies and that had help been sought immediately there may – however slim – have been a chance of saving Miss Powell’s life.”

“Yes. Yes of course sir. I...”

“Could you therefore avoid using the phrase ‘transferring Miss Powell’s body.’”

“Yes. Yes... Apologies Sir. To the court and...” The barrister looked down. “My client freely admits the offence but...but as he has repeatedly stated, the incident was a fight between...between the two of them which escalated beyond...”

“Mr. Graham, have you not listened to the forensic evidence just presented that – however things may have started – the attack on Miss Powell was sustained well beyond a first blow which, although very serious, might not have ended in her death.”

“Yes your honour, I merely wish to represent my client’s view...comments...that the relationship was...could be volatile. As could Miss Powell be on occasion.” The barrister dropped his head towards his chest again.

“Mr. Graham, I hardly think that that comment mitigates anything which subsequently happened. And further, unless you have anything more constructive to

relay to both me and Miss Powell's family and friends – he glanced at Julia's group – then I suggest that we leave it there.”

“Sir.” The barrister sat.

“Mr. Court Clerk, do we have an impact statement from the deceased's mother.”

“Yes Sir.” The clerk handed the Judge a single sheet of paper. “This impact statement – which will be on court records – speaks of the loss of a daughter and a friend to many. Of a young woman brutally deprived of most of her life.”

Julia lifted her head and looked to her right into the glass box. Charlie sat, she could only see the profile, but his head was straight now, looking directly at the Judge. Still with his hand on hers he followed Julia's gaze and looked at the profile of the young man, before turning back to the Judge in synchronism with her.

“It is normal...usual...to read out an impact statement to court. But this is often in cases tried by Jury. In this case it is a sentencing hearing and so I do not wish to inflict more...more suffering on Miss Powell's mother. A mother with an only child whom she has, for many years, raised and looked after alone.

It remains only for me to pronounce sentence, which I have considered long and dutifully, of course bearing in mind the defendant's...the perpetrator's previous lack of blemishes in his behaviour. I find no mitigation in evidence or opinion,” he glanced at the barrister, “and have dutifully therefore concluded my deliberations. Mr. Wilkinson, will you stand please.”

Charlie stood, Julia stopped breathing.

“Mr. Wilkinson you are sentenced to eighteen years imprisonment at Her Majesty's Pleasure. Take him down.”

Charlie stood motionless for a second, maybe two, before the two uniforms converged to lay a hand on each shoulder again and turn him around in the glass box. On the far side of the box Charlie's group murmured and consoled. As Charlie turned, his eye-line met with Julia's for a moment, two blank, expressionless faces, before starting a

descent carefully down the winding steps.

The Judge rose, all stood instinctively and then sat again as the door on the left of the double-tiered construction closed quietly behind him.

“Come on,” he said. “Come on now.” Julia's group rose together, this time the exit in one knot of people, not with Julia at the vanguard. No words. Just heads lowered, not catching glances as they made their way to the elevator. “No,” Julia said and walked towards the stairway. “Yes of course,” he calculated. Just no risk, no chance however small, of being trapped if only for a few seconds in a box with Charlie's group. They descended huddled together in formation. The entrance still churning with people and bags and security, all attending their allotted time. No security going out though. Just straight through double doors and a half nod from the man ensuring that the exit was not abused for entry.

No words. Just a group, silent, standing, looking for a break in the silence.

“How long were we in there?” Julia said.

“Just an hour,” he replied.