

The S.O.D. Saga

Kay Santillo

Foreword

This book is a strange kind of semi-autobiographical fiction, based loosely on my life. So much of it is pure fiction, however, that it's best to treat it all as fiction. It *is* best, believe me!

If my memory serves me at all, I first started to write *The S.O.D. Saga* in 1995 and finished it a year or so later. After a great number of rejections, I finally had it published by what turned out to be a rogue company (found trustingly in *The Writer's Handbook*) in 1998. A few copies of this sad and expensive mishap must still be around today, but I don't suppose they'd fetch much on eBay.

I wrote *The S.O.D. Sequel* because it was inside me and clamouring to be let out. I even started *The S.O.D. Trequel*, but got as far as Chapter 1 and then nothing – absolutely nothing. It wasn't a case of writer's block, more a case of life chewing me up and spitting me out, definitely older and hopefully a bit wiser.

In late 2008, I suddenly felt the need to continue with *The S.O.D. Trequel*, but knew the first two books needed a rewrite. This involved a certain amount of discipline and many hours sat at the computer, not allowing myself to play *Spider Solitaire* until I had reached a certain goal post (though not in the sporting sense). Now *The S.O.D. Trequel* is about to close and continue life as *The S.O.D. Quad*. Trust me. I know these things.

As for the characters, I need to say they are just a figment and if they happen to resemble any living or non-living person in any way whatsoever – well, it's just pure coincidence, nothing to do with me at all. It is done. Think what you will. Enjoy!

Kay Santillo, February 2010.

CHAPTER 1

It was a Saturday in September 1991 and Sandra Olivia Dullkettle was having a 39th birthday. She wasn't entirely depressed, just prone to prolonged bouts of morbid introspection, interspersed with spasms of convulsive sobbing.

It wasn't so much the word 'birthday', but more the preceding adjective 'happy' that seemed to be the greater cause of her sodden handkerchief. True, 'birthday' had some interesting connotations – some vague and ancient imagery concerning a tortoise and a twin-tub washing machine – but 'happy' was definitely the catalyst to her spontaneous disintegration. The combination of the two, moreover, was proving catastrophic.

The day hadn't particularly started all that well.

"Happy birthday, Sandra!" her husband, Osborn Declan Dullkettle, had said to her that morning, as he had tripped into their bedroom over a pair of lurking boxer shorts, whilst carrying a mug of tea made 10 minutes ago for her. He was attractive in a dark-haired, slightly balding sort of way, but sometimes displayed remarkable powers of distraction for a communications engineer, not to mention mixed wires (which Sandra often did).

"Sorry," he said distractedly, "I got waylaid by that dodgy handle on the kitchen cupboard. Uh – I'll wipe this up, it's only spilt on two or three of your birthday cards here. Pass me the tissues. Er – are you upset?"

Their 10-year-old daughter, Madeleine Annabelle Dullkettle, appeared in the bedroom doorway, kicking aside the offending boxer shorts and raising a quizzical, pre-adolescent eyebrow, as her far seeing clear green eyes took in the sight of her copiously weeping mother and her grovelling, confused father.

"Daddy!" she said, tossing her long, blonde hair with the aggrieved sensibility of one beyond her years. "Dad, when people are crying their heads off, they're normally upset!" She swept past her even further confused father and sat down gently on the edge of the bed by her mother, using her best adult consoling manner.

"Happy birthday, Mummy," she said, smiling into her mother's swimming, desperate eyes. Her own eyes widened in disbelief. "Have I said something wrong? Mum, are you upset?"

Just then, a gangling vision of male youth with short, dark hair and glasses obscured the doorway.

"Hey!" said Osborn, throwing a wad of tea-stained tissues in the direction of his 15-year-old son, Gulliver Orville Dullkettle. "Throw these away and bring me a dishcloth – and make your mother another cup of tea, please."

"Humph," remarked Gulliver, as he retrieved the birthday cards that the wad of tissues had knocked flying from his hand. "These cards just came in the post. Actually, Mother, I didn't get you a card, or even a present, to be honest, but happy birthday anyway!" Consternation clouded his brow. "Mother? Are you upset?"

Later that morning, when Madeleine and Gulliver had dematerialised with various friends and Osborn had gone to the supermarket for some carpet cleaner, Sandra managed to pull herself together a little, by making herself a mug of black coffee and reflecting in analytical dejection on the mindlessly boring course her life had taken.

'Have I finally cracked? Who am I? Is it really in some breathtakingly wonderful and infinitely wise plan that I should arrive here at this point on this sofa in this slowly atrophying mind and this strangely proportioned body? Was there a big bang? Is gender relevant after death? Should I have taken my A-levels after all? Why do my custards always burn? What is the meaning of life?'

No answers were forthcoming, so Sandra began to indulge in a little parental pondering. Her parents were both psychologists and Sandra wondered (not for the first time) if this had contributed to a disturbed childhood – not to mention a sado-masochistic tendency to hypothesise on every excruciatingly boring facet of human behaviour, by the utilisation of a plethora of hideously accurate long words.

Sandra hurriedly swigged another gulp of caffeine, trying not to get too bogged down by the question of why she felt she needed caffeine, a stimulant, when she so

obviously needed tranquillising. Should she instead depress herself with alcohol – but the word 'depress' was too depressing, so she compromised by reaching for the box of chocolate liqueurs she had been given for her birthday and tried not to get too bogged down with the question of whether it was the chocolate or the liqueur she needed. 'God, I really am a mess,' she was stimulated to think depressedly.

The more she thought about her parents, the more she began to piece together certain contributing factors to her growing sense of disillusion. Her mother, Caroline Orlanda Dent, had graduated in psychology and specialised in the study of the development of the self-concept. Her main hypothesis had been embarrassingly self-relevant, as Sandra had realised as soon as she'd interpreted it (about two weeks ago).

Caroline's Hypothesis

The acronymous connotation of a person's name will subconsciously direct that person to exhibit behaviours semantically consistent with the acronym.

Sandra's Interpretation

Someone whose initials spell SOD will behave like one.

Caroline had been secretly proud at the dissent her hypothesis had provoked, contemptuously dismissing the sniggering she sometimes encountered as irrelevant in the development of her self-concept as a psychologist. One of the dissenters, a previous fellow student of Caroline's, with an unhealthy (to Caroline) leaning towards behaviourism, had been very open about his views.

"Ruddy rubbish!" he had expostulated politely. "My initials are LAW and they're meaningless."

Caroline had decided not to follow up by discussing laws of behaviourism. Leonard Arthur Watercress had fascinated her and the two of them had subsequently embarked upon a tame but gratifying romance, which had resulted in the decision to commit matrimony.

Following the realisation that her initials on marriage would be COW, Caroline, in a fit of pique and in a fit at finding that she was pregnant, had decided that their offspring should suffer too (in the name of social science, of course) and their daughter had thus been named Sandra Olivia Watercress. Caroline had then decided to devote her life to a firsthand study of the effect of acronymous meanings on a child's development of self-concept. Subsequently, Sandra had spent a lot of her childhood with the strange impression that she was being observed.

Meanwhile, Sandra's father, Leonard, had flirted with the idea of trying to prove there was no cognitive mediation process involved in the acquisition of self-concept.

"If I were to treat Sandra like a mouse," he had said during an argument one day, "she would respond accordingly."

Thankfully, he had been diverted into other fields. A fellow psychologist, Ivor Swede, had invited his help into what was to become a famous study involving the conditioning of a 17-year-old boy called Jonathon Erkwhistle (codenamed J.ERK 1) to respond orgasmically to receiving electric shocks. Later, when public outrage had died down, it had been discovered that at the time the experiment had taken place, J.ERK 1 had been a latent masochist anyway, and so the results had been nullified. Not, however, before the names of Swede and Watercress had made an irrevocable impact on psychological history. Caroline had decided not to mention to Leonard the breaking of laws – moral, ethical or judicial – in relation to the semantic connotation of his initials. It was a negative correlation, anyway.

Sandra finished her coffee and noticed she was developing a headache. She sighed and gazed at the tea-stained birthday cards on top of the fireplace, fighting and losing against a fresh onslaught of tears. 'I suppose it's the thought that counts,' she managed to think philosophically. 'It's just rather a pity that I seem to have an innate desire for perfection, which spoils my enjoyment of an imperfect world and causes me to go around mentally straightening pictures on walls and wishing I carried around my very own handy spirit level.'

She remembered with a twisted sort of grin, a previous birthday when Gulliver had actually given her a spirit level for a present, saying it would be sure to come in useful. She hadn't really meant to break it when she'd whacked it across his knee.

'I'm not a very good mother,' she thought suddenly. 'When they were young, I always wanted them to be older.' She remembered the other mothers at the school gate, talking about missing their children so dreadfully now they had started school. She remembered guiltily how she had sat in the garden that first lunchtime alone, with a sandwich, a book, blissful silence and the feeling that she was supremely happy.

Later, when the supreme happiness at being alone had turned into a degenerative crabbiness at being bored, she had listened to a friend's advice and found herself a job as a relief library assistant. The only relief involved, however, had been financial and that was only a little more than inconsequential.

The job hadn't gone well. Her feet were unused to being stood on all day and rebelled. She had almost enjoyed replacing books on shelves but her (un)natural sense of tidiness had been relentlessly outraged to see people casually picking up books to browse through, before misplacing them haphazardly back on the shelf. 'I have a tidiness problem,' she had ultimately decided. She then spent a whole day putting books back on the shelves at least six books away from where they really belonged. It didn't make much difference in the non-fiction section, as those books had always been like that anyway.

Her tidiness problem had not been the reason for her leaving the job, however. Dealing with the public had been the final killer. She had truly started out being polite and helpful, completely quelling her frequent desire when date stamping to say, "Couldn't you find anything more intellectually rewarding than this?" or, "How can you read such sexist claptrap?" She had even smiled at people who had lost their library card, or people who handed over a £20 note to pay a 20-pence fine.

The herd of children stampeding in after school was over had finally irritated her beyond redemption. She knew she should have been encouraging and friendly with the children pursuing their projects, asking their endless questions such as, "Have you got a book about the mating habits of the black-handed spider monkey?" or, "Have you got an A-Z of electrodynamics?"

It had been the smartass 12-year-old boy with the direct gaze who'd finally unhinged her. "Have you got a book about the changing role of women in modern society?" he had asked loudly.

At first Sandra had been able to match his gaze as she replied in an emphatic negative.

He had adopted an aggressive stance. "There's a book called *Men Underneath* that my mother wants to borrow."

"Insidious little git," Sandra had muttered aloud, before she could stop herself. Unfortunately, the boy's mother had appeared unnoticed on the scene and was incensed at the emotionally damaging verbal abuse her son had received.

As Sandra had left the library that afternoon, complete with the knowledge that she was unsuitable as a relief library assistant, she had walked home with a sense of freedom rather than of failure. 'I don't want a job as a dogsbody,' she thought. 'I have a brain...'

Osborn came in just then, interrupting her chain of thought and brandishing a large bunch of black grapes. "I bought these to cheer you up," he said smilingly, as three of the grapes dropped off and rolled directly under his left foot as he moved across to sit next to Sandra. "It's just that it's your birthday and people should be happy on their birthday." Sandra managed to look him in the eye for a moment before convulsing noisily into a clean, dry handkerchief.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I'll make you a cup of coffee. Have some liqueur chocolates. Have some grapes! I'll wipe up these squashed ones." He hopped into the kitchen on his right foot.

Sandra was suddenly overcome with fondness for him. 'He means well. He's a really nice person underneath – after all, it's not his fault about his parents,' she thought magnanimously.

Osborn's parents were, in fact, strangely serious about religion. The form their religion took seemed strangely serious to Sandra and, on occasion, seriously strange.

After being an insurance salesman for a number of years, Osborn's father, Basil Arthur Dullkettle, had had an experience whilst visiting a prospective client one day. He had since refused to speak about the incident, although he was known to have emerged from the house in question gibbering foolishly that he was innocent and hadn't realised the significance of the black candle and the cucumber. From then on, he'd been a changed person, completely giving up the thrill of losing on the horses for the sake of his soul. He had joined his local church to seek redemption. Instead, he'd found Osborn's mother, Sybil Isadora Newtcrusher.

Fortunately, Basil wasn't into acronyms and perceived Sybil to be a woman of grace and virtue, enhanced by good cooking abilities and extraordinarily inviting big breasts. He particularly loved it in meetings when Sybil would leap up in a religious ecstasy, waving her arms in the air and shouting "Praise the Lord!" He noticed on these occasions that the other men in the congregation would respond with a particularly fervent "Ar-men!"

Although Basil found such overt expressions of faith alien to his somewhat taciturn nature, he did his best to please Sybil by actually leading the clapping in several choruses at one of the Easter meetings. He suspected the other men were a little jealous of the urgent, meaningful looks Sybil kept flashing his way, because they all seemed reluctant to join in. Some of the congregation even directed him definitely dirty looks. He just smiled boldly at Sybil and clapped even harder. After the service, Sybil approached him with a smouldering gaze, tactfully avoiding the groups of agitated, muttering people.

"Your clapping was sincere but inappropriate," she said in a restrained voice. "May I remind you that today is Good Friday." She turned away with a rather intriguing wobble and left the church. Basil pondered quietly on the implication of both her words and her wobble, before walking home dejectedly to consider (unbeknown to him) living up to his acronym.

Being a woman of grace and virtue, however, Sybil had later gone out of her way to make friendly overtures to Basil. He wasn't really a music buff, but he had enjoyed the *Post-Lent Praise and Pig-Out Evening*, when Sybil had grabbed his arm as he was about to enter the church hall, dragging him into the kitchen, where she had been making sandwiches.

"I need some help," she said curtly, thrusting a knife into his hand. "Slice this up for me, please." As she placed the large, fat cucumber in his other hand, Basil experienced a moment of pure panic. Mind over matter? Good over evil? Sybil over cucumber? Basil lost control and was toppling dazedly to the floor, when Sybil managed to arrest his fall by grasping him to her wobbling proportions.

From that moment forward they had never looked back and had married within six months. The church continued to play an important part in their lives, although Basil never again led any clapping and continued to act unpredictably in the presence of cucumbers. He resolutely followed his career in insurance salesmanship, however, and had been suitably impressed at the birth of their firstborn, Lawrence Adrian, the following year.

"He'll be a good investment for the future," he said to Sybil, on visiting her after the birth of their son.

"Praise the Lord!" she uttered in a stupor of exhaustion and pethidine, swinging her arms weakly around the vicinity of her head.

"We should protect our assets and have another son as soon as possible," Basil continued thoughtfully. He was a little surprised when Sybil's arm somehow came into forcible contact with him.

"I want a girl next time," she said emphatically.

However, her wish had not been fulfilled and two years after Lawrence's birth, Osborn had entered the world.

At this point, Osborn entered the room and Sandra was jolted out of her ponderings about whether Osborn had indeed protected his parents' assets. As for the daughter, Kirsty Iris, that they had finally had nine years later...

"Sorry, I was waylaid by some biscuits," said Osborn apologetically. "Would you like one? Don't forget the parentals and Lawrence are coming here for your birthday tea." He sat down beside her on the sofa and patted her knee, causing two large drops of coffee to splosh from the mug in her hand on to the new skirt she had put on that day to cheer herself up.

Sandra looked at Osborn and smiled beatifically. She had come to an important realisation. "I am alive and this is the rest of my life," she said reverently. "I – oh my God, I'd forgotten *they* were coming!"

The birthday tea wasn't a complete disaster, more a scene of unmitigated personality mismatching. Sandra considered it fortunate that Osborn's sister Kirsty was safely engrossed in her own life in Cambridgeshire, or else the mayhem *would* have been complete. Sandra stayed in the kitchen as much as possible, fiddling with food and eating chocolate liqueurs to keep body and soul together. The time she did spend with the others had its interesting moments, though. Snatches of conversations floated closely to her perverted sense of humour:

"Oh, I think women have a little bit of men in them," Basil was saying generously.

"Can we play a game?" asked Madeleine hopefully.

"Yes, but don't forget men sometimes have a little bit of women in them if they're lucky," retorted Caroline, sipping a glass of sherry, as teetotallers Basil and Sybil regarded her in lightly disguised disdain.

"Can we play a game?" asked Madeleine appealingly.

"I don't go in for all those old-fashioned repressive values of neatness and order," muttered Gulliver, brushing vol-au-vent remains artistically on the carpet. "I believe in liberation of expression by any means available."

"Really?" Dark-haired Lawrence looked at Gulliver. "You're odd," he said evenly.

"Can we play a game?" asked Madeleine plaintively.

"Just wait till you're a grown-up with a vacuum cleaner, Gulliver," said Caroline into a piece of quiche.

"Can we play a game?" asked Madeleine assertively.

"Later on," said Lawrence, "Right now I need to fortify the inner man with a vol-au-vent or six."

Sandra had already noticed her father's face was wearing a defiantly stubborn expression, so she was prepared for the worst when Sybil offered him a plate of pizza slices. "Do you like olives?" asked Sybil with polite pseudo-interest.

"Can we *play a game*?" asked Madeleine forcefully.

"I don't know, I've never seen Olive's," replied Leonard with a grin.

"Can we play a GAME?" asked Madeleine heavily.

Sybil had then turned to Gulliver, obviously expecting a more reasonable response to her conversational skills. "What do you want to do when you finish your A-levels?" she asked him, as he was picking off sesame seeds from a crust of bread.

"Can. We. Play. A. Game?" asked Madeleine desperately.

"I don't give a monkey's left testicle," mumbled Gulliver, looking up with an expression of impending terminal boredom.

"Can we play a game..." asked Madeleine resignedly.

"How long have you been interested in zoology then, Gulliver?" continued Sybil obliviously.

"Let's play a game!" yelled Sandra and Osborn in unison.

"I don't want to now," said Madeleine sulkily.

"Come on Maddy, I'm sure you do – I've finished eating," cajoled Lawrence. "What games have you got?"

"I've got a new one!" said Madeleine, brightening immediately. "It's called *Clueless* – or else we could play *Monotony*, or *Frisk!*"

Sandra had almost felt reasonably happy at that point, until a while later when the embarrassing ceremony of the birthday cake had inevitably occurred. Suddenly she was the focus of attention and could almost feel her level of arousal soaring up much too quickly, past optimum, then downwards into the realms of inarticulate idiocy. The words

of the accompanying song finished her off completely. She pushed her way through the lot of them and ran up the stairs.

"Happy birthday, dear Sandra," she could hear, as she reached the top. "Where's she gone? What's happened? Is she upset?"

It was her mother, still carrying her glass of sherry, who followed her. Caroline sat alongside Sandra on the top stair, sipping thoughtfully as Sandra sobbed out her misery.

"It's my birthday and I'm NOT happy! I'm a person, I have a brain and I'm NOT going to be a dogsbody. I don't particularly like dogs. I know it's my fault I didn't finish my A-levels, but I wanted to go out into the real world and besides, I liked boys and there weren't many of them around at an all-girls school.

"I hate cooking. I detest sewing and cleaning the toilet. The word 'housewife' makes me want to vomit copiously. I can't live my life through other people, I need to be stretched. I'm becoming a withering vegetable and I'm capable of so much more than incinerating fishfingers, massacring mushrooms and being a gender object. My life is ebbing away, my brain cells are decreasing without my consent, my skin is wrinkling perceptibly and my vital parts are sagging relentlessly.

"I believe in God, but I don't understand the reason for my own existence if this is all it is. I've had enough. I'll never sew up another hole in a pair of knickers again. I refuse to continue scraping off mould from vertical blinds with a toothbrush. I may even let dirty underwear accumulate heedlessly in bedrooms – no, perhaps not. But I'll never again pick hairs out of the soap. Especially other people's hairs! If my life is reduced to nothing more than this, then whoever I am will POSITIVELY DIE!"

Caroline's cheeks were flushed as her daughter's tirade came to a close. As usual, the sherry had gone straight to her head, but fortunately her psychological professionalism overcame the alcohol. "You're upset," she opined, when Sandra had finished blowing her nose. "As it happens, I have a friend who specialises in identity crisis counselling, so I suppose I could give her a ring. Don't worry, Sandra," she finished, wondering privately if perhaps the acronym SOD was after all too much for anyone to contend with.

As Sandra lay in bed that night, she tried to reconcile her jumbled emotions. "I'm a person," she whispered fiercely to herself. "I'm loved. I have a good enough life, a healthy enough body, a useful enough brain and a comprehensive set of music cassettes. But something is missing and that something is *me*. I'm lost and I need to find myself."

CHAPTER 2

The next day, Sandra felt a mixture of confusion and determination rising slowly out of her helpless despair. Now she had begun to break out of the mould which had caused her to suffer such chronic, low-grade claustrophobia for all those years, she was determined never again to slip back inside.

As to the course her life should take, however, she was totally confused. She spent most of the day in physical inertia and mental overactivity. Her consumption of coffee and chocolate liqueurs reached an all time high. Osborn, Gulliver and Madeleine thought it best to leave her alone, to alternately weep and sit staring at the tea-stained birthday cards. Before she went to bed that night, she removed all the cards from the fireplace. It seemed a symbolic thing to do.

"Tomorrow," she announced, "is the first day of the rest of my mindlessly boring existence."

During the following week, in moments when the blackness inside her head had shifted to mid-tone grey, she forced herself to seek advice from her friends. She felt it was the only action she could take that wasn't detrimental to her health or her sanity. Her friends – most of whom had jobs of varying descriptions – all of whom (except one) could drive – most of whom owned a dishwasher – and some of whom she began to wonder if 'convenient childminder' on her part of the relationship was more appropriate

than 'friend' – offered her interesting, if not downright peculiar, solutions. She decided to make a list of them:

- 1) Get a job
- 2) Learn to drive
- 3) Try hypnotherapy
- 4) Have an affair
- 5) Become a feminist
- 6) Do an Open University degree
- 7) Go to cake decorating classes
- 8) Take tranquillisers
- 9) Join the Church of Scientology
- 10) Count my blessings
- 11) Do voluntary work
- 12) Try a macrobiotic diet
- 13) Register as a childminder
- 14) Write a book
- 15) Go on the game
- 16) Practise Zen meditation
- 17) Take up jogging
- 18) Start my own business
- 19) Cultivate marijuana
- 20) Consult a shrink

She had just completed the list and was staring in irreverent amazement at its diversity, when the phone rang. It was her mother.

"Hello Sandra, how are you?"

"I'm fine. I'm all right. I'm OK. Oh, I don't know!"

"Yes, I thought you might be."

"Might be what?" Sandra's voice was guarded in suspicion.

"Never mind, dear. I rang to say I've spoken to that friend of mine who specialises in identity crisis counselling – Isabelle Dell. I worked with her a lot before I retired. She's been on sick leave – bit of a breakdown – but she'd be happy to hear from you, she deals with plenty of cases like yours..." Caroline's voice trailed off as she presumably realised the insensitivity of her words.

"I'm not a case, Mum. I'm not even a nutcase. I'm me, Sandra Olivia Dullkettle. I'm unique. I'm not a SOD. I'm about to discover my true identity as a person. I'm – I'm – oh, I'm so bloody confused!"

"Ye-es. Well let me give you Isabelle's number and make sure you give her a ring to fix an appointment. She's waiting to hear from you. I've explained that you're my daughter and I've told her all about you. Anyway, I must dash, I have a Literary Lunch with a newly-published feminist writer called Fanny Penprase to organise. See you soon, Sandra. Bye!"

"Bye." Sandra replaced the receiver and stood gazing at the dust on the hall mirror. "I'm not just your daughter, Mum," she said aloud to her dusty reflection. "I'm me and I wish you would stop observing me. I wish you would just be yourself, whoever that is. I know you're a mother and I know you're a psychologist, but there's no need to carry on playing these silly games with me. I'd rather know the real you, which includes mother and psychologist, but so much more."

Sandra returned thoughtfully to her list. 'How observant and analytical I'm becoming,' she observed analytically. 'Just like my mother.'

The list didn't pose too many problems, as most of the suggestions were either too weird or too expensive or simply out of the question, as in number 15. 'I wouldn't earn much,' mused Sandra, 'unless there are some young men out there who haven't yet resolved their Oedipus complex.' She crossed out the other numbers that weren't applicable, scribbling down the first reason that entered her mind.

- 1) Tried it
- 2) Can't afford it
- 5) They scare me – and besides, I like men
- 6) I don't fancy taking out a second mortgage
- 7) Anything that just gets eaten afterwards is a complete waste of time and energy
- 8) I don't feel I need drugs, I want control of my body
- 9) I'm too sceptical of modern religions
- 10) I do
- 11) If I do go out to work, I'd rather be paid for it
- 12) Can't be bothered, food is boring
- 13) I don't find self-fulfilment in minding my own children, let alone other people's
- 14) About what?
- 15) A joke
- 17) Too physical – too boring
- 18) Too financially oriented and too much like hard work
- 19) My African violets always die

Sandra paused at suggestion 20, to consult a shrink, and remembered Isabelle Dell. She thought of her own day to day existence and felt the familiar suffocating heaviness around her heart, restricting her breathing and her life energy. She thought of her future and felt tiny, suppurating wounds of grief opening in her mind and all over the inside of her body.

'I have to do this,' she thought with a pain that felt as old as time. 'I'm alone in this world, before God or Whoever, and all the rest of my life. I have to do this, for myself.'

The third time she dialled, she managed not to drop the receiver down again in gut-wrenching panic. The amount of time that elapsed before someone the other end answered, allowed her just enough time to calm herself by breathing deeply, so she was able to speak coherently. The phone call went smoothly. Her adrenaline subsided. She made an appointment to see Isabelle Dell the following week. When she replaced the receiver, though, her hands were trembling.

'I really am a mess,' she thought, 'but I did it!' She went in search of a chocolate liqueur, but they had all gone. 'I don't need chocolate liqueurs, anyway,' she thought triumphantly, as she went in search of a chocolate biscuit.

Since her slightly sodden birthday, Osborn had either been treating her with thinly veiled suspicion, or seemingly avoiding her altogether. She didn't mind in the slightest, as she discovered she was grateful for the space. She wanted to tell him what was happening inside her, but the time never felt quite right. There was far too much sorting out to be achieved inside her own head before she could attempt to run it past Osborn.

She found herself cuddling him a lot in bed at night. He didn't seem to mind arms and legs thrown across him in the middle of the night and only really complained when his circulation had been cut off quite badly.

On the morning of her visit to Isabelle Dell, Sandra woke with bats inside her stomach. 'Why can't I be content with ordinary butterflies?' she thought, as she rushed to the bathroom.

Osborn had offered to drive her to the appointed place, but she had declined, knowing that she still needed to be by herself and needed to achieve something by herself – even if it was only catching a bus to keep an appointment she had made, in a strange building, with a strange person. 'I hope Ms Dell isn't too strange, though,' thought Sandra, as she stepped quasi-confidently onto the wrong bus.

Ms Dell seemed, in fact, remarkably unremarkable in her early fifties, Sandra guessed and relaxed immediately, although wondering briefly if she was becoming an ageist. Ms Dell didn't appear at all perturbed by Sandra's late arrival. She just hurriedly finished the iced bun she had been eating, put the magazine inside a drawer and pushed the coffee cup haphazardly to one side.

"Hello Sandra, I'm Isabelle."

"Hello Isabelle, I'm Sandra," gasped Sandra, having just run up three flights of stairs.

"Yes. Do sit down wherever you feel most comfortable," said Isabelle, indicating the only other chair in the room. "Now Sandra, how can I help you?"

"I thought you already knew."

"I'd like to hear it in your own words."

"Well, I don't know how to explain it, really. I feel I'm such a nobody, although I know I'm a person inside. A real person, I mean. I'm someone who thinks and feels deeply – someone who is capable of making far more important decisions than what to burn for tea each night."

"What sort of decisions would you prefer to be making?"

"I don't know. I suppose it's not really a question of what decisions I want to make, but more a question of being recognised as someone who is able to make decisions."

"Who decided you should come to see me?"

"Well, my mother suggested it, but I made the decision."

"Good! We can perhaps talk about making decisions in more detail later on. It's my guess there are other factors that led to your coming here today. Is there something you would particularly like to talk about next?"

"I'm not sure. I can't decide."

"That's all right. There's a little exercise it might be a good idea for you to try. I'd like you to think of the question: 'Who am I?' and then write down 20 statements about yourself, each one starting: 'I am'. Do you think you can do that?"

Sandra took the pen and paper which Isabelle handed her and felt her mind go a blank. 'Who the hell am I?' she thought with a feeling approaching panic. 'What on Earth can I write? I don't know who I am!'

"Take your time, Sandra, there's no panic," said Isabelle, standing up and brushing crumbs from her skirt. "I'll go and make us a cup of coffee. Would you like one? You might feel more relaxed on your own, so I'll be back in five minutes."

Sandra looked at her watch as Isabelle left the room, wondering if there was any chance of escape. 'Hell no,' she suddenly thought to herself, 'I'll have wasted three lots of bus fare if I leave now.' She resolutely picked up the pen and wrote:

- 1) I am indecisive
- 2) I am bothered about money
- 3) I am a hopeless cook
- 4) I am too tidy
- 5) I am too thoughtful
- 6) I am too sensitive
- 7) I am not a normal mother
- 8) I am too dependent on chocolate liqueurs
- 9) I am too dependent on my husband
- 10) I am too dependent on other people's opinions of me
- 11) I have strange and disturbing thoughts
- 12) I am spiritually confused
- 13) I am an academic failure
- 14) I am inherently boring
- 15) I am inherently bored
- 16) I am an emotional wreck
- 17) I am afraid of making mistakes
- 18) I am afraid of who I really am
- 19) I am afraid of people observing me
- 20) I am basically positive and optimistic

Isabelle came back into the room as Sandra was deliberating painfully whether number 20 was too ridiculous for words and placed two coffee cups on the table.

"Here we are," she said, smiling. "Good heavens, I forgot to put the coffee in. Never mind, I see you've finished, so I'd like to have a look at what you've written. While I do that, here are a couple of forms I'd like you to fill out for me, please. Just general background information, you know, any sexual problems, that sort of thing." She took Sandra's list eagerly.

Sandra's mouth twitched as she looked at the forms – whether in amusement or in anticipation of forthcoming embarrassment, she wasn't sure. She looked at some of the questions in amazement, wondering if people ever confessed to such idiosyncratic, or just plain depraved, behaviour. 'I shouldn't judge, though,' she mused. 'I've done a lot of strange things in my time, like the incident with the telephoto lens and the creativity sessions with the squirry cream.'

Isabelle looked up from Sandra's *Twenty Statements Test* just then with carefully controlled eyebrows.

"You haven't finished the forms yet?" she asked, a little feebly. "Right, no matter, you can take them home to fill out and send them to me by the next session. There are one or two things on your list here that we can discuss next time."

"OK." Sandra's voice betrayed her anxiety.

"Looking at the overview of your twenty statements, Sandra, I wonder if perhaps you're a little too self-judgmental – maybe even too self-critical? How does that sound to you?"

"I guess I'm always too busy pulling myself to pieces to have given it much thought."

"Ye-es. Do you talk to yourself at all, Sandra?"

"Oh no. Well, yes."

"What sort of things do you say to yourself?"

"Oh, nothing really derogatory. 'Sandra, you're a raving nutcase' – 'Pull yourself together, woman' – 'Do you have to be such a cretinous, degenerate freak?' – you know, that sort of thing."

"Ye-es." Isabelle grabbed at the cup of coffee-less coffee and gulped a little. "I'd like you in the week ahead, I think, to try talking to yourself a little more positively. Be kind to yourself. Tell yourself how good it is to be thoughtful and sensitive like you are. Congratulate yourself on any decision you might make, even if it *is* what to burn – er – cook for tea. In fact, if you don't feel like cooking, don't do it!"

"Really?" Sandra's interest was piqued.

"Yes. Tell yourself you're an intelligent, perceptive person to have reached this stage of self-awareness. Give yourself a break. Pamper yourself, even. Have long, hot bubble baths, paint your toenails, eat chocolate liqueurs..." Isabelle stopped a little abruptly, rubbing her hand along her forehead. "Well, just for this coming week, anyway. Next week we might investigate self-honesty. Remember, though, positive self-talk!" Her hand dropped to her lap in what seemed to be exhaustion.

Sandra decided to practise positive self-talk in the bus going home. 'I'm thoughtful and sensitive,' she said to herself. 'I'm thoughtful to have stopped off on my way to the bus stop to buy myself these chocolate liqueurs.' Her self digested this information. 'No, I'm not! I'm just a pig, I indulge in comfort eating and I can't even get this positive self-talk thing right.'

When she arrived home, Sandra felt drained. She debated whether to have a long, hot bubble bath or to paint her toenails, but she really couldn't decide. She just sat on the sofa with a cup of tea and the unopened box of chocolate liqueurs, quietly gazing into the confusion of her own mind.

'I'm becoming a layabout,' she thought guiltily. 'I really should be attacking the ironing mountain, or thinking about tea tonight.' The mere thought of preparing yet another meal she wasn't remotely interested in made her want to scream abandonedly.

"No!" she said aloud. "There's more to life for me than filling people's stomachs. There's more to me than being a domestic convenience. But just not doing tea won't help – I need to find something that fulfils my innate being." She flounced from the sofa to the kitchen, to fling together the quickest meal she could find.

"Great tea, Mother," said Gulliver. "This stir-dry sauce really adds an element of intrigue."

"I like the favour," said Madeleine loyally.

"Flavour, darling. It's stir-fry sauce, Gulliver." corrected Sandra.

"No, definitely stir-dry," said Gulliver, wearing his pseudo-innocent look.

"So, what contributions have you made to the world today, Gulliver?" asked Osborn quickly, still unsure of Sandra's reactions to everyday familial abuse.

"I," stated Gulliver importantly, "am now chairman of *The Anti-Theory Anti-Intellectual Debating Society*. It's a liberal exploration beyond the boundaries of conventional thought, with an emphasis on everyday issues. Nobody else wanted to be chairman. I can't understand it, because it means I've got total power over what subjects we'll be discussing."

"Don't you mean you're chairperson?" asked Osborn.

"Absolutely!" said Sandra suddenly, without fully realising she'd spoken.

"Anyway," continued Gulliver, "I've decided that our first debate will be entitled: *If people were perfect, there'd be no reason to exist.*"

"Do you not think that might endanger the intellectual equilibrium of the society?" asked Osborn, trying to coax a little more nourishment from the remains of the stir-dry sauce.

"OK then," said Gulliver, unperturbed. "How about: *Children's primary school literature should provide a realistic introduction to the everyday forms of language encountered at secondary school – for example, 'Winnie the Pooh' should be retitled 'Winnie the Shit'*. How about that?"

"Leave Winnie the Pooh alone!" said Madeleine hotly. "And I wish you would all use real words and not oxenatious – big showy off words all the time."

"Sorry Mad," said Gulliver.

"Don't call me Mad!"

"If people were perfect," began Sandra with an expression almost like pain passing over her brow, "they'd be gods, not people – and being people, perfection as we define it is therefore indefinable in any perfect form."

After the logic of Sandra's observation had finally reached base, Osborn looked up quizzically. "You should take up philosophy, because that was convoluted and obscure enough to fool any normal thinking person."

"Oh, you're all just too speakative," said Madeleine, frowning.

Gulliver too had been thinking. "I'll stick to that perfection thing for the first debate," he said, glancing furtively at his mother. "I'll organise a mass debating session one lunchtime."

Sandra and Osborn groaned in unison.

As Sandra lay in bed that night, she felt a faint promise of colour filtering through the black and grey. She traced it back to her philosophical remark at the tea table and the feeling of pleasure that had followed as she'd realised she was still capable of using her brain.

'I think I'll stick with the counselling,' she decided. 'It's rather comforting to talk about yourself for a whole hour (providing I catch the right bus) with someone who's intelligent and who actually listens without judging. I feel as though I'm almost a real person there. I must learn to be real again, or I'll die. The world is so full of sham and stereotyping and it's a diabolical waste of time and energy. Who gives a toss that you should eat fish with a fish knife, or pretend to enjoy those kinky underwear parties where all they want you to do is buy something outrageously expensive that you'll never wear. I've never worn those flaming fuchsia open-crotch panties, anyway.'

'I shall devote the rest of my life to the pursuit of reality. I shall question fearlessly the role of stereotypes. I shall run the risk of being misunderstood for the sake of my higher ideals. I shall employ my mind in the never-ending acquisition of knowledge, which will ultimately allow me greater freedom of thought and expression. I may even – yes, I may even join a philosophy class!' Sandra threw her leg across Osborn in precipitate alarm.

'Hell no, they'd all be highly intellectual and my ignorance would show itself in some moronic remark.' She threw an arm over Osborn and groaned inwardly. 'I'm too sensitive. I'm too dependent on other people's opinions of me. I'm afraid of making mistakes. I'm afraid of people observing me.' She wished she had another available part of her body to throw across Osborn, to prevent herself from sinking downwards into deep grey.

"Positive self-talk!" she suddenly remembered aloud.

"What?" grunted Osborn, removing Sandra's leg from around his neck.

"I'm thoughtful and sensitive," intoned Sandra. "I'm intelligent and perceptive to have reached this stage of self-awareness." The greyness still prevailed. 'Well, I wish I wasn't,' she thought dispiritedly. 'It's much too painful. I wish I was just a happy cabbage, content to read Mills & Boon and turned on by going to watch male strippers with a group of screeching female friends.' As she thought this, however, she knew that would mean the certain death of Sandra.

'Which is more terrifying,' she wondered, 'losing my life in terminal unfulfilment, or finding myself in honest relationship with the real world? The choice is mine. The outcome is mine. The fear is mine. The total responsibility is mine. The financial outlay ought to be mine...'

She turned over restlessly, trying to find some semblance of peace in a storm of unanswered questions. She noticed that a persistent thought seemed to keep pulsating in her head.

'Cabbages,' she was finally able to articulate to herself. 'Cabbages! I hate the damn things.'

CHAPTER 3

The following morning, Sandra awoke with the knowledge that she must join a local philosophy course or die. 'It would be very handy in this case if there *is* a local philosophy course,' she thought, with a trace of innate humour piercing through the underlying desperation. 'Or then again, it would be a very useful cop-out if there wasn't. No, fight Sandra, fight!'

She soon found herself fighting through the ritual panics of a normal weekday morning.

"Are there any matching socks?"

"This milk's off."

"Do you know where my primary school reports are? I must have them this morning."

"Somebody's stolen the last low-fat walnut and coconut all butter cereal bar!"

"I've invited Damien and Nigel here after school."

"Can Claire and Becky come here after school?"

"Oh God, I just need some peace," muttered Sandra to the teapot, before leaving them to their own devices, while she went to get herself ready.

She found she could hardly wait to pick up a booklet of forthcoming courses to be run that academic year at local schools and the College of Further Education. She even marched fairly boldly into the library, where she knew there would be some course booklets, despite having avoided the place for two years since the 'insidious little git' incident. In actuality, 'fairly boldly' meant that she peered in through the glass door of the library until she was sure there were no library personnel around that she recognised, before quickly slipping in to grab a booklet and equally quickly slipping out again.

The course booklet opened up a whole new world of opportunities. "Hmm – Italian, astro-navigation, sociology, electronics, cake decorating, metapsychology, masonry walling, callanetics, tap dancing, car maintenance, word processing, philosophy..." she was saying aloud to herself. It was there! A few of her vital organs seemed to double flip before settling down into gentle somersaults.

She filled out the form before she could change her mind, then halted at the cheque book, beginning to feel guilty about the course fee. 'As a family unit, we can't

afford this,' she thought dejectedly. 'How can I justify spending out all this on me when I don't contribute financially at all?' She thought about her working friends and felt herself slipping again into potholes of self-criticism and uselessness.

Her talk with Isabelle Dell entered her mind, complete with images of grimacing cabbages. 'I'm being too self-critical here,' she thought. 'I *do* contribute to this family unit, by all the housework...' The word 'housework' resulted in its usual effect of mind-shrivelling claustrophobia. All avenues of hope seemed to lead to dead ends of despair. 'I feel as bad as I did on my birthday,' thought Sandra, sniffing her way to the bathroom, where she cried profusely into a *Dejected Damson Mood Matching Toilet Roll* for approximately three minutes.

"My birthday!" she said aloud suddenly, returning excitedly to the cheque book. "I can use my birthday money. It won't quite cover the cost, but it'll help. What a good job I haven't spent it already." She wrote out the cheque. "I didn't really want that black see-through body stocking anyway."

