

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

***FLYING FREE***

by

Delys Beck Avni AVNDEL001

Dissertation submitted in *fulfilment* of the requirements for the  
award of the degree of Master of Arts in Creative Writing

Department of English

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

2001

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, or quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature

Date 13<sup>th</sup> August 2001

Signed by candidate

## SYNOPSIS

Phillip Grier, architect and artist has told his students they should visit White Gables Hotel in order to understand the significance of urban and architectural planning. It is there he encounters Jenny who, seeking temporary accommodation, has taken her lecturer's advice. Their meeting is unusual. He is drunk; on a bender to escape his inadequacies and obsessions, the result of a traumatic childhood. She is patently terrified at finding herself in such a disreputable place and clings to him for protection.

Discovering that they were both abandoned at the same orphanage, children who were "not quite right", they form a deep bond of supportive friendship. Jenny moves into a flat on Grier's property. Although twelve years Philly's junior Jen is the stronger character, practical and willing to cope with her problems. She has plastic surgery to rectify the ugly scar of the initial repair to her hare lip, but Philly refuses to face or discuss his physical problem, a genital anomaly, hypospadias. He hides the shame of his deformity behind a neurotic silence.

Despite the close bond they develop the relationship is platonic. Philly maintains he is not the marrying kind, shows no interest in sex and leaves for a trip to the USA after telling Jen she must go out with young men her own age. Feeling rejected and unhappy Jen is swept off her feet by a mysterious foreigner and finds herself married to him. Their tempestuous relationship lasts for three weeks before Yannis Nikoloupopolis is sent overseas by George who controls his activities and finances. Yan never returns, is reported dead and Jen goes back to share a home with Philly. Together they raise Yannis her son.

The burden of the story is told indirectly, with no linear continuity, but as facts emerge in conversations and thoughts drawn out by Yannis' determination to discover the undivulged secrets of his genesis. He considers the asexual friendship of his 'parents' abnormal and wants to understand why their close, loving friendship has progressed no further. He gnaws unceasingly, a rat at the wainscoting of truth beyond which lie rewards of *facts*. It is as a result of his unremitting questions that we discover many versions of events as well as twisted and submerged emotions.

The truth is as evasive as the letter Jen's mother left for her to read on attaining her majority. When it is eventually found, a lifetime later, many of the words are indecipherable, obliterated by time.

The happy family changes. Yannis leaves to travel Europe with Algaia, a blind girl he met in hospital when he was fifteen and with whom he has since corresponded. Philly, after a *crise de nerfs*, and the long delayed operation, is now able to participate in male bonding activities without the fear and shame of mockery. He joins "The Group", a New Age ascetic vegetarian movement with which Jen has no sympathy. The couple's main meeting points - the boy Yannis and the creation and enjoyment of spectacular meals - are gone. Jen turns to her piano for fulfilment and to still the yearning to create something more lasting than the food and nurturing which have absorbed her time. Having lost both her son and her companion Jen feels her entire adult life has been negated. When blind Gaia returns, pregnant with Yannis' twins, Jen decides to leave, to fly free, to start her life again from that point and live as a *complete* person.

93,005 WORDS

*FLYING FREE*

by

AVNI

University of Cape Town

*A second life, a soul anew*  
*My Dark Rosaleen!*

From *Dark Rosaleen* by James Clarence Mangan 1803-1849

University of Cape Town

## INDEX

| CHAPTER |                   | PAGE |
|---------|-------------------|------|
| 1       | The Staircase     | 1    |
| 2       | Telling           | 10   |
| 3       | Glass House       | 59   |
| 4       | Emotion           | 66   |
| 5       | Another Breakfast | 88   |
| 6       | Morning After     | 110  |
| 7       | Disintegration    | 140  |
| 8       | Reintegration     | 148  |
| 9       | Intervention      | 161  |
| 10      | Revelation        | 171  |
| 11      | Beginnings        | 210  |
| 12      | Reorientation     | 229  |
| 13      | Identity          | 245  |
| 14      | <i>Dal Segno</i>  | 275  |
|         | Bibliography      | 292  |

## CHAPTER 1 THE STAIRCASE

"Gut-feel is real, think-feel is phoney." Phillip Grier, lecturing on the sociological significance of urban and architectural design, vibrated to his pet theme. Failed architect and mediocre lecturer, he was, nonetheless, incandescent when imparting the realities of slum life to the social sciences students. A few gifted strokes on the board created an atmosphere. Crooked lines and smudged surfaces reverberated with aborted symphonies of boxed-in lives. Fluttering his fingers in ineffectual jabbing movements, as if they were pieces of chalk he wished to throw at the complacent, adequately breakfasted faces, he seemed incapable of any grand or definite gesture.

"You bleat agreement like a lot of blethering sheep, yet year after year you go out and do sweet bu- ...nothing. Do *one* of you have a single original idea in your head?"

Small grumbling waves of sound indicated their displeasure. Antagonising his audience would not get the response he wanted, and he knew it. He was afraid of them; sure they were laughing at his inability to relate to, or even converse with normal youngsters. He hated the job.

"How many of you, or your parents, are associated with the petition to restore White Gables instead of replacing it with a modern block of subsidised flats?" Grier spun them into his trap. They clamoured, student-like, to be seen identifying with the avant-garde stand against authority. Even the uninvolved waved hands. Except Jenny.

Her thoughts wandered. Wraithlike half-forgotten feelings drifted alternately obscuring then revealing memories of the old couple, Rory and Maudie ÓDowd. They had taken her into their home and overprotected her in all the wrong ways. Dad ÓDowd, even more doting than Mummy ÓDowd, had named her Jenny, cutely, because with the gaping half open hare-lip she had looked like 'a dear little Jenny wren baby bird with its beak open for food'. Their good-deed charity, though loving, had not extended beyond elderly Uncle Doc's patch-up surgical job. Twice a month they played Monopoly with him over the weekend, the other Saturday afternoons he called to examine the children at the 'home' where Jenny had been left as an infant. It was not because they begrudged her specialist attention, for - in their innocence - they truly believed their old doctor friend had done the best that was possible: they came, after all, from a culture which accepted without query, and did not expect to do more than bear the hardships God, or Fate, laid upon them.

Filigree's snort of indignant triumph obliterated the image of the three old people. "Ha! Hmph! A unique situation! A temple of 'sexploitation' and the libbers among you are protecting it? Beauty at the expense of comfort, utility and integrity is it? A female approach perhaps?"

Jenny stopped listening again and thought about feeling; how it stretches up from a spasm in the belly or the chest, clenching and aching in a void, an unidentifiable site immune to anodyne. Once it had hurt to turn, responding to a 'hello there', see a face fall, hear changed tones of voice. Now, she bluffed herself, an ugly scar was a superficiality. If people judged only by externals, well, that was their loss. When things changed they would recognise their own echoed emptiness. Flaunting a metre-long coppery blonde nimbus

she waved this challenge down her back. Its magnificence never failed to net approaches whose abrupt reversal, when she turned, reinforced her determination to live in a re-shaped society. She, Jenny, aged nineteen, was going to alter the world, or at least help to do so. Change was inevitable, preferably by revolution. It's simpler that way, clear away the dead wood, she thought eyeing the lecturer whose apparent fragility and rococo vehemence were nicely expressed by his nickname, Filigree.

His unamused smile was venom-dipped: he loathed them, their self-assured dismissal of his inadequacies. "How would you propose to start breaking the vicious cycle – poverty, homelessness, degradation, crime? People need decent homes, shelter, an identification with community. All the academic philosophising and 'understanding' weigh as nothing against the misery, the sheer desolation, the black sludge agony of hunger and cold and rejection flooding away all decent impulses."

"But it's a beautiful old building," called someone safe in the anonymity of the back rows. Filigree quivered, a dark-headed flower on a wiry stalk, lashed by an inner storm, the petals of his black curls took on a life of their own as he nervously swept fingers across his scalp, trying to extract thoughts in whole chunks acceptable to the youngsters.

"Beautiful?" His tone denied it. "The only beautiful thing about the dump is the lying façade, oh, and the staircase. Yes, I'll admit the stairs *are* beautiful, but, by God," he exclaimed, briefly forgotten, now, the nervous lack of self-confidence usually shadow-dogging him. "It's iniquitous, those huge curving stairs utilising all the living space so that the rooms upstairs are mere pokey cubicles and the so-called public rooms downstairs are ludicrous. That

stairway doesn't belong there, it's out of proportion and out of keeping in a third-rate whorehouse."

The class, recently schoolchildren, tittered at the unintended salaciousness of the word. "You laugh, but the laugh's on you. The place was built as a brothel last century, euphemistically called 'The Parsonage' because of its proximity to a church, and provided with whacking big stairs, with all their trimmings, just to add 'tone'. One charges the customers more if the first impression is of a high-class joint. Remember that, you future businessmen. Oh yes," he added, subsiding, "and women, of course."

Phillip Grier feared women; avoided confrontation with these mysterious, tauntingly covered time-bombs waiting to explode and annihilate him. He continued, the clear light of his convictions flickering through his words faintly. "The place masqueraded as an hotel, and still purports to provide 'accommodation'. But hell ... *you* should live there. Can you imagine what it does to a person when home is one of a row of identical doors queuing along an airless passage with a single inadequate bathroom at the end? You should *live* there to understand. Stairs aren't worth saving, but I think people are. Would any of *you* stay in this monument to futility, this beautiful sweep of staircase placed as an exhibit in a box and behind this ... this ploy to dazzle and blind one to the real purpose, the booths in which human lives are measured out in coins and alcohol?" The anger faded from his voice, whatever inner battle he fought subsided. "Do you not realise that dank, dingy rooms create dank dingy people?" He knew he could not reach them. "It's a refuge for the dispirited," he mumbled. Possibly only Jenny, sitting alone in the front row, caught his last remark. She was strangely disturbed.

\*

\*

\*

Jenny was caught in a crowd in the slum area approaching the White Gables hotel. The laughter and banter of a friendly demonstration disappeared. It turned into a riot. Stone eyes and clenched fists threw viciousness and rocks. She looked into the faces of hating and hated alike and saw no difference. Fear twisted her gut, and, as she tasted it flat and metallic on her tongue, she remembered Filigree's words some months ago. "Gut-feel".

The unexpected violence and shed blood disturbed Jenny's ideals; clarity disappeared. Confused, she lost direction. Chance had involved her in the turmoil on her way to White Gables. The lecturer's descriptions and inappropriate vehemence had roiled through her mind until, calling her curiosity 'research', she decided to see the one-time brothel for herself. Scampering away from the ugliness and anger she had not achieved her goal, but Phillip Grier's words remained entangled in her thoughts.. "*You should live there; you should live there.*" Well, perhaps he was right, perhaps then she would understand everything again.

Too much had happened in the last six months. Jenny, perplexed and undecided about her future wavered at a forked road. Bewildered, still mourning the recent deaths of her adoptive parents, the sale of the old farmhouse, she was both achingly alone yet intoxicatingly free. Sensibly she had decided on temporary accommodation before daring the next step, but, a few hours ago, a row with the landlady had catapulted her out of the rooms taken some weeks back. Now she needed shelter for a night or two while finding something suitable. Half-unwilling, as a cat testing rain-wet ground it must cross, Jenny decided to explore, be a bit daring and discover what Filigree had been talking about.

She often thought of him and that last lecture. He might be an adult but there was something about him, some withdrawal ... something which made her picture a sad little boy, which was ridiculous, really, because he could be so full of enthusiasm and so vibrantly alive. Well, she decided, she would take the plunge.

Though the open doors of White Gables the staircase was only partially visible. Half afraid, but unwilling to retreat, Jenny stepped in. A gum-chewing woman at the reception desk looked up, "Yeah, you want something?" Jenny booked in. The receptionist shoved a key across the counter; attached to it was a dirty piece of cardboard on which a number was scrawled. Without losing a cud-like movement of her jaws she muttered, waving a hand in the direction of the stairs, "Up them stairs an' a forf room onna right." Holding her small suitcase Jenny looked around dismayed by the grubbiness and neglect. The curve and sweep which carried the ornate carving of the banisters *was* beautiful, yet the total effect seemed obscene. She thought, with surprise, that the lecturer had misunderstood its purpose. It was not there to impress, but to invite. It was too big, boldly and sensuously curved like the stereotype of some frontier prostitute, brazenly and invitingly overstating her attractions with tight satin and too low *décolletage*. The staircase was designed to invite ascent and she, nervously, accepted the invitation. It seemed appropriate that the flamboyance ended in the nonentity of a dim passageway receding into darkness. No statement after overstatement.

But later, creeping down that glum passage during the night, Jenny again knew fear. Unable to sleep in the strange, stuffy murkiness she had lain awake listening to sounds which she

interpreted as violence and debauchery. The stained carpet and splotted walls suggested depravity. Hidden threats whispered in their tell-tale smears and gummy residues; gelatinous globs snail-tracked down dirty surfaces. Tension worked its way to her bladder. Dim light shining through open door - a guide for return - she fumbled her way to the bathroom. Her scar, worn as a shield, was forgotten. Jenny was as apprehensive as any beautiful girl fearing physical attack and violation. Each creaking board, each sound of movement or briefly raised voice from closed room, hovered palpably and menacingly in the otherwise unnatural silence. Pushing against the half-open bathroom door she encountered the resistance of some yielding object which emitted a scary, unrecognisable sound. Her gut rose again lurchingly, she was choking with fear. What lay behind that door, and dared she enter? -- her need was imperative.

The whine of tired hinges spun her around. Her worst terrors confirmed, she saw a small wiry man, clutching a bottle, swaying in the doorway while he fumbled with his trousers. Recognition, caught as a gasp in her throat, washed away the apprehension, while Phillip Grier, peering through his alcoholic haze toward the sound sensed that something was wrong. "Wha's a matter?" he slurred. "Sorry, gotta have a leak," he excused his premature unzipping, while fuzzily thinking that it was the hair, yes, there was something about that hair... Suddenly shocked realisation hit him. "Wha' th'hell you doing here?"

"There's a body behind the door," she replied. In spite of his condition the relief of familiarity scudded fear away: she felt safe, seeing his nose twitch with agitation in its usual way. Moving closer, she clutched at him for protection from the invisible horror in the bathroom. "You said we should find out what it was like ..."

"D'you always do what you're told?" he snapped, irritation a guard against inadequacy. He looked at her, not knowing what to say. Dim light hiding the scar she looked almost beautiful, those huge, soft, frightened brown eyes. He wondered why he had not realised it before. Considerably sobered he too pushed the bathroom door. Meeting the same resistance and sound his efforts were followed by a thin trickle of liquid from under the door.

Suddenly it was more important to get this girl out of here than continue the bender he had begun. Seldom called upon to do so it was not often that Philly Grier was capable of acting decisively. The shaming image of himself some months back, lying half naked behind that same bathroom door, incontinent and frustratingly banging a bottle against the old lead pipes to break it open, compelled him to action. It became important this girl did not see what he believed lay hidden there. In some peculiar way he felt his own degradation would be obliterated if he saved her from a similar sight.

"Look", he said, "I'm going to get you out of here. I shoot my mouth off sometimes ... but this is *not* the place for a girl like you, unless you come on a conducted day-trip." He smiled at her, trying to lighten the tension. As he put his arm around her rigid shoulders to lead her away Jenny burst into tears. "I've *got* to go to the bathroom," she sobbed. His genuine, unstudied gentleness coming after the tension had tumbled her defences. Assumed armour disappeared, and because he responded kindly she clung to him, her need feeding his ability. "Hush now," taking her hand and leading her away like a child, "there's a cloakroom under the staircase. Come, I'll take you down there, then afterwards we'll leave."

As he stumbled on the stairs Jenny realised he needed her assistance and strength as much as she needed his gentle comforting. "These damn stairs," she said. The relief of laughter formed a bond as they went down the curving sweep, each with a protective arm around the other.

Behind the bathroom door of White Gables a broken pipe leaked over the floor. The disintegrating plastic bucket, wedged between the bath and door to catch the drip, had finally split open and fallen over. Tonight it had received a harder than usual shove. It had been squashed many times by the opening door in the months since the pipe had been cracked by a man unable to break either a bottle or the constricting bonds of his loneliness.

## CHAPTER 2 TELLING

Twenty-one and a half years later a woman and her son sit in a garden.

"Tell me about my father."

"But I *have* told you everything, there is so little to tell, it's ... the time ... we were together for such a short time. I have told you all I know."

"Yes, yes," the boy says; on the border of young manhood, impatient and hungry, needing to place himself, to have some masculine identification, he is driven – after having forced himself to remain patient for so long – to fill the blank spaces. "Yes, you've given me fragments of *facts*, some of them, but I want to know more ... what you felt, the things you spoke about, what he thought. I mean, what was he really *like*?"

"How do I know what he thought?" She is impatient. "You can't get inside somebody else's head, besides ... I don't know, it all seems so long ago, we never really got a chance to know one another."

"That's bulsh. Philly says you met *him* the same night you met my father and look how you became friends immediately. I mean, the two of you communicate, you understand each other, he says right from the start ... well, what about my father?"

Jenny, adept after years of evasion, parries the question, "Nonsense, I never met Philly that night, I'd known him before, he was ..."

"He was a lecturer, that's what, somebody ... you'd gone to his lectures, and that on a part-time basis, I mean you never got to *know* him until that night. He told me about it, he said ..."

"Yes, I know. It's become a sort of Philly family myth. He has to create them as he has nothing else. His own childhood so grim. All those strangers looking after him, belonging nowhere, nobody really who cared." Like a good shepherd she herds her words carefully along a safer route.

"Right: the way he put his arm around you because you were so frightened and you walked down the stairs of that terrible place, clinging to him, the first person who'd ever needed him."

"Hmmpf," she snorts in denial. "Yannis, it wasn't like that at all. We walked down arm in arm because he was just plain drunk, unsteady on his feet. I couldn't face him falling down the stairs on top of everything else. Yes, I *was* scared, but I was the one who kept my head when he passed out later and ..."

"That's when you met my father, wasn't it? But Ma, your version is always different from Philly's. Surely, between the two of you, you can arrive at something that doesn't change all the time? I mean, it's not as if it were some story, some fiction that never happened. Damn it, just for once give me something, somewhere I can place myself."

Trying to wriggle out of a corner she replies, "And if this were fiction that is where we could leave them, your father, and those two lost people walking down the stairs, together; arm-in-arm, into the future." She sighs, pauses before adding, "But reality, somehow it doesn't work that way."

They are both silent for a while, thoughts thrumming on the what-might-have-been, their tunes different. "Any case," she adds, "it's difficult to say. Memories do differ, it's got a lot more to do with personality than with the male-female thing. Even then, though so much younger than him, I was a lot more practical than Philly. What's this father quest all about anyway, Yannis? You've always

had Philly. I thought there was this special bond between the two of you?"

"Sure," he nods. "I know what he's done for me, meant to us both, but I need to place myself genetically, to know where I come from. There was a time, when I was little, that I believed he was my father, my real father, and there was some secret, some mystery which made it necessary to pretend he wasn't. I mean, it's as if ... well, we do have such similar colouring we could be related ... and I wanted us to be. Surely you, of all people, can understand. You've told me you would have given anything just to know what your parents looked like, what the colour of your mother's eyes was."

"But you know that, Yannis," she grabs at this side-line, evading the point of the question. "You know your father had these strange eyes, yellow like a lion's, and that he would stare with no expression, nobody had a clue what was going on in his mind." She will not remember that once she thought those eyes golden like wild honey; intoxicating.

"No." Dismissively impatient to get at the intangible thing, that unspoken nuance gliding like a wraith through the conversations about his father, he almost barks. "I know about his eyes, what he looked like, something like me except for colouring, hair and eyes different but the face the same. And Philly says his eyes were like a hawk's, cold, predatory. Was he, was he predatory?"

She ignores his question, perhaps because she does not know the answer, perhaps because she knows it too well. "You want me to tell you *everything*? How I feel, what I remember, what I reconstruct, what I imagine? That's nonsense. Memories are unreliable, intangible, not necessarily the truth. Attitudes change and the way we look at events, and people, changes too." She

knows, after all these years, it is time to come to terms with ... with what? ... disappointment, resentment, acknowledging the way she really felt about that brief episode, the foolish three-week marriage, his reported death.

"You can have no idea, Yannis, how much there was to cope with at the time. You've always had me, or Philly, to back you up. We've taught you how to handle problems."

"Ma, I know it wasn't easy for you, but you've never explained, never let me see into ... *things*, the way it was for you. Why, Philly knows more about you and my father than I do."

She starts to object, but he bends over kissing her on the nose, a special childhood ritual they had both outgrown. "I'm not picking on you," he reassures her, "just tell me any way you want, all jumbled up like. I need to know it from *your* perspective. I'm a big boy now, you don't have to protect me from the nasties and the 'dretted lurgy' anymore. You've given me the stable and loving childhood you were determined I'd have, in spite of myself. If you knew how I'd craved the mystery of yours and Philly's." He hams it up, the old familiar family jokes settling tensions.

Jenny sighs. "If that's what you want." She is unsure, has never sorted it out in her own mind, the tumult of emotions. If she still does not understand, how can it be made clear to her son?

"It's strange, nostalgia; how memories change." She has managed, over the years, to avoid thoughts of this tumultuous interlude in her life, wedging herself safely in the hum-drum of daily make-work busy-ness.

"Philly says it's not the memories that change, but the perspective, the point of view, the way that different things matter as you get older."

"Yes," she agrees, "but sometimes certain parts of the past just seem to melt away. Maybe that's because it's not important any more, it no longer frightens or hurts or gives pleasure. Disappointment ...?" she trails off, then takes a deep breath as if to plunge into a cold, dark pool. "All right, here goes, but you have to understand, I wasn't the me you know." She has managed, over the years not to regret the changes, nor to look at the past. "It was like being thrown into a wash-machine spinning madly, my quiet life slashed apart by overwhelming ... er, I don't know how to describe it ... such strangely unfamiliar and not always pleasant emotions. All that unaccustomed drama coming on top of the years of isolation." She escapes into byways of explanation. "Leaving school to help care for Dad after his stroke. Mum couldn't cope, she wasn't strong enough, remember they were in their sixties when they took me in."

"I thought you had to be a certain age to adopt children, I never understood how you ended up with such a very old couple."

Her diversionary ploy successful, Jenny swings comfortably into the old story. "It's because if they hadn't I wouldn't be here now. Nobody had time at the 'home' to feed a split-lipped baby who couldn't suck a bottle and had to be spoon-fed. Two drops in and ten drops out is what they told me happened. Besides," she muses, happy to evade facing demons, "I don't think nuns have strong maternal instincts. So when old Uncle Doc Harry saw me fading away and Mom spending all that love and care on sick chickens and stray kittens, he knew she'd pull me through. He moved heaven and earth and half the welfare department to arrange the adoption. Nobody else wanted me, people don't ... not when there is something wrong with kids, you know. And I was so ill too; a real miserable little changeling with a hare-lip. It was a mercy it didn't extend to a cleft palate, that was rare good luck, else I'd surely have been a

goner, starved to death through lack of skill.” In safe waters again, Jen sails through, navigating to avoid shoals of self-examination and revelation.

“When the old nun on duty that night came to answer the doorbell she didn’t notice me, in a Moses basket, being pushed aside by the heavy door that opened outwards. All she saw was a young woman running down the long avenue and thought it some prankster. By the time Uncle Doc made his morning call I was half frozen. He saw this animal, a cat obviously, jump out of the basket and run away as he came up the stairs. If it hadn’t curled up beside me I should have died of hypothermia, he reckoned. He teased me, called me ‘The Cat Child’, and said I’d disproved an old wives’ tale.”

“How come, how did you do that and ... well, what about all the Aids babies today that are being fostered and adopted?”

“It was different then. Deformed babies weren’t fashionable.” She pauses and looks at her son. “You know, Yannis, *that* is exactly why you haven’t got the whole picture,” she prevaricates, sheltering behind half-truths, determined to direct the flow of this conversation. “We always go off at a tangent. Now, if you want the story, listen and don’t ask irrelevant questions.”

“But Ma, everything is relevant. And how did you disprove the old wives?”

“But that’s got nothing to do with the story, it’s just a stupid superstition that cats climb into baby’s cribs and suck the breath out of them. And then they die, of course. So how does that help you with knowing about ... about me and your father, and the way things happened?”

“It all adds atmosphere, background. It makes the story more real, so that I can see it and feel it.” Eyes narrowed, he stares into

the far distance where an ability to visualise people and places is creating pictures.

His mother, aware of his only-child propensity to construct and inhabit imaginary situations, challenges, "Well, feel the terrible loneliness then: studying by correspondence, keeping up the 'farm', just a plot really, the poultry and Dad's garden; the actual farm had been sold off in bits years ago as the factories and industrial areas encroached and the ground became increasingly valuable. Dad made a lot of money and invested it well, but we continued to live simply, even though it wasn't necessary." In the years that have passed since then she has deliberately avoided recollection; her life rich and full enough now to ignore her undeveloped and embarrassingly raw early self: the polywog turned mermaid.

"Why did you do it then?" he asks, "Struggling with a plot of ground surrounded by slums and factories?"

"Somehow it seemed impossible to neglect it after all the happy years we'd spent together there. I'd never realised how much Dad was teaching me as he told me stories and I 'helped' him. So patient, what a pest I must have been. But it was hard work, work, work, until the rezoning forced us to sell the livestock. By then I was so glad to do so. Mum somehow never helped outside, and people were forever breaking in and stealing those damn chickens. And, of course, we were frightened all the time, or at least I was because by then Mum was living in cloud cuckoo land."

"Hang on," he interrupts "you always said she was so good with the chickens, nursed the damn things when they were sick and you just hated having to help and hold them while she dosed them or attended to their open sores, all smelly and yech ...?"

"Right, but she didn't clean the bloody pens and runs, nor spray the roosts for tampanis; she fed them, OK, cluck cluck cluck

and chatting in that peculiar tone of voice old women adopt for animals and babies. 'There now is it a hungry ikkle thing and greedy Mr Rooster won't share: shoo you nasty little man, give the girls a chance.' It made me curl up inside, it seemed so gooey and inappropriate. Stupid how embarrassed kids get over their parents' actions, even if nobody else is watching, ... hey, wait now: did *I* ever do that to you?"

For a while he wonders if a truthful answer will upset her, then takes refuge in the usual family way of coping with difficulties: he dismisses a problem by joking. "Of course you did, all parents do, it's part of the job description, but this is *your* story, not mine, we'll come to that later, the dramatic revelation, the drama ...tootleootoo," he fanfared, "*The Things My Mother Did To Me!!!*" He laughs, acting up so that she will not take offence or be hurt. "I mean, how much better it is for me than it was for you never being able to unburden yourself, or work it out, so that you sort of carried it along and possibly went to the other extreme in my childhood, always treating me as an adult and with such respect for how I felt. There *were* times I longed for you to just make decisions and not always discuss it with me and make *me* decide, even if it was only to point out afterwards where or how I'd made the wrong choices."

Safe again now, for a while, Jenny chats happily as she draws her son out to speak about himself. "But ... but didn't it make you feel important, a part of the family? And it certainly taught you to think for yourself and not be afraid to voice your own opinions, even if they differed..."

"Yes Mama, it did," softening the criticism with the old childhood appellation, "but there were times I wanted to be bone lazy, to goof off and just be a little kid and let the adults carry the can, OK? No harm done and I'm sure I'm a better man for it. Any

case you were in the chicken yard with your Mam, so what happens next? But wait, first enlighten me, I thought tampons were ... well ... er, you know?"

"*Tampans* not *pons*: they're some ghastly bedbug-like type of poultry tick. I remember looking it up in the big *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* Dad'd bought just before his stroke - he was a great one for reference books and made me look up everything I asked about before he'd explain it - well, it said that they are 'a species of acarus remarkable for the venom of their bite.' Horrible things, they'd disappear into anything wooden and stank, and I repeated the dictionary definition like some sort of mantra as I battled with them." She chants in a sing-song voice, " 'Species of acarus remarkable for the venom of their bite.' They'd suck the blood out of the darn chickens which sort of drooped and died. God I was glad when we had to get shot of them, I hated them, and I don't really think the eggs tasted that much better than shop ones. Anyhow it's a lot pleasanter eating a bird whose antecedents and pet-name you are not familiar with - oh, hello, this is Harriette for dinner today - particularly if these include disease, dosing and death."

"Oh Ma, be serious, better still, continue the story, but, what's an acarus when it's at home?"

"You see, that's exactly what happens with us," waving her hands about in descriptive circles, half impatient, half amused. "We go off at tangents, zoom around happily in circles having a wonderful talk-party while the main topic wanders off in desolation and dies of neglect" She shakes her head, takes a deep breath, "here we go again, right off the track."

Jen, is smugly pleased. Yannis is beguiled by her apparently sincere attempts to get on with the story, while her diversionary tactics are side-tracking it. "Like my Dad, you know, I've always

told you, 'go look it up yourself'. I always meant to find out more but never did. It would be fun if *you* could. Would you?"

He grunts his assent. "Uhhuh," hams it up a bit, "another Nicol project launched, mother and son discover secrets of mysterious chicken slayer, world fame follows."

"If you're not careful," she threatens, "and you don't make some decision soon about your future career you'll end up as some phoney advertising mogul, filthy rich, smoking a cigar with a bimbo blonde on each arm."

"And one thing I'll be able to rely on for sure, is my mother for the clichéd stereotype, outdated of course."

"Of course, they wouldn't be clichés and stereotypes if they weren't, now would they? And when you've found out about the acarus thing remember to tell me. Terrible one has to wait a whole generation before one's son can educate one."

Putting an arm around her, he strikes up a pose as if introducing her to an audience. "My mother, the moron ..." then turns, hugs her and adds, "who taught me to travel through books, excited my curiosity, gave me the ability to use my hands creatively, and bloody never gives me any peace if she thinks I am in danger of a bit of mental relaxation." Then suddenly he stops clowning. "You know I'd rather be anything than a businessman and I'm not crazy about being part of some huge organisation, and sure, yes, you're right, I *have* to decide. It's scary, I graduate in a few weeks and I'm still not quite sure where I'm heading. As things are going at the moment I'm likely to 'drop out' and do a pale imitation of Philly, but it'd take me years to build up the reputation he has. And he does supply a very specialised market doesn't he? I'm still dabbling around, unable to choose one of many directions. Oh gosh Ma, so

many interesting things to do; am I ever going to be able to decide what I intend to *be*?"

"That's the price you pay, my boy, for being a ruddy genius!"

"Oh, Ma, be serious, better still, continue the story."

Where was I? But, being serious for a moment, please choose something that will make you happy, something you'd really like to do for the rest of your life. Don't choose just on material considerations. I mean, yes, one has to have enough to eat and all that but its amazing how happy one can be on a moderate budget, and Philly and I whilst budgeting moderately and enjoying our lives have saved, so you won't be destitute when we're gone."

"Yes, I *have* been thinking and really need to discuss it all with you and Philly ... I do have tentative ..." He stops suddenly, looks at her as if only now realising the implication of her last remark. Facing the idea of death, connected to people he loves, as more than just an abstract concept in the unforeseeable future disturbs him: he responds irritably, "And for heaven's sake don't talk like that, it'll be ages before either of you are even old, so please ..." He escapes by changing the subject and prompts, "You were saying how tough things were, with all the farm work, and you having to leave school and study by correspondence and Grandma wouldn't help outside, and ... oh yes, you hated the chickens."

"I still have nightmares about the smell of chickenshit, shovelling the gooey stuff ... yet it's marvellous in the garden, that is when it's old enough and diluted sufficiently. But no, it was the cleaning out of those damn pens after Dad had the stroke. Funny how smells evoke memories, one actually returns to places and people, you're *there* as if it were here and now when you smell certain smells. But I certainly have more good smell than bad smell memories ... that old kitchen with Mum's marvellous cooking and

baking smells ... the whole house with handfuls of cloves and lavender bags shoved into every little odd space ... and those wonderful broad old wooden floor planks glowing and smelling of polish. It still has them, though they've ruined the whole atmosphere and outward appearance, building the house on to ... 'incorporating' it into the modern mall, making it a display feature. They've ruined the place, not because it's not lived in, but because they've made it all so artificial, using it as a poshed-up venue for exhibitions and displays of fake antique furniture and artefacts that don't really go with the spirit of the old house."

Yannis is determined to nail the inconsistencies appearing in the family history: these have seemed more glaring and bothersome as he gets older. "But you said *that* was one of Philly's triumphs, and you only found out quite a while after you got to know him that he was responsible for saving the old house, how he talked them into making it a part of the new building and using it instead of knocking it down."

"Yes, but somehow when I went into it after they 'converted' it, with its floorboards treated so they don't need sweet-smelling polish, filled with all that larney stuff which isn't meant to be used, just for show, it upset me." She realises, now, part of her resentment arose from feeling lost and uprooted when she left the familiarity of the old house for the cold comfort of digs in somebody else's unwelcoming home. "We *used* those big copper pots, *and* polished them too, made jams and preserves in them; they weren't just expensive containers for Japanese-style artificial flower arrangements, d'you know what I mean? It's all so ... so phoney." She struggles to explain, to infuse with emotion the difference which meant so much to her at the time. "The house has lost its spirit, it's been prostituted and that's not what Philly intended, *he* fought to keep it

as it was - well, obviously the untidy bits and pieces removed - the personal touch, the lived-in feel was supposed to stay, that's why they persuaded me to let them have some of the best old pieces of furniture. Sure they paid a fair price, but I'd rather have kept them if I'd known they were to be used to show off the twee and trendy."

"You never wanted to take me there to show me?"

"Because I wouldn't have been showing you the truth. Your image of my childhood would have been totally warped. You could never imagine what it was really like, not with all those terribly wrong and out of context smart blinds and things, and fancy floor coverings hiding the beautiful wood, and those stupid fake Italian statues in the 'courtyard' at the back, no, they called it the 'patio'. For God's sake, it was the backyard of a farmhouse, even if it was a beautiful, big old farmhouse. And they took up the really old, original cobbled paving because it wasn't 'commercially practical'. Philly told me, later, that's when he walked out on them, the lucrative job and the firm where he'd been promised a senior partnership. The whole idea was to make the place a sort of museum, a true reflection of an ordinary old farmhouse, one where real people lived, where one made do and patched and things were used for their original useful purpose, or for practical make-do's such as the sad-irons as door-stops. Not a display case for crystal and fabrics at hundreds a metre, and modern glass and stainless steel furniture, and couture clothing and jewellery that nobody living there could have afforded, or even used or worn if they could. Ghrrr!" she growls her anger and impatience.

"So, where were we?" Yannis persists, accustomed to her detours leading nowhere near his goal. "And next time you preach to me about going off at a tangent remember the pot, OK?"

"What pot?"

"Oh Ma, it's not like you to be so slow, the pot calling the kettle black, yes?"

"Right, that's why these 'remembery' sessions should be structured and organised, a 'once upon a time' sort of thing where we have a limited amount of time to tell a tale and stick to it, like we used to do at the Story-telling group." Jenny hopes her suggestion will help to curtail his increasing persistence, to restrict it within boundaries of time which she knows she can manipulate to avoid the confrontation she dreads.

"I'd forgotten all about that." He takes the bait beautifully "I remember now, we'd go to the kids' sessions, it was great. Whatever happened, why did we stop?"

"It petered out, the venue was sold, or something, and oh you know how it goes with these organised things, people start scrapping about who does what and who's the boss."

"Hey remember how we went through a stage when the bed-time – and the other stories too – all began 'once upon a twice...'? I think Philly started that lurk."

"Kettle," she retaliates and they both laugh. "I wonder if all families, all mothers and sons are like this?" she ponders.

"Not bloody likely, I should hope not, the world would grind to a jabbering halt."

"Nonsense, look how much we all achieve, I think we're the most creative family, both individually and as a group. I mean you and Philly ... you're both artists, and I'm ... well, I'm not so bad as a craftsman."

"It's craftsperson now if you want to be politically correct. Anyhow continue with the story." He prompts impatiently, "Once upon a time, Ma, there lived ... go on with the little lonely girl who

hated poultry, and eventually I hope we'll come to the bit about my father."

"Well, Mum changed so; already after Dad's stroke she began to diminish as if he were the battery that kept her going. She was terrified of letting me out of sight, afraid to be alone, afraid of everything, every sound, the wind, the street, noises. It's as if she feared she might not exist if she could not connect to one of us. And of course she didn't have the strength to nurse him, turn him and attend to his needs, so I had to leave school to help, and that's when she began to cling to me, cling like a bloody tampan. All I did was nurse, work and study through the correspondence college."

"But Ma, that wasn't all bad." He reminds her how she managed to finish two years' schooling in one, and had a B.A. at nineteen whilst her schoolmates were still messing around. Yannis recognises his mother's game and is becoming adept at circling round and round, a shark hunting, until the soft underbelly is inadvertently revealed for the swift attack; the one question he hopes will eviscerate the secret, send its guts tumbling out with the truth.

"Sure," Jen grumbles, not wanting to revisit those years, "and became a recluse who had never been out with boys, who didn't even know what it was to be a normal teenager growing up with other kids. But even before that, when they decided I was to go to a 'decent school' it meant isolation, no friends, no birthday parties, no playing sport or visiting with other kids after class."

"But why, you said you had a happy childhood so what's this all about now?"

"Yes, it was happy in that I had protective, devoted, communicative parents and I was the centre of their world. They taught me all the things they knew, and we did love each other, but

going to that good school meant going to one miles away. I don't suppose it would have mattered, really, where I went because there was no regular transport to and from our area."

Jen remembers, unwillingly, the ramshackle bus that twice a week smoked its way to and from outlying villages; in on Mondays and out on Fridays. The rest of the time her Dad had to fetch and carry, which played havoc with the milking and delivery schedules. It was always a rush: picking her up immediately after school in order to be back in time for the afternoon feeding and milking, no time for her to chat with the other girls after school. In the mornings they had to start the milking extra early in order to get her to school in time, which was hell in winter. And breakfast either gulped standing in the kitchen, or sandwiches eaten as they drove.

"People have no idea how isolated farmers' children can be."

"That's why you wanted me to go to a school reasonably nearby and made sure I had a means of transport – though I preferred to walk rather than pedal that damn bike – so's I could be independent: and you always insisted I ask kids around even when I didn't really want to? I remember they loved coming here because you put on such grand spreads for them, just for an ordinary afternoon's visit. And I hated it, the waste of time when I wanted to do my own things and not play gracious host and Scrabble or 'Monotony' ... whatever. They didn't come for me but for the grub, the cakes and the snacks and the green peppermint milkshakes, and they made jokes about us at school afterwards."

Like champion ping-pong players, long accustomed to each other's strokes, mother and son continue their game of question and answer, waylaying information and bouncing remarks across at each other.

"That's terrible, Yannis, you never told me about that ... why not ... oh my God, did I *inflict* things on you? I'm so sorry."

"Calm down Ma, it didn't bug me at all, gave me a chance to point out what bad mannered little shits they were and not invite them again though they would beg to come around, particularly when I said there was your special chocolate cake on the go that week. Gave me a sort of power actually, which I misused. I played all superior and was quite nasty at times, made them humiliate themselves and beg. You never knew what an unpleasant little brat I could be? Besides I knew they teased and made silly jokes because they felt inferior and were out of their depth in a home where the kid was treated like an intelligent human being. I think they were jealous too because of all the space I had to myself, I mean how many kids have their own 'den' and are allowed to mess around cooking in their own 'kitchenette', and yet they saw we aren't grand."

"Yes," she agrees, "even a clot would realise the house is simple, under-furnished, I mean they wouldn't be intimidated or think you were some rich spoilt kid."

"It was just all those books," he side-steps, not wanting to upset her by explaining just how weird his schoolmates thought he and his home were.

The visiting children called the family 'strange': there was no 'lounge' in the accepted sense, with sofas and coffee tables and ornaments to dust and clean. The living-room was just that; a place where the family spent their working and relaxing time together. In addition to walls and walls of books, bookshelves wandered off into and down a third of the centre of a room, Philly's carvings and models loomed out of dark corners and unexpected alcoves. Jen's spinning wheels with baskets of raw wool at various

stages of processing tripped up the unwary. Visitors would be confronted by great pots of boiling dye as well as all Yannis' arty junk. Strangers found the atmosphere 'odd', not to mention the rainbow festoons of variegated skeins and bags of raw wool drying out on the clotheslines next to the undies. And, of course, the 'experiments' were disconcerting, particularly the smelly ones, when Philly and Yannis fooled around with stuff to model or cast. Yannis laughs, remembering. "And boy, did they ever think I was spoilt! They were jealous, Ma, and I put up with them because of the kick it gave me, which was actually rather mean. Kids can be such little monsters."

"But *you* weren't, you were such a nice little boy, always sunshiny," she purrs, hoping he will go on and on talking about himself.

"Come off it Ma, you're too prejudiced to judge. And, by the way, where did you get that idea to make ginger chocolate icing? I've never seen it in any recipe book, but it's surely grand, those unexpected lumps of preserved ginger, and one's teeth sinking into them all crisp then soft, and the flavour, exotic and warm. It's odd, isn't it, the way in which your disadvantages shaped my advantages, which I didn't always need or want. You were determined I'd lead a 'normal' sociable childhood even if it killed me to do so, and if there is such a thing as 'normal'."

"Must I apologise? At least you've learned to mix: *enforced* solitude may develop the imagination but doesn't make for a fully rounded individual."

Yannis disagrees. He thinks his mother and Philly are delightful and more than fully rounded, despite their lonely childhood experiences. He has noticed most kids can't even talk to their mothers, leave alone have fun with them: he is convinced

nobody else's parents are as special as his. Perhaps they are 'different' but it's a nice 'difference' and he would rather be like them than the Robertsons down the road who fight all the time.

In some perverse way Yannis is enjoying himself. He feels suddenly, with his approaching majority, as if he has become not only independent and free, but *entitled* to pursue and capture the hidden truths about his father. Until now he has respected his mother's unwillingness to talk about what, obviously, had been a traumatic experience. With all the patience and determination of a fly-fisherman along a difficult stream he is relentless in his pursuit, but willing to explore and cover every seemingly empty pool. "And whew, have we wandered off the track again? So, go on, you're marooned on the small-holding amongst the cows and chickenshit. I know you used to help with the milking on occasion, how did that happen?"

Jen is not going to let the story shrivel for lack of dramatic atmosphere: in her best teller-of-tales manner she plays her voice like a harp. "When the help were drunk or didn't rock up on a freezing mid-winter morning, and there was absolutely nobody to give a hand with fetching the beastly cows in and getting the milking done, Dad would stand at my door and cough, apologetically, until I'd wake up and realise he needed me to get up and give a hand. Invariably it was around three thirty in the pre-dawn morning and roaring with wind and rain." She makes wailing wind sounds, "Wheeee, wheeee, and splashing down our collars the cold, freezing drops."

"Didn't you resent it, I mean that's child labour?"

"No, not really." She tries to recollect how she felt about those swirling Cape winter mornings, the sky swathed in clouds, mist creeping along the ground and the stable buildings, moulding them

into wavering soft outlines. Like many other half repressed memories she can see the picture but her feelings are a blank.. “No, I just absorbed it all. I think I was a puddingy sort of child.”

“Pudding, what d’you mean *pudding*?”

“Stodgy. I can’t even remember feeling about things, not ’till I got a lot older ... I sort of took it all for granted, that *that’s* the way it was ... never questioned it or even thought about it, just accepted. Suety, you know? Pudding.”

“Uh-uh,” Yannis counters shaking his head until he flaps dark curls onto his forehead, “I find that very hard to believe, after all you are so ... so, I mean you respond, you vibrate to everything, except when you are ‘doing the right thing by me’.” He says this pulling a sour face and sounding preachy. “You are incredibly sensitive to my needs and my feelings. How could this develop from a stolid child?”

“Well I think I just must have been. Perhaps too much fresh air and clean living?” They laugh, mime deep breathing and somewhat skewed haloes.

“Except for the chickenshit,” he adds.

“Yes, perhaps *those* fumes caused an emotional and mental anaesthesia?” Becoming serious she returns to her childhood as he watches her retrieving memories. There is a comfortable silence for a while.

“But you know, Yannis, looking back, it was fun in a odd sort of way, and I did feel so important, so necessary, a part of the whole set up. It wasn’t as if I was the child on the side so to speak; no, I was part of the whole solid ... *thing*, you know.”

“But I still can’t understand why you were so isolated?”

“Mom just couldn’t learn to drive and though I could when I was fourteen, obviously I was not allowed to, you couldn’t get a

licence at that age.” Jen explains that right from the beginning it was impossible to invite kids from school to come over and play, and neither could she go to their houses because of the transport problem. There was never a chance to make close friends; besides which she was ‘different’. One can always pick out children who are being brought up by their grandparents or people old enough to be so: their clothes are ‘odd’. The girls wear dresses which are either too long or too short, the opposite of what is in fashion, and they behave differently. All the parents gush about ‘good manners’, but the other children – and they are the ones who matter – think they’re odd.

“So you’re telling me you never knew any kids your own age, ever?”

“No, nonsense, of course I *knew* other kids, well, actually not until I started going to school, really. And, sometimes when I was little, their friends visited bringing grandchildren along, and I vaguely remember when I was very little, a birthday party or two. Can’t remember if I went to them or if they were mine.”

“No memories of blowing your candles out and wishing?”

“No, I don’t think so, I seem to remember a darkish room and somebody coming in with a cake, or something that was alight, but it could have been Dad coming in with the Christmas pudding aflame, he was always in charge of what Mum called ‘the pyrotechnics’; making and lighting fires, putting them out.”

Jen is enjoying herself recreating her happy childhood, keeping Yannis off the subject of his father. She tells how her ‘Da’ was the adventurous one, when it came to food, and paints a picture of an occasion when he thought to jazz up the pancakes by pouring liqueur over them and setting them alight. “I remember now,” she says, retrieving images, “there was this bottle which had

been in the sideboard for ages.” Her Dad had said it was an old gift, some unfamiliar liqueur, one of those unopened bottles that lurk musty and untroubled for years. When it was rediscovered nobody knew what to do with it until he decided to make Crêpes Suzettes. Explaining to his curious daughter that it was a very fancy French way of doing pancakes, he mixed and poured and ignited, but something went wrong. She laughs, telling her son, “Mum said he nearly burned the house down, and it did taste very odd. He was the only one who ate any, pretending to be sophisticated, but I saw the left-overs in the pig swill.”

“He sounds like a great guy, your Dad ... and when he died, what happened then?” Yannis is humouring her, trying to draw her out and trap her into telling the hidden things he knows are shadowed in the past.

“Mum became all neurotic after Dad’s death, I mean even more than she’d become during the years he lay there paralysed, only grunting or speaking with his eyes, and getting thinner and thinner, wasting away, no matter how we exercised and massaged his legs and arms.”

“Must have been really tough on you.” It was hard for Yannis to imagine something so different from his own cosseted childhood.

Jenny was only fourteen when she had to leave school. They allowed her to finish the year studying at home and sent two of the teachers to invigilate when she wrote the exams. Twice she had to stop writing, unhitch her concentration, and help with the old man. She was pretty chuffed with herself when the results came out so well.

It had been difficult for the young girl, loved and over-sheltered, when, overnight, she had to become the adult in the family. She was not prepared for it. Rory ÓDowd had always been

protective and loving, they could turn to him for everything. When he lay there incapable, the laughter gradually seeping out of his eyes, it was as if he were undergoing some change into a totally different being, a complete stranger. Then the same thing happened to her Mum, only worse for she became the enemy. "I still feel guilty," Jen confesses, finding it hard to put into words, "... the relief when she died, and I was free, at last, to get out and do things, and start living my own life."

It had taken a long time to loosen the first fierce bite of this tightly clenching guilt, sucking the juice out of her new life, even though she realised it had been untenable toward the end and anybody would have been entitled to feel relief. The senile old woman had refused to let Jen out of her sight. She wailed when somebody strange was brought in to sit with her, and could not, or would not understand that her daughter had to attend to business - shopping, the lawyer or the bank - after the old man died. He must have known what would happen for he had made Jenny a co-executor, but it was hard for such an inexperienced girl to make big decisions. The lawyer guided her, but she did have the final say about the house, and wanted to sell it then and there. She had been too many years in that geriatric atmosphere, and realised she was becoming an old woman herself. First she had been isolated in what had become a run-down industrial area, and then trapped in a house surrounded by commercial building activity. But the decision excoriated her self-image: she had to sell yet knew it would kill her Mum to move her. It was impossible to examine her motives honestly so she pushed them aside, deciding to 'sort it out tomorrow', when the work-load lessened and the most urgent practical problems were sorted out.

"Was there nobody else to help, what about friends, or neighbours?"

"For goodness sake," Jen snaps, irritated both by residues of guilt and her son's inability to grasp the situation, "any friends not already dead were themselves in need of help, most in old age homes and as for the neighbours, well, there weren't any. I *told* you the original farm just kept shrinking as industries developed and Dad sold off pieces, and invested in other property and shares and things. Any people living in the area were really slummy types, not the sort at all with whom one could make friends or rely on, and that's not being snobbish. They weren't the nice solid peasant type, but riff-raff, drunks, druggies and disorderly drop-outs, they were so rough and unkind to one another too. And then this huge shopping complex was going up all around us. Can't you *understand*?"

The developers had bought all the other properties in the immediate area, those that Rory ÓDowd had sold years before when the land was cut up. There had been a few small factories and the little shops surrounding them; a café and a fish and chips place, grubby and unfriendly, places where their daughter was not allowed to go shopping to spend her weekly pocket money. A terrible dry-cleaner's that stank had stood over the road, its decrepit machinery always clattering unseen, making strange sucking noises in the background. As a child Jen had thought of it as menacingly mysterious as well as filthy, and imagined all sorts of ridiculous scenarios in which it featured as the villain.

The investors, a massive consortium, had been trying to buy them out for ages, but Mrs Maudie ÓDowd always refused to budge. Eventually the builders went ahead and started construction on the properties surrounding the farm house on its remaining tiny piece of ground. The ÓDowds were stuck in the middle of all that noise and

bustle, but still the old woman clung on, eventually never leaving the house; it would be traumatic for her to leave the rooms she had lived in so long. She had developed cataracts by then and needed an operation, but again refused, so it was important for her to be in a familiar place where she could move around, a mole comfortable in her darkness, even if she couldn't see clearly. Maudie knew that place like the palm of her hand, calluses and all. Eventually it was arranged that though the house was sold and the construction firm could go ahead with the building of it into the complex, or rather the complex onto it, they were allowed to remain until Jen could persuade her Mum to move. She was so sure, with the noise and all the people about, the constant banging and dust, that the frightened old woman would want to escape, but no, she dug in and it started to become a problem. Obviously they could not stay there forever.

Maudie's life had really stopped, she never spoke except when she cried if she thought Jenny was going out of the room. She couldn't remember things she had been told, couldn't discuss anything, refused to eat. It was a battle to get any nourishment into her, and then she became incontinent. Jen knows that she can never explain to her young son the claustrophobic fear and desperation she felt, locked up with a half-crazy old woman; she does not even try, dismissing the situation as briefly as possible.

"God, it was awful and I was all alone, there wasn't a soul left that they knew, nobody who could visit or help, and I didn't know then that I could have contacted social welfare or a community nursing sister, or somebody. So, when she died it was such a relief and yet I felt terribly guilty about admitting it."

"It seems like something from the Dark Ages, surely there must be people who help in such situations?"

“Yes, there are now but I’m not so sure about then. And there was so much to attend to, decisions about what to sell and what to keep. I had to decide where to stay and what to do until after my operations – to remove the scar.” She points at the barely visible hair-line on her top lip, evidence of successful plastic surgery. “Of course I inherited everything although much of the money was tied up until I was older. There was enough to live on and for further education, even a little car after I sold the old one. And do you know I got a fantastic price for it because it was supposed to be a sort of vintage car with all its original bits and pieces. It was Dad’s baby and he’d kept it in mint condition, and because we used the van for the farm it just seemed easier for us to use it all the time, if we went anywhere as a family, for shopping or to the beach.”

“But the impression I got was that you people didn’t go out that often?”

“No, it’s not easy when there is always something waiting to be fed, or watered or milked or collected and packed and delivered. And towards the end, when we were scaled down to almost nothing, Dad didn’t employ anybody to help because the only people available in the area wanted to work in the factories or on the building sites, or they were absolutely worse than useless. There was an awful lot of drunkenness and it scared Mom and me no end. These guys would come staggering past, swearing and often fighting.”

“How did you cope, like, what did you do?”

“We played ostrich, or more likely tortoise, retreating into the house and closing and barricading everything. I’m sure Mum’s escape into mindlessness was a way of avoiding facing the scariness of it all. Believe me there were times when I felt I was going that

way myself, so you see, when her death released me ..." she trails off.

"I'd never realised how bad it was, I mean the emotional as well as the physical stress and hard work. If I'd been there to help would you have hung onto it? I always fancied myself as a farmer," he jokes.

"Even if you'd been there, grown up as you are now and able to help, no. It wasn't the pleasant place of a hundred years before. The trees, the orchards were all cut down and the dam had been 'reclaimed and land-filled', it was horrid. But it could only get better after that lot and it was heady having nobody to look after or worry about except myself. Strange, at first, all that empty time, and having no one close. Not even knowing anybody I could call an acquaintance, leave alone a friend. That's why I attended those odd courses up at varsity. And then the main priority was removing the scar. I couldn't do anything when Mum was alive because it was impossible to leave her, even for a night. At least I had the good sense, *then*, to store most of the stuff, get temporary accommodation and only sign up for part-time courses, and wait until I knew what I wanted to do and how the operation would turn out."

Again Yannis picks up undercurrents and asks, "And later, was that when you did *not* have 'the good sense', when you met my father?"

"But it was all so strange at varsity after the years of solitary study," Jen continues as if she has not heard his question. "Though I already had a degree from the correspondence university, I wanted to experience what it was like to be a student at a real campus, even if only part time. I wanted to be a part of it, to attend the actual lectures and meet other young people. They all seemed so young

and impractical yet so much more sophisticated, more experienced than I was. Impossible to fit in with them.”

“And it was at that stage, wasn’t it, that you met Philly and my father?” Yannis, his patience rewarded, has come full-circle.

“Yes. And then, of course, there was Philly and his friendship and *his* problems. And out of the blue meeting ‘the fisherman’ again, and the strange romance – if you could call it that. You know, that first evening when he helped us, I thought he was some crew member from a tatty foreign fishing boat. He hardly spoke English and seemed so ... well so *foreign*, so strange.” She has manacled the memory of his fascination and battens it down, unwilling it should escape and modify the official version of the past.

“But when you met him later, in the hospital, and found out he wasn’t a fisherman and were able to communicate better ... what happened then?”

Cornered, Jen plays for time; she gives a deep sigh as she assumes a weary expression and says in a tired voice, “I think I’m going to need a cup of tea, or something ...”

“Please Ma, we seem to be – eventually – quivering on the brink, and I have been patient, just tell me the next bit and then I’ll bring you whatever you want.”

Obviously it’s not going to be easy, but she sighs and continues. “Well, finding myself married, pregnant, widowed before I caught my breath and realised what was happening ... all in three, no, five weeks – we only found out he was dead two weeks after he left ...” She stops, tries again from another angle, rattling on as if a rush of words could divert her son’s purpose. “No. So, when I was ... evicted from his flat I folded all my feelings away with the new curtains I’d just finished sewing and not yet hung. Put everything

in mothballs and got on with making a life for myself, and you, of course. Surviving. I was good at that, and then ... well, there was Philly and his miseries to cope with, and I hadn't wanted my son to grow up with the blank spaces we'd both had as children. I just built this image for you: a legend of the dream man, the perfect person one never finds, so that you could have a strong sense of a father in the background, even if he was dead. That's something Philly and I never had. When one is very young you believe this ideal person exists in the same way you believe in perfect love. And then you learn that love and life are all about compromise." She sighs, musing. "Perhaps memory is its own fiction -- and that is all we have to rely on."

Yannis appears to capitulate, hoping by gentling her to lull Jen into a false sense of security. "Perhaps you're right and we both need a cup of tea and some nourishment. Hang on, don't go away." He gets up, strides away singing opera. She bends over, her face close to the lawn, sniffing the smell of the grass and relishing the numerous oxalis which she refuses to classify as weeds because of the variety and tenacious continuous blossoming of the varied flower types. His voice trails back slightly off-key with the effort of assuming both roles of a duet: "*Parigi, o cara ... tralalaa.*" Yannis sings in a manner never intended by Verdi.

He returns with a pot of tea snuggling under an oversized tea-cosy and a large plate of door-stop sandwiches. They both tuck in.

"The advantage of being a peasant," he says with his mouth full, "is that one can really enjoy the soul of things. We don't have to tart them up and give them fancy names or shapes. Chunks of fresh bread, olive oil, goat's milk cheese and sliced onion, mmmh...," as he licks a drizzle of oil off his fingers, "ambrosia. But, talking of remembering things ... Philly says memory is all a

matter of creating different versions as moods or perspectives change. He thinks what is real at the instant it is *felt*, actually or in recollection, is the truth of *that* moment. But you seem to have just missed out whole chapters in the last bit of the story. Is there nothing you can give me that is real at *this* moment?"

She ignores his question. "Well, maybe Philly's right, after all it's what one feels now that hurts or ..."

"Is that the problem?" he pounces. "Is there something that hurts, and you can't face it? You haven't told me a darn thing about my father I don't know, just summarised it all. Why can't you tell it to me, from the beginning, like a story? Beginning from the night you met ...?"

"It didn't start then. I told you I thought he was some foreign fisherman, a roughie. It wasn't till later that we really met, got to know one another, spoke. He dazzled me, swept me off my feet, I suppose. What do you want me to tell you?"

"From the beginning, from when you walked down the stairs. And I can't believe Philly was a lush. I've heard his version, now tell me yours. Please?"

"From when we walked down? OK. We dashed down into the loos under the stairs. The ladies' was a terrible cubby hole, fusty, with no globe, toilet paper or towel." Jen knows she can never convey the claustrophobia of it, dark and tight as a contracting uterus. "I couldn't get out of there quickly enough. When I opened the door I stood in the gloom, watching him, Philly, sprawled across a narrow bench against the wall. It looked as if it had once been a form in a school gymnasium. Dozing he lay there, mouth and fly half open and ..."

"Or half closed", Yannis interrupts.

"Tangents again?"

His lips make a *moue* of apology.

"I stood there, drying my hands on my old towelling gown, wondering what to do next and was just going to step out and wake him when there were loud voices at the entrance and I crouched back, hiding in the darkness. You know the sort of artificial voice some women put on when they are playing up to an audience of men? Well I never saw them but I heard these two girls, harsh high voices, teasing and flattering the men, then suddenly one's tone dropped back to normal and she said, 'Fer feck's sake wa's the perfessor doing down here?' Then they both giggled in their real voices and the other one said, 'Think he's looking for a piece of action?' And they laughed and discussed how one of the others, called Saphire - obviously her professional name - 'half pissed', had forced herself into his room during his last binge, and offered her services free and he'd panicked and couldn't get her out of there quickly enough. Then a gruff man's voice interrupted and asked if they thought they were being paid to cackle and 'let's get on with it.'

As they climbed the stairs one girl, the giggly one, said, 'Smetter of fec, my gran worked inna orphanage, yer know tha' big convent place onna hill with all the trees an all, where the nuns are? Tha's where he war as a kid, and she says there's somping a matter wit' him, and later when she's working a' the hospital an' she has ter take the folders fer filing she sees his and looks in an' seems his prick's not quite right.' The giggling voice trailed off as she tripped, clumping loudly enough to wake Philly. At the time I still thought of him as Mr Grier, or Filigree, his nickname amongst the students, but was filled with such a surge of feeling as if I'd found a lost relative. Nothing else mattered except we both came from the same place."

Yannis had not expected this information about Philly and is almost, but not quite, at a loss for a response. "He didn't know about that, not until later when you swapped life stories, so from the beginning he liked you for yourself, that's something, particularly as you hadn't had your mouth fixed yet, and you've shown me the photos, with that scar pulling all skew. I mean, that shows he's a decent person and looks for what's real, not just externals."

"My son, the philosopher, or is it the psychologist?" She tousles his hair. Jen's unacknowledged sensuality has always manifested itself in the tactile actions of a hands-on mother and the celebrations she achieves with meals. Unable to verbalise her physicality, the need to touch and be touched, she continues her interpretation of motivations.

"It was a lot more than that. We were both so *needing*, we seemed to prop one another up, though at that stage he seemed hell bent on disappearing up the ass of some fantasy. Well, what happened next was weird. As he started up he seemed to look straight through me; I'd stepped forward. A strange look came over his face, beatific I think would be the right word. He seemed to glow, it was all so spooky; and he said, 'Mummy? Mummy?' Then he stretched out his hand and grabbed at my gown and said, 'Teddy, oh Teddy', in the most contented voice. I didn't know what to make of it and jerked back so that he overbalanced and landed on the bench, with his hand sliding along the rough surface and collecting a huge splinter. He slumped there, wide awake now, sucking at his hand and trying to pull it out, the splinter I mean. He looked like a small child who had been hurt. I sat down next to him and said, 'Here, let me see if I can get it out'. He looked at me, shook his head and said 'But you are real?' The whole thing was

disconcerting. Then he pulled himself together and apologised, explaining he'd thought, for a moment I was a fantasy come true."

Jenny explains how, as a child, Philly had a picture of a woman with blonde plaits piled on her head and black lace draped like a flowing mantilla. He did not remember where he found the picture; it was probably cut out from some girly magazine one of his relief sitters brought in on the nanny's night off. He'd thought she was very beautiful and convinced himself it was his real mother, fantasising that she had lost him and wanted to find him. He never realised that the lace was about all she had on and when the adults found the picture - which he would kiss goodnight when his light was switched off - found it with the kid's messy lip marks all over, innocently plonked anywhere in the dark, they went berserk. They said he was some sort of pervert, and the old bag who looked after him swore he was a freak and there was a hell of a row. Of course the picture was taken away. He was only a kid and had no idea what all the fuss was about, it took him years to work it out. So, when he opened his eyes, that drunken night, and saw Jenny's hair all piled up in a big knot, the black lace exposed, draped across her leg when she dried her hands, pulling the gown aside, he thought, for a moment, that the dream had come true. The woman with the crown of hair and black lace actually existed. Jenny, accustomed to caring for people, was moved. She realised how huge was his need, to last like that, into adulthood.

"And what was the 'Teddy' all about and how come you were sporting black lace nighties?" Yannis, almost against his will, is being drawn into the story, he is intrigued by the previously unrevealed small details "I thought your Mum ÓDowd, was so practical and everything was sensible and plain?"

"Yes, well, Teddy was a painful memory too. He'd had this small soft teddy, apparently made from the same sort of towelling. It must have been a baby's toy, pink and blue, quite unusual in that the woof and the warp were, like my gown, constructed in such a way that sometimes the material showed blue, sometimes pink, depends on the angle and the light. And one day they decided he was a big boy and too old for a baby's teddy bear and it disappeared. It was like his security blanket. You know how drear his childhood was. As for the black lace, well, after years of Mum's solid home-mades and practical old fashioned clothes I spoilt myself a bit. Funny, I still wasn't able to splurge on ready-mades - old habits die hard I suppose - but I rationalised what I 'saved' could be spent on gorgeous material. Probably cost a lot more, but for the first time I really experienced the satisfaction and joy of making things, beautiful things, for myself. It also filled in the empty time. The feel of them, those wonderful luscious fabrics ..." The memory remains richly satisfying.

"But what has all this got to do with my father, the 'fisherman'?"

Jen, realises her son's persistence is that of a hunter following a trail and wonders what small rewards will throw him off the scent. She determines to spin the story out until, at the very end, she will escape leaving him to worry an empty skin of diversionary description. She reminds him accusingly, trying to shift the pressure, "You said to tell you all, *everything* from the moment of descending the stairs. He was pathetic, Philly, sitting bundled there, his hand bleeding. I said I had tweezers and a needle upstairs and I'd attend to the splinter, so we went up to my room and I asked him straight out, 'Why?' 'Why what?' he said. And I think that's where we got off on the right foot, because I replied 'You

know damn well what, and it doesn't make any sense, a man like you, brilliant, erudite, eloquent, good looking' – he had the ability to scintillate when he wanted to. Then he told me he came there to escape, into his fantasy, to get away from reality; or closer to it, for as he got older he realised the woman in his picture could well have been what he called 'somebody who'd slipped'. So, if he ever found his real mother it might be in such a place. Warped thinking really. And then he became all concerned about me, said he felt responsible, as he darn well should have, silly clot telling us to go and stay in a place like that. 'I'll go to my room,' he said, 'and let you get dressed and packed and then I'll take you home.' Well, by that stage I broke down."

"I don't have a home', I said, and started crying again. So *that* required another long explanation about selling the house and finding some temporary place near the hospital and university, where I could stay until things were sorted out, like removing the scar, and I knew what I wanted to do."

Jenny described how hard it was to find anything decent in the vicinity, she had trudged for miles until she eventually found a room. It was gloomy and badly furnished, but big, and opened onto a large, screened-in veranda where she could do 'light cooking', which was important. She did not want to eat boarding house food or be tied to somebody else's timetable, besides she loved cooking. "After all those years of bland invalid food and not being able to experiment I just wanted to be *free, free, free*."

"Then that morning the dragon landlady came storming into my room, without knocking, screaming that did I think her place was a brothel and she'd told me I couldn't have men in my room and she'd heard me the night before. Which was nonsense as I never knew a soul to ask to visit me, not even girls, and I was

celebrating my twentieth birthday all alone, feeling very sorry for myself and miserable. I'd had a Shakespeare tape on - just bought it that afternoon as a present to myself - with women's voices as well as men's declaiming in what, to any sane person, were anything but conversational tones. I switched it on, again, to prove it to her. Then she started screaming about the cooking smells - it was bacon - and the upshot was we had a massive barney and she told me to get out, and I got on my high horse and said I would do so immediately and she knew what she could do with her nasty temper and her grubby room."

"My Ma the brawler? I can't imagine you having a shouting match with a landlady for goodness sake!"

"Well I did."

She took everything - except an overnight bag and a box which was too large for the taxi - to the storeroom where her other possessions were, with the furniture from the house. Later she went to fetch the box in her Dad's old 'vintage' car which she was taking to the chap who had bought it. It was a huge petrol guzzler, too big for her to drive comfortably around town. Back at the digs she found *five* young guys, first year students, had been put into her room. It was obvious the fight was a ruse to get her out and make more money on the place. Having nowhere to stay and not wanting to make another mistake, Jenny thought it was a brilliant idea to take the lecturer's advice, do some social research and from a temporary place look around for something suitable.

"So there we were," she concludes, "me homeless and he 'motherless'. 'In any case, you are in no condition to drive,' I told him. I didn't know, at the time, he didn't drive."

“But you both told me he had this marvellous old Rolls?” At times Yannis finds it difficult to reconcile the apparent contradictions built into the family mythology.

“Yes, his family’s car, but they had never bothered – not like Dad who taught me to drive on the plot and all the quiet country roads when I had to sit on two cushions to see over the steering wheel and stretch to reach the pedals, even though the seat was as far forward as it would go – they never taught him anything. Well, it wasn’t ‘they’ any more, for his adoptive father had left them years before and his Auntie Trudie - she never let him call her Mom - neglected him right from the beginning, until she died and left him everything by default.”

“Ma, get to the bits about my father. We can do Philly’s and your history later, when we’re all together. I love the way you two fill in pieces for one another, like a sort of comedy act.”

“OK.” But again she veers away, teasing out the story she is telling. “So he never said he didn’t have a car there, but suggested we go for coffee and sober up and sort out my problem. I reminded him that sobering up was not a ‘we’ thing. And we started laughing. Then he said he knew this little place, a sort of dive really, around the corner, ‘two blocks down and to the left.’ It was where he used to go the mornings after his escape into drunken fantasy. He said their food was almost as divine as their coffee. We discovered we were hungry. It was strange, some sort of conspiratorial mood overcame us and ...”

“How do you mean, conspiratorial?”

“Well, it was as if we were both involved in this secret, a conspiracy, and we had to make plans.”

“You were friends right from the start. Why did you never get married? You are so in tune.”

"Oh Yannis, has Philly never spoken to you about his secret, his 'problem'? I thought perhaps ... you being so close ..."

"No. He's not *gay*, is he? It just doesn't make sense the way you two live, so close yet so physically distant. I mean, he never even touches you, it's as if you two deliberately avoid the sort of normal contact even just ordinary friends have. I've often wondered. I mean he never shows any sign that he might be, unless he is a non-practising one. He always avoids the issue if I raise it."

"As we will now. It's not *my* secret to divulge."

Yannis is sure this implies that there is, indeed, a secret of her own she is hiding. He tries the indirect approach. "So, what's this about a problem?"

Glad to be let off the hook, even if only temporarily, Jen expands, "I'm not quite sure *what* the problem is, I know there is a problem, a medical one needing surgery, I think. He sort of briefly skirted it, in the beginning, but used words I did not understand, and then when I wanted to look them up - my dictionary was packed away at the time - I'd forgotten them. It's not the sort of thing you can come back to with, 'Hey, what were those big words you used ...?' Besides I know he was embarrassed, and so was I for that matter, not so much because I had a clue, even after the remark that girl at White Gables made, but because he was so obviously ill at ease about it, whatever it was ... or is. And then of course, later ... well ... it seemed too late, we'd sort of slipped into the pattern of this friendship ... there was a bond. It was important, I think, that we just accepted each other, warts, scars, complexes and all."

Yannis wonders if he should joke about their family being like Bluebeard's, with all the hidden corpses of forbidden secrets dangling in cupboards, but decides not to provide his mother with a

theme from which to spin a new life-line story down which she can escape. Unremitting gentle pressure, he decides, will eventually net results. "I know he is very private, even after all this time, I mean guys sort of pee together, but never Philly. If we go to the loo when we're out he always goes into the stall and closes the door, it's sort of strange. I wondered if he is so over modest because he has something to hide, a complex about size or something wrong with him? And there is this thing about him always having all those underpants he washes all the time. I reckon he has some sort of phobia about cleanliness?"

"Where were we?" she pointedly changes the subject.

"You were planning on going to a dive."

"Yes. And then he said he had this long-unused terrible flat, with a separate entrance, where they had kept him as a kid and I could use that until I'd sorted myself out. He said I could have it for free, but I couldn't accept that, it had to be a proper business arrangement. Anyway I said I'd be happy to use it for the night at least, and we could see in the morning, if he was sure it was separate, and he said yes, there was a door between the flat and the house but also a huge iron gate and they could both be locked. In fact he said they'd been locked since his Aunt Trudie died and he moved into the house and later remodelled it, but had left the flat untouched. And all he wanted was for me to make him a home-cooked meal, and was I any good with pancakes, and if we didn't go to George's place, the dive, and eat right now we'd probably both die of starvation and solve all our problems."

"You and Philly always managed to make a joke about things, no matter how terrible they were. I remember the time the geyser sprang a leak, and hey, you remember when that clot drove into the beautiful cast-iron fence Philly had so painstakingly rescued,

renovated and finished putting up the day before? We all ended up having a 'disaster party' so that we could start all over again. Crazy, hey?"

"Sure. And do you know what made it all so special? You won't believe it, well, not about him, for me it was obvious, but neither of us had ever been on a 'date' before. I know this wasn't really a date, but neither of us had ever been out with anybody before. This was the first time he was taking a woman anywhere, and we were going to have a midnight meal. Of course nobody had ever asked me anywhere. So it was a sort of great occasion and we joked about it. 'First date', for both of us. There was something so warm, yet childlike about him. It's as if he were playing games."

"I can imagine it," Yannis smiles.

"Right, so we go down half a block, then he grabs my arm and dashes me over the street, to the right, and I begin to wonder, and panic a bit because he had said down two and to the left. 'Hey, what's this', I said. 'Something really special I want to show you' he replied. Then he took me to a grotty little shop front, the windows so dirty one could hardly peer in, and asks me to look in and tell him what I see. It took some time but eventually I made out this quite beautiful piece of wood standing upright. It was strangely carved, parts in such detail others sort of unfinished. It looked like a great big wax statue that had started to melt. Quite out of place, and disturbingly somebody had shoved sort of glowing red lights in the eye sockets and at the feet – one was perfectly carved, the other still emerging from the wood, clumpy like - was a totally inappropriate collection of mechanical toys all whirring around. I mean they just did not belong there. There was a carousel, one could see the thing revolving. Then he asked me if I'd noticed 'the artist' and pointed out what I'd thought was just a dark bundle. It

was an old man, with a dirty beard, sitting with a dim light shining on his hands. He had a watchmaker's glass in his one eye and Philly said this was Seppe – Giuseppe – and he was a mechanical genius and made all these totally accurately detailed contraptions which worked perfectly. 'And the statue, the carving?' I asked. 'Oh,' he said, off-hand like, 'that's mine. He made me some exquisitely functioning escalators and lifts for an architectural model I built and wanted nothing else but the carving. The ghoulish eyes were his addition and it kills me every time I see them, mocking, there in the dark.' ”

“It must have been odd, that's a fairly scruffy part of Cape Town and surely would have been worse then, before the big clean up, so close to the docks and all? Wasn't it scary?”

“Yes, it was, but also it was all part of ... I mean, it fitted so perfectly into this fantasy world that was sort of exploding, developing, all round me. But that wasn't all. Just when I thought we were going to cross over to the left, because we'd come to the end of the two blocks, he shot over the road, still on the wrong side and when I started flapping again, he said, 'Wait, I have something else to show you'. And in another little strange shop - but this one was clean - right up against the window, as if the glass were the front wall, was a miniature house. Not a doll's house, a real house all in proportion, filled with exactly in proportion furniture – as he explained – and you will never believe what was living in it. Two bloody mice! They ran about over the furniture and had pellets put down for them on the little dining-room table. The old guy, Bruno, that ran this place wasn't there, but he too was some expert: a famous miniature maker who did things for people all over the world. These two old men were, apparently, the only people Philly really knew, with whom he was friendly.”

"And my father, where does he come in?" Yannis believes if he gnaws steadily, a persistent rodent at the obstinate wainscoting, he will discover a reward of information.

"Well, eventually we got to this place, small, dimly lit, a sort of bar or serving counter on one side and a few tables in the long leg of an L-shaped space facing the window and the road. They were all occupied so we sat at a single, wobbly table in the other shorter section. As we walked in the guy behind the counter frowned and said, 'You early. What you bring one those girls here? I not want.' And Philly went into a long explanation that I was a student of his and there'd been some misunderstanding and now we needed food and coffee. And the food *was* divine, very Mediterranean, but half-way through Philly got all green, started sweating, jumped up and ran to a door behind the counter. I heard him throwing up and got up to go to him, to see if I could help. It was then it happened.

"There was this sort of harpoon thing on the wall, for hats or something, I suppose, but as I got up quickly my hair got hooked in it, a great big knot of it I had on the top. There was no way I could get it loose. The guy behind the bar, George, barked out a name and from behind the counter, like a slow-motion film of a plant growing, this person appeared. Later I found that he was sitting studying, cross-legged, helping out when needed. I thought they were sort of distant relations.

"Anyhow, he came across to help, but I was thoroughly hooked, so he stepped up close, leant my face against his chest because it was so dim he's more or less working by touch. I remember clearly he smelt of cloves and it swept me back to when Dad would comfort me as a child when I hurt myself or Mum was too strict. He also put a handful of cloves in his wardrobe: keeps the moths and things away without the stink of chemicals and

naphthalene. Like Dad, he seemed so strong and sure in his touch. Then suddenly he put one arm around me and picked me up as if I weighed nothing at all, so that he could untangle me more easily.

“After the years of being in charge, being the strong one with nobody to turn to or comfort me, it was wonderful, being held against this forceful male body, almost like a caress. It had been so long since somebody *held* me, to help or console; the old people clung, wanting or wailing like children. There was such a feeling, such a sensation of power and assured confidence. And all the time he said nothing or very little and that in a strong accent. ‘Pleez moef your head to de left.’ And I was so close, I felt the rumble of it in his chest; there were dark hairs at the open neck of his shirt and my cheek rested against them. It was an inexpressibly intimate feeling. For a while I escaped into the sort of fantasy that Philly created, but of course I realised, or thought I did, that this person was ... well, OK I admit, I was a horrible snob and I lumped him with the other half-shaven sort of working class, or navy types. Yes, I was young, stupid, inexperienced and I suppose intolerant or just scared of the unfamiliar. Any case when we eventually got to Philly he was sort of passed out cold, over the basin. Apparently he’d normally sleep off the binge before coming here and perhaps the food, the night air, I don’t know, were all too much on a bellyful of booze, but he was totally incapable.”

“And that was the first time you saw him, my father, Yannis Nicolopoulropolis? How come if he made such an impression you could just forget him so that you didn’t recognise him when you saw him again six months later? What about his memorable eyes?”

“It was so dark and I hardly had a chance to look into his eyes with my face against his chest, that came later; and then, so much else happened that night. Philly fainting, or passing out, and

having to get him home. We couldn't raise a taxi and eventually George told Yan - your father - to take us. Philly could barely give us the address, leave alone direct us sensibly and when we got there he handed over this key, a small latchkey. It was dark as sin and we were faced by a whacking great door, something like a museum, solid, carved. Naturally the keyhole was a huge thing needing a great lump of metal. Philly was no use, he seemed to be in a sort of dream state. Eventually I found an ordinary door set well to the side within the parent door and we got in. You can't imagine... "

"Yes, of course I can. Don't you remember? After the place was sold and became an exhibition centre and sort of museum of architecture, you took me there several times. I was still a small kid and I know exactly how that ice carving of a hanging staircase, all glassy and glittery, with no visible means of support, strikes one. How did my father react to it?"

"After the initial shock I think all he wanted was to dump us and get the hell out of this crazy situation. He was very good, though. Philly sort of faded completely as we started up the stairs and your father threw him over his shoulder and took him up. 'Which the room?' he demanded of me and could not, or would not understand I was as strange there as he was. I could imagine if the roles were reversed - though I can't see Philly carrying anybody up the stairs - he would have made a game of searching through the rooms and guessing which was the right one. It wasn't difficult though. Half of them were locked and the only other bedroom open was so obviously unused and female in an old-fashioned and over-fussy way. It looked tarty."

Jen thought Philly's room was strangely ascetic, after all the display downstairs. She was overwhelmed. The Good Samaritan tossed Philly on the bed, mumbled something, started down the

stairs and disappeared out of their lives before she could even thank him properly. It took a while to get Philly's shoes and jacket off, she didn't try to undress him, only to make him as comfortable as possible, cover him up, roll him on his side so he would not choke if he got sick again; the sort of nursing tasks one learns to do when you look after a semi-paralysed person came automatically to her. Then she explored, looking for a place to sleep. It was easy to find the connecting door to the flat, and the key which hung on a hook by the door, but the iron gate was locked and there was no way to open it, so she decided to sleep on a sofa downstairs. Somehow she didn't want to use the other bedroom and felt diffident about sleeping on the same floor as a strange man in a very peculiar house.

Jen wants to travel further into her adventure, thinking, happily, that she has given her son the descriptive sop he wanted... "I found ..."

"No", more emphatic than he intends, Yannis' voice zig-zags between adolescence and young-manhood, "no, no, no!" Then seeing her start in surprise, gentler as he leans over clasping her shoulder to reassure, to confirm their close bond. "You are going off on tangents, avoiding the issue. What are you trying to hide? What is the big secret? Why does Philly always come between me and my father?" As she starts to protest he adds quickly, "I mean not really, but when you start telling me of my father you end up talking about Philly. Always."

"It isn't like that, how can you understand if you don't know the way things were, what happened ... how it all worked up to a point. Besides, Philly *has* always been part of it. If it hadn't been for him ... you just don't understand."

"Well, tell me. And how could you just let him walk out, my father? What if you had never seen him again, I wouldn't even be here ... why did you let him go like that and what happened when you did meet him again and how and why? I know it was at the hospital but you never told me how it all came about."

"He wasn't your father at the time. I didn't even know the man. Besides one can't stop somebody walking out if they want to." After a pause "He was good at that."

"At what?"

"Walking."

"He walked out on you?"

"George said he was killed, in an accident, going from the airport. We never found out what *really* happened."

"You promised, and what's George got to do with it? All these years I've asked and asked, and you *said* when I was twenty-one, old enough to understand, you *promised* to explain, to give me *all* the details, to tell me everything about my father. Well, that's only a few weeks away and we'll have house guests then, when Gaia comes to visit, so don't you think ...?" Yannis wants his answers *now*, before he tells them of his intention to go overseas with Gaia when she returns. His mother will probably be upset by this decision not to continue with post-graduate study, and god knows how she will take the news that he intends to travel like a gypsy through Europe with an older woman, with whom, he thinks, he may fall in love.

"Yes of course..." she trails off, undecided what attitude to adopt, or where this is taking them. Jen is not quite sure how she feels about the friendship. Initially the girl had impressed her, but she is worried about the long correspondence that Yannis has kept up, over the years, since they met as teenagers in hospital. He spends hours recording conversations, cutting and splicing small

reel to reel tapes so that Gaia's remarks and his replies flow, almost like a play. As if the tapes were not enough they exchange bulky letters. Jen wonders who reads them to her, and how she manages to type so well. Algaia is blind.

What initially attracted Jen was the girl's unfailing cheerfulness and her positive attitude. It had, according to Yannis' glowing accounts, enabled her to overcome her handicap and achieve remarkable results studying languages. But, like most mothers, Jen wants better for her son than a blind orphan as best friend.

She resents the dark whirlwind of disaster that swirled the twins into Cape Town for adequate medical attention. Feeling there has been enough drama in their own lives, now that they have achieved a calm anchorage for themselves, she begrudges the presence of any thing or person which may disturb the placid tenor of their uneventful lives.

Gaia and her twin brother, Gerard, had been caught in an ambush with their parents, during a rebel attack in Liberia. One of the boy's hands was chopped off, the girl was blinded, the parents disappeared. They were never seen again. After a period of treatment in the hospital, where Yannis landed up after his accident, the children were sent to live with a distant relative in England.

Although Yannis has kept them up-to-date with Gaia's progress Jen grasps at the opportunity to make small-talk and delay further confrontation. "Yes, your pen-pal, well not 'pen' exactly, but you've managed to keep in touch all these years. What on earth do you find to talk and write about, I mean, you haven't seen one another for ages, surely ...?"

Yannis says nothing and Jen tries again. "They were twins, weren't they?" she asks.

"Yes," he replies, thinking he might as well get it over with, do the spadework for what he intends to zap at them later. "But her brother, Gerard, has really come to grief. He never wanted to go to England when they were sent over to those relatives there. I mean there was absolutely nobody else, no other family. And while Gaia was studying he just sort of became more and more negative. OK he'd lost a hand and that's terrible, when you're still a kid, but I don't think it's as bad as being totally blind. You know she's undergone so many plastic reconstructive ops. and they're jolly painful, and yet she's continued getting one qualification after the other. She's apparently quite in demand as a translator at conferences and that sort of thing."

"How many languages does she speak now? I remember you telling us a while ago that she was going on to Greek and Russian next year." It's Jen's turn to go off at a tangent.

"Yes Ma, well, her home languages are English and French, then she mastered Spanish and Portuguese and Italian, oh yes, and German. The Greek and Russian is what *this* is all about."

Yannis continues, preparing the ground. He wants his family to feel as if Gaia is an old acquaintance of theirs, so that her name and activities slip naturally into their thoughts and through their words, like a familiar song one finds oneself humming. He fills in background explaining that Gerard resents his sister's success. It seems pointless for her to remain in London to be near him, so she has decided to pay a last visit to the old missionary who rescued them and brought them to safety. They have kept in touch until recently, when Gaia got a letter from the retirement home, saying that if she wanted to see the old woman, who is getting increasingly

frail, she had better come over soon. The home is in a sprawling Victorian house, up in Gardens, and Gaia hopes to get some information about what happened to her parents. At the time, when they were in Cape Town—she and her brother - they had never asked. Yannis wonders if they were too afraid to hear the truth.

“One doesn’t ask when you are young,” Jen explains, “it’s only later that you want to, often when it’s too late.” She sighs, “As for George? He was a monster.” She shivers. “It’s getting cold.”

“Yes, it’s going to rain.” He picks up the tray “So much for our revelatory tea party. Why can’t you just tell me ...?”

The rain sweeps down.

## CHAPTER 3 GLASS HOUSE

The strange foreign man rushed out leaving the door open. Jenny called out after him, into the darkness, "Thank you, thank you," but he was gone. She shut the door turning into the silence of the unfamiliar house. The entrance hall was vast and was dominated by the fantastic crystal staircase. She wondered if Mr Grier had a thing about staircases? The one at White Gables, the one in the miniature house in the shop, the half-finished carving above the mechanical toys, spread-eagled against the outline of a ladder – not a cross – as if it were saying something about climbing. And here, descending from the high ceiling of the upper floor, two similar but much smaller structures than the stairway, served as chandeliers. The light seemed to move and wind up the circling curves so that the entire space glittered and gleamed as an illuminated cave. She thought the effect was beautiful, but scary. Somehow it wasn't right in a suburban home; it made her uncomfortable, like being locked up after hours in a deserted opera house.

The whole effect set her wondering why the man had to escape into fantasy in a run-down hotel when this place was itself some sort of crazy fairyland. The stair treads appeared to be of frosted glass, with – at random intervals – strange soft lights shining through less opaque ones. Icicles of glowing glass rose up and down, stalactites and stalagmites, she never remembered which hang and which rise, and thought "Oh yes, the mites might reach the ceiling, or is it the other way around?" She couldn't make out how it all hung there and found it disturbing, but was vaguely comforted by seeing, against the left wall, faint traces on wood panelling of the path of the original staircase, not suspended in

space in the middle of the room, but mounting sensibly, securely wedged against the solidness of structure.

There were glass cases along the walls, three on each side, apparently also suspended in air – she bent down to see how they were secured and found they stood on columns of something transparent. In the cases were miniatures, models of buildings surrounded by small artificial gardens. They were very exotic, some looked as if they were designs for carvings, except that they were all obviously intended to be functional. The place was like a museum.

On the right side the wall was also of glass and it was strange to see glass shelves with ornaments jutting into the space beyond. From this side, the wrong side, they seemed back-to-front. Entering the room she found the transparent wall was only see-through from the other direction and found it uncanny, for it gave no privacy, anybody could look in from the hall and people in here would not realise they were being watched. There was nothing to sleep on, even the chairs and a long curving sofa were made from the strange glass-like material. The cushions were firm and thin, cold ivory-white plastic material, precisely square and unyielding. No comfort here. It gave her the creeps, “It’s like a film set, not a room where real people live,” she thought. The outside walls were a combination of opaque glass bricks spitting small sparks of reflected light and huge clear panes through which she could see into a neglected garden. The living-room, if that is what it was, seemed frigid and hard and looked like a giant installation or exhibition-piece. She thought of Alice and adventures beyond the Looking-Glass. Fantasy.

The effect of the strange evening, the silence, the unconscious, sleeping man upstairs and the surreal quality of her surroundings catapulted together; she shivered and retreated into

the comforting habit of a solitary child, talking to herself. This had become an art after Dad's stroke when she was torn by his silent frustration. Their close bond enabled her to half-guess his wishes or responses which she would express in an imitation of his voice, and mostly his eyes smiled back. Standing there now, afraid and unsure, she could almost hear him. "Thar's nothin' so bad we can't make some type of a plan for copin' with it. There now me cailin, ye'll come through smilin' at the end." Reassured she took stock but came to the conclusion that if the last several hours were all about real life and being grown-up she was not that keenly anticipative about it at all.

Trying to look on the positive side she consoled herself that it had been an evening for adventure and for firsts. "Who would have thought, in the one night, I'd have two men paying me attention, and me with the scar an' all?" she muttered. Grumpily her alter ego admitted it was just by chance, which started off one of her interminable auto-arguments. "That may be so, but one took me to dinner, the other held me in his arm, so close his beard grazed my face and I could get the smell of him, and I've never so much as had my hand held by any man before but Dad and old Uncle Doc Harry, and that's a different matter entirely. I think he liked to hold me close, the feel of it. It was grand."

"Don't be daft. It would be better finding a place to sleep than thinking of this malarkey." She recognised Mum's voice in her sensible self and went off exploring. To the left of the huge entrance hall which ran the entire length of the house, dividing it in half, there was a kitchen and a large pantry with a passage leading to what must be the flat of which he spoke. She opened the door but could not unlock the gate, and even if that were wide open and inviting it was not an invitation she would have accepted unless she

planned to do a Miss Havisham. "The place is that dusty and draped with cobwebs; must have been neglected for years." Her voice echoed in the passage and to maintain the reassurance of its familiarity she began mumbling, "Stupid man, damn and blast, come out tops, damn, damn, damn, can't last forever this nightmare night, damn damn damn."

Returning to the entrance she found the comfort of a solid wooden door inviting discovery. It was diagonally opposite the glass one and led into rooms whose substantial reassurance contrasted with the frigid beauty of translucent fragility. A great inglenook fireplace spreading along the garden-side wall reminded her of Dad telling her that *aingeal* is the Gaelic word for fire and light. This room was friendly, alive and lived in: grained wood panelling and smiling floors, a big dark crimson leather sofa, cushions – some pushed aside onto the floor – the warmth, the books. She went through the hinged interleading doors into a room beyond. It was obviously his study, the strange green-eyed man with the black curls who was supposed to be an adult but acted and played like a child. Though book-lined and serious with angle-poise lamp over a huge drawing table, a workbench with vice, tools tidily arranged and a block of wood gleaming in the light, the room seemed poised for play. It was full of odd unmatched items which yet nudged against each other with an informality which seemed friendly. Strips of heavy modelling cardboard in different bright colours neatly stacked with portfolio covers in a wooden stand suggested fun in combination with work. She realised that there was proper light in here – having reached without thinking for the light-switch on entering – and it calmed her anxiety.

Wrapped in her gown and a red mohair rug from the bench in the inglenook she fell asleep. The rain sang softly in the gutters.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, to avoid any further problems caused by black lace and towelling, she was up early, dressed and in the kitchen. Inexperienced in the matter of hangovers she used her imagination, did the best with what she found and emerged with a meal of grapefruit segments, savoury mince, toast and coffee. She thought it might be dicey carrying a tray up those stairs, but surprisingly the glass-like stuff was not slippery and the treads were broad and shallow. The smell of the food preceded her. Nobody had ever brought Phillip Grier breakfast in bed, the unaccustomed experience flailed his memory of the night before. "Mr Grier, Mr Grier," she called to alert him and avoid any awkwardness. "may I bring your breakfast in?"

He was embarrassed. "Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry. That's twice I've caused you problems ... and call me Phil ...Philly. You see, usually I sleep it off: going out in the cool of the night, then the food so soon after the bottle must have ... oh I am so sorry ... and how did we get here?"

"The tall, well-built fellow, a nephew of George's I think, he ... George, told him to bring you home. I don't know what his name is, he unhooked me when I caught my hair on that hat-rack thing on the wall."

"But how did you people know where to come?"

"Well, for a stranger he seems to have a pretty good idea of the city, besides you kept repeating the address and surfaced, from time to time, with surprisingly coherent directions."

"That's strange. I don't think George has any family, but then, he does seem to have an awful lot of young men about who

owe him favours. They all speak different languages and he's so cagey, never wants to make small-talk, says we have no idea what it's like to live in a constantly war-torn place like the Balkans, refugees, a perpetual struggle for survival ... and he doesn't have time for gossiping, just business. Strange sort of fellow. But oh, my goodness you *have* made a feast, smells delicious, and yes, I'm hungry, famished really."

"I hope you like it."

"But what about you, surely you're going to have something?"

"Mine's down in the kitchen."

"Nonsense, here, give me a few minutes to get washed and dressed and I'll join you. Is that OK, it won't get spoiled will it? Don't worry, I'll carry it down, be with you in a jiffy."

Later, sitting at the big old kitchen table with a fresh stack of hot toast and a bottle of Seville marmalade he'd fetched from the pantry, he asked, "Did you find the flat all right?"

"Yes. I found it but not the key to the gate. It's anything but all right though, have you seen it recently?"

"No, why?"

"When was anybody last in there?"

Suddenly reality penetrated Philly's shield which, most of the time, kept him comfortably protected from the troublesome nitty-gritty details of living. "Oh, of course, yes, yes, it must be in a terrible state, I haven't been there for ... why it must be years, not since I moved into the house. That used to be where they kept me. But I told you that last night ... I'm so sorry, stupid of me. How did you manage?"

She told him and he was contrite. After breakfast he asked, "Would you like to see the flat now? The missing key is slotted into a groove in the side post."

"It's in an awful mess, isn't it? I don't think I can cope with sorting it out, not at this stage, I'm due in hospital in a few weeks."

He was immediately concerned but too shy to ask personal questions. "Oh no, naturally I'll have it cleaned out and painted, you can choose your own colours if you like, that is if you want it, it's a quiet place to recuperate."

"More like rejoicing I'll be doing with my face fixed and my scar removed, even if it takes several months and operations in stages." She was not shy to speak of it.

"And I won't hold you to cooking for your rent, though you certainly know how to do it well," he teased. "You can house-sit for me when I have to make trips away, exhibitions and things. And I'm going to have to do a trip overseas: I've always avoided it with the excuse that the house cannot be left untended. Scared to roam too far from my safety zone." He laughed half ruefully, surprised that he could reveal such secret things to this strange girl with whom he feels so totally at ease. "But it's my big chance: contra the rent against your watchful eye?"

"No," she replied, remembering Mum's strictures about not placing oneself under an obligation and never, under any circumstances, accepting gifts other than flowers, chocolates or books from a man. "No," she repeated, "a proper deal, so that we can stay friends, or nothing. But I'd be happy to be your watchdog if I do take the flat."

## CHAPTER 4 EMOTION

The rain has kept them indoors. They are all in the kitchen making pancakes. Jenny mixes the batter, Philly with his agile hands tosses them – he is the only one who can do so without landing crumpled circles on the floor – and Yannis meticulously powders them with sugared cinnamon and ground star-anise, then dribbles freshly squeezed lemon over as he rolls them up. Laughter, coffee aroma and friendly bantering about different flavours swirl around the room.

“Why not a Seville marmalade filling?” asks Philly.

“Oh you and your bitter marmalade,” Jenny teases “you got me hooked on it that first morning and I’ve been addicted ever since, but there is a right time and a wrong time for it and now we want something a bit more ... er ...exotic? What about cream and grated chocolate?” she suggests. They have tried them all but always return to the old standby Yannis favours.

“What flavour did my father like best?”. He worries his father’s image like a raven pecking at some almost invisible smear of carrion on the roadside, wanting to unearth the mystery he believes is hidden there.

“I don’t think I made pancakes for him. He was not a kitchen sort of man. That was ‘woman’s work’, but if we’d had them they would probably have been something savoury. I can’t remember.”

“Why always the memory blank?” Yannis asks.

Jenny sighs. “You do nag so, don’t you!”

“He has a right to,” Philly interposes, hoping that the truth will cure the boy’s obsession with his father. He has always been jealous of the man. “I think it’s time; you should tell him, let him

make up his own mind. In fact, perhaps it's time for me to tell a few things too."

"About my blood father?" Yannis asks.

With her back turned, and very much under her breath so the others cannot hear, Jenny mutters, "Your bloody blood father, after all these years, why can't he leave me in peace?"

"No, actually about myself," Philly replies, "though I'll tell you the little I know about him, which is probably just a different slant on what your mother can tell you: that is if she agrees." Philly feels there are secrets with which he has lived too long: silent questions that have been gnawing at him, disturbing his peace of mind. Perhaps this is why Yannis cannot accept him totally as the *de facto* father he has always been, but has nagged, for years, to learn more about his 'real' father. How more 'real' than the paternal devotion and care he has given the boy can a father be, he wonders.

"Perhaps it's time, Jen; we always realised that sooner or later he'd have to evaluate things on his own, form his own conclusions. Maybe it's time now to clean things out the way we cleaned out that 'prison' flat. Remember? When we found the boarded-up part next to the alcove, with all the old furniture and things? It helped sort out so much that had been unclear ...mm? What do you think?"

"But it's *not* what he is made from. He is not at all like his father. And what happens to his self-image if he doesn't like what he hears?" She turns to her son. "I can only give you more questions and maybe things you'd rather not hear about, and then what will happen? You know there were two such different sides to him, he could be so charming and confident and ... " Floundering for words, she briskly reorganises her straying thoughts. "On the other hand, absolutely ice-cold and ... well, I don't know. We have

to remember he never knew his parents.” She limps down into excuses.

“Not *another* one, surely Ma?”

“No, not like us, he was a street child in a war-torn country, never had anybody supervise or provide or care, not until George picked him up and he ...”

“George? What had he to do with it?”

“Look, son,” Philly looks across at Jen, eyebrow raised for permission, she nods and he explains how George would go around looking for youngsters in the ever-boiling Balkans; countries like Yugoslavia, as they were splintering into murderous factions. He scoured them, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, Macedonia, even Greece and Turkey; impoverished countries enmeshed in civil wars, or their after-effects, where these children were survivors who had nothing, no family, no homes. Some couldn’t even remember anything other than refugee camps or ghastly orphanages from which they had run away. George looked for the ones that were tough survivors, exceptionally smart and keen to learn; boys who had tried to put themselves through school, and he took them in, educated them, sent them to technicons and even to universities.

Yannis interrupts, “But Ma said he was a monster, that sounds like a philanthropist?”

“No, not when you’re a cold-blooded crook and don’t care a damn about their human and emotional needs, just want to use them, to get them hooked into your system through obligation.”

It was only after the young man, Yan, disappeared that contradictory bits of information drifted through, like half legible fragments of newspaper blown in and out by gusts that obliterated as much as they revealed. George had collected a stable of lost children; kids so aware that their only chance in life was to get an

education they were more or less prepared to do *anything* he demanded. He had them educated in order to have crooked lawyers and accountants at his disposal. Without doubt they had to do a lot of other things besides. George made damn sure *his* hands were never soiled, always having wonderful low-key covers like that little place around the corner from White Gables, and he lived unostentatiously never drawing attention or suspicion. It seems he had planned that Yannis' father, who was the brightest of the bright, would be an irreplaceable asset to him. Besides being very intelligent, some sort of mathematical genius apparently, the young man was also obviously a survivor with street smarts. Not that George was above having documents and certificates forged to get his brightest boys into institutions where they somehow managed to get advanced qualifications without having gone through the basics. The mind boggles at how people like that do it.

Whatever the arrangement had been, George had Yannis' father under his thumb. He was at a hospital in Cape Town completing his final intern year, doing plastic surgery. There was friction between them - George kept him on a tight rein - although nobody really knew the details, whatever information was available came in whispered half-sentences, little puffs of air from various sources over the years, and not any of them enough to sail the smallest boat of speculation to a safe port. What they did salvage was all fitted together, like a jigsaw puzzle with half the pieces missing, putting two and two together to make three and a half, drawing on assumptions from things Yan had said to Jen. Philly was convinced the man had been severely emotionally damaged, a bit of a Jekyll and Hyde, for his actions made no sense, the way he behaved, the things he did, the way he treated Jen.

"Let *me* tell him about that part of it," she holds up a hand as if to field a spinning ball before it smashes something. "But later," she adds, "it's not the time now, there are other things he must know in order to judge fairly."

"Oh Jen, you always make excuses, the guy was an out and out ... OK, OK, I'll leave it to you."

"I gather you weren't a fan of my father's?"

"My boy, *this* was the only time I ever regretted not being a rugger bugger type. I should have liked to have torn him apart limb from limb, and would probably have made an utter fool of myself, leave alone being reduced to mincemeat, if your mother hadn't stopped me."

Jen tries hard to explain without condemning or implying value judgements of either man. She tells how they were attacked by what, at the time, she had thought were muggers. Later she wondered if they were thugs sent by George to teach his protégé a lesson. She had watched this street fight, petrified and shocked as Yan grabbed an empty bottle lying in the gutter, bashed off the end and went for the assailants quicker than one <sup>can</sup> tell. He must have sliced at least one of them up badly; there was a lot of blood and *he* never had as much as a scratch on him.

"What was most chilling," she remembers with a shudder, "he was not in the least perturbed. We went home - up to his flat, that is, they attacked us as we were coming round the corner to it - and he sat down immediately and ate a big meal. I couldn't look at food, I was shaking like a leaf, and what really upset me was he never tried to comfort me, just growled to pull myself together and get his food on the table, as if it was the sort of thing that happened every day. He called it putting myself 'straight' but I knew what he meant. His English had improved incredibly by that time. But I *really* don't

want to tell you about odd incidents, I need to start at the beginning, to explain things. It's not fair, not on him nor on you and ... well, there were a lot of very nice things about him mixed in with ... oh what do you expect," turning to Philly, "with such a terrible background? He was starved and beaten and abused and used and never knew a kind or loving word, what do you think that must have done to him, shaped him? He never really had a chance to develop a gentler side, and George made damn sure he never would, didn't he?"

"Perhaps I've suspected, for a long time, that something was ... not quite right?. It's better to know, to face what is, or was, than live with imagined ghosts. Maybe if there are things, traits I should guard against ...?" Yannis leaves the thought hanging.

"No, Yannis," his mother says. "I think to a large extent, given a half decent chance, one makes oneself. I always believed I was the way I am because of the protection and all the love and caring I had, but look at Philly. He was so emotionally deprived from the start, nobody even seemed to worry about him until his 'tutor' Richard came along, and yet he is so tender and full of love. I think he's a lot kinder than I am, and so gifted too. Where did he get it from? Obviously not from the nut-case who adopted him as a fashion accessory with his black curls and green eyes and wasn't even sure if 'Philly' was a girl's name or a boy's, and didn't seem to care either way (and we'll tell you all about *that* later too), then when she got bored because it wasn't as easy to handle a child as a French poodle, she shoved him in a junk room with a series of minders out of hell. And he certainly did not get it from his parents who put him over the convent wall in the middle of winter dressed in dungarees and nothing else ...except a head full of nits and ..."

“Hey, how do you know that?” Philly asks surprised and taken aback. “I never told you this, I can’t even remember anything like that.”

“What about that recurrent nightmare you said you had as a child, about being dropped over a wall, scraping your knees so badly, falling and hurting yourself, and then a lot of big black birds descending on you and forcing you into a big tank of water?”

“That’s hardly the same as the details you’ve just given. Nits, I ask you ...!”