"I've applied to join that philosophy course," announced Sandra at teatime. "Sorry it's just a bacon sandwich and beans tonight, I couldn't face cooking."

"That's OK, Mum," said Madeleine, "beans are good fibre. I want to be a vegetablian, though."

"Vegetarian, darling – and you need to eat a properly balanced diet," said Sandra. She gazed at her daughter, feeling vague darts of concern. "We hardly eat meat anyway."

"And when we do, it's totally unrecognisable as dead flesh," said Gulliver.

"Why not try being a little more helpful, you two!" exclaimed Osborn to Gulliver and Madeleine. "Don't just point out what you don't like or don't want – make suggestions."

"Make it yourself," muttered Sandra.

"I know what," said Gulliver brightly. "We could kill two birds with one stone, pardon the metaphor – we could eat sushi every day." He studiously avoided the dirty looks aimed his way.

"What's sushi?" asked Madeleine, frowning.

"Raw fish," replied Gulliver.

"That would make me a fish-eating vegetarian," said Madeleine thoughtfully, "although I'd want the sushi cooked. Mum, I want to be a fish-eating vegetarian!"

"OK then," replied Sandra, feeling intuitively that this was important to Madeleine. "We'll give it a try. What's made you think about all this, though?"

"We were talking about healthy food at school today," continued Madeleine animatedly. "We've got this project to do. We've got to ask our parents and grandparents, if we can, about the food they eat and the food they used to eat when they were children."

"Crumbs!" said Sandra, thinking of the suet puddings and sugar-sweetened vegetables of her past.

"You must have been very poor," commented Gulliver. "Are you going to ask Grandma and Grandad Dullkettle, Mad?"

"Don't call me Mad. Yes, I am," replied Madeleine. "And Grandma and Grandad Watercross. When are we next seeing them, Mum?"

"Soon, I hope," interrupted Gulliver. "At school we're studying moral and sexual values over the generations, particularly relating to religion, so I've got a lot of questions I want to ask them too."

"Oh my God," breathed Sandra wearily.

"Dynamite," muttered Osborn, knowing the questions his son was capable of asking his grandparents.

Sandra began to feel lightheaded with an overload of input. 'Or it's not so much the input,' she reasoned to herself, 'as my own reaction to it. Where have I been all these years? I actually agree with so much that Gulliver and Madeleine are saying. I can remember when I used to be moved to anger by all the injustice, greed and trickery in the world. I can remember writing "CND" over all my rough books at school – and then

getting caught writing "All you need is love" on the maths classroom blackboard and having to write out 500 lines of "All you need is maths". Maybe that was the trap. Love (not maths) meant inevitable marriage and inevitable role keeping. 18 was too young to be married.' She gazed at Osborn's furrowed brow. 'I hadn't finished developing my personal values or my independence. I should have learned to drive then, while I could almost afford it. I should have followed a career. I should have finished my A-levels...'

A can of worms seemed to be opening inside her head – marriage, world-suffering, self-worth, the past, the future, guilt, parents, children, in-laws, regret, God, fear, money, a job, old age, responsibilities, growth, death, failures – a seemingly bottomless pit of issues as yet not dealt with.

Later that evening, Sandra fought the urge to open the box of chocolate liqueurs she had bought after her counselling session the day before. Somehow it seemed symbolic. If she opened the box now, she would be giving in to old behaviours, old traps. The emerging Sandra needed to fight, to overcome her old escapes.

'When I finish the philosophy course,' she bargained with herself, 'I shall open the box then as a symbol of the release of my real self. It won't matter that they'll be way past their sell by date, because I'll be nowhere near mine!'

Five days later, a family get-together had been arranged in order for Gulliver and Madeleine to interview their grandparents.

"Don't do any special food, Mother," Gulliver had said to Sandra casually. "Especially not a trifle – or a meringue – or a raspberry flan – and definitely not a gooseberry fool."

"I can take a hint," Sandra had said. "I'll manage to restrain myself from doing custard as well, if it pleases you."

"Oh, it's not that exactly," Gulliver had replied. "It's just that I fancy having a go at the food. I'm entering a really creative and responsible stage and have some unique ideas of what we could eat. Of course, I'll need some money."

The get-together took place on a warm and beautiful afternoon in late September. Sandra would have given a month's supply of chocolate to be somewhere other than her home. She felt she desperately needed to be alone, to start disentangling the can of worms in her mind; to worry needlessly but peacefully about her next appointment with Isabelle Dell the following day; to suffer acute anxiety, in blissful solitude, about the first philosophy course evening on the coming Thursday.

Instead, she spent the whole afternoon feeling the strain of the great effort needed to keep playing her roles of mother, daughter, daughter-in-law and wife. 'I'm doing this for Gulliver and Madeleine,' she said inwardly, trying to reconcile the silent scream of the Sandra inside to the social game she felt she was forced to play outside. 'Where is the dividing line, though, between self and selfishness?'

"Sandra?" Caroline's voice interrupted her at that rather crucial moment. "Are you all right? Sandra, I've just been asked the most extraordinary questions by Madeleine. Is she all right? Is the trifle all right? It seems to have a very strange flavour."

"Gulliver made the trifle," replied Sandra, smiling. "It's Drambuie and Southern Comfort, I believe."

"Ah, Sandra," said Leonard, her father, approaching somewhat rapidly from Gulliver's direction. His kindly face appeared a little flushed. "I wouldn't mind another slice of that chocolate pudding type thing. Evasive sort of flavour. Rather strong, really. Definitely moreish, though." He seemed to have been avoiding Sandra's eyes, but made a sudden decision to come clean.

"Sandra, I've just been asked the most extraordinary questions by Gulliver. He isn't planning to become a psychologist by any chance, is he? Following in the footsteps of Masters and Johnson, I wouldn't be surprised, eh? Of course, personally, I think behaviourism..."

"No Dad," interrupted Sandra, smiling. "Gulliver's just doing a sort of survey at school."

"Quite a relief," said Leonard, looking bemused. "What is this flavour, though?"

"Lager and Bacardi, I believe," replied Sandra, edging over to where Gulliver was now interviewing Sybil.

"Of course, we never had sex at school in my day, dear," Sybil was saying, looking a little puzzled. To Sandra's relief, Gulliver was keeping a perfectly straight face as he wrote everything down.

"I was so surprised when your Uncle Lawrence was born," continued Sybil. "Of course, moral values have declined since people stopped going to church. Why don't you come to church with Grandad and me, if you're interested in this sort of thing? Of course, you'd have to wear something a little more normal."

"Do you mean I'd have to conform?"

Sandra moved quickly into view, to stop any further embarrassment. Why she was embarrassed when Sybil and Gulliver so obviously weren't hadn't entered her head.

"Oh, hello Sandra," said Sybil. "Sorry to trouble you, but are there any desserts or puddings without alcohol?"

After Sandra had sorted out Sybil with a nectarine and a banana, she placed herself within earshot of Gulliver and his final victim, Basil. He was looking very red, Sandra noticed with dismay.

"I – uh – don't think it would be wise for me to answer that question, Gulliver," he said stiltedly. "I have to say, I don't think it's at all appropriate for you to be dealing with this sort of thing at school."

"But I'm at home now, Grandad, with my family," pointed out Gulliver reasonably.

"I still don't think – I mean, I don't feel it proper that these matters should be discussed between men and women."

"But they concern men and women, Grandad." Gulliver was pushing his luck, thought Sandra.

"Granted," said Basil, beads of sweat appearing on his forehead, "but it was never talked about in my day and we got on all right. There's no discipline these days, that's the trouble. No moral fibre. A good spanking worked wonders – no need for all this psychological nonsense and loose talk. Your Auntie Kirsty was a bit of a wild one, wanting to go to the cinema, if you ever!" He looked around suddenly to see if Caroline or Leonard were in earshot and noticed Sandra.

"Ah Sandra," he said peremptorily, leaning towards her. "I think the devil is up to his tricks again. The young generation these days is a prime target. It was bad enough when Lawrence, Osborn and Kirsty were children, but I'll pray for you all."

"Have a cucumber sandwich, Grandad?" asked Madeleine, waving a plate under his nose.

Basil turned a rather violent shade of puce and all but thrust the plate from Madeleine's hand. "No thank you!" he muttered oddly. "I'll take this bowl of fruit salad. God's good, healthy, unadulterated fruit of the earth. Can't do better than that." He started to eat with an almost religious fervour.

"Madeleine!" hissed Sandra to her busily writing daughter. "What liquid did you and Gulliver put in the fruit salad?"

"Oh, nothing much, just some orange juice, apple juice and gin."

Sandra caught the right bus to see Isabelle Dell the following morning. The air was wreathed with fine mist and coolness, with a promise of later sun and warmth. Sandra normally loved such September mornings that gave her a fresh early morning glow of self-righteousness, without it actually being some unearthly hour of dawn.

Today, though, there seemed to be a sense of uncomfortable poignancy in the air. 'Or is it me?' wondered Sandra, as she sat by the window in the bus. 'It must be me! It has something to do with how I used to feel in my childhood. September always meant my birthday and the start of being a different age. It also meant the start of another year at school, with fresh exercise books and a new pencil case, usually given to me for my birthday.'

She gazed out of the window, lost in reflection. She was lucky, since some days the windows were so filthy, you couldn't see a thing. 'Now September is just another

month in another year. No fresh exercise books, no pencil case, no aim, no purpose, no – God, yes, it's philosophy tomorrow!' She jerked herself into reality and saw the bus had passed her stop.

'Oh well,' she thought philosophically, 'just a couple of bus stops out. I'm such a dreamer, though, I don't really function well in this world at all. In fact, I don't fit in properly anywhere. I'm an inveterate waster of time – everyone else is out there go-getting (what sloppy grammar) and I'm just plodding along merrily into certain brain death. I'm a has-been that never was; an alien from the planet Nowhere; a middle-aged mutant nothing woman; a total waste of DNA; a gross mismanagement of life as we know it...'

At this point, Sandra noticed she had left the bus and was heading towards Isabelle Dell's office. She almost turned around again, but thoughts of wasted bus fare kept her going.

"Hello Sarah!" said Isabelle, looking up and smiling, as Sandra flopped a little gracelessly into the chair. "How are you this morning? How's the positive self-talk?"

"I'm Sandra. I'm fine, thank you," she replied automatically. Then her eyes seemed to lock with Isabelle's, in mutual recognition of untruth. "No, I'm not fine. I'm a failure. My life is a waste of time. I don't live up to other people's expectations."

"Why should you live up to other people's expectations, Sandra?"

"Because they expect it of me."

"OK, but what about your own expectations of yourself?"

"I haven't thought about that." Sandra gazed pensively at the empty packet of pickled squid n' vinegar crisps in the waste paper bin. "I suppose I expect myself to be perfect."

"Do you think that's a reasonable expectation?"

"In my case, yes."

"What about other people?"

"Oh, people are human, they make mistakes."

"Are you saying you're not human?" Isabelle was failing at trying not to smile.

"Sometimes I wonder, but – yes, of course I'm human."

"So therefore, if you're human, you're allowed to make mistakes. How does that sound to you?"

"Weird. Marvellous. I wish I could believe it."

"Say it to yourself – "I am allowed to make mistakes" – keep on saying it until it becomes familiar. Try saying it now to see how it sounds."

"I feel stupid."

"It's worth it, Sandra. Can you give it a go?"

"OK. I – umm – I am allowed to make mistakes." Sandra found herself looking at the floor in abject embarrassment.

"That's great! How about a cup of coffee?"

"Yes please."

"Good. What I'd like you to do while I nip out for – er – to make the coffee, is first of all to write out five times on this piece of paper: "I am allowed to make mistakes". The idea is for you to then keep that piece of paper in a handbag or in a book, to take out and look at when you feel you need to. Then I'd like you to write down on this other piece of paper as many positive aspects of yourself that you can think of. I think it might help with the positive self-talk. Can you manage that?"

"Yes," sighed Sandra, reaching for the pen and feeling like a schoolgirl.

The act of writing "I am allowed to make mistakes", however, was enormously liberating. Sandra was delighted at the sense of freedom of expression the words on the paper seemed to allow her. She remembered how she had been good at creative writing at school, particularly a very moving essay once, about a tortoise and a twin-tub washing machine. She remembered her ability to write rude poetry during a rebellious time of her life, somewhere between the boy with the moped who wore a string vest and Osborn. She remembered she was supposed to be writing down her positive aspects. Remembering Isabelle's previous words about self-honesty, the list was easy to compile:

I am good at essay writing (if about tortoises and washing machines)
 I am good at writing rude poetry
 I am good at tidying up
 I am good at straightening lopsided pictures on walls
 I am good at burning fishfingers
 I am good at daydreaming
 I am good at being a failure
 I am good at self deprecation
 I am now good at self-honesty
 I am not much good at anything else I can think of

Isabelle soon returned with two cups of coffee and Sandra handed her the list.

"Ye-es." Isabelle read the list, frowning thoughtfully. "How much are your family involved in your counselling? Are they supportive? Do they understand? Do they know?"

"They know I'm coming here. I don't think they understand, they just think I've finally cracked up. Osborn has withdrawn a lot. I don't know what else you mean."

"Well, I was wondering if you could possibly ask them to help a little, by writing down their perceptions of your positive aspects. How do you feel about that?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid of what they'd write."

"That's OK, don't worry. If you do feel up to asking them, that would be fine. If not, though, we'll keep working on this ourselves anyway."

Sandra began to feel like a schoolgirl again, transported back into disturbing scenes of feeling small and observed. Isabelle noticed her discomfiture.

"Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?" she asked.

"I don't know. Yes, I do. I feel small and observed. I don't know if there's any point coming here. I should be paying you like everybody else does, not coming here for nothing just because my mother's your friend. I want to be myself, but there's too much in me that's gone wrong. It's too late. I feel silly making lists about myself. I want to do something with my life now. And you seem to be drinking my coffee."

"Oh! I'm sorry." Isabelle was experiencing a certain amount of discomfiture herself. She sighed deeply, put a finger to her lips, then decided to be truthful.

"I'm glad you're telling me honestly how you feel. It helps me to be honest with you. It's true I owe your mother a favour – several really. I've been through a rough patch myself recently and Caroline has been there, helping me along. I don't think of you as Caroline's daughter, Sandra, you're a person in your own right. If you don't want to carry on seeing me, I'll quite understand, but I'd be very sorry. If you'd rather see someone else as a fully paying client, that can be easily arranged." She stopped uncertainly and looked at Sandra.

"I don't know." Sandra was struggling with financial pride and emotional need. "No – yes, I'd like to carry on seeing you."

"I'm glad." Isabelle drained Sandra's cup of coffee. "I feel there's a lot of good, positive work we can go through together. Is there any particular way you'd like our meetings to be? You to choose what we talk about for starters? No more lists?" She was smiling.

"I don't mind the lists really," said Sandra in a low voice, "but there are things I'd like to tell you about – like the philosophy course I'm starting on Thursday and the symbolism of the chocolate liqueurs."

All throughout Thursday, Sandra alternated quite spectacularly between terror and exhilaration. The start of the philosophy course was foremost in her mind, punctuated by memories of her conversation with Isabelle Dell. She was aware that her inner dialogue was lacking in normality.

'It's not normal, the way I think to myself,' she thought to herself. 'How wonderful! Who else can you think to anyway, except yourself? If you think aloud to someone else, you must be talking, which isn't thinking. I wonder how many people aren't normal in the same way that I'm not normal? If there were enough of us, we'd essentially be classified as normal anyway.'

'God, I'm terrified about tonight. I wonder why I keep referring to God? Is spiritual awareness activated by emotional turmoil? Am I subconsciously trying to talk to God rather than to myself? Am I about to embark on a journey of spiritual growth, synonymous with intellectual expansion?

'God, my brain hurts. There, I've said it again. Or thought it, rather. I wonder why psychologists (and children of psychologists) need to use big words so appallingly? I wonder if I should study psychology instead of philosophy? Hell no, I might end up like my parents, or Isabelle. That's not so bad, though. I'm glad I sorted out the money issue with her yesterday. I feel as though I actually took control of events instead of being passive and pathetic. I feel a sense of equality with her now, as if I'm free to be myself with her. Oh shit, I'm burning the scrambled egg. God, I'm terrified about tonight...'

At 3 minutes to 7 that evening, Sandra sat in the CFE classroom with twelve other philosophy students, all covertly displaying various attitudes of nonchalance and suspicion towards each other. Sandra herself was sitting at the back of the room, trying to breathe deeply and slowly and trying not to be terrified of everyone in the entire room, especially the tutor. It did help that he had his jumper on inside out, but apart from that he looked rather too intelligent for comfort. His brown hair was fairly long and unruly, complete with a beard. He wore glasses and had arms that seemed quite capable of flailing around in intellectual ecstasies of philosophical uncertainty. 'Hmm, not bad,' thought Sandra appraisingly. 'About 7 out of 10 on the *Aesthetically Pleasing First Impression Scale* and about – let's see – 8 out of 10 on the *Raw Masculine Appeal Scale*...'

"Hello everyone!" the fairly aesthetically pleasing tutor said suddenly, standing up and banging his knee on the leg of the table. "Ah, another bruise! Er – yes, I'm Philip Schopenhankant and I'm a philosopher. Well now, I expect that many of you think philosophers talk in obscure and convoluted ways, but I assure you that I'll be doing my utmost to speak in plain, everyday terms, clearly understandable to those of you unfamiliar with abstract ideologies, contrary to the habitual contemporary linguistic vagaries of excessive specialisation..."

Sandra immediately began to feel on familiar territory and probably for the first time ever, silently thanked her parents for the psychologically intricate words to which she'd spent her formative years unconsciously listening. She began to jot down notes, mostly concerning words she wanted to look up later. She did feel rather uneasy that Philip Schopenhankant considered the words solipsism, tautological, dialectic and epistemology to be plain, everyday terms, but was comforted by the fact that most other people in the class were looking incredibly confused, even mildly nauseated.

The allotted two hours passed quickly for Sandra. She even enjoyed splitting up into small groups to discuss the meaning of truth and reality. She noticed there seemed to be two distinct age groups in the class – the bright, young, mostly confident up-and-comings in their early twenties and the jaded, interestingly experienced, not-sure-if-coming-or-goings in their early forties. After wondering briefly if she really was becoming an ageist, she noticed there was an approximately equal number of each gender in the class, including a couple of interesting looking men in the small group she was in. She had to remind herself to consider the concepts of truth and reality and to leave her *Raw Masculine Appeal Scale* until later.

Philip came around to each group in turn, sitting casually on the table and confusing them all by asking if the objects of their knowledge were, and could only ever be, the data of their experience. He said it very nicely, though, and when his left arm gesticulated accidentally into Sandra's right shoulder, he apologised very sincerely.

"I'm so sorry, I do become a little philosophically excited. You are...?"

"Sandra. It's quite all right, really – truly!"

"Ah yes, reality and truth – two tremendous areas of objective doubt and uncertainty." His eyes assumed an almost mystical quality. "Yes, who's to say, Sally, who's to say?"

The class had ended soon afterwards, after Philip had passed around a reading list and had set an essay question about the relationship between Socrates and Plato.

Even the names of the philosophers gave Sandra a small buzz of pleasure. She walked home on a high, with the words 'I am alive, I am alive' singing gently in her head.

Osborn seemed a little put out when Sandra arrived home. "The video's chewing up tapes, I couldn't get that burnt scrambled egg off the bottom of the saucepan, Madeleine's thrown up twice, Gulliver says he needs a clean shirt for tomorrow and your mother rang up to say your father's been ill since Saturday." He glared at her accusingly.

"I'm sorry things have gone wrong for you this evening," replied Sandra. "I had a very good evening, thank you. I'll ring Mum tomorrow morning. I'll see to the saucepan myself and Gulliver can just wait for his clean shirt. I'm going to see if Maddy's all right." She left Osborn to his sense of victimisation, feeling overcome again with the injustice and claustrophobia of being a scapegoat for all ills.

As she lay in bed that night, though, the memory of the philosophy class was like a bubble of freedom inside her. 'I really *am* alive,' she thought, 'I'm not a cabbage, or even a putrid little Brussels sprout. I'm not just a housewife. Gosh, I feel sick. I'm a real philosophy student. I'm a person with a brain and I felt I could breathe tonight. I wish Osborn had been a bit more encouraging, though. I wonder what's wrong? Hell, I really do feel sick...'

As Sandra was about to precipitately enter the bathroom, Gulliver was just precipitately coming out.

"Hi Mother," he said weakly. "I think it was that scrambled egg we had tonight," but Sandra found herself physically unable to reply.

'This is reality,' she thought ruefully afterwards. 'Physical reality – no tremendous area of doubt and uncertainty here.'

CHAPTER 4

Three days later, on the first Sunday in October, Sandra had fully recovered from her attack of reality ad nauseam and stood looking at herself in the mirror as she was dressing.

"I really need to lose a few pounds," she said to her reflection. "Here – and here – and a bit here – and a bit there – and loads around there – and definitely under there..." She resumed an upright position. "God, I really need to do some exercises, regularly. I need to cultivate some self-esteem by making my body look and feel as good as it can. I've noticed I feel more confident when I think I look OK. Some of my clothes make me feel like a bovine blob of lard. Yuck!" She shivered involuntarily and turned towards her wardrobe.

"I'll get rid of all the clothes that don't express the new me," she continued brightly. "Maybe I should have bought that black see through body stocking after all – ha! No, in future I shall only wear clothes that make me feel good. I'll just put on this old t-shirt for now, though, and my comfortable old jeans."

She worked her way through the wardrobe, throwing discarded clothes on the bed, not noticing how the pile was beginning to assume jumble sale size proportions. Osborn came upstairs and looked in amazement at the vast heap on his side of the bed.

"What are you doing now?" he asked suspiciously.

"I'm giving away the clothes that aren't me anymore," Sandra replied a little breathlessly, extricating a pair of large yellow and blue check flared trousers from underneath a frilly red blouse. "I need to build up my self-esteem by only wearing clothes that express my true self. Perhaps you should do it too!" She smiled at him from behind a faded pale green maternity dress with little white hedgehogs on the collar.

"I'm not obsessed with myself like you are," he said darkly, heaving the mountainous pile over to her side of the bed.

"I'm not obsessed with myself!" Sandra looked up, surprised and hurt at his sudden coldness.

"Well, you certainly haven't had much time for anyone else lately."

"I'm sorry, I didn't realise – I've been trying to – I've been..." Sandra lapsed slowly into confused speechlessness.

"When was the last time we made love?"

"I don't know. I don't keep a log book of it." Her voice was low and controlled.

"No, you haven't felt like it, so it doesn't matter about me."

"It's not like that."

"What is it like, then? All you talk about lately is self, self, self!"

"I need to find myself again, that's all. I really don't mean to be selfish. I do care about others. I care about you! But I feel like a broken puppet – a fragmented Sindy doll shut away in an attic with no meaning to her life. Well, I don't want to spend the rest of my life in a plastic coma, or having my strings jerked constantly by other people. And anyway, how can I share the real me with you, if I don't even know who I am?"

"Bullshit! All this crap about the meaning of life makes me sick. It's just an excuse to do whatever you want to do, regardless of other people. What about the meaning of *our* life together? What's happened to that?"

"It's still there, but it's not..." Sandra stopped suddenly.

"It's not what?"

"It's not enough. I don't mean that *you're* not enough, I just mean that I have to find a meaning of life for myself." Sandra felt unnervingly committed to honesty.

"You've changed. You're not the person I married. You're turning into a selfish bitch!" Osborn picked up a yellow and pink spotted sundress and threw it onto the floor.

Sandra had been so surprised at Osborn's unexpected onslaught that she'd hardly known how to react, but the word 'bitch' seemed to unlock all the hurt she felt at his accusations.

"You know I hate that word," she managed to blurt out, before crying finally overtook her. "I'm not a bitch – I'm not selfish." She sank down on top of the uneven pile of clothes, sliding off on to a black maxi coat and a *Can't Get No Satisfaction* t-shirt, feeling totally alone and misunderstood.

Osborn stood gazing at a multicoloured skinny rib top he had never thought suited her. He too felt alone and misunderstood and he hated to see her cry. He tried to sit down on top of the pile, but rolled down sideways next to Sandra. He put his hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I do love you, but I'm just so frightened that..." He was aware there was more he was experiencing, but his feelings were as yet too formless to articulate.

The comfort of his touch conflicted for a while with Sandra's pain, but it also reminded her of need, forgiveness and pleasure. She turned and opened her arms to him.

They'd never made love on a heap of old clothes before. It might have been a very passionate experience if it hadn't been for the coat hangers.

Sandra was looking forward to the second philosophy class, except for the fact that her essay was bothering her. Writing a discourse on the relationship between Socrates and Plato was radically different from a creative story about a tortoise and a twin-tub washing machine. However, Sandra did her best, by carefully reading her text book and attempting to hide her lack of knowledge behind a creative use of big words. Gulliver and Madeleine seemed quite intrigued that their mother was now among the ranks of perplexed and sweating browed essay writers.

"I've got an essay to write, Mum," said Madeleine. "It's called: *Life at home – how would you change it?* I'm looking forward to writing about you and Dad and Gulliver."

"Gosh, I wonder what you're going to write, darling." said Sandra, a little worriedly.

"I've got an essay to write too," said Gulliver. "It's easy this time. We were allowed to make up our own titles so that we could fully identify with them."

"Go on," sighed Sandra, "tell me the title."

"*The Suffering of a Teenage Virgin*," replied Gulliver, looking over Sandra's shoulder as she was finishing her last paragraph. "What on earth does dialectic mean?"

At the class that Thursday evening, Sandra got to know one or two of her fellow students. Sitting on her left side was a quiet young woman in her early twenties, with smiling brown eyes and a pair of enormous earrings. Sitting on her right side was one of the interesting looking men Sandra had noticed the week before. 'Well, possibly an 8.5 on the *Raw Masculine Appeal Scale*,' thought Sandra, as she took out her essay. 'I wonder what he's called? Oh, I see he's done his essay on a word processor. Very impressive, it makes mine look decidedly schoolgirlish. I wonder if I can notice his name on the top of his essay...'

"Hi, my name's Geoff," said the man with the impressive looking essay, turning towards her. "How did you find the homework?"

"A bit difficult," replied Sandra, feeling herself blush. "I don't think I've written enough, really. I wasn't well. I'm Sandra, by the way."

"Oh? I thought you were called Sally." Geoff smiled as Philip Schopenhauer began to speak.

"Hello everyone! Right, let's get started. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates maintained that to do philosophy is to rehearse for death – to practise being dead. Who has any comments on that? Let's see, whose name do I know – Sally?"

"It's Sandra, actually. Umm, I don't know. I suppose some people see life as a slow and painful death," replied Sandra, having searched wildly for any remotely relevant comment. "I don't see the connection with philosophy, though?"

"Interesting. Thank you, Sally. Well now, being dead is presumably having one's soul separate from one's body – so in doing philosophy, we are separating the soul from the body, because we aren't thinking of the here and now where the body is."

'Philip clearly loves his subject,' thought Sandra, as she completely lost the thread of his argument. 'He seems to have a nasty graze on his cheek. I wonder if the others can understand a single word of this? I wonder if they've all done their essays?'

Later, in small discussion groups, the subject was *Virtue Is Knowledge*. It took a considerable effort to consider what virtue actually was. Sandra noticed the quiet young woman with the enormous earrings had said nothing. She wondered whether to ask her what her interpretation of virtue was, but was afraid of embarrassing her. 'It's funny how people seem to pick out certain other people as interesting, even before they've spoken to them,' she mused. 'I wonder if anyone is finding me interesting?' She looked around and caught Geoff's gaze. At first, he looked away, but then looked back and smiled.

'Hmm, about 9 on the *Sexy Smiling Eyes Scale*,' she thought, trying to smile back surreptitiously and sexily with her eyes. 'God! Am I flirting?' she asked herself with a little shock. She sat back in her chair, trying to assume an attitude of deep intelligence.

After the class had finished, Sandra contrived to walk out of the building next to the quiet young woman with the enormous earrings. "How did you find the class tonight?" she asked her, smiling.

"Hard going," answered the quiet young woman quietly.

"Yes, me too," said Sandra. "I'm not looking forward to getting my essay back, either."

"No, nor me, I don't think I wrote enough."

"I'm Sandra, by the way."

"Oh? I thought you were called Sally. I'm Elaine."

They had walked together for part of the way home, talking generally about their fears for the course and whether they would decide to sit the exam at the end of it.

When Elaine had headed in a different direction, Sandra reflected on the evening's events. 'I'm not afraid of Elaine like I am of most people,' she thought. 'I don't find her intimidating, because she seems to accept me the way I am. I'm not sure about her earrings, though, I wouldn't have the nerve to wear anything like that. I wonder what Isabelle thinks of expressing yourself through what you wear? Some of her clothes are slightly strange! And what about that guy, Geoff? I wonder why I'm attracted to some men, is it normal? Perhaps I'm a suppressed nymphomaniac? Good, nearly home, I could do with a mug of steaming hot chocolate. I'm really tired, I hope Osborn doesn't fancy a close encounter tonight.'

Two days later, Sandra fell prey to a guilt trip and decided to treat her culinarily deprived family to some actual cooking, settling finally on a vegetarian quiche. Gulliver was home, obviously bored, and following her around like he used to do in pre-school days.

"Haven't you got any mind-bending essays with questionable titles to do?" asked Sandra, chopping onions with acute displeasure. "Oh, bloody hell and festering maggots, I hate, loathe and detest chopping onions!" She found she often gave verbal vent to her feelings in the kitchen these days.

"Oh, poor little Mummy," said Gulliver in the playful tone he sometimes adopted. "Shall I chop the nasty onions for you?"

"Oh, push off," replied Sandra, secretly enjoying their camaraderie. "No don't, pass me the cheese, please?"

"Which sort, Edam or immature Cheddar?"

"Gulliver Orville Dullkettle, you're a twit of the first order – a hopelessly insane, socially subversive, idiotic, raving, foaming at the mouth, gormless twit!"

"I'm very moved by your obvious affection for me – but what are gorms and why haven't I got any?"

"It must be a congenital defect."

"Oh. Well, I hope you realise."

"Realise what?"

"Nothing, I just hope you realise."

"Gulliver!" Sandra picked up the can opener and made vague, threatening gestures at her grinning son.

"Ah, we want to play, do we?" said Gulliver, picking up the nearest object.

"Gulliver, stop terrorising me with that French stick! Stop, I'm your mother!"

"I don't give a monkey's left testicle," said Gulliver in a sing-song voice, as Sandra collapsed laughingly on to the draining board, with a French stick stuffed halfway up her jumper.

"Gulliver?" asked Sandra rather more seriously, when she'd regained her composure and removed the French stick. "Do you think other children talk to their mothers like you talk to me?"

"Point number one – I'm not a child. Point number two – what exactly do I talk to you like?"

"Like your adolescent obsession with sex that seems to include primate genitalia, for instance?"

"Oh, that. Well, personally I don't give a monkey's left testicle. Or even a right one, come to that."

"But I'm your mother! I ought to be more mother-like?"

"Oh bollocks, Mother, I like you just the way you are."

'The quiche might actually have been a success,' thought Sandra as she lay in bed that night, 'if I hadn't forgotten to put in the eggs. I really don't care – but then again, I suppose I do. God, I'm in such a peculiar place at the moment. What relevance does forgetting to put eggs in a quiche have to do with the ultimate reality and meaning of life? Does everything happen for a purpose? Am I, for instance, alive for some wonderful reason as yet unrevealed to me – and was it absolutely necessary within a divine plan for me to forget those eggs?

'Is everyone alive for a specific reason? What about Hitler, Amin, Hussein? What about aborted fetuses and children born with horrendous defects? What about cancer, AIDS, Alzheimer's disease and other living deaths? God, this is so depressing, but it's reality. I have to face the truth – although truth and reality are inherently different, aren't they?

'I know my truth isn't always Osborn's truth, although we live within the same domestic reality. OK, so truth is subjective, but isn't reality subjective as well, seeing different people define the same situation in individual ways? So how can anyone say they have the answer to anything? All they really have is an answer for themselves. God, where do You come into this? If You are the creator of all – Hitler, cancer, eggless quiches, me – why?'

Sandra gradually slipped into sleep with the weight of a thousand unanswered questions threatening to engulf her. She slipped into a dream state, where she was conscious of being one among a countless number of formless beings, toiling along an unending, ill-defined path. She became aware of a feeling of transition and timelessness. She looked all around her to see where the feeling was coming from. The feeling was everywhere around her, yet the feeling was inside her. As her realisation of the feeling grew, so did her awareness of the light. The light also was everywhere around her and inside her. The light became a white, purifying fire. She tried to communicate to the light expanding inside her, but her words were lost in a sudden explosion of love. Formless, wordless, infinite love, radiating in waves of joy and peace, all over the world.

Sandra woke, weeping, with an unbearable sense of loss. She crept downstairs with a pressing, burning need to be alone. She knelt in front of the sofa with a *Spiritual Saffron Mood Matching Toilet Roll*, weeping for the whole world, for the beauty of the light and for her lost self. Words and phrases seemed to pass solemnly and enigmatically through her whole being: transformation – pain – freedom – integration – joy – peace beyond understanding – sorrow – truth – reality – eggless quiches – birth – death – sanctification – love.

She looked up in a state of heightened awareness, seeing nothing, but feeling a loving presence. She heard nothing, but felt a loving communication that seemed to say, 'I'm still with you'. Her weeping ceased instantly, as did the presence. She rose from her knees and sat on the sofa, clutching the *Spiritual Saffron Mood Matching Toilet Roll*, with pins and needles rampaging in both legs. She sat there for a long time, with a feeling of almost perfect peace, despite the pins and needles and the fact that she was cold.

She now knew for a certainty there was no easy way to any of the answers she desired so desperately to find – no formula guaranteed to discover absolute truth or reality. She felt, though, that her uniqueness as an individual and her struggle towards self-growth had been sanctified. She blew her nose and went back to bed. Osborn was lying with a pillow clutched to his chest and as she looked at him, she could almost feel the difficulties that lay ahead.

"Please come with me, Osborn," she whispered to him as he slept. "I don't want to leave you behind."

CHAPTER 5

Sandra awoke next morning to the sound of the alarm on Osborn's watch. She tried not to be annoyed too much that it was in fact a Sunday and Osborn had put the alarm on by mistake again. The memory of the night before came flooding back. 'I've had a religious experience!' she thought excitedly and got up to look in the mirror to see if she'd changed. She was a little disappointed to see that her few grey hairs hadn't supernaturally reverted to their original colour and that her wrinkles and blemishes hadn't miraculously been transformed into a youthful, fresh smoothness. 'I suppose physical perfection is irrelevant to someone who's been spiritually aroused,' she thought a little wistfully. 'Pity, it would save dyeing my hair and using tons of face creams that don't work.'

Osborn hadn't stirred, so she went downstairs to make some tea. 'I'm a very peculiar mixture, really,' she reflected. 'I laugh at serious things and I get serious about little, laughable things. I don't feel as though I'm irreverent or insensitive, though, I just think life is a strange mixture of the incredibly serious and the insanely funny.' She heard Gulliver in the bathroom and knocked on the door. He opened it with a razor blade in his hand.

"Morning Gully, I wondered if would you like some tea? Goodness, you're not going to slit your wrists, are you?"

"No," he replied, looking embarrassed. "I was going to shave. Don't call me Gully."

"OK. Shave what? No, don't answer that. Ah, I see – a faint little shadow of a moustache. I don't think you've got enough hair to shave, though?"

"Enough hair? I've got hair all over my arms and legs and chest-to-be!"

"Fair enough," said Sandra, laughing. "Why don't you borrow Dad's shaver? Is Maddy up yet?"

"I heard her crying earlier on, I think it might be something to do with school. I asked her, but she told me to go away."

"Oh? I'll go and see. Thanks."

Sandra went and listened outside Madeleine's bedroom door, but all was silent. She knocked gently. "Maddy? Are you awake?"

"Yes," came the muffled reply.

Sandra opened the door and saw Madeleine hastily putting away a book in her bedside cabinet. She knew it was her diary and wondered briefly about the secrecy rights of a 10-year-old. "Are you OK, Mad?"

"I'm not mad!" Sandra saw the tears welling up in Madeleine's eyes.

"I'm sorry, I won't call you that anymore. What's wrong, angel?"

"I'm not an angel. Nothing's wrong. Except Claire and Becky went into town yesterday and they didn't ask me." The tears began to run freely down Madeleine's nose.

Sandra felt a quick moment of fury on behalf of her daughter, knowing how sensitive she was. "Why do you think they did that?" she wondered aloud.

"They don't like me. Nobody likes me!" wailed Madeleine.

"Oh Maddybelle, I'm sure they do." Sandra sat on the bed cuddling Madeleine. "They're just being silly. Lots of people like you, I'm absolutely positive of that."

"You're not me, Mum," sobbed Madeleine.

"I know," soothed Sandra, not really knowing how to console Madeleine. "None of us know exactly what it's like to be anyone else, but we all have feelings. Maybe some of us a bit more than others. We all make mistakes, too. They probably missed you and wished they'd asked you in the first place. They might have got lost in the market and had to ask a police officer to help them, or they might have been horribly pooped on by a flock of pigeons in the town centre."

"I still wish they'd asked me," said Madeleine in a small voice. "I don't know what to do today. Can we do something nice?"

"Well, I was going to go to church with Grandma and Grandad Dullkettle this morning, but we can do anything you like this afternoon – anything at all – how about that?"

"Church?" Madeleine looked at Sandra doubtfully. "You don't go to church."

"No, but you can come with me if you like," said Sandra lamely, "and we'll go out somewhere nice after lunch."

"OK," replied Madeleine. "Next Saturday can we go into town and you buy me something new to wear?"

"To wear?" echoed Sandra, surprised at this unusual request from Madeleine, who normally wanted to buy books, or pens, or anything in the stationery department.

"I want to look nice, so people will like me," said Madeleine, making a move to disengage. "Can I have toast for breakfast?"

"Yes, of course you can. Let's go downstairs, then."

It was only later, as Sandra was taking a mug of tea up to Osborn, that she began to ponder upon Madeleine's desire to look nice so that people would like her. It didn't feel at all right and Sandra resolved to keep a close eye on this new and disturbing aspect of her sensitive daughter.

"Hello," said Sandra, climbing into bed beside Osborn. "Sleep well?"

"No, I've been awake since 4 o' clock. You were sleeping soundly."

"I had a dream..." Sandra paused, wondering how to explain.

"I had a dream, too. I was being chased by a herd of laughing hyenas, who turned into a group of militant feminists wielding sawn-off water pistols."

"You didn't!" Sandra looked at him in grinning disbelief.

"Yes, I flaming well did. And you were at the front, brandishing a cap gun."

"I wonder what your dream means? I'm sure some dreams have a certain amount of symbolism or repressed emotion in them."

"I don't think so. I think dreams are highly likely to be the crazed product of an overactive imagination. Oh, that means my imagination..."

Sandra was disquieted. 'How can I tell him about my dream? That's twice this morning I've been disquieted,' she thought disquietedly. 'Firstly Maddy and now Osborn. I wonder why being disquieted has made me go quiet? If I'm really disquieted, shouldn't I be roused into noise? Who can I tell about my dream? Mum and Dad? Isabelle Dell? What about Osborn's mum and dad? They're always going on about praising the Lord and telling us they're praying for us, after all. God, if I'm going to go to church with them, I'd better give them a ring.'

She turned to Osborn suddenly, causing his mug to jolt against his teeth. "Sorry! Osborn, I was thinking of going to church with your mum and dad this morning. Maddy said she'll come too. I must give them a ring."

"Gordon Bennett! What *is* happening to you?" Osborn's accusing glare was present in full force.

"I think I'm having a spiritual awakening," answered Sandra quietly. "Do you want to come too?"

"God no, I've been to their church before, remember?" said Osborn heatedly. The tea had been quite hot. "I'm a living product of their sincere but fanatical Sunday school teaching. I spent several years of my life trying to come to terms with the incredible possibility that Jesus wanted me for a sunbeam."

"But didn't it teach you more than that? That there *is* a spiritual side of our nature that we so often try to cover up with materialism, or intellectualism, or momentary pleasures...?"