“Perhaps I also have some confessions to make.” Caught out, Jen puts on a brave face stretching the story like taffy, extracting the sweet diverting bits. “You know when you refused to ask questions, to go and see the sisters at the orphanage after we found all your adoption papers stuffed into that old wooden kist in the sealed-up room? Well, I went to them. You know as a kid I was in and out of the place with Uncle Doc. I think, early on, I even believed those nuns were my aunts and grandmothers, my real family, and that the orphanage was the family estate. It wasn’t till after Dad and Mum died, though, that *they* told me all they knew about me, which wasn’t much. Sister Bridget-Mary saying in that simpering voice of hers ‘And we all knew, didn’t we, which Irish convent trained the hands that embroidered the layette your mither left for you in that big black portmanteau.’ As if it were the fault of a rival convent that I was there. And the old sister who’d not found me the cold night I was left at the door - she’d made a special pet of me later - she was well over ninety then, but she remembered clearly the day you were dumped.”

Jen repeats the story she heard of how the terrified child was found shivering and wailing softly, rocking himself under a bush in the orphanage grounds. He could not have been more than three

years old, skinny, dirty, clasping his arms tightly around himself as if he would wrap his misery into a cocoon of self protection and pupate until it was safe to emerge. All he said was 'Philly'. When they asked him his name he wailed 'Philly' and when they asked where he came from and who his parents were, or where he lived, all he could get out was 'Philly'; even when they asked if he were hungry. The old nun had said he'd probably never seen a bath in his life. He fought like a demon when they tried to put him in a nice comforting hot one, for he was blue from the cold. For a long time all he would eat was bread, as if he had never ever seen anything else.

"You were a mess," Jen wrinkles her nose as if to demonstrate the point, then smiles and says comfortingly "and look how you turned out. Beautiful, intelligent, kind ... perfect in fact."

Yannis, again, cannot resist what to him has always been the obvious question. Perhaps he hopes to nudge Philly into an acceptable answer. "Well, if you think he's so perfect why did you never marry him then?"

"He never asked me, besides we are such good friends it would have been a tragedy to spoil it."

Everybody starts talking at once. Unreturned volleys of conversation bounce about the room, words are lobbed like tennis balls against a practice wall of noise. Philly protests that Jen *knows* that is not all there is to it; Yannis demands loudly if his father is not truly dead and has *this* stood in their way, prevented them from having a *normal* relationship. Both Philly and Jen start protesting about standards of normality, while Yannis keeps repeating that they have, after all, spent all these years under the same roof, as if this were a magic formula to solve all their problems.

"Maybe the same roof but separate establishments," Jen eventually barks.

"We each have our own place," Philly adds more gently.

"A semi-detached, lovingly restored five storey Victorian house, with the middle partitions mostly removed, is hardly separate," Yannis protests. He reminds them that when they cleared that old flat together, when Jen moved in, they ended up cooking together in the main kitchen, according to their stories. "You both made a big production of the shared meals, inventing recipes and working together like some stupid TV cooking show. A precursor to *The Two Fat Ladies*," he almost accuses.

Both Philly and Jenny argue that they are not fat and neither is it a five-storey house and Yannis says that this has absolutely nothing to do with the subject, so they ask him why he brought it up and point out that an attic and a room off a landing a quarter way up the stairs are not separate floors by any stretch of the imagination, even if there are two of them on the way up.

"Besides he's an architect, so he should know," Jenny adds.

"More of an artist, but we're way off the point," grumbles Yannis. "We share expenses, we do everything, go everywhere together. We are a family in everything except name, and I've always wanted that, more than anything else in the world, especially when I was at school."

Again the clamour as Philly and Jen point out, speaking together and over one another, how both went to all the school PTA meetings, and helped him with homework. Philly tells him how everything stopped, *everything* had to wait so that they could have their special times together. "They were the best time of our lives, all our lives," he reminds them.

"Nobody could have cared more or loved you more, given you more time or attention and he always made the most wonderful stage sets for any school play you were in." Jen points out.

"I know, I know, and I love you both for it, but you must admit the set-up is a bit odd and I need to know why. I mean you obviously care deeply for each other, you're such good friends, real pals like, and yet ...," leaving the unsayable dangling, for even with their close relationship how could he ask them why they didn't sleep together?

"But tell me about those papers," he continues his probing, fluttering constantly like some darting honey-bird in the area where he hopes to find nectar. "What did you find out, Philly, and didn't they make a difference to the way you felt about yourself, knowing more about your parents?"

"Yes I shall, but first, Jenny, I thought we had no secrets and you've kept this one all these years, why? Why didn't you tell me? I wouldn't have minded, I can understand why you wanted to know, but not to tell me?" Philly is dazed by the unaccustomed disruption of their normal easy domestic amiability; it disturbs his tranquillity and his immediate impulse is to escape, to rush up to his workroom and shut the door tightly against the waves of agitation that are swamping him.

"And who's the one with the major secret?" Jen retaliates, unable to resist the little dig. "Besides, I only tried to find out about your family, what the nuns knew, I wouldn't let them tell me anything else. Even when old Sister Cecilia, half senile, would have let the cat out of the bag wanting to tell me there was 'something not right', I shut her up immediately, told her it wasn't anything to do with me and all I wanted was to help you find out some more about your natural family, as I had about mine."

At the time Mother Superior was dead set against the beautiful little waif of a boy going to 'that terrible woman', but the social worker said funds had been cut and they should be grateful to 'anybody who took a kid that was not quite right'. Jenny was always aware of how different her happy loving childhood had been from Philly's. As another 'kid who was not quite right' she has had immense empathy for him, has been patient with his foibles and neurotic little hang-ups, but now her patience is, at times, wearing thin. She irritably points out that *he* has never been forthcoming.

"I've waited all this time for you to share your troubles with me but you never have, not the way I've told you even the most personal and terrible things." She stops abruptly looking over at Yannis to see if his ever-active curiosity has been alerted, but thinks, with relief, that it has been diverted by the unfamiliar undercurrent between the two people he loves.

Intending to keep the tone light she continues, "You should have known that, no matter what, it would not have made a difference to our friendship ... to the way I feel about you. Don't you trust me?" Her resolution collapses and, almost crying, she says very quietly, almost as if she were speaking to herself, "... all these years I've been waiting and waiting and hoping ... yet you still exclude me from something so important to you ... whatever it is. It's the fact that you never even gave me a chance to choose ... perhaps our lives could have been ... different." Pulling herself together Jen shakes her head, waves her hands in some vague dismissive gesture. "Oh sorry, never mind." Though she is visibly upset she smiles, trying to make a joke of it. "Forget about it, it's just me being an hysterical middle-aged woman, I'm sorry, it's only that ..." She trails off and Philly realises that his avoidance of

unpalatable facts has hurt her, and possibly himself, more than he realised.

“Let’s work it out later, Jen, basically it’s *our* problem, not his, and yes, you do have a point and perhaps having something I could not face, or talk about, has been part of it ... the ‘problem’. But you, also, have refused to speak about ... well, you know what, the bad ... incidents ... that happened.”

Philly has worried about Yannis’ recent increasing persistence in nagging for information concerning his father; the way he has constantly confronted any chance scrap of conversation, shaking it like a terrier with a rat, breaking the neck of relaxed family chats with his fierce determination. The atmosphere has changed, become charged by an unfamiliar – and for Philly – an uncomfortable energy. Not one normally to take the initiative he has eventually decided that, perhaps, they should clarify the situation for their boy, get him sorted out. For quite a while, uncharacteristically, he has been thinking about their problems instead of deliberately avoiding them and has come, unwillingly, to the conclusion that keeping things hidden does not make them go away, or lessen the pain. He crosses his right arm across his body, clutching at his side while the left arm goes up with cupped hand to support his left cheek and chin. This is Philly’s peculiar stance for coping with the most serious decisions he has to make. Watching him it strikes Jen like a small electric shock that this greying man, in his fifties, still retains much of the little lost boy cowering, clasping himself in a bundle under the bushes of the old orphanage. As Philly rocks slightly they hear the familiar low-throated hmmm, hmmm, with which he seems to tick off points or problems as he disposes of them. Yannis and his mother are quiet, they both realise that the family is approaching some turning point.

Looking graver than they have ever seen him, Philly nods, "Yes," he says slowly, "confrontation seems, eventually, the inevitable way to cope with problems, sort them out ... dispose of them instead of letting them lie buried to fester ..." He turns to Jen, takes her hand. "You too, the things we never spoke about although we both knew they were there ... the permanent damage ... that big operation ... your regrets ... those terrible months of depression?"

How can he admit, now, that he has deliberately manoeuvred situations in order to prevent speaking about problems, has kept quiet or diverted the conversation when Jen tried to raise important issues, as, initially, for him it was easier that way. He has pretended that she also deliberately avoided the next step because of the complications on her side, and he has been too much of a coward to say that those on his would cancel hers out.

"We've been so happy, so close ... I was afraid to lose you ... to lose what we had ... it seemed safer to just let things be. Have I hurt you, Jen?" It is difficult for Philly to put a name to intimate physical problems, both his own and Jen's: he skirts around, avoiding the words as he would a revolting smell. It is as if he knows what has to be unearthed but is afraid to do so. Jenny often thinks he reminds her of an unwilling sniffer dog, hoping to hell he doesn't uncover something too nasty to cope with.

Philly wants, more than anything else, to restore the happy pond-like placidity. He realises he has to reassure Jen and at the same time face up to his own inadequacies, two seemingly contradictory acts, for his submerged fears constantly drift to surfaces, bubbling quietly like bloated corpses. Unsure of how to proceed, wobbling, an unskilled acrobat on a tightrope, he tumbles in, saying the first things that come to mind, making matters worse.

"Please do not feel rejected, I would never reject you in even the smallest way, you and Pup are my whole life. It was just that I could not bear ... Oh God, what a coward I am, not helping you, not getting you to talk through all those horrible ... those bad experiences ... and just really to avoid talking of my own ... the thing that ... my own shame. I can't tell you how useless ... how inadequate ..."

Yannis, now thoroughly convinced of some horrible secret lurking in his background, bursts out, "What 'bad things'? Oh god, I knew there was something unspeakable. Ma, *was* your husband my father?" He silently wonders if he is the result of a rape but cannot express this horror to his mother.

"Of course he was your father."

"Well was it, I mean, did you, er, did you *have* to get married, sort of shot-gun and is that why he left so soon?" he finishes in a rush.

"No, of course not, and he *was* killed in an accident, or so George told us and we could never prove anything else. And I will tell you, but later, all the details; how, why I found myself married to him."

"Well, what were the bad things if you were married and he was my father? I've gathered he was a bit of a ... character. And why did he fly off to Athens, I mean what was the so urgent 'business'?"

As usual it is Philly who restores calm. "Jen, tell him again, briefly, how you met his father, the yellow eyes and the yellow roses part, and then we will start the whole saga from the beginning and fill in all the twiddly bits."

"Can't we put some time aside *right now*, when we can concentrate on this, not be diverted by ... oh, all the things we have

to attend to, meals, passing the toast, rushing off to lectures or appointments, sort of thing?" asks Yannis. "And then we can sit here, all three of us together, for moral support, and go through ... whatever it is? I realise it's sort of opening up old wounds like, but ...," turning to Philly, "*you* said it is time for confronting ... *things*. In any case, now that I positively know that there are aspects ... sort of ... in the background, I mean, facts you didn't want to upset me with when I was a kid ..." He stops and the other two watch him working out how to turn his galloping thoughts into acceptable words. In a lighter mood they would have teased him about hearing the cogs turn, but now they stay silent. He turns to them accusingly. "It seems everybody around here has secrets which should have been shared ages ago. Well, *I* have some of my own too."

"Nothing wrong, is it?" Jen asks anxiously and Philly adds, "Can we help ...?"

"No, don't worry, it's not anything really terrible, just perhaps ... something that might disappoint you. But there is another aspect which will amuse you, perhaps even please you ... and I do need your advice about ... well, we'll come to *me* later. Your turn now."

Philly rushes to reassure, using their own special nickname: it seems he always makes a particular effort to avoid the boy's given name as if doing so would cement too close an association with the father, a man Philly is still unable to forgive. "Pup, my boy, you should know by now that even if we may not always like what you do – and it's a long time since that happened, you've grown to be such a great guy – no matter what you do you'll always be our favourite kid."

“Well that can’t be too hard seeing as I’m the only one. Funny how it always worked when I *was* a kid, that reassurance. But no, I’m not telling you anything, not yet, not until you ...” He interrupts himself in a burst of impatience. “How can I really look to my future when I’m not sure of my past, surely I’m entitled to ...to know *who* I am, what the mystery is all about. So my father was a shit I presume, OK, that’s not a unique situation, or was *he* a crook? And what were the terrible things that happened to my mother, was he involved in this, was I? Come on, folks, play fair.”

Unconsciously he adopts Philly’s thinking pose, something they usually rag him about; now, again, they remain silent. Cheek and chin in hand he continues. “You know, I wouldn’t be at all surprised if this feeling of unfinished business, this sort of knowledge that something is lurking in the shadows, waiting to be sorted out, is what has kept me from being able to make any decisions about my future

“All right,” Philly replies teasingly, “make us feel guilty, we deserve it.”

“Perhaps it could work, I mean it might be easier to handle if we told it as something removed from us, a history, so we can all stay calm and happy,” Jen suggests, desperately trying to delay the inevitable moment when her son will lose his happy innocence. “Oh of course there will be emotion, but let’s remember to keep it in proportion and not let it ruin our present happiness. It all happened so long ago, didn’t it? It’s not really important now, it can’t change who we are and what we have.”

“Except,” Philly adds, “that we never coped with it and I never did what I should have about *my* ‘problem’ because I wanted to identify with you, Jen. I never wanted to be whole if you felt you weren’t.”

Jenny blanches, gets up, walks around to where Philly sits, and for the first time in their twenty-two years of close friendship puts her arms around him and kisses him, fully, on the lips. As he rises to hold her he whispers, "All these wasted years, these wasted years."

By now Yannis is almost dancing with impatience and surprise. "What's going on here? Obviously this isn't just about me and my father is it? Please, somebody talk to me, what happened, what's happening?"

Jen turns to him "You're right, this is about a lot more than your father with whom I shared only three months of my life. This is about Philly and me ... and you too," she adds. "If I promise you," turning to Philly for his agreement, "if we both promise you that we'll answer all your questions, could you wait just a little longer so that Philly and I can sort out some things first?"

"I think," Philly adds, "that when we've done that it may be easier to clarify all sorts of questions about which we ourselves seem to have been muddled up."

"Fair enough," Yannis replies, "but don't confuse *my* confusion with yours. You're important to me, right, and I realise there are misunderstandings, things unsaid, perhaps, between you that should have been said, yet ... at the moment my head's all in a whirl, but I still want to know about *him*, whoever he was, my progenitor, although you, Philly ... well, nobody can ever take your place. You were ... you are, after all, really the only practising father I ever had and ever will know, or want. It's just, please understand this, it's not rejection, nothing will make any difference to *us*, it's just I *need* to know what sort of genes I carry, *who I am*, before I can get on with the rest of my life."

"It seems your mother and I also have some things to clear up so that we, too, can get on with the rest of *our* lives. We seem to have stalled somewhere along the way. I think we all have to try and sort out the interlocking, er, what shall we call them? Problems? Questions? Whatever, let's try and keep our heads and do it calmly and sensibly and ..."

"I can't see it quite working that way, knowing the two of you, and myself of course," Yannis interrupts. "And it seems 'hang-ups' might just be the most appropriate word."

"To get back to your question about what finding the papers did for me," Philly continues, facing the boy, wanting him to understand. "Yes, well they did clear up some questions, but there were no details there, no personal details about me."

"You asked \_\_\_\_\_ how finding the papers made me feel about myself. It didn't really change anything because there were no personal details about where I came from, other than the orphanage where they gave me the surname Grier. I believe they work down the alphabet when naming foundlings."

"No," Jen interposes indignantly, "it wasn't like that at all, the nuns would discuss the question and study the child so that they could choose a name that truly suited it, they really did care about the kids, nothing as heartless as what you suggest, Philly. No. They'd argue about it for hours and make sure the initials couldn't be turned into things to be teased about, like G A G or P I G. I know, I was there, visiting, during some of their discussion sessions. That's not to say, of course, in their innocence that they didn't have a John Thomas, but sure they tried awfully hard to avoid stamping the wee kids with the odd sort of names the Irish nuns were always coming up with; names that were unpronounceable from the spelling of them, like Seamus or Tóibín

or Malarchy, though they did call one poor little cod Michael Fynn, and I'm sure he ended up being called Mickey. Mayhap the name was marked on yer dungarees," she suggests, lapsing as she occasionally does, at times of stress, into something approaching Rory ÓDowd's Hiberno-English. "It is an unusual one. Perhaps you even eventually told them that's what it was?"

Yannis is confused and asks, "But if you're adopted, don't you get to use your adoptive parents' names? Ma did."

"In normal circumstances, my boy, yes." Philly tries to explain but Jen butts in with the fact that she didn't have a name to start with, the nuns were still arguing which saint would be the most appropriate for her and they were awfully miffed when the ÓDowds gave her a name that couldn't be linked, at all at all, to any saint they knew of. This leaves her son even more confused. He asks testily, "What do the saints have to do with it and for goodness sake can't we ever stick to the story?"

"You're right," Philly agrees. "At this stage the saints are not relevant, but ... let me tell you about the papers. Maybe afterwards you'll understand better about the Harding-Joneses, and why I ended up ... oh hell, this is hard. Look, Pup, I know I haven't said or done the things I should have: but, if for years and years you are absolutely not allowed to show any feelings, not allowed to cry, not even allowed to laugh or sing loudly, then it's difficult when life is going so smoothly, as ours has, to take any sort of positive action that might disrupt it. OK, I'm a coward and I've always retreated so deeply into the dream world that it fused with the real. You want something so badly that you actually imagine its there. You are my family, it didn't seem necessary to ..."

"The papers, Philly, the papers you found?" Yannis tries to bring him back from wandering in the confusion of unspoken intentions.

"Yes, well, there were a lot of letters and draft copies of the contract between them, Trudie and John."

Philly finds himself lost in the legal details of his adoptive parents' marriage of convenience and does not manage to make it clear to Yannis how, or why, John could have been willing to sign adoption papers when Trudie got the crazy idea that a kid would be cuter, a better fashion accessory, than a dog. John had insisted his cooperation was on condition his wife let 'him off the hook', let him do 'his own thing', and that he would have nothing to do with the 'damn kid'. That is what he wrote into the draft contract. As far as Yannis could make out the whole thing was a malevolent spider web on which human emotions were tangled and sacrificed to greed.

It was an arranged marriage which they had agreed just to keep valid on paper, so that neither would forfeit the benefits in terms of her father's will. He had tied them up, ensuring that both would lose everything if they got divorced, no matter whose fault it was. It was as if he were punishing them together, in a sadistic way, by forcing them to choose what he knew neither could resist, all that money and property, but at a terrible price. He knew if she got her hands on it Trudie would blow the business he had built up over all the years: at least John, the workaholic, could be trusted to cherish and continue to build it up. Or that is what he hoped. The whole will thing seemed so twisted and deliberately unkind.

"In the end," Philly tried to explain, "it must have been the only thing the crazy old man loved, the business. I don't think he could stand her, the father I mean, though John too, at the end, couldn't bear to be in the same house. But though he obviously

disliked her he must have felt some strange obligation to assure his only daughter was looked after, although she was long past the age where most women are out of the home and earning their own living, or married. There was something funny there though; all those letters from him to her when she was younger and they were under the same roof, with paragraphs blacked out, and the two of them so close after her mother died when she was a kid. Living in that big house together, until she grew up more like his concubine than his daughter, the way he indulged her until she became a horrible fat spoiled neurotic. Everything seemed to blow up suddenly and he had that miserable flat built on, almost overnight, and insisted she stay there and leave him alone. It's all there in the papers, but never the WHY of it. And then John, the work machine, the right-hand man who was the obvious person to take over and who was so infatuated with the firm he would have sold his soul to the devil – and did – to get his hands on it and keep it. Oh God, it's all so complicated, how can one ever explain it to you, Pup?"

Both Jen and Philly are jittery, anxious to sort out their own misunderstandings. They are intensely aware that the jagged edges of long subdued tensions, which have just broken through, can rip their domestic harmony apart. Their contradictory versions of the story Yannis is clamouring for is also a potential source of friction.

"I think we've all had enough for today," Philly says in a far more determined tone than usual. "In any case you and I have plans, remember Pup?"

"I agree," Jen says. "And what are your plans?" she asks casually.

"That," says Yannis smiling again, "is another big secret, and you'll just have to wait," turning to Philly, "won't she?"

"That's fine. We'll all wait for a secret-unfolding session, after Philly and I ..."

Again Yannis interrupts, "Just one question now, please, for a yes or no answer: did the problem with my father have something to do with money?"

"I don't really know and certainly can't give a yes or no answer. It's all so complicated and mixed up." Jen replies and gives a big sigh. "Love, friendship, money..."

"We've managed to balance them somehow," Philly adds more cheerfully, "the world's biggest troublemakers, though I'm not quite sure how and I'm darn sure it was never deliberate, we just seemed to muddle along."

"Oh please, no more analysis or philosophising now," Jen pleads. "I'm tired. Could we pack the discussion in now? Besides you two have plans and I shall have to find something with which to console myself for being excluded." Looking at Philly her lips and expression soundlessly confirm, "Later?"

He nods as he and Yannis leave, caught up already in the excitement of the secret they have planned to surprise the woman they both love in their different ways.

## CHAPTER 5 ANOTHER BREAKFAST

"Would you please pass me a slice of toast," Yannis asks at breakfast the next morning.

"Goodness, one wouldn't believe it was only ... well, it seems only a few months ago that you came storming in like a tornado, all stretch and grab over the table, hi-jacking the entire toast rack, and now you're sitting all nice and polite with a grin wound twice around your face. What's up?"

"Come off it, Ma, I might have been a bit grabby when I was starving but never that bad. Besides it's a kid's job to take the Michael, particularly with a mother that rises so beautifully, like a fat trout to a fly...", shaking his head with an expression of mock ecstasy as if savouring the occasion, or the trout.

"*You* come off it, Philly's Pup," reminding him how he came by the old nickname. "You nearly ate us out of house and home at one stage"

This was one of the many family jokes. It started when Philly decided the boy needed a pet 'because all growing boys should have a dog', and they went off to the pet shop where Philly fell in love with a soft-eyed brown miniature dachshund. Yannis, however, was hypnotised by the singing canaries, so they came home with both and then discovered that Yannis was allergic to dogs' dander and Philly to canaries. He hated the constant warbling and could not, for the life of him, understand how Jen and Yannis could spend so much time whistling to them. He found their delight when the birds sang back incomprehensible; all he could hear was noise, so he pretended the feathers made him sneeze. Jen had wondered if

Philly was jealous, or resentful of the fact that Yannis ignored his pup.

Eventually the pets were returned, but Yannis felt bad, knowing Philly had wanted a dog all his life. Sure that the disappointment was his fault he insisted on taking the pet's place. *He* would be 'Philly's Pup'. At first it seemed funny, but his persistence wore the adults down. Yannis demanded meals in the dog's dish in addition to those he ate at the table. Jen was convinced he would become overweight, he seemed to be eating all the time. Whenever she dished up their meals she had to dish up for the damn Pup as well.

"I remember," Yannis concedes, "but didn't you only give me half portions, both as a boy and as a dog? It seemed such fun, barking and yapping, and jumping around on all fours." He clowns around reliving his childhood pranks as both Philly and Jen laughingly agree it might have been fun then but he is grown up now and they've had quite enough of that, thank you.

"I don't think you really enjoyed the licking part though, Philly. Besides if I was to be your pup I had to behave like one, didn't I?"

"Yes, but you did carry it a bit far," Philly reminds him.

They were able to tolerate the barking and even the attempt at chewing slippers – Yannis' teeth did not have the needle-sharp destructive effect of a four-legged pup's. But it was after he saw the dogs in the park peeing all over the place and Philly explained how dogs mark their territory by leaving their scent that they had a hard time of it convincing him it wasn't necessary for him to follow suit.

"And, have you forgotten," his mother adds, "how you used to take possession, like a blinking octopus you were, all arms and grabbing tentacles and you'd polish off everything in sight, God help

anybody else who might want seconds. Talk about fat trout ... I'm not fat, am I Philly?" appealing to the one source where she can always be sure of approval.

"You see Ma, there you go again, no, of course you jolly well know you're not fat. It's the rising trout are so, but you suffer from their syndrome, you rise in the same satisfying way." They all laughingly agree, even the culprit herself admits to the tendency although insisting she always sees the joke and swears she won't fall for the same trick again, but does, every time, much to her son's satisfaction. Yannis' mood changes and he adds musingly, "But you know, we are actually very nice people, and we have nice habits too..."

Before he can finish both Jenny and Philly, sending eye-signals across the table while trying not to react, begin making odd noises as if they are choking or trying to hold back a cough. Yannis looks at them amazed, this is so unlike their usual considerate response to his opinions. "Hey," he says as their mirth explodes, the one setting the other off, "what's so funny about that?"

"Sorry, love," Jenny says as Philly shakes his head, still emitting the odd splutter, "it really has nothing to do with you, but there was this funny thing about a couple living in a flat down the road. It was a ground-floor flat with a little garden, and we used to pass them when going for a walk with you in your pram."

"He looked like a right gangster, quite a bit older than her," adds Philly as they go into their usual two-handed narrative style. It is completely unrehearsed but to an outsider it would seem to flow like a pre-prepared performance.

"Yes," Jen comes in, "she looked so terribly young and as if she didn't quite know what had hit her. Seemed no more than a

child herself and she had these two little boys, babies really, which she would lug around, one on each hip.”

Taking turns they tell Yannis how one evening, as they walked past and made the usual polite neighbourly greeting, Jen commiserated about the difficulty of coping with twins and the woman laughingly explained that the toddlers were not twins, there was a thirteen months difference. Jen, feeling a bit of a fool, compounded her error by tactlessly blurting out, “You poor thing,” but was again put in her place when the young mother explained how she had actually planned for them to be a year apart, but had not quite made it. Then, as they walked off, the man started singing. They were always singing these odd songs with words he had obviously made up himself. “Oh we are naiirce people with naiirce habits,” and after a small pause he added, “we breed like rabbits, that’s all.” And then the two of them started singing together with an exaggerated self-parodying yowling on the word ‘nice’. It was just so unexpected and funny. After that every time Jen and Philly passed on their walk, as soon as they were out of earshot, they would sing this song like a sort of signature tune. Philly demonstrates, giving an example of the yowling delivery.

“Mmmm. I wonder whatever happened to them?” Jen muses. “They seemed happy enough though he never seemed to lift a finger to help her, poor kid. Quite a strange character he was, could be ever so charming, but I always felt it was just a big act. Something like ...” She doesn’t finish and Philly, following her train of thought quickly continues before Yannis starts asking questions.

“Why, I told you. He was a bit of a gambler, a professional card-sharp, in fact. As long as he stuck to cards everything was hunky-dory, but then he got gripped by the gee-gees and lost money hand over fist – which he didn’t have – then started drinking

heavily. I don't know, they got into debt or something, the messenger of the court banging on the door leaving summonses all the time, so she upped and left him."

"With a kid on each hip?" Yannis asks.

"Right, and one on the way from what I understand," Philly replies.

"And then what happened? You never told me ... surely I couldn't have forgotten?" Jen queries.

"It seems after a year or two he managed to kick the gambling and the drink and they were on the verge of making a new start. They'd decided to move down to a coastal town where she'd got an excellent job, transferred to be a branch sales-manager of an indent firm, the lady apparently had a way with sales. She went ahead to find a house and a suitable nursery-school for the kids. And waited for him, and waited. Nobody knew where he was and she was livid, sure he'd gone on a binge, leaving her in the lurch again, with a big house hired and all; then the next thing she hears he has been killed in an accident. Somebody sent her a telegram of condolence, but nobody ever got around to notifying her officially."

"I would never have forgotten a story like that if you'd told me," Jen protests.

"But I did, and I remember distinctly when. It was as we were waiting that terrible night," he pauses, lost for a moment, reflecting, reliving the fear and the tension, then emerges as a retriever from the water, shaking his head and torso as if to fling away the bad resurfacing emotions. "After Pup's accident."

Philly had gone down to the hospital cafeteria to get coffee and something for Jen to eat, as she refused to leave the hard bench in the freezing passage outside the operating theatre. On his way down he had met the Derringers, neighbours of the Rabbit family.

They were visiting their daughter, who had just had a baby, and were bubbling with excited gossip. When Philly returned with the food and the story he had hoped to take Jen's mind off what was happening on the other side of the double swinging door. The fierce draught kept moving it and it seemed to be deliberately taunting them. Every time the door swayed and squeaked they thought it was going to open and they looked up anticipating some news. It was then Philly told Jen the story, a bit jazzed up for dramatic effect. She was sitting with tears rolling down her cheeks, motionless, not saying a word, but he is certain she must remember for, although she was not diverted, she did acknowledge his efforts. Jen remember nothing; it is a complete blank.

"Well," Philly concedes, "I suppose your mind was on the boy."

Unexpectedly Jen almost wails, "It was all my fault, oh God, I'm so sorry."

Amazed, Yannis asks, "But how could it possibly have had anything to do with you, I mean it isn't as if you were friends of the family or anything like that, to influence them?"

"No, silly, *your* accident."

Again there is a clamour, everybody talks at once and amazingly manages to hear and respond to what the others are saying. It is like an orchestral and choir performance. Yannis points out his mother is being plain ridiculous as she was not even there when the accident happened. Countering their reassurances, like the burden of a melody to which the men add descant and bass, she continues blaming herself for agreeing to the purchase of a scooter, producing different themes on the same notes. Argument and counter argument weave in and out. Counterpoint and harmony revolve around Jen's guilt about the unsuitability of the machine to withstand the gale force Cape winds, while Yannis

consoles that the 50cc was *his* choice because the fuel economy favoured his pocket money and slim earnings budget. Philly's placating, if somewhat repetitive bleat, reminds them at regular intervals that they had *all* agreed on that particular bike. Both Philly and Yannis keep assuring Jen that it is foolish of her to blame herself. Yannis maintains that she should blame God or Fate or the crazy weather, if she must blame anybody. It had been a one in a million freak chance, that mini twister, coming out of nowhere and hitting him, picking him up, twirling him around and throwing him down with the bike on top. At the time he had joked that the bike wasn't damaged. The same wind had pushed a double-decker bus right over onto its side, then just down the road pulled out a big pine tree, like a cork from a bottle.

"How could it by any wild stretch of the imagination have been your fault, double silly?" Yannis continues to reassure his mother.

But Jenny refuses to be comforted so easily. She was unhappy about the dangers all along, torn between wanting to say no at the time, but also not wanting her son to be isolated, unable to get to and from people, or places he wished to visit, as she had been at that age. Yannis was always so keen to go down to the museum or the art gallery to sketch and wander around, getting new ideas, but she could not always be available to save him the long walk down and back up the footslopes of the mountain in the summer heat or winter storms.

"Ma, it's past and I really don't mind."

"Yes, but you don't understand, you were born so perfect and if I hadn't agreed to that damn bike you wouldn't have suffered all that pain and had that nasty scar," she mourns his imperfection.

"But look, it was the best thing that happened to me."

"How can you say that?" she asks shocked.

"Work it out for yourself, if I hadn't been in plaster all that time, I would never have been able to get out of the compulsory sport which I hated, the bloody rugby."

Yannis dreaded it; all those big guys deliberately knocking hell out of the duffers at sport. Besides the accident meant he managed to avoid it and still be considered a hero. The younger boys, even some of the bigger fellows, would come around and say, 'Wow, you nearly wiped yourself out on a motor bike hey?'. And then, after the plaster came off and he walked around for months on elbow crutches, with the limp of a war-wounded hero, he was permanently absolved from everything except swimming. There, the interesting scars seemed to make him 'one of the guys'. He would imply that the ugly keloid one on his abdomen, where they took skin for grafting, was the result of a shark bite. That really blew their minds and the boys forgot that they had teased him unmercifully for not sharing their interests or being a bit of a swot.

"In any case," he points out to Jen, "look how I followed in my mother's footsteps and got so far ahead in school, studying at home during those months of convalescence."

"You're just trying to make me feel better."

"The most important thing," he continues, teasing now, "is that at last I was one of the family."

"That's a terrible thing to say, Yannis, you were always one of the family, what do you mean by that?" She ruffles, a flustered hen trying to head her chick off from water.

"My dear trout mother, how could I be ... well, I was going to say the only *perfect* one in the family, but you've already told us Philly is perfect, so shall I just say it was lonely being the only *unblemished* one around. No, joking aside, it was a godsend, saving

me from what might have been an otherwise traumatic life in that good boys' school. I was just too different, our set-up was too ... what shall I call it? too civilised for them to relate to. Oh yes, of course there were some of the kids with whom I could communicate, but the big bully ones would have made my life unbearable. By the time I returned, quite the hero, they had other fish to fry and I really enjoyed the last couple of years at school, particularly when I came back several classes ahead of them and was a senior whilst they were still juniors and had to show me some respect."

"You're just saying it to ..."

"Make you feel better?" he interrupts again. "No, believe me I'm not and didn't you notice how rapidly the limp improved after I left school and with it the threat of compulsory sports? And I bet you never imagined I had that petty, vindictive streak in me, your 'perfect' son making the nasties eat crow?"

Philly, in his inimitable way, manages to change the subject by intoning the Rabbit family's song. "For we are naaiirce people with naaiirce habits."

"But you missed out on the breeding like rabbits bit," Yannis tactlessly comments, compounding his error by adding "I could have done with a sibling or two." The pained silence greeting his remark makes him aware of his *gaffe*. "OK, OK, I'm sorry. That was obviously tactless, but if I am to avoid making silly blunders then - and here we're back at square one again - I must be party to the family's full map of forbidden and dangerous ground."

"We told you we would explain things, don't nag now and spoil your mother's surprise," Philly remonstrates.

"Surprise?" Jen asks, pretending ignorance, "what surprise? What have the two of you been up to again? I thought you both

looked too smug and chirpy this morning. I always know when you've been hiding something."

"Oh, you just say that Ma. How can you always know? It's a ploy to trap, make us tell and admit, when you suspect something, isn't it?"

She is not going to tell them how, whenever they are up to something, they remind her of two bantam roosters, strutting their self-satisfaction across the barnyard, so smiles sweetly and nods enigmatically.

"Shall we give it to her now?" Philly asks, deliberately drawing the process out to tease.

"Well, I don't know," Yannis responds, falling into a familiar pattern, "do you think she deserves it?"

"What is it, what is it?" Jen says, as excited now as any little girl.

"It is an 'unbirthday present'," Philly replies. "Won't you fetch it, Pup, you know where we've hidden it from prying female eyes."

When Yannis returns with a big box wrapped in blank newsprint-paper hand-decorated with splashes and squiggles of paint, they make her close her eyes and guess what's inside the box. Naturally she protests and insists she be allowed to feel it or be given a clue. They help unwrap the paper, making sure she is not peeping at the box, and slip her hands into it where she feels around and pretends to be mystified.

"Come on, guess," they urge.

Jen, who knows that the gift is a bread-making machine, enjoys teasing them and makes many ridiculous guesses to try their patience. It is family ritual, this acquisition of culinary implements and accessories. Theirs is an almost Lucullian obsession with the

processes of the kitchen, and they rejoice over each addition as votaries offering a new ceremonial vessel at an altar.

After the excitement subsides Yannis asks "Ma, did my father ever give you any presents?".

Jenny is not sure how to answer. The abrupt 'no' on the tip of her tongue needs clarification, she answers dodgily. "Well, there wasn't all that much time, besides George did keep him on a very short string. I don't think he was even aware of the fun of presents: you must remember the sort of background from which he came."

"That means no." The boy's retort is flat and hard.

"Wait, of course, yes, he gave me the best present I have ever had."

Yannis lifts an eyebrow, "Hmmm?" he queries.

"He gave me you." There is an awkward silence. Under the circumstances the reply sounds soppy, but Yannis is too polite to say this, instead he gives his mother a hug and clowns around, hand on chest with an exaggerated gesture, "The best," he quips.

The little ceremony of the gift-giving has, as Philly anticipated, lowered the tension carried over from the previous day; they're back to their normal relaxed family banter.

"Pup, thank you for not nagging or asking questions..." Philly starts but Jen interrupts, "He was well on his way to start again, but you never gave him a chance, did you now? You really are quite a clever man, Philly," she teases.

They all want to keep the atmosphere light, avoid the currents of yesterday's drama. Somehow it seems as if this will make it easier to face facts and emotions they have avoided for so long, besides they are not quite ready – or sure how – to discuss with Yannis the outcome of their previous night's conversation. They need time to adjust, to feel their way around emotions that are not

new but have been kept in tight rein for so many years that there seems no other way to handle them.

It has been a painful discussion and they sat until late into the night, wasting time skirting around issues, both of them bogged down, overladen carts full of dead wood that had to be removed before the wheels of open discussion and decision would move smoothly. Jen, knowing that unless *she* started Philly would never manage to pull himself from the mire of his fears and complexes, confessed she had avoided speaking of what pained her. She acknowledged that she had been resentful and angry for many years after Yannis' birth and had, in her heart, blamed everybody, the doctors, Philly, the boy's dead father for the botch-up which had necessitated a hysterectomy when her son was born. She had felt mutilated and incomplete as a woman and it was only after she began to do voluntary work as a 'Cuddler' at the children's hospital that she stopped aching for more children of her own. But that was all a long time ago: she said she had killed off *her* problem with hard work and now, wasn't it time Philly murdered his?

Philly remembered how much activity she had piled into each day until it seemed that she, or the hours, would explode with too much pressure, like an old steam engine fired up to bursting point. And the more frenziedly she whirled her days away, too tired to think or regret or brood, the more he turned inwards until eventually their only mutual meeting ground was Yannis and the preparation and enjoyment of food. It had soothed him, not having to make decisions about his 'problem' and he was happily ensconced in his rut, hibernating until some future cataclysmic spring spurred him to action. He was afraid but knew the time had come. He felt as if some force over which he had no control was moving him, slowly, like ground shifting and settling into a different

pattern as tectonic plates ground faintly below. He felt he was changing and that there was more to it than just having passed over the 'big five-o', settling down stodgily into his fifties.

They had made two decisions, and although Jen wondered how much these had been influenced by the glug-wein with which she had constantly replenished his mug, Philly gave no sign of backing out. He had already phoned to make an appointment with a specialist, and, if things went well after the operation they would formalise their relationship and get married. It was of these two decisions that neither of them quite knew how to tell Yannis.

"Let's go and experiment with our new toy now," Jen suggests, wanting to take the pressure off Philly; she still thinks of him as emotionally fragile. "Things might clarify themselves as we work and chat. Tell you what, I'll even bake a cake for later and promise to give a detailed and coherent account when the spirit moves. When I do start spilling the beans I'll tell you about your father's yellow eyes and the yellow roses, OK son?"

"OK, on condition it's your special chocolate cake with the ginger coffee icing."

"Three inches thick," Philly adds.

"Men, they have to get in the last word, even if it doesn't make sense. Whoever heard of three inch icing?"

They look at one another and laugh, remembering Yannis's first attempt at making and icing a cake. The atmosphere is creamy rich with affection and relaxed enough, Yannis thinks, for parents to accept a slight wobble in their scheme for a son's future.

Reminding his mother that she has been nagging him to make decisions about what post-graduate course of study to pursue he tries gently to ease in the suggestion that his future may take another direction. As everybody again starts speaking together,

questioning, offering suggestions, Yannis announces that he has a couple of points he wants to talk about.

"Mr Angela phoned me and offered to buy my Philjens"

"What?" Philly splutters.

"How does he know about them?" asks Jen, practically.

"Remember when that girl Thaila came here a couple of days ago?"

"Thaila, who is Thaila?" asks Philly.

"Mr Angela's daughter."

"You mean Angelo," stressing the final o, "Angel-O of 'The Gallery'?" Philly queries. Yannis nods as Philly turns to Jen, fidgets and diffidently confesses he has not got around to collecting the few pieces left unsold after his last exhibition. "I must remember to collect them, won't you tie a knot in my memory and ... and ... well, just jolly well nag me till I do?"

Not quite sure how to express his dislike of the girl, Yannis, employing all his mother's declamatory skills, filling in the actions wherever he can, tells of their recent encounter. After practically walking over him on campus for years, without a flicker of recognition - which suited him fine - one morning recently she suddenly grabbed him as he walked by. He felt as if he had been pounced on by a hunting rodent which he could not shake off. She was all long nails and thin clawing fingers, touching and clinging to his clothes, making an embarrassing play, as if they were bosom buddies. Dropping Philly's name in every second sentence, in an obvious attempt to impress her friends that she was on intimate terms with the great Phillip Grier's family, she introduced Yannis as his son.

"She was pawing me and all I wanted was to get away. She's got a skin as thick as two rhinoceroses. And uses too much musky

perfume,” he shudders and wrinkles his nose, pulling the sort of face more usually associated with finding something long-dead behind an old box in the cellar. “I said, ‘May I have my arm and my sleeve back, please?’ several times, but she just tittered and flapped and clung on. So, when she asked did I know where they could get a couple of masks for their theatre group – she’s doing drama, never stops being dramatic, in fact – I pulled away and said they can be made from *papier mâché*, and she could fashion them as she wished.”

Yannis is not quite sure how he became enmeshed. He told her, as he broke loose and walked away, that they were easy to make and he had done several. That evening she arrived, unmasked and unexpected, saying she had just popped in to see if his masks were suitable. “Such a cheek! I never offered them or said a thing to encourage her.”

At the time Yannis was just astounded and put off his stroke by her gall, but in retrospect, after speaking to her father, he thinks she might have been sent by him to check out what Philly was doing. She had been unashamedly intrusive, walking around without so much as a by your leave, peering into corners and opening the closed door into the studio. Yannis had told her she could not go in there, it was private, but she ignored him and barged in. It was as he tried to hustle her out, that she saw the figurines and asked what they were and had Philly made them. She was swivelling her eyes about, glancing all over, a ferret sniffing after a mouse. Throwing out questions about Philly’s work, where was it and what was he was currently doing and was he preparing new stuff for an exhibition, she fingered everything in sight with the determination of an old woman squeezing fruit on a market stall. To get her out Yannis grabbed some of the little figures that were in a

box saying he would show them to her in the other room. The ruse worked, he got her out and very pointedly locked the door to the studio, removing the key.

"She's just so phoney," he grouses, "I can't stand girls like that. She knows her stuff though, asked if the figures were maquettes for your 'new work', commenting how your style had changed, and that some of them seemed like caricatures of your previous larger works. She was too curious, in an unpleasant sort of way, about what you were doing."

"That makes sense" Philly replies. He had been a bit cagey when Angelo asked when was he planning the next exhibition in 'The Gallery', and was thinking of making other arrangements. "I just don't like the man. He tries to paw your mother, and as for his wife ... well the less said the better."

"Yes, I thought something funny was on the go." Yannis confirms his dislike and distrust of the dealer. "Anyhow, I said no, they were my Philjens, and they were commentaries on materials and reflections on statements you and Ma had made, and that I had done them. So she asked what a Philjen was, and I, stupidly, replied it was derived from my parents' names as you'd both contributed material and ideas for their construction. Meanwhile she wanted me to give her the masks, which I refused to do, so before I could say anything further, or get her out of there, she's on her cell phone to Daddy -what Thaila wants Thaila gets, it seems - and she asks him can she buy them as they're essential to her play and they're 'real works of art, from Grier Junior.' Then she tells him that I've a box full of fascinating 'mock ups' of my Dad's work."

By this time Yannis was on tenterhooks. He refused to sell his figurines and asked the girl to leave, but she insisted she *had* to take them to show her father. At the same time said she wanted to

buy three of the masks. When Jen heard this she grumbled, "Oh no, you didn't let her take your beautiful masks, they are part of a set?"

Yannis consoles his mother that by now he was no longer behaving like a gentleman and sold the three cracked-around-the-edges masks which weren't part of the set, but the first experimental efforts before he got the mixture right, and that he had also insisted on a cheque immediately. "I did tell her to look them over and see if she was happy with them. She seemed to believe the flaws were part of the design, not realising they are disintegrating. I warned her, though, that they wouldn't take rough treatment."

Thaila had refused to leave unless she could take some of the Philjens with her. "You would have been proud of me, Ma. I wrote out an invoice and made her sign it, 'Received from Grier Junior Studios six Philjen figurines in good order and condition, to be returned in the same undamaged state in which they were received.' I should have put a time limit. And Philly, please forgive me for using your name."

"Well you certainly have ..."

Before Philly can reply he adds, "Don't say anything about that now, please, I'm coming to that aspect later." He takes a deep breath. "No, wait, there is a lot more." Yannis is enjoying himself immensely. He flaunts his mother's gift of telling a story with the theatricality of tone and gesture which can convert a simple action into a mini-drama. Assuming two different voices, and moving his position as he acts each role he continues with his dramatisation of the scene, telling how old man Angelo phoned ordering him to be at 'The Gallery' the following morning at ten o'clock.

"Doesn't ask if it's convenient, just says he'll 'see me there tomorrow at ten'. I said 'Excuse me, to whom do you wish to

speak?’ and he barks ‘Grier Junior, and if you want your money you better be there.’ So I suggested there must be some mistake, and asked what it was all in connection with, and he says ‘those little toys you sent to me.’ By now I’m getting annoyed. ‘Excuse me,’ I say again, very toffee-nosed, ‘but there must be some misunderstanding. My work is not for sale, and your daughter insisted on taking those Philjens to show you although I was most unwilling that she do so.’

Yannis had infuriated the gallery owner by telling him that he had only allowed Thaila to remove the figurines as she was so insistent, would not take no for an answer and leave without them. He baited the angry man, tied safely at a distance to the telephone cord, by adding “I had a prior engagement and as she was delaying me it seemed the only way to get rid er ... to get her to leave.” Yannis claims he said it that way on purpose as he was so fed up about the incident, and wanted to offend old Angelo who nearly burst a blood vessel.

“You’re a cocky little shit, aren’t you?” he stormed.

Yannis remained cool as ice. “I beg your pardon, sir, I think I must have misheard you.”

“Look, I’ll give you two thou for them.”

At this twist to the story Philly and Jen gasp simultaneously, “What?” “You’re making this up?”

“No, but I remembered you always telling me, Ma, if something is too good to be true, it is. Something here just didn’t make sense. I mean who pays a totally unknown youngster that sort of money for ...”

“I always told you they were amusing and clever, and your workmanship has improved tremendously over the years, but yes, you are an unknown.” Philly had found it difficult to resist pushing

the boy in that direction. He had encouraged him as much as he could, being sure the youngster was gifted, but Jen and he had agreed they would not unduly influence Yannis' choice of career in any way. "So what happened then?" Philly asks.

"Now I'm really icy, and so polite it's like mocking him. 'The works are not for sale, sir. I suggest you discuss the matter with my father.' 'You crazy?' he asks, 'what youngster refuses that sort of money, I'll give you three thousand.' 'Excuse me', I come back, all dripping honey, 'but you are surely aware of the cost of raw materials, not to mention my time.' 'Yes, OK. what's the stuff you use?' 'Again, sir, I suggest you approach my father, and as a gallery manager' - I know he is the owner and hoped this would rile him - 'you must surely be aware that an artist or a craftsman, even if he is only a 'youngster', does not divulge his technical procedures.'

"By this time I could almost feel him vibrating over the phone lines. 'D'you exhibit with your father overseas?' he asks. Again I repeat, 'All business matters must be discussed with Mr Grier,' and after a pause I add 'senior.' 'You silly little punk I'm offering you three thou each for those and any other maquettes, I mean, what did you call them?' 'Philjens, I think it's an Icelandic word, sir, and they are not maquettes but commentaries, and again I must repeat I am not prepared to enter into any arrangement with you.' So, and Philly listen carefully to this, he comes a new angle and suggests that we put on an exhibition of what he calls our 'joint works' and he'll advertise it as 'The Apple Falls From the Tree'. Philly, can you believe such effrontery? Without even discussing it with you!"

Philly is tickled by Yannis' story and proud of the way he evaded the wily dealer's money-baited trap. Realising the next Grier exhibition may not be at his premises Angelo obviously thought to trick an inexperienced aspirant into some commitment. "He is the

sort of dealer who will take advantage of anybody if he can get away with it." Philly complains. "And though it may seem churlish to say so, because obviously I have benefited from it, he is so blatantly commercial."

"They're also so persistent," Yannis adds, eventually winding down and asks, "But, what do you think of Angelo's cheek?"

"He's a rogue but he knows the market, it's great he sees financial potential in your work," Philly enthuses. "Let old Angelo introduce you, he has all the connections and yes, let's have a joint exhibition. I'd be delighted, and so very proud."

"You really mean it, Philly? Do you honestly think my funny pieces are good enough? I mean, it seems a cheek showing them with yours. Besides, isn't it a bit amateur, working in so many different mediums?"

"I wouldn't suggest it if I didn't, and no, of course not, it's diversity. Now, what is your next point?"

"It might seem contradictory after all this, but ... I'm not quite sure how to put it. You see I know this might be a disappointment to you both. I don't want to continue at varsity, not at the moment. I don't sort of feel an academic career is right for me. Maybe later I'll look at further post-grad study. What I want to do is travel and look at some technical stuff. Do a couple of technicon courses, learn about dyes and metals and the things I want to work with while I'm deciding where I'm actually heading."

"That sounds fine," Jen says, "We were in fact thinking it might be a good idea if we all did a trip next year."

"Hang on, Ma. There is more to this too." Yannis finds it difficult baldly to announce his intentions; he knows Jen is not prepared for his sudden exodus from the nest and had hoped to introduce the idea gradually.

"I have other plans. Remember Algaia? Because she is coming over privately, not to give talks or translate or anything, she's not being backed by an organisation who would normally provide somebody to take her around, be a guide sort of thing. So, she's put a proposition to me. She doesn't use a seeing-eye dog. It doesn't fit in with her set-up, and she needs somebody who can get on with their own thing while she is busy, yet be around when she needs help. She thinks maybe if we get on as well with each other as we have done all these years communicating over distances, that we can give it a trial run when she arrives next month. If it works she has suggested that if I will be her eyes she will be the linguist who can make a tour overseas so much easier. She intends spending some months in Greece, but plans to make forays all over Europe. Later she has to be in Russia for at least three months, maybe longer. She has contacts all over and can arrange for me to attend classes, or get part-time work in various work-shops and studios where I can really investigate all the things I'm curious about; crafts like that jewel-like enamel work and burnished matte metal finishes. It would be a wonderful opportunity and I can earn my own keep as I go along. Would you mind terribly if I tried it?"

"But that's absolutely brilliant," Jen enthuses, trying to cover her maternal separation angst.

"Yes," Philly agrees, "it's absolute hell trying to make one's own way in a country where you not only don't understand the language but where all the street signs and menus and everything is written in an indecipherable alphabet, like Greek or Arabic. And, judging from her letters she seems mature, sensible and reliable. She's a couple of years older than you if I remember correctly?"

"Yes, she's exactly two years and three days older. Don't you remember ? We celebrated our birthdays together at the hospital

because the staff said it would be too much extra work and disruption of routine to have two parties for three kids within three days of each other. But I realise that in practical experience and suffering she is way beyond anything I've reached yet. And she is such a thoroughly *nice* person." He looks around, relieved that he has announced his intentions without creating a crisis, and adds as if he were putting the final decoration to a gourmet dish, "*and* she has such a sense of humour."

"We can sort out all the details later," Jen suggests. "You can see how it'll work out when she comes to stay with us." She has a sneaking hope that it won't, then reprimands herself, remembering her own need, at that age, to fly free.

"Of course the house will be echoingly empty without you. I'll have to think of ... something ..."