"Some pleasures are more than momentary if you get your timing right."

"Yes, I know! But – oh, I don't know. I'm just so sure there's more, if only I knew what it is. I know there's definitely a physical reality, but I want to find out more about a spiritual reality."

Just then a manifestation of physical reality appeared in the open doorway, knocking politely with one hand and holding an *Adolescent Size Tissue* to his left ear with the other.

"Hi, Dad. Er – could I borrow your shaver, please?"

At 3 minutes to 11 that morning, Sandra sat in church between Madeleine and Sybil. Basil was at home, feeling unwell. To Sandra's amazement, Sybil had told her that she and Madeleine must wear something on their head and had lent them a scarf each.

"But why?" Sandra had asked incredulously. "Is there something offensive about our hair?"

"No dear," whispered Sybil, looking at her a little anxiously. "Just read 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 when you get home. I was always having to remind Kirsty of those wonderful verses."

The service passed in rather a daze for Sandra. She and Madeleine enjoyed singing the hymns – or at least, the ones with which they were familiar. The sermon, though, seemed incredibly long and Sandra didn't much like being talked at as if she were some sinful form of low life. Madeleine snuggled up closer to Sandra and they held hands.

'Maybe I've got the wrong end of the stick,' thought Sandra, wonderingly. 'Only this service has absolutely nothing in common with what I know I felt last night. I'm also hoping it doesn't do Maddy any harm. I would never have subjected her to this in her delicate state if I'd known.'

She found she became increasingly irritated by the frequent utterances of "Praise the Lord!" from some of the men, interspersed now and then with a muttered "Alleluia!" The women seemed strangely subdued, too. In fact, she was highly relieved when the service was over at last.

"Wasn't that a wonderful service!" exclaimed Sybil, as they were leaving the church. "Did you enjoy it?"

"Well, to be honest, I couldn't help noticing the women were a lot quieter than the men," ventured Sandra, handing Sybil back the scarves.

"Ah yes, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. Read it when you get home, dear. Ah, here's my friend, Mrs Canter. Good morning, Winnie!"

"Well, praise the Lord, Sybil – hello!"

"Wasn't it a good service, Winnie!"

"Yes, praise the Lord, Sybil, it was indeed!"

"Winnie, this is my daughter-in-law Sandra and my granddaughter, Madeleine. They're visiting us this morning."

"Ah, praise the Lord! Lovely to see you, Madeleine. Are you a committed Christian, Sandra?"

"Actually, no..." replied Sandra, finding the utmost difficulty not to say, "but I really think you ought to be."

"Praise the Lord!" Sandra heard Winnie saying, as she moved thankfully away.

When Sandra and Madeleine arrived home, they found Gulliver in the kitchen, vigorously attacking a rather puny little onion with the most vicious looking kitchen knife they possessed.

"Hi! I fancied a French bread pizza for lunch," he said, "seeing I don't know how to do a roast."

"I don't think they roast French bread pizzas," said Madeleine brightly. Sandra had been very thankful that the abominable church service didn't seem to have affected Madeleine in the slightest.

"Roasted or not, we don't have any French bread, Gulliver. Never mind, we can improvise," said Sandra.

"Oh no! I've cut my bloody finger!" shouted Gulliver suddenly, dropping the kitchen knife.

"Gulliver! Are you OK?" asked Sandra anxiously, remembering the incident with the garage roof and the secateurs.

"I'll get a plasterer," said Madeleine, gazing at Gulliver's bloody finger.

"A plaster, darling," said Sandra. "In the middle drawer."

"A plasterer will do," joked Gulliver a little weakly. "I feel like getting plastered. Oh no, I must be feeling weak, I made a flaky joke. You don't swear in front of Grandma W, do you, Mother?"

"No, not usually," replied Sandra thoughtfully, fixing the plaster not very successfully on Gulliver's finger. "This isn't bleeding very much at all now. I'll carry on with the lunch, shall I? Yes, I find it hard to be myself with Mum sometimes. There seems to be too much of a mother-daughter restriction. I'd like to get to know her as a person, though."

"What about Grandad W?"

"Mmm, difficult. He doesn't seem to talk much about himself. It's almost as if there's something in his past he'd rather forget. No, I don't know him much as a person, either."

"Do you wish you had a brother or a sister?"

"No, not really. Well, yes, I suppose I do. I often used to wonder what a brother or sister of mine would have been like. You know, incredibly talented, sensationally good looking. No, seriously – I know I missed out on all the things you learn from the sibling rivalry bit, like having to share chocolate, blame, living space and parents, but I learned quite quickly how to enjoy my own company. Why?"

"Oh nothing, I just wondered," said Gulliver, idly playing with his plaster. "Well, to be honest, Damien, Nigel and I were talking about our families and they both said they thought only children were spoilt."

"Ah, that old chestnut," sighed Sandra, scraping the onions into the pan. "Misunderstood again. What did *you* say?"

"That they were speaking out of their – umm – ignorance. I don't think people like me, because I say what I think is the truth."

"You just be yourself. How's your anti-everything debating society going?"

"I don't think people are ready for it. I was debating with Damien about his smoking habit being an outward expression of inner moral ignorance and mentioned that I wasn't happy rotting my lungs by passive smoking."

"Can I help to cook the lunch, Mum?" asked Madeleine hopefully.

"OK then, darling, can you put some of this tomato purée in with the onions and stir them gently? What did Damien say about the passive smoking, Gulliver?"

"He said he didn't go much on my habit of squeezing my spots."

"Natasha Waymore squeezes her spots," ventured Madeleine, struggling to open the tomato purée.

"She's got spots already?" asked Sandra.

"She's got tits!" said Madeleine emphatically, achieving success with the lid.

"Mad!" shrieked Sandra.

"Yes, you are," said Osborn, suddenly appearing with a newspaper in one hand and an empty mug in the other. "You're back, then. How did you survive the service?"

"Oh, I don't know," sighed Sandra. "It wasn't like I thought it would be. I felt as though – well, I felt as though I couldn't breathe properly there. Oh yes! We've got a bible somewhere, haven't we? I want to look something up."

"Hey Dad, there's a little pink thing poking out of your trousers."

"What?!" exclaimed Osborn, looking downwards.

"No, down here," said Gulliver, bending down to pick off something sticky attached to Osborn's trouser leg. "Oh, it's my plaster."

"Dad, the onions are spitting at me!" screeched Madeleine suddenly, whirling around with the tube of tomato purée. "Oh – sorry Dad, I forgot the lid was off."

"Sunday, bloody Sunday," muttered Osborn, scraping tomato purée from his shirt into the sink with a spoon. "Gulliver, help Maddy with the stirring. Maddy, let him! Where's your mother gone?"

Sandra was in the sitting room, poring over 1 Corinthians, chapter 14. "This is awful," she was saying. "How can this be right?"

"What's that?" asked Osborn, on his way to the bedroom to change his shirt.

"According to this, *you* are made in the image of God and are the mirror of his glory, while *I* just reflect the glory of you. Unbelievable!" Sandra threw the bible down, feeling hurt and confused. She couldn't find any similarity between the God she'd been encountering all morning and the knowledge of love she'd experienced the night before.

"Have you been told about the bit that says women should be silent in church?" asked Osborn rather hesitantly.

"No! Oh, hang on, I suppose that's the other bit your mother mentioned." Sandra picked up the bible again and found the relevant page.

"Ha! So, it's shameful for a woman to speak in church, is it? Well, I shan't be going anymore. They can stick their patriarchal rubbish right back up their patriarchal backsides." Sandra felt tears of betrayal filling her eyes. "I just can't believe that's right," she said in a subdued voice, standing up and placing herself in Osborn's arms for the sheer comfort of another human body against hers. "Yuck! What's this red stuff on your shirt? Oh, sod physical reality! Sod spiritual reality! Sod everything in the whole sodding world!"

Sandra was glad to be seeing Isabelle the following day, although she felt a certain reluctance to relate her recent experiences. 'I'm prejudging her reaction, though,' she thought guiltily, as she rode along in the bus on a grey, wet morning. 'I owe her more honesty than that. Anyway, she already knows I'm a bit strange.'

Sandra thought Isabelle was looking very tired as they greeted one another and sat in the familiar, faded chairs.

"Anything special you'd like to talk about today?" Isabelle was saying, as Sandra wondered whether to ask her if she was all right.

"Oh, well yes, there is – but are you OK, Isabelle? You look very tired."

"Ah, it's noticeable then. I haven't been sleeping very well lately. I'm thinking of getting divorced. There really doesn't seem to be any point in continuing a relationship that in reality is just a sham of conventional role playing..." Isabelle's voice trailed away, then she looked up quickly at Sandra. "I'm sorry, I really shouldn't be unburdening myself on you."

"No!" Sandra reached across and took Isabelle's hand, as much to her own surprise as to Isabelle's. "I don't want you to be just my counsellor," she said earnestly.

"I want you to be my friend." She withdrew her hand suddenly. "This isn't normal, is it?"

Isabelle sat back in her chair and smiled. "I think 'normal' is a highly overrated word, not to mention a dodgy concept." She sighed, gazing at Sandra. "No, this isn't normal in the context of a professional counselling relationship – not as recommended by this practice, anyway. But I've actually been seeing you in my lunch break and just borrowing this spare room, so we don't exactly have to be constrained by normality."

"Thank goodness for that. I sometimes think normality is inherently boring."

"You said there was something you wanted to talk about today?"

"Well yes, there is – but I think you need to talk about yourself as much as I need to talk about myself?"

"Oh, no! Well, maybe. I don't know. It feels a bit strange suddenly casting off the rules of normality, doesn't it?"

"It certainly does." Sandra laughed a little uncertainly.

"How about, seeing this is my lunch break, that we go out for a sandwich and a drink, perhaps?" suggested Isabelle, brightening up considerably. "There's a pub just down the road that doesn't get terribly busy at lunchtimes. We can easily talk there, in more relaxed conditions than here."

"OK!" Sandra liked the idea. "Isabelle?" she asked, as they got up to go. "Can we really be friends?"

"I think we're already halfway there," replied Isabelle, smiling.

Sitting in the bus on the way home, Sandra felt warm and elated. 'I just can't believe how life changes from one moment to the next,' she thought. 'Yesterday I felt every door I tried to open shutting in my face, but today I can see a whole lifetime – well, the rest of it – of real friendships stretching ahead. That's so much what I want to do, to be a real person and have real relationships. Honest, living, mind and heart communication with real people. It feels so good! It's so comforting to find someone who feels the same way as I do about roles and social game playing. I feel so honoured that Isabelle talked to me about the deep things inside herself and so grateful that she just listened when I told her about my dream and the experience afterwards.'

Sandra suddenly became aware that several people were smiling at her. She wondered if her hair was sticking up oddly, or if she'd been the target of some practical joker, but then she realised that she was smiling to herself. Beaming from ear to ear, in fact, with sheer happiness. She gave one last hearty grin to her slightly bemused audience, before turning to the window, a little bashfully, to resume her reflections.

'I'm none the wiser about my dream,' she continued to herself, 'but what's happened today just feels so right, even though Isabelle and I seem to be very unlikely people to be friends, what with the age gap and everything. I suppose that's part of the uniqueness of individual human relationships, once you stop being restricted by social norms.'

She stood up to get off the bus. 'I feel ten feet tall to be friends with Isabelle!' she thought triumphantly, just before her left foot experienced a spatial mismanagement with the bottom step of the bus.

'Oh well, just another bruise on the backside of life,' she thought philosophically, as she picked herself up and waved to all the people smiling at her through the windows of the bus.

The third philosophy class was progressing well. Sandra had seated herself beside Elaine and was feeling quite relaxed and almost confident. 'I hope Philip doesn't land one of his mind-exploding questions on me, though,' she thought. 'Oh dear, I see his label's sticking up out of his jumper. I wish I could poke it back in for him. Oops, that's my tidiness problem again!'

Philip was well into Hume's theory of personal identity. Sandra felt particularly interested in this subject and tried to activate her brain cells accordingly.

"Hume argued that although we take it for granted that we have selves, we cannot actually locate this self in experience or in observation. When we introspect, for instance, what we may find are memories, thoughts, feelings and so on, but we do not

find some other entity – a self that has these thoughts, feelings, memories, etc. Who can identify with this? Sally, what do you find when you look into your own mind, searching for your own identity?"

"Oh hell, I mean well. Yes. It's Sandra, actually. Well, to be honest, I find confusion, paradox, a complete hotchpotch of different parts that seem to belong, or to have belonged, to someone else – and yet I know they are, or have been, a part of who I am – my identity." She stopped suddenly, devoid of further explanation. 'Pick the bones out of that, Schopenhaut,' she thought, a little testily.

"Interesting. Yes, interesting. Are you saying that all you ever find is a passing perception of your identity, never any kind of persistent self?"

"Probably." Sandra felt unable to commit herself to the absolute affirmative.

"Hmm. Do you believe you are the same person today as you were yesterday, or the day before, for instance?"

"I – umm – don't know," answered Sandra, beginning to feel victimised. "Why don't you ask someone else?" She glanced across at Geoff, briefly catching his eyes on her, before he looked away. She tried consciously to control the blush she felt rushing to her cheeks. 'Oh bugger,' she thought. 'Why me? Why now? My identity is having enough trauma all by itself, without any complications. Still, I do find it all strangely enjoyable...'

Geoff and Elaine were in her discussion group again, trying this time to discover what they considered to be their persistent selves. Nobody seemed to know what to say. Surprisingly, it was Elaine who broke the silence in the end.

"I feel there are two parts to my self sometimes," she said in a quiet voice, "but they both feel part of my identity, or persistent self, if that's what he means."

"I'm not sure I know anything he means," said Sandra, smiling. "On the whole, I think I prefer reading about all this in solitary ignorance."

"You always answer his questions as if you know what you're talking about," observed Geoff, smiling back.

"I do? It's all a cover! I'm very interested in identity and self and all that stuff, though."

"You are? I've got a really good book you might like to read. I'll bring it along next week, if you like?" Geoff's smile soared up to a resounding 9.5 on Sandra's *Sexy Smiling Eyes Scale*.

Philip was doing his rounds of the discussion groups and came along to sit on the only spare table space, beside Sandra. While he was looking the other way, she reached across and deftly tucked in his jumper label. He felt the touch, turned around quickly with his arm raised, as if to swat a fly, and slipped awkwardly off the table.

"What the...?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" said Sandra, with a horrified expression on her face. "I was just tucking your label back in." She stopped in sheer embarrassment.

"That's quite all right, Sally," said Philip, rubbing his bottom and smiling benignly. "Sorry about the little outburst, I seem to have been suffering from premature exasperation lately. Ah! That reminds me, I have some essays to return."

Sandra tried to escape from the class as soon as possible, to walk home alone in the cool night air. 'I'm a bit of a disaster area sometimes,' she thought. 'I've just caused Philip Schopenhaut to sustain a bruise on his backside, I've avoided walking home with Elaine, I feel uncomfortably interested in Geoff and I have a returned essay in my bag that I'm afraid to look at.' Large drops of rain began to fall rapidly.

'I couldn't say I have a mindlessly boring existence anymore, though!' Sandra skipped along the empty pavement, her face upturned to the sky. A car horn suddenly shocked her into sobriety. Philip Schopenhaut drove past, smiling and waving, as she collided into a surprised old man who had emerged from his garden to walk his dog.

CHAPTER 6

October was slipping away in a jumble of mixed emotions, lucid moments of sudden self-insight and a frustrating array of everyday trivia. Sandra was aware she spent a lot of time deep in thought and was also becoming aware of other people's reactions to her

changing ways. Most of her friends (except a couple of school friends who'd faithfully kept in touch over the years) had more or less drifted back into their own lives now that Sandra had cast off her role of convenient childminder. They'd simply looked at her quizzically when she'd first said no to a request, but when the second request was turned down, the going became a little tougher.

"I'm sorry, I have to finish an essay," said Sandra truthfully to a current second request, to look after a 4-year-old boy and his 2-year-old sister for half a day.

"Oh. Well, if that's the only reason, I'm sure they wouldn't be any trouble. They could play together quietly by themselves while you finish your essay."

"I'm sorry, I really need to be able to think, alone," replied Sandra, feeling extremely awkward, but justified in the certain knowledge that 4-year-old boys and their 2-year-old sisters are congenitally incapable of ever playing quietly together by themselves. In fact, the last time Sandra had looked after this particular pair, she'd spent almost an hour trying to extricate a pair of ornamental chopsticks from the grille of the gas fire, followed by a highly uncomfortable few moments apologising to the man next door for the demise of his mesembryanthemums.

After this short conversation, which had taken place at the school gate after a fund-raising noisy auction, Sandra was walking away when another friend caught her up.

"Hi Sandra," said Alison, who was much taller than Sandra and whose son Sam was in Gulliver's class. "I wasn't eavesdropping, honestly, but I think I heard you being assertive back there? It was most impressive."

"Hi Alison," said Sandra, feeling herself blush a little. "Assertive? Me?"

"Yes, don't put yourself down," said Alison warmly. "Tell me to go and mind my own business, but you said something about an essay?"

"I've joined a philosophy class," replied Sandra, feeling strangely embarrassed. "I got to the point where I had to go and do something for myself. I'm 39 and life is passing me by. I have to do something now, or I'll degenerate into a Savoy cabbage."

"Wow, that could be me speaking," said Alison, as they walked along together, "except I'm 44 and I feel more like a compressed cauliflower. I think it's healthy to expand yourself intellectually. I'm trying to persuade myself to go to an assertiveness class that's about to start up, actually. I don't suppose you'd come with me?"

"I don't really think so," replied Sandra, admiring Alison's directness. "I think I confuse assertiveness with aggressiveness, to be honest. I have this awful picture in my head of aggressive women with enormous emancipated boobs flopping around, wearing badges that announce how sisters are doing it for themselves." She laughed self-consciously, hoping she hadn't completely put her foot in it and trying to ascertain whether Alison was braless or not.

"Ha! Yes, I know what you mean. No worries, it's just that it's a friend of a friend who's started up this group. She's recently separated and is looking for a new direction in her life. I must confess, I find assertiveness has a strange allure."

"I agree – it's just that I can't really afford to go to another group," explained Sandra, annoyed that money seemed to figure so prominently in her thought processes.

"Oh, it's not run by an institute, or anything. She's doing it on a contribute-as-you-can basis in her own home."

"I see." Sandra was frantically trying to analyse why her first instinct had been a refusal. She tried to be logical and reasonable in her excuses. "Well, I feel too scared when it comes to assertiveness – I'm a philosophy student – I wear a bra..." She laughed uncertainly. "Take no notice of me, Alison, I'm just being silly! When does this group meet?" She half hoped the reply would be Thursday evening, so that her final attempt at an excuse would be perfectly valid.

"Tuesday evening, 7 o' clock. Shall I call for you? Dirk goes to *Self Awareness for Men* on Tuesday evenings now, as it happens. I don't suppose Osborn...?"

"No! Does Dirk find it helpful?" Sandra was thinking of Osborn's moods of late.

"It's hard to say," replied Alison evasively. "Anyway, I'll call for you at about ¼ to 7 on Tuesday evening?"

"OK then, I'll look forward to it – I think."

The following day, a damp Saturday in late October, the four Dullkettles were reluctant guests at a church wedding. The groom, Anthony Mulch, was a rather disagreeable relative of Osborn's, who fortunately only kept in touch by Christmas cards (usually a thin-papered, brown-skied scene of deep winter gloom, the obvious product of a depressive mind).

Sandra hadn't entered a church since her first and last visit to Basil and Sybil's church. Although this was a different church, she sat in an otherwise empty pew between Osborn and Madeleine, feeling disgruntled and uncomfortable in her best dress of several years – a purple striped knee length thing with a ribbon at the neck that she had miserably failed to tie in a casual, jaunty way. She had already made a note to donate the dress to charity, when Madeleine turned to her.

"Mum," she whispered, "I don't like your dress anymore, it makes you look like someone else's mummy."

"Gosh, thanks Maddy, I think you've just given me a compliment. You look lovely in your new dress. Ah, here are Grandma and Grandad Dullkettle – oh, Uncle Lawrence too. You'd better move over and let them in."

"Hello," said Sybil breathlessly, resplendent in a feathered hat. We're a bit late, Basil was speaking to Kirsty on the phone. Such a pity she couldn't come to this wedding, it might have reminded her of the delights of marriage. I begin to despair that she'll ever find a good man. I do like your dress, Sandra. I've got a matching headscarf in my bag if you'd like to borrow it?"

"No thanks," replied Sandra firmly. "You must be sad Lawrence hasn't found a good woman, then?" She smiled at Lawrence, who winked back with slightly startled brown eyes. "Here's the bride, poor sod..." Her words were drowned out by a fresh onslaught of the organ.

Sandra found herself listening to the marriage service with a keenly analytical mind. She was disturbed at the depth of profound distaste she felt at some of the underlying concepts. That marriage was a holy mystery in which man and woman became one flesh was an abomination to her.

'Why haven't I felt this way before?' she wondered, looking at Osborn and thinking of herself as being one flesh with him. 'Hmm, I can understand the sexual symbolism,' she thought, 'but that's all. I suppose emotionally we're linked together in certain ways – many ways of everyday interaction – but my flesh is my own, thank you very much. Besides, I'm sure at the day of judgement, if there is such a thing, we're accountable for our own self and not just part of some symbiotic arrangement. The concept of joint penis ownership is interesting, perhaps...'

The minister's words, "forsaking all others" suddenly resonated in Sandra's head. She was surprised at the sensation of emptiness the words evoked. 'Forsaking all others sounds so final and narrow-souled,' she thought sadly. 'I suppose it refers to adultery, but what a waste. Sex aside, it's something I can't subscribe to now and yet I made those vows willingly all those years ago. Although our wedding service was very meaningful to me at the time, it seems now that it was a convention that had to be got through in order to attain the marital status I so desired then. God, I've changed. God...' Sandra was aware of a deep place inside herself, untouched since the night of the dream. She wanted to explore there, but was afraid.

The service continued. 'God, he's saying he's going to worship her – surely that's morally wrong? How come it slipped into the marriage service in the first place, if God is the only one we're supposed to worship? Ah, I knew it, she's said she's going to obey him, the poor deluded creature. Did I say I would obey Osborn? Oh God, did I say that?'

Sandra felt weak with sudden horror. 'I can't remember what I said. I must have blocked it out years ago. I don't like this marriage service, I'm feeling claustrophobic. I need to escape from all this mindless convention that up until now I've just accepted unquestioningly. I need time and space to realise my own set of values. I need to ask God what the hell is going on and I want Him to answer me once and for all in a way I can actually understand!'

The deep place in Sandra was trying to find expression in a release of tears. She suppressed them painfully and only semi-successfully. She felt a squeeze on her arm

and turned to see Sybil dabbing her own eyes daintily with a lace-trimmed handkerchief. "It's beautiful, isn't it!" exclaimed Sybil. "I can see you're moved, just like I am. Praise the Lord for His wonderful gift of marriage!"

Sandra's tears were arrested in sheer incredulity. She stole a glance at Basil, but his expression was uninterpretable. She sneaked a look at Lawrence, but he had his eyes shut. She turned and smiled at Osborn. He looked back at her with an intensity of mind activity that she didn't even want to try to define. She looked at Gulliver, but he was engaged in exploring how good the service sheet was for origami. Madeleine was gazing intently at a boy who looked to be about 12 years old. 'She's growing up already,' thought Sandra sadly and suddenly felt acutely, inexplicably alone. It was an old, familiar feeling that she had always denied before.

'Even marriage and children don't take away the aloneness,' she realised. 'So many people unconsciously try to hide away in the false sense of security that marriage appears to bring. They elevate the marriage to a position of prime importance – marriage über alles – but it's the two people within the marriage that matter, the two separate, individual people who need to realise their own identity and fulfil their own potential, rather than merge into some unidentifiable splodge of stereotypical role keeping. It feels like death to me, this ancient idea of finding your other half and living inextricably joined un/happily ever after.

'It's a fear reaction surely? A joint insurance scheme designed to eliminate any danger of realising your aloneness in this world and therefore any real attempt at truly facing yourself? Yet I don't see why it has to be that way? Surely two people, married or otherwise, can follow their own particular pattern of personal growth and still be supportive of each other – accept each other for the unique individual each one of them is? *That* feels like life to me. I wonder why I haven't seen it this way before? I wonder how Osborn sees it all? I'd love to find out, even though the thought of that fills me with a strange fear...'

The service was ending at last. Sybil was chattering away to Osborn. "I'm sure Anthony will be happy now with a wife to look after him. A man needs a woman, you know, for all those little home comforts."

Sandra caught Osborn's eye and a moment of true communication passed between them, before they both broke into involuntary spasms of laughter. Sandra pretended to sneeze, while Osborn pretended to cough.

"Oh dear, are you two catching colds? It's a bit chilly in here."

"What about a woman needing a man, Sybil?" broke in Basil, holding her arm to guide her through the church porch. "Where would you be, m'dear, without a man about the house?"

"Yes, you're right," replied Sybil. "We two were made for each other – a marriage made in heaven, praise the Lord!"

"Osborn," said Sandra quietly, making sure she was out of earshot of her in-laws, "that woman is your mother. Does she really believe all that stuff?"

"They both do," replied Osborn. His face clouded. "I thought you did."

"Me? Well, maybe I half believed it, if that's possible, several lifetimes ago. I'd love to talk with you about it?" Their eyes met in piercing recognition of as yet unspoken conflict.

The wedding reception was saved from being terminally tedious by the anecdotes of Lawrence, the verbal quips of Gulliver (who was allowed two glasses of wine), Madeleine's obvious interest in the 12-year-old boy and an announcement from Basil that he had decided to go into the ministry.

"I know it's a bit late in life," he said over a bowl of iced mulligatawny, "but I feel I've been called to administer the comfort of God's message to the lost and needy."

"What's the comfort of God's message then, Grandad?" asked Gulliver conversationally.

"Eternal life to the saved – hell and damnation to the unsaved," replied Basil dogmatically, looking at Gulliver with a modicum of suspicion.

"Er – very comforting," mused Gulliver, looking askance. "And what exactly must I do to be saved, pray?"

"Yes, prayer – and you must give your life to the Lord Jesus Christ," intoned Basil, "meekly repenting for all your sins. Do you want to do that now, Gulliver? Do you want to inherit the Earth and spend the rest of your days singing praises to Almighty God?"

"Dad!" hissed Osborn, leaning towards his father and dipping his tie neatly into the mulligatawny soup. "Not here, for God's sake!"

"For Gulliver's sake, actually," replied Basil rather testily, pushing his half-finished bowl of soup away. A woman from across the table was looking at them with interest.

"I couldn't help noticing," she said, looking at Basil, "but are you a committed Christian?"

"I am indeed, as is my other half," replied Basil, feeling himself to be on solid ground again. "This is my grandson..."

"Are you a committed Christian?" the woman asked, looking enquiringly at Gulliver.

"No, I've never even been inside a psychiatric unit," replied Gulliver artlessly.

"Gulliver!" Sandra thought it was about time she intervened. She tried wildly to think of something further to say. "Er – Gulliver, wasn't there something you wanted to tell me?" she asked, communicating non-verbally with her son with frantically gesticulative eyes.

"Well yes, Mother. As a matter of fact, there *is* something. I've been trying to hide it for some time now, but this thing is just too big for me. Mother, I'm a lesbian."

An indecipherable sound escaped from Sandra's lips. She glanced fearfully at Basil and Sybil.

"Oh, is that a pop group, then?" Sybil was asking Gulliver.

"No Sybil," replied Basil sternly. "I fear it is the devil talking." He looked thunderously at Osborn. "I will pray for Gulliver," he pronounced.

'So much for Mum's acronym hypothesis in Gulliver's case,' thought Sandra with pleasure. 'GOD, my Aunt Fanny! I must tell Mum.'

"I will also pray for Madeleine," added Basil, having caught sight of Madeleine dancing with a group of girls. "She reminds me of Kirsty before I managed to tame her – although I still pray daily for her too, as I do for Lawrence and all of you."

'Oh, belt up,' thought Sandra wearily. 'If you think you've tamed Kirsty, you're sadly mistaken and who do you think you are to try to tame anyone anyway? Just lay off Madeleine, too, she's only dancing and having fun, for heaven's sake. Actually, I think I'll go and join them...'

At home that evening, Sandra tried to find time and space to talk with Osborn. It proved impossible, with incoming phone calls (Sandra's mother to ask them to tea the following week, Madeleine's friend Lucy asking her out to a sleepover and a desperate double-glazing sales person called Brian); outgoing phone calls (Gulliver arranging to go to Damien's house to discuss something secretive); a congealing pile of dishes dating from the previous evening; and a documentary that Osborn wanted to watch about the ramifications of hugging in nudist camps. She'd even sat on the edge of the bath to soak her feet while Osborn lay in it relaxing, but had been interrupted by someone collecting on behalf of *Save the Wrinkle Horned Rhinoceros*. At that point she'd given up.

'Why is it so difficult simply to talk together?' she thought later when they were in bed. 'Spontaneity is practically a no-go area in this household. I'll have to make an appointment with him. How awful that we're stuck in this never-ending round of chores, responsibilities, commitments...'

"Sandra?" Osborn's voice came as a bit of a shock in the darkness.

"Yes?" Sandra wondered why she suddenly felt afraid at what he might be wanting to say to her.

"Did you lock the back door?"

"Yes."

"Did you lock the front door?"

"YES."

"What about the patio door?"

"Would you like me to get out of bed, go downstairs and check it for you?" Disappointment had manifested itself in sarcasm, before Sandra turned forcefully over on to her side, away from him.

"Sandra, you've taken all the duvet."

"I don't care about the sodding duvet!" She turned agitatedly back towards him. "I care about us! I want to know what you're thinking when you look at me with your inscrutable eyes. I *feel* you thinking things about me."

"I don't know you anymore. You've changed."

"I'm only trying to be myself. I wanted to tell you about how I felt at the wedding today." Sandra felt her heart beating faster in anticipation of forthcoming misunderstanding.

"What's stopping you?" The antagonism in his voice was plain.

"Nothing, now." She hesitated and sighed. "Well, I was astounded at how anti I felt about the conventional side of marriage – at how much it felt just like a social ritual."

"Go on."

"I was thinking how convention can stop two people from being their true selves and how they can so easily get caught in a trap of self-restricting social conformity."

"Bloody self again," muttered Osborn.

"But don't you see that when people are truly themselves, they're able to share themselves with others in relationships that are real?"

"Are you saying our relationship isn't real?"

"No, but I felt it was stifling me. I couldn't breathe. I wasn't being my true self."

"And what exactly does being your true self mean? Having affairs? Getting a divorce?" Osborn's voice was cold and hard.

"No, it's not like that. I just need you to allow me space to find out who I really am. I want you to *accept* me as I am."

"And what about me?" Osborn's voice was lower now. Sandra thought she detected an underlying note of fear.

"You can discover who *you* really are."

"I know who I am. I knew where I was until you started all this self crap. All these people trying to discover the meaning of life are selfish, boring egotists who wouldn't recognise the meaning of life if it hit them in the guts."

"Oh Osborn, I do love you." Sandra suddenly felt in tune with the deep place inside herself.

"Love – ha! Where does love fit into your scheme of things? Or do you spend your time loving yourself?"

"Can't you feel me loving you? I can't adequately explain what I know inside – that love is somehow the answer to everything."

There was a long silence. In the darkness and the silence, Sandra reached out to show Osborn an expression of love that she knew he understood.

The silence was disturbed by heavy footsteps coming up the stairs. Sandra froze in horror until there was a familiar tap on the door.

"Hi, it's only me!" Gulliver called quietly from the other side of the door. "Just to let you know that I forgot my key, but luckily the patio door was open. Good night!"

CHAPTER 7

The following Monday lunchtime, Sandra was sitting comfortably opposite Isabelle in *The King's Buttock*, the pub they seemed to have adopted as their own.

"I've left him, Sandra," said Isabelle, as soon as they had sat down with their drinks and sandwiches.

"You have?" Sandra's hand instinctively found Isabelle's. "You're getting a divorce?" She was aware of the conflict of her own feelings at this news, before she gently drew her hand away.

"Yes, I've seen my solicitor. It's all under way and do you know, I feel like a great weight has been lifted off my shoulders."

"I'm pleased for you, Isabelle." Sandra's small voice betrayed her disquiet.

"How about you, Sandra? How are you feeling?"

"Oh, as confused as ever. We went to a wedding at the weekend." It felt very comforting to Sandra to pour out all her recently acknowledged feelings about marriage.

"Yes, it's a difficult process, acknowledging that we don't necessarily agree with what's so deeply ingrained in us from childhood – the myth that one day we'll be married and live happily ever after." Isabelle sipped her spiced lager thoughtfully.

"I never liked fairy stories anyway," mused Sandra. "I knew I was supposed to enjoy them, but I was far more impressed by stories of real people, like Helen Keller and Anne Frank. Come to think of it, I didn't go much on cartoons, either, I thought they were silly. I wanted reality. I remember wanting to find out what life was all about even way back then. I'm not so sure I'm any the wiser now, though."

"Don't underestimate yourself, it's incredibly easy to become caught up in the rules and roles of society. I was very eager to get married myself. I don't regret it, since it was a wonderful learning experience." Isabelle laughed ruefully. "The sad bit is the way that idealism and expectations can so successfully stop a couple from appreciating and affirming each other as the real people they actually are."

"Yes, I agree. What gets me as well is this romantic nausea that somewhere in the world is a person exactly right for you and that when you find this so-called other half of yourself, you'll be completely fulfilled, have multiple orgasms hand over fist and die with a fatuous smile on your face." Sandra grinned as Isabelle spluttered into her lager.

"Yes! I always thought it strange that so many people seem to find their so-called other half within fairly easy geographical distance. Or maybe somewhere in Vladivostok there's a male specimen of perfect proportions to fit mine, with much intelligence, perceptiveness and sensitivity and *it*, just waiting for me."

"Ha! I must admit that on the odd occasion I've wondered what it would be like to be with someone else."

"Be?" Isabelle raised her eyebrows mischievously. "Come on, Sandra, be a little more explicit?"

"Oh, all right then, to sleep with someone else."

"Still a little euphemistic?"

"OK, to have sex with someone else. Will that do?"

"Perfectly. Do I take it that Osborn's been the only one?"

"Yes. I guess that's a bit unusual in this day and age? Maybe that's why I wonder what it would be like with someone else."

"I think it might be a big disappointment."

"Or a little one? Sorry. Do you know, though, I know I'm getting older because I'm beginning to find some grey-haired men strangely attractive."

"Yes, *tempus fugit*, I suppose. What about that guy you've mentioned in your philosophy class, has he got grey hair, by any chance?"

"Oh, you mean Geoff." Sandra felt the familiar stirrings of an impending blush, so sipped her drink as a diversion. "No, not really – well, maybe just a touch. He lent me a book, actually. I must give it back at the next class."

"Do you find him attractive?" Isabelle was smiling.

"How did you guess? Yes, I find it difficult to admit to myself, but I do. Regardless of what we said, though, I'm married. I didn't set out to look for excitement – or male appreciation – or warm flutterings when he looks at me – or finding myself thinking of him at odd moments – and alternately enjoying and resenting those feelings." Sandra gave a small laugh and sipped her drink again.

"You're human." Isabelle sat back, looking at Sandra warmly. "I understand your conflict, I really do. There's this colleague I've been attracted to for some time now." It was Isabelle's turn to become unusually pink.

"Oh Izzie, you too?"

"Izzie?"

"Sorry, a term of affection. Do you mind?"

"No, I like it!"

"What's he called?"

"Ah, I was wondering if you'd ask that. It's quite funny actually, I'm sure you'll enjoy it. He's called Eric Godfrey Overman. His ex-wife became quite a radical feminist and told him his surname was sexist, so he threatened to change it by deed poll to Overwoman. That was roughly when she left him to go and live with a gym teacher called Jennifer Thrush."

All the following day, Sandra regretted having given in to Alison regarding the assertiveness group. She tried creatively to conjure up excuses, such as her pet goldfish had suffered a fatal heart attack (completely untrue); the cooker had exploded and she needed to burn fishfingers over a Trangia (wildly untrue); Madeleine had suffered a self-image crisis and needed her to stay home and paint her toenails (insanely untrue); she'd forgotten an appointment she had with a desperate man called Brian who wanted to sell her double glazing (thankfully untrue).

Finally, she asked Osborn at the tea table if he minded her going, ready to stay home magnanimously at his first murmurings of reluctance at being without her company that evening.

"You don't want me to go to Alison's assertiveness group with her tonight, do you," she stated in a completely unbiased manner.

"It's entirely up to you," replied Osborn, picking out grey lumps from his mashed potato. "As the independent person you keep stressing you are, you must do as you think fit. Besides, I have a book I want to read, so I could do with some peace and quiet."

"Ah, so could I, Dad," said Gulliver, engaged in the same potato type pursuit. "I have to prepare this week's topic for debate."

"What book's that?" Sandra asked Osborn, discomfited.

"One Terry at work lent me," replied Osborn enigmatically.

"What's it called, *The Life and Loves of a Deranged Radio Technician*?" asked Sandra, even more discomfited.

"No, *The Life and Loves of a Teenage Virgin*," said Gulliver, "in a special slim pocket-sized edition."

"The title of the book, Osborn?" Sandra was now officially exasperated.

"Oh yes, it's – er – *The Male Menopause and You*, or something."

"Really?" Sandra looked at Osborn in astonishment.

"Does anybody want to know what I want to do this evening?" asked Madeleine, having discarded half of her mashed potato.

"Yes, my darling," replied Sandra. "What do you want to do this evening?"

"Well, I was going to ask if you could paint my toenails, but Lucy rang and said she was going to call around to give me the book I need for our project, so I don't need you after all."

"Oh, that's good – I think. I won't be late home, anyway, so..."

"Is anyone remotely interested in the proposed title of my next debate?" asked Gulliver.

"No!" chorused three voices.

"OK then, it's: *Should bungee jumping be considered a sport or a compulsive leaping disorder*? Great, isn't it?"

At 7 o'clock that evening, Sandra sat with her arms protectively folded in a large room with six other women, having failed to identify any of them as being braless. This made her a little uncomfortable, as she'd discarded her own bra at approximately 18:40 that evening. She had even briefly wondered about wearing denim dungarees, but fortunately had never owned a pair. She merely tried to assume an attitude of casual but intense self confidence, even to the extent of replying "Yo" when asked if she would like coffee.

However, she was comforted to see that the leader was a slight, dark-haired woman of about her own age, called Jasmine (who, as far as Sandra could ascertain, was not wearing a badge saying that sisters were doing it for themselves).

After a round of introductions, when Sandra embarrassingly described herself as a "philosophy student" and consequently received several enquiring glances that she

studiously ignored, Jasmine talked about the four types of women and asked them each to say what type they thought they were. Sandra had a terrible time trying to decide if she was aggressive, a doormat, indirectly aggressive, or assertive. She became seriously hot and flustered at the realisation that she still found it incredibly difficult to make decisions and, at one stage, even unfolded her arms and waved them around a bit in an attempt to cool herself down.

As the others started to talk about themselves, though, she realised she was not alone in indecision. When Jasmine asked her what conclusions she'd reached, she felt able to be honest.

"I loathe aggression, both direct and indirect, but it's a fact of my life as much as anybody else's. I loathe doormats, but strangely identify with them, although in an old kind of way. As for being assertive..." She was cut short by a woman in denim dungarees, who suddenly erupted in a storm of tears, saying she hadn't the faintest idea why she'd come to the group, because she'd never wanted to be a woman anyway. She hadn't really wanted to have six babies, or an evening job selling party plan underwear. She had always wanted to be a plumber, installing boilers, fixing blocked U-bends and strutting around in overalls wielding an oxyacetylene torch.

Sandra sat back rather bemused, as Jasmine and some of the others discussed career possibilities in plumbing for a 37-year-old woman with six children. 'Why for God's sake is there such an unholy fuss over being male or female?' she thought tiredly. 'I suppose it's the demon stereotyping again – which I've been doing about this group, if I'm painfully honest. That woman could probably have played around with ballcocks to her heart's content if she'd been born male. Why have six babies, though? I knew after having one that two was my limit! Surely it's not because she's Catholic? Surely nobody living in reality takes any notice of the Pope anymore? I suppose I shouldn't judge, I have no idea of her life circumstances.' The discussion and Sandra's thoughts went on and on independently.

"Coming, Sandra?" Alison's voice broke into her reverie.

"Oh – yes. Sorry, I was daydreaming."

"I noticed. It didn't turn out to be a very good evening, did it! I hope it won't put you off coming again?" Alison seemed genuinely concerned, Sandra noticed with surprise.

"Thank you for coming, Alison and Sandra!" called Jasmine, as they were on their way out. "I hope you found it stimulating. Here's a car sticker each. See you in a fortnight!"

Sandra took the car sticker, gaping at it disbelievingly. It was ready to inform all and sundry that sisters were, after all, doing it for themselves.

Two days later, on her way to the philosophy class, Sandra was reflecting on how fragmented and untidy her week had felt so far. It was early November and even the leaves were swirling around the gutters in untidy piles.

Sandra felt tired, unsure of herself and even a little weepy. 'I wish I didn't have to come here tonight,' she thought defeatedly, kicking a pile of leaves away. 'No, that's not true. I *do* want to come here, but it all takes so much energy and nothing in my life feels particularly easy at the moment. I'm not sure what I'm accomplishing, if anything. I like seeing Isabelle but I don't think I offer her much in the way of constructive conversation. It's mostly her listening to me, although we did have a laugh on Monday.

'The assertiveness group seems a bit weird and I don't feel as though I belong there – and I am *not* going to use that car sticker. Osborn and I seem to be at odds with each other a lot of the time. Madeleine's beginning to worry me again, she just doesn't seem completely happy...

'Philosophy is ridiculously difficult and I've got to give that book back to Geoff tonight, but I don't know what to say to him. I'm getting older by the minute. God appears to have let me down. I've got a spot on my chin. I can't get that stain off the sitting room carpet. I think the washing machine's on the blink again. I'm too fat for this skirt...' Sandra could feel herself beginning to spiral downwards, but seemed powerless to do anything except perpetuate it.

As she approached the CFE, she felt ridiculous tears of self-pity filling her eyes. On entering the building, she went looking for the toilet, where she'd be able to gather herself together. She found it easily enough, considering her hopeless sense of direction. Fortunately, no one else was there, so she took her time combing her hair and testing out the soap dispenser and hand drier for efficiency. After she'd awarded them a joint 7.5 on her *Public Services Efficiency Scale*, she finally felt ready to face the philosophy class. She turned to the door, but found to her horror that it wouldn't open. She pushed and pulled and nearly cried again with frustration.

"I'm such a fool!" she said aloud to herself, trying not to panic. "The caretaker must have come along and locked up while I was drying my hands. I'll have to bang on the door, or something, Shit, shit SHIT!" As she pulled frantically at the door handle again, she heard the noise of a door opening around the corner behind her. She turned around in amazement to see Elaine looking at her enquiringly.

"Hi," said Elaine, as Sandra let go the door handle and tried to appear normal. "Are you OK? I saw you coming in. You looked a bit upset, so I thought I'd better check. Er – did you want something from the supplies cupboard?"

"Ah! Ha! Oh dear, what an utter idiot I am." Sandra began to wish desperately that she could assume another identity.

"What's wrong?" Elaine smiled a little uncertainly.

"You'll never believe this, but I thought this door was the way out." Sandra began to relax in the presence of undemanding Elaine. "Let's go, before my credibility dissolves altogether. Which is the way to the classroom?"

"This way," replied Elaine smiling. "And you're not an idiot. I don't know how you can answer Philip's questions the way you do. I just panic at the thought of being asked something I don't know. I have to force myself to come here sometimes."

"Me too." Sandra smiled back at Elaine in a moment of understanding, before they went into the classroom and sat down. Philip was already speaking, but stopped to say hello.

"Hello Sally and – Eileen, is it?"

"Elaine."

"Ah well, close enough! I'd just begun to talk about the question of Ethics, Sally and Eileen."

Sandra sat quietly, still feeling rather odd and oversensitive, but with a pleasantly increasing feeling of beginning to belong in this group of vaguely like-minded people. Even the room itself was beginning to assume an almost comforting atmosphere of familiarity. She looked around surreptitiously at the others, wondering what they were thinking, as Philip began to mention consequentialists and deontologists. Geoff was looking particularly attractive in a purple jumper. 'How nice,' thought Sandra, 'my favourite colour – and his hair is pleasantly long and beginning to curl. Yes! An absolute, definite – let's see – 9.5 on the *Aesthetically Pleasing Male Scale* – oh!'

Geoff had caught Sandra's eye and was smiling. She smiled back. 'Brown eyes,' she thought with enjoyment. 'Bit of a crooked nose, but interesting lips – definitely kissable – preferably on a warm summer's evening under a starlit sky – walking along a seashore, sharing a bottle of wine...'

"So, would you say you are a consequentialist or a deontologist, Sally?" Philip's enquiring voice broke into Sandra's escalating fantasies.

"Ah!" Sandra's brain went into overdrive, but came up with a dearth of anything remotely appropriate. "I'm sorry, Philip," she said at last. "My mind was elsewhere."

"OK." Philip smiled fleetingly at Sandra in her discomfiture. "I must confess that philosophical musings tend to take me like that too. It's in the text book, anyway."

'What a kind person Philip is,' thought Sandra gratefully. 'He would never put anybody down. That's what it seems like, anyway. Teachers do make such a difference to the learning experience. I'll never forget that old bat who told me I was a stupid little girl in front of the whole class when I was six. I'm sure it's marred my confidence for life. Encouragement is so valuable and vital. I hope I've encouraged Gulliver and Madeleine enough. I hope they know I don't mean it when I call them ignorant louts or cretinous lumps. Oh God! What damage I might unknowingly have inflicted on them! What an

incredible responsibility it is to be a parent – and a teacher, come to that. What's that bandage around Philip's ankle? What's he done to himself now, I wonder? He's such a nice person...'

Sandra was really trying very hard to concentrate, but there seemed to be too many conflicting thoughts and emotions fighting each other for supremacy inside her head. She felt a floating-like sensation of being out of control of her own dynamics. She remained silent during the group discussion and even Philip didn't ask her any more questions. 'I must be giving out no-go signals,' she thought guiltily. 'What do I say to Geoff, though, when I give him back his book?' She felt her stomach lurch at the thought. Whether it was with pleasure or panic, she was unable to tell.

The class finally drew to an end, with Philip asking them to write a 1,000-word discussion on the advantages of Utilitarianism. Sandra seriously began to wonder if she was an innate masochist because of the pleasure she felt at the thought of writing another essay. As the group began to filter away, she searched in her bag for Geoff's book.

"Hi, how are you?" To her surprise, Geoff had come up behind her.

"I'm fine. Well, a bit tired, to be honest. I was going to give you back your book – ah, here it is." Sandra fished it out triumphantly from her bag and handed it to him.

"Er – this isn't my book."

"What? Oh!" Sandra hurriedly snatched *The Male Menopause and You* from Geoff's hand. "I'm sorry, I've brought the wrong one! I'll have to bring yours back next week."

"What did you think of it?" Geoff was trying not to smile too obviously.

"I enjoyed it – honestly! I thought it explained things well. For the first time in my entire life, I think I actually understood what metaphysical means." Sandra gave a small, apologetic laugh.

"Yes, I found it very helpful too. I've got another similar one, actually, that you might enjoy. I can't think of the title offhand. It was something to do with the philosophy of God, though."

"Oh, I'm definitely interested in that. I had... Well yes, I'd like to borrow it, please."

"OK." Geoff turned around to pick up the books that Philip had just dropped behind them on his way out of the door.

"Ah, thank you! Jim, isn't it?"

"Geoff."

"Ah, right. I'll remember all your names by the time the course finishes. At least I've got Sally's firmly committed to memory."

"Actually..." Sandra found she just couldn't bring herself to break the bad news. "What have you done to your ankle?" she asked instead, as the three of them walked along the corridor to the exit.

"I fell up an escalator," explained Philip. "I had my mind on other things. Cultural relativism in relation to the Labour and Conservative parties, if I remember rightly."

"What exactly is cultural relativism?" Sandra found herself intrigued, as Geoff opened the door for her and Philip.

"It's the view that no society has the right to say what is right or wrong about another society."

"So if party politicians operated on a belief system of cultural relativism, things would be a lot quieter?" asked Geoff.

"Quite so!" replied Philip. "Right, here's the old banger. See you next week then, accidents permitting."

"He's a nice person," remarked Sandra to Geoff. She was feeling strangely awkward in the rain. "See you next week, Geoff." She turned up her collar and began to walk away.

"Did you walk?" Geoff called after her. "Can I give you a lift?"

"Oh no, it's OK, thank you." The invitation was very tempting, but Sandra's pride appeared to be causing her problems. "I don't live all that far away, just up the road and along a bit." The rain was beginning to come down much harder.

"It's no trouble, you'll get very wet."

"OK then, I give in. Thank you!"

Sandra's awkwardness began to melt away as he drove her home, despite the fact that she twice gave him ambiguous directions. Her negative feelings of earlier that evening faded away in the simple pleasure of having found someone with whom she felt at ease. It was also very pleasant not to have got soaked to the skin. Geoff drew up outside her house and looked at her.

"Have fun writing the essay," he said, smiling.

"I'll try. You too, of course. Actually, I quite like writing essays, although my son and daughter think I'm a bit mad."

"How old are they?"

"Gulliver's 15 and Madeleine's 10." Sandra hadn't even thought of lying about their ages – somehow there was no need to be anyone but herself with Geoff.

"An unusual name, Gulliver?"

"Yes, I've apologised to him many times over the years. It's my fault, I was in a most peculiar frame of mind after I'd given birth to him. Do you have children?"

"Yes, Geraint's 15 and Opal's 13. My wife Helena was in a most peculiar frame of mind after she'd given birth."

"Ha! Oh well, I'm not the only crazy woman around, then."

"You're not crazy. You're unique, like we all are."

"Actually, I don't mind being a little bit crazy, it stops life from being boring. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that insanity keeps me sane." Sandra laughed a little self-consciously.

"That's an interesting philosophy of life. I do enjoy people's uniqueness."

"It's refreshing to hear you say that. Well, I really must go. Thank you for the lift and the book and the talk." Sandra reached for her bag.

"I enjoyed it." Geoff's hand was covering hers. "Maybe we can talk again?"

"Yes, I'd like that." Sandra was experiencing warmth, external and internal, as she reluctantly withdrew her hand. "Goodnight!"

CHAPTER 8

The following Sunday, the four Dullkettles had been invited to Sandra's parents' house for tea. It was the 5th of November, a dull, uninteresting rain-soaked day. The night before, Sandra had been awake for hours, thinking of all the things she would like to talk about with her mother. When she tried to formulate actual words and sentences, however, the feelings she wanted to convey seemed to metamorphose into clouds of cotton wool inside her head.

She'd tried a few openers, like: 'Hi Mum, was I a difficult child?'; 'Mother, did you actually want my initials to spell SOW?'; 'Mumsie dearest, do you think of me primarily as a daughter or a person?'; 'Materkins, do you like me as I am now?'; 'Mummy, I'm sorry I drowned the tortoise in the twin-tub washing machine...' At that point, Sandra had shot up in bed, horrified.

'I'd forgotten that!' she thought with a panicky feeling. 'Oh my God, I'm a tortoise murderer. Yuck! How obscene. Maybe that's why I've never wanted gerbils or mice or pets of any kind in the house. Maybe that's why I'm secretly rather afraid of the washing machine. Maybe that's why I'm such a stupid, degenerate freak. God, I really fancy a chocolate liqueur.'

Consequently, by the following afternoon, Sandra was feeling tired in an odd sort of way. 'Or is it odd in a tired sort of way?' she mused tiredly. 'Or maybe actually odd and tired,' she continued oddly. 'Well, whatever it is, I wish I could turn off my brain for a while and give myself some relief.'

When they arrived, Leonard opened the door to them with a trowel in his hand. "Hello, come in! Don't mind me, I was just having erection problems."

"Dad?" Sandra's voice was somewhat high pitched in a split-second choice between concern and hilarity.

"Don't squeak, Sandra. My brick wall in the back garden has fallen down again."

"Oh. Where's Mum?"

"In her study writing, the last time I saw her."

"When was that, Grandad, two weeks ago?" Gulliver, now taller than his grandfather, stepped inside the door.

"A bit of a wit as ever, I see, Gulliver!" said Leonard, hitting his grandson playfully on the back.

"A bit of a twit, you mean, Grandad!" said Madeleine brightly, just before Gulliver hit his sister playfully on the back.

"Stop hitting Madeleine," said Osborn, hitting his son playfully on the back.

"Sorry Dad," replied Gulliver, hitting his father playfully on the back.

"Will you lot stop resorting to violence!" shouted Sandra, hitting the nearest one to her (Gulliver) rather less playfully on his chest.

"Ouch! Mind my left nipple!" said Gulliver playfully.

"I'll squeeze your right one mercilessly if you don't back off," hissed Sandra playfully to her son. She realised she found it hard to speak menacingly to someone taller than herself.

While the others went through to the sitting room and started to play cards, Sandra went to her mother's study.

"Hello?" she said, poking her head around the door.

"Hello Sandra, come in." Caroline looked up through her reading glasses before taking them off. "Sorry, I didn't hear the doorbell. I was just going through some old papers. Take that pile of books off the chair and sit down."

"I always used to sit in this chair," said Sandra nostalgically. "I must have sat here and read *Cinderella* at least a hundred times while you were working."

"Yes, then it was *What Katy Did* and then *Lorna Doone* and then *Lady Chatterley's Lover* behind the cover of the atlas." Caroline placed her glasses on the desk.

"I didn't realise you knew about my wicked ruse?"

"Of course. I showed quite remarkable restraint in waiting till you'd finished, so I could read it myself." They both laughed a little self-consciously.

"I had a proper D H Lawrence phase," said Sandra, sitting down in the chair. Her legs automatically curled up beneath her, as they always had done in the past. "It seems ages since I last sat here." She felt strangely comfortable. 'Or is it comfortably strange?' she thought. 'No brain, relax!'

"You've seemed busy with Osborn and the children for a long time," Caroline was saying.

"I was always terrified that Gulliver and Madeleine would come in here and mess up all your stuff," remembered Sandra. "Then when they were older, I'd simply got out of the habit, I suppose."

"Well, it's nice to see you here again, anyway," said Caroline, smiling. "How are you?"

"I'm OK." Sandra felt suddenly shy, realising this was the perfect time to reveal herself to her mother. "I – umm – I remembered about the tortoise last night." Her voice seemed to be shrivelling up in her throat.

"You did?" Caroline's eyes widened in surprise. "You were so upset at the time. You had nightmares for months afterwards. You used to run out of the room when I was using the washing machine, too."

"Did I?" Sandra felt a sudden unnerving sensation of noise, fear and swishing water.

"Yes, I was worried about you for quite a while. I remember having psychological discussions with Leonard that eventually ended in a rip-roaring row."

"What about?"

"Well, as I remember it, he said we should do two things to cure you. One was to buy you six more tortoises and leave you in a room with them until you realised nothing awful would happen. That was a behaviourist remedy, of course. Implosion therapy – crazy, I told him! Fortunately, not long after that, it was decided that importing tortoises was cruel anyway, so that was that."

"Think of all the lettuce and cucumber you were saved from buying."

"Yes! Myself, I thought that your maturing self-concept would help to sort it out, with a little work on your self-esteem on my part. I used to come into your room on my way to bed every night to cuddle you and tell you that you were a valuable and special person and not a bit like a female pig..."

"Really? I never knew. I was asleep." Sandra's eyes darted to the window in embarrassment, before looking again at her mother.

"Yes, I know I should have told you while you were awake, but..." Caroline's eyes also found refuge in looking out of the window.

"What was the other thing Dad said you should do?"

"We should have taken you to a launderette and turned on all the washing machines simultaneously – another behaviourist remedy called flooding. I remember telling him to stuff his behaviourism right back where it came from. We didn't speak for ages afterwards."

"This is very interesting."

"Oh, there's plenty more I could tell you. It's funny really, I was sorting through my old papers and came across all my notes on my old acronym hypothesis only this morning."

"Ah, I wanted to ask you about that."

"What about it?"

"Well, basically – why did you saddle me with the initials SOW?"

"Ye-es. I'm sorry, Sandra, it was my fault. I was deeply into my hypothesis at that time and I must confess to feeling resentful that I was pregnant before I wanted to be. I thought it would be a wonderful opportunity for a living experiment."

"You mean me?"

"Yes. I *am* sorry, truly. Your father pointed out, of course, that as a non-laboratory experiment, it was prone to far too much subjective interpretation. I told him that his so-called scientific experiments with rats, not to mention adolescent boys, were totally dehumanising and morally wrong."

"Adolescent boys?" Sandra was intrigued at all this hitherto unknown information.

"Oh, something his colleague diverted into. Nothing dreadful, just... Well, you'd better ask him yourself." Caroline looked suddenly evasive. "Meanwhile, you were growing up into such a sweet little thing."

"Thing?"

"Oh, you know what I mean!"

"Not like a sow after all, then?"

"As much as I'm like a cod or a cow. Don't answer that! Oh, I do feel rather stupid about all this."

"Don't worry, I understand. Well, I'm not sure I do understand really, but I know we all do some funny things sometimes."

Sandra was beginning to feel released from anxiety and free to speak spontaneously. "Actually, I could never understand why I lumbered Gulliver and Madeleine with their acronyms. I can remember having that conversation with you once about your hypothesis, so the idea must have been in my head. I can also remember feeling most peculiar after they were born – especially with Gulliver somehow. I felt as though my life wasn't my own anymore. Everything felt out of true for ages, like a strange dream I was trapped inside. Although I loved breastfeeding, I can remember the feeling when I stopped – a heady, releasing feeling of being in possession of my own body again. But as for letting them be known as GOD and MAD – I just don't know."

"It was probably a touch of post-natal depression. I suffered badly from that myself. Their names were interesting to me because of my hypothesis, of course."

"Right. I suppose post-natally, hormones are pretty much up the creek."

"Exactly. Plus the enormous change in life perspectives that babies seem to bring with them." Caroline was sitting back thoughtfully. "Do they ever mention their acronyms?"

"Oh yes. Well, they joke about it, but I've got a sneaking suspicion that they either resent it, or they think I've got a screw loose."

"What does Osborn say?"

"Oh, he knows I've got several screws loose."

"I feel partly responsible for this," said Caroline. "Me and my hypothesis! Although it was original research, you know. Besides, acronyms of people's names do happen by chance – just think of Dad, Basil and Sybil, for instance."

"Dad's is neither here nor there really – LAW."

"Don't be too sure."

"I like BAD, though and SID is just a bit silly."

"Do you realise what Sybil's acronym was before she married Basil?"

"No, I don't think I've heard anyone mention it."

"Probably because it was SIN."

"Really?" Sandra hooted with laughter. "With their religious persuasion, too! Oh, isn't this cruel of me to laugh at them. It's not really them, though, it's life. Life can be such a scream sometimes."

"In more ways than one." They both sat quietly for a few moments until Caroline spoke again. "How are you getting along with Isabelle?"

"Fine. Did she tell you we go to the pub now?"

"She mentioned it. I haven't seen her for a while, I don't go into the centre much these days. In fact, I'm wondering what to do with my life now I'm really retired. Lots of women my age seem to be happily ensconced in good works and domesticity. It's true, I actually did bake a coffee aubergine spice cake yesterday – but on the whole, I want to try something else. I was thinking of joining a creative writing group."

"Most writing groups are creative."

"Are you being funny, Sandra?"

"Trying – yes, funny and trying. I'm enjoying talking with you like this. I've got this thing about being real with people lately."

"Do you mean honest?"

"Yes, I suppose I do. I'm so fed up with role playing. It keeps people confined within such conventional expectations and stops them from realising their own potential. I feel rather strongly about this."

"So I see. Of course, some role keeping is necessary for society to run relatively smoothly. Also, people like to know where they stand."

"Yes, of course. No, I meant people who indulge in role playing without even questioning it."

"They may have no idea of how they're behaving."

"I suppose not. I suppose it's more comfortable to have assigned positions in life – statuses, like mother, wife, teacher – and to live accordingly. Personally, though, I'd just rather be myself."

"But part of yourself is mother and wife."

"Ye-es. But I'm not going to let my life roles eclipse my life potential."

"What does Osborn say?" Caroline was smiling a little nervously, Sandra thought.

"Oh, I don't know! I feel as though he doesn't really understand, although I want him to." Sandra shifted her position in the chair, uncomfortable at the realisation that people kept asking her about Osborn, as if nothing she aspired to of her own accord could exist without taking him into account.

"It's difficult when someone in a relationship begins to change the old patterns of behaviour. It can upset the whole applecart." Caroline rested her chin on her hand. "I suppose he's quite intelligent though, Sandra, and he'll basically just have to get on with it. Of course, when you think of his parents, you realise there may be a few problems – but who doesn't have problems? There, I'm being cruel about Basil and Sybil now. I don't mean it like that, it's just that their perspective on life is so different to ours."

"You mean they don't question everything?"

"Yes, that's part of it. Also, their particular form of religion seems to have narrowed their outlook on life to a set of rules and behaviours that seem, quite frankly, archaic and outlandish."

"Oh, I'm so glad I'm not the only one to see it that way, although Osborn questioned their religion years ago in his adolescence and their beloved firstborn Lawrence left home as soon as he possibly could. Even their longed-for daughter Kirsty

finally moved to Cambridgeshire to get away from them. Osborn said there were loads of horrible rows about everything in his family."

"I'm not surprised, since Basil and Sybil's applears were well and truly upset by their own children. It happens, you know! But I think Osborn seems a bit more perceptive than other members of his family."

"He says he doesn't believe in God because of them, whereas I think I do believe in God. I want to, anyway."

"I believe in God, but I wonder if your God is the same God as mine?"

"What do you mean?"

"I can't help but think how each one of us has an idea of God that's deeply and fundamentally subjective – which of course leads to the question of how can anyone possibly define objectively the reality of God?"

"You sound like my philosophy tutor. But that's an intellectual process. What about the experiential reality of God?"

"You sound like a philosophy student, Sandra. I don't know, I rather think my intellectualising gets in the way. As I become older, though, I'm inclined to believe rather than endlessly question – although then I think I'm merely indulging in some life preserving wish fulfilment, because I rather go for the idea of a future existence."

"Mmm." Sandra wanted to take it further, to talk about her dream. Somehow, though, something seemed to be holding her back. She was afraid that although she was delighting in this newly found openness with her mother, the dream would be a step too far.

"You're pensive?" Caroline raised an eyebrow.

"I was just thinking how much I've wanted to talk with you like this for a long time."

"Adult to adult?"

"Yes. I used to feel you were so much a mother and a psychologist and I wanted to know you as a person."

"You mean stuff the roles and let's be real?"

"Yes. Honest with each other."

"I feel as if you're just beginning to let me know the real you, Sandra."

"You mean I've been playing the daughter role too much?"

"Well, you may have needed to, as much as I may have needed to play the mother and psychologist roles, but now something seems to have changed."

"Mum?"

"Yes?"

"I used to feel you and Dad were observing me. I didn't like it. I remember thinking I wanted to be like the tortoise and hide inside my protective shell."

"I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to make life difficult for you, I was just trying to cope with it myself." Caroline seemed to suddenly become tired. "I know what, let's go and have a piece of my cake. Where are the others?"

"Playing cards in the sitting room, I think."

Sandra and Caroline went to find them. "I've got a bad hand," Sandra could hear Leonard saying seriously.

"Probably arthritis, Grandad," she heard Gulliver reply.

"Hello you lot!" she said gaily, entering the room.

"Hello Mum," replied Madeleine. "It's your first lay, Gulliver."

"At last! Well, it's official banging night tonight."

"Gulliver! He means firework night," Sandra explained for the benefit of Madeleine and Leonard. "Oh, thank you, Mum." As she prepared to take a piece of the coffee aubergine spice cake her mother was offering her, she wondered why Gulliver was constantly joking. 'Is he covering up a deep-seated fear of seriousness?' she thought concernedly. 'Or does he know he makes me laugh and does it for praise and attention? Or is he just basically around the bend?'

She gasped a little as the cake affronted her taste buds. 'On the whole, I think I'll go for the last explanation, it's easier to cope with.'

As she lay awake that night, Sandra remembered her mother's remark about creative writing. It had been something she'd once enjoyed doing herself, particularly poetry. Obscene adolescent verses aside, she'd once thought of herself as very vaguely, almost likely and quite possibly, rather talented. Smiling at her once much healthier self-esteem, she now explored the real possibility of reverting to verse.

Over the years, she'd almost thoughtlessly jotted down pleasing phrases and lines that had entered her head in moments of creative tension. She remembered a notebook she'd secreted somewhere containing first lines that had never matured. She chuckled inwardly as she remembered a poem of epic proportions she had once quite badly wanted to write about reality.

In reality, all that had ever come into being was the first line about knickers airing on a vacuum cleaner handle – something that had once struck her most forcibly as an illustration of distasteful reality. In reality, the offending object had been Madeleine's navy-blue school knickers, but nobody needed ever to have known that.

Sandra lay peacefully, remembering the pleasure of the visit to her parents. As they'd been leaving, Caroline had pressed a paperback book into Sandra's hand. It was about self-actualisation and Sandra had already read the first two chapters that evening. The book itself seemed to be a symbol of the new relationship that Sandra felt she was embarking upon with her mother. Leonard had muttered something about hippies and psycho-babble when he'd noticed the title, but Sandra had just smiled at him. One day soon, she had thought, she would talk with her father as well.

The book had mentioned creativity, Sandra remembered, as she reflected on the past and her mother. A first line seemed to surreptitiously creep into her mind about golden images of warmth, followed by some further possibilities. Sandra suddenly felt excited and very far from sleep.

She crept out of bed and went carefully down the stairs. She found some paper and a pen and began to write. It was very difficult. She kept getting images of her childhood past mixed up with an insistent vision of Madeleine's navy-blue knickers on the vacuum cleaner handle.

Finally, she gave up and went to make some tea. It was 01:13. The kettle had just finished boiling, when Gulliver appeared. Sandra's heart beat a little anxiously.

"What's the matter? Aren't you feeling well?"

"No, I'm fine. I just can't sleep and I heard the kettle boiling."

"Would you like some tea?"

"I might as well, thanks." He yawned and stretched. "Actually, I keep worrying about *The Anti-Theory Anti-Intellectual Debating Society*. I keep wondering whether I'm a good enough chairperson and whether my subjects for debate are original enough, that sort of thing."

"Have you had any feedback?"

"Well yes, we did have a vote last week about possible new chairpersonship."

"What a mouthful. How did it go?"

"Oh, it was declared unanimously that I would be reinstated as leader for the next three months."

"Unanimous? That's good."

"Yes, there were only two dissenters who found my subjects for debate too unreal."

"Er..." Sandra didn't complete her sentence as Gulliver continued his train of thought aloud.

"But what's reality, I keep asking myself – and it real, anyway?"

CHAPTER 9

November had finally slid away in a depressing aura of damp and drizzling cold. Sandra was on her way to meet Isabelle, sitting uncomfortably in a crowded, steamed-up bus and feeling intensely unsociable.

'I wish I could drive,' she thought almost savagely, as a small boy behind her kept kicking the back of her seat. 'I should have learned when I was 17 and had a slowly

accumulating supply of self-confidence and money. I feel such a drop out from the human race sometimes. Maybe more of a non-starter. But the roads are so terrifying – or rather, the morons on them are. I wouldn't be able to close my eyes when lorries loomed, or when cars shot out of nowhere.'

"Drive into me, madam, why don't you?" shouted the driver suddenly, as a car shot out of nowhere. "Too busy chatting to her friend," he said to anyone within hearing distance behind him. "Bloody women drivers again."

'Ha!' thought Sandra. 'What about male drivers, my man?' She looked around her to see most people seemingly slumped in apathy. 'Why don't we hear people talking about bloody men drivers again, that's what I'd like to know. Why this incredible dichotomy of gender (God, I love big words) when really there are just good, bad and mediocre drivers, regardless of whether they're male or female?'

She looked at the driver intently. 'Sexist idiot,' she thought, a little unkindly. 'I bet he doesn't know how to make a decent vegetable lasagne and iron a perfect crease down a pair of trousers – although to be honest, neither do I. I wish I *could* make a decent vegetable lasagne and iron a perfect crease down a pair of trousers. No I don't!'

She tried to look behind the large woman with the three bulging shopping bags sitting beside her, in order to see out of the steamed-up window. 'Ah, a few bus stops to go yet. This is interesting, really, the way my ire rises at certain issues in a way it never used to before. Jasmine and her feminist friends would be proud of me. No they wouldn't, they'd expect me to approach the driver and state my views assertively. Well, I'm not going to! I might cause an accident. People might look at me. I might be thrown off the bus. After I've paid, too...'

Half an hour later, Sandra and Isabelle sat in *The King's Buttock*. It was the first time they'd met for three weeks, as Isabelle had firstly had a heavy cold and secondly, had apparently been otherwise engaged.

"Sorry about the last few weeks," said Isabelle to Sandra. "It's really good to see you again. It wasn't that I didn't want to see you, I was just rather tied up with house moving and with Eric."

"Gosh, tied up with Eric? I didn't know you were into that sort of thing, Isabelle."

"You seem bright, Sandra?"

"I do? Amazing. I wasn't feeling bright this morning. Maybe it was the weather or something, but I do feel much better sitting here with you. I missed having someone to tell all the funny bits to – the bits I just don't think Osborn would understand, because I'm not sure *I* understand them."

"Sounds interesting. What bits?"

"Oh, nothing special. November seems to have been such a dreary, dead month. Apart from Geoff, that is."

"Yes? The last time you spoke about him, he'd given you a lift home and held your hand. Any developments?"

"Well, he gave me a lift home the following week. We talked a bit about philosophy and about ourselves. He gave me a lift home the week after that, as well." Sandra laughed lightly and sipped her half-calorie satsuma and kiwi fruit juice. She felt warm at the memory. Too warm for comfort, she thought guiltily, as she realised exactly how much she was looking forward to the coming Thursday evening.

"Did he hold your hand again?" asked Isabelle with unconcealed curiosity.

"Yes." Sandra felt embarrassed. "It doesn't mean anything, though. That is, it just feels like two people being friendly, that's all. I find it very comforting."

"Exciting at all?" Isabelle raised her eyebrows smilingly.

"Just a touch, maybe." Sandra sat reflecting for a moment on her own terminology. "I didn't go to the class last week, because I had a cold and although I kind of missed seeing him, I missed philosophy just as much, which was comforting to me."

"Why comforting?"

"I suppose I feel confused about liking being with another man so much."

"So much?" Isabelle smiled again. "Take no notice of my comments, Sandra, I'm merely feeling a little bit wicked, that's all. I do understand something of your conflict,

believe me. Like everything, of course, you'll have to find your own way to resolve it – which I have every confidence you will."

"Thank you for saying that." Sandra looked at Isabelle appreciatively. "I'm not sure I believe it inside, but it helps me to hear you say it. Oh, I *am* looking forward to seeing Geoff again this Thursday!" She hesitated, investigating the feeling. "And it's so good to be able to say it aloud, to admit it to you as well as to myself."

"I know what you mean," said Isabelle thoughtfully. "I'm just rediscovering the joy of being truly myself with someone. It's so liberating."

"Eric?" It was Sandra's turn to smile.

"Yes." Isabelle hesitated. "You know I mentioned house moving?"

"Yes?"

"Well, Eric asked me to move in with him, so I have."

"Wow." Sandra's inner response wasn't entirely positive. "Are you happy?"

"Very. I'd forgotten what it feels like to be in love."

"In love?" Sandra was wondering at the strange sensation of disquiet she felt.

"I rather think so. Funny, isn't it." Isabelle laughed a little ruefully.

"Funny? Why?"

"Well, me at 50-something, thinking I'm in love again, after all this time. Life certainly is strange. That reminds me, your mother dropped by the office the other day."

"Is that strange?" Sandra laughed.

"Only in a comment she made – something about it being a good job she wasn't still researching her acronym hypothesis anymore. Ah, here come our soya chicken and alfalfa sandwiches at last."

After she left Isabelle, Sandra went into the city centre to attempt some Christmas shopping. She had meant to start weeks ago, but had kept putting it off. Christmas had begun to fill her several years ago with a deep sense of disillusion that seemed to become worse with time.

Every year she ranted and raved to the nearest available pair of ears that it was utterly ridiculous to put up Christmas lights in the city during early October. Every year she started out determined to buy small and inexpensive, but tasteful and thoughtful presents. Every year she ended up in a panic, thinking she hadn't spent as much money on people as they would on her and therefore ended up buying extra bits that added up to far more than was necessary.

Every year she was determined to cut down on food and drink, but somehow the tins of biscuits, chocolate decorations, economy sized (obscenely enormous) packets of nuts, the Christmas pudding nobody really liked, the log cakes, the mince pies she detested making and the bottles of alcohol they couldn't really afford, all found their way into the kitchen. Every year she ended up hating Christmas – the commercialism, the stress of cooking, the financial outlay, the gluttony, the religious sham and most of all, her ineffectual inner rebellion.

The shops were crowded, despite the antisocial weather. Sandra wandered among the men's gift section in one of the main stores, looking askance at the rows of golf balls containing after shave, golf balls gift wrapped in flannels, golf balls with diaries, soap in the shape of golf balls, musical underpants with motifs of men wielding golf clubs, leather wallets with special places for golf tees and rows of incredibly tacky joke socks (some involving golf balls).

The women's gift section was slightly more innovative, with potpourri stationery, potpourri wrapped in knickers, potpourri-scented talcum powder, potpourri with candles, corn dollies with potpourri stuffed up their dresses and potpourri-scented potpourri. She was surprised not to have seen a unisex potpourri-filled golf ball set.

'Half the world is starving,' thought Sandra, 'and the other half (like me) seriously considers wasting inordinate amounts of money on totally unnecessary rubbish like this, purely for the sake of convention. We truly need our heads examined! Well, sod convention. Sod golf balls and potpourri. I refuse to be sucked into this mindless, commercial mass hysteria. Sod Christmas. I'm going home.'

The Dullkettles were seated around the tea table, although it was often used as a breakfast and lunch table too.

"Madeleine?" asked Sandra. "What would you like for Christmas?"

"A boyfriend," replied Madeleine. "Or some new clothes. Or some make-up. Or a hair dryer. Or some boots. Or all of that."

"Goodness, Maddy," said Sandra, surprised. "Why do you want a boyfriend?" She realised she was feeling alarmed at Madeleine's reply and its sudden leap from the childhood Christmas requests of the previous year.

"Claire's going out with Andrew Fairhead and Becky's going out with Matthew Strong," replied Madeleine, "and I feel left out."

"Oh dear," said Sandra. "You're only 10, though!"

"Claire's 11," replied Madeleine, "and anyway, some girls in my class had boyfriends last year."

"This is worrying," said Sandra, more to herself than to Madeleine. "I know girls are growing up more quickly these days, but I just hadn't realised." She smiled at Madeleine. "You'll have a boyfriend when the time is right, Maddybelle, you can't rush these things. He needs to be the right boy for you, not just any boy so you can say you have a boyfriend."

"It's always me that's different, though," said Madeleine. "Claire and Becky always tease me about being different to them."

"Do they?" Sandra was about to say that she didn't feel they were very good friends if they did that, but decided that would be too upsetting for Madeleine. "What about the other girls in your class, have they got boyfriends?"

"No, not all of them," replied Madeleine. "Actually, not many of them. I'd really love to have some new clothes, though."

"OK, we'll go into town, just you and me. Or Dad can come if he likes?" Sandra had caught Osborn's glance.

"Yes, I'd really like that," came Osborn's unexpected reply. "We can buy you some new boots as well."

"Thank you, Dad! Can we go this weekend?"

"We'll go soon, Christmas is quite close. What about you, Gully?" asked Sandra.

"Don't call me Gully. I'm not coming with you," said Gulliver. "But I'd like a quadrasonic personal stereo, a mobile satellite TV system, a complete new wardrobe – the one I've had since I was two is falling to bits – the Oxford book of rhyming expletives and six dozen pairs of socks because I couldn't find any again this morning."

"OK, I suppose it was my fault for asking," said Sandra. "How about you, Osborn?"

"Me? I'd like a quiet life and freedom from responsibility for providing for you all," replied Osborn. "I wouldn't mind six dozen pairs of socks too, since mine are always disappearing as well."

"Very exciting," said Sandra, awaiting reciprocation that never came. "Oh well," she continued brightly, "what would you like for Christmas, Sandra, my darling? Let me see..." As she seriously began to think, she was alarmed at the image of Geoff that popped into her mind – Geoff wearing a pair of potpourri fragranced underpants, complete with an interestingly placed golf ball motif.

"What are you smiling at?" asked Osborn suspiciously.

"Oh, nothing much," replied Sandra guiltily, with a small laugh. "I can't think what I really want." She looked at Osborn, suddenly moved by his air of depression. "I wish I could make you happy," she said gently, touching his hair as she got up to clear the plates from the table.

"You could," he said quietly. "You could go back to being the person I married."

As evening slowly approached on Thursday, Sandra found herself counting the hours until she would see Geoff. 'This is ridiculous,' she thought, catching herself counting 2 hours 52 minutes and 35 seconds to go. 'Pull yourself together, woman, he's only a friend who happens to be male – with nice eyes – and a clean, manly profile – warm hands – interesting ideas – oh God, 2 hours 51 minutes and 55 seconds to go.'

At 1 hour 9 minutes and 48 seconds to go, Sandra was watching the news on television. The headlines were filled with human tragedy. It was the pictures of sick, starving children that finally twisted knives of despair in her heart. She looked away from a close-up of a dying baby who was too far gone to care about the flies buzzing around his nose. She felt she had betrayed such innocent victims by her mere contemplation of buying potpourri and golf ball trivia.

'God,' she thought. 'Where are You? Why are those children born into a suffering existence with no other purpose in life except to survive? How can I be so concerned about myself and my so-called self-actualisation, when these people are dying in droves for lack of food, clean water and medicine? Why the potpourri and golf balls, for God's sake?'

She got up, unable to sit there in apparent apathy and unable to communicate her distress to the others. She went upstairs and found herself kneeling at the side of the bed. Tears began to pour from her eyes.

"God," she sobbed quietly, "God, God, God." No other words would come. She felt nothing but a gradual relief from pent-up emotion. 'Oh well,' she thought eventually, getting up to go and look in the mirror. 'Life has to go on. God, my face is a mess, where are the *Mood Matching Toilet Rolls*? I suppose we're all dealt a certain hand of cards in life and we just have to play them accordingly, to the best of our ability. I can't help thinking I've been dealt a joker by mistake, though.' She reapplied mascara and treated herself to a generous squirt of *Hysteria*, the perfume that Osborn had given her for her birthday.

She looked at her watch and sighed. 'Only 53 minutes and 10 seconds to go,' she thought guiltily. 'I wonder what God thinks of me feeling the way I do? I wonder what Geoff will be wearing tonight? His purple jumper, I hope, with the navy cords...'

53 minutes and 10 seconds later, Sandra sat anxiously glancing at her watch. It was 7 o'clock and Geoff had not yet appeared. Five excruciating minutes later, Philip had appeared with a box of *Mega-King Size Tissues for Men* and had begun the class with the news that he had a bit of a cold. His eyes did look rather puffy, thought Sandra, through the biting disappointment she was feeling at Geoff's absence.

'Maybe his car's broken down and he'll be here in a minute – maybe his daughter's pet hamster has given birth to sextuplets – maybe he's too upset about the state of the world to come – maybe he's looking for a book to lend me – maybe he suddenly thought he needed to run a cool iron over his purple jumper.' Sandra kept feeding herself with fresh waves of hope.

Another five minutes passed. 'Don't be silly, Sandra. He's not coming and you'll just have to live with it,' she thought with a sigh. 'It doesn't matter, he's only a casual friend. Actually, is he a friend or an acquaintance? No, I'd say he was definitely a friend. But really, it just doesn't matter.'

However, although Sandra's thought processes appeared to be agreeing with her, the rest of her seemed to be engulfed in a reaction of despair. She sat slumped in her chair, her head resting on her hand, desperately fighting her feelings, until her cheeks were flushed and her head was aching. Her eyes wandered across the room and noticed Elaine, slumped strangely enough in a similar attitude. As Elaine looked back at Sandra, both raised their eyebrows enquiringly, then smiled wanly before looking towards Philip, who began to sneeze for the umpteenth time.