## CHAPTER 6 MORNING AFTER

By the time they finished their tour of the flat, Philly and Jenny were dusty and laughing about the fragments of cobwebs draped over their clothes. They were also firm friends. Perhaps, being only children, they shared a capacity for creating imaginary companions and situations. Seating herself in the old wing-backed chair with frayed armrests - which Trudie had relegated to the minder's room - Jenny assumed a superciliously haughty air, "Amuse me, Pip," she ordered, trying to wipe cobwebs off her shoulders. "Well, I doesn't rightly know 'ow, Miss Havisham, ma'am," he immediately responded with what he thought the appropriate accent. It was as if some outer layer of restraint had been peeled from them, and as children released from the influence of restrictive adults they lost themselves in the enjoyment of the moment. Jenny had got him to stop apologising for the condition of the place by forgetting herself and pointing out that they were already so dirty a bit more wouldn't make "a mouse's tit's difference". After his initial brief stunned silence, in response to the ÓDowd Irish forthrightness coming so unexpectedly from this unusual girl, he pretended he'd found a mouse in his pocket and chased her around, threatening to put it down her neck as a punishment for being disrespectful to mice.

Breathless they plopped themselves down on a disintegrating sofa which immediately collapsed, a rusted old caster rolling sadly along the uneven floor. "But you know," Jenny said as they moved to a couple of straight-backed chairs, "Pip was supposed to *entertain* Miss Havisham, not play with her, and certainly not chase the poor old bat through all those cobwebs; it was Estelle he was supposed to play with."

“Estelle? Mmmm. Pretty name, horrid girl.”

“Estralita, another version, is my second name ... little star.”

“Jenny Estralita,” he tasted on his tongue, rolling and savouring the last name.

“No,” she laughed. “It’s more confusing, it’s Róisín Estralita Emer.”

“And the Jenny? Where does that come from?”

She explained, telling him about the orphanage, her adoptive parents’ preference for a plain name and the reason they chose Jenny before they knew of the names her mother had given her.

“Apparently,” she concluded, “there was a sealed letter left for me to read when I turned twenty-one. Naturally the nuns opened and read it. Only later when they or the social workers were unable to trace my parents, was it handed to my adoptive parents. Because of the sort of people *they* were it was a case of being torn between honouring my mother’s wishes and, as I started asking questions, assuring me I was not some unwanted by-blow. They compromised by giving me outlines but no details, not letting me see or hold the actual pages in my hands, the only part of my mother I had; that had to wait until my majority. After Mum died I looked for that darn letter – I don’t have their scruples about honouring the wishes of the dead.” The twinge from an old wound, sharp realisation striking again, fraught questions trembled with a long suppressed pain. “Maybe my birth mother isn’t dead?” she added plaintively.

The insistent bass accompaniment to all melodies adoptees compose about their *real* parents syncopated through her thoughts: why? and why? and why? The beat is always there, it interweaves with the unanswered questions about *them*. Who were they? What were they? How and when and why; always the why. *Why did they abandon me? Why was I not wanted?* It reverberates through a

permanently incomplete construction of self-image from which the basic building-blocks of identity are missing.

Jenny, much loved by her adoptive parents, developed a constructive coping mechanism; she liked herself and learnt to laugh at her foibles and weaknesses. As a child pretending she was a song-bird invited into an empty nest - unlike a usurping cuckoo - she was the source of much happiness. Warbling for her supper, she brought immense joy to herself and parents who were somewhat astonished at the new melody and merriment in a once drably quiet home. Brooding seemed pointless, instead she decided to forestall life's sneaky pinches by zapping in first and turning the negative and the nasty aside with humour. Mostly it worked and when it didn't she was able to sustain her sense of the ridiculous.

"Anyhow," she continued, "What with the rush to pack and get everything into storage I couldn't find it, that mysterious letter actually touched by my real mother's hands, so *that's* one of the things I plan to do, for sure, in the immediate future, *find the lost letter.*" Self-mockingly dramatic she turned it, as with so much else, into a game. "It must be somewhere, but who can work out Mum's logic about putting things in safe places." Laughingly she explained how the old woman was famous for putting important or necessary items away so 'safely' they sometimes took years to find again, like keys or the milk cheque. "And I'm afraid I rather just dumped the cupboard contents into cartons with no fine tooth-combing for hidden secrets."

Philly, to avoid thinking of *his* genesis, adroitly turned the subject before it was his turn to tell. "Don't you use any of your rather unusual names? What are they?"

"The first and last Irish as my own mother, the middle Spanish, I think."

Jenny, with the élan of the born story-teller, is adept at taking the smallest bit of information, working and stretching it like a piece of risen dough until it is formed, then baked into a feast. It is almost as if she were there, with the people of whom she speaks, and in her mind's eye she is. Cheeks glowing and hands moving to make outlines in the air, seemingly to touch them, she described a dark, good-looking but frail young man from a hoity toity Spanish family with big estates. In spite of different backgrounds he and the Irish horse-trainer's feisty daughter fall in love and get married secretly. Voice rising and falling dramatically she shaped her tale, embroidering into it her conviction that his wealthy parents probably regarded the girl as no better than a mere stable-hand.

"So when I came along like this," she touched her scar, "there was no way, my mother believed, that she could give me the care and help I needed. My father, still a student and very much under a strong paternal thumb, was seemingly powerless, and, obviously strapped for cash. They had been afraid to tell his parents about the marriage, somehow assuming there would be no off-spring until these were, conveniently, invited. My anticipated arrival created havoc. Apparently if I'd been the perfect son and heir I might have been used to break parental ice and gain acceptance and a cash flow. But then I arrived, somewhat early, while my father was still away, overseas, at university.

"My maternal grandfather was my mother's sole source of support, financial and emotional, it seems, and then there was some accident, he got kicked in the head by a maverick horse and she was left alone, penniless, without shelter, in a strange country. Everything was tied up with his job and her in-laws, unaware of the relationship, merely wired for a replacement to be found before the big race, or blood-stock sale, or whatever it was we were here for.

Dad, trying to be very gentle, told me my natural father was unaware of my survival, so I presume he was told I was still-born, or something like that, to avoid presenting this double whammy to his parents. Not only was I not the saviour son but ..." she shrugged her shoulders, indicating the scar. "So she, my real mother, did what Dad told me is a very Irish Catholic thing - he was also Irish but had come to Africa yonks ages ago - she trusted the nuns, the Church, to solve all problems. Left me on their doorstep with a beautiful layette, which seems also to have disappeared, and a letter telling me she loved me, but ..." Momentarily subdued she added sadly, "I don't even know my proper surname."

Still anxious to divert possible questions about himself Philly consoled, "At least you know something about your background," and played the trump card of diversionary tactics. "What's the Emer then?"

Where other children were brought up on *Mother Goose* and nursery rhymes, Jenny had lived and fought all the legendary battles of Ireland, from those of the original Tuatha Dé Danann through to Michael Collins' exploits during the 'Troubles' which eventually led to Independence. Steeped in Gaelic mythology, folklore and politics, she rather enjoyed the chance to show off a bit and declaimed with suitable drama, "Ah, Emer, *she* was the main wife of Ireland's greatest hero Cúchulainn and was blessed with the six most valued female attributes. Not only was she beautiful but so was her voice and she spoke sweetly, which I think means she had the gift of the gab. But no bimbo this one, a busy little housewife it appears, being famous for her needlework, and to top it all she was chaste and wise. Too much! A tall order to live up to and a rather odd name for a baby born with a deformity. But perhaps my mother was thinking that Emer was only ever once jealous of her husband's

philandering? Seems he was quite a boy with the girls, they were drawn to him like a magnet."

Philly was enchanted but sceptical. "How do you know all this, was it in the letter?"

"Of course not," she laughed. "In my rather isolated childhood, between books and Dad's stories, I had all the old folk-tale and mythological characters as companions. At one stage I was even convinced I was a Centaur and was sure Pegasus would pay me a visit, come down white and shiny one pink dawn to carry me away. I was mad about that horse."

"Where did you want him to take you, to find your own parents?"

"Sometimes, but more often to visit the casts of characters I combined with no regard for the cultures or periods from which they came. It would be nothing for me to have St George's dragon chatting amiably with the Gorgon, or Ariadne consoling herself with some historical Irish hunk like Fionn mac Cumhaill. They were so vivid, there in the room with me, or outside when I hid in the big mulberry tree. I would come down stained purple from consorting with emperors and ripe mulberries to Mum's eternal grumblings that nice girls did not climb trees like little monkeys. They included me all the time, those old heroes and adventurous women, in their conversations. Much more interesting than the girls at school."

"And the Róisín?" he persisted. "I don't think I've ever heard that one before?"

"Nothing if not patriotic, my mother, I assume; it's usually referred to as Roisín Dubh, which means the dark little rose. It was a sort of secret code the dispossessed and repressed Irish used for personifying Ireland. It represented their dream of freedom. They weren't allowed to express open nationalist sentiments, it was

regarded as treason and they were punished, so they composed and sang beautiful sad songs about the ill-treated precious wee rose, as if it were a woman they yearned for, but it was for a free Ireland. Everybody except the English occupiers knew this.

"These songs were rallying calls for young men to revolt against the tyrant occupier and her unjust rule. The modern form is Dark Rosaleen about whom some good and a whole lot of bad poetry has been written. I know all this because of Dad, he was a great one for folklore and Ireland's rebellious history: I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he came to Africa, a man wanted by the Tans, escaping to safety. He drilled me in the infamous Penal Laws so I would know and understand my heritage, and *how important it is to fight to be free.*" Her expression changed and Philly wondered what has dimmed the sparkle. "Yes," she continued, her voice flat, "these things I know, but I don't even know what my mother or father looked like, or what their names were – and that hurts."

"Well, Little Star, at least you know they cared. You were, obviously, a child of love: you know *something* about them. I'm sure the Roisín part was inspired by your melting dark eyes."

"Actually I think that is the Spanish heritage. I wonder about them sometimes, so very very dark with this gingery hair, it's odd."

"I think you're fishing for compliments," he teased. "You know darn well your hair is not ginger, it's gorgeous; gold ... no, coppery, new burnished copper. Beautiful." With one of his quick mood changes, with which Jenny was later to become so familiar he mused, "The name Estelle reminded me of Stella. Stella and Richard. If it hadn't been for them I would have been a right mess, not that I'm not one, but I'd have been a thousand times worse." He pointed at a dark mark against one wall. "We used to put an oil-burning heater in that corner – the place gets cold as sin in winter

... hey ...," returning to the present, "this isn't going to be such a good idea for you in winter, I'm sorry, I forgot."

"That's fine," she reassured, "I only need a place for a few months, while I'm having the scar removed and deciding what to do with the rest of my life, sorting everything out. I can't live with half of me and my things in storage for ever, can I? I really want a home of my own, but I'm not sure if I want it here or ... well, I've seen so little of the world, perhaps I should travel, fly away, be totally free before I make up my mind? But go on, the oil-burning heater in the corner?"

"Yes, at first we thought to put it in the centre of the room so everything around it would be warmed up. It could have been a good idea except somebody continually bumped into it. There was always a pot of soup or stew in winter, or a kettle of something, brewing on the top, and we must have wiped as much off the floor as we consumed, until, in desperation, Stella said that while she was living with a herd of mastodons the heater would remain in a safe place, and it was moved.

"Who were Stella and Richard and why were you here and not in the big main house ... I mean, if it was so cold ...?" Not sure how to phrase her curiosity she left it dangling.

Philly explained that Richard was the 'tutor' who came after Mrs Hoffmann. Tightly corseted with an unbendable straight back she was fair and firm though as rigid as her posture. He remembered the prickly hairs on her chin and joked that it must have been his first experience of gender confusion. After the previous procession of people, some of whom bashed him around and others who kept him on short rations in order to take the extra food home, and all of them teasing and mocking him, she had seemed secure and reliable.

Mrs Hoffmann was the first person to read to him and teach him about all sorts of things. Though there was none of the cuddling and affection a child needs he liked her. It was a strange relationship between two such disparate people, the timid little boy and the large, rather overpowering woman, but it was based on mutual respect. She started to demand things for him and eventually there was a spectacular fight. Trudie, having one of her hysterical temper attacks, dismissed Mrs Hoffmann on the spot. Philly was eight and a bit and remembered the noise although he did not really understand what it was all about. Mrs Hoffman shouting that if Trudie refused to let "ze child" have the medical attention he needed he would grow up a freak, and that she was sick and tired of the meanness and all the extra hours and work she was expected to do when relief sitters never pitched up, and Trudie shouting that she wasn't throwing good money after bad, and that she'd been "crooked by the bloody nuns".

Philly thought the darkness of his memories was a fog over a stormy sea through which he must navigate without losing direction. He tried to explain the trauma of his childhood without being overly dramatic.

This particular scene - as with so many others - occurred at the bottom of the stairs where Trudie picked all her fights, as if she needed tiered steps as spectators. John, hearing the racket, made one of his rare appearances gliding out on light feet from his section of the house, which Philly now used as a studio and living quarters. On the few occasions they met, the withdrawn man was, in his strange way, good to the boy, protecting him from his adoptive mother's excesses. Saying it was not necessary for a child to witness such a degrading scene he told Philly to go and wait in his rooms, the library, where the child was not normally allowed. When

John eventually returned, and found Philly reading a dictionary, he was amused that the youngster was trying to find out what 'degrading' meant.

John felt uncomfortable with children and addressing Philly as if he were an adult told him baldly that Mrs Hoffman would no longer be looking after him. Something in the child's reaction must have indicated that he was upset by this news because John then asked if he was fond of her. It is unlikely that the boy knew what was meant by "fond" for he selfishly replied, "No, but she takes me to the library where I get interesting books, and she reads to me." It was then John found out that Philly was not attending school and had not been since the short time at nursery school.

Philly, finding himself almost entrapped by the one subject he avoids, attempted to skirt around it, "Much later I learned I wasn't welcome there ... that they ... well ... the nursery school couldn't cope with my ... the trouble caused by my 'problem'." He paused, not knowing how, nor wanting, to go into the details of his 'problem'. "Well, because I had, that is ... I have a ... a genital anomaly." He slurred and tumbled over the words, shoving the subject aside with them, rushed on, to avoid discussion. "And, er, and when John allowed me out some time later Mrs Hoffmann was gone," he concluded, changing the subject in a flurry, glossing over how John had again intervened on his behalf when he was left alone in the flat for a week or so. He did not want to recreate his frightened loneliness in the cold rooms.

"I think he insisted that Trudie get a tutor for me rather than the women who really had no idea about looking after a boy, particularly one with my sort of, er, 'problem'. After that he allowed me to go and read in his library when he was not there, and later, when he saw that I respected books, he allowed me to borrow those

I found interesting. Look,” he said after a pause, not sure how to continue, or if he were able to summarise the disaster of his childhood, “this is not actually the cosiest of places - at the moment - to chat, so have a final look around, you’re welcome to the place, but make sure you could put up with it. It’s not all that convenient, with the bathroom and kitchen tacked on to what was, obviously, once the veranda. Then, if you decide you want it we can talk inside.”

Sensing his embarrassment Jenny turned the conversation to the strange construction of the flat which was really a conglomeration of bits added or converted from their original purpose. The narrow room leading from the passage in the main house had an little alcove, a truncated bottom stroke of an upside-down L, into which just fitted a juvenile bed. Its length was extended by an unravelling cane chair which seemed intent on tripping up the unwary. One wall forming this odd space was the half-mast, metre high remains of what had been knocked down to incorporate the veranda. A series of pillars had been left for support so that the little kitchen and bathroom lacked a fourth complete wall. Jenny wondered how anybody could get into that bed from the bottom if they had to clamber over the chair.

“I slept in that cubby-hole. After I put the chair at the bottom, when I outgrew the bed’s length, I used to vault into bed, like a young Minoan athlete challenging the bulls. I didn’t mind that so much as not having any space of my own. As you see, this room is like a hall into all the others, there was never any privacy. There wasn’t even a place to keep my clothes until Richard put up that frame,” Philly pointed to a structure in the corner opposite the door to the passage. It had a rail for hanging a single jacket and some shelves underneath, with a faded curtain which Stella had

fixed around it. The sad door of a kitchen unit drooping open on one hinge revealed the space he had appropriated for his books and personal things. "Eventually, after we had massive fights with her, Trudie let us have a small tottery desk and some rickety chests of drawers. I think they came from the attic," he apologised, waving hands at the desolate furniture, its spirit long since broken, as it disintegrated on the cold concrete floor of the veranda masquerading as a normal series of rooms.

He paused and looked around, perhaps seeing the place with a stranger's eyes. "We also used to wonder about the walls between, they sort of divide the space into little sections, like a warren." He pointed at some shelves against the wall, narrow as a child's hand, explaining how Richard had put them up to display 'treasures' picked up on their walks. "We loved beach-combing and hiking on the mountain. I think it gave me a sense of power to be able to choose and decide what to leave and what to bring home. Richard would explain about different geological formations and rocks and point out interesting objects. I became a dab hand at discovering odd pebbles and gnarled bits of wood twisted in agony. It was the shape and feel I loved, more than their history. I saw hidden faces and limbs and movement in them. The grain spoke to me, I thought they were like me, something imprisoned, frozen inside by an evil magician, begging, begging to be let out. I ruined several kitchen knives and his razor trying to do so, then Richard gave me a simple little set of Xacto craft knives. It was then I really started carving the drift wood and twisted pieces we found all over on our walks. That's where it all started. It was marvellous, I became ... *me*."

"He seems a nice guy, your Richard, tell me about him." Jenny was fascinated, watching Philly's enthusiasm vibrate right

through to his hair. He had combed, with unconscious fingers, the curled black threads of it into a rumpled waving mop.

The situation changed for Philly after Richard came. A student, older than the others, looking for a part-time job to pad his bursary, tutoring, he thought, would entail set hours to arrive, teach and leave. It was touch and go when he found it was a live-in position but the idea of the accommodation and food, included in the deal, appealed to him.

For the strange little boy, always watching silently from the outside, this was his first experience of a normal, happy relationship for Stella bounced into his life with Richard. She turned the ghastly little flat into a home, cosseted, spoilt and cooked for the two males when she visited. Philly could not remember ever having seen a couple laughing together, teasing, showing affection and making a game out of household tasks. For the first time he felt secure and was happy. Knowing they would return he was able to keep himself contentedly busy during their absences. Later, they planned to get married and when Richard gave notice Trudie wanted him to stay. She said Stella could move in if she did the cooking and kept the place clean. She had often stood in when relief sitters did not pitch up. Of course this was a way for stingy Trudie to save extra expense, and for a young couple in their situation, it was a viable financial proposition, accommodation being so expensive.

Jen imagined the ramshackle bachelor student housekeeping on a shoe-string, the poor little unwanted boy relishing the unaccustomed splashes of warmth and happiness, and again felt a surge of protective empathy. "And what happened to you when they were married and he had his days off or his annual leave? He wouldn't have gone off without his new wife, would he?"

“Well, I think that’s one of the reasons Trudie kept her temper in check with him.”

The young couple generally never took time off. They used to joke it was good practice for having their own family, for - often at their own expense - they took Philly along with them when they went away for weekends and even longer periods during school holidays. They were so desperate to get away from the depressing atmosphere and Trudie’s brooding volcanic presence. One never knew when she would explode and the lava of her anger burn everybody within earshot: the kitchen just down the passage was another favourite site for an eruption.

Eventually they balked, refusing to take Philly if his share of the expenses was not paid. After a couple of occasions, when they left him behind, they managed to prove to Trudie that paying his minimal portion was a lot cheaper than getting in a part-time relief minder, who had to be fed as well. They pointed out that they didn’t *have* to take him along on days off. She agreed, eventually, but was so mean she would work it down to the last cent. Of course there was never enough for extras and fun things, ice-cream, movies, special treats like take-aways, or that sort of indulgence. To include Philly - his share, that is - Richard and Stella generally chipped in fifty-fifty. They were great people. Trudie gave barely enough to cover the boy’s keep and sometimes, grudgingly, the entrance-fee when they went out camping. As she refused to pay their food costs during official time off - though they were still looking after the child- she found it cheaper than having him at home with a minder.

Jenny found herself wanting to protect and spoil this man, to make up for all the lost joys of his childhood. Her own adoptive parents, although not extravagant, had not stinted her the small treats children relish and she was shocked at how little love and

attention the boy had experienced. Her obvious interest warmed him and he, enjoying her concern, felt at ease. He was illuminated by enthusiasm over remembered camping and hiking trips. "For me it was marvellous, like being part of a family" he explained, "and for the first time in my life I began to understand about loving relationships, caring and sharing. They taught me about kindness and being human, by their own example. It must have been hell for them always having this odd kid around, but they never made me feel unwanted. When I got older, though, I did realise I was often a fifth wheel, particularly after they were married. I often felt uncomfortable and embarrassed ... you know. The place was too small and inconvenient for two and a half adults." Philly, ill at ease at the direction into which he had stumbled quickly veered away and added, "I think they felt sorry for me. Richard would tell me that I must understand he was only a paid employee and the time would come when he would finish his studies and have to leave, but we could stay friends."

"And did you?" Jenny had heard the loneliness, a grace note, slipping unobtrusively into the narrative. Only her youth and the shyness of inexperience prevented her from placing comforting arms around this stranger who had, unasked and unexpectedly, bound her to him with half-recognised cords of empathy. She knew it was sheer luck she had escaped a similarly unloved and lonely childhood. And he, unconsciously aware of the warmth of her compassion, crept emotionally nearer with the hesitancy of a stray cat. He had never spoken about his childhood before. Even the two old men, his friends Sepe and Bruno, were kept at arm's length, their sharing confined to mutual creative interests.

Philly's time at university had been spent in terror of a personal involvement which would reveal his secret and his shame –

his 'problem'. Not unfriendly, but diffident and unsure, he had made none but intellectual contacts, talking outside lecture theatres, listening when others in the group gathered in clusters to argue and laugh. He often thought they were like birds, flocking, wheeling, chattering and separating into small clusters or, more poignantly, pairing off. He knew this was not for him, was afraid to chat to the young women who were put off by his tentative attitude. After lectures he withdrew like some small, dark-haired forest mammal scurrying away from the danger of scooping predator and greedy eyes. Friendship was not something that came easily to him after the loss of Richard.

"Did we stay friends?" he repeated her question, avoiding the painful 'no'. "I don't like to think about that. It was the worst of Trudie's crazy tantrums that ended things. She knew, in a couple of months when qualified in his profession, Richard would be leaving, to start a proper job. As I said, he'd not taken leave for a good many years, allowing it to accumulate. She must have realised he had a lump sum due, in lieu of this, which she would have to pay when he left, and though it wasn't that much she had a thing about money, couldn't bear to part with it, stinking rich as she was. They'd been saving up for years and had planned on the untaken leave pay as part of the deposit for a place of their own."

Aware that her question had been side-stepped because Philly found it hard to express his pain, Jen gently tried sailing towards the problem on another tack. "Weren't you scared, or upset at the idea of them leaving? After all they were the only family you had?" Jen's interest and concern softened - like hot chocolate sauce poured over ice-cream - the coldness of his reserve. It was catharsis. His frozen memories, melting, poured out. "It was a lot more complicated than that. I was fifteen by then and Richard and

Stella had expanded my mind and my spirit. They had set me on my future path because it became quite a game to draw up alternative plans to show how we would have reconstructed the flat. We competed to see who could design the most comfortable living area, using the same amount of space. I'm sure that my interest in architecture and in designing the use of space came from those endless discussions and drawings. We measured and re-measured, we came up with some crazy ideas, putting in imaginary mezzanine areas to accommodate storage and sleeping space. That's when I became interested in the problems stairs present."

Jenny tried to imagine how three of them had managed in the cramped quarters, especially with a boy growing into a teenager, and compared it with the roominess she had enjoyed in the old farmhouse.

"Go on with the story," she urged. "What happened at the end?"

"I must admit I was looking forward to having the flat to myself. He paused and mumbled too softly for Jenny to catch the words, "Those awful night noises from their room ..." In response to Jenny's "What's that?" he continued, "Obviously Trudie was not going to employ another minder. Richard had, with her agreement, arranged for me to complete my final year of school at one of those cram colleges where all one did was the school work. There were no compulsory extra-curricular activities, so I would not be embarrassed by being forced to do sports with all the locker-room and shower problems it would have entailed. Boys can be such beasts .

"We'd planned for me to visit them and were to continue with our camping trips. They had arranged all this with Trudie. Perhaps she thought to pick a fight and avoid the expense the promised

visits entailed. It would no longer be necessary for her to contra my costs against a replacement minder's salary. Whatever her reason she excelled herself and did something she'd never done before. It was a Sunday morning, a rainy cold day with the wind tearing and sobbing at the windows to come in. Normally we were early risers but though it was after seven it was still dark enough to need a light to read. And this is what I was doing, snug in my little capsuled corner when, without knocking, Trudie sneaked in.

"It's strange how light-footed some big people can be. I don't think she realised that little alcove off the stark narrow room - more like a draughty passage - was all the sleeping and living-space I had. She probably hadn't given it a thought, and surprised to see me there hissed, 'What are you staring at you little brat, and why are you lazing in bed instead of being up and doing something useful to justify your deformed existence?' I called out to warn them, but obviously they never heard."

Stella was pregnant, still in the early stages. Nobody knew how Trudie had found out, they never told, but perhaps one of her maids had seen the boxes of booties, or heard them laughing over the knitting. Trudie resented laughter and happiness in others and could have been curious as to its cause. Stella had knitted a dozen different bootie styles, embroidered roses, put little rosettes of lace on them, boxed them beautifully in a sort of egg-box carton she made from the backs of old note-pads and taken them to work to show 'the girls'. Somebody had insisted on buying the box as a gift for a friend who had just had a baby, paid a good price too, so Stella came home empty-handed as far as booties were concerned but with orders for more than she could make. She had both Richard and Philly knitting, said it was a perfectly acceptable male activity; the original old fishing guernseys were knitted by men, the fishermen of

the Channel Islands, on sharpened pieces of wire, and if it was good enough for these tough guys, well what made them think they were so special? It was a way to earn extra money, and she gave Philly his fair share. It was hilarious. Joking and horsing around in the beginning they made many mistakes which Stella covered up with little embroidered roses. This became the most popular design and later, when it wasn't necessary, she had to continue her 'sprinkled rose-bud style'

"You know," Jen remarked astutely, "you are doing exactly what I do, waffle on or change the subject when I don't want to face something unpleasant. It's OK. I know how one wants to avoid rough edges of the past scraping again. And, by the way, I think your Stella was absolutely right. I was son and daughter and learnt to do all the boy tasks as well as the girl skills. I think it balances a person, develops both the male and female sides, makes life a lot rounder and more interesting." She added shoring up, with little bricks of positivity, the walls of her defences, "Perhaps it makes it easier to be alone."

They were both quiet for a while, companionably so, with no sense of awkwardness or strain. Her smile, comforting as a handclasp, spoke her understanding.

"Would you rather not tell me what happened?" she asked, then repeated reassuringly, "It's OK."

"You're right. I do do that, avoid the subject, waffle around," and going off at a tangent, as if to demonstrate, he asked, "By the way, do you like waffles, the ones you eat, I mean? I adore them, but it hardly seems worth all the trouble making them for one."

Jenn's laugh was infectious. He joined in and found it loosened something tight within himself, something that had gagged his ability to speak and confide his pain. She responded to his

question, still chuckling. "You are the pits, much cleverer than I have ever been at changing the subject, but yes, not only am I a waffle fan but I've just bought a dinky little self-cleaning waffle pan, haven't tried it out yet, thanks to Mrs Bitchy Landlady. May I invite you, when I have a socket of my own in which to plug it, to a waffle feast?"

Philly was enchanted by this girl; she soothed his prickliness, he felt at home with her and, after accepting her invitation with a parodied formality of clicked heels and hand on heart, dared to open up. "I've never spoken about it before, perhaps it is a release to do so. As I was saying, Trudie slithered in, bad-mouthed me, then made a dash for their room, Richard's and Stella's. Again she didn't knock and flung the door open. Apparently they were both naked, in bed, and that monster pulled the covers off, obviously homed in on Stella's very small bulge and started screaming and saying the most horrific things. I'll never forget it, the words and things she said, revolting."

He shuddered, pulling a lemon-tasting face as he described how the ranting woman called Stella a whore and a slut. Saliva and words flying she spat out that Richard was a pervert, and graphically in the foulest language described how and what they must have done. Yelling that she didn't want them under her roof a minute longer she tried to herd them out of the room, naked as they were. She made such a clamjamphrie, screaming incoherently, throwing things around, that again John - who fortunately was on one of his rare visits at home - came to intervene. And again he sent the boy to his library to avoid the scene. It took the two men some considerable time and effort to physically control the ranting Trudie and drag her back to her room downstairs, the one they called her lair, with the one-way spyglass window.

"I don't know the details." Philly continued, frowning into the past. "There was an awful lot of noise. She carried on like a mad woman, a fulminating banshee, and I think by then she really was seriously mentally unstable."

He never knew if Trudie had actually physically attacked Stella, who ended up in hospital, but naturally Richard was so concerned about her, that they might lose the baby, that he did not say goodbye when he rushed off with her to get medical attention. Perhaps he threatened to sue, for John went to a lot of trouble to sort everything out. He had all their things professionally packed, he found and paid for alternative accommodation. They never came back.

By the time John sorted the frightened boy out and he had crept back, confused and miserable, to the wrecked flat, he was himself a wreck, shaking and jumping at every sound. Met by shattered crockery, the mirrors broken, splintered glass crunched underfoot, and the smell of vomit where Stella had been unable to make it to the bathroom in time, he felt utterly helpless and wanted to run away.

"Thank heavens I had the good sense to realise I must finish my education before I could escape, so I started cleaning up. John left immediately on another trip without telling me where they were and though Richard did phone some weeks later - when he knew Trudie was no longer there - to say goodbye, and that everything was OK, and they had arranged with the firm he was going to work for to take a post overseas immediately, I never saw them again."

"Oh my god! What an horrific story. And where was Trudie, in a nut-house where she belonged no doubt?"

"No, that was the most macabre part. They took her to that room and, as John told me later, sedated her with a great slug of

whiskey. She seems to have been a bit of a secret lush.” He paused and ruefully admitted that this might seem rather like pointing out another’s mote when one’s own beam was so flagrantly visible. “Some hours later the maid took the usual morning tray with coffee and something to eat, knocked on the door and was met with a tirade of foul abuse. ‘I’ll bloody-well tell you when to make food, who do you think is the boss around here?’ sort of thing, followed by a tirade of very insulting names. This maid, the one who usually attended to Trudie’s personal wants, quietly placed the tray inside the door, took off her uniform and left the house.”

Several days went past in the main house without Trudie reappearing. The staff that hadn’t walked out couldn’t give a damn if she wanted to starve herself and nobody was going to knock on that door until summoned. I had not been in the house since Richard came, with the exception, of course, of that terrible morning when John sent me to his rooms, so I had no idea of the routine or what was going on. And naturally I wanted to avoid Trudie like a swamp fever. It was four days later when the staff came in a group to call me to open the door. Something was wrong they said, something was smelling. Can you imagine my trepidation? Naturally I refused at first, but there was nobody else. John was away, overseas. I didn’t know where to contact Richard. I was absolutely on my own.”

He paused and for the first time Jen saw him clasp his side with one hand and place his face at a slanted angle in the palm of the other. It was a posture which suggested to her that he was hugging himself for reassurance. Taking a deep breath he dropped his arms. She noticed his hands were clenched as he continued.

“She was sprawled out of her chair, half on the floor, with the phone still dangling from one hand. I remember noticing it was the

left one and irrelevantly wondering why, when she was right-handed. She had soiled herself and smelled terrible. She was swollen and blueish-black, and ... very dead. Even I knew that. But I didn't know much else and hadn't a clue what to do. Then I thought to contact Auntie Mary who had eventually left when Trudie accused her of stealing something she'd lost and then refused to pay Mary's wages, even when the item was found later in the linen basket by the laundry maid. Later, after the autopsy, they said she'd had a massive heart attack. So," he concluded, "that's me."

"What an absolutely terrible thing to happen to a child. Oh I'm so sorry, Philly. I had such caring adoptive parents, oh you poor thing. Are you OK now?"

"Not really, isn't it obvious?"

"I don't know what to say ..." she faltered.

"Perhaps we'd better just look at the flat as we intended to do. I'm sorry. I had no intention of dumping all this on you, I don't know what came over me, I'm sorry."

"No, friends goof off together and share miseries and I think, perhaps, we are friends? We've done both today."

Making a final inspection of what Philly called "the dungeon". they explored every corner and cupboard, discovering abandoned artefacts of his unhappy buried childhood. Jenny had climbed onto a small stool to investigate a top shelf from which something dangled and excavated a large rubber duck behind a pile of raggedy, mouldering torn-up towels. Peering at the blurred writing in marker-ink on its base she deciphered the name 'Peter'. "Are you travelling incognito or did you steal some other poor little boy's toy?" she teased. He explained it had been a second-hand gift from Auntie Mary, the servant who had been kind to him and with whom he still stayed in touch, and then entertained Jenny with the story

of how he had learned to read because of that present. His minder at the time had been the not unkind but rather stolid Mrs Hoffmann, mit' two ffs und two nns please as she'd constantly had to remind Trudie who insisted on delaying the payment of the salary cheque by misspelling the name.

"What a monster the woman was," Jenny commented indignantly. She was fascinated to hear how the small boy had nagged to know what the writing on the duck's belly meant, and how, having learnt the sounds of these letters insisted on learning others. Mrs Hoffmann, Germanic and thorough, never thought it unusual for a child still playing with bath toys to be learning to read and was pleased by his quick curiosity and determination, for read he did within a very short time. He become obsessed with it, reading every printed word within reach. It was his constant nagging for 'more words' that led to the exasperated Mrs Hoffman taking him to the library. This, more than anything else, helped to shape his hungry mind, allowing him to escape from his frequent lonely misery into a magic world.

There was something about Jenny's presence, attentive and interested, which enabled Philly to present as amusing many incidents which had been painful. He was giddy with surprise at his own blossoming, telling humorous stories, laughing and joking with a woman without the usual stammering stiffness. But she saw through the self-mockery. She longed to put her arms around him and comfort him but knew this would send him skittering back into his self-effacing solitude.

He lapsed into his usual diffidence again, pushing with his toe at a disintegrating doorstep-brick disguised as a basket of flowers, and supposed the flat wouldn't be of any use to her. She teased for a while, asking if it came with or without the mice and cobwebs, and

was there perhaps a resident ghost whose whims would have to be considered? Becoming practical she checked about hot water, and electricity accounts, then decided the flat might well be the temporary solution she needed. It didn't grab her but would do, and there was something about the man ...

Jenny mock-seriously told him it seemed her belongings would be safe there, during her absences in hospital, if he could guarantee to discipline the mice. But there was a problem: she intended buying a small car as it was impossible to manage without transport, so she had to have shelter for the vehicle as well.

Philly took her to the huge triple garage which, like the flat, had been unopened for years, and was, if possible, in an even greater state of ruin. She was fascinated by the beautiful old car which stood dejected, sunk on deflated tyres under a dust-cover. Surprised that he had never learned to drive Jenny offered to teach him. In her imagination she could see the solitary boy, after the horrific events of which he had just told her, scarcely daring to breathe in case something else went wrong, keeping his head down, glued to his studies, retreating deeper and deeper into his loneliness. Scolding him for neglecting the vehicle she pointed out its value and said he should do as she had done, sell it to a collector. Gradually the relationship was assuming a shape it was to continue for the many years it took Philly to accept that he too could participate in and even expect to enjoy the good things of life.

After Philly discovered, while they were feasting on pancakes, that they had both been left at the same institution, they were kept so busy comparing notes and discussing the problems an adopted child experiences that time somehow slipped by unnoticed. It was almost midday before Jenny pointed out she would have to find accommodation until the flat had been fixed up. This led to Philly's

field of competence. A few phone calls and he had arranged with painters, plumbers and carpenters. It was left for Jenny to suggest that the rooms would have to be cleaned and emptied before the painters could start and that it would take a good few hours, maybe days, and several people to do so. Still arguing, in between phone calls, about the advantages or disadvantages of not having relatives who always seem to insist on comparing one's looks with those of some unspeakable family member, they were unable to locate a cleaning service willing to do the job immediately. It was then that Jenny saw another side of Philly. She overheard the conversation.

"Auntie Mary, this is Philly and I'm in big *BIG* trouble." He listened for a while, chuckling before continuing. "You are the only person I know who knows how to clean a place properly, and yes, you were absolutely right, I should not have locked the flat and left it, but now I need it to be cleaned. What must I do?" The voice at the other end sounded indignant. "No, of course not," he retorted, "surely you know me better than that? I would never expect you to climb about cleaning it, but you do have lots of nieces and grandchildren and I'll pay you twice what the cleaning service charges if you'll organise and supervise them and start today. Get a taxi from the station, naturally I'll pay all your fares, and in the meantime I'll go and buy whatever you need. Just tell me what to get, you're the expert." Then, after another torrent of speech, "No, I'm not planning to move back in, or open a shebeen or do anything silly; I want it for a friend who needs a temporary place, and OK, I promise I won't do anything rash until I speak to you first and get your advice." Concluding the conversation he explained that Auntie Mary had been the wiry old coloured housekeeper who'd put up with Trudie's insults, for a longer than usual time, in order to keep an eye on him, and possibly to outwit the woman they both considered

their enemy. He was even able to chuckle at what had once made him cower.

Turning to Jenny, however, his confidence seemed to seep away, "Well, the place may be clean by tonight but certainly not cleared out and painted, and that doesn't solve your immediate problem, so ...?"

Jenny, in a holiday mood, remembered spending a marvellous weekend, when she was a child, at a little fishing village along the coast. It had become quite popular and she wondered if they might have a room for her at the old guest house, and if the fishermen still sold slithery silver fish on the quayside.

"Then I can combine business with pleasure." She explained that a farmer in the area produced small quantities of superb mohair wool which he rationed out to 'deserving' craftspeople. "If I'm lucky I might be able to get some."

Philly, intrigued at learning that she had several spinning wheels, was genuinely interested to find out more about the craft. The conversation twirled around, danced off, returned to the original starting point: they were having a wonderful time, two loners discovering the solace of companionship.

He could never later explain his temerity but found himself suggesting, to his absolute amazement, that perhaps they could both go, it would be fun, and they could book in at separate establishments if it made her feel more comfortable.

Later that same afternoon, having left Auntie Mary supervising her team with more than enough cleaning equipment and food to set up in business, Jenny and Philly caught the last bus down the coast, "by the skin of their teeth" as she chided him. Thinking about it later she realised that Philly's apparent

extravagance with food supplies for the cleaning team was his tactful and gentle way of being charitable without offending.

\*       \*       \*       \*

That weekend was one of those occasions when everything seemed to flow and the rapport established between them earlier fused into a solid bond of friendship and affection with all the expectations and commitments of close family ties. A wet grizzly mist blowing in from the sea had kept most people indoors, so walking with the gulls along the beach they revelled in the apparent isolation of the place. In the distance larger gulls cursed the wind-churned water as they hovered, waiting for a chance to swoop in and grab between the slapping rise and swirling fall of waves. After all the talk they walked in a silence that was warm and accepting.

Early the next morning, on the way to the Farmer's Co-op. where Jenny was to meet the recalcitrant mohair producer, they passed a newly established car dealer. In the display window, smugly flaunting its attractions, sat a little yellow car exactly the type and colour she had considered buying. "What do you think of it?" she asked Philly who had no hesitation in admitting his complete ignorance, but yes, *he* liked the look of it, and what did she think?

They took the car out for a run to see how it handled and half an hour later a delighted salesman made a very quick sale on condition he'd get the licence and insurance fixed that very day. Although the conditions of her parents' wills kept her on a rather stringent budget, except for educational purposes, the old car had been hers to dispose of as she wished, and she had done so wisely,

approaching vintage car associations and playing one collector against the other. Those years of accompanying Dad on business trips, when he concluded deals with his customers, had put an experienced bargaining head on her young shoulders. Then there was something about the last thirty-six hours or so, this strange but absorbing new friendship which demanded some grand gesture; in any case she'd intended getting transport so that was one item ticked off the list.

"Of course you know what we are going to do for the rest of the weekend?" she asked Philly who had a pretty shrewd idea but felt that if he did not name what he dreaded it might be avoided, so he merely shook his head.

"You are going to learn to drive."

"But the weather ..." he started to object.

"Is perfect," she countered. "The country roads will be comparatively empty and if you start in the worst conditions, well, things can only improve."

Philly was a bit surprised when her frugal impulses had her down at the bus station selling their return tickets at only a few cents below the going price, but, as she pointed out "The money will help pay for petrol, besides I can't bear to waste things, it seems sinful somehow, when hundreds, no, thousands of people are so deprived." The journey home was filled with their friendly arguments about how it could or could not make the slightest bit of difference to the underprivileged if people learned to be less wasteful.

"It's amazing," Philly commented, "we disagree, we have different points of view, but our discussions are so amicable. I really enjoy having a ding-dong verbal sparring match with you."

“That,” Jenny commented with a wisdom beyond her years, “is because you probably don’t have any really strong feelings about many things. It’s think-feel, not gut-feel for you.” He acknowledged her diagnosis with a smile, and knew in his innermost heart and chary gut that this girl had already started to change the world for him.

University of Cape Town

## CHAPTER 7 DISINTEGRATION

The smells of freshly baked bread and chocolate cake create a relaxed atmosphere, as Philly and Yannis carry food into the big room they call 'the family den'. It would hardly please an interior decorator as each of them has contributed a personal touch. Jen's travelling spinning wheel is not just there for decoration, but so that she can keep her hands busy - as other women pick up their knitting - while relaxing, particularly on a rainy winter's night when the huge fireplace is a magnet for the family and occasional friends and neighbours. Although they have no need for much socialisation and seldom entertain formally, people seem drawn to them - perhaps because they are curious - and are inclined to pop in. There have been occasions though, when not wanting to disrupt the serenity of the evening, the family have pretended not to be home and left the door-bell unanswered in the same spirit in which they pull out the phone plug when wanting to concentrate on a project or enjoy an evening undisturbed by outsiders.

Philly considers the fireplace one of his greatest achievements. Similar to the inglenook he had constructed in the old house in which Jenny had slept on the red leather sofa the night they got to know one another, this one, however, was built for more practical purposes. Designed like those in old cottage kitchens it has ovens built into the sides where home-made bread can be baked: there is a grid which can be turned, as well as several huge hooks from which pots and kettles of various sizes are suspended. Where other families have barbecues out in the garden they picnic around the fireplace where they find it comfier to read or sketch or make things while, at the same time, enjoying the informality and relaxation of

the setting. Philly and Jen know that this very centre of their shared conjoined home is the place where they all feel most secure and have decided it is the best place in which to unravel the problems of the past – and the present.

Although the weather is really too warm to require a fire it is difficult to resist the comfort of a huge log smouldering slowly. It will prevent disrupting the flow of conversation, they rationalise, for they will not have to go into the kitchen for refills. They place a big metal coffee-pot and several pottery bowls of food along the sides of the fire.

“Right, I’ll start as I promised. After Philly and I had examined the flat ...” Jen begins, but Yannis, somewhat shamefacedly interrupts.

“Look, I know this sounds crazy after the way I have carried on, insisting I have to know all the facts immediately if not yesterday, but before you say anything I think I must say something, or rather ...”

“Are you on the verge of shocking us witless?” Jen challenges, unconsciously revealing her own fear.

Unusually for him Yannis does not respond jokingly. “No, well, I hope not. What I want you both to be absolutely sure and certain of is that what I am going to say, to *ask*, is not influenced by what you may tell me. This is why I’m chipping in, beforehand, so that you understand this is spoken from where we are *now*. I wouldn’t want you to think it is caused by any revelations that are bound to be a bit disruptive. It arises from our happy loving family, and I’ve thought about it for a very long time.” He flounders, the weight of what he wants to suggest squashing out his usual exuberance.

“Go ahead, Pup.” Philly encourages.

“OK, but first I have a question. Just *one* question,” he hastens to add as Jen responds irritably with, “You and your bloody questions!”

“You see,” he continues, “the answer might reflect on what I want to say. Ma, why did you give me my father’s name if, as I gather, the marriage wasn’t altogether a screaming success?”

“It was the only thing I could give you from your father.”

“And then,” Philly adds “we found out later that we couldn’t even be sure of that, because it turned out George had got forged papers for more than half of ‘his boys’, so that if your father came from Albania, as he told your mother he had, then it seems odd he had such a Greek name, but who knows?”

“Well, that’s fine, so ... there are no sensitive sentimental issues at stake there?” He had suspected there would not be as his mother had legally changed the unwieldy surname to a crisp Nicol even before his birth.

“Not really, why do you ask?” Jen replies, skirting the unspoken.

“That’s what I’m coming to Ma. Well, that brings me to ... er ... starting with a substitute to replace my absence underfoot.” He looks at them both, grits his teeth and releases the welter of his thoughts. “Why don’t you and Philly get married and then he can adopt me officially and we can all have the same name and he can move in with you and you can use his part for exhibitions and ...” he blurts out in one spurt before losing courage. “You see, then I can be Phillip Grier the second and my son will be the third,” he adds somewhat plaintively. “The Angelas, I mean Angelos, thought Pup was some sort of abbreviation for Phillip, and so have a lot of other people ...” he peters out.

Philly bends over, he covers his face with his hands. As his shoulders begin to shake Jen and Yannis look at him, appalled. Because he had for years fantasised about them being a 'proper family', had for so long wanted to be accepted and acknowledged as Philly's son, Yannis only now realises he is breaking the family's strict code of respecting each other's personal privacy. Feeling awkward and guilty he assumes Philly is laughing, laughing at *him*, at what he has suggested. He blurts out, "Don't *laugh* at me Philly ... don't laugh. I'm sorry ... so sorry ... forgive me ... I had no right ... I have been so presumptuous. Please forget all about it ... I ... no, I can't say I didn't mean it. I was just ... I was ... stupid." As he stumbles from the room he hears Philly gasp, "No ..." and does not wait to hear the crushing end, curling up inside with the feeling that he has ruined everything for all of them. But he had been so sure ... particularly after they'd agreed to 'sort things out between them'. Yannis leaves the house burning with a small boy's sense of shame and desolation. He walks with no definite destination, no plan in mind. Several hours later he is still walking.

"No," Philly sobs, as without warning the overwhelming emotion, engendered by Yannis' request, rips away a segment of his childhood amnesia. "No, it's *not* Philly, *she* was Philly, I'm Martin. They took her away, dragged her out of the car and I called and I called, but she never came back. I think they killed her ... and I wouldn't think about it, wouldn't admit she'd never come back, just called and called ..."

Jen, meanwhile, though also fleetingly having assumed Philly is laughing - they have never seen him cry and he has always acknowledged this inability as one of his problems - recognises that Philly is in the grip of reactions he cannot control. She moves over to him, calling over her shoulder to Yannis, "Come and help, he is

*not laughing.*" Her son does not reappear, he has not heard her: she is left to cope with the crisis alone.

Philly is wracked by sobs. His hysterical reaction to Yannis' request - the very thing he has desired all the boy's life, but been too hesitant, too lacking in confidence to suggest - has triggered off and released tears. Long withheld, this emotional release had tightly suppressed feelings and unwanted memories which now envelop him, battering his fragile sense of stability. They rage chokingly, desert dust storms of profound pain whipping through the protective amnesia cloud. All the deliberately forgotten horror of that long-ago evening, the shock of what followed, the magnitude of a child's terror which he could never face, had initially been kept at bay behind the tears the little boy had refused to shed. Now, pushed beyond his capacity to control himself, Philly's weeping has breached the unshed dammed-up sorrow. He is washed away, gasping and shuddering. He is both adult and three-year old child who has seen his parents murdered in a high-jacking.

He can't remember details, just the violence, his mother being dragged from the car and the men doing awful things to her, terrible things, and stabbing at her afterwards, and blood, all the blood over her lovely face. Then a loud bang and the man, his father, thrown out and the strangers driving away with him still in the back, where he had been asleep before the noise had woken him. Too frightened to make a sound he had only started to scream when they drove off leaving his parents behind. It seems there was an eternity of being kept in a dark, smelly place by these strange, nasty people who'd argued and joked about selling him like the stolen car. He remembers vaguely that somebody had said, "Nobody wants a child who never stops screeching, particularly one whose pisser thing is all bugged up," so he'd continued wailing, calling for his mother

by the pet name both he and his father used, hoping they would take him back to his parents. It seemed so obvious that *they* would want him, he was sure they would come and find him, until he, eventually, believed they had abandoned him. Broken-hearted, hungry, cold and afraid, he became silent except for the constantly repeated “Philly”, the only thing left from his early childhood. The rest was a blank.

Ever since he'd brought them home from the hospital, Philly had been afraid to broach the subject of adoption for he did not want to upset the delicate equilibrium they achieved. Fearing rejection, he has carried the pain of not having the courage to ask. Jen had sunk deep into a post-partum, post-operative depression, and the child was so small and fragile that he had cancelled all his commitments and nursed them both for months until suddenly one day, for no obvious reason, she'd come out of her gloom and told him. “I can't continue to stay here.” It was as if clinging to her independence had been the only thing that mattered. She had insisted all along on remaining in the flat, refusing to move into the house. Atypically she seemed unaware of the inconvenience, or that, for months, he'd slept on a stretcher in the house pantry near to the open inter-leading flat door. He was always close at hand if she needed him or if the baby cried at night before she was strong enough to cope.

He had been unable to reply until Jen, realising he'd taken her statement as a rejection of himself, explained that she wanted a proper home for her son, a house full of love and fun and laughter, not this flat with its inconvenient design and chilling memories freezing her up. And as for the main house, well, *it* was a museum,

wasn't it? The glass portion was never meant for kids. She hated the place. It reminded her all the time of the terrible stories he'd told her about his childhood and how he'd explained that the reverse one-way glass was a way of hitting back at the memory of Trudie lurking behind her hidden pane of one-way glass. The image of that terrible woman would always be there. Jen pictured her waiting until Philly came along, clinging fearfully to his current minder – if he were allowed to do so – then, just as they were at the bottom of the old wooden stairs, creaking their way up to the inconvenient laundry room off the first landing, she would pounce, like some bogey-man or monster with which the more ignorant minders frightened Philly into good behaviour.

Surely, she persuaded him, he wanted to get away from the memories of Trudie rushing from her lair, always finding some reason to make a scene. She did it deliberately to humiliate anybody the boy liked, so that they would resign, often on the spot. Then he would be blamed and told nobody stayed because he was impossible. At other times there would be screeching battles between two aggressive women spoiling for a fight. These were the times he heard that he was a 'freak', or a 'weirdo'. After the departure of yet another minder there were occasions when he remained alone for days, locked in the flat so that he 'would not cause trouble', his food handed to him through the bars of the gate by the kitchen staff, if and when they were kind, or remembered.

Reminding him of all the negative connotations the house had, Jenny then reassured Philly she did not intend to leave *him*, he was essential to their lives, but she had no intention of bringing up *her* son in the shadow of Trudie Harding-Jones.

Of course that was when he should have asked her to marry him, but again the fear of rejection, the thought of his own

deformity stood in the way. They had been so happy. As soon as she started dreaming about having her own place, a home where she could express her personality and have the space she had longed for since leaving the old farm-house, Jen started to bloom again, teasing, singing funny little made-up songs. "A home, tra-la, I'm going to have a home again," she warbled to a variety of tunes, and made rude jokes about the many unsuitable houses she viewed, driving all over with the baby in his bassinet wedged safely on the back seat of the car. And Philly had been as terrified, then, of disrupting what he considered his tenuous position in her life, as of moving away from the only home he knew. Always unsure and indecisive it was difficult enough for him to make one big change without suggesting another.

It had taken years of Jen's unfailing cheerful reassurance and backing-up to reach his present relaxed but fragile self-confidence. He hardly ever scuttled off any more into his section of the house, to hide his feeling of inadequacy. And now, like Yannis, he believes that he has blown everything apart, that their whole world is capsizing through his stupidity.

"I never laughed, I wasn't laughing, Pup, my boy ...," his voice fails under the overwhelming misery that pounds through him. It feels as if his whole body, his entire life is being shredded, and he can not stop the shuddering and the sobbing and is ashamed and humiliated. He realises he has lost control and can do nothing about it.

By now Jen has her arms around him, holding him tightly, rocking him, trying to comfort him as an adult holds an hysterical child she is trying to soothe. Torn between Philly's desolation and what she realises is Yannis' despair she is, herself, distraught.

## CHAPTER 8 REINTEGRATION

It is dark and a spiteful fickle wind is blowing the rain first in one direction then another as if to make sure everything is splashed and tormented from all sides. Philly, still vibrating emotionally and physically from his *crise de nerfs*, is walking backwards and forwards, climbing to the attic floor to look if he can see 'his boy' returning. Jen is anxious not only about her son who has, apparently, gone out without jacket or wallet; she has worried about Philly's mental state ever since the strange emotional seizure shone its brutal spotlight, burning selective holes in his amnesia about everything before 'the home'. He is babbling, "Oh Pup, why can't I ever do anything right, Pup why can't I ever do anything right?" His concern about the boy exacerbates the stress of his earlier turmoil.

Jen sees him scramble through desk drawers, asks what he is looking for and is frightened when he replies, "I'm looking for Bruno's phone number, he took to Pup, showed him his 'trade secrets', remember? The miniatures ... he gave Pup his precious miniatures and tools when, when ..." He trails off forgetting that Bruno has been dead for over five years. Everything he owned, including the contents of his little shop, he had left to Yannis because he was impressed by the boy's interest and keenness to learn. Philly only remembers Jen saying 'We can always make room for the miniatures but NO mice,' but forgets the context or the occasion. He suggests they phone Bruno to find out if Pup has gone there.

Not wanting to make him more anxious, Jen tells him she has already phoned every possible and impossible person to whom the

boy could have gone: nobody has seen Yannis. They do not sleep that night.

“Oh teenagers walk out all the time, you’ll hear from him sure enough when he runs out of cash,” the police say. They are not concerned. Yannis has disappeared, left without clothes or money, but they take no notice of these facts and laughingly assure Philly and Jen that all parents think their kids are “not that sort of youngster.” The sergeant’s refusal to take the matter seriously turns to irritation as he explain that a person must be gone for a certain time before even being listed as missing, the police can’t waste their time running after spoilt, irresponsible young people, or wives, who shove off overnight after a tiff at home. When they try to explain Yannis is not a teenager, will, in fact, be twenty-one in a couple of weeks, he ignores them, calls out rudely, “Next, move on there.” There is no help from that quarter.

Nobody has eaten since the previous day; the food and coffee pot of their anticipated feast stand untouched alongside the dead fire. As Jen bends to remove them the cold ash spirals up in response to the movement. Philly crouches down, scoops up a double handful of ash and smears it over his face as if washing it with soap. Jen tries to get him to have a relaxing hot bath but he ignores her and sits swaying and moaning in short little grunts of pain. Again – as when his childhood world was shattered - he has stopped talking. He ignores all her questions and drones in a childish monotone, wailing, “Pup, Pup, Pup.” His last coherent comment has been, “He is also gone and it is my fault, all my fault.”

A monstrous gelid hand grasps Jen, it squeezes thought and action until nothing is left but juddering fear, freezing her mind.

The phone rings, she jumps to answer it, hoping. It is a wrong number, but the irritation and movement reactivate her.

They have no family doctor since their seldom called-upon GP emigrated and Yannis has long since stopped being taken for regular paediatric check-ups and inoculations. Jen remembers that, as a result of their talk, Philly phoned to make an appointment with a specialist. He had taken the practice over from the previous doctor whom Philly consulted years before, when the courage to proceed with the recommended surgery failed him. She phones now, explains the situation, is told by a somewhat irate voice that he is a urologist and is certainly not going to make a house-call on an hysterical middle-aged man; but Jenny is persistent, pointing out the patient has an appointment the following week. The upshot is that she cleans then bundles a dazed Philly into the car, drives him to the private hospital where the specialist has agreed to meet them if they allow him to call in whatever colleagues he thinks necessary. Jen is wary of placing Philly in psychiatric hands but realises she has little choice at the moment. She hopes her explanation of the situation will persuade the urologist that, under the circumstances, temporary sedation - and later his skills - will be sufficient to help restore Philly's mental equilibrium. But she knows if Yannis does not return soon Philly could face a permanent breakdown.

He lies heavily sedated in the clinic. Jen travels backwards and forwards between hospital and home, where she leaves messages for Yannis pinned all over; bits of paper flutter against the surfaces to which they are attached and she hopes the movements will catch her son's eye when ... if ... he returns. She is ragged with lack of sleep and anxiety. The two people who have been the centre of her life for so long, on whom she has felt able to rely implicitly,

in hospital, but he really does think the patient should be in a more stable mental frame before undergoing the restructuring procedure. He has presumed she is Mrs Grier and she does not correct him.

Returning to the ward, Jen thinks of their discussion, several evenings before. When he had eventually decided to have the long-delayed surgery they had agreed that, until they were sure of the outcome, there could be no decisions made of changed life-style. Mostly, for practical reasons and for the boy's sake, they agreed it was a good idea to formalise their relationship, get married, but otherwise to let their <sup>m</sup>otions flow freely, like undammed water finding its own level when left to carve its headstrong way through sand or rock. They would force nothing; but neither would they continue to block their natural responses.

"This will be the hardest thing," Philly had said, "learning to change the habits of so many years. Control comes as spontaneously as the impulse to stretch out and hold your hand." He had confessed to being immensely scared. If they changed the balance it might ruin what they had, particularly if he didn't "come up to scratch." It would be best not to make decisions to act in this or that way; just allow whatever would happen to do so freely. They would let themselves respond to impulses held in check so long, to touch or hug. Jen had blurted out that *she* was also scared, "After that terribly traumatic experience with ... with ... all that hurt, *you* know how it was ...". Even now she does not want to speak of it although she realises that sooner or later Yannis must be given some information, even if it is a very censored version.

Jen goes up to where Philly sits, forlornly, in the bed. She puts her arms around him, places her cheek against his, holds him tightly. Softly and very seriously she says, "I love you, Philly, *just as you are*, and have done so all these years. It doesn't matter a damn

have deserted her. She is angry, yet feels guilty about this reaction, wondering why love and anger, and yes, hate too, sometimes are so intertwined, then overlaid, like a hard-centre, with the dark coating of guilt?

On returning to his bedside she finds Philly, emerging from his recuperative sleep, being lectured by the specialist. She is about to excuse herself but Philly insists on including her in the discussion. It seems he has, momentarily, forgotten the cause of his collapse and says, "Yannis will have to hold the fort at home because if I am going to have this long-deferred operation, or maybe series of operations – it seems a plastic surgeon could also be involved – then, I am such a coward, I shall need you here to chivvy me along."

The doctor is about to suggest that it might be a good idea if Mr Grier first gets over his little, er, upset and stabilise emotionally before ..., when Jen interrupts, heading him off by shaking her head, indicating that he should not reopen that subject.

"My diary is in the car, perhaps I can walk down with you and we can arrange dates?" He catches on and when they are out of earshot she explains to him that Yannis' continued absence can not

indefinitely<sup>be</sup> hidden from Philly. When he finds out the boy is still missing his mental state may not be conducive to successful surgical recovery.

"Can't you sort of put it on hold for a few days, keep him here and say you are preparing him, building him up for the operation?"

Again the specialist reminds her he is a urologist, he has neither the competency nor interest to treat emotional problems other than those related to his field, and not even those when they go over-the-top. He obviously thinks Philly's have. And again they reach a compromise. He will give her another two days, keep Philly

to me how the op. turns out, as long as I can hold you, as I've wanted to do for so long. And," she adds, reverting to the humour that has illuminated their friendship, "you'd better take out insurance against being damaged by over-hugging. I've an awful lot of time and wanting to make up." They spend the rest of visiting-time sitting very close together, holding hands but saying little. They are content, absorbing the comfort of nearness. The nurse who brings in the patient's tea returns giggling to tell her colleagues about the 'soppy old couple'. They are totally unaware of her or her opinions.

Jen is relieved nothing has been said about Yannis and wonders, apprehensively, if it is the effect of the sedatives, or Philly's disturbed emotions which have put him in such a dreamy, somewhat-removed-from-reality frame of mind. She worries how she will cope if Yannis remains missing, drives, with tears on her cheeks, pondering why it seems when one thing is given in life, another is taken away. She firmly decides not to be pessimistic and is sure – ascribing her feeling to maternal instinct – that her son will return. But she is still desperately anxious as she goes about the day's business.

When she arrives home that night at ten o'clock – after the evening visit – Jen sees a ragged bundle against the post of the high gate. It looks like a sleeping hobo. She is scared and unwilling to use the automatic control to open and give access to whoever it is lying there, so she puts the car in reverse, switches the lights on bright and hoots. The bundle moves. It is Yannis, naked except for underpants and the stinking rag he has wrapped around himself. She winds down her window as relief, anger and delight tumble about in her mouth. "Are you all right? Where the hell have you

been? Oh god, do you know the anxiety you've caused us? Why are you in that get-up?"

Yannis, stiff from cold, the miles he has walked, giddy from hunger, staggers towards the car. She opens the door. "Get in. Yech, but you stink. What happened? Why ...?" She stretches over, puts her arms around him, holds him close to her, the stench notwithstanding. She is a woman who needs to touch, and her son is the only person with whom she has been able to express her strong tactile nature. She holds the boy tightly in her arms for long minutes.

"Ma, I was mugged. I was sitting in a park. It seems the dark stalked and pounced, caught me before I realised ... I *was* going to phone, then come home; but the next thing I knew I was lying on the ground, freezing cold. All my clothes, my shoes, my watch, everything gone, the back of my head bleeding and throbbing, and I not even *there* when it happened."

"What do you mean, 'not there'?" His mother's usual quick comprehension slips, she wants to hug and hit him, all at the same time.

"I never heard or saw a thing, Ma. One moment I'm sitting on a bench thinking what a big asshole I am, the next I'm lying starkers on the ground, what happened in between I might as well not have been there for all I know. Perhaps because I had no money they took everything else. I had no cash, how could I phone? When I did try, eventually, using a washer some old tramps lent me - and showed me how to use - there was no reply. They gave me this," he indicates the smelly remnants of an old blanket, "and were prepared to share their booze and cigarettes with me, but nobody seemed to worry about food."

"Are you OK? Are you hurt? Why didn't you come in instead of lying out there in the cold.?"

"Keys, Ma, one needs them to get in. Fortunately I left mine at home, so at least those weren't pinched with my clobber. I didn't think, just walked and walked until I came to the railway line and then, as I couldn't get across, walked along the fence till I came to a station. I don't know what I was thinking ... just had this urge to get away. I felt so embarrassed, so ashamed. I mean I was behaving like a stupid kid. I had no right to blurt all that out ... it wasn't for *me* to suggest, but I was so sure. Philly always says I'm like his own son and he wishes I really was, I thought ..."

"If you'd only waited, we had so much to tell you, we'd decided ... but, what happened to you then? Are you positive you're all right?" Jen feels that news can be put on hold until maternal anxiety is satisfied. Usually crystallly competent, the one who calmly organises and plans, whose clarity remains unsullied by emotional currents, she is now helplessly confused, a tadpole in a drying up mudhole. She has lost her sense of direction. Thoughts spark through her mind giving off little shocks of insight. Half listening, half planning - her emotions stretched and pulled between the needs of the two men - she is conscious of a bubble of resentment. It rises slowly through the murk of what she is beginning to think of as dark agitation caused by fragile male egos. She is tired of always playing the role of Earth Mother, the nurturing female. She remains silent while Yannis, visibly overwrought, tries to tell what happened, to explain away what she resentfully feels is his sheer bloody incompetence. She is convinced that in the same situation she would have coped better.

"Yes, Ma," he reassures. "I'm OK , well, more or less, just awfully tired and cold, and smelly, but you've already noticed that.

One misses the little comforts of civilisation when they're not available, soap, toilet paper. Then? Oh yes, I just walked into the station. There was a train with doors open so I got in. I had no idea where it was going, nor a ticket. I just got on. Like a bloody zombie. Then later on some unsavoury-looking characters jumped in: I was, as far as I knew, alone in the compartment so I hopped out as the doors were beginning to shut. At least I used my nut there. I didn't have a clue where I was because I just walked out of the ... it wasn't really a station, just a sort of little siding, like, maybe not even a proper stop. I never thought, then, to check for a name. Afterwards, I don't know how long it was, it hit me you would be worried. I was cold, freezing in fact, and hungry ... suddenly realised I was exhausted and cold. Any case, I saw a little park, thought it might be a good idea to sit down for a bit and get my mind together. I was planning to look for a cop-shop, I had no money to phone, and the next thing I knew, as I told you, I was lying there like this.

When I eventually found some cops and a van they weren't very friendly, thought I was some drunk, said if I needed to phone they'd put me in the cells and I could talk to a social worker or somebody the next day. No offer of something to cover myself. They wanted to shove me in the back with a lot of terrible-looking characters who were jeering at me and making indecent suggestions. God, I was scared ... one hears these stories about guys, guys like me, the non-aggressive, sissy type I suppose, being gang-raped in jails or the cells. I just turned around and ran, well, more like hobbled. It was an education hearing the suggestions they screamed at me. They all thought it so funny, even the cops laughed as I staggered off." He shivers, fear still peeling off his outer layers of cocky youthful self-confidence. Yannis has grown up.

“And then these hoboes crawled out from under a bush, said they’d watched it all from the distance. *That* was a lesson. Rough and raw, smelly and half-sozzled as they were, when they saw my distress they were kind. OK, so perhaps I didn’t have anything more left to be stolen, but ...” he shivers again, shakes his head and sighs.

They go through the gateway, park the car and enter the house as they talk.

“Please, can I get something to eat first. Wash and eat ... get some warm clothes on. Where is Philly?” he asks, realising the house has an empty, neglected feel to it.

“He’s in hospital, he broke down ... I needed you to help, why the hell did you charge off like that? It exacerbated everything ... it was terrible, *terrible*; none of you there when I needed you, each causing trouble for the other. You can be such a bloody fool at times,” she yells. Her relief over her son’s return loosens tight floodgates: she, who is never uncontrollably angry, now allows temper to splatter her words.

“Why, what happened to him, is it serious?” Then, almost sobbing, disturbed by his mother’s unusual loss of control, the final disorienting occurrence, he wails, “Why did he laugh at me?”

“Don’t be such a damn fool, he was crying, he was overcome, so touched by what you asked, particularly as we’d already decided to, that he ...”

“Why did he say ‘No’ in such a peculiar way?” In his distraught state Yannis does not notice the import of what his mother has just said.

“He wasn’t saying no to you, if you’d had the decency to hang on ... he was remembering things; that Philly isn’t *his* name, but what they called his mother. That’s what the ‘no’ was about. It

seems she was murdered and he saw it all, then had this amnesia when they found him hiding under a bush in the orphanage grounds. When you didn't come back he collapsed completely, had a sort of continuous nervous crisis and popped his marbles, for a while. Look, go have a hot shower, I'll quickly get you something to eat, then we go back to the hospital and you sit by his bed till he wakes. I don't care if you haven't slept for the last two days, because if he comes to and thinks you are still missing he could well go off his head completely. Go on now, we'll talk about it in the car. I'll take some extra food and a thermos."

"I'm sorry, Ma, I'm sorry. Will he be all right?"

"Well, he's going to have that operation he should have had a million years ago, and he's very scared and ..."

"Operation? What operation, is he in danger?"

"Don't be such an asshole, Yannis. It's that repair thing that ... but go and get cleaned up, and dress warmly. *He'll* tell you all about it. Hurry now."

Although Philly is in a private ward the sister on night duty is not very happy about visitors at this hour. "The patient is asleep," she tells them frostily. After Jen explains that the patient's collapse has been partly due to the boy's disappearance - he'd been mugged and nobody knew where he was - they get grudging permission to sit in Philly's room. "But mind, no lights and no waking him!"

Yannis has recovered sufficiently to make a mock salute and mumble "Yas sir," behind Authority's back, as they walk down the passage.

As they enter his room Philly is tossing about and moaning in his sleep. Yannis steps up to the bed and clasps his hand; he bends over and holds Philly to quieten him. At the boy's touch he relaxes and falls into a deeper, quieter sleep. Jen curls up in a large

uncomfortable armchair and Yannis, resting his head on the bed, falls asleep with an arm over Philly.

It may be the clatter of the nurses starting the washes, or the pink early morning light strained through the departing grey of night that wakes them. Yannis moves, his arm a mass of pins-and-needles, and Philly in response opens his eyes, sits up and grabs him in an almost desperate hug. "Why did you do that? Why did you walk away from me?" he asks, the sight of Yannis reminding him of what had happened, now that the sedatives have worn off.

"I thought you were laughing ..." but before Yannis can finish Philly shakes him gently, saying, "You should know better than that. But to walk away ... well, I suppose it's the bad example I've set."

"What do you mean? You've never walked away from us."

"No, but I've been avoiding problems, difficult situations, things I was too cowardly to handle. I've never once faced up to anything I should have coped with. I've never talked about the things that needed talking about. I think I've sheltered behind my 'problem' as an excuse not to have to grow up. It was a form of denial. If it hadn't been for your mother I would never even have made that first trip overseas."

Jenny stirs, "Who's making a trip overseas?"

The night sister enters, "OUT," she orders. "This isn't a nightclub, and we've got our washes to finish. If you're well enough to entertain all night then you're certainly well enough to get up and shower, and go home too, I'm sure."

"Certainly I'll get up and shower," Philly agrees, trying to placate her, "but I can't go home till I've had my op. I don't think I'd pick up the courage to come back to you again," he beams his most charming smile at her.

“Be that as it may,” the sister grumbles, “but this is against all the rules.”

“Tell you what,” Philly offers, “they’ll go home now and not return until visiting time. I think they might just do with a good sleep.”

“Hmmmph,” she replies, and flounces out.

“Oh dear, we seem to have upset the apple-cart. I hope she doesn’t take it out on you. Look, we’ll come back later, and you can put this young man here thoroughly on the carpet, OK?”

“Just tether him by one hind leg so he doesn’t stray away again,” and turning to Yannis, “Are you all right, Pup? We’ve got a lot to sort out and talk about.”

“I was mugged and stripped naked, and then coveted by a cop-van full of desperados, so I’ve learned my lesson about walking out in the dark alone,” Yannis half-jokingly replies.

The sister’s face appears, frowning, around the door. “*If* you please.” she hisses.

“Come on, Ma, we’d better slope out while we’re still in one piece.”

As they leave Philly calls out, “I don’t have my address book with me, please bring it, but in the meantime phone my lawyer and ask him to contact me.”

In response to Yannis querying raised eyebrow Philly mutters, “All the legal nuts and bolts about water-tight adoption ...” The sister slams the door shut.

## CHAPTER 9 INTERVENTION

On the way back to the hospital that afternoon Jen does something she has not done for years. She buys a cake. "It's for the staff," she explains.

"Bribery and corruption? Ma, I never expected it of you. And what's wrong with your famous home-made creations?"

"I was just too damn tired to go into the kitchen and be creative, and it's a nice thing to do, show your appreciation of them. OK, yes, bribery and corruption, but there are times when it's permissible and this is one of them. Nurses can make a big difference to the time one spends lying flat on your back, not being allowed to move, or whatever, as you should well know, and I see no harm in making sure Philly gets the best attention I can bribe and corrupt out of them."

"Don't you think he will disapprove? You know what a stickler he is for ethics and principles?"

"Not if you don't open your big mouth and blab. He's also a sucker about being generous and rewarding people who are good to him, so let's keep it on that level."

"And in my innocence I thought good adult relationships – like yours – were ones of pure honesty and trust," he declaims.

Usually his mother enjoys his good-natured ragging, but the stress of the last several days, and anxiety for the weeks to come if the operation is a failure, have made her unusually snappish. "Don't push it too far, my boy. And it's about time you learnt that being adult has a hell of a lot to do with learning to consider other people and perhaps having the sense to anticipate what might upset them."

"But Ma, how was I to know he'd react in that way?"

"I'm not talking about Philly, you clot, I'm talking about you, just walking out like that. I think you've added twenty years to my life. You certainly caused Philly to go off his head and I was throwing up from worry. It was like expecting you, all over again, those months I was pregnant. And all that good food we'd prepared, and were going to feast on, wasted too," she adds turning the drama into bathos. They both have enough sense of humour left to laugh.

Philly is waiting for them, looking relaxed in one of the two armchairs. "Gosh, you don't look sick at all," Yannis blurts out. "You look as pleased as Punch, sitting there."

"Well, I'm not actually *sick*, but I'm darn sure I'll feel like that in a couple of days, after the operation."

"So soon?" Jen queries.

"Yes, I had a quarter dozen of doctors fussing around me from shortly after breakfast until about ten minutes ago; they've agreed I've passed all the tests and at fifty-four I might well make medical history having this op. which usually is, and should be, done in early childhood. That's the bad news. The good news is there are so many really excellent new techniques that the process should be a lot easier than it was in the past. "

"Oh?" She is afraid to ask for details, does not want to push him into saying more than he can comfortably cope with at the moment.

"Mmm. Dr Graham, the urologist chappie, reckons that I must have had at least two corrective procedures when I was a very young kid, says there are scar traces. Naturally he gave me hell for leaving things so long, says it's much more difficult to do this sort of repair on an adult, and he wants to work with Bill Davis, the plastic guy."

"That's only a sixth of doctors, who was the third guy?" Yannis wants to know.

"Actually it was a guy-ess." He looks over at Jen, "Don't be upset, I know you think shrinks are the pits, but she is a very nice old lady, and I was able to speak to her the way I could never have opened myself to another man. Her name is Grace Rivers and it suits her, she is full of grace. She reckons - and I think she's right - the reason I have ..." he stops, determined on a new start in both the sentence and his life, and speaks slowly, carefully, as if laying out the route to be followed. "No; the trouble *was* ... er, that I *had*, this block about facing up to ... about *talking* about my condition, is that it caused me such humiliation and rejection, so I overcompensated by trying to block it out. The same mechanism, you know, which I used to forget what happened ... my parents ... before the orphanage. And, by the way, that sort of flash about names ... well, there's no point changing things now, even if it was real and not just another surfacing nightmare.

"Then the memory of all those minders who mocked and laughed at me, or threatened further damage to my ...my ... You know," he gasps, sudden insight flooding in, "it wasn't just my own self-image that was insecure, but with all those people having different names and comments about my ... my," he is still shy and Yannis, as usual jumps in. "Your family jewels," he prompts.

"Hmmp, more like family liability than jewels I'd say. No, enough of skirting around and using euphemisms," Philly bravely faces up to facts. "My funny-looking, malformed penis was called by so many odd labels that I'm sure part of the problem is, that is, was," he takes a deep breath before continuing, "neither of us really had an identity. I didn't know who or what I was, nor why I had this appendage that seemed different from what it should be. I

didn't know what to call the darn thing to start with. Avoiding the subject was a form of denying I wasn't normal as well as avoiding embarrassment. Before we settle down, did you bring anything to eat?"

"Sorry, no." Jen says. "We overslept."

"We did, but we gave it to the nurses." Yannis chimes in. "You wouldn't have wanted to eat it, in any case. It was one of those plastic-looking bought cakes, quite horribly decorated with big chunks of crystallised fruit over bilious bumps of blobbed synthetic cream. Hey, that's jolly alliterative, perhaps I'm headed for an advertising agency after all, for my sins." They laugh and Jen is grateful to her son for banteringly restoring the atmosphere to normal and demonstrating - better than any serious declaration could express it - that nothing has changed: they are the same loving, accepting family of whom Philly is still a main player.

"Yes, Ma was so zonked out she keeled over in the family den. Sat down 'for five minutes', on the sofa and the next thing she was snoring away like a, er a treadmill, and ..."

"You mean a saw-mill, don't you?" Philly comments. "Sit here, next to me, Pup," he says as Jen moves to the chair by the window. She knows it is time for their planned talk which was blown away by Yannis' bombshell plan to reorganise their lives, and wonders, rather guiltily, if Philly's over-the-top reaction to the boy's suggestion is perhaps his subconscious way <sup>to</sup> again delay putting a name to his 'problem'.

"Good, I'm glad you rested, I thought you might, and I phoned out for an extra-large family-sized pizza so we won't have the staff coming in and out with tea and stuff, and I have a couple of bottles of ginger beer stashed away in the locker; got them from the mobile

canteen this morning.” He smiles at them seeking their approval as well as trying to lighten the looming tensions.

“Pup, your mother and I had many things to discuss with you when matters ... well, when they kind of got out of control. I apologise. I have done a lot of thinking; not just since she and I sorted out our hang-ups and problems, but also when I realised what walking away from a difficult situation can do; to people and relationships, the trauma, the hurt to those one loves as well as the damage to one’s self. I want you to make this a bit easier for me, please, by not interrupting. You can ask all the questions you want afterwards. Now I’m doing ... admitting something here that I have made a fine art of avoiding all my life.” He pauses, takes a deep breath, then rushes in. “I was born with this defect.” He puts up a warning hand as Yannis leans forward to question. “Unlike your mother’s, mine was safely hidden, well, hidden from the general run of people, that is, but not from child-minders or other little boys who saw it and teased. I was born with a condition called hypospadias.”

Respecting the admonition not to question Yannis cannot resist miming, hands held up and apart, a request for clarification.

“OK, OK. I know you don’t know what that is, I’ll explain simply. Just as your mother’s defect was caused by a fault in the ... well, let’s call it the joining-up mechanism in the foetus, so was mine. It happens sometimes that boys are born with an incomplete fusion of the tissues of the penis, combined with a malformed or incomplete urethra. I don’t know much about the other forms, they all have their own fancy names. Hypospadias is the defective foetal formation of the ... er ... what happens is one ... I have a ... ”

Jen sees how difficult it is for him to continue and has to hold herself in check not to jump in and take over to make it easier for

him. She has done that too often and for too long and realises if Philly is ever to become whole he must fight his own bogeymen.

Philly puts his hand in his dressing-gown pocket and pulls out a piece of paper. "I copied this definition from a very old Medical dictionary, the *The Merck Manual*, one of the sisters lent me, she'd used it as a student. It says," he starts to read, " 'The hypospadiac urethra in the male opens proximal to its usual position, presenting along the shaft of the penis, at the penoscrotal junction, between the scrotal folds or in the perineum.' There is a bit more about the technical mechanics of the thing, but the main problem is ..." he starts to read again. " 'Principal complications are the patient's inability to direct the urinary stream, and sexual disability in later life.' So there you have it. I can also add that at times, under stress, physical stress, sneezing even, if you have a full bladder you can leak. And *that* aspect has been the most terrible. Embarrassing and humiliating. As a kid I used to use old rags." Turning to Jen, "Remember that pile of old frayed towels you saw in the flat, that first day when you found the duck?"

"Yes. I remember you were so uncomfortable until you diverted me with the story of how you learned to read, and I wondered what sensitive spot had been touched."

"Later," Philly explains, "with the marvellous invention of adult incontinence pants - for use on long journeys or when you are not sure of the available toilet facilities - life became easier. That is, as long as one made sure not to get too close up to people. I was always terrified somebody would feel the bulge through my clothes. It's not the sort of bulge men boast of ..." He turns to Jen, smiles wryly and explains, "That's why I never wanted to dance with you, but as part of the new me I'd be happy to go to those classes you

suggested we attend, all those years ago. You might make a ball-room dancer of me yet!" He chuckles at the idea.

"You mean ..." Yannis starts, but again Philly silences him.

"Of course I over-magnified the problem, because except for, as I said, those long journeys or a dearth of lavatories, it is usually OK. But it is always there, the knowledge, the fear that one *can* disgrace oneself. The memory of those screaming, angry minders is still permanently in the background of my mind. It haunts me. Even now, all these years later, I sometimes have nightmares about them, tweaking my poor deformed little penis and yelling abuse when I leaked. They would threaten, hit, even humiliate me if we went to the park. They'd broadcast to the other nannies and kids, 'Hey this baby here wets his pants and his bed'. Those that got around to actually looking at me close enough to see the ..." he refers to the piece of paper again, " 'associated ventral curvature', would comment disparagingly or taunt and mock me, or what was worse, burst out laughing. You have no idea ..."

He pauses, sighs deeply and rests his face on his two open palms as if he were protecting himself. "You cannot imagine the emotional pain, the feelings of inferiority, the sense of desperation. Luckily as I got old enough to bath myself, and I made pretty sure that I did so as soon as I could, most of them never bothered to check on my personal hygiene. Part of being so frightened of an operation was the ingrained idea, deep in my subconscious, probably instilled by the cruder minders, that the original fault was due to some mutilation; that it had been a type of punishment for something, but I never knew what. Yet, in the background of my mind I was always aware that I had been part of something horrible, something with knives flashing and blood. Never knowing, never understanding, that was *part* of the hell.

“They’d threaten me with the idea of having the rest chopped off, and that this would be done by a doctor if I didn’t stop leaking. I developed a set reaction: first there would be this luke-warmish glow, not a blush, not outside, nothing you could see, it was all inside, invisible to others. Then a sour taste, on the sides of my tongue and I’d feel every part of me, deep inside, beginning to curdle like milk gone off. I’d stand there, unable to move, probably looking blankly at whoever was screaming at me, because my non-reaction seemed to irritate them the more. But I dared not move. I knew if I did the curds and the whey would separate and the fluid would drip, drip, drip, drop by drop. I would be like the bag of curds Auntie Mary hung over a basin in the pantry, to make cottage cheese. And I knew how dry and crumbly the curds could be if too much fluid ran off, and was afraid I’d disintegrate, crumble away into thousands of useless little white pieces. It was crazy. You know what kids are like, their way-out imaginings.

“Eventually I sort of accepted this was the way I was and *nothing could change it*, but carried the fear and the shame into adulthood. And then I met your mother. She moved into the flat and for the first time in my life I had a friend, a real friend. Yes, Richard and Stella were caring and good to me, but they had each other, I was an unnecessary appendage: and the two old men from the little odd shops shared my interests and taught me much, but Jen and I ... we both needed one another. We had a most marvellous ball, a six-month party of laughter and fun and caring, unspoken, but we *cared*, looked after one another.”

“After six months she had the scar removed and when she came out of the hospital after the final lip op. I – for the first time in my life – picked up enough courage and determination to decide to undergo the necessary surgery. I had been invited to America by

the firm whose products I'd experimented with, the 'glass staircase' project, except it wasn't really glass. I decided to go and have the op. there, where nobody knew me or could gossip or point fingers. I had this absolute paranoid obsession that nobody should know. I couldn't even talk to *you* about it, Jen," he turns to her apologetically, needing her to understand. "Although I wanted to, if you only knew how I wanted to, but just could not. Well, the business with the synthetic glass people – we had a lot of exhibitions and lectures, even demonstrations all over the USA, using my models – took about four months and I was going into the hospital when ... when I had to come back."

"Oh my god," Jen gasps, "*I* messed it all up for you?"

"No, it was my fault for not having told you how I felt about you and what I intended to do. I understand it was stupid of me to insist, before I left, that you go out with young men your own age. I remember, when you asked me why I had not married, telling you I would never marry because I couldn't be a proper husband, couldn't father children and would not inflict childlessness on any woman. I don't think you really took it in. You know when I asked you - after your plastic surgery for the scar was so successful and you looked so lovely - what you wanted to do with your life, you told me you didn't really have any career ambitions. Just wanted to have lots of kids and a happy family life."

"Yes, I remember," Jen sighs, wondering again at the power of small misunderstandings to change lives. She thinks, cynically, that one might just as well go with the flow, dreams and desires seemed not to matter; they made no difference to the way the pieces fell, shaping the pattern of one's life. "I went on about being the perfect wife and mother and having a home full of kids. I really wanted all those kids, and I suppose I made a bit of a song and

dance about it. But it was also to let you know that I didn't crave the bright lights, that I'd be satisfied being the sort of home bird you were. And I thought that bit about not being a father meant you weren't interested in all the difficult messy bits of the role, like discipline, or nappies and stuff. Lots of men can't handle it, and I was letting you know that was OK by me. I was so confident if you had kids you would turn out the perfect father, as you have done with Yannis, so patient and *caring*."

Yannis, unable to keep quiet any longer, now that the situation seems to have turned into the usual sort of family discussion, says, "It seems there was a total lack of communication, even honesty?" he looks meaningfully at his mother. They ignore his interruption.

"I could hardly have asked you to hang around, for a man twelve years your senior who might or might not have returned able to give you what you wanted. I thought if the op had been a success..."

"What happened? Why did you have to come home and why was it my mother's fault?" Again Yannis is unable to stand the interminable delay in unfolding the narrative.

"I never said it was her fault. It was basically due to my stupidity, not communicating; the fear of being turned into a bag of dripping cottage cheese again." He turns to Jen, "Perhaps you'd better take over here?"

## CHAPTER 10 REVELATION

It is Jen's turn now. Excavating deliberately repressed feelings, bagged and buried many years ago, is as distasteful to her as scraping off the impacted detritus of festered memories. It *hurts*, like unnecessarily hacking at ingrown toenails one has learned to live with. Not a woman to brood, she has always made a point of living the hour, the day. Turning to her son she takes his hand, appealing for empathy.

"It's my turn to play the coward. I am going to find this very difficult to tell you, Yannis, and for you it will be hard to understand. Yes, I was a silly little fool, but I felt Philly had rejected me. He seemed to make it so clear he had no intention of marrying, which meant, to me, of course, that he did not care the way I thought he did, the way I wanted him to."

Philly interjects, "It wasn't like that at all, I didn't want to hurt you, to set little land-mines of disappointment erupting along your path for the rest of your life, every time you saw a woman with a pram and knew I couldn't ..." He still finds it difficult to talk about his inadequacy. "If I'd been selfish and married you, as god knows I wanted to, it would have been *my* fault. You know how much your son has meant to you, imagine if I'd deprived you of this joy. It was like throwing a cat in water asking me to speak about emotions then, I come out all bedraggled and ridiculous, and speaking before the planned operation in America seemed ... Well, I think if one really loves somebody one is more concerned about *their* happiness than your own, not just for the moment, but as a life-scheme. You were so young, so vibrant, so wanting a family of your own, how could I tell you what I felt, at that stage? I know how most adoptees

yearn, more than anything else, for their own children, their first real blood relatives. It's such an important thing, I could never have dreamt of withholding it from you through my own selfish wishes."

Jen looks at him, willing the message of his words to fill the empty spaces his long silence has created; she imagines herself a desiccated sponge soaking, soaking up accidental splashes of water. She knows a heart is merely a bundle of muscles to pump blood, so why, for stretched-out years, has she felt this pain of emptiness in her chest, why imagined her heart was drought-parched? She says, addressing her son but looking into Philly's eyes, "And right from the start, Yannis, you had better know that there has never been anybody, for me, but Philly. I have never loved anyone else. And I have lived with the pain of believing he never wanted me as anything else but a friend. It was the price I was prepared to pay for having him a close part of my life."

Yannis is confused, "But then how, why ... where does my father come into it? You didn't just use him to get a baby, for god's sake?" He is shocked at the idea.

Jen wonders how she can save her son from the series of shocks ahead. At least she can reassure him on *this* point. "No, of course not, it's just that ... I had no intention of marrying him. It just happened."

There is a knock at the door; it is the pizza delivery service. His tension makes Philly uncharacteristically short with the youth; he looks pointedly at his watch saying, "That's certainly the longest half-hour. They said you'd be here by two and it's a good half-hour after, which means your half-hour was actually an hour."

The poor fellow, evidently confused by the procession of half-hours, tries to explain. "Sorry," he apologises, "but there were two

security checks and they kept me waiting while they let the cars in, then again at the front door here, downstairs ...”

“It’s OK, sorry I snapped,” Philly apologises handing him a conciliatory tip.

“Thanks hey, Captain. Right, next time I comes by helicopter, OK?”

Yannis, on tenterhooks, is impatient of the delay. “Ma, you are not making sense. Things like marrying don’t just ‘happen’. Please, I beg you, get to the point.”

“Well shut up and don’t interrupt because this is difficult and I *must* lead up to it if you are ever to understand – and forgive,” she adds in a low voice. “It was while I was in the hospital, having the last plastic surgery op. that I met your father again,” Jenny struggles to explain through a mouthful of melted cheese topping. “This is jolly nice,” she says, trying to collect the long strands of mozzarella that stretch between her mouth and the slice of pizza she has just bitten into.

“Can’t this family do anything without turning it into a feast?” Yannis asks, irritated by the stalling. He has waited so long. “I feel like a piece of that cheese shoved through the systematic delaying teeth of a grater, emerging a pile of nothing on the other side. I’m frazzled with waiting.”

“Sorry, you’ll realise later why it’s not something I’ve wanted to talk about, and I don’t think, actually, it’s something you’ll be glad to have heard,” his mother warns. “I was half dozy from the pre-med, being pushed in through the theatre anteroom for the final restructuring operation when from nowhere this vague figure was bending over me. He seemed to float, must have been masked, all I registered was – or is it were?- the eyes; strange light eyes. For a moment I thought it was a big bird perching, or soaring there, over

me, until - I don't know if it happened, or if I imagined it - somebody clasped my hand and said something about me being gorgeous when they were finished with me. That could, of course, have been half-dreaming wishful thinking. I forgot all about it until a couple of days after, as I was walking down the corridor to the phone - the one in the ward was on the blink, it was a sort of mobile thing they pushed from bed to bed as needed and one could never get at it when it was working. This person behind me, speaking with a strong accent, said something about them having done a good job, as promised.

"I turned around, looked at him and thought - wondering who he was - these were the yellow eyes from theatre. Silly what goes through one's mind, for as he spoke to me I decided his were leonine, not avian eyes. He asked if I didn't remember him and I mumbled something about seeing him before the op. Then he made this odd grimace which passed for laughter with him and said, 'I unpick your hair from de wall and taxi you home.' My first thought was that the 'fisherman' had got work as a cleaner in the hospital, so I asked him, rather patronisingly, had he managed to get a good job there, and was it better than working at George's? He half laughed again - it was a hard, round sound, like water-worn pebbles being rolled about in a tin - and said he was an intern. For a moment I didn't register until he explained he was studying plastic surgery and had assisted my surgeon. You can imagine how surprised I was, and I suppose to cover my own discomfort at presuming he was a cleaner - and probably showing it in my attitude - I overcompensated by being very charming.

"He took me by the arm then, suggesting I join him for a cup of coffee. I was flustered, pointed out I was in a dressing gown and pulled my arm away. The open area downstairs which served as a

sort of café was visible from where we stood, near the wide staircase, and he remarked that quite a few patients were sitting there in gowns. I said that others may well do so but I did not go out in public restaurants in my negligee, nor did I allow strange men to grab my arm. His whole attitude changed. He apologised, saying he'd thought I was a girl from White Gables that the 'Professor' had brought to George's." She turns to Philly and asks why people always presume he is a professor, but he does not accept this invitation to go off at a tangent and merely lifts his shoulders.

"Naturally I was offended," she continues with her story, "and zapped around, walking off very snootily. And then I felt guilty because I had not thanked him properly for helping us home, so turned, came back and said, 'You did not give me an opportunity to thank you for your help when you took us home, and I wish to do so now, but that does not give you the right to be rude to me,' and stalked off again. As I walked away I heard him saying something in a foreign language and chuckling the rolling-pebbles sound, but it had no mirth in it, rather it seemed like a judgmental comment."

Philly gives a loud sniff and mutters under his breath that he can just imagine what the blighter said, but Jen ignores him and continues.

"The next day I got dressed to go for my final pre-discharge check in the doctor's rooms which were in another part of the complex. When I came back Philly was waiting to take me home, but the room was filled with dozens of vases and bowls and baskets of yellow roses. It was like some Romantic Victorian poet's bower, very over-the-top, but the excess was, perhaps, what charmed. There were no cards or indication where they came from. Philly was really the only person who knew I was there and they weren't from

him, so I went to the nursing station to ask what it was all about. They giggled and handed me an envelope. It was a note, badly spelt and in a practically indecipherable scrawl, 'Sorry I make you cross, ples take flowrs, show I am repinting.' It was signed "Yannis, (the taxi) Dr Nicoloupopolis'. I didn't know what to do or say."

"Yes," Philly chips in, impatient to show the raw underbelly of the man before Jen starts making excuses for him. "Meanwhile I'd found out the flowers had all come from the room of the kid next door. She was about fourteen, had terminal cancer, knew she was dying and asked her family and friends not to send flowers to her when she was gone, but rather send them now, when she could still enjoy them. Had said something about dreaming of being surrounded by masses of yellow roses. So they sent her roses, yellow ones, in all different shapes, sizes and shades; and somebody had written about this in the papers, and how brave she was and how tragic it all was. The nurses showed me the article while I was waiting. The next day, that very day, the day she died, about a dozen florists, as well as many other complete strangers, sent her yellow roses. Your ..." he searches for the correct word, holding his contempt in control, not wanting to hurt Yannis too much. "Your, er, young doctor, probably unfamiliar with ... well, with what we would consider the correct behaviour under the circumstances, had gone into the room after the dead girl had been removed, he'd taken off the cards from as many of the offerings as he could carry through in several journeys to your mother's room. She was so chuffed, so flattered, I couldn't tell her, at the time, where the flowers had originally come from, but suggested that she leave them for the nurses as carting them home would cause them to droop and fade."

"Not knowing anything about this I thought he was jealous, and to please him did as he suggested. I was so sure that *now* he would acknowledge we had something special going for us, although we hadn't got to the ... the smooching stage. But it was there, the *feeling*. And then he went off to America without even kissing me goodbye and I cried for a week and then I got cross."

"I tried to phone you every day but you were never in."

"I was, but I wasn't answering the phone. Several weeks later, when I went to the doctor's rooms for the final check-up, I banged into him, your father Yannis; I mean actually collided, in the passage. He was coming around the corner at a fast lope, the hunting wolf - but *they* have green eyes, don't they? - and I was trotting along, a brisk little bunny, as I was a bit late. After all the apologies he again asked me to coffee, because now I was dressed, and I again refused, as I was on my way to the appointment. When I came out about an hour later - doctors always seem to be running late - there he was. I was flattered by the assumption he'd hung around, waiting for me, and this time I said OK. We had coffee. I thought he was funny, well, not humorous funny really, more like interesting and exotic, and his accent was charming. His English had improved so much since the very first meeting that we were able to communicate, more or less. In fact his accent and odd use of words were the humorous part, because, as I discovered later, your father was a very serious man. Nothing in his life had given him cause for real laughter. He asked me for a date and I declined and noticed he seemed a bit offended, but the implications didn't register."

"What implications?" Yannis asks.

"That he didn't brook refusals kindly. I mean, after all," she explains looking over at Philly, "he would never have survived had

he not gone after what he wanted with that sort of lethal determination.”

“And it was round about then,” Philly adds, to exonerate her, “that I phoned and said I was thinking of having some medical attention and it might delay my return and she thought I was making excuses because I wouldn’t give details. Mmmh, I suppose I did sound cagey,” he admits. “I couldn’t, to save my life, talk about the ‘problem’ over the phone. Perhaps if I had ...?” He leaves the desolate might-have-beens hanging, forgotten washing on a sagging line.

“Yes, Philly. I knew something was up, something you weren’t telling me about. You know I always know when you two, the men in my life, are scheming something and trying to hide it from me. I have these special antennae,” Jen tries to make it easier by introducing a bantering tone.

“But, Ma, why didn’t you want to go out with him, my father, and how do the ‘implications’ come into it?”

“I don’t really know why; perhaps because I wanted to be with Philly. There was nothing I could put my finger on. Female instinct and intuition, I suppose. One should always listen to your gut feeling and not try to rationalise it away. There was something both fascinating and ... well, almost repellent I suppose, about him: his really strange expressionless eyes, his icy intensity and his total cold lack of humour. And the implications bit is that when he wanted something and was thwarted he got ... how can I put it?”

“Nasty and vicious,” Philly chips in.

“No, I wouldn’t put it quite that way. You must remember, and we didn’t know it at the time, he had never had a home, had only stayed alive as a kid because he had learnt that when he

wanted something he took it, no matter how. We found out a lot of things afterwards.”

“After what?” Yannis asks.

“After George told us he had been killed in an accident and we could get no confirmation, no death certificate, nothing. He seemed to have vanished into thin air almost as if he had never existed. Even Philly’s very good connections in Greece were only able to deal in faded second-hand rumours.”

“Yes,” Philly hastens to add, careful not to condemn outright but loading his words with suggestive emotive content. “About the only thing we found out is he seemed to have had no past, no family, no anything; typically one of ‘George’s boys’, scooped up from god knows what cesspool, and probably renamed as many times as the forged or stolen passports required it.”

“One should pity him for such a past,” Jen tries to exonerate. Suddenly she is having trouble repressing unwanted memories of her tingling response to Yan’s fey influence.

“That doesn’t excuse him for what he did to you,” Philly grumbles.

“*What* did he do to you Ma, what was so terrible you can’t get to speak about it?”

“I’m coming to that, please, let me take it in steps, the way it happened. It’s like trying to crack nuts with my teeth, getting at the ... the relevant bits here. After Philly phoned about having medical attention but not being willing, or able, to give me any details I was cross and hurt for a while and then I remembered our talk in the flat, that first day. You must realise I was still an inexperienced kid, didn’t have a clue what a man’s ‘genital’ was all about, or how it looked or functioned or was supposed to be, leave alone a ‘genital anomaly’. So I went to the library at the medical school to try and

find out. There seem to be hundreds, OK dozens, of different problems in this category. It frightened me, I didn't know what to make of it all. As I was going to a reading table with a pile of books, somebody pushed past me and something sharp scratched my bare skin and drew blood. I think it was the tip of a metal-edged ruler. It was the same strange person who seemed to be making a habit of bumping into me. He was very apologetic, very competent in getting disinfectant and plaster and fixing it. Really it was only a minor scratch. After the fuss I sat and read till early evening, and, would you believe it, when I was leaving there he was, hovering again, almost as if to pounce on me. But, of course, I never saw it that way then. I think I was fascinated and - as I said before - flattered by the idea that a doctor, and a specialist at that, could be so interested in an insignificant nobody."

"That's nonsense," Philly interjects angrily. "You have always been attractive, your eyes ..." he struggles to express how beautiful he finds her, the only similes that come to him are meltingly dark seal-pup eyes, or images of bowls of dark hot chocolate sauce drowning the clear white of cream. He accepts his inadequacy when it comes to *galant* phrases, but soldiers on, nonetheless. "Besides your personality draws people; you're happy, and full of fun in a dreary world. They want to warm themselves at your cheerful glow. For somebody like him you must have been the sun and the moon and the stars all wrapped into one smiling parcel. That damn stupid mystical stereotype about doctors being something larger than life, little gods!"

"At the time I was lonely and sad and very confused and I'm jolly sure I wasn't radiating much *joie de vivre*," Jen counters. "Any case, he walked with me to my car and commented - typically male - on its features, asked how big the boot was and when I opened it to

show him he said. 'I take you for food, wait, I put bicycle inside car and we go eat.' Before I could reply he'd zapped around the corner and reappeared with a bike which he promptly sort of folded around and plonked in the boot. It was all too quick for me and I kind of sat there, dazed. Then hopping in beside me, he asked why I didn't drive and I said I hadn't a clue what was happening nor where I was supposed to go. 'We go haf food,' he insisted.

"Following his directions we landed up in that grotty part of town, near White Gables. He took me up to his flat and told me to sit down, which I did, feeling very uncomfortable and wondering how the hell I'd got myself into this situation. The place was so miserable, nothing bright or comfortable. I imagined it looked like an overnight doss house and felt sorry for it's bleakness. Within a few minutes – I thought he'd gone to change so he could take me *out* to a restaurant - he reappeared with something heated up in a grubby cardboard box and two plastic spoons. Whatever it was the stuff was terrible, soggy and lukewarm. I didn't want to hurt his feelings and really did try to eat some of it, but left most, made silly excuses about having had a huge late lunch, when actually I was starving."

Deeply lost in the past she gets up, walks to the window and looks out, turns back into the room, still silent. The others respect her need for a moment to gather her thoughts and her courage. Returning, she pours herself a glass of ginger beer, continues, trying desperately to make them understand how it felt, how it happened.

"I think it was supposed to be Chinese - the food in the box," she explains, seeing their blank expressions. "He seemed completely oblivious of its taste or texture and wolfed it down, including what I'd left. It was only afterwards, when I got to know him a bit better, that I realised this lack of culinary appreciation

was a left-over from a permanently hungry childhood. I was embarrassed, but my main concern was not to offend *him*, not to hurt his feeling by seeming to reject him or his ghastly meal.”

Turning to Yannis she stresses the importance of this point. “I want you to *understand* this. One can get oneself into a terrible corner if you are shy about saying ‘NO’ loudly and clearly, afraid to speak out because you don’t want to hurt somebody’s feelings. People suffer all sorts of discomforts rather than offend or hurt a person who may be a total stranger. I got away as soon as I could. It was a peculiar and disturbing experience, but exciting too, and I felt complimented in some odd manner. The doctor aura enhanced a fey sort of magnetism he had, not charm really, I can’t quite put a finger on it, but it was there. Personality perhaps? Some sort of Svengali charisma? Perhaps it was simply that because he was so foreign and not belonging, so oddly different, that I felt an obligation to be kinder, more polite than I would have been to any ordinary young man?”

“How and when did you actually get together?” Yannis is insistent on the details.

“He’d seen a couple of posters in the car advertising a dance at the Youth Community Centre in Valley Street and I’d explained – more for something to say than any other reason – that Philly and I had got involved teaching the youngsters arts and crafts once a week and helping those who wanted to study further. It was more a way of keeping kids off the street, doing something useful and interesting, than a grand educational project.” she explains.

Yannis doesn’t give a damn about these extraneous details and almost snaps at her, “Go on!”

“Sorry.” She takes a determinedly deep breath and plunges in again. “He pitched up, just walked in at the dance without an

invitation or an explanation. Never paid for a ticket either, though it was a fundraiser for the Centre. He was surprisingly helpful, which was unexpected as I already had an impression of him as a morose, rather taciturn person. The kids took a shine to him, though, when he started doing tricks, stage magician's tricks, sleight of hand stuff. He was jolly good at it too. Seemed to get through to the little tough street-fighters. I saw him chatting to them for ages.

"Then he insisted on dancing with me, got the youngsters to nag on his behalf, and I really enjoyed it. I'd missed the dancing. Mom had taught me; we used to dance to old-fashioned records played - scratches and all - on the ancient turntable at home, before everything went wrong. It was sort of out-of-keeping with the rest of her but she was a grand dancer and mad about it and as soon as I was old enough to partner her she stopped nagging Dad to dance. He said he'd outgrown the sport, but he'd sit there in his easy-chair with the stuffing bulging in the wrong places and stack the turntable for us, while we danced and danced to the flickering of the fire, or candles in summer. We had perfectly good electricity, but dancing, for Mom, demanded live flames. So you see it was something I did well. Surprisingly your father was pretty good too, not so much with the complicated things like tangos, but with the waltzes and jazzy numbers." She pauses again, finding it increasingly difficult to continue.