Sandra was vaguely aware that Philip was trying to impart some enthusiasm about Logic and Alternative Logics. She managed to catch something about a Law of the Excluded Middle before Philip fell into a rather prolonged fit of coughing. Sandra began to feel very sorry for him and was relieved when he stopped coughing, blew his nose resoundingly and turned apologetically to the class.

"I'm so sorry," he said rather hoarsely, "but this just isn't working. I'm going to have to break up the class early and go home to bed. It's the only logical thing to do." He sneezed twice more before continuing. "Next week is the last class before Christmas, so we can finish early then too and go to the pub – it's a kind of tradition." He tried to laugh a little, but started to cough instead. Sandra felt extremely sorry for him.

'This is very strange,' she thought as she put away her books. 'I'm not really a maternal person at all, but Philip seems to bring out certain maternal-type feelings in me. I want to wrap his scarf around his neck and turn up his collar to keep out the cold. Weird – what *is* happening to me?'

Sandra noticed that Elaine was still looking ill at ease. She walked along beside her as they both left the classroom.

"Are you OK?" she asked a little uncertainly.

"No, not really," replied Elaine with a heavy sigh. "I had a row at home before I came here tonight and now we can go home early, I don't want to."

"I know the feeling," replied Sandra, wondering whether she should ask any further questions. They carried on into the car park. "You walk to the class, don't you?" asked Sandra, mainly to break the silence, which was becoming awkward.

"I walked tonight, but sometimes I drive." Elaine seemed reluctant to speak. Sandra was aware of a sinking feeling at her own non-driving status, as she realised she had been hoping that quiet Elaine was a non-driver like herself. 'What a selfish person I am,' she thought, 'wanting Elaine to be a non-achiever in an area in which I'm obviously beginning to feel very non-achieving myself, just to assuage my own feelings of inadequacy.'

She suddenly had an idea, then just as suddenly was almost overcome by a lack of confidence. She knew she had to make a decision quickly whether to say anything or not, as they'd already left the college car park.

"Seeing we're early, how about going for a drink at the pub that's fairly close to here?" she blurted out.

"Yes, that would be nice." Elaine seemed to brighten a little.

"Good," said Sandra, smiling with relief that her suggestion had been worthwhile.

They reached *The Queen's Uterus* eight minutes later and were pleased to see it wasn't horribly crowded. Sandra lived through a moment of acute embarrassment when she realised she'd left her purse at home, but Elaine seemed only too pleased to buy her a drink.

They settled down at a corner table and looked at each other a little uncertainly. "Thank you for suggesting this," began Elaine. "I don't want to burden you with my troubles, but it's just good to be here with someone."

"Well, I'm not exactly keen on going home early myself, to be honest," said Sandra. "Things have been a little rough for me there lately, too. I don't mind at all, though, if you want to talk about anything. It's not a burden, believe me. In fact, you'd probably feel much better if you *did* talk about it." She tried to smile encouragingly, but felt as though she had failed when Elaine's face seemed to cloud over.

"I don't want to frighten you away, that's all."

"You won't frighten me away." Sandra was puzzled.

"You don't know what I have to say, if I tell you."

"That's true. But we're all human, Elaine, we all have our foibles and strange bits and secrets and what have you." Sandra couldn't help wondering what Elaine was so obviously struggling with.

"I want to tell you, but I really am afraid that it'll put you off me." Elaine looked doubtfully into Sandra's eyes.

"I do my best not to judge people." Sandra found herself choosing her words carefully. "No matter what someone may have done, I always remember that religious saying about there for the grace of God go I, or whatever it is. Maybe it should be more like there but for a different set of life variables go I, if you prefer?" Sandra looked into Elaine's eyes, trying to offer the reassurance she felt Elaine needed.

There was a silence as Elaine looked away, frowning slightly, before she eventually looked back and spoke. "I'm a lesbian," she said quietly. "I've realised it for a number of years, but now I really feel as if I want to come out and to stop living a lie. Yesterday I told my parents. Have I shocked you?"

"No, I'm not shocked," replied Sandra calmly. 'What a shock,' she found herself thinking. 'I didn't see that one coming. This person sitting opposite me is a person first and foremost, just as I am, so why do I feel ever so slightly uncomfortable at her news?'

"I feel a mixture of relief and fear," Elaine was saying. "My mother in particular kept saying I would never settle down and get married if I didn't make any attempt to go out with boys. I got so sick of it all, because it felt as if she wasn't listening to me or caring about *me*."

"You don't get along very well with your mother?"

"No, she prefers my older brother to me."

"How about your father, do you get along with him?"

"He's OK. I get the feeling he sort of loves me in a distant way."

"That sounds like my father and me." Sandra was surprised to hear herself say those words.

"I don't know, I just feel so confused lately."

As Sandra heard Elaine echoing her own recently acknowledged sense of confusion, she suddenly felt desperately tired. She remembered the absence of Geoff and felt like crying at her stupid self-induced vulnerability. She thought of Osborn and the coldness and mistrust she kept seeing in his eyes. She thought of the dying little boy and the rows of golf ball soaps. She sighed deeply and tried to concentrate on Elaine.

"Life is so confusing, once you try to face it honestly," she said.

"You seem so sensible, though, Sandra, as if you've sussed out everything. I always thought that by the time I was 30, I would have my life sorted out and be happy. But I'm 24 already and I feel I'm going nowhere."

"I'm 39 and I'm just starting to look at myself honestly," said Sandra. "In some ways I feel as though my life is just beginning, although I must admit that in other ways it feels as though things are in the process of dying, which feels sad and uncomfortable and scary. I'm sorry, I'll depress you if I carry on like this."

"No! To be honest, I thought you were looking a bit disturbed this evening, it didn't seem like you."

"I think disturbed is the right word."

"Thank you for this evening, Sandra."

"I'm glad I thought of it."

"I meant thank you for accepting me as I am."

"That's OK." Sandra felt she was beginning to flounder in a morass of tiredness and unexplored reactions. "I feel as if I'm not much use to you, actually, because I'm so damn tired and rather confused myself."

"Do you want to talk about it?" asked Elaine, looking serious.

"Umm – yes, I do, but I don't feel that now is the right time. For me, I mean." Sandra tried rather unsuccessfully to smile.

"OK." Elaine looked disappointed. "Another time, maybe?"

"Yes, I'd like that. I'll give you my phone number, so you can ring me if you want to during the week." Sandra drained her wet martini. "Well, I guess it's time to go home now, whether we want to or not!"

Sandra lay in bed that night with the first line of a poem forming in her mind. Since her creative reawakening the night following the talk with her mother, she had experienced a veritable outpouring of poetical expression. She had already completed four poems of varying length and subject matter and was well into her original epic about reality.

She had also begun to read poetry quite prolifically, but was experiencing difficulty with contemporary poems in particular. They seemed to range from the subjectively banal to the intellectually indecipherable. Many seemed to set out specifically to shock by explicit violent sexual imagery and unwarranted use of the word 'fuck'. Others were just plain boring, about sunsets, or Milton Keynes in winter. Hardly any seemed to express deep inner feelings with a depth like Sandra felt hers did.

She reflected for a while on her perceived alienation from the poetical genre. 'It's convention again, I suppose,' she ruminated. 'The particular socio-artistic convention of the time. Well, sod socio-artistic convention, I shall just be myself.'

She lay thoughtfully for a while, slowly drifting into sleep. 'I wonder if I should include the word 'fuck' in my next poem?'

CHAPTER 10

Throughout the following weekend, Sandra was aware of feeling strangely and irrevocably rebellious. Her silent inner reactions, which she had once kept so tightly hidden inside herself, seemed to be boiling up and spilling out into actual physical or verbal expression.

She tried to sit down quietly on Saturday afternoon to write Christmas cards, while Osborn and Lawrence (who had turned up half an hour ago for an unexpected visit) were watching football on television. She'd enjoyed Christmas shopping with Madeleine and Osborn that morning, until the crowds had become unbearable. By then, though, Madeleine had been happy to find a new pair of boots and a new pair of jeans, so they'd called it a day.

'It's a Saturday in December and I have the feeling we're wasting our precious time this afternoon,' she thought. Although she was in another room, the muted sounds of the television and the sudden yells of Osborn and Lawrence were rather profoundly annoying.

'Here I am writing cards to distant members of Osborn's family I've never even met,' she thought, 'as well as to people I see every week – and some people, to be honest, I rather dislike. In fact, I'm not sending them cards because I want to, but simply because I'd feel guilty if I didn't. It's so ridiculous!'

She tried to make herself feel better by choosing a nice card to someone she actually wanted to wish a happy Christmas – an old friend she hadn't seen for a number of years. After deciding carefully on something witty but warm to say, she picked up her favourite pen and started to write in her best handwriting. A sudden verbal eruption of "Goal!" from the other room made her jerk her pen in alarm, causing a nasty splodge of ink to appear on the card.

"Bloody football!" she shouted, standing up and throwing the card to the floor. "I LOATHE football! It's the most insanely boring, ridiculous waste of time and money in the entire Western world! The mentality of football players and football fans completely baffles me! In fact, the whole sporting world baffles me! Sport, you say? A load of sodding balls is what I say!"

The following day, Sandra had felt rebellious in a creative sort of way, which had led her uncharacteristically into the kitchen. Her creativity had taken the form of an eclectic curry of vast proportions, since it was an excellent way of clearing out the food cupboard. It felt definitely therapeutic to empty the contents of various old packets and jars into the large pan and watch everything merge into the accommodating curry sauce. By the time Sandra had finished, she'd even impressed herself.

Madeleine came sauntering into the kitchen, sniffing the air and peering into the pan rather cautiously.

"Time to dish up," announced Sandra triumphantly.

"Is this a curry, Mum?" asked Madeleine.

"It certainly is," replied Sandra, as they both gazed into the volcanic pan.

"Ah – ah!" cried Sandra, as the curry suddenly rebelled all over the side of the pan and on to the top of the cooker, where its overspill sizzled for a while until it was finally dead.

"Lunch nearly ready?" asked Osborn, sauntering into the kitchen. "I would have helped, but I think I might have caught Lawrence's cold, my eyes feel really heavy. Is that a curry?"

"Yes!" replied Sandra somewhat abruptly.

"Fancy some wine?" asked Osborn, ignoring the somewhat abruptness.

"Yes please, red, white or purple?" asked Gulliver, sauntering into the kitchen. "Hey, is that a curry?"

"I was speaking to your mother."

"Anything'll do. God, curry is such a yellow stain," said Sandra, wondering why God had suddenly come on the scene. "Omnipresence, I suppose," she said aloud without realising.

"Not Christmas presents?" asked Gulliver, looking for wine glasses.

"Don't talk to me about Christmas presents," said Sandra, beginning to dish up. "Or cards, or cakes, or – strewth, there's more of this than I thought."

"Shall I open the window?" asked Madeleine, screwing up her nose. "I'm feeling a bit suffercated."

"Me too," said Osborn. "I'll open the window, Mad, you're not quite tall enough yet."

"I'm not mad, Dad!"

"I'll be mad in a minute if someone doesn't help me with these dishes, they're rather heavy," said Sandra. "Wow, I'm pleased with myself, I've risen to an economically challenging situation and have achieved a filling Sunday lunch."

"It's the gastronomically challenging bit I'm worried about," said Osborn. "I'm not a well man with this lurking cold."

"Go to the well man clinic, Dad," said Madeleine.

"I don't see how anyone can be remotely connected with cold while eating this curry," said Gulliver, beginning to sweat a little. "Can I pour myself some more wine?"

"Wino!" said Sandra, still feeling pleased with herself.

"Why yes, believe me," replied Gulliver. "You haven't tasted it yet."

"Quite interesting," gasped Osborn.

"My eyes are watering," whispered Madeleine.

"I don't know what's wrong with you all," said Sandra, chewing merrily. "It's – it's..." Suddenly the phone rang.

"I'll go!" said Osborn, Gulliver and Madeleine, jumping up together, but Gulliver was closest. The other two returned to their seats disconsolately.

"I don't know why you don't like my curry," said Sandra, a little hurt. She replaced her fork on her plate. "You can tell me straight, you know, I'm a woman of the world."

"What world would that be, a total fantasy world?" asked Osborn, suddenly grinning. "Hey, I can breathe. My nose has unblocked completely, your curry's performed a miracle!" He went to Sandra's chair, bent over and put his arm around her neck from behind, unfortunately pinching her arm against the chair.

"You're hurting!"

"No I'm not, I feel better now." He gave her bra a twang and sat down again.

"You know I hate that."

"I'm sorry, I just fancied having some fun with you for a change." His face resumed its recently habitual look of cold wariness. "It seems I'm not even allowed to have fun with you anymore?"

"Fun?" Sandra felt suddenly deflated. "I'm surprised you want to have fun, or anything, with someone who can't even cook a decent meal."

"I like your indecent meals, Mum," said Madeleine loyally.

"That was your friend Alison, Mother," said Gulliver, re-entering the curry zone. "She just rang to remind you it's the assertiveness group's Hope Supper this Tuesday. She'll pick you up as usual."

"What's a Hope Supper?" asked Madeleine curiously.

"Same as a Faith Supper, where everyone brings some food, but in this case no one is sure anyone will actually remember to bring any food, so they just hope something edible will appear on the table."

"A bit like at home, then," commented Gulliver casually.

"Yes – yes – YES!" Sandra tried to discover whether she minded having fun poked at her, or whether it might be injuring her currently fragile self-esteem. 'I need to talk with Isabelle,' she thought, as the others chatted on. 'I need to talk about Isabelle-type things, like self-esteem and self-actualisation. I need to discuss why I loathe sport and am essentially uncompetitive, or whether that's a form of self-defence? I want to decide with her whether I go to the assertiveness group because I want to, or because I'm not assertive enough to say I don't want to go. I want to show her my latest poem, although I'm stuck on the last verse – or maybe I should use the analogy of the toasting fork and the water melon after all? Yes, I think I might...'

"I'll help you with the dishes," said Gulliver, standing up. "I need a challenge."
 "Thank you," replied Sandra. "Oh, sod the dishes, I need to create."

The phone rang the following morning, just after 9. It was Isabelle, postponing their meeting that lunchtime.

"I hope you don't mind," said Isabelle, "but Eric has got the day off and wants me to help him with his Christmas shopping."

"Oh, that's all right, I don't mind," replied Sandra. 'I do, though, I *do* mind!' she thought fiercely, as Isabelle went into details of Eric's Christmas present difficulties. 'I don't like being the wishy washy, amenable leftover whose needs are always considered after everyone else's. I *wanted* to talk with Isabelle today.' Sandra felt her throat constricting and tears of disappointment forming, but resolutely set her mouth in a coping attitude and listened to Isabelle.

"I'm not even sure if I'll be able to see you next Monday," continued Isabelle, "because Eric's got a conference in Chipping Sodbury and wants me to go with him – and the Monday after that, of course, is Christmas Day. I'm sorry, Sandra, I feel I'm letting you down."

"I don't know what to say."

"You can ring me any time you like, you know that, don't you?"

"Yes."

"I must go, Eric's waiting in the car. Have a lovely Christmas!"

"Yes, you too, Isabelle. Bye." Sandra replaced the receiver quickly and wiped her eyes. "You soft meatless wimp!" she shouted to her reflection in the mirror, then sighed convulsively. "Isabelle's only postponing seeing you, she hasn't broken friends with you, like girls were always doing at school. Pull yourself together, woman."

After crying dejectedly into a *Feckless Fawn Mood Matching Toilet Roll* for a few moments, wondering what feck was and why she hadn't got any, Sandra decided she would go into the city centre anyway, to finalise the Christmas shopping.

She returned three hours later with three golf ball soap sets, two pairs of musical underpants, two potpourri writing folders, four knickers with potpourri gift sets and a potpourri Christmas pudding in the shape of a golf ball.

'This has absolutely nothing to do with the meaning of Christmas,' she thought, as she rebelliously wrapped up the presents in *Super Deluxe Economy Gift Wrap*. 'This is pure commercialised Christmas convention and it stinks. I detest myself for taking part in it in such a puerile way. I can't believe I've bought such utter codswallop, whatever that is, which we can't afford anyway.'

Right at this minute, though, I don't give a feck. I refuse to cook a fisherman's pie for tea tonight and I shan't go to the Hope Supper tomorrow. I want to eat several chocolate liqueurs and I want to see Geoff on Thursday. I want to lose half a stone and have a normal family life, if that even exists. I want Osborn to love me for who I am instead of who I was and I want Madeleine to be happy with her friends. I want the bathroom completely redecorated and I want no more fillings in my teeth, ever. I want some new black shoes and I want...' the phone interrupted any further escalating desires.

"Hello Sandra, it's Elaine. I hope I'm not interrupting?"

"Hello Elaine! No, you're not interrupting, I was only wrapping up Christmas presents."

"It was Christmas I kind of rang about."

"Oh?"

"I've decided to go and stay with a friend for a couple of weeks and I'm leaving tomorrow, so I won't be at the class on Thursday."

"OK. How are things at home?" There was an ambiguous noise at the other end of the line. Elaine seemed to be laughing a little hysterically.

"It's good that you can laugh about it now," said Sandra brightly. The noise altered in pitch, then died down slightly.

"I'm not laughing, I'm crying." Elaine's voice dissolved again.

"Oh God, I'm so sorry!" Sandra wished she could disappear into the turquoise and

mauve vase she was standing beside. "I really didn't mean to – oh dear, have you had another row with your parents?"

"With my mother," gulped Elaine, sniffing heavily. "She said I wasn't the daughter she wanted, so I'm going."

"What does your father say?"

"He hasn't said anything. I haven't told them I'm leaving."

"Are you going to tell them? I'm sure they'd be worried."

"I'm going to leave a note. I just couldn't stand another scene."

"Oh, I see." Sandra's mind became horribly blank.

"I just wanted to let you know, because you were so understanding last Thursday." Elaine's voice wavered alarmingly. "You listened to me without judging and that meant everything."

"Thank you, I feel honoured."

"I wanted to wish you a happy Christmas. I was going to give you a card, but I won't see you now and I don't know your address."

"That's all right, I understand."

"Could you give me your address? I've written the card already and I'd feel better if I could send it to you."

"Of course. What about your friend's address, Elaine? I'd like to send you a card, too."

'Maybe Christmas has its good points after all,' pondered Sandra, after they'd exchanged addresses and wished each other a good holiday. Elaine had calmed down by the end of the phone call, but Sandra felt rather drained. 'There's no way I'm cooking a fisherman's pie now,' she thought on her way to the kitchen. 'I'll do another one of those boil dry in the bag efforts instead.'

At 5 minutes past 8 on Tuesday evening, Sandra sat down for the third time in Jasmine's large sitting room. She had managed to evade two of the previous meetings through a viral excuse – a real stinker of a cold that had asserted itself for a duration of fifteen days – that was her excuse and she was sticking assertively to it.

She had contributed to the Hope Supper by furtively sneaking on to the table a small plate of rock buns that Madeleine had baked at school the week before, hoping that nobody would actually eat any of them. To her horror and amazement, the table was laden with healthy but exotic salads, professional looking gateaux and an impressive assortment of bread and pastries.

Looking around, she would have sworn that at least four out of the nine women there were now braless, although she couldn't of course be sure, without appearing deranged. As usual, everyone seemed to be engrossed in conversation, except the woman who had wanted to be a plumber. She was intently studying a *Nuts, Screws, Washers and Bolts* magazine.

"Hi everyone," said Jasmine suddenly, appearing small and ethereal in a kaftan that looked several sizes too big. "I thought that before we start eating, we could spend some time discussing our crumple buttons – those vulnerable places we have in our defensive armour. How about you Alison, where is your crumple button?"

"I'm sorry? Could you explain a bit more what a crumple button actually is?" Alison looked rather discomfited, so Sandra gave her a small nudge and an encouraging smile.

"Ah, Sandra! You seem to know about crumple buttons, so tell us about yours, please." Jasmine looked eagerly and expectantly at Sandra.

"OK, my crumple button..." Sandra began to experience a sudden urge to laugh and had to make a concerted effort to force it down. "Well no, to be honest, I'm not sure what you – umm – explicitly mean by crumple buttons!" A large giggle suddenly escaped without Sandra's consent. She tried to disguise it with a discreet cough, but seemed to snort loudly instead, followed by a further large giggle. She was aware of being covertly scrutinised curiously by several of the others.

"Ya – OK." Jasmine gazed at Sandra for a further few seconds, before launching into a detailed description of particular sensitive areas that cause psychological

crumpling by the mere mention of a word or phrase. "These words or phrases may refer to anything about your appearance, personality, background, education, competence or anything at all," she continued. "It may be a specific word, such as 'stupid', 'self-centred', 'wimp', 'bitch', or a comment about being a bad cook, an obsessive tidier, or a useless mother, that sort of thing. Have you all got the message now?" Jasmine looked at Sandra again.

'Which one do I choose?' Sandra was thinking, as she glanced over at Alison.

"I've got the message," said Alison, glancing back at Sandra and smiling. "I would say my crumple button is my nose. Honestly, I would have a nose job if I could afford it. I just get so oversensitive and defensive if I think people are looking at my nose."

"Right," said Jasmine, obviously trying to look at Alison without gazing curiously at her nose. She looked away. "Anyone else?"

Sandra was astounded at the variety of crumple buttons that existed even in such a small group, from being overenthusiastic in bed to uneven nipples. For herself, she stated that her crumple buttons were being told she was stupid, self centred, a wimp, a bitch, a bad cook, an obsessive tidier and a useless mother.

"OK Sandra, thank you for your contribution," said Jasmine, looking at Sandra as if she were a challenging case.

'I'm a challenging case,' thought Sandra, with a medium degree of satisfaction. 'There's definitely a part of me that fights against outright conformity. Is it individuality, or is it arrogance? I want to belong, but I don't want social norms to dictate my life. I *have* to be myself and if they don't like me, that's up to them. I want to be liked, though.

'I hope Madeleine's buns aren't too horribly stale. I wonder if all these women think they're nonconformist because they come to meetings like this. Or maybe I'm too judgemental, or critical. I wonder if that woman with uneven nipples is wearing a bra. I can't quite see. It must be difficult to drop out completely from the social scene. I do admire dropouts, simply because they've refused to conform, but some of them do look dead scruffy sometimes. Still, appearance isn't everything.

'That woman looks ridiculous in those denim dungarees, though, she's going to drop out sideways if she's not careful. No, it's the mentality and motivation of dropouts that I'm interested in. Maybe one day I could open a drop-in centre for dropouts! Oh God, we're doing exercises in pairs again.'

Sandra found herself paired with the would-be plumber, Freddie, to make lists of valid and invalid criticisms, then practise being assertive when on the receiving end of crumple button criticisms. Sandra found it quite alarming at first when she had to accuse Freddie of being unstable with an oxyacetylene torch, but she soon got into the swing of things.

When it was Freddie's turn to tell her she was a bitch, Sandra found herself giggling uncontrollably again. To her surprise, Freddie began to laugh too. Soon the whole room was sniggering, so Jasmine said it was time to relax and eat.

The evening soon passed. Jasmine amused them all with her account of how, back in the Sixties, she had misunderstood the concept of going on a trip and had embarked on a hitchhiking tour of the world. She had actually reached as far as Gordano Service Station before her money had run out.

At around 22:00, people began to leave. Jasmine said her usual goodbyes at the door, but to Sandra's surprise, she handed each of them a Christmas card on the way out. 'What a very nice gesture,' thought Sandra, as she opened the envelope, smiling. Her face dropped a little, however, as she read the boldly printed message inside: THIS CHRISTMAS SISTERS WILL BE DOING IT FOR THEMSELVES!

CHAPTER 11

Thursday evening had arrived. All week Sandra had continued to fight her desire to see Geoff. However, at 11 minutes and 29 seconds to 7, on her way to the CFE, she gave into her excitement by twirling her umbrella around in the air when nobody was looking, while steadfastly refusing to consider that he might be away for a second week.

Fortunately, the fear she didn't have was unfounded. She bumped into Geoff just inside the door, as she put down her umbrella and shook raindrops all over him.

"Geoff! I'm so sorry, I didn't see you."

"It's OK, my fault. I was waiting inside the door," replied Geoff, trying to wipe his face in his jumper sleeve. "I saw you walking along, twirling your umbrella in the air."

"What?" Sandra looked at him, blushing a little. "You really must think I'm crazy."

"I told you, I like crazy women." His smile was igniting something very warm inside her. "I suppose we'd better go in."

"Did you know we were going to finish early tonight and go to the pub?" asked Sandra as they walked along, suddenly assailed by the fear that he might be unprepared or unable to join them in the pub after the class.

"Funnily enough, I bumped into Philip at *Safebury's* the other day and we had a bit of a chat about cultural relativism in advertising while standing at the dead fish counter – and yes, he did mention it." Sandra felt rather than saw Geoff looking at her, as he added almost shyly, "I was hoping you'd be there?"

"Yes." Sandra felt further words elude her, as her heart began to beat very fast. 'Am I about to fulfil my potential as a loose woman here, or am I about to come down with a virus?' she wondered anxiously, as they entered the classroom.

The atmosphere of the class was decidedly more laid-back than usual, thought Sandra, as she looked around at the others. As well as Elaine, three more people were missing, which tended to create a somewhat cosier feel to the proceedings.

After a general chat for ten minutes about what good philosophy books to buy for Christmas, Philip steered the conversation in a relaxed way back to philosophy of science. Sandra realised she wasn't concentrating properly when she failed for at least thirteen minutes to grasp Popper's concept of falsifiability. She didn't mind in the slightest, however, as she was sitting next to Geoff and was particularly enjoying her own concept of physical proximity.

"Right, is everyone clear about Popper's view that proper theories are made up of exceptionless generalisations universally quantified?" Philip looked around the class expectantly and seemed reassured that the blank expressions he saw meant there were no problems. "OK then, let's adjourn to *The Queen's Uterus*. Anyone need a lift? Oh gosh yes, I do. I'd forgotten the old banger's finally given up the ghost! Although I could walk, of course." He looked at Geoff hopefully. "Would you have a spare seat, Jim?"

"Yes, of course, be my guest." Geoff turned to Sandra. "Can I give you a lift too?"

"Thank you, yes." Sandra smiled at Geoff and found their eyes meeting for a few seconds longer than usual. 'Wow, prolonged eye contact,' thought Sandra, with a small inner flip of pleasure.

The Queen's Uterus was very crowded and Sandra found herself stuck in a corner next to a pair of up-and-comings in their early twenties she'd never actually spoken with. She was also too far from Geoff for comfortable conversation. She sipped her drink and became prey to what felt like unreasonable disappointment.

As the evening wore on, it became more and more acute, until it began to overwhelm her. 'I can't bear this,' she thought. 'This is too stupid for words, but I can't bear it. What's happening to me? I might as well go home, but I don't want to without speaking to him just once, to wish him a flaming, sodding happy Christmas.' She stood up abruptly to go to the Ladies Room. Philip turned round suddenly from a deep conversation about sexual relativism with one of the up-and-coming twenty somethings and accidentally dug her sharply in her side with his elbow.

"Oh Sally, I'm sorry!" He looked confused for a moment. "Are you leaving us already?"

"No, I'm just going to the loo." Sandra tried hard to smile.

"Ah! Bodily needs always overrule the freedom of the mind in the end, eh?"

"Yes." Sandra realised she was only smiling half-heartedly, but felt powerless to make it full-hearted.

'I wish Elaine was here,' she thought, as she entered the coolness of the Ladies Room. 'At least I would have someone to talk with. I think I'll go home. Geoff is only an acquaintance after all. He doesn't matter to me like that. I'm a free spirit – in theory, if

not much else. I don't need to talk with him, he's only a person I happen to get along with well. I have my independence and my pride to think of. I shall walk out of here with my head held high. I shan't even wish him a flaming, sodding happy Christmas, just to prove he doesn't matter that much to me. After all, I'm an assertive woman who's learning to be existentially self-sufficient. In fact, I wouldn't even want to talk with him now if he appeared to me in a vision.'

As Sandra left the Ladies Room, Geoff appeared in Sandra's vision. Sandra stopped in her tracks and smiled, completely against her will.

"Hi," said Geoff, smiling it seemed against his will.

"Hi," replied Sandra, suddenly very unsure of herself.

"I really wanted to talk with you, if you have time. Could I buy you a drink?" Geoff seemed uncharacteristically unsure of himself.

"OK. Thank you." Sandra's whole reserve seemed to thaw out instantly at the realisation that Geoff wanted to talk with her as much as she wanted to talk with him. They stood together at the bar, thawed out, crowded out, even somewhat spaced out, but mainly just happy to be in each other's presence.

"I hope you don't think I'm being weird," Geoff started saying rather hesitantly, "but quite honestly, I don't know what I wanted to talk about. I think it's more a question of feeling cheated back there at being near you and unable to talk. You must think I'm a crazy man."

"I like crazy men." Sandra felt ultra-relaxed in a rather excitable way. "I like your honesty, though. I'm glad you feel the same – umm – I'm just glad!" This time Sandra smiled full-heartedly. Geoff smiled back full-heartedly. They smiled at each other full-heartedly.

After all that slightly embarrassing full-heartedness, they stood and talked of their feelings about Christmas, youth in Asia, bungee jumping, the Liberal Nationalist party, vegetarian lasagnes and the Bishop of Lesser-Spalding-on-the-Wold. Sandra was vaguely aware of how much they were looking into each other's eyes. Guiltily, she looked at where the rest of the class had been sitting, but to her surprise, they'd gone.

"They've gone," she said guiltily. "What time is it?"

"Just before 10," Geoff looked guiltily apologetic. "I must go. Helena's at her tap-dancing class Christmas get-together and I promised Opal I'd try to be back by ten. Can I drive you home?"

"Oh no, it's all right. Your daughter's expecting you. It's not far to walk." Sandra smiled weakly, as her desire for him to drive her home showed rather obviously through her words.

"I'll take you home. I want to." Geoff touched Sandra's arm with apparent involuntary, guilty, full-hearted pleasure (so Sandra hoped) as they gathered their coats in a slight daze and walked to his car.

"Philip must have had a lift home with someone else," said Sandra, as Geoff opened the car door.

"Yes. I'm glad, really." Geoff sat and turned towards Sandra, as she shut her door and looked at him. A moment passed between them that seemed to have no need for words. Geoff held out his hands, smiling.

"My hands are warm for once," said Sandra, as she put her hands in his. "Yours are always warm."

"Your hands are small and I like to warm them up."

"Do you think this is normal?" Sandra felt a momentary confusion amid the comfort she was feeling. "Is this just a friendly sort of thing to do, even though we're both married?"

"I think everyone needs friends," said Geoff, after a fairly long pause. "I tend to be spontaneous, I suppose. This seems to be the right thing to be doing right now, that's all. Why, would you rather we didn't hold hands?" He gave a small laugh of embarrassment.

"Oh no. No!" Sandra gave a small laugh of embarrassment herself, before they seemed to be leaning involuntarily towards each other. Then, to her utter amazement, he gently proffered his lips. She touched them just as gently with her own.

'Was that a kiss, or just a touching of lips?' she was wondering, as he began to kiss her slowly, gently and deeply. She responded intuitively and with pleasure. The shock of it only hit her fully afterwards, as he then drove her to her house in silence.

She felt inexplicably close to tears as she interpreted his silence as regret. She was almost afraid to look at him as she clicked open the car door and turned to say goodbye.

"A flaming, sodding happy Christmas, Geoff," she said in a low, small voice.

"You too, Sandra," he said in an indecipherable voice, turning to look at her as he tried very hard to smile.

CHAPTER 12

Christmas had run its inevitable course. Sandra had endured its inherent gluttony, expense and boredom. It was the first day she had been on her own for two weeks. She would normally have revelled in the peace, but as she began to take down the Christmas cards and decorations, she felt alone and disillusioned.

Since the kiss, she'd tried alternately either to block it from her mind, or to resolve it as just a silly Christmas indiscretion. She'd succeeded successfully in neither and unsuccessfully in both. The day after had been the worst – she'd spent the whole day on and off crying into an *Ominous Orange Mood Matching Toilet Roll*. After that, though, family considerations had taken precedence over her turmoil.

The phone rang. Her heart leapt for a moment in the absurd hope that it was Geoff, before she forcibly corrected it. It was, in fact, her mother-in-law.

"Hello Sandra dear, how are you?"

"Well, actually, I don't feel..."

"Oh good, that's what I like to hear. Did you like our Christmas gifts? We didn't really get to speak to one another over Christmas, did we? Basil was so busy with his ministry. Were the gifts acceptable?"

"Yes, lovely. Thank you for my potpourri-perfumed set of dusters."

"Did the others like their gifts? Only it's so difficult to choose something a bit different, especially for those men of ours, eh?"

"Yes, it is. Yes, they all liked their presents, thank you. Madeleine was enthralled with the potpourri wrapped in a thermal vest and Gulliver really appreciated the pocket size book of bible quotations..." Sandra broke off in horror as she realised her capacity for telling outright lies. 'The only thing Gulliver appreciated was the irony of it,' she thought quickly. 'What the hell did they give Osborn? All I can remember is that he gave it 9 out of 10 on his *Most Outlandish Present Scale*.'

"How did Osborn like his gift?" continued Sybil, sweetly but relentlessly.

"Umm – what was it you gave him again?" Sandra fervently hoped she didn't sound too incredibly false.

"Why, the orange sweater with the miniature golf ball pattern, dear," answered Sybil a trifle tartly. "I know he's not really into golf and Basil thought it was rather bright, but I thought it was charming. Has he worn it yet?"

"Oh yes," replied Sandra, crossing her fingers. 'This is terrible,' she was thinking. 'I hate telling these lies, but I can't deliberately hurt her feelings. God, this is such a revolting farce. As far as Christmas is concerned, this is ramming the nails right bang into the coffin.'

"Good, that's lovely." Sybil seemed easily convinced. "What I was really ringing for, though, is to ask if Osborn and the rest of you would like to come to church on Sunday to hear Basil's trial sermon, about the holiness of marriage."

'Bloody hell,' was Sandra's inner reaction. 'It *will* be a trial. I can't cope with this, what on Earth am I supposed to say?'

"Of course, we'll understand if you don't want to come, or if you have other plans. Do you think you'll be able to make it? We'd really love Lawrence to be there, or Kirsty, but Osborn is the one who lives closest."

'And he's third best,' thought Sandra, feeling her ire rise. 'How can you be so blatant about how much you love and revere your beloved firstborn son, how much you

admire and miss your so much wanted daughter and then just treat Osborn as a convenience? He's the handy family scapegoat, the one who's there to fix all your problems and stand in for the other two when they're busy enjoying their own lives, having escaped your clutches.'

"Basil sees it as such an important step in his life," Sybil was rambling on. "He feels so deeply honoured to be carrying out the Lord's work like this."

"I'm not sure we can make it," butted in Sandra quickly. "I'll tell Osborn you rang and ask him to ring you back, OK?"

"Oh, all right then, dear. It's been lovely talking to you. I'm glad everything's going so well, praise the Lord, and I'm glad you liked the gifts so much. God bless you all. Bye!"

"Bye." Sandra put the phone down dispiritedly. 'Life is simply too complicated,' she thought, 'which must be an oxymoron. I don't know where I'm going after all. Osborn and I seem like strangers to each other half the time. What do I want from my life? Or is that the wrong question? Why do I feel so unfulfilled? Osborn is basically a good person and deserves to be much happier than he is now, but he seems to want more from me than I can possibly give him.'

'Maybe I should try harder, with even the small inconsequential things in life, like cooking. Maybe he'll like me better if I attempt a boeuf bourgignon. God no, I don't want to induce a crisis of any kind. Besides, I hate touching meat and beef is so meaty. I wish he could love me just as I am. I wish he – someone – anyone – would just put their arms around me and hold me, without saying anything or wanting anything.'

As Sandra was on her way to weep into a *Pathetic Purple Mood Matching Toilet Roll*, the phone rang again. This time it was Isabelle, asking if Sandra was free that lunchtime. Sandra gladly accepted and went to meet Isabelle, somewhat comforted. *The King's Buttock* suddenly felt a very inviting place to be.

"You look a bit distracted," said Isabelle in greeting, as she joined Sandra in their seat beneath an artist's impression of the king's left elbow.

"I'm glad Christmas is over," replied Sandra with a sigh. "How was your holiday? It seems a long time since we last met."

"Yes, I'm sorry about that, truly. I could tell you minded really." Isabelle smiled apologetically. "How are you?"

"Confused. Sometimes I wonder if I'm back at square one, although it feels as if I've travelled a hundred miles since then."

"Has anything particular happened?"

"Yes and no. Life as usual – and life as unusual. At one time, I even found myself wanting to open that box of symbolic chocolate liqueurs."

"It was that bad?" Isabelle smiled again, sympathetically.

"Oh, it's stupid really. I got upset at the futility of Christmas – and I feel Osborn doesn't love me for who I am – and I had a lot of presents I didn't like – and I made an absolute prat of myself at the assertiveness group – and then I made this awful curry – and then Geoff kissed me and I liked it, although I didn't want to, but he didn't seem to like it, although I wanted him to..." Sandra trailed off, looking at Isabelle in near despair.

"Oh, Sandra." Isabelle sighed quietly.

"What?"

"Life is such a pickle of peculiar ingredients sometimes." Isabelle reached out her hand and covered Sandra's.

"More like an enormous festering flagon of mangy mango chutney, you mean!" Sandra laughed at her own terrible alliteration, feeling comforted at Isabelle's gesture. Isabelle smiled and squeezed Sandra's hand gently, before taking hers away.

"I'm glad to see that insanity is still keeping you sane. Tell me about everything. It doesn't matter if I'm late back to work, I don't have any appointments until 14:30. Tell me about Geoff?"

Sandra found that telling Isabelle about what was on her mind most definitely helped. Isabelle's quiet acceptance of everything Sandra said seemed to assuage the guilt and confusion. Also, the prawn and banana half-open sandwiches they'd ordered turned out to be bizarrely delicious.

By the time they parted at 10 minutes and 38 seconds past 2, Sandra felt strong and calm enough to go into a card shop without the risk of immediate apoplexy. For some time now, she'd been noticing with increasing irritability the ridiculously high prices of the cards and the trivia that commercialism was insidiously inflicting upon the novelty hungry public. It seemed that one could no longer achieve adulthood without being assailed by cards, badges, balloons, rosettes, streamers, tankards, cuddly toys, mugs and underwear that boldly and unflatteringly advertised one's age.

Sandra had been amazed on her last birthday to receive an ashtray in the shape of a chamber pot saying 'I am 49'. Admittedly, it had been from Sybil, who'd thought it was a charming novelty plant holder and hadn't realised the age was wrong, but even so! Sandra thought that nothing to do with consumerism had the power to shock or amaze her anymore. She believed that manufacturers would make absolutely anything, that shops would sell absolutely anything and that people would buy absolutely anything.

She entered the shop with the air of someone who is worldly wise and above the contemptible vagaries of an industry that played on people's gullibility.

"I don't believe this!" Sandra found she had expostulated aloud at a card offering congratulations on a successful vasectomy. "Oh my God, no!" This time it was a card sending commiserations on the occasion of a 100th job application.

"They're good, aren't they," commented a woman with a tartan shopping trolley. "You can get one for almost anything here. I don't suppose you've seen one saying 'Good Luck with the Liposuction', have you? I thought I'd get one because my neighbour's daughter was talking about having it done the other day. I'm sure I saw one last time, it was so pretty. Do you know what liposuction is, at all?"

"Ah! Ha!" Sandra was almost speechless. "No, I'm sorry," she said, as she turned to leave the shop. Just then, something by the door caught her eye. It was a small plastic card with a picture of two pink frogs, holding hands, with the message *Let's Try Again*. Sandra hesitated, thinking of Osborn. She walked back up the aisle of the shop to make sure nobody was looking, then quickly went back to grab the card and surreptitiously hand it to the girl at the till.

"Hello!" The girl at the till, Sandra realised too late, was one of the up-and-coming twenty somethings in the philosophy class.

"Oh, hello." Sandra smiled tensely. "Have you worked here long?"

"No, this is just temporary. I've applied to go to university in September."

"That's great." Sandra held out her money. 'Put the bloody thing in a bag, for heaven's sake,' she was thinking. She looked at the girl. "I wish I had the nerve to do that."

"Why don't you?" the girl asked seriously. "You always know what you're talking about in class, when I don't even know what some of the words mean."

"I haven't really given it much thought," replied Sandra quickly, not noticing the actual moment a seed was sown in her mind. The seed was stored silently, awaiting possible future germination.

"Well, it's worth thinking about at least," said the girl encouragingly, as she looked at the card and held it up to the light in order to see it properly. "These frogs are very pink, aren't they?"

Early that evening, Sandra resolutely presented a soya bourgignon to her unsuspecting family. They seemed a little subdued, but Sandra attributed that to other causes. Osborn had taken advantage that afternoon of a special three fillings for the price of two offer with his dentist, Madeleine had scuffed a nasty mark on her new boots and Gulliver had been accused of deliberately misrepresenting the aims of *The Anti-Theory Anti-Intellectual Debating Society* by promoting a recent debate entitled: *Period dramas – are they an essential part of sex education as we know it?*

"Well, all those adverts on television about wings are ridiculous," he said unrepentantly. "They'll be making them with tail rotors next."

"I think it's a tasteless invasion of female privacy," said Sandra. "On the other hand, though, why shouldn't males know what we have to put up with? Not that it's anything to worry about," she added hastily, smiling at Madeleine.

Miraculously, there were no complaints about the soya bourgignon, although Sandra had played safe by dishing up small portions. Despite that fact, however, she felt encouraged and smiled broadly at everyone.

"What would you like for dessert?" she asked sweetly.

"I'll have one of those really low-fat yoghurts," replied Madeleine.

"I wouldn't mind one of those walnutless walnut whips," answered Gulliver. "Or else a whipless walnut whip would do. Or a whipped walnut, or..."

"I can't eat anything else," said Osborn, "my gums are beginning to hurt."

"Poor you," said Sandra. "Why don't you go upstairs to lie down and I'll bring you a mug of tea?"

"Upstairs? Lie down?" Osborn looked at Sandra suspiciously. "Have you got something to tell me?"

"No, of course not," said Sandra, rather offended. "It was just a suggestion, I was only thinking of you!"

"Actually, I think I will go upstairs for a bit," said Osborn, ignoring Gulliver's sniggers. "I want to start reading *The Male Menopause and the New Man*."

"Oh? Where did you get that from?" Sandra was curious.

"Terry at work lent it to me."

"Shouldn't it be *The Male Menopause and the Old Man*?" asked Gulliver stickily from inside a walnutless walnut whip.

"Gulliver!" Sandra was torn between being humoured and being intrigued. "Terry was the one who lent you *The Male Menopause and You*, wasn't he?"

"Yes. This is the sequel."

"What did you think of the first one?"

"I didn't think you'd want to know, you're always busy with your other concerns."

"Osborn!" said Sandra, surprised and hurt. "I *do* want to know."

"I'll tell you sometime," said Osborn leaving the table.

A little while later, Sandra took two mugs of tea upstairs, plus the book her parents had given her for Christmas (as fervently recommended by Philip) called *Misunderstanding Philosophy*. So far it had proved very helpful, pointing out many concepts Sandra had indeed misunderstood and she'd still only read halfway through the first chapter. She set the mugs down, then surreptitiously gave herself a generous squirt of *Mea Culpa*, the perfume Osborn had given her for Christmas. She sat down on the bed beside Osborn, as they both sipped tea and started to read their books.

'How companionable,' she thought. 'This is really warm and comfortable, we should do this more often.' Osborn, however, seemed rather ominously restless. "You're not comfortable?" she asked him with a certain amount of trepidation.

"I don't feel comfortable with you anymore." The truth in all its baldness assailed Sandra with a shock.

"Why not?" She felt ridiculously like a six-year-old, who'd just been told she was no longer a best friend.

"I told you, you're not the same person I married. I don't know where I am with you. Or who *I* am." He sat staring ahead. "You tell me you want me to be happy, but I don't know *how* to be happy anymore. I don't enjoy my job, I hate it. The main motivation there is money, money, money. I want to do something *I* want to do with my life, not just be a convenient breadwinner. That's all I feel I am to you lot, just a meal ticket." He looked across at Sandra accusingly, in pain and confusion.

"I had no idea you felt like this," said Sandra, feeling her lower lip actually beginning to tremble. "I've never thought of you as just a meal ticket, ever."

"Well, it feels that way. I'm hemmed in by responsibility every way I turn – the children, you, our parents, my job, the mortgage. The way I see it, I'm not allowed to be myself at all."

"I'm not your responsibility, I'm my own. I thought we were a partnership. I manage the money and we've always made decisions together."

"You mean you make the decisions and I follow them."

"No! I don't make you do anything!" Sandra could no longer stop herself crying. "I know I'm not a doormat like your mother, but..."

"Yes, go on, bring my parents into it. They're yet another disaster area in my life. I know I wasn't loved because I wasn't the girl my mother so desperately wanted and my father was so authoritarian, I once felt I hated him. Since he's applied to go into the ministry, he hardly speaks to me at all, except to ask me to do things for him. Lawrence and Kirsty have more or less opted out and expect me to pick up the pieces all the time. Some bloody family life I've got!"

"But I'm doing my best," said Sandra in a small voice. She was finding the most hurtful thing was the way she'd approached Osborn in love and peace, only to be accused of neglect and unconcern.

"Well, I feel you've rejected me – the real me – just like my parents did."

"But I feel you're rejecting *me* – who *I* really am!"

Osborn sneezed suddenly, then was silent. He and Sandra sat deep in thought for a while. Osborn sneezed again, then placed his hand on Sandra's thigh. He looked at her and sneezed again.

"You haven't got another cold coming, have you?" Somehow the everyday question seemed safe.

"No, I think it's the perfume you're wearing."

"It's the one you gave me for Christmas," said Sandra, as Osborn blew his nose. He turned and looked at her seriously.

"Sandra, I don't want to hurt you, but I feel the bottom is slipping out of my world and lately I've been wondering if there's any future for us at all."

"Well, I'm positive there is," said Sandra instinctively. She was reminded of her last birthday, when she'd felt the bottom slipping out of her own world. Since then, how far had she travelled? There still seemed far too many questions and hardly any answers.

She sighed heavily. Osborn sneezed and turned to her again. Their eyes met. Their hands met. Their lips met. Their knees, shoulders and a few other interesting parts of their bodies met.

Osborn's book fell open at the page he'd been reading. The chapter heading was *The New Man Talks About His Feelings*. Sandra noticed that her book had also fallen open at the page she'd been reading. The chapter was called *Existence Precedes Essence*.

'These books have got a lot to answer for,' she thought. 'Not to mention this perfume,' as Osborn sneezed at a very inopportune moment.

CHAPTER 13

The following Thursday, Sandra awoke with tense nervous headaches all over her body. 'I've got tense nervous headaches all over my body,' was her first waking thought. 'I also have to face Geoff tonight.'

The day fortunately passed quickly, as Sandra suddenly remembered an essay she'd forgotten, entitled *External objects have no real existence distinct from their being perceived*. On remembering the title, she wished she could forget it again, but decided that on the whole, it was much better than scrubbing the bath and pondering life's imponderables. 'Although an essay question like that is surely pondering life's imponderables,' she thought with a lopsided grin.

She never actually finished the essay, as there turned out to be too many imponderables to ponder upon. However, by the time she was on her way to the CFE that evening, she felt as if she didn't really care. 'The bath needed cleaning anyway,' she thought defiantly, 'and besides, I don't really understand Berkeley and Idealism.'

She walked along through the biting air of an early January evening. 'Oh my God, how am I going to face Geoff? And will Elaine be there? And is God really my God? And is Osborn seriously thinking of leaving me? Or leaving his job? And is Madeleine really OK? And is Gulliver really OK? And should I try to talk with my father? And why is our society so inherently violent? And what *is* the meaning of life?'

Philip bumped into Sandra on her way into the college building. He had a smear of oil on his cheek and was wiping his hands on a *Gargantuan Size Tissue*.

"Ah, hello Sally. I've just been having a spot of bother with the new buggy. I saw you coming along the road. I would have given you a lift, but I was afraid of stalling. Anyway, I expect you were enjoying your walk, you looked deep in thought. I do so enjoy a quiet walk myself, to gather my thoughts peacefully, to philosophise quietly..." His words trailed away.

"Hello Philip."

"Er – what room are we in again, Sally?"

"This one here." Sandra could see that neither Geoff, nor Elaine, nor even the girl from the card shop was there yet. She was unable to gauge her feelings at that, so took out her text book and pretended to read it, as the others gradually began to filter into the room.

After a certain amount of filtering had taken place, Sandra risked a glance around the room. Still no Geoff or Elaine, although the girl from the card shop was there and smiled at her. Sandra was smiling back, when she felt a brief touch on her shoulder. She looked up, as Geoff passed behind her and found a seat opposite to hers. Sandra was inexplicably afraid to look at him and first gazed rigidly at her text book, then at Philip as he started to talk.

"Tonight we'll have to consider examinations," Philip was saying, still wiping his hands.

Sandra heard the words as if from a great distance. 'Examinations?' she thought dully. 'Is that a philosophical concept I haven't come across yet? Oh, examinations!' She looked up startled, straight into Geoff's eyes. He mouthed "Hello" before she turned her gaze away, startled, straight into Philip's eyes.

"You'll have to make a decision next week whether you want to take the GCSE exam or not," Philip was saying when Sandra's startled gaze startled him. "Do you have a question, Sally?"

"Oh! Ah! Do we have to pay for this exam?" Philip's question had startled Sandra into saying the first logical thing she could think of, which wouldn't immediately brand her as being mentally challenged. She felt herself blushing and wanted very badly to escape. Instead, her eyes took refuge in her text book.

"I was wondering that, too." Geoff's voice floated into her heat of misery like a cool evening breeze.

Sandra let herself calm down for a few seconds before looking across at Geoff. He was looking at his text book. She kept on looking at him, in between looking at Philip with the most studious gaze she could muster under the circumstances.

"So, Sally and Jim," Philip was saying, at last giving up and throwing the *Gargantuan Size Tissue* into the bin, "your question was very relevant. Cheque books next week, please!"

At last Geoff looked at Sandra. She quickly mouthed "Hello" and smiled. Geoff smiled. Philip noticed them both smiling.

"Sorry, did I make a verbal faux pas? A double entendre? Or a philosophical misnomer, perhaps?" Philip's eyebrows lifted – rather fetchingly, Sandra thought and awarded him an instant 8 out of 10 on her *Rather Fetching Expression Scale*.

"No!" both Sandra and Geoff replied together, before lapsing into another round of somewhat gratuitous smiling.

For the first time in quite a few weeks, Sandra found herself really enjoying the lesson. Suddenly Berkeley's view on Idealism seemed interesting. The discussion group in which she took part (in rather an amusing and intelligent manner, she hoped) seemed lively and vibrant. She hardly noticed when she stabbed herself badly with her fountain pen. She explained to Philip politely and assertively why she hadn't produced an essay. She didn't even feel stupid when she realised her text book was, in fact, *The Male Menopause and the New Man*. Life had opened up as a warm and exciting experience. The real meaning of life, she felt, was just around the corner.

At the end of the lesson, she approached Geoff confidently, not minding the quizzical looks people were giving Osborn's book, as they filtered out of the room.

"Hi! Could I be bold and ask you for a lift home? I just wanted to say something."

"Go ahead."

"No, not here. I wanted to say it in the car if I could – you know, privately."

"Sure. I wanted to say something too. Is your hand OK? Has it been bleeding?"

"Yes, but I think it's stopped. It's nothing really, I just stabbed myself by mistake."

They walked to Geoff's car through a sudden, squally shower. Sandra wrapped her scarf around her neck tightly, beginning to feel nervous, cold and wet. Her hand started to throb slightly. She was determined to tell Geoff how she felt, though – and besides, it was pleasantly dry inside his car.

"You first, or me?" asked Geoff, turning to look at her.

"I'll go first," she said quickly, rather surprised at the spontaneity of her decision. She sat in silence for a few moments, unable to make up her mind what to say next and how to say it when she knew what it was going to be.

"Well, it's nothing much, I guess. In fact, I feel dead silly saying it."

"I understand." He smiled at her in the semi-darkness.

"I hope you will. OK – I realise you wish we hadn't kissed last time I saw you and I understand, I really do. I know it was just an impulsive Christmassy thing and didn't mean anything, so you don't have to worry that I do think it meant anything, because I don't – oh, I seem to be stuck."

"I see." Geoff paused slightly. "You wish we hadn't kissed?"

"No, I didn't mean that. I really am stuck, by the way."

"Then you didn't mind us kissing?"

"No, I liked it, but I'm actually stuck."

"It's OK, I understand, these things are difficult to say. I'm confused, though. You mean you liked us kissing, but you think I wish we hadn't?"

"Yes, Geoff, but I'm stuck! My scarf has got caught in something behind me here."

"Oh! I'm sorry!" Geoff burst out laughing, as he reached across to free Sandra's scarf from the seat belt attachment. Sandra felt his warm lips on her cold cheek and turned to him without her own consent. Their second kiss was as slow, gentle and deep as the first one had been.

"Ah!" Sandra moved away from him reluctantly, remembering what else she'd been meaning to say. "I was going to say something else."

"Yes?" He too moved away.

"I like holding hands, I can handle that. Sorry. Yes, that's OK, but kissing is something different. It's..." She suddenly leaned across and kissed him, hard.

"It's what?" Geoff sounded strangely disturbed.

"It's too nice." Sandra sighed heavily. "It's too nice and it leads to other things and I'm too married and so are you. Oh God, that makes me sound so old-fashioned, but I have to tell you the truth about how I feel."

"Yes." Geoff sat thoughtfully. Sandra was horribly afraid that she'd offended him.

"I do care," she said, reaching her hand out to touch his cheek. He caught hold of her extended hand.

"I intended to tell you roughly the same thing. I like being with you and I most definitely find you attractive, but having an affair simply isn't on my agenda right now."

"Did you think I thought it was?" Sandra felt mildly offended.

"No." He squeezed her hand.

"Ouch! Damn, I think it's bleeding again." She took her hand away and tried to look at it in the dark.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you. Do you want a hankie? I've got a clean one here." He pulled a handkerchief out of his jacket and handed it to her. "Sandra, I feel you deserve the truth. I hadn't planned to kiss you and I'm pretty sure you didn't plan to kiss me. I guess spontaneity has its downfalls, although I enjoyed it very much."

"I really didn't think you had." Sandra wrapped Geoff's hankie around her hand.

"Enjoyed it? Oh, but I did." He leaned over slowly and kissed her slowly. "Oh dear, what shall we do?"

"Well, we could be incredibly good and boring and never get together like this again, or we could compromise." Sandra was surprised at her sudden clear-headedness.

"What's the compromise?"

"We could continue to be friends who just talk together and maybe hold hands now and again – and possibly have the odd kiss?" Sandra broke off, annoyed at the discrepancy between her thoughts and her feelings.

"Do you think that would work?"

"No."

"Nor do I." Geoff sighed. "In theory it should, of course, but I just don't know. This is very difficult."

"I'm sorry, Geoff. Shall we agree not to be physical? Just verbal? I value that so much."

"OK. We're being very mature about this, aren't we?" He laughed ruefully.

"I just hate to hurt other people."

"Me too."

"So, no more kissing?" asked Sandra, with a resolve she didn't feel.

"Right."

"We're mature people who consider the consequences of our actions."

"Right."

"We're very mature people who try never to hurt others."

"Right."

"We're extremely mature people who can control our emotions."

"Right."

They fell against each other in a passionate frenzy, failing to notice the sudden approach of Philip, until he knocked politely on the steamed-up window.

"Ah, Jim – and Sally as well, how nice. Sorry to disturb you. Having a heated discussion about Berkeley's Idealism, I suppose. Er – you wouldn't be able to oblige me with a lift home, Jim, I suppose? I can't seem to get this new buggy of mine started."

During the following week, Sandra spent a great deal of time composing a short, explanatory letter to Geoff, as well as attempting to finish her essay on Idealism. The night after the second (third, fourth and fifth) kiss, she had hardly slept. She found she couldn't reconcile her feelings for Geoff with her feelings for Osborn, let alone her feelings for herself. She had decided in the cold light of dawn (with sunrise about 08:05 at that time of year) that a letter and a period of cooling down should do the trick.

By the following Thursday, the letter had finally taken the following shape:

Dear Geoff

As much as I enjoy being with you, etc, I really think that a period of cooling down would be beneficial. This doesn't mean forever – maybe until after Easter? It's just that I need to sort out my life. I still want to be your friend, but there are difficulties and being with you is one of them! Seriously, though, I do hope you understand. Take care of yourself.

With love (she had finally decided on love, after having flirted with regards, sincerity and best wishes)

The crazy woman, Sandra.

Gulliver sloped into the room just as she was signing her name.

"Yo, Mother Bitch."

"Yo, Son of a Bitch." Sandra looked up. "Why do you speak so revoltingly to me?"

"It's what I am, revolting. Anyway, you say you want me to be myself."

"I do indeed. I suppose it's just a phase. I can remember when you used to say "bums and poos" all the time, but you stopped all that. Then it was one set of revolting words after another, really."

"I've dropped testicles now."

"Gulliver!"

"Who's that you're writing to?" asked Gulliver conversationally.

"Just an old school friend of mine, I owe her a letter," said Sandra, suddenly realising she was lying and feeling a sense of extreme self-disgust.

"Well, give her one, then. I've got a spare piece of junk mail you can have," said Gulliver, standing by the window. Sandra suddenly thought that he looked lost.

"You look lost," she said suddenly, ignoring his joke.

"No, I know I'm at home."

"Is everything all right?"

"Yes. I was just wondering why we haven't got PVC windows."

"We *have* got PVC windows!"

"No we haven't," he said, tapping the window. "These are definitely glass."

"Gulliver! Are you sure you're all right?" Sandra began to wonder if her mother's intuition was working overtime, or if she might be in the first stage of a nervous breakdown.

"Half left. I don't know." He seemed agitated and uncertain.

"You know you can tell me anything, don't you," said Sandra, thinking it was possibly worth a try.

"Yo, Mother Bitch." He looked uncomfortable, but continued to talk. "I don't know. I just feel so useless sometimes. GCSEs are boring, although I find some of the work quite hard, especially French. I haven't had a girlfriend since I was 13, my nose is too big, I can't stop telling stupid jokes, my hair sticks out, I can't stand your cooking anymore, the computer's just wiped out a program, nobody really likes me, my feet are too big, I don't have any money, I can't think of a subject for the next debate and I've got a spot."

'Haven't we all,' thought Sandra musingly. "Oh Gulliver!"

"What?"

"I think you're just going through a difficult phase at the moment." Sandra looked at him fondly, but fortunately he was looking the other way. "I'm glad you've got it off your chest. You're *not* useless, you're intelligent and coping well with your GCSEs on the whole. You're a good-looking swine, although you don't believe it – you've got lovely eyes and your nose is no bigger than mine." Sandra steadfastly ignored Gulliver's raised eyebrows at that point and carried on blithely. "You've got quite a unique sense of humour and you're sensitive to even be feeling all these sensitive feelings. You'll have a girlfriend soon, I'm sure you will."

"Thanks. I wish I could believe you. There was one thing I said that I didn't quite mean, though."

"Yes, it's OK, I know you were only teasing me about my cooking." Sandra smiled benevolently, feeling exceptionally maternal for a moment.

"Oh no, I meant that. No, it was what I said about not having any money. I was trying to remind you that you owe me this month's allowance."

"Gulliver!" Sandra felt deeply offended for an instant, until she happened to notice his grin. "Gulliver, you stinking, noxious, malodorous wretch."

"Happy families, I see," said Osborn, having come in unnoticed from work.

"Hello, you're home early," said Sandra to Osborn, still in a happy frame of mind at Gulliver's unexpected openness with her. "You're glad to be home, though aren't you? I mean, what more could you want? Lively conversation, clean comfortable surroundings, wonderful food – in fact, I bet you spend at least a small part of each working day wishing you were home and feeling incredibly homesick?"

"You're right there," continued Osborn dryly. "I spend a lot of my time feeling incredibly sick of home."

Before Sandra could reply in a suitably hurt tone, the phone rang. It was her mother, inviting her to a Literary Luncheon the following day.

"One of the group I usually go with has been called into hospital for a replacement hip operation," explained Caroline. "The first operation she had didn't take. She knows I have a daughter who enjoys reading, so she asked me if I'd like to give the ticket to you. Would you like to come?"

"I don't know. How many are in the group? I'm afraid I'd feel the odd one out." Sandra was glad she felt she could be honest with her mother now.

"Oh, I don't think you'd feel odd. They're a friendly – well, they're an odd sort of group, really, so you should fit in very nicely."

"Thank you!"

"You know what I mean, Sandra."

"Promise you'll sit next to me?"

"Yes, of course I will. I'm sure you'll enjoy it, the food's always good."

After they'd finalised the arrangements, Sandra went into the kitchen and tried to analyse her feelings while she was making a pot of tea. 'Or maybe I'm trying to make a pot of tea while analysing my feelings,' she thought analytically, as she was making the pot of tea. Her life sometimes seemed to be taking a course all of its own. She had apparently initiated the change of direction by that appalling disintegration on her last birthday, she supposed.

'I didn't know it was going to happen, though. I didn't plan it and it felt as if I had no control,' she remembered vividly. 'It was as if a part of me that I'd unconsciously spent years subduing, suddenly could keep quiet no longer. It's really odd how that subdued part of me seemed like such a stranger to who I thought I was.'

'Perhaps I've developed a split personality? No, I don't think so, the subdued part of me feels as if it belongs to the normal me now. That's presupposing I was normal in the first place, of course. It still doesn't feel at all comfortable – will it ever? Maybe I have severe personality problems and need extensive psychoanalysis.'

"Hello Mum," said Madeleine, entering the kitchen and looking decidedly lost.

"Hello Maddybelle, how are you?" asked Sandra, turning around to look properly at Madeleine.

"All right. Why have you put tea bags in the coffee filter jug?" Madeleine came up to Sandra and put her arms around her. "I do love you, Mum, you're peculiar, like I am."

"Thank you, my darling," said Sandra, almost overwhelmed by Madeleine's sudden affection. "I love you too, but you're not peculiar, you're just lovely."

"No I'm not. I'm peculiar because I dreamt about food the other night." Madeleine detached herself from Sandra and stood twirling her long, blonde hair. "I dreamt about a big piece of meat, with chips and peas and I wanted to eat it all."

"That's not peculiar, Maddy, it probably just meant you were hungry and fancied some meat. Maybe you should eat some meat instead of being a fish-eating vegetarian? Don't worry about the dream, everyone dreams about all sorts of strange things and it doesn't necessarily mean anything peculiar."

"Am I really not necessarily peculiar?" Madeleine looked hopeful, but then her face clouded over. "Becky said I was peculiar to dream about food," she said miserably.

"Well, she shouldn't have said that, she's supposed to be your friend."

"Becky's not as bad as Claire, though."

"Why, what did Claire say about your dream?"

"No, not the dream." Tears started to fall silently from Madeleine's green eyes.

"What's wrong, darling?" Sandra hugged Madeleine again.

"It wasn't me who scuffed my new boots, it was Claire. She tried them on and then she went and scraped one of them against the wall on purpose."

"Why did she do that?" Sandra was aghast at Claire's audacity.

"She said I was big-headed because I always get better marks than she does." The tears were still falling.

"But that's horrible of her!" Sandra handed Madeleine some kitchen roll. "She must be jealous of you if she said that. Would you like me to go and talk to her mother?"

"No, please don't do that, Mum! I'm not speaking to Claire anymore, I don't want her as my friend. The trouble is that Becky's not speaking to me now, either." Madeleine blew her nose noisily.

"But there are other, much nicer girls in your class. What about Lucy? She's your friend too and she seems a lot kinder than Claire and Becky?"

"Yes, she's really nice. She asked me over to her house again, but Claire said she was stupid."

"Well, Claire's not your friend anymore, so why don't you ask Lucy here?"

"Can I? OK, I will." A glimmer of a smile crossed Madeleine's face. "Can I have some meat for tea?"

"Of course you can!"

"Can I have some new boots?" Madeleine wiped her eyes and smiled as Sandra hesitated. "I was only joking, Mum."

Sandra smiled as Madeleine went to rescue the tea bags from the coffee filter jug. Madeleine was full of surprises. For some irrational reason, she had expected Madeleine to grow up very much like herself, or Osborn, or even Gulliver. Madeleine, however, was very much like herself. Sandra smiled even further, remembering a fair-haired baby girl with the most adorable baby girl legs, who'd been passionately involved with Gulliver's Action Man for many years. Action Man had boldly been to a great many places where presumably no Action Man had ever been before.

Sandra remembered her secret delight when Madeleine had shown no interest whatsoever in an expensive toy vacuum cleaner that Sybil and Basil had proudly presented her with one Christmas. She also remembered Gulliver's delight with a toy cooker that she and Osborn had given him – until the day when he'd dropped it on to the bare toes of his left foot.

'I wonder if I should encourage Gulliver to cook more?' wondered Sandra suddenly with hope. 'He used to really enjoy playing with dried peas and pasta shells. God, how those memories are priceless.'

"What are you thinking about, Mum?" asked Madeleine, bringing Sandra back to the present.

"Oh, Action Man – remember him?"

"I've still got him somewhere."

"He was mine, you stole him!" accused Gulliver, coming into the kitchen. "I haven't forgiven you for that, Mad."

"Don't call me Mad, it makes me mad! You melted my plastic tool set, anyway."

"You peed in the teapot of my tea set."

"Hey, you two," shouted Sandra, "that's all in the past!"

"Oh, we're just enjoying ourselves," said Gulliver, as Madeleine hit him not exactly playfully on the bottom.

'I suppose I don't naturally understand the sibling rivalry thing, never having had a sibling to rival with,' thought Sandra sadly. 'It somehow feels as if something is missing in me because of that.'

"Hey, be quiet!" she shouted, as the sibling rivalry in the kitchen escalated again. "Gulliver, how do you feel about cooking tea tonight?"

"Me? Ah well." He looked at Sandra a little pained. "It's odd," he continued, "but suddenly my left foot hurts."

"I'll help you cook tea, Mum," offered Madeleine eagerly. "Gulliver, we're having meat!"

'I have this all planned,' thought Sandra on her way to the CFE that evening. 'I will smile in a friendly way to Geoff, while politely handing him my letter. I will explain anything he wants to know in a firm, mature manner. I am in control of this situation and can handle it my way. I will most likely walk home with Elaine tonight, if she's there.' She walked on gingerly across a patch of frost. 'Oh my God, he's waiting in the doorway!'

Sandra fumbled in her bag for the letter as she cautiously approached. On reaching the doorway and going inside, she quickly said hello and held out the letter, then laughed self-consciously. At exactly the same time, Geoff had said hello and had handed her a letter too. He laughed self-consciously.

"I thought it was better to put things down on paper, rather than trying to – er – explain in your car," said Sandra. "I hope you don't mind."

"Ditto," he had time to say, before Philip came along, almost as if on cue.

"Hello Sally and Jim," said Philip warmly. "You two busy enjoying one of your philosophical discussions again?"

"Er – yes," replied Geoff.

"Er – no," replied Sandra.

The three of them walked along to the classroom together. Sandra was thinking that it would seem odd and churlish if she didn't sit next to Geoff. He obviously thought the same and they sat side by side, each nonchalantly not opening the other's letter.

Finally, as the class began, Sandra slipped Geoff's letter in between the pages of her text book and tried to slit it open with her pen top. Unfortunately, at a tough bit, the pen top shot violently out of her hand and across the room.

"Sorry," she muttered, as she crawled under Philip's desk to retrieve it.

"OK Sally. Right, I have the relevant forms here for those who want to take the exam," continued Philip. "We might as well get this over and done with, before we delight ourselves with Nominalism."

Sandra hurriedly filled out her form and cheque, so she could have time to sneak a look at Geoff's letter. Trembling a little, she opened her text book to where the letter was nestling.

Dear Sandra

As much as I enjoy our time together, it seems that a cooling down period might help matters. I don't mean forever, perhaps just until Easter? What do you think? It's just that I need to sort out my life. I'd still like you to think of me as your friend, as I still think of you as my friend. Take care.

With warm, sincere wishes

The crazy man, Geoff.

A little tearfully, she shut the book and looked at Geoff. She saw that he had been sneaking a look at her letter in between the pages of his text book. Her heart thumped as he looked at her. They both smiled tentatively. Underneath the table, their legs touched tentatively.

'My leg has just moved tentatively, without my consent,' thought Sandra with wonder, 'but it feels very comforting.'

She spent the rest of the time feeling resolute in her decision, a little tearful, comforted by Geoff's leg and totally, utterly disinterested in Nominalism.

"Does anyone know if Eileen will be taking the exam?" asked Philip, as the class was ending and people were dispersing.

"Oh, you mean Elaine," said Sandra, suddenly jerked into reality. "I could probably find out. I'll try to find out by next week."

"Thank you, Sally," said Philip politely. "I must say, I'm delighted at the way I've remembered people's names this year, because I'm usually hopeless."

Sandra smiled at Philip almost fondly. "Goodnight," she said, looking at Philip and then Geoff, before she picked up her bag and quickly left the room.

"Sandra!" she heard Geoff's voice call urgently, as she hurried along the corridor. "Sandra, stop!"

'Oh no, please don't do this to me,' she thought hopefully, as she stopped to look behind her.

"You forgot your text book," said Geoff, handing her the book. His letter fluttered out from between its pages. "Oh, sorry." He bent to pick it up and handed it to her. "Sandra, thank you for your letter." He put his hand on her arm.

"Thank you for yours."

"Until after Easter, then?" Geoff looked sombre.

"Yes." Sandra noticed some more of the philosophy class coming along the corridor in the distance.

"Oh Sandra, just one more time before goodbye?" Geoff pulled her into the room they had been standing by and almost slammed the door shut. He dropped his bag, put his hands in her hair and kissed her. She dropped her bag, put her hands in his hair and kissed him back. They then disengaged fiercely at the sound of a cough and jumped apart wildly as they noticed the caretaker, who had been checking that the windows were shut.

"Time to shut up the college now," he said brusquely, opening the door for them to pass through.

"Mature students they call themselves," they heard him muttering, as they guiltily left the room. "Bloody immature students, if you ask me."

CHAPTER 14

The following lunchtime, Sandra found herself sitting beside her mother at the Literary Luncheon, feeling incredibly old and wise. She had spent quite a lot of time the night before crying into a *Licentious Lemon Mood Matching Toilet Roll*, while composing a tragic little poem entitled *Pain Hurts*.

Before meeting her mother that morning, she had daydreamed about pouring everything out to Caroline in a moment of soul to soul togetherness – of relieving herself of the unbearable weight of conflict, doubt and longing – of confessing her innermost thoughts and recent outermost actions – of hearing her mother say very calmly and convincingly that everything was going to be all right.

Somehow though, as Sandra met her mother in the entrance hall, her daydreaming just didn't feel right. Something was holding her back, so she let it all go and became caught up in the moment instead. Dressed in some of their classier clothes, it seemed that Caroline was genuinely pleased to see Sandra, if the way she kept introducing Sandra to her friends as "my daughter" was anything to go by.

'She seems to be proud of me,' thought Sandra with surprised pleasure. 'Can that be possible? I know I've always been proud that she's my mother.'

The surroundings were plush and pleasant and the group of people her mother introduced her to seemed kindly enough, if not decidedly on the odd side. Sandra didn't actually say much, but listened with fascination to other conversations about deferred royalties and imaginative marketing techniques.

When the guest speaker gave her talk, Sandra was entranced. Letitia Kedgere was a poet. A real, published poet! One of the main things Sandra was entranced about, however, was Letitia Kedgere's extreme ordinariness. In fact, she looked remarkably like the woman on the fish counter at *Safebury's*.

As Letitia talked honestly about the many rejections she'd received at the beginning of her career, while skipping a little hurriedly over the attempted suicide at her 300th rejection, Sandra became overcome with a new resolve. 'I'll send my poems to editors of small poetry magazines, like Letitia did,' she thought, smiling. 'If she can be rejected, so can I!'

Afterwards, Letitia was signing copies of her new poetry book entitled *Pain Hurts*. Sandra was a little put out about this at first, until she decided to re-title last night's poem *The Hurtingness of Pain*. She borrowed some money from Caroline to buy a copy of Letitia's book and while Letitia was signing it, she managed to screw up her courage.

"Where would I find the addresses of small poetry magazines?" she asked in a rather breathless voice, before laughing falsely at her mistake. "Oops! I mean, I write poetry and I would like to be rejected too."

"Right." Letitia looked up at Sandra quizzically for a moment, but decided not to ask any questions. "What you need is the annual *Writer's Handbook*. The local library should be able to get hold of a copy for you."

"Thank you very much," said Sandra, thinking she would have to practise a flourishing signature for her own future book signing events.

"Well, good luck," said Letitia, handing her the book with a wan smile. "If you ever become suicidal, the Samaritans are very helpful."

Sandra walked over slowly to her mother, feeling she had found a new purpose in life. There was only one thing bothering her. 'If my work is ever published, people like my mother and father might get to read it,' she thought with horror. 'I hope the shock won't be too much for them, I would rather like them to carry on speaking to me for the rest of their lives. And what if Basil and Sybil read it? Or my old friends? Or my doctor? Or my dentist? Or Gulliver's and Madeleine's teachers? Or our neighbours? Or the assertiveness group? Or the philosophy class? Or Geoff?'

Sandra felt her heart jump at the thought of Geoff. 'I'd like to show him my poetry,' she thought, 'but I must keep to our arrangement of keeping everything cool.'

"Right, are we ready to be off?" asked Caroline brightly, before she noticed Sandra's pensive look. "Are you all right, Sandra?"

"I'm OK," lied Sandra. "Sort of," she added, rather more truthfully.

"Shall we go and have another cup of coffee by ourselves?"

"Yes please – although I haven't got any money left."

"Don't worry, just tell me what's on your mind. I haven't been your mother for nearly forty years not to recognise that tired look."

Sandra found she was unable to talk about Geoff. She discovered while sitting and sipping coffee with her mother, that Geoff was a conflict still locked tightly inside. She knew that she somehow needed to deal with it herself, but for the moment her mother's presence felt safe. She found herself talking about her feelings for Osborn, her worries for their future and finally, her decision to become a rejected poet.

"What do you think Osborn will say about your poetry?" asked Caroline.

"Oh, he's read some of it already. I don't think he liked it much. I suppose it wasn't his style really – banal reality about knickers airing on a vacuum cleaner handle, that sort of thing." Sandra sat thoughtfully for a moment. "I'm not sure we're on the same wavelength at all sometimes."

"I understand that. I feel that way about your dad and me. Quite a lot, to be honest. I really think it was quite ridiculous for a fundamental behaviourist and a more or less humanist ever to have got married in the first place." Caroline sighed. "Sometimes I can't stand his rigidity, or his jokes that I don't find funny, but other times I find myself thinking what a basically kind person he is. I sometimes almost laugh at his silly jokes. It's not really his fault that he was lured into that fiasco with Ivor Swede."

"What fiasco?" asked Sandra, astounded. She sat transfixed, as Caroline finally explained.

"Wow," was the only response she could muster.

"He did refuse to work with Swede after that, though, give him his due," continued Caroline, "but I'm not sure whether he did that for me and has regretted it ever since. Swede is quite a name in the psychosexual field now."

They continued to talk long after they'd finished their coffee. Finally, Caroline sighed and said she had to go.

"Yes, I'm bursting too," said Sandra.

"No, I mean I have to go home."

"Oops! I do love you, Mum. Oops!" It had slipped out before Sandra had given it permission. They both looked slightly embarrassed before smiling briefly at one another.

'Spontaneity again,' thought Sandra. 'Perhaps I should make sure I think carefully before I'm spontaneous in future.'

When she arrived home, Sandra found a letter from Elaine on the doormat. She opened it neatly and carefully. 'Hmm, I see I still have my neatness problem,' she mused. 'I should have ripped it open in gay abandon. Gosh, Elaine's handwriting is very small. Beautifully neat, though.'

Elaine had written to explain that she would no longer be able to come to the philosophy class. The friend she'd been staying with had asked her to move in permanently. Elaine referred to it tentatively as a relationship, Sandra noticed. She said she was very happy and although her father had promised to keep in touch by phone, her mother was still extremely upset and personally blaming the philosophy class for turning her daughter's head. Sandra had laughed ruefully at that point and wondered if she could blame the philosophy class for turning *her* head. She decided, however, that her head had already turned of its own accord.

Elaine ended the letter by saying that she hoped Sandra's problems had sorted themselves out and she was sorry they'd never got to talk about them. She would, however, be delighted if Sandra could write to her and stay in touch, as she felt that Sandra had been a true friend in an hour of need.

As Sandra lay in bed that night, she reflected on the strange nature of relationships. This was followed by a long reflection on the nature of strange relationships. 'I wonder if people only see what they really want to see in other people?' she wondered restlessly. 'Elaine thinks of me as a true friend, but I only listened to her properly for about half an hour one evening.' She tossed a little.

'Then there's Osborn, who maybe only saw in me in the past what he wanted to see. Now he's being forced to see what else there is, he's really not so sure he likes what he sees. Of course, that works the other way too. I probably only saw in him what *I* wanted to see, which may not have been the essential Osborn – or even the inessential Osborn, come to that.' She turned a little.

'Dad sees me mainly as a daughter, I think, although to be honest I don't really know. He did give me that personalised toothbrush that said *Sandra* and not *Daughter* when Mum was ill and he had to buy me a present. I liked that. Pity it had a picture of a little pink pig on it, though.' She tossed and turned a little.

'I think Mum is beginning to see me as me, although it only seemed to happen because I went peculiar on my birthday. Otherwise, she may have gone on in the same old way. That feels a bit rough.' She tossed a lot.

'Basil and Sybil only see me as a daughter-in-law who keeps house for their son and grandchildren, I'm sure of that. Potpourri dusters, for heaven's sake! As for Lawrence and Kirsty, I really don't know how much I figure in their lives at all, although I suppose it's the same the other way around. I'm sad about that, to be honest. I can remember thinking when I married Osborn that maybe I would get to share his brother and sister.' She turned a lot.

'Alison and the assertiveness group see me as a budding feminist who's deeply interested in – well, feminism obviously. I still don't know what I think of that, except that it feels a bit unbalanced somehow.' She tossed and turned a lot.

'I'm not sure how Isabelle sees me, except perhaps I might remind her of herself when she was younger? I don't know, that's probably too much of an assumption.' She tossed and turned a great deal.

'What did Geoff see in me when he first met me? A possible future lay?' Sandra shocked herself fully awake with that thought. 'Oh no, I know that's not true – is it? Surely he meant what he said about enjoying our talks? Oh please. Oh God. Oh, sod it, pain really hurts!' She reached out her hand and fumbled for the *Treacherous Turquoise Mood Matching Toilet Roll* that she'd previously placed by her bedside, just in case.

Towards early morning, Sandra was dreaming. It had begun with a philosophy class scenario, in which Elaine was sitting in between Osborn and Geoff. Sandra was the tutor and was trying desperately to explain the concept of counterfactuals. All the time, however, she was feeling insanely jealous of Elaine, who kept turning to one side to kiss Osborn, then turning the other side to kiss Geoff.

Meanwhile, at the back of the room, Philip and Isabelle were having a heart to heart. Sandra could clearly hear Philip saying mournfully that his wife understood him. At that point, Isabelle grabbed him by his orange sweater with the miniature golf ball pattern and began to kiss him. Elaine's mother then stormed into the room, pulled Elaine out of her seat and marched her out of the door.

Sandra, trying in vain to control events while simultaneously trying in vain to understand the concept of counterfactuals, suddenly seemed to flip her lid.

"Listen, you lot!" she heard herself screeching. "If I were a man, I wouldn't need to be a feminist!"

The scene changed subtly. Still in the philosophy classroom, but with the rest of the class strangely absent, Osborn was in floods of tears, explaining to Isabelle that his wife didn't understand him. At that point, Isabelle threw him down on the nearest table and began to undress him.