It is Philly's turn to help. "You must understand," he says, turning to Yannis, "she was so young, all alone for the first time in her life, with nobody to talk to, in that awful flat, looking after an echoing empty house with an eerie atmosphere, and the ghost of Maudie's self-murdering hysteria. And here was a young doctor, exotically interesting if not handsome, and flatteringly attentive."

"But it wasn't those things," Jen almost sobs. "It wasn't anything like that, it was being *held*. The sheltering protectiveness of it, the dancing ... the movement. I think that's what blurred my common-sense, dulled the warning signals, my own discomfort with the man. If you had just once held me, kissed me goodbye, Philly," she turns to him with tears in her eyes, "I would not have been so vulnerable. It was that terrible feeling, a sort of certain knowledge, that you would not come back to me, or if you did, it would be to tell me I must move out."

"But that's ridiculous, what could have given you such an idea? You *knew* how much I enjoyed your company, what fun we had, surely ..." Philly says as Jen tries to explain.

"Yes, all those months we had been friends, I thought we were growing so close but you kept your distance. We'd spoken and laughed about everything, everything except love, that is. And you seemed terribly insistent - without explaining why - about not being the marrying type. I'd so missed the warmth and comfort of just having an arm around me. And yes, I suppose I was moved by the music and the moment, and I'm pretty sure - though I didn't suspect it at the time - that he was doctoring the cold-drink; perhaps not so much for me as for himself. I think he drank swiftly and silently, using it as a light anaesthetic, not enough for others to notice, but just keeping the levels up enough to dull his pain, emotional pain. I think, looking back, he was near breaking point. He told me he hated medicine, was fascinated by maths and would sit doing, whatever it is they do, sums? problems?, as other people read books or play games. One of his abilities, his tricks I suppose, was being able to add up six columns of different currencies simultaneously, virtually within seconds, without putting pen to paper, and then convert the one to the other equally rapidly. It was

because he was so brilliant at maths that George discovered him and as a good pass in maths was a requisite for medical school, decided that Yannis was to be stuffed into the slot, whether it fitted him or not. He used to say he felt like some poor peasant who, wandering along the way, was seized and forced into an ill-fitting suit of rusty armour in an attempt to turn him into a knight." She drums with her fingers on the window-sill, a rhythm like the galloping of horses' hooves. "He really *hated* surgery," she adds.

"He'd brought a great big plastic bottle of this fruit juice mixture, and I thought it was because I'd spoken to him about getting sufficient fresh fruit and veggies in his diet, that time of the terrible boxed food. I enjoyed the evening, felt relaxed and happy. We went dancing several times again, and each time I felt that relaxed, warm glow, but didn't have the nous, at the time, to wonder if there might be something more in the drink than fruit juices diluted with root beer or iron brew. I knew both are innocuous.

"He didn't have much time to himself, what with the studies and spending his off duties helping George, of whom he was patently terrified. He never wanted George to know that he was seeing me, but we managed to get out into the country for drives occasionally. I took him around to show him the local beauty spots, which he didn't particularly appreciate, not being an outdoors type of man. He preferred just sitting in his flat swotting, with me to keep him company, or occasionally the odd movie. I used to think that, with his yellow eyes, he reminded me of a lion retreating into the dimness of a cave and believed he went to films more for the dark escape than pleasure. He seemed, always, to find the stories puerile, except the rare surrealist treatment of devastation, starvation and man pitted against man for survival. There was a Czechoslovakian film - I can't remember the name - about

cannibalism in a post future-war destroyed society and landscape, which he went to see several times. 'Makes sense,' he would say of it, though never commenting on the beauty of the actual filming; the frames like paintings. He was so complex and yet, in some ways, so utterly simple." She sighs, passes her glass for a refill. "Talking is thirsty work."

Jen has no idea how to explain or rationalise her actions which, in retrospect, were so illogical. She was, after all, no bird being mesmerised by a snake and yet she had been drawn to the strange man despite her intention to ignore, or better still control, the ridiculous flutterings in her gut every time he put his arms around her on the dance floor. She had melted, floated, changed into a stranger, another unfamiliar being. Now her account would leave great chunks of the truth behind, like abandoned parcels waiting to be collected at some subconscious lost property office. She plunges on.

"Coming up to his flat and just sitting there, *was*, of course, my fault. I'd said I didn't think he ate properly and he should know better, being a doctor, so he asked why didn't I show him how. So I did, and naturally I ended up preparing the food while he studied: it became a habit. There was no fun, no joy to it like when *we* prepare meals and fool around." She has to excuse herself, draw and keep a firm line between *that episode* and her real life.

"It was almost as if I were some prisoner on day-time parole, reporting up to his flat for community duty before returning to the misery of a nightly isolation cell; but I allowed it to happen. One seems to commit terrible mistakes by merely avoiding taking decisive action. Oops," she says, looking across at Philly, "I didn't mean that to refer to anybody but myself. At the time I knew it was all wrong for me, but it was like sinking knee-deep in syrup and

then trying to wade out. I was just too lazy, no, too indifferent to make the effort. It was acting, or not acting, like a stupid, thwarted child. I don't know if I thought I'd get back at Philly, or get him back, by hurting myself, because I was hurting. I disliked what I was doing, was bored and discontented most of the time, but went on doing it. You can't blame your father for that, Yannis. And I don't suppose one can blame him either for presuming I was romantically interested in him, though that never cropped up, not until that terrible night of the party.

"We went out less and less as his finals approached. I would sit silently, minding my own business, reading or knitting, or making nourishing meals, the stereotype of 'the good little woman'."

Yannis can't resist the crack, "It doesn't sound like you at all, Ma."

"Yes, well." She does not accept the challenge. "Of course, as he seldom had anything decent in the flat, I started bringing the ingredients. I don't know, it was such a strange relationship. We spoke very little and when we did our conversational range was limited by his apparent inability to cope with abstracts in English.

"He'd get me to check him from his text-books; lists and names, and functions which must have been learnt parrot-fashion because with his poor grasp of the language he couldn't possibly understand a great deal of what he was repeating. I often had to explain what I'd managed to extract from the medical jargon, and translate into the basic English we spoke. And I was fool enough to presume it was just a casual, keep-one-another-company sort of platonic acquaintanceship. Looking back, later, I realised that my help was probably part of his strategy to pass his exams. I think, initially, it was a case of using me to help and then he began to enjoy, got accustomed to, the company. Perhaps the cooking helped

him to appreciate my charms.” She laughs, then warns, “OK that’s the end of the easy bit,” shakes her head like a dog trying to get rid of something that has crawled into its ear and, addressing Yannis, explains that she herself does not understand what comes next, so he must not ask her to elucidate, just accept and work it out for himself. His answer will be as good, or maybe better than hers; distance can give clarity, like seeing details on a far mountain on a clear day. It is difficult for her to continue. Like an overburdened cart-horse she struggles to get purchase on the rough ground of her subject so that she may draw the heavy facts forward.

“Then there was a function at the hospital, in the nurses’ home, and he invited me. It was the first time he’d actually taken me anywhere and I was curious and thrilled at the idea of going to a proper grown-up do for the first time in my life. But it was disappointing, there was a lot of surreptitious drinking, people giggling over bottles in back-pockets, and I felt uncomfortable. He’d told me to dress formally and I even bought a new dress, instead of making one, but we were both ridiculously wrongly dressed for the occasion. We must have been figures of fun. The other girls were laughing at me, I’m sure. He kept introducing me as his fiancée, not in those words, but saying things like, ‘She going to be my wife.’ I asked him not to and then I realised he’d probably had a bit too much to drink and when he started arguing and insisting that I must be his wife I replied, to shut him up, ‘Yes, when Hell freezes over’. I said it several times. Of course he misunderstood me and thought I had agreed, but I didn’t realise this at the time.

“Towards midnight I began to feel bilious and giddy although I’d not had anything except cold-drink or his famous fruit juice, as far as I knew. Maybe something in the snacks, I thought. You must remember I’d had absolutely no experience of any sort of social life.

I came, more or less, straight from the years of isolation, nursing the old people on the 'farm', to moving into the flat at Philly's place. Living there was a sort of reality void. I don't think I spoke to more than half a dozen people – except Philly – in those six months, and those only casual strangers in shops or banks. Any case, it was late, I felt lousy and I wanted to go home. He was pretty peeved, said I was spoiling the evening. I was prepared to leave on my own, but he followed me outside, which was just as well, for suddenly I felt terrible and got all wobbly at the knees. He was very solicitous, seemed to sober up; broke a vial of something into a handkerchief and said to sniff it and I'd feel better. I was doubtful, you know how I feel about taking medicines, so he took a deep sniff himself and laughed at my silliness."

"My god," Philly gasps, "I never knew about that, you never told me. Didn't you realise what he was doing? It was 'poppers', amyl-nitrate, wasn't it?"

"Naturally I didn't realise," Jen almost snaps, "not then, of course. If I had, things would never have taken the course they did. It took me several days of feeling ill ... but I'm getting ahead of things. By then I was in no state to drive, so he took the wheel. The worse I felt the more he medicated me. At one stage I remember he stopped the car at a caf and got me another cold-drink, so that I could take some tablets he said would clear the nausea. By now I had developed a blinding headache, it throbbed and throbbed, and I was in such a daze that I had no idea what was happening. I couldn't remember much after this, just bits and pieces. It turned into a kaleidoscope, sharp jagged bits of colour or sound, nothing clear, I seemed to be giggling and didn't know what the joke was.

"There were vague images of going to a house and of a bearded man who opened up for us. They talked for a while,

seemed to be arguing, then the man put on some sort of robe which I thought was fancy-dress. White and flowing. I couldn't understand a word they were saying. Everything was in a disconnected haze, floating, and I with it. It seemed we were playing games, something like charades. Later, when trying to work it all out, I remembered that we'd stood in front of this person and held hands and that he, the doctor, told me not to talk, just nod and smile and say yes when he did. I thought we were being offered some refreshments and I must be polite; I hoped it would be a good strong pot of tea. Then a woman, the man's wife I suppose, in a satin dressing-gown that smelled of sweat and stale perfume, was hugging, patting and kissing me, and I hated it. She was very fat and breathed garlic all over me. I've never liked strangers touching me and was so distressed by this and trying to avoid her whilst still being polite, that I don't suppose I noticed much else. I seemed to remember the sensations, smells and tastes and pictures in my mind, like the pot of tea I wanted, rather than words or what happened."

"Are you telling me that my father drugged and abducted you?" Yannis is horrified.

"No, not really. I found out later ..." She stops, trying to sort out her memories and her thoughts. "From here I'm going to have to tell this not chronologically, as it happened, but with the facts I later found out, else it won't make sense. You see whatever happened was an accident. He never meant to harm me. It was the first time he had been to any of the parties at the hospital. I don't think he was well liked, or even accepted by the other interns. He just did not fit in with them at all, was too different, too serious, the frown on the collective smiling student face. I think he decided to go to this particular one because they were always ribbing him and

he was determined to show them he too had a private life and was not just the odd swot they made him out to be.

“He was most insistent I dress formally and of course both of us were totally wrongly overdressed, as I’ve said. I felt like Christmas cake at a cocktail party. Several of the young doctors – I thought them strange the way they behaved and spoke, something totally new to me, in-your-face gay men I found out later – well, they were being very funny in a spiteful rollicking sort of way, sniping at him, at us and our outfits. It was painful for me, but worse to watch him squirming his discomfort. Of course he didn’t understand half of what they were saying, just stood there, silent, morose like a great big dancing bear on a short chain trying to swipe at wasps darting in and out, dive-bombing him.

“He told me later that it was the first time he’d ever taken amyl nitrate and only did so because they challenged him. He felt his honour was at stake. Yes,” she acknowledged Yannis’ querying frown, “make sense of that. He had this weird concept of honour; it was something one fought and died for and apparently accepted stupid challenges to protect. They said he was a wimp, too scared to live. Of course this wasn’t true, but I don’t think he ever spoke to anybody about his background, and he was so hungry for acceptance, for belonging somewhere, as I later realised, that he took on their dare.

“Although he never really admitted it in so many words, his actions later showed that he had also been taking drugs regularly, not for fun, but to keep awake so he could cope with his work-load, and then later to sleep when he was too hyped-up. At that stage he was also sold on the idea of mood relaxants as a wonderful way to help cope with tensions and presumed it was what I needed too. Or so he said when he chucked everything away later. I’m getting

ahead again. As it was, the combination affected him far worse than it did me. He'd probably had a lot more.

"Whatever I might have taken I did so apparently willingly, as far as he was concerned. *Know that.* He did not realise how naïve I was, how stupid not to understand. Ignorance is not an excuse in the law, I believe. Initially I was feeling good, sort of floating, and it never occurred to me that there was more to this than the atmosphere and the excitement. I was so tense, so scared and yet excited, my gut churned and apparently my brain did too. But yes, I suppose if one puts it bluntly, it did work out as drugging and abducting, except I seemed to be co-operating all the way ... how else explain what happened? I hadn't even had a beer to drink. *He* thought I was enjoying the recreational drugs in the spiked canapés – funny little snacky things that were new to me but tasted delicious – and knew what was going on, as he told me later. Everybody else seemed to know what the score was. The trouble was once I was woozy I stopped thinking clearly, if I thought at all that is, and apparently it happened with such a minimal dosage that he concluded I'd already taken something. And, as Yan explained afterwards, when we tried to sort the whole mess out, he understood when I said 'Yes, when Hell freezes over', that it was an idiomatic form of hearty agreement meaning such a good idea would nullify the effects of Hades. Stop the burning.

"I don't want to go into the details, Yannis, but the next thing I knew was when I woke up the following morning. I was so sore I could hardly move and thought I'd wet the bed, but it was blood and ... well, you know. I tried to work out what was happening and had very faint memories of something hurting and somebody heavy on top of me and fighting and ... and then everything was a blank. Then I realised I was not at home and screamed and he came

through from the bathroom, very jovial and friendly. He said he hoped I wasn't going to be a lazy wife –the closest he ever came to teasing or making a joke, if it was a joke - and why didn't I climb out of bed and make my husband's breakfast, it was late." Tears are running down Jen's cheeks but she is trying to continue with the story until Yannis, who has got up and put his arm around her, says it's not necessary for her to continue. He'd had no idea and would never have nagged and subjected her to this if he'd known.

"I'll summarise the rest," Philly takes over. "You wanted to know, well, let me tell you. When she started crying and making a fuss he just told her that what he'd done was fine, it was better that way because it was always 'no good the first time for woman'. He really thought he'd done her a kindness, but he'd obviously been carried away and never realised he'd hurt her rather badly. Of course they had a terrible argument. She refused to accept that they were actually married until he waved a piece of paper at her and flung out of the flat telling her he'd be back when she stopped being hysterical. There was no way she could get out, no phone in the flat and her clothes were, well, let's just say they were in no condition to wear even if she had managed to get out."

"No, it wasn't quite like that." Jen insists on being fair, perhaps more for her son's sake than veracity demands. "When he realised how hurt I was he was very concerned and apologetic. Said he was a fool to let those 'robbishes' taunt him into 'losing himself'. I can't repeat what he said, his broken English and accent, but I could see he was genuinely upset, this man who never showed any emotion, was usually so tightly controlled and disciplined. He admitted he had gone wild, and had wanted to beat me and force me when I resisted, even in my dopey state. As far as he was concerned we were married and he had rights, but he never meant to hurt me

and was sorry, sorry, sorry. It had been such a long time since he'd been with a woman and the poppers and the drink and god knows what else, and my soft white skin ... Then waving his arms around, dramatically he swore an oath never again to take anything to make him lose control of himself. Flushed all his tablets and a few of the vials he had left down the loo. But I don't think he knew how bruised and hurt I was, and yes, he did say it was better, the first time, for a girl to be a little bit 'away'.

"He gave me a tube of brown iodine-based ointment and told me to use as much as I could, and of course, this caused most of the trouble. He wanted to check the damage, but naturally I refused although he argued that he was a doctor and my husband.

"This set me off and I flew at him, verbally - I could hardly move physically - and said I hated him, he was the last person I would marry even if he was the only man in the world. He was upset when he realised I did not want him, did not want to be with him. He actually broke down then and cried. It was terrible. 'I tink you luf me', he kept repeating. It was impossible to make him understand one does kind things for others without it necessarily implying a commitment. The concept of friendship, particularly between a man and a woman, was absolutely impossible for him to grasp and he was convinced that my helping him with his studies and cooking meals implied I accepted him as 'my man'. I said how could he imagine such a thing and that he'd never showed the slightest interest, for if he had I would have immediately put him straight. And then he explained the reason he had not tried to ... to fondle me or take it further was because he respected my virginity. Even with my inexperience his attitude that one only caresses when one makes love, what's the point otherwise? seemed strange. It had been his seeming total lack of interest in me, physically, which

made me feel safe, made me believe the whole thing was a pal thing. I think I must have performed like a fish-wife, screaming at him in frustration at what I called his stupidity for not understanding my values and ideas. Strangely it appeared he felt more comfortable with me in that role than in my usual polite, considerate mode. Then he had to go on duty and said we would talk later, when I was not hysterical. He meant well, I am sure. All I could do was wait for him to return.

"I got up and lay in the bath for hours. Where to turn? What to do? I was so sore and the water stung. Eventually, when I'd dried myself on a miserable little ragged towel, I made sure to put as much of the iodine-ointment as far up as I could. It burnt like hell which made me think it was doing a good job. If only I'd known it would cause a terrible allergic reaction which sort of ... there is no other way to describe what it did than rotted the tissue away. I didn't understand what was happening and because I couldn't see, kept using more and more of it as my condition deteriorated. Feeling desperate and frightened and thinking it must do the trick I wouldn't even discuss it with Yan. I was embarrassed about my inadequacy." Nobody realises, least of all Jen, quite what convoluted subterranean depths she has just revealed.

"After the bath I put on a pair of his pants and a shirt; he didn't have many clothes but I was so angry that I didn't care if I messed his stuff up, and believe me that ointment stained!

"He genuinely believed we could make a go of it. I was sure it was an impossible situation, but had no idea what to do. I believed marriage was a very special and sacred sacrament so I felt trapped, resented it like hell, and told him so when he returned. But he maintained that I'd agreed, been willing to elope. When I said I didn't love him he just laughed in that peculiar humourless rolling

of dry pebbles way and said when I got used to being married it would be different, I'd enjoy it. 'Always difficult the first time,' he kept saying, as if it was just the physical aspect that was the problem. It was impossible to make him understand we had nothing in common, that we weren't even really friends. He kept trying to persuade me that because we were both alone it would be good if we joined together; we would be *family* he said. I told him, again and again, tick-tocking it out like a metronome, 'it is impossible, it is impossible' until he became cross and we screamed at one another."

"Your mother was always feisty, a survivor," Philly points out.

"And stupid," Jen adds. "You see, I was feeling terrible, headachy and bilious and so sore, so the doctor – and he was always different in that role – came to the fore again and he gave me something to drink and told me to sleep and when I felt better we would talk again. I never suspected he would sedate me so heavily, but when I woke up it was about midnight and I was alone. I think he may have been on night duty. You know when they are on call they can be on stand-by for up to thirty-six hours, or more, at a stint. When he returned, late the next afternoon, or it may have been the one after – I lost all track of time – I was still groggy. He asked if I was hungry and I said no; that terrible headache like a muted buzz-saw obliterated all sensation except pain, but he insisted I eat. He brought me something and seemed very worried. What neither of us knew was that I was – and still am – extremely allergic to iodine. It was the standard, widely used substance for pre-op cleansing of the skin and wounds, who would have thought it could make all my raw areas much, much worse? Over the several days I used the stuff it chewed up the mucous membranes it came

in contact with: the more I applied the more I started suppurating and getting infected. It was horrible.

“About half an hour after I ate I started vomiting. I think he panicked because ... well, I don’t quite know how to put this but sometimes I thought all he knew about medicine was the plastic surgery bit.”

“Ma, you really don’t have to ...” Yannis begins, but she is now insistent that she tell him the story as fairly as possible. “You must never forget,” she stresses, turning to him, “that he was a lost soul, like some poor little animal being swirled away in a whirlpool, and whatever he did was not done maliciously, but either in ignorance, as he knew no better, or because he genuinely believed it was the right thing for him to do. He seemed obsessed with the idea that being married would be a protection, for both of us, from the rest of the world.”

“But surely,” Philly interjects, “surely he must have realised you were not well, not yourself. Why did he go on sedating you?”

“I thought you said he’d thrown all the tablets away?” Yannis asks.

“I’m sure he did. I could find nothing in the flat when I looked, maybe he brought something with him when he returned. I don’t know. What was obvious though was that he was not taking anything. He was dead tired but found it difficult to sleep. OK maybe that’s because he rolled up on some blankets on the bare floor. I wouldn’t let him near me and he was decent about that, he could have...” She trails off, then resumes: “About the sedation, I really think he believed that if I calmed down, if I would make love with him, willingly, get over the hump of my discomfort, that everything would sort itself out and we would kind of click automatically into the strong family unit he kept talking about.

Looking back it's actually rather sad, he was so desperate, and he saw the whole thing in such unrealistic simple terms. 'Family' seemed a magic word to him, something that would solve all problems.

"I don't know what made me come to my senses, but I refused to take any more medication. In fact I refused to eat anything I hadn't prepared myself, and after some time I felt strong enough, no, not strong, but sane enough to attempt to drive home. He broke down and cried, sobbed, begged me. It was awful. And flattering, in a sick, strange sort of way. I think by now I was quite adrift from reality. He had my keys and refused to give them to me unless I promised to come back when I'd got some clothes. He said we could talk calmly after I'd thought about it and had seen how desolate loneliness was. That was the word he used, 'desolate'. He was so frantic to keep me and I was equally frantic to get away, to get home and phone Philly, I'd have agreed to anything to be able to leave without any more scenes."

"But you went back, I could never understand why," Philly points out.

"He wasn't a fool, though he had misjudged me, but that was only because he'd probably never met such an unsophisticated and stupidly innocent girl before. Or if he had, then most certainly he hadn't got to know her or gone out with her. You know, except when he was doing his doctoring bit, he had absolutely no idea about being gentle. He didn't have a clue about tenderness either.

"Yes, why did I go back? Well, he guaranteed my return: after I got home and managed to pull myself together – being in the familiar atmosphere helped a lot there – I found his wallet in my handbag and his textbooks in the car. If I'd decided not to go back there was no way I could have contacted him to return his things.

At first I was tempted not to, and damned him for trying to manipulate me into that position where decency gave me no choice. I was pretty sure he wouldn't remember where the house was, he'd only been there once, that first night, and I didn't know then that he could find anybody he wanted to, in any case he had the car number. I never thought of those things.

"The more I tried to work it out the more I wondered if it was some sort of trap. What if he laid a charge of theft against me? You see, I wasn't thinking logically and had no idea what to do, what to think, because, when we were screaming at each other, he'd said something in his broken English which sounded as if he was threatening he'd make trouble for Philly. If I left him, my husband, to go and stay in Philly's house, then he could smear Philly's name all over the papers, sue him for alienation of affection, that sort of scandal. Naturally he didn't put it like that, but that was, more or less, the drift of things. That's why, when I couldn't get hold of Philly on the phone – I tried for ages – I decided to go back, return the frayed almost empty wallet and the dog-eared second-hand medical books and try to sort out the disaster reasonably and amicably."

"You *weren't* thinking straight, Ma," Yannis interjects.

Philly tries to explain, "Probably she was already running a fever. By the time she managed to contact me and I got back she was so ill, a massive infection and a nasty allergic reaction combined, she *couldn't* think straight."

"And I was so terribly depressed. I'd never had emotional problems before and it drained me. I couldn't do anything but sit in a heap, sunk in gloom, not even think. My whole life seemed ruined, my mind just wanted to close down, it was one great big blank. There seemed no way out, except suicide and I didn't have

the courage for that. No, I'd got myself into this mess and now had to see it through, into whichever crooked cul-de-sac I stumbled.

"When I got back to the flat he wasn't there, so I sat waiting outside in the car, I didn't have a key. I don't know how long I waited, but it was getting dark and I was stiff and cold and needed to go to the loo. Just as I'd decided to leave he came around the corner and was so delighted to see me. It was surreal. One would think everything was hunky-dory, not this mess. I wanted to speak in the car but the need for the bathroom drove me upstairs. We talked till late. He realised I wasn't feeling well, in fact I got the shivers but refused the medication he offered. I wonder, now, if there was something else there to which I was allergic, it seems too odd that no sooner was I in the flat than I became ill. The upshot was after much persuasion I agreed to stay on certain conditions. From my point of view it was the only way to prove it wouldn't work, and do so with the minimum amount of nastiness. Perhaps, at that stage, I couldn't bear to be alone. I was desperate for companionship and yet I was sure he would realise we had nothing in common, and release me from whatever commitment I had made, particularly if I only spoke of things he couldn't discuss. I made him promise not to try to touch me. He could see I was feeling ill; I was so very tender and sore I couldn't walk or sit properly, and he seemed really contrite. Perhaps because I felt so ill I was frightened to be alone. It sounds crazy, but you must realise most of the time I just lay on the lumpy bed, dozed on and off, drowned in misery.

"Then even I realised something very bad was wrong and wanted to see a doctor. He argued he was a doctor and why if I wouldn't let him help me did I want to go to a stranger. That's when I yelled at him that he was worse than a stranger and we had another exhausting fight. The door was unlocked, I stormed out,

but he'd hidden my bag with the car and house keys and my cheque-book and money. It was at this stage I really started to get frightened. I think this saved me because instead of sitting around depressed and doing nothing but sink deeper into the mire, refusing to think and face things, I began to get truly angry. No longer did I feel sorry for him or even try to see his point of view.. It didn't make sense. I was sick, miserable and lousy company sitting there hunched up, feathers awry like a sick chicken chewed by tampans. Why did he insist I stay when we snarled at each other all the time, and I refused to have anything to do with him?

"I started getting nauseous again, realised I'd missed my periods and knew I needed help, desperately. I *had* to get away, so if logical discussion and honesty didn't work I'd try deceit. The idea was to pretend I'd accepted things, ask for some money from my bag to buy groceries so I could make a decent meal; we'd both been living on bread and pies and ghastly stuff he brought in, never any fruit or fresh veggies. I couldn't go home by taxi as I'd thought to do because I didn't know where he'd put my keys, so when I was supposedly buying groceries I went to Bruno's little shop, and without giving him details said I was in some trouble and had to contact Philly. I insisted on leaving my heavy gold antique locket there until I could get back and pay for the phone call."

Philly takes over in the peculiar manner they have developed, over the years, of sharing the telling of a story in a form of verbal table tennis. "Naturally I flew back immediately. You know I'm a physical coward and I didn't have any plan of action but came straight from the airport to the address she gave me. As I approached the flat I heard loud, angry voices, male voices, then the door swung open and George charged out, not bothering to shut it. He was a short, stocky, hairy man and made me think of an

infuriated ram, curly head down, intent on butting anything in his way. I don't think he even saw me, he was so frenzied. Just as I was, politely, going to ring the bell I heard ... the doctor, screaming. You know the sort of almost falsetto high note some men achieve when they are so tense that everything about them is strung tightly, including the vocal chords? His voice was vibrating at that pitch and your mother was answering in her usual brown velvet contralto. I think the angrier she got the calmer she became and the lower her voice sank. It was odd, his high male shrillness and her low honeyed female sweetness. He was calling your mother a fool, a traitor, all sorts of swear words in strange languages, because she had told George they were married."

"George had been away," Jen takes over, "and on returning found the café had been neglected. He must have heard rumours or gossip about his prize pupil overlooking his duties and being seen with a strange woman, not one of their crowd. He came storming up, charged in without knocking, had his own key apparently, and started hauling your father over the coals; I couldn't believe how meek and mild Yan, your father, was in response to George's tirade. Of course I didn't understand a word, but recognised various derogatory words used for women. I'd been in the kitchen and came out, still holding the knife I was using, and George turned on me asking who I thought I was, interfering with his plans and didn't I know this man – jabbing hard at Yan – was supposed to be working and was promised to his, George's, niece in Greece. He called me all sorts of whores and bitches, saying I had no business interfering with 'family'.

"Well, you know me. That was the limit and I exploded in turn. Said if it was family he was so keen about then I *was* family, we were married, and furthermore against my wishes, and now

there was going to be an addition to the family. I said I had been wanting to get the hell out of there right from the beginning, but my handbag with money and keys had been hidden from me, and if he'd get his nephew to hand them back I'd be gone instantly and glad to see the end of the lot of them. I was spitting fire by then, but frozen fire, I was so cross, and the more they screamed and shouted the quieter and deadlier I became, like poison. ”

“Thank god he didn't take your mother seriously, probably because she was so low-key and quiet about it all. He had not paid sufficient attention to be bothered to take his spite out on her,” Philly adds. “I didn't know, then, what hold he had on, on er, the doctor, who I overheard telling Jen he had been ordered to fly back to Europe the next day. He erupted, blamed your mother for spoiling his life and his chances. She asked how could he go just before his finals, and that George must realise that would defeat his own plans to educate him. The reply was chilling and to the effect that George didn't give a damn for qualifications or pieces of paper. It was enough that ‘his boys’ could do the job. Because of Jen - it was *her* fault that impossible young man had the temerity to say - he could not now get this piece of paper, his certificate. He was becoming very dramatic, you know how some of these European people can be, said he would never be able to get out of George's grasp, he knew enough surgery, now, to do what George wanted, fingerprints, faces he could change, but without the final qualification he was lost. For the rest of his life he would continue to be a slave!

“And then he turned on her and accused her of refusing him because she had somebody else. He had given her tablets, special medicine, to make sure she could not be pregnant, and any case it was only that one unprotected time. Then I heard a slap and Jen

said, 'Touch me again and I'll kill you.' Cold as ice her voice was and it frightened me; that wasn't the Jen I knew. Of course I rushed in then and she was standing there threatening him with a long curved kitchen knife. Fortunately for us all the fight seemed knocked out of him, whether by George or the scene with your mother I don't know. He seemed to be absolutely obsessed by her.

"I took one look and saw she was feverish, had lost so much weight. Taking her arm I turned to him and said if he made any trouble at all I would lay charges, so many charges he'd be in jail for years. He seemed to panic then because he said something about 'No police, no police, we talk, yes?' Jen said, still in that snake-cold voice, 'Give me my things you've stolen.' He didn't say another word, went to a trunk covered with a cloth, unlocked it, handed her bag to her. He was shaking though and deadly pale. And this is where she soared. She opened her bag, took out all the notes, tucked them in his shirt pocket without a word, turned and walked out. The effect was somewhat spoiled as she was limping."

"No, you misread my intention," Jen corrects. "It wasn't to wound, but to compensate. Material things, out of necessity, meant a lot to him. It was intended to make things a bit easier for him. I had, after all, caused him as much trouble as he'd caused me. In a strange way I felt a mixture of compassion and a peculiar sort of affection, as one would for a dog or a maverick horse one could not tame because it had been so ill-treated. It was the sort of feeling I imagine they have at the SPCA when they have to put down the unwanted and unlovely animals no one wants to own. There were a lot of good things there, a lot of potential if I'd had the wisdom and patience to help him develop them. But I was too immature, too frightened. And, of course, I didn't love him. He might have fascinated me, in the beginning; the unfamiliar has the same

strange sort of attraction as danger, perhaps it's the allure the trout feels when rising to an irresistible fly. And he *did* say something," turning to Philly, "don't you remember? As we left he called out, 'I haf to go, business for George, I cannot choose, I haf to go, but I come back Djenny, I come back quick, two weeks and we make everyting good dis time. You go get well, OK.'"

"She was too sick to function logically, just going round and round like one of those mechanical toys with broken traction on the one side, round and round until the battery, or the mechanism runs down," Philly explains. "I took her, immediately, to get medical attention, and as I suspected she had a raging fever, an infection ... and the injuries, the open skin had given extra easy access to the substance to which she was so allergic. It was a miracle she hadn't gone into anaphylactic shock. She needed sutures and remained in hospital on a drip for several days. What you must never forget, Pup, is you were always, from the beginning, a separate person to her and she was determined to give you, her much wanted child, the best she was able to provide. She could have terminated the pregnancy but she fought to retain it, fought really hard. She was as sick as a dog for months."

"Yes," Jen adds. "I walked around the house with a bucket." Seeing Yannis' quizzical expression she explains. "It appears I was one of those rare types who spend the greater part of their pregnancy cotching their heart out. It was easier, safer, less messy to have a bucket handy when I heaved. Couldn't always get to the bathroom in time and got sick of wiping up the mess."

"A subconscious device for purification perhaps?" Philly suggests.

"And my father?" Yannis asks. He is stunned by what he has heard, has not absorbed it yet, but he still needs closure.

"A few weeks after I came home from hospital we decided to sort out the legal aspects and went up to the flat. I thought he'd be back from overseas by then, though of course as he'd missed the exams there probably wasn't any point, unless they'd give him another opportunity. We didn't take his accusations against George seriously at that stage, put it down to exaggeration, being upset, you know. George had not taken the key of the door when he stormed out. He'd put it down on the table when he needed both his hands to gesticulate during the shouting match and I'd picked it up as we left. Despite feeling so rotten I'd been aware that a key was necessary if I wanted to fetch my things that were there, books and a spinning wheel. Your father was absolutely enchanted when he found out I could spin and had insisted I bring a wheel to the flat so I could sit and spin as he studied," Jen explains. "Besides," she adds, "I'd felt cross and spiteful when we left and wanted to hit back, somehow."

"Never mock female intuition," Philly adds. "As soon as she came out of hospital she kept insisting that she *had* to get up to the flat and I stalled, saying she should get her strength up first. I had a horror of the place and, as I usually did, was trying to avoid an unpleasant experience. That day she would not put it off any longer. When we got there George was supervising the packing up of the stuff, including hers. We challenged his right and he told us that the doctor was dead, had been killed in a traffic accident on the way into Athens, from the airport. He refused to give any further particulars, said he knew nothing more about it, and grudgingly allowed Jen to remove her things but insisted she do so immediately as the flat belonged to him and, as his rent hadn't been paid, he had let the place. Jen said she needed time to go through what George had packed to get the marriage certificate and check if any items

belonging to her were there. He laughed, said it was just a bit of paper and didn't mean a thing; as a purely religious ceremony - although the priest had the right to perform these weddings - it was not legally valid unless registered. Hers had not been. He was so nasty; he had them throw her things out of the flat, she could pack in the passageway, he snarled, she was trespassing on his property."

"Although, in one way, it was a relief to know there would be no complicated legal issues, I couldn't understand, until Philly reminded me about a Jewish couple we knew. They had been married by a rabbi who was not a registered marriage officer and, like us, they did not have a civil ceremony. When she walked out on him there was nothing he could do except to refuse her a *gett*, the Jewish divorce. It didn't make any difference to her and she got on with her life as if nothing had happened. I decided to do the same, except something *had* happened. You. " She turns to her son, willing him to understand. "My whole life took on extra value and meaning. Having you made up for everything else, not knowing my parents, having no family, the aloneness. Now, at last, I was going to have my very own family. You will never know just how special you have always been to me."

Jenny is terrified that Yannis will ask her to clarify his status, a far too complicated issue for her to argue as a non-observer of any formal religion, yet the echo of the word 'bastard' always reverberates in her sub-conscious, while she fumes against the injustice of labelling an innocent child for the parents' act. Again Philly, at least temporarily, saves the situation. He points out how they had tried to verify George's report, hired a firm in Athens to trace the missing man, but having no legal documentary evidence of relationship, nor the sort of particulars that bureaucracy demands -

things like an ID number and place and date of birth – they were unable to make much headway.

“The language barrier was ... it was like trying to swim in glue, even when we went to the embassy our enquiries were processed in Athens. It wasn’t always easy to follow some of the translations which went off at irrelevant tangents, in the manner of a rainstorm-stream breaking its banks and petering off in little useless pools of misinformation.

“We’ll show you the letters and replies, it’s quite a bulky stack of correspondence. I have them all filed away,” Philly concludes. “It was a dead-end, and after a while we gave up. There seemed no point in looking for somebody who, if he was alive, obviously did not wish to return, particularly as your mother had no desire to continue a relationship into which she felt she had been tricked, for whatever sad and pitiable motive.”

“Naturally,” Jen reassures, “had he returned and wanted to be a father to you, I should have done everything to encourage and help this. As things turned out it is Philly who has filled that role.”

“And, on that subject,” Philly stretches over and takes the boy’s hand, “on that subject I want you and your mother to go up to Ken’s office tomorrow, he is handling all the legal ramifications and would like you there at about two o’clock, if that’s all right with you?” He turns and checks with Jen. “I’ve left it to you to make any decisions you want about changing your name; but yes, I’m awfully chuffed at your suggestion of a whole string of little Phillip Griers, from one on to infinity. We will naturally have to settle on appropriate abbreviations and nick-names to avoid a herd of thundering male feet running in response to your mother’s call, ‘Want a slice of cake, Philly?’ Seriously though, because you’re an adult, twenty-one in a few days, my goodness, hard to believe, that

little baby ...” He turns away, blows his nose loudly, and pretends, “Damn hayfever! Well, let Ken explain it all, he’s handling all the business and contractual aspects and your mother’s and my wills. You, as our son – all signed and sealed legally as far as I’m concerned – naturally inherit everything and your interests are also being included in our ante-nuptial contract. Not that we anticipate anything happening to either of us for a long time,” he hastens to reassure a frowning Yannis, beginning to look anxious. “It’s just a safe and sensible thing to do. I won’t see you then until tomorrow night, so give me a good good-night kiss, as you did when you were my little Pup – no licking though – and let’s all have an early night to recuperate. You too, Jen,” he adds. “Kiss the patient good-night.”

## CHAPTER 11 BEGINNINGS

They are very quiet in the car, mother and son, driving home. Jen's anxiety about Yannis' reaction, how he will feel about her now, is a big damp cloth wiping the words off the blackboard of her thoughts. Although he is driving Yannis extends an arm across his mother's shoulders, gives her a reassuring hug before replacing his hand on the wheel.

"It's OK, Mama, it's fine. I knew there was something not entirely right, but I never realised how sad it must have been, how terrible for you. So," he pauses, not quite sure how to choose the delicate right words which could eggshell dance over the friable seal of the secret without collapsing the brittle surrounds and damaging all, beyond retrieval. "You were apparently torn between two extremes? I seem to gather that you felt *something* for him, my maverick father." He does not quite know how to ask the question he needs answered and though he tries to be tactful he blunders, big-booted, crushing the little pearly shells of her wilfully submerged memories before she can retrieve and examine them. It has become an obsession for Yannis to confirm he was conceived in love, or at least with joy.

"You say he fascinated you, and it's obvious you felt sorry for him. *Beware of Pity*, remember? Stefan Zweig. But there was, no, still is, a lot more to it than that, isn't there? I somehow get the impression that here, again, you and Philly have different versions, different takes on the whole situation, the man, your feelings, what happened." He is silent, waiting for a reply, but Jen, obdurate, just mumbles.

"You know I'm not one to brood, to live in the past. Why waste energy on things you can't change, it's past, gone, finito. It's *today* that matters for me."

Yannis, in pursuit of that indefinable essence for which he is searching, continues attempting to distil unexpressed secrets from his mother's words. Nothing he has been told has completed the *feel* of his father for him and he is determined to capture this. It is as elusive as a faint scent, the merest whiff of success, being blown away before it can lead the hunter to his quarry.

"A part is missing: something between your soft pitying and the results of the iodine allergy. I know you had your face shoved in aspects of life that you probably weren't ready for yet, well, not in that harsh manner. And as for him, poor blighter, poor lost piece torn off the fabric of humanity; I'm glad you don't hate him, don't blame him entirely, and I do understand why Philly resents him. If it really happened that way, and you don't seem to be all that sure yourself in the telling, I'm not condoning what he did for one moment, - please don't think so - but I reckon I can understand how driven he must have been, and how the unaccustomed poppers, on top of everything else, your 'soft white skin' and your apparent consent and then withdrawal must have scorified him. You did withdraw your consent, didn't you?"

Jen remains silent, no bait will lure her into the open. Yannis continues, a psychological dentist trying to scrape out the debris from an emotional bad tooth before it can be made whole again. "What I can't understand is why, if it was all so bad, you stayed with him for three weeks, it just doesn't make sense. I mean, the whole story is like lacework."

"What do you mean, lacework?" she falls into the snare.

“Full of holes.” His answer blunt, to the point, evokes irritation; controlled it is as rapidly gone as the flicker of a doused match, nonetheless it leaves faint sparks: falling, they glow upon the packed tinder of Jen’s submerged resentment and frustration. Slowly - as Yannis continues to probe - very quietly the forces of a subterranean fire seep through the masking smoke of her repressed subconscious. Anger, long kept moribund, surges, throbbing in every blood-vessel and nerve. Eventually, as he continues probing, she turns, flares.

“What are you trying to do? It’s cost me all of this time, all my adult years, to build a good life, give Philly some sort of self-confidence and identity. Damn it, damn *you*. I’d thump you if you weren’t driving. What are you trying to do? And what were you trying to do back there, in the hospital, with all your silly questions? D’you want to prove he is only *second-best*? Break him down? Destroy him? We’ve had a good life, a bloody good life. And it’s all been directed, all that energy and hard work on my part, at making it good for *you*. It doesn’t just happen, effortlessly, it costs, my boy, it costs. A good life ...” she repeats, white lipped, nostrils flared; a nerve tics near the old scar. Its rhythm flicks away all the old perpetually good humoured, imperturbable Jenny placidity.

Yannis has never seen his mother incandescently angry. Irritable, yes, occasionally; annoyed, never with the family. He is uncomfortable, feels the tight clutch of guilt attempting to squeeze apology or retreat from him. One thing Jen has taught him is that it is pointless attempting to discuss anything with a person who is being buffeted by emotion or alcohol, yet, lifting his shoulders perceptibly against the expected storm, he pursues his prey.

“I know you and Philly are not ...”

His thoughts have run away ahead of his words. How does one tell one's mother you know there are people, unlike herself and Philly, whose physical desires erupt explosively, so fiercely that they can disrupt the normal sensible business of life, separate the sound core from the dross which then goes spinning off, a molten, mindless lava. He knows how difficult it is to contain these impulses, prevent them flaming out of control, even without the added fire of alcohol, drugs and a desirable woman at hand. He *understands*, identifies with the unknown father.

"Ma, you know, everybody is not as celibate as you and Philly. Most people, particularly nowadays, with all the blatant in-your-face sexual titillation in the media, would find your attitude, your way of life, strange. It's not *natural*, for god's sake!"

"Nonsense," Jen retorts indignantly. "What about all the thousands of priests and nuns, and just ordinary people who don't think it necessary, or nice, or sensible for that matter, to go screwing around with all and sundry?"

"Yes, well ..." he is not going to argue. "As for myself, I have no intention of what you call 'screwing around'. I think, watching you and Philly, that it must be great spending the rest of one's life with somebody with whom you forge a deep emotional bond of friendship. But if I'm to do that it seems I shall have to get married pretty young. I don't really enjoy casual scuffles with the girls I know, here at varsity, and so far have managed to hold the wilder carnal impulses in check, but I am driven - mightily. It's really only because Gaia and I have spoken, written, about sex and love and commitment - we share so many similar thoughts on life - that I've managed to hang on to the somewhat frayed loin-cloth of my virginity. Don't laugh. I know one can't be in love with a person you haven't seen since you were fifteen, but I'm certainly enchanted

by her mind, her humour, her personality. She is so courageous and I respect and admire her, and if, in the flesh, my fantasies come true, well then ... What I'm trying to say is, I think we may very well have the sort of friendship that you and Philly have, but I'm hoping that there will be a lot more, that *we* will have a complete relationship and if that proves to be the case it seems the outcome is logically inevitable. Just warning you."

All Jen can reply to this is, "Wow!" The silence is as soporifically warm as the attendant dark night outside. She places a hand on her son's arm, squeezing it, touch saying more than words; then, withheld tears soft in her voice, adds, "Thank you, for understanding, and thank you for confiding in me." Inevitably, Jen's unfailing defence mechanism against emotional loss of equilibrium swings into place, "This family has certainly succeeded in chucking an armoury of explosive facts around these last few days, hasn't it?"

"Yes, let's just hope the results are going to be a beautiful fireworks display. But, Ma, how does one *know*, really know when somebody is the right person? You've told me old Gramps ÓDowd said never to fall for a pretty face and a sweet voice alone, one needs more for the dark, boring winter nights, particularly when time has been somewhat cruel to the pretty face and voice. But how do you decide, sensibly, when the hormones are moaning away like mad?"

"Are you asking a pig how to fly?" she laughs. "I'm hardly the expert, am I? It was just god's good luck that the very first man who put an arm around me, was also kind and gentle and funny and sweet and seemed to need me as much as I needed him – even if it was in a rather unconventional way – and that he happened to be completely right for me under the circumstances, accepting me back after all my foolish actions, and their results. I can't help you,

son. I think you must trust your own deep inner gut reaction. But ask yourself if you have the stamina, the moral stamina, to take on - at so young an age - all the restrictions, extra duties and dedication it will require in this case. I think one has to be a very special, very kind and patient person to choose a blind partner, no matter how well you get on together. There is going to be so much you will miss out on in life."

"Like you and Philly have missed out?" his answer is intended to remind, gently, that disabilities have not, in her case, negated love. "Just one more question, please? Can't you give me one single little positive thing, in the welter of all the contradictory images, just one, something special about my father? What drew you to him, what made you keep coming back for more if everything was so wrong? I promise I won't repeat it to Philly."

"Promise?"

"Of course. He was my father and it's between you and me, but I need to know."

"Magnetic." The word leaves her unwillingly.

"What do you mean, magnetic. Explain."

"You want to squeeze out the last drop, don't you, Yannis. You're so like him, that way, you know. All right. From that very first time, that time in George's grotty little caf, when he put his arms around me, I melted. No, more than that. It was fizzing and melting all at the same time. I can't explain it. I've never been one for booze or drugs, never intentionally tried or been interested in such mind-bending stuff, but your father, well, he had what I imagine would be that sort of effect. I just sort of floated away, lost myself. I can't even begin to explain it. Even with the discomfort of the allergy reaction, the terrible frustration of it and everything else

that was so out of camber, he was ... magic. I'd never experienced anything like it before - or since,"

"It wasn't only that one time was it?" Yannis pushes it.

"If it hadn't been for Philly 'rescuing' me, and me feeling so ill, and him having to leave, of course, all the if if ifs, I suppose I would have spent my life in some seedy little lodging, or series of tatty rooms all over the place, dragging you up, he and I alternatively scrapping and scre..." She breaks off, scrambling to climb out of the clinging morass of the past which she has so successfully avoided acknowledging, until now. "But it didn't happen that way, did it, so what's the point of this gruesome disinterment? It's all so very old and very dead. And I'm not going to discuss it any more. I've had enough of this, it's morbid. Rather spend your energy for working out your *own* life, not what did or didn't happen in mine."

"Well, it won't be long now and we shall see what happens in mine. I'm pretty sure, though, that if the chemistry works, or whatever it is that clicks into action, what we may miss out on won't be nearly so drastic, so crippling, as what you and Philly have missed. People adapt, don't they? We'll see, she's due to arrive soon, and Ma, would you come to the airport with me? You and Philly, together, if he's out of hospital by then. You see if things go horribly wrong and it's all embarrassing, it would make it easier, having you there." Yannis worries he may have let the cat out of the bag, suggesting that Philly may be home in such a short time. He knows that the appointment with the lawyer is a ploy to keep Jen away from the hospital until after the operation, scheduled for the following day. Scared as he is Philly still wants to save her the anxiety of sitting around worrying while he is in theatre; he plans to present her, next evening when she visits, with a *fait accompli*.

Fortunately Jen has missed the glitch, her mind occupied with the idea of her baby, a young man now, ready and eager for sexual experience, and love too if that can be part of the package. She wonders what has kept him from the usual wild sowing of oats each generation seems to indulge in earlier than the one before. Her mind gnawing at the bone of conjecture, she hopes, fiercely, that it is the atmosphere of love and emotional security at home that has kept him unsinged. She has laboured so hard to create and keep, for her two men, the balance of an environment where their disparate emotional needs are satisfied and, weary, wonders if she has burnt out her own core.

It is a bumpy mental passage, for a mother, accepting this transition and the inevitable distancing it creates between herself and her male offspring. Jen ponders if it is easier with a daughter, this growing up and becoming a sexually active adult. Can mothers and daughters share a community of feeling engendered by similar emotions and experiences? She dismisses the idea, realising it is not relevant to her: it is a situation she will never face, and, practical as ever, she is not going to waste time, or feelings, on a situation that will never arise. Rather, she decides, it is wiser to garner her forces for what will, inevitably, be emotionally taxing weeks ahead. This does not prevent her thinking, wistfully, that she wishes there had been other children, a girl perhaps; if only Yannis had been twins, like his friend Gaia. Wanting her son to be fulfilled and happy she is determined not be the sort of interfering mother that comedians joke about. She points out the alternative possibility which could arise.

“And what if it goes wonderfully right? Won’t we be an embarrassment then, being at your first meeting after all those years of letters and tapes?”

"Of course not. There is plenty of time. I don't want to rush either Gaia or myself; it must all unfold, beautifully, like a rose opening." He chuckles, a bit shy about his romantic attitude. "On a more practical note, would you mind, awfully, if when we are in Athens, Gaia with her Greek and me with my eyes, if we try to find out anything more about the mystery of the disappearing doctor?" He must make a joke of it; the magician's cloak of invisibility behind which so many emotions can be disguised.

"I had presumed you would." She answers simply, wondering how to reopen the subject, how to explain to her son that it was not lack of desire, but the circumstances, Philly's 'problem' which had made them an asexual couple. She struggles to explain a fact that she herself cannot understand; that Philly would always veer away from the subject, scuttling into a bolt-hole like a rabbit smelling a fox. Why had they not spoken about it, she and Philly, with all that so-evident affection and tolerance? Was he, perhaps, one of those rare asexual men?

They had coped surprisingly well with all the other problems and difficulties, especially since they had moved from the museum house tainted by Trudie's malevolent lingering presence. The tempo of their life together had, most of the time, been hypnotically smooth: a syrup-sweet and treacly slow-flowing time-warp along a mythological river, where a hundred years of real life, the world outside, passed as one day. It had been too good to gamble on changing the pattern. Exposing his disability would probably have tumbled Philly into a deeper retreat of despair than ever before. And now? How would he react if neural pathways, unused so long, sabotaged physiological repair? This was a distinct possibility, the surgeon had warned. Would Philly be changed by the disappointment of failure? And what about her own hang-ups if it

were a success? Revulsion? Philly was family, not a lover, and would she, too, need surgery to her scarred and resentful, failed and unwilling love and birth passage? Yannis' impatient retort jolts her from her reverie.