Meanwhile, Geoff had come in and was standing in front of Sandra with his hand on her arm, explaining quietly that his wife was trying to understand him. Sandra threw him down on the nearest table – fortunately not the one occupied by Osborn and Isabelle – and began to undress him. She was staring in amazement at his underpants with the interestingly placed golf ball motif, when the caretaker entered the room, brandishing a broom.

"Time to shut up the college now!" he shouted, waving his broom at them. "Mature students, my ass!"

CHAPTER 15

March was passing slowly. Sandra felt she had endured two of the loneliest months of her entire life. Osborn had become visibly and almost tangibly depressed and she was beginning to be seriously worried about him. She had three times recently come across him sniffing beside a box of *New Man Size Tissues* (more like *Ordinary Size*, from what she could see). She had wondered briefly whether she should share her *Mood Matching Toilet Rolls* with him, but had decided against it on the grounds that she would probably need them herself.

She'd asked him what was wrong on all three occasions, but to her extreme distress, he had told her to go away. The weight of Osborn's apparent burden lay heavily on her heart, competing at times with her own, until she felt the best thing in the world might be to lie down and go to sleep for ever.

At that point, though, she always thought of Madeleine and Gulliver and knew that she would put up with anything to be there for them. Nothing justified leaving them alone to fight their way through the battles of life on their own, or at least, without her. Madeleine was at such a vulnerable stage, poised between childhood and adolescence. At one moment she seemed quite happy with life and the next moment, she seemed quite confused and unhappy.

As for Gulliver, he was vulnerable in his own way, she was sure of that. He still hid behind humour, which was a good coping mechanism after all, but she felt in her heart that he still needed her, still relied on her to encourage him and simply be there for him on those few and far between occasions when he talked about himself.

Despite everything, or maybe because of everything, she decided her best course of action was to concentrate on passing the philosophy exam. She had paid for it, after all. At the philosophy classes, she found she could dissociate herself to a large extent from her ravaged feelings, by concentrating on the subject matter.

Over the weeks, she had managed to achieve a belief that the subject mattered to her, by a form of self-fulfilling prophecy involving the phrase: 'Philosophy is cool and I am good at it'. Her essay marks were rising steadily, she was able to use 'a priori' and 'a posteriori' in the right context and she had even begun to feel comfortable with counterfactuals.

She and Geoff were polite and friendly towards each other during the class, but went their separate ways afterwards. Sandra considered she was coping with this very well. She was only usually incoherent with pain for two days afterwards. By Sunday she usually felt a kind of exhausted numbness, followed by three days of gradually lessening total devastation. The only trouble was that by then it was Thursday and the whole cycle was ready to start again.

She had met Isabelle only twice since the end of January. There was no doubt that Isabelle was heavily into Eric Godfrey Overman – or rather that Eric Godfrey Overman was heavily into Isabelle, thought Sandra a little coarsely, after having once seen a photo of Eric. How anyone with Isabelle's apparent sensitivity could make love with someone who sported such a serious beer gut was something that Sandra privately couldn't understand. She had once semi-publicly not understood it in a conversation with Osborn, but he had only lifted up his top and admired his own flat stomach.

Isabelle and Eric had spent the first two weeks of February enjoying a winter holiday in Spain and Isabelle had looked so happy and carefree when she returned, that Sandra hadn't felt able to bare her soul.

Her soul, in fact, sometimes felt like her only friend, but it was really a pity that it hurt so much. There were moments, even an hour or two sometimes, of comfort from various people. Gulliver's humour and Madeleine's individuality often shone through. Once she had even laughed aloud at a Monty Viper sketch, but put that down to a kind of reactive hysteria.

Several times, she and Osborn had turned to each other in the dark of a mutually sleepless night and made familiar, fairly fast love. 'I would miss this,' Sandra had thought afterwards the last time, 'although it's in the dark and I want us to be in the light. It's a good way of getting to sleep, though.'

She had been to the assertiveness group only once since the Hope Supper, but she had borrowed some books from Jasmine and was finding them both fascinating and horrifying. The accounts of manipulation and domination of women in the past were a revelation to her. 'I've been blind,' she thought with amazement. 'I really have been prejudiced, because I thought feminists were fanatics and I totally, utterly, categorically, am against extremism of any sort. I might even wear a badge. No, maybe not.'

She and Elaine had exchanged letters twice, but Sandra felt unable to divulge the entire contents of her inner multilemma. Elaine seemed to be busy working out her own feelings and Sandra was happy to discuss them with her on paper.

As she tried to reply to Elaine's latest letter, Sandra realised that she told different bits of herself to different people. 'Nobody could stand all my bits together,' she thought with a welcome stab of humour. 'No, I tell people about the bits I think they can relate to, I suppose. I should think everyone must.' She bit the top of her pen.

'I know that some people long for a relationship in which they can share all of themselves with another, but I don't think that's realistic. There are obviously parts of Osborn that he's better off sharing with another communications engineer. The same applies to more personal aspects too, like spiritual beliefs and plenty of other aspects of our lives. I do believe in honesty and openness, but more as a choice than an obligation. Honesty and openness can be a gift then, rather than a right. Rights seem so dogmatic. I think, on the whole they should be balanced by lefts. I wonder if I'm a latent Liberal Democrat? Oh God, I don't know what's the matter with me.' She bit her knuckle.

'I seem so sceptical of everything. It would be so much easier to accept everything unquestioningly. Hey Sandra! Are you out of your mind?' She bit her elbow.

'Am I out of my mind? No, I just think that healthy scepticism needs to be balanced by healthy open-mindedness. God, my brain hurts.' She bit her shoulder.

"Gulliver!" she suddenly shrieked loudly, hurting her throat. "That Monty Viper CD is driving me around the bloody bend! If I hear that *Traffic Light Song* once more, I'll throw up all over your carpet!"

"Er – Mother," said Gulliver politely, poking his head around the door.

"Don't try your pseudo-innocent crap on me, you mad moron!" she shouted, enjoying the sheer relief of venting her pent-up emotion in a relatively harmless way. Gulliver was quite a harmless relative on the whole. "I'm your mother! I know when you're trying to pull the sodding wool over my eyes! Well, up yours, shithead!" She sighed with a strange pleasure.

"Er – Mother!" Gulliver was smiling alarmingly. "Damien's here in my room, remember?" He had muttered the last phrase rather agitatedly, Sandra noticed, but she wasn't especially in the mood to care.

"What? Who? Damien? You mean that spotty, big-nosed git with the flat backside?"

"Hello, Mrs Dullkettle," said Damien, poking his head around the door with a rather furtive smile. "I've turned off Monty Viper. Is Acid Freaks Rave 666 OK?"

It was the Thursday before Easter and the four Dullkettles had been invited to a family engagement party, on Sandra's side of the family. The about-to-be engaged person who'd invited them had always seemed a little vacant to Sandra, but perfectly pleasant otherwise.

Sandra was having a crisis about what to wear. She was presuming there would be a disco and was hoping to find something incredibly sexy in her wardrobe that would make her look with-it, young and slim. Unfortunately, nothing had come to light.

Madeleine poked her head around the door. "Mum, do I look all right in this?"

"Yes, you look lovely, darling!"

"Can I wear some make-up?"

"Oh, I don't know." Sandra saw Madeleine's crestfallen face. "Just a bit, then."

"Thanks, Mum. What are you wearing?"

"I don't know, I can't seem to find anything." Sandra thought how much more grown up Madeleine suddenly seemed than a mere six months ago.

"What about that top you bought me in the sale that's too big at the moment?"

"What top? Oh yes, that one. I don't know, you can't wear a bra with it. But it *is* rather special. Perhaps I could try it on?"

A few moments later, Sandra was attempting to fit herself into the top. After a lot of stretching, breathing in and twisting herself around, she achieved the almost impossible. Madeleine was grinning broadly, but then looked horrified as Sandra twisted once too often to the left, splitting the right-hand seam and thus causing her right breast to escape. After a moment's hesitation, Madeleine couldn't stop herself dissolving into laughter.

"Oh Maddy, I'm so sorry!" Sandra was contrite, as she covered herself up with her hand. "I'll buy you a new top as soon as I can, I promise!"

"It's OK, Mum, I wasn't sure I liked that one much anyway," gasped Madeleine. "You did look so funny when the seam split! It must be funny to have boobs like that."

"Thanks, but just you wait till you have boobs!"

"I can't wait, Mum, I want to wear a bra like some of the girls in my class do."

"Really?" Sandra managed to extricate herself from the top. "Hey Maddy?"

"What?"

"The right one did it!"

Later that evening, Sandra sat at a table at the engagement party, wearing an old little black number she'd resurrected from the jumble bag, decorated with a long, chiffon multi-coloured scarf tied around her waist. At the table with her were Osborn, Gulliver, Madeleine and a man of about 80 called Jack.

Sandra presumed that Jack was a distant relative from her childhood, as he seemed very talkative and friendly. On their arrival, he had greeted them familiarly and had offered to buy them a drink. Never one to look a gift horse (or any sort of gift) in the mouth, Sandra had looked him in the eye and accepted graciously.

"Gracious, yes! A drink would be lovely, thank you," she had said. Then, ignoring the hisses of "Who is he?" from Gulliver and Madeleine, she had sat beside Jack and listened to his lively conversation about his old vegetable garden.

However, just as Jack was embarking upon slug pellets, Sandra noticed her mother and father arriving and made space for them at the table. Her father looked a little tired, she thought, but he soon settled down with a drink beside Jack, who had by then progressed to woolly aphids.

"Who is he?" Sandra managed to hiss to Caroline, just as the disco proper started.

"I haven't the faintest!" shouted Caroline above the noise. "I must go and shout hello to people, are you coming?"

Sandra followed her mother around, shouting hello. It was impossible to communicate much else. Sandra was rather concerned that Osborn, usually quite gregarious on these occasions, was sitting and gazing into space.

After she'd finished shouting hello and admiring the table of engagement presents (feeling half jealous and half relieved that she, a married woman of 21 years, did not possess a great number of the intricate looking gadgets there) she went back and sat next to Osborn. She tried to put a hand on his thigh, but he moved away. Hurt, she turned to Gulliver.

"Where's Madeleine?" she shouted.

"Dancing with those girls over there," he shouted. "One of them came and got her. I might join them, I'm really bored."

'Well, that's a bit of a shocker, Gulliver's actually approaching that group of girls,' thought Sandra. 'I'm quite surprised at Madeleine too, but it's really good that your own children can keep surprising you. I expect the music's got to them.' She started to tap her fingers.

'I recognise this – is it Acid Freaks Rave 666? It's the beat that gets you going.' She started to tap her foot. 'I used to love dancing. I could really let myself go – lose myself in the music – the rhythm – the hypnotic, compulsive beat of the drums...' She moved her head rhythmically. 'I must dance!' She looked at the young dancers and reconsidered. 'I'll just have another drink first.'

She sat sipping her second drink and noticed someone had apparently bought her a third drink, so she drank that too. She started to reminisce about her old dancing days. She could picture the building, the entrance where she used to hang around with her old dancing partner (Andrea Bonkworthy), the cloakroom, the bar, the seats, the big shiny ball thing hanging from the ceiling, the groups, the excitement, the sweating male interesting bodies of the sweating male interesting young men. Young men? Ah no, chaps, that was the term! She chuckled aloud, but fortunately nobody heard.

She remembered the odd lifts home with the odd chaps, but more frequently, the bus rides home with Andrea. She remembered feeling sophisticated and seductive – except on the bus – and that time when the song called *Montego Bay* had been playing and a chap had asked her if she'd ever been to Montego Bay. She still thought it had been unkind of him to laugh derisively and say "So long, dull child!" when she'd answered that she hadn't been to Montego Bay, but she'd been to Whitley Bay.

"Come on Sandra, let's dance!" shouted Caroline, nudging Sandra's arm. Sandra leaned over and asked Osborn if he wanted to dance, but he shook his head and continued to gaze into space. Sandra was considering whether she should stay with him, when she heard the DJ announce that it was Sixties time and the unmistakable sounds of T. Rex hit the atmosphere.

"Yes!" She shot up and dragged Caroline on to the middle of the dance floor, giving the man with the video camera a cheeky wave on the way.

All the movements came back instinctively, as Sandra lost herself deliciously, a trifle disjointedly, but quite abandonedly, in the music. 'Or am I really finding myself?' she thought for a moment, as T. Rex ended and The Spencer Davis Group began. She noticed Madeleine's group of girls (plus Gulliver) looking at her and giggling, but she just smiled and waved her arms around a little more fervently.

Three songs later, Caroline indicated that she was going to go back and sit down. Sandra was about to follow her, when she heard the never-forgotten opening notes of *San Francisco*. She turned back to the dance floor as if in a trance, remembering the heady, mind-bending and completely baffling experience of her Flower Power summer of not-quite-love in 1967. She attached herself loosely to a dancing group of distant relatives (although they smiled broadly and invited her into their circle) and swayed rhythmically and even perhaps a touch transcendently, or so she hoped.

The Flower Power summer had been a very spiritual experience, Sandra and her friends had decided on their return to school in September. The four of them had spent their entire time floating around Plymouth Hoe dressed in strange ethnic dresses, numerous strings of beads, small bells from a local pet shop and flowers from the municipal gardens. Of course, it hadn't been quite so existentially uplifting when it had rained. Somehow, the atmosphere in the Hoe Café and in the Hoe shelters on uncomfortable wooden seats (with slats missing) had tended to detract from the ambience of their spiritual journey. However, that was life, they had decided mystically, while overdosing on Mars Bars.

Sandra remembered the fine days most vividly, though – sitting on the grass making daisy chains and discussing the lyrics of *Magical Mystery Tour*. To this day, Sandra could find no meaning at all to the words of *I am the Walrus*.

Sometimes, sailors would join them on the grass, she recalled a little shamefully. Some of the sailors had been weird, with strange accents and funny turns of phrase, not to mention the odd funny turn itself. Sandra remembered one sailor she'd gone for a walk with alone. He seemed to smoke a lot and speak very little. They had reclined on the grass and Sandra had arranged a daisy chain in his chest hair, in preparation for what she hoped was going to be a spiritually meaningful physical encounter – her first, to be fair. However, he'd closed his eyes and carried on smoking. When Sandra had accidentally elbowed him in the groin, he'd looked at her in surprise.

"Dig some grass, babe?" was all he'd been moved to say.

"No thank you, I'm no hooligan, I'm into love and peace for your information," she'd blurted out, before running back to find the others. It had only been later when she'd recounted the scene to her friends, that she'd realised how close she'd come to having a mind-altering experience.

The Sixties time ended and the Nineties time restarted, but Sandra didn't care and continued to dance the evening and all her troubles away. 'I'm still a free, musical spirit child at heart,' she thought, when she leaned against the bar for another drink, in order to assuage her thirst. 'I'd forgotten how music and moving to music can lift you high, high away. God, that beat does things to me. I must return my body to the groovy happening scene. I must continue to express my existential funky stuff. I simply owe it to myself. Why does that man with the video camera keep pointing it at me?'

Towards the end of the evening, the slow music started in earnest. Sandra was walking away – she needed another drink, anyway – when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned and practically fell in amazement into Osborn's arms. He seemed to be looking at her a little strangely, she dimly registered, but didn't care. She had caught a sniff of his *Hint of Male Sweat* splash-on and was feeling decidedly friendly.

They danced two slow dances, then lurched back to the table. Sandra suddenly realised how exhausted she was and how much her feet hurt. 'I should have taken off my shoes, like I used to,' she thought hazily. 'Oh – I did. I wonder where they are? Dad looks tired. I should think so, sitting next to that guy Jack all evening. I wonder who he is? Wow, I think it's time we went home, my funky stuff has totally transcended itself.'

Later, Sandra lay in bed with revolting eardrums, hoping they hadn't been permanently damaged by the loud music. 'I sound just like a boring, middle-aged person,' she noticed wonderingly. 'God, I suppose I *will* be a boring, middle-aged person when I'm 40, which is just over five months away now.' She almost shot up in bed with horror at applying the middle-aged label to herself.

'I hate ageism,' she thought with disgust, 'especially when it applies to me. Older people aren't venerated in this society like they should be – like they are in some countries. Mind you, I'll never forget that time at the service station when that coach load of militant pensioners came in and terrorised the coffee queue with their sticks and umbrellas. I was quite frightened.'

"Sandra," Osborn's voice suddenly mumbled from the other side of the bed, alarming Sandra, who had thought he was asleep.

"Yes?" she answered cautiously.

"I do love you." He turned towards her, flopped his hand onto her thigh and started to snore gently.

Sandra's emotions seemed to start somersaulting. Lots of emotions, all at once. Combined with the noise sensation in her ears, the effect was quite startling.

'I'm so emotionally involved with Osborn,' she thought, 'and I do love him, I know I do – but I don't feel *in* love with him anymore – not for years and years. I can't remember when it stopped. It must have been very gradual, although I do remember things changed radically when we had Gulliver. It's difficult to be a sex goddess in a maternity bra. No, it was deeper than that, of course. It was like growing up in one gigantic leap. Becoming a mother was the biggest shock of my entire life, although I wouldn't change it for a single thing. Or hundreds of things, actually.'

'It's inevitable that I should change, for heaven's sake. He's changed too. He used to smile a lot and laugh with me, just like it was with Geoff. Oh no!' A pain of acute longing shot through her body, leaving an ache somewhere deep inside. She tried to force it away.

'No! Oh God, why is this happening to me? I don't want it! I've tried so hard to stop thinking of him. I thought it had got better, but it hasn't. It's still here, eating away at my insides. I think of him, I dream of him, I want to be with him, I want him...' Realisation assailed her like a wave of nausea. 'I'm infatuated,' she thought dully, hating the label she felt she must truthfully apply to herself. 'I've somehow, totally against my will, become a fully-fledged infatuee.'

Osborn's hand suddenly clenched her thigh in an edge of sleep spasm. "Oh!" Sandra cried out in alarm. She had forgotten all about his hand being there. She peered at him in the darkness, trying to check that his eyes were shut. 'He can't read my mind,' she thought in irrational panic, 'can he?'

CHAPTER 16

As soon as the phone rang at just gone 8 the following morning, Sandra was sure it was bad news. She stumbled out of bed and downstairs to the hall, her heart beating quickly. Her mother's voice at the other end of the line sounded strange and rather lower-pitched than usual.

"Sandra, I'm sorry to ring early. I know you must be tired from last night, but I'm afraid Dad's in hospital."

"Oh?" Sandra felt her heart sink and began to feel a little dizzy.

"He's resting now. He's all right, they say, but he had a heart attack last night."

"Oh no." Sandra steadied herself against the wall.

"They let me stay at the hospital all night. There was a comfortable chair by his bed, but I couldn't sleep."

"Oh Mum."

"He's in the best place, Sandra – the Cardiac Care Unit, attached to various monitors. He was dozing when I left him just now."

"Are you going to stay there? What will you do? What should we do? Can we visit him?" Sandra tried desperately to gather her thoughts together.

"The doctor's coming to check on him later this morning. I'll stay here, I think, and give you a ring when the doctor's been."

"OK. Are you all right? You must be awfully tired."

"I'm all right. I do feel tired, though. I expect it'll catch up with me later."

"Are you sure you're all right? Is there anything I can do? Anything at all?" Sandra fought back her tears.

"Pray for him?" Her mother's voice was so low that Sandra could hardly hear it.

"I will. But Mum, if anything happens, if there's any sign that – you know..." Sandra found that she couldn't articulate the awful thought in her head.

"I'll ring you right away, I promise. I must go Sandra, my money's run out. Take care and don't worry. Bye."

The phone line went dead before Sandra could tell her mother to take care. It seemed the final straw. She slumped to the floor with her back against the wall and wept with a heavy heart. To top it all there wasn't a single *Mood Matching Toilet Roll* in sight.

Early that evening, Sandra sat at her father's bedside, holding his hand while he slept. She looked and felt like a wreck, with a blotchy face and swollen eyes, but she didn't care. Her father was alive and all the signs were reasonably good, the doctor had said. So, she had been given a second chance to tell him what she'd been meaning to for several months. 'The only trouble is,' she thought sadly, 'I don't know how to put it and I don't want to upset him in any way, especially now.'

She sat silently, looking around discreetly at the other people in the Unit. 'This goes on all the time,' she thought. 'People are seriously ill and die every day while I spend my time studying obscure concepts that nobody seems to give a toss about (except Philip) and mooning over a man I met six months ago, just because he paid me some attention - and because he scored 9 on the *Sexy Smiling Eyes Scale* - and because he's sensitive and intelligent and gentle and oh God, stop it!'

Just then, Leonard opened his eyes, turned his head towards Sandra and smiled.

"Hello, Dad. How are you?" Sandra bit her lip at her stupid question.

"I'm fine, love." He squeezed her hand. "It's good to see you."

"Oh Dad!" Sandra wiped away two large tears that seemed to have appeared from nowhere. "I love you, Dad," she managed to whisper, before she was forced to delve into her bag for a *Mournful Maroon Mood Matching Toilet Roll*.

By Easter Sunday, Sandra was a little less anxious about her father, as Caroline had been told he would probably be sent home by the end of the following week. Sandra had asked her mother to have Sunday lunch with them and Caroline by then had become so desperately tired that she'd agreed without a moment's hesitation. Actually, the lunch didn't seem all that bad, even if Sandra thought so herself.

"Mum, this lunch is lovely," said Madeleine, smiling at Sandra. "You haven't done a roast like this for ages."

"It's not bad at all," said Gulliver, smiling at Sandra. "It reminds me of the best meal I ever had. Do you remember those charcoal flame burger grill things you set alight last year on my birthday? They were something else."

"They were actually lamb roasties in a special mint sauce flavoured breadcrumb coating," said Sandra a little acerbically. She vegetated a while over her carrots and kale. "It wasn't my fault that the *Bestwear* man called and I got involved with his brushes."

"Thank you, Sandra," said Caroline. "Thank you for going to all this trouble. I would probably have just had a cheese sandwich if I'd been home."

"Ah, now that's something she can cook," said Osborn with a weird grin. He was on his third glass of wine, Sandra noticed with surprise.

"I forgot to say, do you remember that man Jack, who sat at our table at the engagement party?" asked Caroline, having noticed the weird grin.

"Yes?" replied Sandra, Gulliver and Madeleine, looking up with interest.

"I found out who he is," continued Caroline. "I had a phone call from one of Leonard's aunts who'd been at the party, asking after Leonard. Anyway, we got chatting – well, she did mostly – bit of a gasbag, to be honest. It turns out, though, that this man Jack lives with his daughter and son-in-law in a granddad flat, next to the place where the party was held. He apparently gets so lonely that he often dresses up and wanders into parties that are held there. People often fail to realise that he's not one of theirs, or else they realise and they don't mind. Poor old soul!"

"It's sad," agreed Sandra. "It's really sad that some people are so lonely, although you don't have to be old to be lonely. It's difficult when you have the responsibility of looking after an ageing parent, though. Oh! I didn't mean you, Mum."

"Don't worry, I won't be a burden to you. I just hope I don't have a stroke and get trapped inside my own body."

"Yes," sighed Sandra, feeling suddenly depressed. "Life can be so hard."

"They say life is what you make it," said Caroline, "but you've only got a limited set of life variables when the chips are down."

"Chips!" exclaimed Gulliver. "Now that's something we haven't had for a long time. I fancy some chips."

"Chops!" said Osborn suddenly. "Now that's something we haven't had for an equally long time. Actually, I don't like them much."

"Chaps!" said Madeleine brightly. "I wouldn't mind a chap like Becky has." She flushed suddenly, as Sandra gazed at her in surprise.

"Are you subjected to this kind of verbal badinage every mealtime?" Caroline asked Sandra, her eyebrows raised. "No wonder you nearly went over the edge, so to speak. What with that and your acronym."

"What's a verbal bandage, Grandma?" asked Madeleine, looking confused. "And what's an acronym?"

"An acronym is a sort of abbreviation of the first letters of words," explained Caroline to Madeleine, "so your mum's acronym is – well, my acronym is COW. Your acronym is MAD."

"I don't like acronyms," muttered Madeleine. "They're stupid."

"I meant to tell you, Sandra," continued Caroline. "I was seriously thinking of reinvestigating my acronym hypothesis yesterday. This horrible man was at the hospital, visiting his father in the next bed to Leonard. He was loud and obnoxious and he pinched my chair when I went to the loo. Later on, I happened to notice when he was signing a form that his signature was G I Tappitt. It cheered me up for the rest of the day."

Just after 8 that evening, Sandra and Madeleine arrived home from visiting Leonard. Osborn and Gulliver had both visited the day before, so Sandra was feeling pleased that as a family, they were all taking part. Leonard had seemed a little down, she thought, as she locked the door, but he had flirted once (very badly) with a nurse, so she felt reasonably sure that he was improving.

She went to look for Osborn, to ask if he wanted a cup of tea. To her astonishment, she found him in the dining room, writing a letter. He looked up a little guiltily, she thought.

"What are you doing?" she asked with surprise, since she'd really meant to ask if he wanted tea.

"I'm writing a note to a friend," he replied, looking at her with inscrutable eyes.

"Oh, right. What friend?" Sandra was nonplussed.

"A friend I've made at work," replied Osborn coolly.

"Oh, that's nice. Isn't it a bit strange, though, writing to someone at work? I mean, you must see him nearly every day?"

"It's one of the secretaries."

"I didn't know you had any male secretaries."

"We don't. She's called Theresa."

"Oh?" For a moment, Sandra was utterly confused, as well as feeling utterly stupid. "I – umm – have you known her long?"

"About two months. We got talking about religion, that's how it started."

"How all what started?" Sandra felt icy cold fingers snaking down her spine.

"Oh, just being friendly. She goes to this charismatic church." He looked away. "I said I would go with her one evening."

"Oh?"

"Do you mind?"

"No, of course not, you're free to have your own friends," replied Sandra, before what she was actually feeling hit her in words. 'I do, I *do* mind,' she thought with pain. 'You wouldn't come to church with *me*.'

"You can come if you really want to," said Osborn. "I told her I might go next Sunday, but it seems inappropriate with your father being in hospital, so I was just writing to explain."

"Oh." Sandra's emotions were tumbling around. 'You could have waited and told her next time you saw her at work,' she was thinking. She then remembered her own letter to Geoff, as well as his to her.

"I would have rung her," said Osborn, "but I don't know her number yet and she's not in the book."

"Oh." Sandra stood very still, acutely aware of the word 'yet'. She suddenly felt as if she needed to escape. "So, do you want tea?" she asked quickly, leaving the room without waiting for his reply.

Sandra lay in bed that night clutching a *Tortured Taupe Mood Matching Toilet Roll*, although her eyes were dry. She was experiencing dissonance between her emotions and her beliefs, mostly in the area of Osborn and his friend Theresa. She whispered the name to herself. It was only a name, but it was very strange how she suddenly disliked it so much.

On the whole, she much preferred her beliefs, which upheld simply and logically that it was perfectly all right for Osborn and her to enjoy their own friends of either gender. Her emotions, however, could in no way be called simple or logical. She felt betrayed, confused and alone.

She tried to fit Geoff into the friend of either gender category, but found that he refused to fit. He was too much Geoff – too unique – too special – too wanted. She tried to fit Theresa into the friend of either gender category, but she also refused to fit. She was too much unknown – probably too young – probably too capable – and too much now the other woman.

'This is ridiculous,' thought Sandra testily. 'My thoughts and feelings are running away with me. I'm a perceptive and intelligent woman who is – who is at this moment deeply and irrevocably alone.'

She discarded the *Tortured Taupe Mood Matching Toilet Roll* and searched just inside her pillowcase where she'd hidden Geoff's handkerchief, now washed, although rather crumpled. She held on to it with the words 'I am alone, I am alone' running through her head.

She awoke in the early hours of dawn (with sunrise about 06:15 at that time of year) having let go of Geoff's handkerchief and with the words 'I am alone' carved like an eternal reality in her mind. She put the handkerchief back inside her pillowcase and turned to look at Osborn with eyes that felt sad, old and very heavy. Osborn was sleeping with a pretty lilac lace-edged handkerchief that wasn't Sandra's next to his face.

Somehow a week had passed. In the grand scheme of things, it had actually been quite easy, as the days had followed on after one another. Leonard had returned home on Friday, but Sandra had continued to feel alone. In fact, she felt as if she'd always been alone, but had simply refused to face it.

'We're all born alone,' she thought dully, as Osborn prepared to go to church with Theresa for the first time that evening. 'We're born alone and we die alone and what goes on in between is just a masquerade. We're assigned our roles with their different masks and if we're very lucky, we can choose one or two – and we just pretend. Well, I'm too tired to go on pretending anymore.'

She went to the kitchen to finish the Easter Egg that Caroline had given her. 'I haven't even enjoyed this chocolate,' she thought, even more dully. 'Nothing in life feels worth living for, not even this milk chocolate Easter Egg with its assortment of super deluxe rich luxury chocolates inside. In fact, it's making me feel quite sick.'

"Hello Mother," said Gulliver, appearing around the dining room door. "Shall I cook tea tonight?"

"Hi Gulliver," replied Sandra, noticing his concerned gaze. She made a tremendous effort to rouse herself. "Haven't we had tea? Oh dear, sorry. Yes, we must have some tea." She attempted a smile. "I don't want anything, but you help yourself to anything in the cupboards and I'll come and help soon, I promise."

"Hello Mum," said Madeleine, appearing in the dining room as Gulliver disappeared into the kitchen. "I thought I heard voices. What are we having for tea?" She sat down at the table and smiled at Sandra.

"Gulliver's just gone to choose something," said Sandra, attempting another smile. "You could go and help – make it a joint effort, if you like?"

"No, I don't fancy a roast, it would take too long," replied Madeleine. She then looked at Sandra with one of her slightly disconcerting steady gazes. "Mum, what's wrong? Grandad's out of hospital now, I thought you'd be happy about that?"

"Oh, I *am* happy about that. You shouldn't worry about me, Maddy, honestly." Sandra was thinking how much she really didn't want her children to feel any undue concern about her. 'I'm causing distress to these lovely children of mine – of ours,' she thought. 'I must stop being so self-centred.'

"Is it you and Dad, then?" continued Madeleine relentlessly in her obvious search for the truth.

"No, not at all. Well, maybe just a little bit. Everyone has rough patches though, my angel. Just look at you and Claire. I'm sure Dad and I will sort it out soon," lied Sandra. The truth was that she felt she would never be sure of anything where she and Osborn were concerned, ever again.

"Mum, Claire hit me."

"What?" Sandra was shocked out of her thick, gunky blackness.

"It wasn't very hard. I didn't hit her back, I just walked away."

"Good for you, my darling – don't cry." Sandra went to Madeleine and hugged her, hard. "You did the right thing, which means you're so much braver and wiser than she is. I'm so proud of you, I really am."

"Yes, but Mum, why does she hate me?"

"I don't think she hates you, Maddybelle, I think she's unhappy with herself and she's just using you, because you're kind and clever. That doesn't make it right, but I think that may be the reason."

"But I still haven't got a boyfriend, Mum, I can't be pretty enough, or thin enough."

"Madeleine!" Sandra was shocked again. "Please don't ever think you're anything less than lovely, darling. It's not all about how you look anyway, it's about who you are!"

You're so special and I love you so much." Sudden hot tears formed in Sandra's eyes and dropped onto Madeleine's hair. "You mustn't mind so much about what people think of you – or at least, *try* not to mind so much." Sandra wiped her tears away and looked into Madeleine's green eyes. "You've got such beautiful eyes."

"Your eyes haven't been looking at mine much lately, Mum," said Madeleine sombrely.

"I'm so sorry, my darling," said Sandra contritely. 'How profound,' she thought quietly. 'She's only ten and she can put it so beautifully and honestly.'

"Mum, what's Gulliver cooking? It smells a bit funny."

Sandra and Madeleine entered the kitchen together and witnessed a strange and rather worrying sight. Gulliver was standing in front of the cooker, fully dressed in his wet weather gear with the hood pulled tightly around his chin.

"What in the name of...?" began Sandra.

"Hi," said Gulliver as if nothing was abnormal. "This has nearly finished."

"The wet weather gear?" Sandra managed to articulate, fearing he'd finally flipped.

"Well," replied Gulliver with a slightly embarrassed grin. "It said on the packet to stir and stand, covered, for ten minutes. I thought it might make you laugh."

Sandra and Madeleine grinned at one another, then at Gulliver. 'This,' thought Sandra, the tears not far away again, 'this alone is worth living for. I love them so much, these two unique, slightly deranged, wonderful souls who I've helped to bring into the world.' She continued to ponder, as Gulliver undid his hood and Madeleine sniffed the contents of the saucepan suspiciously. 'I hope one day they'll find it in their hearts to forgive me.'

At 22:30, Sandra sat restlessly flipping through *Zen in the New Man's Kitchen* – presumably another gem from Terry at work, she supposed. In between trying to assess the underlying message of the book and failing, she was trying to assess just what could have kept Osborn at church with Theresa for four hours.

'Maybe he's having a spiritual crisis and is being administered to,' she considered, idly glancing at the section on *Mindfulness During Cheesecake Attempts*. 'Or maybe he's met with a fatal accident involving a runaway Mini and I will later have to identify his horribly mangled body. Oh, here he is at last, the inconsiderate, selfish jerk!'

"Hello," she said pseudo-magnanimously, as Osborn gave the impression of floating into the room, his eyes alight. "Good God!" Sandra looked him up and down in amazement.

"Yes, God is good," said Osborn, grinning and sinking onto the sofa. "I've been zapped. Completely, utterly and fantastically zapped!"

"You needn't brag about it," said Sandra acidly. "I realise she's probably younger than I am, with exceptional social skills, an HGV licence, perky little breasts and an ability to cook a superb raspberry and chocolate torte, but there's no need to flaunt it, for God's sake."

"For God's sake?" Osborn looked genuinely confused for a moment. "Oh, I see, you mean Theresa. Oh no, no, no!" He leaned forward with a fervour Sandra hadn't seen since she'd once appeared in the kitchen wearing nothing but a suspender belt and stockings – but that must have been over two decades ago now, she realised sadly.

"No, Sandra," continued Osborn. "This is much more important. Tonight I've been zapped by the Holy Spirit!" He sprawled on the sofa and closed his eyes, smiling.

"Have you been drinking?" asked Sandra coldly.

"Only the elixir of life," he replied, opening his eyes again. "Oh Sandra, you must come and have hands laid on you."

"I would rather have eggs laid on me by a constipated hen than end up like you, like this." Sandra glared at him in hostile confusion. "I bet *she* laid hands on you afterwards!" she shouted, regretting the words as soon as she'd uttered them. In a split second of blind rage, she pounced on the Zen book and sent it hurtling into his lap.

"Ouch!" he cried, grasping his groin with surprise. "I do understand your anger," he continued, a little hoarsely. "Bless you, Sandra."

"I haven't bloody sneezed!" she yelled, before flouncing out of the room. Unfortunately, her sleeve caught on the door handle and jerked her back for a second, but she refused to let that stop her and clomped up the stairs quite satisfactorily, while trying not to make too much noise for Gulliver's and Madeleine's sake.

A short while later, she flounced into bed. 'If he turns out like his parents, I'll divorce him,' she thought defiantly. 'If he goes around saying "Alleluia" and "Praise the Lord" when everything is going horribly wrong, I'll simply not be able to cope. Oops, I've left my earrings on.' She took off her earrings and lay staring at a cobweb on the ceiling.

'What *has* he experienced, though?' she wondered, rather more quietly. 'Whatever it was, it was obviously very real to him. The Holy Spirit – the hands down everyone who wants coffee mob, if you ever! Still, I suppose it could have been worse, like one of the Really New, or Absolutely Newest Age cults. Ah, I can see the spider. Oops, I've left my necklace on.' She took off her necklace and sighed.

'My experience of God seems to be very enigmatic. I suppose God is essentially an enigma, though. I don't know, I really did expect something else after that dream. Something *more*. I feel somewhat abandoned – neglected – rejected – alone. How am I supposed to find out the truth? Oops, I've left my tights on.' She took off her tights and sighed.

'The truth. That little definite article seems to distort or bias things. How can an objective reality of truth be realised, when truth is such a subjective concept? Osborn's truth about God clearly seems very different to mine. Or am I being narrow-minded? Strewth, I've left my skirt on.' She took off her skirt and sighed.

'Do we all find little bits of the truth? Parts of the whole? Yes, that makes sense. Everyone's experience of God – all the different religious sects and cults, etc, have each found different subjective truths, or parts of the whole. And according to good old Gestalt theory, the whole is more than the sum of its parts – so God is more than the sum of all the religions. He's got to be, for God's sake! He's also got to be more than a He or a She – in fact, more than all the limited boundaries of our subjective, finite minds.' She brushed away the spider, which had just dropped onto her nose. 'Good God, I've forgotten to undress altogether.'

CHAPTER 17

It was a beautiful Thursday morning in the middle of April. Sandra stood at the window, reading a letter she'd just received from Elaine. It was a bright, hopeful letter that seemed to fit perfectly with the bright, hopeful morning. Elaine had found a job in the local library and was planning to study for an Open University degree. Sandra sighed a little and gazed at the late flowering daffodils in the garden. They were so yellow, so bright, so sure of themselves, but they were also so silent, so aloof, so unknowable.

Sandra suddenly realised she felt badly in need of a friend – someone to talk with and someone to get to know. She hadn't yet been to the charismatic church with Osborn, although she'd decided she would definitely go with him one day when she felt she could bear it.

'I must have an open mind,' she'd decided one morning at the crack of dawn (with sunrise about 05:45 at that time of year) 'or else my self-image as a perceptive, intelligent, modest, open-minded person will suffer. Those bloody birds are making a racket. What ornithologists see in them, I'll never understand, they're so weird creeping around with their binoculars stuck to their faces. Mind you, my ornithophobia is rather a drawback in that area.'

During the last couple of weeks, Sandra had found she felt rather differently about Geoff – or was it that she felt differently about herself, she wondered? Philosophy classes were due to start again that evening, with the agreed cooling down period over. However, Sandra felt she wasn't the same person now as the Sandra who'd written the cooling down letter to Geoff in January. It all seemed a little ancient and even a little childish. The feeling of being existentially alone was still with her, but it was beginning to grow into a tentative self-assurance that being existentially alone was OK. It had been something that had needed to be faced and she had managed to face it.

Consequently, as she walked to the CFE that evening, she felt a little nervous and unsure of the way Geoff would behave towards her – if any way at all – but deep inside there was a Sandra who was content simply to be her newly evolving self. She knew that this self was as yet a rather frail, wobbly being, but she was satisfied that she was learning to be independent at last.

'Mmm,' she thought, as she walked past front gardens full of spring flowers. 'Existential independence has a very pleasing ring to it. I do feel lonely at the moment, though. Osborn is exploring new worlds – Mum is naturally concerned with Dad – Isabelle is still wrapped up with Eric. It would be so good simply to talk with Geoff again.' It was still there, she noted with dismay, that tiny thrill of arousal at the thought of an imminent encounter with him.

'Just a tiny thrill, though, because I haven't seen him for three weeks,' she justified to herself. The tiny thrill unexpectedly became a much larger thrill, however, as Geoff's car pulled up alongside her. They both seemed to hesitate for a moment, then Geoff leaned over and opened the passenger door.

"Hi," he said, with a very charming smile, which Sandra immediately scored as 9 out of 10 on her *Very Charming Smile Scale*. "Like a lift?"

"Hi," replied Sandra, with what she hoped would be a 9 out of 10 on Geoff's *Incredibly Appealing Smile Scale*. "Thanks." She shut the door and pretended to fiddle with the seat belt, as rather a lot of pulse-tingling memories came flooding back. The car moved off.

"How are you?" asked Geoff, glancing at her.

"I'm OK," she said, glancing at him. "How are you?"

"I'm OK," he replied rather hesitantly. "I notice you didn't say you were fine?" He glanced at her again with a vaguely rueful smile.

"Well, it's been rather a peculiar Easter holiday," she said, sighing. "Things seemed to come to a head, really. I'm glad to ... to get back to normal. Like coming here, I mean, although there are only eight weeks left, I think."

"Yes, it's gone quickly. I missed – uh – these classes, believe it or not." He laughed a little self-consciously.

"Oh, I can believe it! I found that studying philosophy was something real that I could hang on to when everything else seemed to be shifting around and uncertain. Also, it's mine. Nobody else in the family studies it, if that doesn't sound too stupid." She laughed uncertainly, although happy to find they could talk together as easily as they had always done.