"For goodness sake, Ma, you and Philly hid behind the barricade of his 'problem', it's almost as if the two of you treasured it, a magic token to keep you safe in faerie-land, away from the dangers of the real world! Didn't you realise, for Pete's sake, there are more ways than one to skin a cat? Didn't you think of that? Look at all the fun you could have had experimenting." He shakes his head in mock exasperation and chides, "*Parents!* They've got to hang around waiting for their kids to educate them. Any case it's probably just as well I'll be away; give you inexperienced innocents a chance of discovery: you could come up with solutions without the embarrassment of an adult son hanging around. Gosh, this is an odd conversation to be having, a sort of reversal of roles. Sorry I can't give you any tips from practical experience, but I do have a very good book on the subject ..." he trails off, awkwardness overcoming his usual ebullience.

"Thanks. I may just take you up on that offer." Jen, too, subsides in unaccustomed diffidence.

\* \* \*

Philly and Jen celebrated a simple ceremony to bind them together. A non-denominational marriage officer had suggested they compose their own vows, expressing the promises they wished to make each other. Naturally this had ended up as a family project, all sitting around a table, composing everything from the sublime to the ridiculous. Jen had baked crisp brown bread in her new bread-

maker. Philly and Yannis experimented with a huge dish full of sliced butter-nut, green-pepper pieces, carrot strips and cauliflower florets. They had sprinkled these lightly with olive oil and seeds – sesame, linseed, sunflower – then, merely kissing the colourful results with a sprinkling of coarse salt, grilled the lot. They were tearing off great chunks of steaming bread, all eating from the communal dish, scooping up delicious mouthfuls of varied colours and textures while mulling over promises, such as a vow to replace lids firmly to prevent accidents. This, of course, was immediately countered by one not to lift items, particularly glass ones with messy contents, by their insecurely replaced lids. There was a lot of happy hilarity mixed with the serious attempt to formulate a simple and satisfactory marriage vow, but nothing that everybody agreed upon was suggested, except, of course, those utterly unsuitable ones. Then Yannis came up with something which embodied their past and all their hopes for the future.

“You know what *I* would promise, and like to have promised me?” he asked, suddenly grown quiet, looking into the far distance as was his habit when picturing some imagined or remembered incident. He stood up and very solemnly, as if rehearsing, placed his right hand over his heart and said, “I would promise to love with honour, fidelity and respect. Also to keep gentle and compassionate lines of communication open to negotiate any areas of disagreement, or misunderstanding.”

“I think that’s perfect, that’s exactly what we want, don’t you agree?” Philly concurred, turning to Jen for her approval.

“It’s spot-on. Yannis, you’re a genius. Except,” the practical Jen pointed out, “I don’t think the *lines* of communication can be gentle and compassionate. Rather I suggest we promise to keep them open with gentleness and compassion. OK?”

"May we use this or do you want to keep this special thought of yours for yourself, one day?" Philly asked.

"Of course it's for you to use, isn't that what we have been trying to work out?" Yannis immediately agreed, rather proud of himself, and then teasingly suggested, "Let's make it another family tradition, to be passed on from parents to sons?"

It had been an unusual and moving ceremony; these two people whose love had endured twenty-two years of abstinence, making their promises to one another in their home, with only Yannis and Sepe as witnesses. Although well into his nineties and frail, the old man whizzed around in an electrically powered wheel chair as if he were a Le Mans competitor.

Jen, surprised by the speed and afraid there might be an accident, delighted the old man when she accused, "Sepe, I'm convinced you've souped-up the motor, you're an absolute speed freak. I think I should jolly well give you a ticket for dangerous driving. Isn't it time you stopped making little mechanical miracles?"

"I live to the last throb, my girl," he chuckled with his old man's laugh. "You take my advice you travel top speed too, *make it happen*, the magic you want. I give you my toys so you never stop believing in impossibles, how you can change dull to enchantment."

Philly and Yannis were delighted with the collection of marvellously gyrating mechanical miniatures, Sepe's wedding present. They carried them off to the attic, after the ceremony, where Yannis set them up over several days, with suitable backdrops which he painted and constructed. "Sometimes," he mourned, "things come a bit late in life, but I'm going to pretend I'm a kid again and really squeeze every bit of my childish coveting into making the perfect setting for them." As Jen watched this

construction of a child's dream she recognised, among the pieces, the original carousel which Philly had shown her in the old man's shop, that first night, and she felt there was some peculiar symbolic promise linking them. *It* had endured and outlasted the battering of years.

Now, some days later, the family are on another car journey: the people are the same, but not the same on this trip to meet Gaia at the airport. Yannis has officially shed his previous persona and is Phillip Grier Junior, although he prefers to replace the 'junior' with II. He has decided that he wants to be called Philtwo and is trying to retrain his mother by refusing to respond when she calls him by his previous name, when he remembers. Philly is still allowed to call him Pup, or Son. Jen says it's a stupid abbreviation and there has been a tremor of tension, unresolved as yet. But they are very close at this moment, approaching the airport, aware that they are all entering new phases of their lives which could, of necessity, create distances –if only geographically – between them.

Philly and Jen suggest they wait in the car, but Yannis, unfamiliarly tense and nervous, insists they enter the terminal with him. "Why not wait in the restaurant, after all this family eats its way through good and bad crises, so let's all first have a cup of courage-inducing coffee." Jen smiles inwardly at the thought that her son is keeping them close, to clasp at if necessary, in the same way in which Donks, his dilapidated knitted grey donkey, had bulwarked his childhood insecurities.

The plane has arrived, more or less on time, but there is an interminable delay in the customs area. Philly and Jen have come down the stairs and are sitting some distance away as Yannis fumes

at the doorway beyond which, invisible to those waiting, the passengers are being processed. He was unable to recognise Gaia among the people he saw milling around the vehicle bringing them from the distant plane on the runway to the terminal building. Eventually she comes out slowly, alone and unattended, sliding her long cane against the wall of the short passage leading from the restricted area. Philly and Jen are unashamedly staring, amazed at her confidence in this strange place and wondering why no airways staff are assisting her. They see Yannis step forward and gently place a hand on her arm. There is a moment of absolute stillness between the two and then simultaneously they stretch out their arms and are hugging as if they have done so for years. There is no awkwardness, no fumbling or banging of heads. Cheek against cheek they stand for a long time as if absorbing each other. Eventually they move apart. Yannis takes the blind girl's hands, placing them on his face, and as the assimilating eyes of touch in her searching fingers change from curiosity to caress, so too does her serious expression change to laughter. They turn, holding hands, her arm hooked through his guiding one, and nearly equal in height their paces are as matched as a perfect pair of ceremonial carriage horses.

As they approach Philly comments, "Gosh, she's quite beautiful in spite of the odd spectacles. They aren't what one would expect, not dark glasses really, they seem to reflect? And hasn't she got a wonderful tan for somebody who has been in England all this time?" Jen barely has time to remind him that Gaia's *café au lait* 'tan' is natural, god-given through her Martinique Creole father and Spanish-French mother. They had met, fallen in love and married at a French university, then gone to Liberia, where, hoping to 'serve

their fellow-man and escape racial prejudice', they had encountered the ultimate rejection, death - for being different.

Both Jen and Philly follow Yannis' example, placing the girl's hands on their faces so she can picture them. Gaia laughs in surprise, "But he is totally different from you, this son of yours," she tells Jen. "His face is square, almost Slavic, while you have such a perfect oval." To Philly she challenges, "You men have the same hairdresser? I can barely tell the feel of your curls apart, except yours are definitely silkier. So unfair, the boys get the curls while we have to struggle with this straight hair." She turns in, closer to Yannis, mock-seriously asks, "Why didn't you warn me, Flip, you are the ugly duckling in a beautiful family?"

"Ah, but just wait to see what a beautiful swan I turn out to be. With the right treatment, of course, that is," he adds.

Jen is surprised, "You called him Flip? How come he got you to change the habit of years so quickly?"

Gaia is momentarily confused, "Habit, what habit?"

"Why, calling him by his name, Yannis, and changing to Flip, so easily. And what made you decide on Flip? Me, he is insisting, must master Philtwo, crazy, isn't it?"

"Flip? Why I've always called him that, it was a nick-name we gave him in hospital. You know what kids are like? We were bored stiff, not being really sick, mostly long-term surgical or orthopaedic cases. We would discuss the things we most wanted to do when we got out of there, and he would say, 'Never mind getting out, just as soon as I get *my leg* out of this traction, I'm not going to lie on my back again for a year. I'll flip from side to side as much as I like. Flip flip, flip flip', moving his shoulders as far as he was able, from side to side, and pulling funny faces until we all laughed. And then, when my brother, the moaner, would complain, Flip would tell him

to look on the flip side. For instance he'd say, 'Yes, it's tedious at times, and sore, but on the flip side, look at all the ice-cream and attention we get.' There was that group of women who'd get firms to donate stuff, sweets, chips, ice-cream, games and toys, you know, and they would spend time playing with the kids, and cuddling the little ones who were in for long periods. Gerard would snarl back, 'Old Flip-side, go flip yourself'. And he would, singing flip flip to different tunes, until he had us all trying to sing in parts. So everybody ended up calling him Flip. Didn't you know?"

"No," Jen admits. "But then when we visited I suppose we didn't pay much attention to anybody else. It was only later, much later, long after you all left hospital, that I joined the Cuddlers, and started playing with the unvisited, lonely children. But tell me," she changes the subject, "can you really see all that with your fingers or has he told you what we look like, I mean about straight and curly hair and shapes of faces?"

"I can feel it, yes." Gaia answers simply. "Particularly the hair."

"I bet if Ma cut hers it would curl," Yannis chips in, riding a favourite hobby-horse. "All that heavy weight of it and still there is a wave when it hangs loose, I don't know why she burdens herself with it. Sure, it's beautiful, but she doesn't have to play Rapunzel, and it must be an awful fag washing and drying and caring for it."

The young couple go off to fetch the luggage. Philly is about to offer help but a quick glance from Jen reminds him that they would surely want to be alone, together, for a while longer. "Do you think," he asks Jen, "that Pup made that remark about short hair because hers is cut in such a gamine style? It suits her, though, don't you think?" Jen agrees and wonders why she has carried the heavy weight of hers around for so long. The free light movement of

Gaia's head, turning on her Nefertiti neck, when she faces each speaker in turn as if she could see them, reminds Jen of the miniature sunflowers in her garden, moving with the sun.

"How right they seem together, so absolutely natural and at ease, as if they've been a couple for years, no constraint at all," Philly remarks wistfully. He and Jen are still somewhat awkward about explorations that may, or may not, lie ahead. It is too soon after the operation to do more than sit close together, clasp hands and relish the comfort of an encircling arm. As assiduously as they have kept their physical distance in the past they now seem almost glued at the shoulder and walk with upper arms brushing against each other, dangling hands linking palms or fingers. Yannis thinks it is sweet the way they move apart when he appears to be watching or comes upon them unexpectedly in the living room, sitting for the first time together on the scarlet sofa, instead of their usual chairs, each on a separate side of the vast inglenook.

"Why couldn't we have been like that?" It is a rhetorical question, for they both know the reason, but Philly answers cheerfully, "But we have all that ahead. When they reach our age the novelty would, surely, have worn off?"

"Yes," Jen agrees and points out, prophetically, "they have still to learn about compromise and negotiation and handling pain and coming out on the other side more united than in the beginning."

"You sound so positive that this will last?" queries Philly, strangely less able than Jen to accept Yannis' transition into masculine adulthood.

"Philly, love, meet your new daughter-in-law, and mine. I just hope he has the stamina ..." She leaves her doubts drifting,

discarded scraps puffed about by a combination of maternal anxiety and hope, dusted by the bitter grit of reality and memory.

"He is so young, so young," Philly mourns, "but you need have no fear of her."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Did you not notice the way she held him? "

"What about it?"

"Tenderly, like a mother, not greedily or hungrily, but gently, comforting."

Jen cannot resist the small sharp retort sparked by her own trepidation. "You know so much about mothers?" and immediately regrets the nastiness of her retort. "Sorry, that was bitchy, unkind of me, it's just ..."

"I know, me too. We're both worried. Not just about them, but about ourselves too, I think. But yes, I know more than most about mothers, having watched you all these years. Not only have you constructively mothered and guided your son, but you have gently, lovingly mothered me as well. Granted it took a while longer - and possibly a lot more effort on your part - for me to be willing to leave the nest, so to speak, and venture into the adult masculine world I feared. I may have left it too late and it could still prove to ... to be ... oh god Jen, what if it's the fiasco I always feared?" He cannot help blurting out his lack of confidence, but there is no time to discuss their own lives for those of the next generation are lapping all around them; overflowing trollies of luggage and adjustments to be made to life-styles tug and twirl for their attention. The currents of their days and nights are changing.

Yannis grins at his mother, elation in his every movement and expression. "You are absolutely right, Ma, Philtwo is a stupid sort of compromise. Gaia says the obvious one is just plain Flip. I'm used

to it too. Do you think ... would it truly be too much of an imposition to ask you to call me that? I really need to celebrate my new status as Philly's legally adopted son by an abandonment of the old name, particularly as it must evoke, well, things better left uninvoked. Gaia reckons I have a cheek and that I'm not showing you the respect and consideration due to you, but it really isn't that way at all."

His mother answers, "Shut up, Flip, pick up the luggage and let's get this poor tired traveller home and fed. I like it. Flip. Close enough and not confusing."

Already part of the family, tactfully moving to less prickly ground, Gaia enthuses, "I have heard all about the delights awaiting me, especially your signature chocolate-coffee-ginger cake. I can't wait."

"Welcome to the piggery," Philly says, reaching across and hugging her to Jen and Yannis' great surprise.

This is, indeed, a new beginning.

## CHAPTER 12 REORIENTATION

It was like being on a wildly spinning carousel, the weeks and months that followed. Familiar tunes and faces presented at regular intervals but these views were interspersed by flashes of unfamiliar events, places, people and the responses they evoked. The first night and day were given over, entirely, to Gaia familiarising herself with the layout of the house. Philly and Jen sat on the sofa eavesdropping as, running her sonar fingers over Yannis' recent work, she exclaimed, "But I can feel the shadows hiding between the solid parts. I am so lucky I can still picture things, I remember colour and form and light and dark. This piece is a portrait of your mother!"

"How can you tell?"

"Oh, easily. You capture the shape although it's constructed from a mass of different textures; bits and pieces which in their roughness or smoothness speak about identity and character. It's amazing, no single solid flow of line to imitate the bone beneath, and yet it's there. I can identify it, clearly, the way her face is formed, the feel of the structure underneath and the way it gives shape."

It had been arranged for the visitor to occupy the guest room at the old-age home. A once elegant old building owned by a Missionary Society active in Colonial times, it now lay crumbling along with its last occupants. The place had the desponding smells of geriatricity; stale urine mixed with cheap disinfectant and the ghosts of defeated meals which had long since given up any pretence of tastefulness or joy. The old missionary lay, a dried-out silver cocoon, wrapped tightly in constricting age while the life within struggled to escape and fly away, free and untrammelled.

She looked as if a tight grasp or loud noise could fragment her arid fragility. Long past remembering or telling anything of the past her speech, less than a breath upon her lips, rustled with the dryness of a body ready to dissolve into dust motes. She had forgotten Gaia, and herself even. The only sign of consciousness was the whispered susurrations of slurred-together words, "Musssgo, musssgo." After several days it was obvious that Gaia's presence was superfluous, and shortly after she returned to the Grier's home the old woman metamorphosed into the dissolution she sought. The experience of the faded gentility, the aching poverty of the home as well as the funeral, were new experiences for all of them. As the family had passed along the veranda where the unwanted remains of lives sat waiting, like eggs in a row, for the final crack which would release them from their brittle shells, hands stretched out and clasped. Dim eyes and dim voices recognised and greeted them as family or friends by whom they had long been forgotten and deserted. It was a jolt in the carousel's smooth turning.

Into the third week of Gaia's stay Jenny sensed that tension was mounting. She overheard tones in voices where words were unclear. One morning she heard the tap tap of the cane and an impatient exclamation, "I'm not paralysed!" followed by her son's voice, "I only want to help." Gaia flounced into the kitchen, "Jen, I have to speak to you." The girl, then, sensing something was afoot said, "Oh, I'm sorry, I never realised you were busy. You're dyeing wool, aren't you?"

Both Jen and Yannis, who was standing sheepishly at the kitchen door, exclaimed simultaneously, "How did you know?"

"That's what I want to speak to you about, Jen. Can't you make this son of yours understand that I am not retarded, nor physically disabled? He is smothering me. Give me the credit for some intelligence. I can smell, and hear and feel vibrations. I walk into a kitchen, hear bubbling, am aware of a steaminess, smell an animal odour, and know you dye material and wool. It's not an outlandish conclusion to assume you are doing just that. If it was up to Flip I would never ever again do a thing for myself. He dogs me. If I stretch out a hand he is there, jumping up to anticipate me and guess what I'm reaching for. I can't even feel anything to get the hang of it without him wanting to 'help'. I'm suffering from sensory deprivation. And I'm perfectly capable of navigating around a place to which I have been so thoroughly introduced."

"But I only wanted to help," Yannis again apologises.

"I have a mouth, damn it, and am quite able to ask for help when I need it. I don't need it shoved down my throat. I mean I can't even get up to go to the loo at night without him hovering," she explains to Jen. "It's embarrassing. Does he lie awake in his room waiting for me to move, or has he a loudspeaker, one of those baby warning gadgets installed to spy on me? I'm not an invalid, I don't have to be helped in or out of chairs. Show me where they are, OK, and that only the first time or if they've been moved. Even then I have enough sense to ask if I can't find somewhere to sit. I'm not about to plonk myself down in mid-air."

"You don't fly off the handle when Philly helps," Yannis complains.

"That's different," she snaps, exasperated.

"How's it different?" Yannis demands.

"Oh, for goodness sake. I thought you had more intelligence than that. Tell him, Jen, please tell him."

“How do you know she knows? It’s not as if you’ve explained, or have you?”

“Because she’s the only one who treats me like a normal adult human being. She doesn’t fuss or act as if I were totally incapable of movement or thought. She respects me.”

“But I respect you too, I care about you.” Yannis is desperate to explain.

“Look, you two,” Jen intervenes, “firstly, before we sort this, or anything, out you will have to understand that the only way any relationship can survive healthily is if you communicate – *clearly*. Particularly in your case, as with anybody who has some physical problem - like Philly and me too - it is essential that this be open; in plain, simple words of one syllable. You have to communicate your feelings and needs without ambiguity. Do not do what we did, waste so many precious years, or, as you seem on the verge of doing, my boy, blow your chances. And Yannis, sorry, Flip, I am surprised at you. Damn it, *you* can see her facial expressions, she has to guess at yours, so why are you so blind? It is not loving to deprive a person of their independence, particularly when it has been so hardly won as Gaia’s has. You have commented on, admired the way she copes and now you are trying to take it away from her? It’s just stupid and unthinking of you. Don’t treat her like a porcelain possession, she is neither.”

Turning to Gaia, Yannis says, “Oh my god! I’m sorry I am such an ass. How did you know my mother understood?”

“Men!” she comments shaking her head and turning towards Jen in the age-old way of women together. “Flip, I think you’re super in a hundred ways and I do appreciate your intentions when they don’t send me up and over the wall, but don’t you people ever observe anything? Haven’t you noticed that your mother doesn’t

jump around me like a flea on a hot stove? She lets me be. She'll place my hand around something to show me where it is: she'll say, when putting my food down, 'Carrots eleven o'clock, peas three, cottage pie sprawled across lower left.' She doesn't try and feed me as if I were some gaga old bat in a bed. How do you think I've managed all these years? I'm not looking for a nanny, merely a pair of eyes in strange places and in traffic." After a pause she adds, "And somebody to laugh with. What's happened to your sense of humour? You have become all custodial and serious; this isn't how we've been these last years. Your letters and tapes bubbled fun and laughter into my life, now you're fussing it all out of me, flattening me like some old toothpaste tube."

There is a heavy silence. Jen, knowingly, waits patiently.

"I'm sorry," Gaia says. "That was ungrateful, ill-mannered and unkind. But it's been building up these last few weeks. I do go off pop. Sorry. I seethe with frustration at being turned into a blown-glass ornament, and seldom have the satisfaction of being sufficiently at ease to explode. I'm not exactly the Dresden shepherdess type. My nasty little temper tantrum is, in a way, a compliment. I never do this with strangers."

"That's the whole point I'm making," Jen chips in now, the example having presented itself. "If you'd told him plainly, right in the beginning, how you felt, instead of trying to refuse politely, so's not to hurt his feelings, he wouldn't have thought you were just trying not to be a burden. Am I right, Son?"

"Yes. I was trying to show you," he tells Gaia, "that I'm happy to do anything, everything to help as much as I can. And yes, I was sure that you were only trying not to inconvenience me. I'm just so scared you might get hurt, and I couldn't bear that, particularly if you were in my care. I'm sorry, we're not usually a smothering

family.” Turning to his mother he demands, “And why is it fine if Philly fusses and I may not?”

Both women start to speak together, then stop, and Jen says, “Right, good practice, you tell him Gaia, the same way you did when you were fed up, to the point, no euphemisms, no ‘being polite’, just straight talk.

And Gaia does. “With Philly, well, it’s like I’m a visitor. He is not a full-time part of my life, always there, whereas with you, if it’s going to work out, you’ll be around for a long time. We need to give each other space. I feel so proud of my achievements, my independence, being just an ordinary person; it somehow lessens me if you, or anybody else, constantly indicates by their actions that I’m a ‘special case’. It implies an inferiority, no matter how lovingly done.”

“I’m glad *that’s* sorted out,” Yannis exclaims. “I knew I was doing something wrong, but couldn’t make out what it was.”

“Why didn’t you just ask, silly? Your Mam is right, we must promise never to do this again, feel uncomfortable because we haven’t the guts to say right out how we feel about something. Sorry,” and Gaia leans over and aims a kiss in the direction of Yannis’ head, while he quickly leans over to facilitate her aim.

“Just before you two rush off to kiss and make up, I would like to add something important,” Jen says, as hand-in-hand the couple turn to leave. “The reason Philly and I survived all this time, despite the tensions, is that neither of us says unkind things in anger, to hurt. No, hang on, I do occasionally, but never him, he never snaps. The thing is we have both tried hard to treat each other with respect. We formulated a sort of shorthand code, years ago, single words as a warning that dangerous ground was being breached. We’ve found it helps to look at a problem as a sort of

puzzle for us to work out together – except the major one which was too big, I think, for us to handle. And as for you, my boy, the *one* thing a woman can't stand is a hawing man. If you are not sure, ask, don't talk rubbish and dither around. Lecture over, orange-box packed away, now scat before I have a dyeing disaster."

Things went well after that first and only pothole along the path of the developing relationship. It took adjustments which, strangely, were harder for the sighted. It was frustrating for them, with their caring, nurturing ways, to watch Gaia struggle to find the armhole of her jacket when they were going out, or have difficulty cutting up her food. She seemed to resent it hugely if they rushed to assist. They had to condition themselves to withhold the helping hand they would automatically extend to one another, and it took her even longer to learn that loving families do this, even for sighted members. Her initial sharpness softened and she enjoyed the playful teasing and repartee, often giving far better than she took.

As the carousel whirled around Jen and Philly drew closer. This was not only because Yannis, structuring his bond with Gaia, had, inevitably, moved from the centre of their close little triad. Able to discuss their relationship openly now, both ready to admit they were afraid that changing it might disturb the lovely balance they had, they were glad that it was not yet time to make decisions about what the next step should be. They were fledglings teetering on a branch, afraid to take that leap into the unknown, and there were no parent birds to speed them on their way. Yet, they were happy. They joked about the hug-insurance and got such satisfaction from mere closeness, basking in the warmth of touch as if it were honeyed sunshine pouring over chunked ice.

Jen watched the excitement mount as the date for the opening of the joint exhibition approached. Gaia appeared almost as nervous as Yannis and on several occasions asked Jen, "What if it isn't a success, will he be devastated? He is so anxious, wanting so much to be financially independent." As it was, Yannis's work, signed Phillip Grier II, outsold Philly's. His pieces, being smaller and less expensive, were easier for the tourists and visiting art fundis to carry off; besides they were a novelty and his name was bruited about as the season's 'new find'. Philly was so overwhelmed by delight one would have thought they were his own creations, which in a way they were, for he had inspired, recognised and guided the young man's talent.

Amid all this activity and daily rejoicing Jen felt as if she were sliding away from the others, a glove, or a flower dropped accidentally in a swift flowing current, with no volition to shape its own life. Most of her creative energy had been poured into the two men who had been central to her life for so long. Now, they were both, simultaneously, withdrawing into their own spaces, finding new strengths, no longer needing the total support she had provided. Like trees escaping from espaliered restriction on a sunny wall, sending out independent free-growing branches, they, too, were willing to challenge the storm winds. She welcomed this, especially Philly's greater decisiveness, but, suddenly deprived of the driving purpose of many years, she experienced a sense of *distract* vacancy in her core. It was strange to feel un-leaned upon, un-missed from the centre of activity. It was also, in a way, heady to be so free.

There had been no time for quiet conversation about her feelings, amidst the daily bustle of the Exhibition; the decisions and discussions about which of the small Philjens would replace those sold, the packing, the transporting and the setting up of them. The other three were absorbed by the Exhibition, Philly and Yannis taking turns to be present all the time, and Philly expanded. For the first time his public diffidence disappeared: his hitherto agonised retreat into silence when expected to make a sales pitch or chat about his own work evaporated as he expounded on that of 'my son'. Jen observed how everybody else was changing. She thought of shapes made by spilt metal escaping when Philly cast a figure and how Yannis, collecting these contorted blobs, combined them to construct forms entirely new and strikingly beautiful in their difference and wondered wasn't it time that she also overflowed the mould?

Telling the family she had things to attend to that day and would not join them at the gallery, refusing Philly's offer of help, she set off, almost sniffing the wind as a migratory hunter entering strange territory. Her first stop was Louis-Pierre, once Pete Lenny, whom she had known and befriended since he was the grubby-faced, unhappy eldest son of the local garage mechanic. With her support he had mustered the courage to follow his bent and horrified his family. Not only did he become a hairdresser, but a few years later - when the salon became so successful - he had 'come out' and moved in with Bruce, his lover and partner of several years. It was early enough for the salon to be comparatively quiet and they were delighted to see her although she never patronised them, preferring

to wash and twirl her mass of hair into the heavy knot worn at the nape of her neck.

"Hi Pete, Bruce," she greeted them casually. "I need your advice. I want a new image."

Pete had for years told her he would kill to get his hands into her mane and create a style that would be more complimentary to her fine bone structure. He sat her in front of a mirror, gathering her hair and moving the mass of it about while she protested that she had no appointment and just wanted some ideas to think about. He ignored her, turning her face so that it was profiled in the mirror. "What do you think Bruce?" he asked, making scissor-like movements with his fingers. After Bruce, in his turn, had wound and moved and turned her hair and face about, the two of them sketched shapes on a piece of paper explaining to her that the light and dark masses represented balances and proportions. She argued and protested but when they promised her that within two weeks her severed hair would be made into several switches which could be worn or discarded at will, she agreed: they were also, after all, artists in their own sphere.

"So much lighter and cooler, far more practical and *heaven* for swimming," they promised her as they snipped away. "And it will make you look fifteen years younger, at least."

The strange feeling of light-headedness soon changed to one of exhilaration. As Yannis had predicted her hair, released from the heavy drag, curled gently and had a movement of its own. The two men were delighted with their handiwork. "It's a total drip-dry style," they assured her, running their fingers through to demonstrate the ease with which she could manage it.

Emboldened by her new image, the feeling of airiness and grace, Jen - as in the past when she had bought her first car - now

again acted on a desire long nurtured but shelved as impractical. Suddenly it became the solution to the unfamiliar emptiness, a new challenge and a source of discipline. She had for years saved the often very generous sums of money given to her by Philly, as un-birthday presents with which to treat herself to some little luxury. He had been hurt by this until she explained how comfortable was the knowledge of a nest-egg lurking ready for the once-in-a-lifetime irresistible object. She made her purchase on condition it could be delivered that same day and when the family came home late that evening, after an exceptionally successful day, they found an ecstatic woman fingering the keys of an upright piano.

Everybody was so elated by success and fulfilled dreams that her purchase was considered a perfectly normal run of the mill occurrence, particularly when she explained that she had already arranged for lessons. Although Philly inwardly mourned the loss of Jen's braids he agreed with the others that the new style was elegant and charming: it was enough if his Jen was happy and comfortable. The evening ended with the family all playing their version of chopsticks until Gaia, who had learnt to play by ear on the old piano in her grandmother's home, sat down and astounded them with a rendition of *Träumerei*, followed by a syncopated version of *Oche Chornia*, to which she sang in Russian. Her voice was unexpectedly resonant, a rich and beautiful contralto and Jen wanted to know why it had never been trained. Her answer, blunt and to the point, was typical, "Money." Gaia was not one to beat around the bush they were discovering, and liked her all the more for her honesty. Later, when they were alone together, Jen said she would love to pay for lessons, it was a sin not to develop something so exquisite. Gaia thanked her, laughingly refusing the offer with a very funny sketch of a blind opera singer making an absolute fool of

herself on stage. "Besides," she added, "it's not my type of life-style. No, not for me, thanks all the same."

The ebullience and high spirits of that evening ~~were~~, perhaps, a way of disguising the trepidation they all felt about the next step in their lives. The young people were due to leave for Greece two days after the Exhibition closed the following week. The flurry of packing, selecting what to take and what to leave, of sorting and storing, while still coping with the demands of the Exhibition, had Yannis and his mother too harassed to be nervous or to mope.

On the last Sunday Yannis decides to take some of his things up to the attic to store them in the big, unused wardrobe which originally came from the old farmhouse. It is an antiquated piece with a large drawer at the bottom of a series of shelves and compartmentalised drawers. It is here that he intends to pack away fragments of his past, but the drawer resists all his and Philly's attempts to open it. Eventually they realise it has been screwed fast through the solid timber of the back. Everybody is intrigued to discover what lies hidden there, especially after Jen says that this drawer has been wedged shut ever since she could remember. When the old piece was dismantled into its three separate sections for easy transport the drawer had, even then, resisted all efforts to budge it. The women are downstairs, chatting, when Yannis comes tumbling down the stairs followed by Philly with a black portmanteau in his hands. It has been wrapped in an oiled cloth, long since dried out, its surface mottled like desert sand patterned in waves formed by a desiccating wind. The old padlock is rusted and refuses to yield to even the most skilled manipulation of its droppers, so eventually Yannis saws through its thin, unyielding curve.

The bag opens with the escape of the *breath* of ancient mothballs, a tired, dispirited smell that belies the delicate contents. It is the long-lost layette the nuns told Jen about and for which she has searched in vain, and there, at the very bottom, underneath the exquisite workmanship, proof of love, lies the letter she was supposed to read half a life-time ago.

"What does it say, what does it say?" Yannis, all eager enthusiasm, lifts it from the bottom of the bag where his exploring fingers have discovered it, camouflaged in an old ivory yellowness matching the bag's lining. He hands it to his mother, but, despite his gentle touch flakes of paper drift down, landing on Jen's dark skirt like ghostly dandruff. She opens it, years of stored anticipation excitedly bobbing up and down in her throat, an uncontrollable lump. She can not trust herself to speak. The ink is faded and something has nibbled away at the surface, making little lace-like patterns. Philly suggests the ink itself has eaten into the paper. Only occasional convent calligraphy loops are decipherable: three pages of ghost writing, with phantom words almost sighing their message, *fath r, love, wanted, afraid, p rents, Da di d*, and at the very end, with the fold of the paper slicing through, *y r lo i g and griev n Moth r*.

"Well, thank goodness Mum and Dad decided to give me the gist of the original, over the years. How strange it is to touch it, and surely it looks more like a hundred and forty-odd years than forty-three since it was written?"

"You know, Jen, dear," Philly comforts her, "all that wonderful handwork, in those little baby-clothes, speaks more volumes than any letter could. I wonder why the ÓDowds never used them for you?"

"Please," Gaia responds, "imagine a baby dribbling and vomiting all over these delicate fabrics. Totally impractical. I can feel they're not meant for the sort of hard washing baby garments get."

"Of course, you're quite rights," Jen agrees, adding, "and Mum was so practical, I can't see her using stuff like this."

"How do you know all that, Gaia?" asks Yannis, amazed and still unable to stop categorising her as a being apart.

Sighing heavily with exaggerated patience Gaia reminds them all that she was not born bloody blind, and had been in and out of her mother's shabby clinic attached to their living quarters in Liberia. "One sees babies if one's mother is a paediatrician, particularly in a slum area in a devastated country. They seemed to scream through my childhood, intruded at all hours of the day and night when their mothers - who always left things too late - would pitch up, wailing, expecting my maman to resuscitate the dead. By the time I was twelve I'd held and helped feed and change and wash more miserable sick babies than the Old Woman Who Lived In A Shoe ever could have done. And their smelly garments," she adds. "We'd wash and iron and mend bundles of donated second-hand clothes, which weren't always too clean. One wonders, sometimes, at the things some people toss out to charity. It's insulting." Then, with a crazy smile she twits in a mock Irish accent, "Oi can do it wit' me oiyes shut!" They enjoy her self-mockery which often includes them and, more effectively than detailed explanation, reminds them of her need for independence, making a game of her disability, easing any stress.

"What are you going to do with all those beautiful things? I can't see them being useful for today's babies snug in their drip-dry

baby-grows, and yet it seems a shame that all that devoted work be wasted." Philly asks.

"It won't be." Jen caresses the little clothes as if they were her mother's hands. "No, they won't be wasted. I am going to cut out, very carefully, all the beautiful hand-embroidered and smocked parts, line them with unadorned pieces of the same material - the long, old-fashioned skirts - then sew them together to make a patchwork blouse, or two, of unmatchable beauty and originality. I shall wear her handiwork, eventually, as my mother intended I should, and handwash it with the same care with which it was created." She gets up, folds each small garment lovingly, replaces them in the old black bag.

"I am going to put them away safely," she says, leaving the room. Nobody follows, respecting her need to communicate with the woman who shaped her and the wispy remnants of a thwarted hope. She goes up the stairs slowly, as if each tread is a personal station of the cross she has carried, the unwanted abandoned child, on her way to lay this ghost to rest in the attic filled with whispers of her past.

It is their last day. Tremors of excitement intertwine with fibres of iridescent anxiety on which Yannis threads small beads of pain and anticipated homesickness. It is his first time of leaving home, the final plunge into independent adulthood, facilitated by the unexpected largesse of his recent success and promised bookings for future joint Exhibitions overseas. These will all be held under the title *The Apple Falls From The Tree*. He hangs onto the satisfaction of this security. So much has changed so rapidly.

As Philly is getting the car out of the garage Yannis takes his mother by the hand, leading her up to the attic, ostensibly to show her where he has packed away his various treasures, but really to say a final goodbye, with her, to his childhood. As they turn to descend he takes a last look over his shoulder and comments, "This would have made a perfect nursery. I never understood why you didn't convert it for me. A good stout gate at the top of the stairs and it would be a child's paradise." He waves goodbye to his old rocking-horse. "It's so full of my kid things now, and Sepe's little world, it even looks like one." His laughing comment is half-shadowed by unshed tears: this leave-taking seems so final.

Jen brushes away sentimentality reminding him the partition between the two houses had not yet been removed when he needed a nursery then briskly adds, "Nonsense. Can you imagine one little boy rattling around, alone, in that huge space. It would have been overpowering. You should have been twins to even half fill it."

The next hour or so is busy with the padded chatter of departure. It dims the ache and considerately subdues the simmer of anticipation one hides from those remaining behind.

Jen and Philly stand watching the young people walk away towards the embarkation exit. Just before the point of no return Yannis turns around, calls teasingly to his mother, "It would have, Ma, you know, it would."

As Jen signals her incomprehension he folds his arms across his chest, miming the rocking of a baby. His final words are a faint, "... make a wonderful nursery." Laughing, he waves goodbye kisses.

## CHAPTER 13 IDENTITY

The house is empty. It is an emptiness which creates distance, an invisible curtain flutters between their faces, separates, disables shared thought and action, smothers mutual growth. It embalms them, each mummified within a secret, seeking self, pupae delving deep into change and identity. Some indefinable metamorphosis – of which he seems still unaware – is transmuting Philly. Still the same considerate loving person, he is like a glass of cordial to which too much water has been added, the original flavour remains recognisable, but insipid.

He sits at his desk for hours, or under a tree in the small garden, tap-tapping, like a death-watch beetle, at a little portable typewriter. It resembles a toy rather than a workmanlike machine, something he had bought for Yannis, years ago, during the boy's long months of inactivity, his leg skewered by steel pins and slung up in painful traction. It is unusual for Philly not to bounce in to announce, with delight, whatever new project he is contemplating. He has always been so eager to show Jen and Yannis sketches and discuss ideas. Now he is silent. It is a silence Jen almost welcomes as, without constraint or guilt, she spends more and more time exploring her own undeveloped depths and abilities. The piano concentrates years of unacknowledged craving for some missing core: it consumes, with pleasure and passion, time previously spent in her several hungry good deed civic duties. It releases her from inchoate yearnings. At last she feels as if she is becoming complete.

Instead of drawing them closer the absence of the young people has cushioned them in a spreading of mental and emotional

elbows. On the surface they are still close, still loving friends, but no more than that. Philly is able to joke that he now has what Pup would call a very presentable improvement to the family jewels, and he wishes the two of them could have indulged, just once, in that childish male pastime of sending golden showers into the dust, competing to see who could pee the furthest. Jen has noticed the smug look of satisfaction with which he emerges from the urinal when they go to the cinema and wonders, amusedly, if he flashes his new acquisition. They have more or less agreed that neither of them really wants to jeopardise their many years of contented friendship by introducing what could be a ship-wrecking reef in the form of sexual experimentation. Philly says, folding the question away, that they don't feel the need.

One evening, almost a month after Yannis and Gaia have left, the front door bell rings. Jen, coming out of the shower, retriever-shakes her wet head, enjoying the comfort and ease of cropped hair. She laughs as the reflected droplets hit the mirror, and slide down, snail-trailing their tracks behind them. Cotton kaftan fussing around her damp body, absorbing moisture which grows into little darker florets of blue, Jen moves lazily down the stairs. Philly has got to the door first and she eavesdrops as he opens it, asking politely, "Can I help you?" The unseen caller responds, "I have a parcel for Jenny." There is a mumble of voices and then she recognises Pete Lenny's voice. As the two men move into the living-room Jen is amused to hear Philly saying, half jokingly, "And I have a bone to pick with you."

"Oh dear," Pete responds assuming a contrite air. "Why is it the men always object when I make their women look gorgeous?"

Without thinking Philly says, "You have destroyed the image of my ... er ... I mean, er, Jen's Madonna look." He flushes. It is a

lightning-flash of revelation, the shock jolts him further into the maze of self-evaluation and deliberate restructuring he is attempting. His efforts to analyse and plan during his sessions on the little typewriter have been sparked by such disturbing insights.

"But that is exactly it," Pete shoots back. "She is a lovely woman and ever since I've known her she has looked like a stereotype of the Virgin Mother. For sh...erbert's sake, she has hidden under that mass of heavy hair, that huge neck-breaking bun, all her life. It is time she allowed her vibrant real inner self to escape." Pulling out his little note-pad he starts sketching shapes and tells Philly that he, of all people, should understand. Jen leans over the banister watching the two men discuss how combinations of form and contour, of massed light and dark, alter the character of even abstract shapes. The sight of Philly excited, chatting with interest, comparing ideas with another man, gives her a feeling of release. Smiling, celebrating the permission she gives herself to withdraw, she returns upstairs to complete her *toilette*. Sensuously she caresses her body with perfumed lotion: she has forgotten that sharp jab of momentary fear, caused by voices crouched in unheard conversation rumbling secretly; it had been as quick as a needle-prick, instantly over.

"Black and white images fascinate me." Pete, still at it, is telling Philly as Jen enters the room some twenty minutes later. An animated Philly turns to her, "Did you know this fellow here is a photographer, and he has quite a collection of shots of our last exhibition?"

"All your local exhibitions. In fact I've bought one of your smaller pieces and recently acquired quite a few of your son's fascinating little figures. My word, *there's* an artist who uses

shadow and light to telling effect.” Turning to Jen, Pete asks reproachfully, “Why didn’t you tell me your boy is an artist?”

Philly and Pete veer into another discussion on the use of contrast and make an appointment for Philly to go over and look at Pete’s photos the following evening. The younger man is planning a display of his work at one of the posh department stores and wants Philly’s permission to feature photographs of the Griers’ recent exhibition.

“One of my earliest successes,” Pete excitedly tells Philly, “was a series of different views of your hanging glass staircase and matching candelabra in the old museum house. The contrasts and the movement of light according to the angle of approach is a perfect subject for abstract black and white studies.”

It is not that they are deliberately excluding Jen, but that this discovery of mutual interests fills their empty unshared spaces. They are carried away on the frothy excitement of little waves of discovery probing and splashing against the solid possibility of interests, mutually shared with another man. As Jen is about to leave the room Philly, noticing her, calls out, “Oh, Pete here has brought your locks.”

“Locks? What locks? I haven’t lost any locks.”

“No, no, not key locks, your braids,” Pete cuts in, understanding her confusion immediately. “The shorn locks, now converted into several rather charming, and much lighter pieces to crown you when you want a change. You never called to fetch them so I thought I’d pop around, perhaps show you how to attach them.”

“Do you know I’d forgotten all about those. Completely went out of my head.”

“Off and out?” Pete parries.

"I'm going to make us something to eat," Jen says as she heads towards the kitchen.

"No, I've overstayed ... I'm leaving now, sorry if I delayed you," Pete apologises, whereupon both Philly and Jen convincingly persuade him that he is the best thing that has happened there for a long time. "I don't know, we just seem to have sunk into a sort of lethargy since Pup left," Philly says. Muttering under her breath Jen, heading towards the kitchen, relapses into her old childhood pattern of chatting to herself, "Well, *you* might have sunk into lethargy, but I've certainly got a world of interesting discoveries to make. Oh god, it's so wonderful not having to be a mother-on-tap. And if you, Pete me boyo, can bring a sparkle back to Philly, well bless you and go for it." Alternatively humming and tasting, licking savoury mixtures off her fingers as she relishes the feel of the their little ridges and whorls beneath the smooth sauces, Jen creates combinations of flavours and textures as she chats quietly to her alter ego. She tries to determine exactly why and how Philly is becoming 'such a pain in the ass'.

Some considerable time later, carrying a bending tray wobbling with tankards of Irish coffee and a platter of toasted sandwiches leaking grilled cheese and smells of garlic pesto, Jen glimpses Pete weeping on Philly's shoulder. Arms comfortably enclosing the sobbing figure, Philly makes desperate eye-signals over the distraught man's back, so she retreats, and then retraces her approach calling out loudly for Philly to "come and help carry." She has no intention of allowing the meal to lose its savour by cooling into rubbery lukewarmness.

Later, when asking Philly, "What was that all about?" he disapprovingly creates a picture of a drunken Bruce, recently nose-ringed and tattooed, mocking an increasingly withdrawn Pete who

had objected to the image his partner was projecting. It was, after all, the older Pete who had given Bruce his start, trained him when he arrived as a gauche apprentice, taught him how to charm and chat with the mostly older women who flocked to the quiet salon. Now his appearance and manner antagonised them, they refused to accept bookings with him. He was also going off on his own at night and spending disproportionate amounts of money on, what Pete suspected, was a growing drug habit. There had been an almighty row. Bruce, becoming violent, had wrecked his room in the flat, then walked out on Pete. It had been a painful and messy separation after all that time. Pete, who had initially taken the younger man under his wing out of pity, had after years as an asexual being been persuaded that he would find happiness in a gay relationship. And he had – with some reservations. He had adored Bruce, pampered and spoiled him until, gradually, their changing life-styles had so irritated them both that they would bicker, two dogs barking on different sides of a fence, each trying desperately to get through to the other, until their frustration culminated in this frenzy of noisy unpleasantness.

Later that evening, as he is about to leave, Pete tells them of a weekend retreat to which he plans to go. This has been the cause of the final eruption between himself and Bruce, one drawn to the flesh, the other to the spirit. As the subject of light and shade became increasingly fascinating to Pete, so too did questions of spiritual values. “There seems a commonality ...,” he tries to explain. “There is this group, we talk about different approaches to what humans are, why we are here and how we should conduct our lives. It’s not really a religious thing, more a discovery of ethics, personal ethics, and what works best for each individual. We read a lot from different scriptures, different masters and gurus, and

discuss what each has to offer. Often we criticise, but always gently, constructively. We give one another space, yet we are a community. *We belong*. There is a lot of mutual support and comfort. And we don't coerce anybody, any change must come voluntarily, from within, acknowledging and answering the natural call of dharma."

"Mmm. I have been doing a bit of amateur soul-searching , recently." Philly is unsure of himself, shy to talk about something for which Jen has little patience, but Pete's broad smile and encouraging nods make him daring enough to step out of line.

"One is such a mystery, even to oneself. Perhaps some guidance on an inward journey might be a good idea?" He has never been a joiner, never been able to participate in the types of peer-group activities, such as scouts, where personal privacies dissolve and shared showers and sleeping space engender communal bonds.

"Wouldn't you like to join us?" Pete offers, the gleaming converted seeking neophytes. "We live very simply, everybody takes a share of the work. There are two, er, well, sort of big dormitories, one for the guys and one for the girls, a crazy kitchen and a calm, brown meditation area. Those last two are still in tents. It took us ages to buy the land, now we're doing the building ourselves, each weekend a little more gets done. It's a marvellous feeling of achievement and self-development. This weekend we're celebrating the official completion and grand opening of the ablution block. Hot water and proper loos, at last! We've spoken about art as a form of going inwards, and have thought about art therapy. It could be a way of releasing and sharing mutual creativity, don't you think? Perhaps you could give us some suggestions...?"

This, Jen subsequently acknowledged, is where it happened, the sharp divergence of paths, for Philly is intrigued by the idea of being part of a group of men working together, having fun, discussing the sensitivities of whatever it is that makes one tick, spirit? soul? without the fear of taunting and humiliation. Turning to Jen he enthuses, "That sounds so interesting." Totally unaware of her withdrawal he bubbles on. "People sharing their efforts, joining to do things for a purpose, building something up together, talking and exchanging ideas. I'd *love* to go, how about it Jen, shall we join in the celebrations this weekend?"

Jen keeps her totally opposite opinion about the invitation to herself, wondering what the hell has got into the man. The idea of such a group, of shared duties in a communal tent kitchen, with a lot of spiritually aspirant odd strangers, gives her the willies. She wants to scream no, no, no, at them both, but smiles hypocritically instead. "Just for a while, I want a bit of a break from playing mother, so not this time, thanks, maybe another? But Philly, you go along and enjoy yourself. I have so much to attend to over the weekend, as it is, I'd neglect you terribly." She lies polite excuses and thinks they'll find her dead first before she goes near the place. And how, she wonders, is Philly ever going to cope? Jen pictures him, an eager and foolish acolyte at the altar of male bonding.

A tingling fizz of excitement fills her; such utter, such total freedom to do those frivolous and fanciful things never before attempted. For over twenty-two years she has not spent a day or a night totally alone: her *being* has always been shared by others. She realises, with shock, that except for that very brief period between her parents' deaths and meeting Philly at White Gables, she has shaped

her life to fit in with those of others, moulded herself to nurture and please, made *that* her source of satisfaction and pleasure. And now, this weekend ahead, she will be totally free to consider nobody's needs or wants or fancies but her own. She is exhilarated, feels as if, unchained, she is escaping from gravity; *free*, gossamer free to float with absolutely no duties, no one to feed, care for, or consider. No time-tables other than those she sets herself. Her days can be scrambled at her will, turning night into day and day into night. A mad impulse implodes, annihilating the old Jenny, cutting her off from all those many years of voluntary service, the children's hospital visits, the women's shelter duties, the regular outings with the mumblers and stumblers of the aged home. She spends several hours on the phone to various committee members and groups, resigning from office, withdrawing her membership, emerging as nakedly unencumbered, as free of identity and associates as if she had emerged, like a sea-wet Venus rising on a shell, new-born into adulthood.

Her plans simmer: delicious whiffs of intoxicating images are carried on the escaping steam of pent-up years of disciplined duty. She is definitely going shopping. Delicately, from the folded-away tissue-paper of dreams, she unfolds images of impractically flimsy black lace and satin underwear; the leisured enjoyment of wickedly over-priced coffee and cake at some posh little *outré* café; a feast of opera and symphony concert, followed by a late extravagant solo dinner. Oysters for starters, shivering delicately on a bed of ice, yes, and the glorious fragrance of the sea and lemon juice and Tobasco sauce. Philly has never been able to face oysters, the mere thought, leave alone the sight of her swallowing them alive, that first weekend away, had made him throw up, so she, of course, since then has denied herself the pleasure. After pigging out on oysters, making up

for all those lost years, she will choose whatever is really special on the menu, something exotic and rare, ending off with a divine zabaglione, flavoured with Cointreau, even if the chef has to make one especially for her. Perhaps even treat herself to an outfit, something totally irresponsible.

Won't it be marvellous to return home to absolute silence, no eager faces asking questions about where she has been, and what has she done, then with loving curiosity clamouring to see what she has bought. A weekend of total privacy, belonging only to herself, not answerable to conscience in the form of family politely not commenting about silly indulgent purchases. And the music! To be able to wallow in great gulps of sound. She had long since abandoned concerts, for though Philly enthusiastically agreed to the outings they apparently left him totally unmoved. He would invariably fall asleep and loll, embarrassingly, onto somebody's shoulder, and it was impossible to try and discuss the music with him afterwards. Yannis reckoned that the man was tone deaf, and perhaps he was. Another disability to which he could not confess?

Jen's initial wild splurging was not carried over to the many following weekends when Philly, now a member of "The Group", escaped to commune with his soul and help supervise building the structures for which he proudly drew up plans.. Jen would send him off with his little black backpack and a duffle bag full of his share of the lentils or beans, or whatever was intended for the communal dishes. She would shudder at the thought of a great big, permanently soot-smudged aluminium pot, rocking unsteadily on the portable gas ring, as the grains at the bottom blackened and burnt. She continued to make a point of having a meal out and

attending some form of entertainment, even if it was only a cinema matinée and a light, but adventurous luncheon, experimenting with new dishes and flavours. They were both, seemingly, utterly content.

And so it is when, after nearly six months away, Yannis phones in a great state of excitement, to say, "Hi there, Ma, get Philly on the extension, I've stacks of news," he finds his mother alone. If he senses some change in the atmosphere his own ebullient concerns overwhelm this. Besides, he is diverted, after the initial surprise, by Jen's quick and humorous picture of Philly, backpacked and duffle-bagged, going through a delayed adolescent boy-scout bonding stage with Pete and some other soul searchers. Yannis' immediate reaction is, "But Pete's gay?" to which Jen responded with some malicious but witty gossip. Briefly recreating the brawl which had ended the relationship between Bruce and Pete she jokes, somewhat cattily, that Bruce had been driven crazy by Pete's frigidity. "Something, apparently, that Philly and he have in common. I wouldn't worry, if I were you, about Philly's unsullied purity. But what's *your* news?"

"Look, Ma. there's just too much to tell over the phone, we're sending you a tape and a long, joint letter, but we think we've found my yellow-eyed father. There's this guy, calls himself Epanimidos Georgiadis, but he as sure as hell was a doctor in Cape Town, and according to the cops here, was one of George's 'boys'. He won't admit a thing, though, but says he *knew* a Yannis whose wife was killed in an accident the day after he left on a business trip. Told us the man was devastated, had 'moved away from himself', whatever than means; made a new life I suppose? We suggested that George told you both the same lie, but he persisted in saying, no, not him.

His English is more than rusty, but Gaia's Greek managed to screw some replies out of him. Taciturn sort of blighter.

"He was shipped by George and sat inside, in clink, for about seven years according to the son of Philly's original private detective. This guy, the son, sports an amazing amount of glitter, some big cheese in the local police. We met him purely by chance as we were leaving his old man's office. I could barely see my way through the blue haze; it stank, horribly, and all around were the ribbed ghosts of cigarettes left to burn out along window sills and table edges." Yannis, almost gabbling, is eager to get as much said in as little time as possible; barely pausing between words and sentences he jumbles important facts with irrelevant observations.

"All the details are in the post, but it was this cop fellow who swore there was a facial resemblance between myself and Epanimidos, and I can see it, a sort of family trademark. It was when I said the only thing I knew about my father was he had these weird yellow eyes, that the cop remembered him. He has a kid, this Epanimidos, about a year younger than myself, who is almost my mirror image, except he has the yellow eyes and sandy hair, and there is a whole litter of little ones which arrived after he got out of clink. I thought of the rabbit song when I saw them tumbling in and out of the dingy shop, seeing myself at various stages of development. It is, apparently, a rather dominant family trait, this broad square face and pointed cleft chin. Some of the little ones have cheek dimples like mine too. And they all seem to adore him, everybody touches everybody else a lot, they climb over him, hug him; all very tactile. Anyhow, he has a sort of oil and wine and olives, supposedly wholesale, business, and a tourist-trap sideline in awful fake reproductions of ancient Greek vases and plates. His

wife is a whale. Short, fat, greasy and with a voice like a mating moose. Bellows at the poor bugger and the kids.”

“Did you see him, did you speak to him, did he ...?”

“Whoa, Ma, yes. And he doesn’t want to know, won’t acknowledge anything, although my appearance shouts the truth. But it’s not important, I’ve laid that ghost. When we left he grasped my shoulders with both hands, a sort of truncated hug, wished me happiness, didn’t say much, but looked at me with such pain in his eyes. Told me to live well and carefully, one can’t undo bad things, he said. At least I’ve seen him, feel even sorrier for him than before – if he is the same guy, which we are convinced he is – but I can’t relive his life for him and the big news I phoned to tell you is that Gaia and I got married this morning. We had a hell of a job finding somebody who’d do just a simple ceremony with those vows we designed, but we did. And we are leaving for Russia next week. Don’t know the final address yet, but will let you have it as soon as we decide on one of several possibilities. Oh, yes, and I’ve sold lots more stuff and am going to do an enamelling course in a place with an unpronounceable name, a little village near Moscow. OK, time’s up, love you, and tell Philly hi. I just hope he doesn’t become too New Age. Somehow I can’t imagine him an ascetic at the dinner table! I’m sending him ...”

Before she has time to reply, or even hear his following words, the phone emits a series of strange honking geese noises and then a high whining electronic buzz like some frantic Jurassic Park mosquito. Jen moves the cacophony away from her ear, sits looking at it held in her hand, as it squawks and clicks sonic noises. She hangs up.

When Philly returns home on Monday morning, sunburned and spiritually sanitised, Jen has already left for a music lesson. Realising that, at her age, she would never be able to achieve the performance ability which comes with an early start and years of practice, she is, nonetheless, determined to write all the theory examinations she can. "I want to learn about the how and the why of music," she fiercely told her teacher. Her driven determination and hours of practice, repeating the same bars over and over again, frighten Philly and make him distracted. It is hard to concentrate with that increasingly irritating repetition; the stopping, starting and continuous reiteration of the same passages of, what is to him, just noise.

He is in the kitchen, trying to cook a large pot of rice and lentils without having recognised that the lentils would take longer. The resultant mushy combination is glueily unappetising and Philly is attempting to rescue the deplorable results with fried onions and curry when Jen walks in. "Hi," she greets, cheerily. "What on earth are you doing there?"

"Lentils and rice. I got it a bit gooey. Perhaps I should have tried turning it into fritters?"

"But, for goodness sake, we're having a simply gorgeous duck *à l'orange* on the menu. I *told* you, before you left. I'm having some people over, a cellist and a fiddler, and we're going to play trio music after the meal. I've rearranged the viola parts for the piano." She is impatient at the way his new life shoves her small comments into forgetfulness. It is as if his existence, here at home, is merely a pause, a rest between the important beats in the music of his new voice.

"It's also going to be a celebration, a triple one," she adds, hoping to ignite his old excitement. He has become so flat with all

his new-found deliberate calm and peacefulness. To her it seems totally phoney, an ill-fitting lid shoved onto an otherwise happily simmering pot. He never even asks what they are to celebrate, merely lifts an eyebrow and smiles in his ridiculous new placid way. It infuriates her. Jen wants to hit him, to bang his head against the wall, to bring him back to the responsive man he seems to be losing on his esoteric solo spiritual journey.

Well, damn him, she thinks, if he wants to be a kill-joy he's not going to dampen *my* delight. Trying to force the old celebratory atmosphere over minor pleasures she twirls around and almost sings, "We're acknowledging that one can rejoice about small things as well as large, they all form a collage of exhilaration in my life. I feel sorry for you Philly, you are losing the wonderful gift of zest you once had." She dances off down the passage and Philly hears the irritating notes she has been playing so frequently. He does not recognise, or even enjoy, her transposed rendition of the rondo from Mozart's Clarinet Concerto in A Major.

"One of my desert island favourites," she half-sings as she returns. "And I've got it, I've got it at last." She looks at him, standing passively patient and realises he is not going to ask, so tells him. "We, no, apparently just I am celebrating my good results in the theory exam, and Yannis finding his father at last and the end of *that* interminable nagging, and ... guess what, the best of the lot? The orange-up ducks - poor little buggers, what luck I had something special planned for my guests - are going to mark a marvellous occasion, and we'll repeat them every anniversary. I'll bet you can't guess what it is?"

Philly is floundering. Jen thinks he looks like a landed fish, opening and closing his mouth and flapping his hands. She feels sorry for him but that tingle of protectiveness no longer flushes

through her and she stands waiting, uncharacteristically, without going to his help

But, but, but I can't, I mean no, not duck. I can't eat the duck."

"For goodness sake, what rubbish, you've always adored it. I've got enough for an army, there's sure to be left-overs in the freezer for ages. And haven't you anything to say about Yannis and the news?" She is irritated, and unaccustomed to this reaction she does not know how to proceed.

"I'm sorry, Jen, it's just, well, I have decided not to eat meat, and ..."

She interrupts, trying to be understanding and reassuring, but only making matters worse, "That's fine, if bloody crazy, but it's your life, anyhow we have fish if you prefer, though it'll make extra work for me. Damn you Philly, what's got into you?"

"Jen, I don't know how to explain it. It was a sort of epiphanic insight, but I really can't ... don't want to eat anything with a face."

Jen looks at him for a long time then asks, very calmly and coldly, "Are you and Pete an 'item' now?" At first Philly has no idea what she means until she makes a crude gesture. She is as shocked as he is by her action, having no idea from where this shorthand originated and never believing she would be capable of such blunt crassness.

Philly is cringing. "What is happening to you, to us?" he asks. "My gosh, that is the last act on my mind. In fact one of the things that Pete and I share is this inability to perform sexually. Not even wanting to, *that* is the thing we share. You know he was also married, briefly?"

"I never knew about that; when, and what has that to do with you and me and him, and these bloody boy-scout week-ends of yours?"

"But we've begged you to come along. Come see for yourself, I don't think I've ever been alone with Pete, not even when I go to his flat, his Mom is always there. She left the old man, ages ago, he was beating her up."

"Sure, and don't I know about that? Remember I was on duty at the shelter when they brought her in looking like blood pudding, and you wouldn't even let me *mention* it to you. And what's this? *You* are the one who always refuses to talk about people, what's with Mr 'I don't want to gossip', today?" she mimics him cruelly in a mimsy falsetto voice, her tone expressing far more contempt than she will allow her words.

"This isn't gossiping, Jen, love, I just want you to understand where Pete and I are coming from."

"And when I wanted, no, desperately *needed* to tell you about the battered and raped women, old women and little kids, all those tragic cases seen during the hospital and shelter visits, you 'didn't want to listen to sordid gossip'. I *had* to talk, wanted somebody close to help me sort out my thoughts and feelings, to see where I was coming from. And you wouldn't, or couldn't, not then when it was my problem, but *now* it's OK for you to speak about these things?"

"You're right, Jen, I was perhaps at fault, but I couldn't bear to hear about all those ghastly acts. I think part of my revulsion towards, er, the physical, you know, this aspect between men and women is..."

Suddenly Jen no longer feels amusedly tolerant, no longer wants to pander to Philly's exaggerated sensibilities. "Oh for god's

sake, Philly, you're not a Victorian maiden, call it by its name, sex, screwing, fu..."

Panicking, he holds up both his hands, bends his head down as if warding off a blow, "No, no no, Jen, love, don't go that way. You know I hate it, the crudeness. It's not like you, what has happened to my sweet Jen?"

She shrugs her shoulders and turns, as if to leave the room. "There's no point in discussing it, is there, really? Besides, it was all so long ago, and I don't need your shoulder, you, or anybody else for that matter, any more." She is defiant, angry, wanting to taunt him to some emotion other than the increasingly passive, spineless sinking of the previous months. To her, it is as if he is disappearing into the cloying quicksands of a bland life negation.

"I've done without an adult confidant for so long I'm a right toughie now." She challenges. "We just don't seem to be able to communicate about anything any more since you disinfected your soul, or whatever it is that throbs to the aura of your crystals."

Singlemindedly Philly insists on explaining himself. If he has understood, or even heard what she is trying to communicate he ignores it, continuing to pluck his single self-pitying string. "Look, I've never spoken of this before because ... well, I wanted to forget it, put it behind me, just think of the *nice* things about Richard and Stella, but perhaps it was the scariness of hearing those muted sounds coming from their room at night. The suppressed laughter, the rhythmic thumping, the little screams; it wasn't ... nice. I'd imagine all sorts of horrible things, terrible things ... violence. What happened to my mother must have subconsciously ..." He trails off, not wanting to trample that mental path, veers sharply onto his new route.

"I'm only now learning to understand about and enjoy the companionship of my own gender; please don't take it away from me. To continue," he paddles on, a tired dog swimming upstream with the stick he is determined to deliver safely. "Because I feel you should know - it impinges on *our* relationship if you have crazy wrong ideas about Pete and me - any way, the old man was such a tyrant he forced Pete to marry. The girl was that floozy the younger brother put in the family way, when he was only fourteen. The Dad thought it was great, really funny, this macho son, a real he-man hero, having 'nooky' with a flashy seventeen-year old blonde, until the girl's parents descended on them like a sheet of fire. He changed his tune soon enough when they threatened law-suits, rubbing the Lenny family's name in the dirt and getting the garage boycotted. So, you know how, well, how Pete was ..."

"Yes, also bloody spineless until somebody got him to stand up for himself."

Philly completely misses the barb, smiles amiable agreement. "Yes, and weren't you that somebody? He was only a kid himself then, nineteen, twenty, at the time. Anyway, they got married, were supposed to stay in a room in the family home, and of course he couldn't perform. Was convinced everybody was sort of standing outside the door, waiting to hear what was happening. Besides she was pregnant, and this as well as the thought of his brother and her ... he is just not the sexy type. *We share this.*"

Eventually he blurts it out, pushed to the truth. "I mean, even though the little fellow now occasionally even stands up and greets me of a morning, I just do not ... the whole idea puts me off, disgusts me. It's not for me. Pete understands. And then this girl ran off with somebody else after a major row. It was probably what she said to him then that made him think he might be gay. But he

isn't, not really. He, like me, is just not a sexually oriented or active being. And he has been to see doctors and counsellors and has told me all about it. It happens. That's the thing. It *does* happen. And there is really no point in trying to alter it. One can take hormones and various drugs, but why? Would you take drugs to make yourself hungry if you weren't? Particularly if it didn't affect your health? *Thanks to Pete* I've learnt to accept myself for what I am. You know there are people who battle for years to subdue their lower chakras. Some even consider the freedom from these urges as a higher form of development along the karmic path, it's seen as a blessing, so in a way I'm really very fortunate. *He* understands."

"And I suppose I have never understood?" She doesn't, not now, she thinks he is talking a lot of gobbledy-gook and has no patience with this New Age approach, but resents fiercely the easy dismissal of all her previous long years of cossetting him, accommodating her life-style to his reclusive one. How can he so lightly negate, ignore, her fraught years of protecting his fragile male ego; not acknowledge her patient understanding when he was unable to speak about his mysterious 'problem', and her acceptance of this without nagging or curiosity? She feels that the respect she accorded his silence deserves greater appreciation than this facile forgetfulness.

"Of course you have. You have been wonderful, it's just that he's a man and obviously ..." he trails off.

Jen is angry: she is having trouble with her realisation that since the emotional umbilical cord between her son and herself has been severed her need to nurture has shrivelled and fallen off like the dried end of that same cord. Perhaps Philly's own nascent masculine identity has helped to release her.

"Look," she says, "we promised to discuss things openly and honestly, so pour us a couple of glasses of that wine over there and let's go sit down to talk about this calmly. It's obviously more important to you than Yannis' news," she adds bitchily.

In the family den Jen notices Philly has poured himself fruit juice. "You not drinking?" she asks. "It's a really beautiful little wine, I got it especially for tonight, and as Yannis and Gaia got married this morning I felt ..."

"What? Why didn't you tell me? And no, I'm not drinking, not any more."

"You hardly gave me a chance to tell you anything, didn't seem particularly interested in the big news, did you? And I never realised wine has a face."

"Jen, please, don't be catty, please try to understand. I've *found* something. It's like you and that ... that darn piano. The constant tinkle tinkle repetition of the same notes drives me crazy, but I'm not criticising you, or asking you to stop. For the very first time in my life I belong somewhere, with a group of people. They actually like me, and *respect* me. I'm important in the group."

"I thought we belonged? And haven't I liked you, and weren't you important to Yannis and me?"

"Jen dear, don't pretend. Don't lie to yourself or to me. From the moment you cut off your hair you started changing."

"Oh bull...*shit*. Am I some female bloody Samson now? It has nothing to do with the hair but everything to do with the fact that increasingly over the months since you joined that passive, smarmy vegetarian Group, *our* meals have become a form of punishment, a deprivation, a need to masticate in silent meditation, instead of a celebration of life. We share nothing any more. You have no conversation except about the boring activities of that anaemic

collection of professionally inadequate personalities. Even your work has suffered. It's become pallid. The old excitement and thrust is gone. You spend hours shut up in that stuffy cubbyhole you constructed, 'meditating'. It seems more like the final total bloody copout to me."

Philly smiles his new complacent irritating smile. He intends deliberately to radiate peace and love, to 'channel Jen's vibes' into a more accepting mode. He knows it is useless to explain this to her and mildly reminds her that she has also changed. "But you are *not* the same Jen either."

"What do you expect?" she snaps. "One minute we were apparently becoming physically closer - I'd waited so patiently, for such a long time, for this, to be held close and comforted - the next you suddenly withdraw, for no apparent reason, like some frigging scalded cat, and suddenly, overnight, you've become this stupid ascetic trying to avoid all the sensual pleasures of life. AND," she yells, angrily, "whatever happened to *talking* about problems? You are worse than ever before, avoiding any discussion or explanation. When I try to raise a question all I get from you is your inane smiling, like a damn Cheshire Cat fading into some eerie mystical silence. Well, I'm not a bloody mind reader. I don't know what went wrong or why."

"If you would only try to understand, Jen. It is what I've always looked for, this path. It suits me." Philly deliberately speaks in a quiet monotone; it is a part of his new persona which drives Jen frantic as he wraps his changed life-style around himself, a magic carpet transporting him to some latter-day nirvana in suburbia.

"That's a new one to me." Jen cannot accept the altered Philly, she keeps scraping at the surface, wanting to find, and

remind him of, the bright companion she hopes may still be hiding below the recently acquired attitudes. "You seemed happy enough, those twenty-two odd years when all my energies were devoted to keeping your belly satisfied, and your once fussy taste-buds. And," she adds, bitterly, "creating a relaxed atmosphere for you to work in, never bothering you with any of the problems, coping myself, with everything, even those tough tasks usually taken on by a man. A *normal* man," she adds bitingly, wondering at how easily her years of restraint, consideration, nurturing and caring - yes, caring too - have been nullified. Jen is both aghast and intoxicated. She revels in the delicious feeling of not having to carry the burden of another adult's juvenile hang-ups, no longer having to pussy-foot past Philly's sensitivities.

Yet, she is pulsingly frustrated at his apparent blindness, his refusal to acknowledge her insight that their whole previous life has been built upon only two shared interests; Yannis and food. The family has met and laughed and created dishes together in the kitchen, ever since that first morning of feasting, and she has shaped herself to accommodate this pattern, to indulge them, spoil them and pander to their imaginations. She has risen to exhaustive heights maintaining the aura of culinary excitement and adventure, even though at times she longed to be released from the daily grind and just spend time quietly satisfying her own need to make things that lasted longer than a meal. It has never been acknowledged, she feels, her sacrifice of self, which she is only now realising. She burns with resentment.

"I hardly recognise you at times, besides the hair is just a symbol, perhaps of something you have rejected," Philly continues, refusing to take up the challenge and go off in unproductive by-ways or argument. "And I notice, when I spoke of the group liking and

respecting me, you said we belonged but you never mentioned respect? I know you cared, still do, probably; I hope so, but I also know, in your innermost heart, you haven't respected me for a long time. And I'm jolly sure, with your shared quick cutting wit, you and Yannis have had your little jokes about my foibles. It's true, all families have jokes, but the shared ones don't cut, only the overheard, hidden ones. "

It takes a great effort for Philly to say, "About the physical thing ... I know we don't touch any more, but you remember that night you offered to give me a massage when my legs and feet were so tired?"

"Yes." She is embarrassed: it is an occasion neither of them have spoken about, each in their own way feeling inadequate and awkward. "You obviously didn't enjoy the experience, rushing off. You could , at least, have told me what I did wrong," Jen complains.

"You did nothing wrong really, I suppose. It's just, well, when you offered to massage it was fine when you worked on the feet. I thought that's what it was all about, but then, when you started moving your hands up my legs ... the whole atmosphere seemed so contrived, the rug in front of the fire, dim lights. I just felt terribly uncomfortable. I hated it. And you started acting so strangely, breathing all funny, I panicked and ..."

"And so you jumped up, mumbled something about needing to go to the loo and scuttled off, a frightened little bunny, and then, about half an hour later, barely put your whiskers around the door, called out good-night, then scampered away again, as if a pack of baying hounds was after you. What a put-down." She glowers at him, then after a while adds. "And if you were massaging in that awkward position for that length of time your breathing would quicken too, it's tough exercise, particularly when one has to stretch

like that. Don't flatter yourself. I was trying to be kind and considerate, work the entire length of the muscle that was bothering you. Bloody cheek. You know, I think your problem is more than just a physical one. You've got some sick mental hang-up about touching and sex, haven't you?"

"But Jen, I have told you, it has nothing to do with you, it's me. And of course I avoided any close contact afterwards. It wouldn't have been fair if I'd encouraged what I couldn't go along with." A sudden lifeline thought has him grabbing at his hair, tugging it as he shakes his head. "Besides, haven't you always said that what happened with you and that man was 'horrible'? I thought you, too, hated the whole dirty business?"

"Philly." Jen looks at him for a long time before continuing; she knows they have long since passed the point where, paddling in the gentle backstreams of his skewed world vision, she can continue to drift along with his vagaries. "Of course it was awful. But remember, you would never let me discuss it. You jumped to conclusions, drew up your own script, wrote the scenario from your view point. And the more I wanted to explain, to talk about it, the more you damped me down, saying it was not necessary to explain. Well, I'm going to do so right now, I've had to live with it all the years you continued to embroider your version. So just have the decency, at last, to listen to somebody else's perspective, to see it from *my* point of view. What was so terrible, horrible, agonising – I know I used all those words, and they described the situation perfectly – was the *frustration*. Wanting something so desperately and being stymied by my own physical inadequacies and allergic reactions. I burned for that man, and when I believed him dead I did the sensible thing, banked my fires and was grateful for the wonderful companionable friendship you and I had. If that meant

going along with whatever fantasies you had, so be it. But you have altered the pattern, not me.”

It is as if Philly has not heard: the sieve of his new beliefs wonderfully excludes what seems irrelevant. Like a dog trained to follow only one scent he blunders on, “This proves what the Buddha said is correct; all pain is caused by attachment and what I am trying to attain, Jen, and what would bring peace to you, as well, is a state of non-attachment. You have become so filled with turmoil recently I can’t relate to you.”

Jen is beyond anger. Philly’s proselytising has, somehow, moved her into another dimension. It is as if she is a scientist, observing from a great distance, or through a microscope, the actions of some minute unfamiliar species. It no longer seems to have anything to do with her. “Mmm, the madonna stroke mother image disappears and you can’t relate to me?” She knows what Philly has said is true, but does not know how to explain the change. She uses the old ploy of an attack being the best method of defence.

“If I am a woman in her own right, not defined as somebody’s mother, or acting towards you in that role, then you can’t relate to me as an adult? But yes, you are right. I have changed. I feel incredibly free. And yet I am aware of an empty space. A space which I do not want to fill with nurturing, not even you, any more, Philly. But you have changed too. I mean, can you imagine the old Philly going off with a lot of strangers, camping out, eating rice and lentils, eschewing gourmet food and wine?”

“Don’t sound bitter, Jen, love. Of course I’ve changed; since my surgery I’m catching up with a retarded development. Doing things I never felt capable or confident of doing before, always held back – even if only in my mind- by my, er ... my deformity. You

know we discussed this. I told you that the op. would change things and you were the one who insisted I should go ahead. Don't begrudge me. I really enjoy being with The Group, being one of the guys, in a decent, clean way, of course.

"You know I was frozen in time and have an awful lot of experimenting, and living, to try out. You too are developing a side of yourself that you probably never allowed out before. Let's enjoy growing, if not together, then alongside."

"Oh damn you, Philly. I suppose you are going to sit like a ruddy death's head at my feast. Nothing ruins the atmosphere as much as a kill-joy. I'd so planned for tonight, looked forward to it. And now, particularly since Yannis' news ..." She shakes her head fiercely and glowers at him.

He takes a small leather folder from his jacket pocket, removes a card creaseworn almost to the softness of velvet, opens it caressingly and hands it to her. "Read," he says.

She does.

*"We are both birds  
cast from the nest, - but you  
bear your injuries within and hide  
your pain, whereas I have  
had my broken wing  
splinted and healed. Is it not time, now,  
to remove the scars and learn to fly - free?"*

She looks at him blankly, "What is this all about?"

"Don't you remember? That is what you wrote to me after your scar was removed? Look at the picture, you drew that too."

It is of two birds, one soaring into a dawn-tinted sky, the other sitting unhappily on a barren branch, wings half lifted, but obviously incapable of flight. The effect is of a slap to the cheek of

an hysteric. Jen, who had genuinely forgotten the card and the occasion, is overwhelmed by a tumbling memory of emotions. The past floods through her, making her acutely aware of what they are losing. And she realises, with iced-water shock, that the process is inevitable and final.

Philly, watching her, says simply, "Jen, dear, I am trying to fly, don't clip my wings." He reassures her he will not foist the rice disaster onto her sophisticated dinner table but will, instead, create some intriguingly colourful dish of roasted veggies.

"Do you realise," he points out, "that we have never had a formal dinner for guests before? It's always been a causal affair in the family den, or a picnic-style meal under the trees. I know this is an event. It must be very special for you, particularly as we are celebrating momentous rites of passage for all of us in this family. I think it deserves an extraordinary memento. I'll be back in time to help. It is very important to me, too. You know what the boy means to me."

It takes self-control on Jen's part not to snap back, "What about the famous non-attachment you are aiming for?" Scepticism is written large on her face. Philly ignores it, excuses himself for several hours and promises to return with a surprise which might exonerate him. Still huffily disgruntled Jen admits that she may be begrudging him the freedom she is herself relishing. But why, why, why, she wonders has he chosen to fly off at such an incompatible angle, damn him. The whole situation irritates with the discomfort of a bad haircut when bits of snapped-off hair, sharp with the soft invisibility of little cactus thorns, continue to scratch and evade removal from where they shelter, hidden, between the threads of one's garments.

The evening is, surprisingly, a huge success. Philly who has gone off to collect a bain-marie for The Group's communal kitchen, returns with a wonderful contraption for Jen. It is a hot-tray on a trolley, the bottom shelf of which comprises rows of charming cerulean blue pottery containers resting in a receptacle for boiling water. He also has several bottles of dry and sweet sparkling grape juice and assures Jen that there are many people who prefer fruit juices to wine, especially if they have to drive home in the dark. It is the closest he has come to a joke for a long time.

Jen has never seen Philly scintillate in company before and is surprised at his performance, charming her guests with funny anecdotes and descriptions of the successes and failures of "The Group's" efforts at building and vegetable growing. Guilt pokes slight fingers into her tightly laced righteousness as she realises that she has so lost touch with his activities as to be hearing these stories for the first time. But she is even more relieved that he has not tried to preach his new beliefs.

Like a beehive repaired after an attack the house begins to reassume its original form. First the huge double kitchen is again divided, the facilities are duplicated on either side. As Philly and his meals grow thinner and more simple, so Jen - when she can be bothered - prepares more elaborate and exotic dishes. Most of the time, though, she dashes into the kitchen like a flight of swallows, swooping to grab some morsel and soaring out again on a high upper-draft of exciting new activities.

Something has altered, with a shifting of gears their pace changed that night of the dinner-party. Jen despairs at the divergence of their paths. She thinks they are like two people from

different primitive tribes, communicating by signal and drumbeat over the roaring of a torrent into the chasm between them. But Philly's unfailing good-humour overcomes the ever-widening distances. Jen has even been a non-participating guest at "The Group's" burgeoning community of self-sufficiency, but it still leaves her with that prickle of discomfort, the feeling of revulsion at such – to her – humourless seriousness, such earnest and laboured need to proclaim their state of peacefulness. She is convinced that they are negating happiness, and the value of the here and now, in their obsessive paddling in the possibility of past and future lives. It's crazy, she thinks, finding it difficult to understand how a cultivated, educated man like Philly can immerse himself in what, to her, are irrational, unproven and totally unscientific fantasies. When he speaks seriously of 'channelling' and the powers of crystals it becomes hard for her to be tolerant. The more esoterically spiritual he becomes the greater is her presence firmly embedded in fact and practicality. As he withdraws in silence, behind his recently soundproofed walls and doors, her space resounds to magnificent cataracts, great tumbling waterfalls of organ notes; Bach's all encompassing Toccatas, Fugues, and Triosonates alternating with symphonic splendour as her collection of recorded music, and the distance between them, grows.

CHAPTER 14 *DAL SEGNO*

Philly is alone in the house, in his section of the kitchen, when Jen's phone rings. He answers it, takes the message and is immediately overwhelmed by concern. He is unable to finish eating his bowl of cereals, fruit and nuts, and watches the sunflower seeds floating disconsolately in the orange juice he is using instead of milk. Taking the bowl outside he tips the contents into a container on the bird feeder. For a while he stands quietly, absorbing the sun and the garden smells, then shoves a finger through the soggy blobs, separating them, squishing down with a perverse satisfaction as if he were invalidating his problems. He turns to go inside, moving heavily, like an old man, weary and tired of conflict. At the window he pauses to watch the birds. The fruit and nectar contingents squabbling for precedence depress him, prompting him to call out pointlessly, "Why must you be so aggressive?" He can hardly wait for Jen's return and before she is through the front door bursts into questions. "Are you all right? What is the matter? Why didn't you tell me you are ill?"

Jen looks at him, taken aback, the thought momentarily flashes through her mind that his meditations have led to hallucination and hysteria. She is bored by the constant spiritual slant he now gives to everything in his life. "What are you talking about?" she sighs with exasperated patience.

"Well a doctor's secretary phoned to say the X-rays and test results are through and could you come in an hour later for your appointment, the doctor will be delayed in theatre?"

"Oh Philly, don't be such a drama queen! I'm following in your footsteps and have been delighted to discover the imagined

damage is not nearly as bad as I had thought. I felt it was time that I, too, had a good check-over and established exactly who and what I am. These are just routine tests. I know I've never been sick since that business after Yannis' birth, but at my age a sensible woman starts thinking of these check up thingies. And, by the way, I've been to counselling sessions about *my* problem. My attitude and phobias and fears caused by that horrible iodine damage. I've also discovered the problem at Yannis' birth was due not to scarring as you said the doctor told you – gosh, you can get the bull by the udder, mixing things up – but to an abnormally massive *placenta praevia* which eliminated any possibility of a natural birth. And it caused an uncontrollable haemorrhage which necessitated the hysterectomy. It was all done to prevent much more serious damage, like death. I don't know where you got your peculiar version from. They said because the ovaries were left intact, I was lucky to avoid the problems that usually crop up after such an early removal of one's major female apparatus. Though old doctor Reynolds has long since retired the records were, surprisingly, still available, on microfiche, it appears. Wonders of modern medicine. It's almost an industry, with all the new doctors in the joint practice. ”

“I am so relieved. Why didn't you tell me? And where is this taking you, Jen?”

She laughs, “Who knows, but certainly – at last – I'm planning on a trip. Overseas; a musical and gastronomic pilgrimage, and I intend to be sure that I'm in sufficiently fine fettle to handle whatever health, or other hazards – or *adventures* – may come my way. I intend to splurge and enjoy myself. With you and Yannis gone it seems I must make a new life for myself. You know, with the exception of some few spectacular and rare extravagances, I've been

very careful with my money. Like an industrious little farmer I have ploughed back returns from investments in property, again and again refertilising them, so to speak, so that interest on capital has generated new capital. There's more than enough to leave Yannis well-off and he seems to be pretty successful himself. Between him and Gaia they've acquired some quite fabulous stuff which they say they are shipping home before they return."

She takes a letter from her pocket, "Here's the latest. I picked it up at the box, this morning. Apparently they're going to spend a couple of weeks after they send everything off, take a well-deserved holiday and roam around with nothing else but a back-pack each for easy movement. Play the tourist game. Yannis says that Gaia's Russian is now so fluent she can speak it in several dialects and accents, and that even he has picked up sufficient, in the eighteen months they've been there, for him to get along in basic conversation in the present tense. They're going to explore some quaint little old places with remarkably intact traditions of local handicrafts." She hands the letter to Philly who reads it, chuckling at Yannis' irreverent comments about important people and his own success. He is not lured by Jen's provocative remarks about him 'being gone': they achieve nothing by arguing. What is the point of denying absence when he also feels that the old Jen has slipped away, leaving a stranger to whom he cannot relate?

"Does he know ...?" he waves his hand at all the signs of their new separate lives.

"Well, I haven't put it down in words of single syllables, you've read most of the letters, after all we do send joint epistles. But yes, in my little private PSs I've given some indication, perhaps expressed my dissatisfaction with the new person you have become. He's not a complete idiot and must have realised how actively busy

we are at different things. He knows too that the marriage is really no more than a convenient legal clarification about joint assets and easy inheritance. Quite frankly I think he is far too occupied with his own busy happy life to spend time imagining scenarios from ours, and far too tactful to ask until he is told."

Philly reads aloud, " 'We have the most gorgeous surprise for you, one for each, but you'll just have to wait until we see you. We're not saying another thing until we're there to watch the expression on your faces. Be prepared!' " He riffles through the pages. "He says they'll be here in about three weeks' time, but will confirm date and flight number later. Hey, that should bring it to the next day or so, don't you think, judging by the date on the letter? What on earth do you suppose it is, the surprise?"

"It wouldn't be a surprise if we could guess, would it now?" Jen points out with her new acerbity. "But he will certainly be surprised at the new you. Do you know you have actually got a permanent tan *and* muscles? What happened to that incipient belly, and the milk and roses complexion you were cosseting? If it's done nothing else for you your famous commune has made you fit. What do you *do* there, besides meditate, and eat that awfully boring stuff? Push-ups?"

Although he frequently winces inwardly, flayed by Jen's recent, often slightly cruel though funny sharpnesses, Philly remains passively cheerful. "Try digging trenches for foundations, and lugging great big bags of cement and concrete breeze-blocks on and off vehicles. Oh, and by the way I'm trading in my car for something more useful and practical, a van or a lorry with a canopy, something into which we can load all those bags of manure we need to change the sandy soil into an organically nourishing medium for

the vegetables. You can't believe how satisfying it is, seeing things grow, harvesting and eating them."

"Can't I?" Jen answers, refraining from asking where he thought their home-grown vegetables and herbs have come from, all those years he was immured in his pasty whiteness, indoors, while she gardened and played the role of handyman around the place. She cannot understand her sudden surges of violent impatient irritation until she remembers a lecture on 'victimology' which suggested that certain attitudes of passivity and humility invite attack. She agrees. It would be a pleasure to shake the man, shake some spine and sense into him: she hates, with a burning passion, his new philosophy and associates, their absolute gormless acceptance of the inevitability of current suffering being due to a previously misled life. It bleeds the guts out of them, she thinks, leaving pallid shells of puerility.

The following days are a scurry of activity; long-closed cupboards opened and aired, floors and furniture polished to glow with the sweetness of lavender-oiled fragrance, biscuits baked and boxed for bed-side nibbles. Jen is not intending to lapse into the earth mother persona ever again, but she is happily preparing the rooms which, like her heart, have stood vacant since her son left home.

Philly and Jen are sitting in the family den discussing plans for making the house easier for Gaia to navigate in comfort. They are sharing one of their rare meals together, the preparation of which Jen now invariably leaves to him, for she still feels the smarting sense of rejection that all creative cooks experience when their efforts are unappreciated. What makes it the more annoying for her

is that what he now rejects are those same dishes he once raved about, and many are ones they developed together. "Strange how food can bind or separate," she muses, remembering the happy family hours they'd spent in the kitchen and at the table. Before Philly can think of a sufficiently tactful reply the phone shrieks out.

"Oh, damn that thing," Jen grumbles as she goes to answer it. She listens with a puzzled frown and replies, "Who wants to know?" Philly watches as she becomes suddenly very still and white, turning into a frozen travesty of her ebullient self. She sits down heavily, answering, "No, that can't be right. In any case he hasn't lived here for over two years, he's in Russia."

The phone cackles incomprehensively to Philly who, alerted by Jen's distress, is standing close trying to eavesdrop.

"What?" she exclaims, "is this some hoax call?" The static-ribbed voice and electronic buzz seem to flow into Jen, changing her appearance and stance visibly "You *are* phoning from Russia?"

As she listens to a crackly explanation Philly dances in agitation, mouthing, "What, what?" until, distracted by his actions, she places her hand over the receiver and hisses at him, "Oh, piss off, go and listen on the extension, I can't make out what he's saying." On his way to the kitchen Philly hears her, almost shouting, "No, no, that can't be right. That was his old passport, he changed his name, he never uses Yannis Nicol any more, it can't be him."

Philly lifts the extension as Jen is still trying to explain. "No, the new one, in his changed name, Phillip Yannis Grier, didn't come through in time, but it was posted on to him, ages ago, and I know he used it. The change of name ..."

The person phoning interrupts. "He was identified." But Jen still fights against the illogicality of what she is being told. "No," she

persists, "it can't possibly be. Wasn't it, the old one, perhaps stolen and on somebody else?" The thought flashes through her mind that his father's son could well have traded his old documents; there has always been that touch of the buccaneer in her boy.

Philly, unable to cope with what he is hearing, cringes and huddles like a small child afraid to be alone. He drops the receiver as if it were attacking him, rushes back to stand close to Jen, watches as she listens to what seems to him an interminable one-sided conversation. He waits apprehensively, for he can see disaster written on her face and body.

Jen has been notified of the death of a Yannis Nicol. Little is known about the details other than that a motor cyclist, careening around a corner had lost control and thundered into a shop window, killing a man standing on the pavement. The dead man had nothing on him, no watch or wallet, and it is presumed he was robbed before the arrival of the police. It was only after he had lain, unidentified, in the morgue for several days that a passport was found slipped in between the lining and the pocket of his anorak. No, they know nothing of the whereabouts of a wife. They were very sorry but doubted it was possible to check the identifying features she gave; a scar on his right leg? The machine had landed on him, burst into flames, the legs, you see ... Yes, yes, they did understand and would phone back in a day or two.

Jarred from his new passivity Philly tries to comfort Jen with the idea that the anorak was, perhaps, stolen when that bag of dirty undergarments they were taking to the laundrette was swiped from Pup and Gaia. She snaps back at him, lapsing momentarily in her distress to her childhood vocabulary, "That was in Greece, you eejit. And sure your dead man is in Russia, byjasus and wouldn't it be a comfort to me if ye spoke some sense?" They are both silent for a

while before she adds, "Besides they never mentioned a thing about that expensive down anorak going missing, just joked about the look on the thief's face when he found the tourists' swiped bag contained nothing but dirty and ragged vests and sagging underpants. They made a whole production of the story and would have mentioned the anorak if it was gone and all."

He goes to the kitchen to make her a strong cup of tea and returns to find her taking a swig of whiskey, neat, from the bottle. He is shocked and disapproving but attempts to hide this. "Jen, you always say to keep your energy for when disaster strikes and not expend it on imagined horrors," he reminds her. "Let's wait until they phone back."

"Bloody hell," she snarls as she goes to the phone to start phoning every possible source of help or information: newspapers, consulates, secretaries of government departments. When she returns Philly starts phoning his cronies, asking them to concentrate, to 'channel' their energies towards a good outcome. After his fourth call Jen can take no more. "For god's sake, let it be. Leave the line open. Go play witch-doctors on your own phone." She turns to the one sure source of comfort and as Philly dispiritedly walks away, mourning the loss of all their previous sweetness, he hears the piano thundering out great gasping chords.

The days pass. "Surely if anything bad had happened Gaia would phone and tell us?" Philly tries to comfort in his increasingly irritating refusal to accept the possibility that she too may have been involved in an accident.

As Jen tries to point out to him, "Gaia would hardly be trotting around all those strange places on her own, blind as she is, now would she?" She cannot express her antagonism at what she

perceives as Philly's impracticality, but neither can she hide it as he fusses around. She never moves far from the phone.

Although Jen is aware of his own concern and hurt, his kindness in trying to prepare appetising meals for her, his presence chafes. She wants to be alone with her thoughts. When Philly goes out to shop for food she feels free to phone her new musical friends, but a certain lingering loyalty to the old relationship makes her refuse their offers to come and keep her company. It will, she knows, place an even greater strain on Philly, having these strangers there. Jen realises how far he stretches himself, going against the grain of his new beliefs in purchasing the meat she enjoys and then preparing it for her. But his fussing presence scalds her with irritation, she has no space left for him; in her heart she knows her son is dead; all her previous life is nullified.

There is no news, nobody has been able to help. The original notification has been officially confirmed with no further details: little Russian villages are, apparently, impenetrable, their police services in a state of chaos. Nearly a week later the phone call they have been waiting for comes. A faint, hardly recognisable female voice greets Jen.

It is all over. Gaia tells how, with only their rucksacks for luggage, they were standing in front of a little shop in a small, out-of-the way village. "We were deciding what gift you would prefer, Jen. Flip was describing a set of beautifully embellished Russian matryona dolls: he wanted us to go inside for me to feel them, and I should have, I should have agreed immediately instead of making silly jokes about standing in the only beam of sun we'd encountered in weeks. He told me there were ten in all, each smaller than the previous one in which it snuggled, until the smallest was barely the size of a thumb-nail. The tops were off, he said, so one could see

them. He couldn't decide if you'd prefer this, or a cruder music box for its quaint old peasant tune." Gaia is obviously finding it hard to speak about the accident. There is a splintered silence until Jen prompts, "What happened, Gaia, what happened?"

"Just as we decided he'd buy the dolls for me and the music box for you, have them all in the family, he said, you know how he always joked, there was this terrible squealing sound. I smelt the singed rubber. It was so quick I can't really remember details, but as I felt him turn to look around, almost in the same movement, he flung me away, shouting, 'Move.' I was terrified, not knowing what was happening. I lay huddled on the ground – you must understand, I was totally confused, Flip had never been rough like that before – there was a thump, a scream, and a crash. I can't remember in what order everything happened, it seemed all at the same moment. A splintering of glass descended on me, it felt like in slow motion, something heavy banged onto my head and then – nothing, until I came to, groggy and completely lost. In a situation like this I am isolated in my blindness. There is so little I can do unless somebody helps. I was told I'd been taken to a small clinic in a larger, neighbouring village, and nobody there could answer any of my questions." Her voice fades away as static or sobs come through the phone in faint waves.

Jen is impatient but controls herself to ask gently, "Are you all right, Gaia? Were you hurt?"

"The glass, the flying glass." Jen can almost hear the shudder as Gaia struggles to continue. "I've been cut all over, lots of superficial small cuts and some nasty bigger ones. There are so many sutures, I can feel them like little insect antennae, moving all over my face and arms. Flip would have laughed ..." Her giggle

betokens hysteria. She can't continue until Jen prods again, "And then, the accident, Flip, what happened to him?"

"Not a single person could, or would, tell me about the accident. Nobody knew anything about Flip. It was like a nightmare, but I knew I was awake because of the pain. I was living in a horror story; frighteningly, it was as if he had never existed. And I was chained down by my blindness. It took several days before the police arrived and even longer to contact the embassy. There was, apparently, a body that needed identification and, at first, I could not persuade them I could do so by touch; if it was Flip. After all one knows the feel of one's husband, somebody you love."

Crazily Jen's mind, her whole being, fills with long-ago sensations, the feel and smell and touch of *her* husband, her son's father. She resurfaces from the past to hear Gaia explaining how, yes, eventually the people in charge listened to her description and then allowed her to ... to say goodbye. "They wouldn't let me touch him, or hug him. They said he was badly burnt, his legs, where I'd told them the old scar was, but they did place his hand, his left hand, in mine. They'd even stolen our wedding ring, but it was certainly his hand. I've held it so often I could never mistake it, even when it was so still and lifeless. Then, when I was searching in his anorak, I found the old passport slipped between the garment and the lining. He'd obviously never noticed it when he fixed the torn pocket. Of course that caused even more trouble and delays with the authorities as I'd told them our name is Grier. But it was, yes, it was him. He had tried to protect me, shielding my body with his. At first they thought he might have died from the burns, or bleeding from the bad cuts, but no, they said it was instant, he hadn't bled much. He was killed by a massive injury at the base of

the skull. He couldn't have felt anything, really. At least, Jen, I can give you that comfort."

Jen feels nothing except emptiness; it is as if her main emotional nerve has been severed. She is frozen, unable to think or even move into a more comfortable position, and listens calmly as Gaia tells her that witnesses later reported how the riderless motor cycle, after hitting the curb, had bounced onto Flip, through the shop window, then rebounded onto him, bursting into flames.

"They thought it might have been a robbery attempt. A young fellow had aimed the machine at the shop window and then, when things went wrong, and he saw us standing there, in the way, he jumped off the moving machine and ran away. And while we were lying there the rucksacks, which had been standing at our feet - they were so heavy and Flip carried the bulk of the stuff, and we were resting - well, they were stolen and so was everything else we had in our pockets. Even our tissues. Strangely, no witnesses had seen *this* happen. The people probably thought we were both dead, and fair game."

Gaia has only the clothes she wore, everything - passport, tickets, money - is gone, and in the time between the accident and being able to try to cancel the travellers' cheques, they too have been cashed. Jen pictures the girl's terrified despondency until, hearing of her plight, some village women 'adopted' her, but it feels as if she is watching some movie. Everything flows past without touching the vast emptiness her body tenuously holds together: she *knows* if anybody approaches her she will disintegrate, fall apart like a sand castle when the moisture of its inner juices is carried away by the wind. And all the while, as Gaia continues blowing the freezing gust of desiccation through Jen's absconded life, something hard and intractable grows, tough as a wood fungus. She realises

she has missed parts of the story, but it doesn't matter. There is only *one* fact that matters

"These *babushkas* are wonderful," Gaia explains as Jen listens without hearing. "I don't think one of them is under sixty, but they took control, bypassed what they said were corrupt policemen, contacted the embassy themselves. I am being fed and cared for and will be on the next plane out, to arrive home in three days time. Could you, would you please meet me and put me up until things are sorted out?"

Philly, watching Jen's face and noting her absolute silence at the beginning of the call, rushed to the kitchen to listen on the extension. In his haste and agitation he knocked a crystal vase over but ignored the damage, stepping over the scattered flowers and fragments of glass surrounded by a widening pool of beige water. He sits weeping as he listens, but the practical Jenny, cold and frozen, is noting addresses and particulars so that she can immediately arrange for a money transfer. It is complicated as Gaia has to use temporary identification and travel papers. Jen offers to fly out and bring her safely home, but this means further delay and all Gaia wants is to leave as soon as possible.

Jen puts the phone down, walks straight to the piano and for the next half hour, until Philly can stand it no longer, she plays and replays the second movement, the haunting Andante, from Mozart's Concerto in C Major. Eventually he walks up to the piano, stills her hands and says, "Jen, you must cry."

She looks blankly up at him, "The music is crying for me," she whispers. But she lets him lead her to the kitchen, seat her at the table and shock her into verbal response with hot strong Irish coffee, more alcohol than coffee. "It's over, it's over," she says. "More than half my life wasted. Everything come to nothing ...

pointless. It's all been pointless, for nothing. All of myself poured into the two of you and I have nothing, nothing to show for it."

He has the wisdom - or the cowardice - to remain quiet. She looks at him, stirred to anger as much by his silence as his speech would have ignited her. Gently he asks, "Do you want to talk about it, Jen?"

"What's the point? *You* think he's just moved to another stage, another place. To me it's finished; over; dead is dead; no more, all over. And it's not right, he's so young. You can't comfort me with your philosophy. I hate it, it's smarmy and a lie. Just because you can't face facts, can't face total dissolution, you make up faerie tales. No, you don't understand. For me when something is finished it's *finished*, dreams, relationships, life. All that vibrant life ... what a waste."

They were silent on the trip to the airport, the memory of the last occasion painfully present. They could not speak of it. When Philly had suggested they take his larger vehicle, the rather mucky lorry he now used to accommodate the needs of 'The Group', Jen had replied. "Oh for hell's sake stop fussing. Try and use some common sense. The girl has no luggage, have you forgotten already?" And the more she withdrew the more he tried to please, to pacify, until turning to him she announced, flatly, "Once she is settled in she can have my half of the house. I'm leaving. I'm going to look up the remaining ÓDowds in Ireland and see if I can find out more about my mother. I am starting again from the beginning. *This* has been the sign."

“What are you talking about Jen? What sign? Besides she’ll need you.”

“In music there is a term, *dal segno*. It means one returns to a particular sign to replay the music, to start again from there. The sign, for me, is the complete nullification of my entire adult life. I am going to try again. Besides, the girl has you. You’re still good at fussing, at looking after people who are lame or scarred or damaged in some way. You have a whole commune of them, people who can’t, or won’t, cope with life on the outside. Not me. At last I want *my* life, the people *in* my life and myself to be whole. I’m going to go out there and try it all over again. Hope to make a better go this time. I’ll send for my piano, or perhaps buy a new one, when I find a place where I can live as a whole, a complete being. And don’t argue. I’ll be kind and polite and make her feel totally at home, hand over the keys to her, when she is ready. It would have been Yannis’, in any case. Don’t clip *my* wings, don’t smother me. Remember once you said I was a survivor? Well, I *must* do this to survive. *I must be free*. I must be who I was meant to be, myself, Roísín.”

At the air terminal Philly stands waiting, ready to guide when Gaia walks out on the arm of an air-hostess. She is clutching her only luggage, a small draw-string bag, heavily embroidered in bright peasant colours and designs. Her face and arms, covered with a multitude of little black thread sutures, give her the appearance of an incomplete piece of tufted upholstery. The opal-tinted dark glasses, which used to suit her face, are gone; in their place an ugly black-rimmed frame glowers heavily as if it intends to complement the numerous black threads. Jen stands to one side as Philly

encloses the blind girl in a long welcoming hug, then Jen bends over, pecks her cheek, places an arm around her shoulder and welcomes, "You have come home."

Gaia, palms turned upwards, says, "Please, each of you, place a hand in mine. I have something to tell you which Flip insisted must wait until he could see your faces. Of course, I can't see you, but it is his surprise, his present for you both, and I am doing it as he planned." She takes their hands, places them gently on her belly, and says, "Flip wanted to do this and say, 'Meet Phillip Grier the Third and Roísín'; they will arrive in five months time. He chose the names when we found out we were having twins, one of each, wasn't that clever of him?"

Jen isn't sure if she means the choosing of names or the making of twins, but keeps silent while Philly fusses affectionately, hugging and patting Gaia comfortingly. Jen wants to snap at him that the girl isn't a dog, for god sake, but holds her tongue as Gaia continues.

"Thank God they survived the accident, I was so worried for a while. At least we will have a part of Flip with us, always. You have no idea how wonderful he was." Jen has the grace to make the correct responses, but it is Philly who does so from the heart. Bear-hugging Gaia, he assures her of the finest medical attention they can get, and speaks of choosing and converting one of the best rooms into a nursery.

On the journey home Philly consoles Gaia, trying to divert her with plans for the twins. The two of them sit close together on the back seat, drawing comfort from each other, whilst Jen, burningly aware of the emptiness of the seat beside her, drives on. They are all conscious of the last trip, and Philly and Gaia speak of it, with love and even a smidgen of laughter. When Philly leans forward to

include Jen in the conversation with a "Do you remember when we took them to the airport, Pup said ..." she interrupts curtly.

"Please, when I'm driving in this traffic I prefer to concentrate." But it is not the traffic on which she is concentrating. Her son's presence is vivid. He is beside her on the empty seat. She sees him that last day when they went up to the attic for their personal goodbye; she remembers his sunniness, his constant loving teasing, his green eyes and dark curls and the happiness in their home. It is all gone now, and she knows she can never be a part of the reconstruction which Philly has so obviously begun. She wonders if Yannis will understand, and thinks of him as he turned, teasingly, calling out his last words to her, "It would have, Ma, it would ... make a wonderful nursery."

Knowing she will not be there to see it she replies, whispering softly, promising him, "It will, Yannis, it will indeed."

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Berkow, Robert. (Ed.) *The Merck Manual of Diagnosis & Therapy*.  
 Rahway, N.J: Merck Sharpe & Dohme Research  
 Laboratories, 1977.
- Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. (Edited by Angus Calder).  
 London: Penguin, 1965.
- Mangan, James Clarence. "Dark Rosaleen" in *The Penguin Book of  
 Irish Verse* (Edited by Brendan Kenelly).  
 Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970.
- Onions, C.T. (Ed.) *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* 3<sup>rd</sup>  
 Edition, Revised.  
 Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968.
- Verdi, Giuseppe. 'Parigi, o cara, noi lasceremo', from the opera *La  
 Traviata*. Milan: Ricordi, 1853.
- Zweig, Stefan. *Beware of Pity*. (Translated by Phyllis & Trevor  
 Blewitt). London: Cassell, 1953.

The names 'Phillip Grier' and 'Jenny' and fragments of some paragraphs in the first nine pages of *Flying Free* are derived from a short story I submitted (as part of a portfolio of prose fiction, poetry and drama) for the BA Hons. Creative Writing course in 2000. It was at the suggestion of my supervisor, Prof. André Brink, that this idea was changed and developed into a full novel. The lines of verse on page 271 are my own.