"No, I don't think it's stupid at all. Damn, we're here."

"Damn, we're here?" echoed Sandra, looking at him and smiling. She knew she was probably smiling inanely and not doing a great deal for the wrinkles around her eyes, but she didn't care. "I thought you said you missed these classes," she said mischievously (as mischievously as a 39-year-old woman can act without jeopardising her credibility as an adult).

"Oh, I've definitely missed them," he replied, smiling rather inanely and showing the intriguing set of wrinkles around his eyes. Sandra immediately awarded him an unheard of 9.75 on her *Sexy Smiling Eyes Scale*. "But I've missed you too. Come on!"

Sandra knew she was grinning as she walked with him to the classroom. A whole two hours of philosophy class then passed, during which Sandra continued to grin rather a lot, even though the whole time was spent looking at past exam papers.

As she walked from the classroom with him afterwards, Sandra realised she was still grinning, because the corners of her mouth had begun to twitch. She laughed aloud at her own stupidity.

"What's funny?" asked Geoff, as he opened the passenger door. "Oh! I didn't even ask you if you'd like a lift home?"

"I'd love a lift home, thank you. What's funny is me – and life – and you – and philosophy – and everything at this minute! I just feel happy, I guess. Insanely happy, or is it happily insane?" She fastened her seat belt and looked at him, suddenly becoming aware of his quietness. "Geoff, I'm happy to see you again, that's all. But you didn't say you were fine? I did notice, despite my ramblings. How are you?"

"I'm OK, but my mother died just before Easter. It wasn't a very good holiday."

"Oh Geoff, I'm so sorry!" Sandra's hand went out instinctively, touching his arm. She sighed, realising that she simply didn't know what to say. She left her hand on his arm and waited to see if he wanted to speak. The silence that followed wasn't at all uncomfortable, although she sensed some underlying emotion that he was either unwilling or unready to express.

"It could have been a lot worse," he said at last. "I'm not sure whether it's actually brought Helena and me closer together or not." He placed his hand on top of hers. "It's good to be able to tell you about it. Well, I know I've hardly said anything about it, actually, but it's good to know you're here to tell if I want to." He laughed apologetically. "I'm sounding crazy again."

"I understand what you mean, I think," said Sandra, not entirely sure whether she did. "You mean like having a support network of friends who are available if necessary?"

"Ye-es. Probably. So in that case, could I have your phone number?"

"Yes." Sandra gave him her number, wondering if Osborn had found out Theresa's number. "Could I have yours?"

"Of course." To Sandra's surprise, he gave her both his home number and his work number.

"Actually, at Easter I wished I could have talked with someone – with you. My father had a heart attack." Sandra continued to tell Geoff about her father and while doing so, realised she'd made no effort as yet to tell her father what she wanted to say to him. "There's such a lot I wish I could tell you about," she finished rather lamely, "but we never have much time."

"No," he replied, looking at his watch. "I guess it's time to go now, but there's always next week and all the other weeks."

"All seven of them now," said Sandra, with an annoying little catch in her voice.

"We'll work something out," he said softly. "Life's too short not to try to make the best of whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. My mother's death has taught me that. Things will work out the way they're meant to, you'll see." He squeezed her hand before gently withdrawing his own.

"Yeh, everything's cool, man," said Sandra with a hint of humour she wasn't sure she felt. She took her hand from his arm. "We'd better go."

As he drove her home, it felt as if they were travelling through uncharted territory. She still had no idea in which direction her life was heading, just a small, growing certainty that she was beginning to direct her own journey. Although she felt fundamentally alone, there were going to be some people along the way, she felt, with whom she could honestly and freely share herself.

'Different parts with different people, though,' she considered, thinking of the different people she knew. In fact, it's probably Gestalt again, different parts of the whole. Nobody knows another person completely, nobody can see the full picture. How sad.' She thought realistically for a moment. 'How fortunate.'

Sandra sat in Jasmine's large sitting room, feeling serious and knowledgeable about the history and underlying motivation of the Women's Liberation Movement. It was a fairly warm evening. Sandra could swear that most of the women in the group were now braless, even the woman with uneven nipples.

'It's a growing practice in this group,' she thought, 'started off unwittingly by me!' She thrust out her chest in pride at her achievement, ignoring the stares that ensued.

She had, in fact, decided to make an appearance at the group that evening as an expression of her newly discovered existential independence – and also because Jasmine had rung earlier to ask her if she could return the books she'd borrowed.

That evening there was a desultory discussion about the fact that although women in the Nineties had apparently won many legal and material battles, there was still a great deal of insidious psychological pressure to conform to old-fashioned stereotypes of physical beauty, the working woman, the mother figure and the sex goddess – and all in the space of a single day.

Sandra sat quietly for a long while, intrigued by the intensity of some of the others as they spoke. 'There are so many issues here,' she thought seriously. 'Religion, men, the family, sex, control – it seems too much to take on board all at once. I agree with lots of what they're saying, but I could never get steamed up the way some of them are.' She sighed and made an effort to give Jasmine her full attention.

"WHAT?! That's a deeply, despicable insult to the entire female population! It's a prejudicial slur that strikes at the very heart of the male dominated gender dichotomy!" expostulated Sandra, leaning forward with her cheeks a flaming pink.

'Oops,' she thought, as she felt the others staring at her. 'I seem to have been spontaneous again and my flaming cheeks have gone all pink. Still, I agree with what I said, it's an incredible insult – or is it?' She had, in fact, just learned that the code for a successful bomb drop over Hiroshima had been *It's a boy*, while in the case of a dud bomb, it was to have been *It's a girl*.

"Ya," Jasmine was responding. "A very disturbing expression of the male concept of femaleness."

"What about the male concept of maleness in that code, though?" asked Sandra, not caring any longer about her flaming cheeks. She noticed that several of the others were rather flushed, anyway. "If being male means giving rise to the aggression of killing hundreds of thousands of people, then I'm glad I'm female."

"Absolutely," said Alison, "although I think it's a great pity that the concept of maleness seems to be synonymous with the concept of aggression."

"Yes, I totally agree," responded Sandra fervently. 'I wish I'd said that,' she found herself thinking.

"Me too," said Freddie the would-be plumber. "I don't see why the concept of femaleness can't be synonymous with the concept of aggression, too."

"Ya," said Jasmine, frowning. "Although aggression is perhaps a difficult concept, like is it a basic drive, or a learned behaviour?"

"You didn't ever study psychology, Jasmine, did you?" asked Sandra, having been suddenly reminded of some past discussions of her parents. She felt a passing stab of nausea – but it passed. "Myself, I think aggression is mainly learned," she continued. "I think our society engenders aggression through misplaced ideals of discipline and competitiveness, although some of this is desirable. Also, the media promotes aggression to a large extent. Speaking for myself, I'm most forcefully, vigorously and violently opposed to aggression."

"Right," said Jasmine a little wanly. "Thank you for your contribution, Sandra. I wonder, though, if you could possibly stop kneading that cushion? It's from India – a bit fragile, you know." She laughed nervously.

"Oh, sorry!" said Sandra, laughing nervously. "My head feels a little strange tonight. It's probably keeping up with the rest of me." She made a desperate resolve to keep quiet for the rest of the evening.

She almost made it, until Jasmine produced a large pile of almost attractive handmade bookmarks that she'd apparently been making for the last few months. She asked them all to take ten each, to sell for group funds.

"Oh my God," exclaimed Sandra, as she was given her ten bookmarks and saw with horror the statement: *Sisters are reading it for themselves*. She felt several pairs of eyes on her again.

"Oh my God, what a good idea!" she continued, nudging Alison to make a quick escape. Unfortunately, she was too late.

"I'm glad you like them, Sandra," beamed Jasmine. "Hey, take these spare ones, I've got plenty more where they came from."

When she arrived home that evening, Sandra had the odd impression that something was odd. 'How odd,' she thought oddly, taking off her jacket in the porch. 'I have the oddest sensation...'

Osborn came into the porch almost immediately and embraced her. 'Yes, that's definitely odd,' she thought oddly, returning his embrace. "Here you are, you can have your embrace back," she said, chuckling a little.

"Sandra," said Osborn, sounding ominously concerned. "Your mother rang while you were out."

"Yes?" Sandra felt herself withdrawing inside a protective shell.

"Your dad's been taken into hospital again, they think it may have been another heart attack."

"Oh God." Sandra felt weak, as if her energy had suddenly drained out of her.

"Come and sit down," said Osborn, gently leading her by the hand. Sandra allowed herself to be led, her mind racing. Along with thoughts of her father, she was noticing Osborn's changed demeanour – the calm assurance, the direct reaching out, the sense of empathy, the orange sweater with the miniature golf ball pattern...

"I ought to ring Mum," she said in a small voice.

"She said not to worry, that she'd ring you in the morning, or as soon as anything happens, or *if* anything happens," said Osborn, still holding her hand.

"I haven't told him yet," said Sandra dully. "I thought he was going to be all right, that it would be OK to leave it until he was really better. Now I might never get the chance and it's all my fault." She fingered her hair. 'If I'd ever been a thumb sucker,' she was thinking, 'I'd be sucking my thumb – hard – right now.'

"What did you want to tell him?" asked Osborn quietly.

"I haven't quite worked it out, actually," replied Sandra. "Not in words, anyway. I just wanted to tell him something along the lines that although we may not have been especially close outwardly when I was a child, like some fathers and daughters are, I still feel very close to him inwardly. I think I had an idealised picture of what a father should be like and because he didn't particularly fit that picture, I let it stop me from appreciating him fully as a person and also as my father."

"OK." Osborn squeezed her hand.

"Mind you, I think it worked both ways," continued Sandra. "I do think that at least a part of him saw me as a real, live, behavioural experiment of his own." Sandra sat quietly for a moment. "I just want to reach out to him – maybe even only once – the real me to the real him, to tell him that I really do love him."

"I'm sure you'll be able to."

"Well, I'm not sure now. He might die tonight." Sandra felt better in a rather painful way, having articulated what she knew she must acknowledge.

"Sandra, if he does, it will be God's will and ultimately for the best."

"Will it be God's will, though? How can you be so sure? Why can't it just be his heart conking out, through too much stress, or cholesterol, or whatever?"

"God's will takes all that into account, but we can pray for him to be healed."

"But you said it was God's will if he dies?"

"Yes, but if it's God's will to heal him, he'll be healed!"

"God's will seems very convenient."

"I thought you believed in God?"

"I do." Sandra sighed. "I felt once – no, twice – that I knew Him, experienced Him. But now I just feel stranded and alone."

"Let me pray for you and your father?" Osborn's voice was eager and confident, like a child with a newly realised skill. Sandra suddenly felt very tired and deflated.

"Oh, all right. Don't be too long, though, I need to go for a pee."

Sandra lay in bed, totally awake, totally exhausted and totally peaceful. She wondered briefly if the peace was an effect of the exhaustion, but found that idea too exhausting to think about seriously. Osborn's prayer had been thankfully short and embarrassingly comforting. He had held her hand throughout. In fact, he was still holding her hand now, as they lay side by side (although they'd disengaged to undress and go to the bathroom).

'I think I'd like someone to be holding my hand when I die,' thought Sandra suddenly. 'Someone I care about and who cares about me, although I suspect that in times of deepest distress, anybody's hand would do. I'm going to have to move my hand away in a minute, though.'

"Sorry, I've got to move my hand," said Osborn. "I've got cramp."

After he'd finished contorting, everything was peaceful again. Sandra listened to his breathing becoming gradually slower. She noticed that her body felt at rest. Her arms and hands were pleasantly warm and tingling, but her mind kept jumping from one person to another.

Finally she slept, but woke in the early hours of dawn (with sunrise about 05:25 at that time of year) having dreamed that she'd died and had been trying unsuccessfully to communicate with some of the people at her funeral. She lay awake, uncomfortably heavy and back in her body again, with a sense of utter frustration and loneliness.

'I wonder if I'm really going over the edge?' she thought quite calmly. 'Or was my psyche just exploring the feeling of having an out-of-body experience, because it's so fed up with having in-body experiences with me? Or was it a premonition? Or just the crazed product of an overactive imagination? Well, whatever the reason, it doesn't seem quite normal. In fact, I would say that something ahead is stirring afoot.' She mused for a moment.

'If I hadn't decided to eradicate the notions of fault and blame years ago, I would probably be blaming this stressful society, or my parents, or the weather, or God, or the Conservative party, or fluoride in the water, or the hole in the ozone layer. It's pretty awful how it's human nature to go around apportioning blame everywhere. If we were all a hundred per cent responsible for everything we said and did, the world would be a so much better place.

When I think of all the terrible things I've said to Gulliver and Madeleine in their formative years, though! I really had no right to tell Gulliver he was a very naughty boy for pushing a £10 note out through the letterbox – or to tell Madeleine she was a really silly girl for throwing her hairbrush on the floor after that awful haircut. If they've grown up with incredibly low self-esteem, or latent emotional disorders, there's nobody else to take the blame, it's my fault entirely.'

CHAPTER 18

It was a Thursday afternoon near the end of April. Sandra sat at the dining room table with her philosophy book open, attempting to answer an essay question from a past exam paper. So far, she had managed three and a half sentences. 'Not a great deal of work for two hours,' she thought tiredly, deciding to make another cup of tea.

Her mother had rung the previous morning to say her father would be having a triple heart bypass operation as soon as possible. He was due to travel to London the following day, accompanied by Caroline and someone from the ambulance service.

Sandra had been to visit him the previous afternoon, but he'd been somewhat sedated. She'd held his hand and told him she loved him, but wasn't sure if he'd heard. She could hardly bear the sight of him looking so tired and institutionalised in his blue paisley pyjamas, so she had decided not to visit that afternoon. Instead, she had given her small, once pink, once fluffy mouse to her mother to give to him for comfort. Although Caroline looked surprised, Sandra was confident that Leonard would appreciate the depth of her gesture, as he himself had given her the mouse once for comfort when she'd been suffering from chicken pox.

"Hello Mother," said Gulliver, coming in from outside and depositing his bag unceremoniously on the floor.

"Hi, Son of a Bitch!" said Sandra, looking up at him. "Why don't you call me Mother Bitch anymore?"

"Oh, it was just a phase. It doesn't seem right now, somehow. I expect I'll come up with something humorously abusive soon. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"I've just made one," said Sandra, quietly amazed at his solicitousness. "What would you like for your birthday, then?"

"Oh, things. Actually, I wrote a list a while ago."

"Good! Why didn't you show it to me?"

"I didn't want to hassle you, what with Grandad and all."

"Thank you, Gulliver." Sandra smiled at him gently. "It's OK," she said, "I'd never forget your birthday, no matter what was happening."

"Hello Mum," said Madeleine, coming in from outside and dropping her bag on the floor. "Shall I make you a cup of tea?"

"I've just made one thanks, Maddy. Goodness, I feel quite looked after." Sandra managed to stop herself saying "for once" just in time.

"Well – Grandad, you know." Madeleine sat down. "Mum, Lucy's asked me to a sleepover at her house. Can I go? Please say I can go!"

"A sleepover? Well, I don't see why not. I'll give Lucy's mother a ring and ask about details. I'll have to check with Dad, as well."

"Thank you, Mum." Madeleine hugged Sandra fiercely and went off smiling to her bedroom.

"That reminds me," said Gulliver. "I was going to ask you if I could go to an all-night rave – disco thing – with Damien. I don't suppose I could go, could I?"

"Oh, Gulliver, I don't know. Is it really a rave, or just a disco thing?"

"It's a disco thing. Damien and I are calling it a rave for fun. It's being run by St James Ambulance, so there'll be plenty of people to administer to me if I get concussion, or something." He looked at Sandra with something akin to pleading in his eyes.

"Well, maybe. I'll have to check with Dad." Sandra found herself smiling, as she remembered similar situations in her own adolescence. "I guess the dance scene has changed a lot since I was your age, it's a bit of a culture shock. I mean, we had groups called Manfred Mann and The Troggs, whereas you have groups called S'Express and..."

"Digital Orgasm?" offered Gulliver.

"Come off it! Really?" Sandra began to feel uncomfortably innocent for once in her life.

"Sure thing," he replied, sniggering a little.

"Oh, I've just remembered, I owe you £7.99 for that cassette," said Sandra, trying to change the subject.

"Just give me a tenner and I'll forget it," said Gulliver nonchalantly.

"I'll give you £7.99 and you can remember it," replied Sandra, grinning. "By the way, how's the debating society going?"

"Ah," said Gulliver, grimacing. "I'm not sure. We had a meeting and decided to change our name slightly."

"What's the new name?"

"*The Pro-Theory Pro-Intellectual Debating Society*," muttered Gulliver.

"Ha!" exclaimed Sandra, then noticed Gulliver's face. "Sorry Gulliver, it's just me letting off steam, or something. Don't take it personally."

"I don't, Mother Bitch, I put it down to your age," retorted Gulliver, before swiftly changing the subject. "I fancy some frozen yoghurt, have we got any?"

"Yes, the fridge was up too high again," said Sandra. "I think I'll have some, too, I'm feeling rather warm."

Sandra decided to go to the philosophy class that evening, although she felt she wouldn't be able to concentrate properly for thinking about her father. 'Not concentrating properly would be nothing new, though,' she thought wryly, as she stepped outside into the bright springtime evening.

'All the daffodils have gone,' she noticed as she walked past the front gardens on her route to the CFE. 'How sad, although it's only their flowers and leaves that have died, of course. Those tulips are colourful. I don't know why springtime and these beautiful, silent flowers in people's gardens should be so evocative. I wish I could put my finger on what they actually do evoke...' She reached over a low, white plastic fence and fingered a large red tulip, feeling its silky, red smoothness.

'This fence seems to detract from the way these flowers should be growing wild and free,' she thought distractedly, 'although as a fence, I suppose it's quite inoffensive.' A dog barked and came bounding out towards her from behind the back of the house. She jumped guiltily and carried on walking.

She met Philip near the entrance of the college, getting out of the passenger seat of a strange car, which then drove off. One of his arms was in a sling, while the other one was coping manfully with a bulging briefcase.

"Hello Philip!" she said, pseudo-brightly. "Let me help you with the briefcase?"

"Ah, hello Sally. Yes, thank you, that would be good," replied Philip, allowing her to take the briefcase. She was surprised to find it was extremely heavy.

"What have you done to your arm?" she asked, coping womanfully with the bulging briefcase.

"Oh, just a minor accident with an escalator," he replied ruefully. "I forgot to step off it, because I was so engrossed in thinking about Chrysippus the Stoic."

"Gosh," said Sandra, in a hushed, impressed voice. "What about him?"

"I was considering how aesthetically pleasing his name sounds – just the stuff for a decent name drop, like Empedocles and Heraclitus. I recommend them all as very effective mindless bore deterrents at parties."

"OK! Here we are," said Sandra, as they entered the classroom. "I'll put this on the chair – oops!" She stared in amazement as the briefcase fell over, releasing half the contents, including a brake disc.

"Oh good, I was wondering where that had disappeared. Thank you Sally, it's so gratifying to regain something that you thought you'd lost."

Sandra went and sat down, pondering his remark. 'I do so much pondering these days, I shall begin to look like a duck,' she reflected. 'On the other hand, I do so much reflecting these days, I shall begin to look like a mirror,' she mused. 'On the other hand, I do so much musing these days I shall begin to look like a mythological goddess. Oh, here's Geoff! He looks quite tired and drawn, though. I suppose that's the way I feel, really, underneath the mask.'

The allotted two hours of the philosophy class passed, like the allotted two hours of a philosophy class are wont to do. Sandra became very much aware of an unusual aura of depression around Geoff. Once, she tried to reach out her leg to touch his, but her chair moved with an embarrassingly horrible screech, so she gave up the attempt. Geoff seemed not to be noticing much, anyway. Sandra felt herself beginning to slip back downwards into her own depression.

When the class was finished, she was undecided about what to do, feeling that maybe Geoff wanted to be left alone.

"Do you want to be left alone?" she asked him suddenly, surprising herself.

"No!" he replied vehemently, surprising himself.

A few minutes later, sitting in Geoff's car, Sandra found she didn't know what to say. "I don't know what to say," she said, proving herself wrong.

"I'm sorry," he said, sighing. "I'm not much fun at the moment."

"We're all human," said Sandra. "We all have emotions."

"Well, mine were certainly up the creek this last week," he said quietly.

"Because of your mother's death? Or other things?" asked Sandra, equally quietly. 'Don't look so sad,' she was thinking, 'it makes me want to comfort you.'

"A whole combination of things probably," he said, looking at her. "I seem to be at this awful transitional stage in my life, wondering exactly what it's all been about – and what I want to do with the rest of it. I was quite close to my mother really, so I suppose her death has unlocked a lot of issues I hadn't faced properly up until now."

Sandra swallowed her own uprising sadness and reached out for his hand. 'Sod convention,' she thought, 'there are times when a touch means more than a thousand sympathetic words.' She saw that Geoff was looking at her. 'His eyes are wet,' she thought with surprise. 'Wetter than normal, anyway. He's letting his guard down, in front of me!' Tears began to well in her own eyes at the thought of him trusting her so much.

"How are *you*?" he asked in a muffled sort of voice.

"My father's going to have a triple bypass operation," she said with a great deal of difficulty. "He's being taken to London tomorrow." She swallowed hard. "I'm wondering if I'll ever see him again." The tears spilled over, along with some of Sandra's underlying sadness.

Geoff reached out and held her. For a moment she abandoned herself, but then she noticed a slight jerking movement of his shoulders. 'He's crying too,' she thought with wonder. Her own tears subsided and she found herself instinctively rubbing his back, gently and rhythmically.

"This is ridiculous," he said after a few moments, lifting his head from her shoulder and fumbling around in his pockets, "but I don't seem to have a handkerchief."

"Have mine – er, yours back," she said, handing him his own handkerchief. "I meant to give it back to you tonight anyway," she lied. 'It's only a thing,' she thought as he took it. 'It's just an object and I don't need objects. It's what's inside that really counts, as well as moments of true communication, like this.' They each blew their nose (in their own handkerchiefs).

"Thank you for this," said Geoff, as they both rearranged themselves. "Thank you for being you."

"It's nothing," she said quietly. "It's nothing and it's everything."

"It's this stupidly ingrained male thing about feeling weak if you cry," he continued. "I can actually remember my mother saying, just the once, that I was a big boy and shouldn't be crying." He smiled briefly, looking a little embarrassed. "Lots of women seem to feel awkward about a man crying too, but it wasn't like that with you." He reached out and put his hand on her cheek.

"Geoff, I feel honoured. You've become very special to me. Oh – is that Philip struggling along there?"

"Oh no!" Geoff sat up straight in alarm. "I promised him a lift home, I'll have to go and get him."

Sandra watched as Geoff ran to Philip and took his briefcase, staggering only momentarily. 'Life!' she thought, somewhat heatedly. 'Life is such a sodding scream.'

It was Sunday evening and Sandra had decided to go to church with Osborn and Theresa. She wasn't sure whether she was being open-minded or just curious, but decided in the end that she was being curiously open-minded.

Osborn had already arranged to give Theresa a lift. 'Aha! So he knows where she lives, then,' she thought, as they drove to Theresa's house. 'Not that I'm jealous, or narrow-minded, or anything. The two of us are free spirits – partners on the journey of life, but essentially separate beings. He doesn't own me and I don't own him. The concept of person possession is completely alien and abominable to me.'

'Ah, so this is where she lives. There she is – and she *is* younger than I am. Her hair is naturally wavy, too, falling on her shoulders just like I've always wished mine would do. Not only that, but she has beautiful breasts! Well, if she thinks she's going to twist my life partner around her younger, perfectly formed little finger, I'll kill her!'

An hour later, however, Sandra was standing in the middle of the church congregation, waving her arms in the air with the others, singing songs of praise to God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. When the service had started, she'd felt embarrassed and aloof, but Theresa had done her best to be friendly. In the middle of the first song, Sandra had grudgingly been forced to admit that Theresa was a very nice person.

In fact, the whole atmosphere was friendly and welcoming, if not positively alive and vibrant. The songs weren't dirges in the guise of hymns, but were modern and joyful. The prayers seemed open and anybody was free to join in. Sandra even considered praying aloud for her father, but lost her nerve when a rather large man beside her stood up and said he was interceding for the timid and the faithless.

Sandra found she actually wanted to listen to the sermon – or talk, as it was called. However, it was only then that serious doubts began to assail her, as the message was delivered in intense tones on the theme of *Anything You Ask*. Little snakes of disbelief began to crawl around Sandra's newborn hope that she had perhaps found a church in which she could belong. The message seemed to indicate that if she had enough faith, everything she asked of God in Jesus' name would be granted.

'So if I have enough faith, I can pray for Dad to be healed in Jesus' name and he will be,' she thought doubtfully. 'That seems conditional and manipulative to me, but everyone else seems to believe it and I do enjoy singing these songs.'

Before the final song, it was announced that there was to be a time of ministry for those who wished to be healed, renewed, or baptised in the Spirit. Sandra turned to see Osborn and Theresa looking at her expectantly. She quickly looked away and became engrossed in the last song – it was a long, repetitive one about the blood of the

lamb, which Sandra found strangely moving. She had been considering vegetarianism for quite a while. She did, in fact, begin to sway gently from side to side with the rest of the congregation. Her body felt warm and light, as she began to feel her separate identity diffusing into a corporate identity of elation, euphoria and what she supposed was the Holy Spirit.

When the song ended, a lot of hugging took place. Sandra noticed Osborn and Theresa in rather a prolonged hug. When they disengaged, however, and Theresa was moving towards her, Sandra launched herself into the arms of the rather large man who had interceded for the timid and the faithless. 'That'll show him!' she thought defiantly, as she crunched her cheek rather painfully against the glasses case the man had in his shirt pocket.

After the hugging had generally stopped and only a few hardened cases were still at it, Sandra found herself gazing curiously towards the area where the ministry was already taking place. Two people were kneeling in front of the altar. One of them, a girl of about fourteen, was in floods of tears, with an older woman ministering to her. This took the form of putting one hand on the girl's head and holding the other hand palm upwards, while gazing at the ceiling and praying earnestly aloud.

The other scenario involved two men in their sixties, Sandra guessed. As she watched, the man who had been standing knelt down beside the already kneeling man and placed his hand on the other's bald patch (somewhat awkwardly, as he had to stretch up rather a lot) and they both began to pray.

Sandra felt a hand on her arm and turned around to see Theresa smiling at her encouragingly. "I can see you feel moved to go forward," said Theresa.

"Oh, I don't know, I was just curious."

"Well, the Lord does work in curious ways. How about praying for the release of the Spirit? I can definitely recommend it. I had the Spirit released in me the night before I took my HGV licence test. I didn't feel a bit nervous the next day. In fact, I don't remember much about it at all."

"God." Sandra looked at Theresa disbelievingly.

"I can recommend it too." Osborn approached them, smiling. "Honestly, I think you'll feel the benefit if you do."

"Oh, what the hell – I mean, yes, why not," replied Sandra. 'I just want to find out what goes on,' she thought. 'I shall focus my mind on God, on what I know of Him myself. If He has anything further to communicate to me, then surely this is a good opportunity.'

She soon found herself kneeling in front of a man of forty-something, who was wearing a very colourful tie. 'I like a nice man in a tie,' she thought a little nervously, awarding him 7 out of 10 on her *Aesthetically Pleasing First Impression Scale*. He knelt beside her and put his hand on her arm. 'How pleasant,' she thought, 'but I must remember to be spiritual now, not physical.'

"What would you like me to pray about with you?" His voice was low and sincere. Sandra found herself talking about her father and then her dream experience of God. When she stopped, the man with the colourful tie remained suitably quiet for a few moments before speaking.

"Ah!" he said, shifting to a different position. "Sorry, I've got pins and needles. Would you like me to pray for the release of the Spirit?"

"Oh, what the hell," replied Sandra rather shortly. 'I want to talk more about my dream experience,' she realised, 'not be offered something that seems as available and life changing as a facial in a sauna.'

"I notice you came in with Theresa and Osborn," continued the man with the colourful tie. "Would you like them to pray with us as well?"

"Oh, what the hell," said Sandra, too far gone for politeness.

"Are you sure?" He beckoned to Osborn and Theresa, who were waiting with barely concealed anticipation nearby.

"Yes, thank you." Sandra began to fidget. 'Come on, let's get on with it,' she was thinking, 'then I can go home and watch that film about the mutant android from the planet Pluto who develops an incurable dog fixation.'

Sandra closed her eyes as three pairs of hands were laid on her in various places. For a few moments she tried to identify whose hand was where, but realised guiltily that the proceedings had started. She focused her mind on her personal knowledge of God.

She found she liked the part where Osborn prayed about her father and grudgingly didn't mind when Theresa prayed for inner peace for them all. When the man with the colourful tie prayed for the release of the Holy Spirit in her, though, Sandra waited in vain for something mystical and wonderful to happen. Instead, she found herself wondering what release of the Holy Spirit meant in realistic terms, until she noticed that the man in the colourful tie was talking in unintelligible words. To her astonishment, Theresa joined in. The noise struck her as strangely comforting.

Sandra opened her eyes curiously, only to stare straight up into the nasal hair of the man in the colourful tie, whose head was uplifted in an ecstatic attitude. A terrible bubble of mirth formed in her solar plexus. She stole a look at Theresa and noticed that her mascara was slightly smudged. The bubble of mirth rose, swelling, into her throat. She looked at Osborn and saw that a pimple was threatening to erupt on the exact middle of his forehead. The bubble of mirth escaped uncontrollably, as Sandra giggled, chuckled, then roared with laughter. The others stopped and looked at her smilingly and knowingly, as tears began to run down her cheeks.

"This is so embarrassing!" she managed to gasp in between bouts of laughter. "I just feel so..."

"The Holy Spirit!" announced Theresa, beaming. "You've been released in the Spirit!"

"Yes, it *is* a release," agreed Sandra, before another spasm overtook her. She put her hands to her sides, grimacing helplessly with the onslaught of a new thought. 'Maybe it should come with a health warning!'

An hour later, Sandra was being driven home by Osborn. They had stopped at Theresa's house en route for a cup of tea and a portion of excellent raspberry and chocolate torte. Sandra had calmed down enough to be able to ask Osborn endless questions about his release of the Spirit; Theresa's release of the Spirit and ensuing HGV licence; speaking in tongues; the name of the man with the colourful tie (Randy, the cause of another bout of hysterical laughter); the theological orientation of the minister whose dogmatic talk had disquieted her; and Osborn's personal, specific and intricate views on life, the universe and everything. All his answers had evoked fresh spasms of mirth, which Sandra completely failed to notice were increasingly annoying Osborn.

On arriving home, Sandra had burst into the sitting room. "I've been released in the Spirit!" she announced, but then realised Gulliver and Madeleine had gone to bed.

"God, you may have been released in the Spirit," said Osborn somewhat tiredly, "but I'm not sure you should have been released into the community just yet."

As she lay in bed, slowly floating into sleep, Sandra felt as though she might indeed be recovering from an intoxicating experience. Her thoughts revolved haphazardly around the events of the past few hours, before drifting hazily to thoughts of the following day. Her last consciously articulated thought before she fell into sleep was simply, 'Dad'.

CHAPTER 19

Sandra's first conscious thought when she awoke the next morning was 'Dad'. This was followed closely by 'Mum', who would be alone in London, waiting while the operation took place. Sandra wondered what she should be feeling, before trying to discover what she was feeling. It was a strange emotional cocktail of anxiety, relief and surrealism.

'I'm feeling hunger as well,' she thought as she went downstairs. 'It seems rather insensitive, but life has to go on. How basic the human condition is, reduced to a number of physiological drives most of the time. I wish we didn't have to eat so frequently, it wastes such a lot of valuable time, when I could be writing poetry or studying philosophy instead. I'd much prefer to exist on spiritual, intellectual and emotional food. Now then, shall I have toast or cereal for breakfast today?'

Just after 09:00, the phone rang. Sandra's heart jumped in alarm, imagining the worst. It wasn't someone offering her a holiday timeshare, however. Neither was it her mother with terrible news. Sandra began to breathe more calmly again, as she listened to Isabelle's voice.

"I'm sorry it's been so long. You must have thought I'd forgotten you?"

"No, I just thought you must be busy with your own life, like I guess we all are. How are you?"

"Oh, busy with my own life! I've been a bit up and down lately, to be honest."

"With Eric, you mean?"

"Yes and no. Sometimes I think it's me being selfish and sometimes I think it's him. I don't suppose we could meet this lunchtime?"

"Ah, it's difficult. I'd better not actually, in case my mother rings. Dad's having a triple bypass operation this morning, you see. Mum's with him in London and I'd like to be here, near the phone."

"Oh Sandra, I'm sorry. I've been so full of myself and my life – selfish again." Isabelle sounded suspiciously self-deprecating, thought Sandra.

"You're not selfish, Isabelle, you're human. I could have rung you as much as you could have rung me. I'd love to see you, perhaps we can make a date?"

After they'd arranged to meet for lunch the following Monday, Sandra put down the phone and realised she was smiling. 'It feels good,' she considered, 'to have friends you might not see for a long time, but when you get in touch with them again, you can carry on from where you left off without being awkward. I really like that. I wonder what they're doing to Dad right now? Oh God, I wish I hadn't wondered that.'

She went to the broom cupboard and took out a broom by mistake. She put it back and took out the vacuum cleaner. 'I wonder what exactly happened to me last night? Was I released in the Spirit, or was it just a sort of cathartic emotional release brought on by a form of group hysteria? God, I wish I could be one of those people who can just believe things. I used to be, I think. Or did I? As a child, I was always deeply suspicious of the supposed seasonal omnipresence of Father Christmas. It was a relief when Mum told me the truth. I wonder how Mum's feeling?'

She pushed the vacuum cleaner into the kitchen (having completely forgotten to plug it in) and went to stand in front of the washing machine, dealing with the appropriate switches automatically. The water began to swish in with an almost alarming noise. 'Gosh, I still have the remnants of my ancient phobia,' she thought with surprise. 'I thought I was over all that. My senses must be oversensitive today. I wonder if that's got anything to do with last night? Spiritual experiences have to enter consciousness through our senses, so our senses act as a sort of experiential medium. Therefore, experiences must be affected by the state of our senses at the time. God, this is so psychological, it's sickening. I must discuss this with Mum or Dad, if...'

She left the washing machine and picked up some spray-on window cleaner and a cloth. She then wandered over to the sitting room window and stood looking out. 'The tulips will be gone soon, I suppose,' she thought. 'They'll start to be really untidy from now on. Their life span is so brief, which is quite sad. On the whole, I'm glad I'm not a flower, I want to live forever. God, I didn't know I wanted to live forever before. Not in this body, though, it's rather limiting. Bodies have this nasty habit of going wrong and disintegrating in the end, like Dad's. I wonder if they've sawn through his chest yet? I wish I didn't have such a vivid imagination. I wish I had someone to talk to...'

She went to stand in front of Gulliver's bedroom window, but it proved too difficult with all the obstacles in the way. 'This is ridiculous,' she thought, trying to move a huge pile of computer magazines to one side. She wrote him a note and pinned it to his pinboard: *Dear Gulliver, you are the untidiest git that ever walked the face of this Earth. Love, Mother x.* She left the window cleaner and cloth in his room, deciding he would have to clean his own window.

'I wish I could ring Geoff,' she thought suddenly. 'It would be comforting just to hear his voice. He'd be at the office now, though, I suppose. I wonder if Osborn ever rings Theresa? I need some coffee. I expect Mum is drinking coffee from a disposable cup she had to get from a drink dispenser right now.'

She went and stood in front of the sink, holding the kettle. The phone rang. Sandra dropped the kettle in the sink and ran to answer it.

"Hello dear," said Sybil's voice. Sandra's heart sank. "It must be a worrying time for you. Basil said a special prayer for Leonard at church yesterday."

"Thank you." Sandra suddenly felt contrite at her own intolerance. 'She's not such a bad old stick,' she found herself thinking.

"He was sorry you and Osborn couldn't come to hear his first sermon that time, although I know he's never mentioned it to you. These men, they don't like to show their feelings, do they?"

"Oh shi – sure, no, yes." Sandra felt the world slipping into a distorted dimension, as she remembered that she had totally forgotten to tell Osborn anything about the invitation to hear his father's trial sermon.

"Are you all right, dear?"

"No. Yes. Actually, I was thinking that it would be better if Basil could speak to Osborn directly, don't you think? I'm sure Osborn would appreciate it and – well, it saves any misunderstandings."

"Oh, all right dear, yes. I'll mention it to Basil. Well, I won't keep you, I expect you're busy with the housework."

"Yes. Sort of. Thank you for ringing."

After the phone call, Sandra realised she felt totally exhausted. She went to the cupboard where she was keeping the symbolic box of chocolate liqueurs and took it out to look at it, feel it, caress the cellophane wrapper while imagining the contents... She jumped guiltily as the kitchen door opened and Gulliver came in.

"What are you doing home?" she asked a little ungraciously.

"I've got two free periods, so I thought I'd come home for lunch – especially seeing you didn't give me any – and also to see if there's any news about Grandad?"

"Oh, I'm sorry! No, there's no news."

"Oh. Well, in that case, do you think you could tell me what you think about my idea for the next debating session?"

"I'm not sure if I feel strong enough for this, but go on."

"OK. Well, it kind of continues the theme of realistic introductions for primary school children to life as they'll encounter it later on."

"Yes? That doesn't sound too bad."

"It's: *Children's toys should prepare them for the cross-gender and sexist issues they will encounter in later years, by the use of toys such as She-Man and He-Woman.* How does that grab you?"

"Like a Sumo wrestler, I should imagine. It's a very interesting thought, though, Gulliver. Why is this kettle in the washing up bowl? No really, it's great! You do your own thing – right on!"

"Great, thanks – I think." He beamed a little, then looked puzzled. "Why is the washing machine working with no clothes in it?"

Time passed very slowly. Eventually Madeleine came home from school and straight away asked Sandra if there was any news.

"No, darling, not yet. Can I have a hug?"

"OK. Mum, Lucy's asked me to her house for tea. She's waiting outside in the car with her mum. They said her dad can bring me home, too. I'm not sure I want to go, though, in case – in case – Mum, can you let go of me now?"

"Sorry, Maddybelle. You go to Lucy's house, because I'm sure Grandad will be OK and you won't be late home. Go and enjoy yourself, my angel. Can I have another hug?"

"Thanks. I love you, Mum." Madeleine hugged Sandra again, before scampering out of the house. Sandra felt lonely the instant she heard the front door shut, but found she was smiling at the realisation that Madeleine seemed much happier at the moment.

The phone call from her mother came about an hour later. By that time, Sandra had completed a short, evocative poem about her father; had removed the cellophane wrapper from around the box of chocolate liqueurs before becoming overcome with intense guilt and putting them back inside the cupboard again; had rung three friends

who had all been out; had sustained a very bad bruise from having tripped over the abandoned vacuum cleaner; had failed to clean any windows whatsoever; and had spent the last hour gazing sightlessly at a past philosophy exam paper.

The phone call was short, but comforting. Her mother sounded well and strong as she told Sandra that the operation had gone well. As Sandra put the phone down, she felt as if a huge weight had disappeared from inside her. She felt her stomach to see if it had become miraculously flat, but was unfortunately disappointed.

She tried to ring Osborn, but he was unavailable. She tried to console herself with the thought that at least she was saving money when people weren't there when she rang. 'I want to speak to someone, though,' she thought with frustration. She rang the speaking clock, but couldn't get a word in edgeways. As she replaced the receiver, however, the phone rang.

"Yes?" she asked tersely.

"Sandra?"

"Yes," said Sandra a great deal more softly, having recognised the voice.

"Hi, it's Geoff. I was wondering how your father is? You said he was being taken to London on Friday?"

"Yes, he had his operation this morning. Mum just rang to say he's OK. Geoff, I'm so pleased you've rung, I was longing to talk with someone."

"Good. I can't talk for long, though, I'm afraid. I'm at work and things are quite hectic. I just wanted to let you know I'm thinking of you."

"Thank you. It means a lot."

"I wasn't sure whether I should ring, to be honest, in case Osborn was home and he misconstrued."

"Oh no, positively not."

"That's an interesting concept, a positive negative?"

"Yes! No, we're two separate people, free to have our own friends. I don't know, really, he might have wondered. I haven't exactly mentioned you to him yet, but I'm not sure why. I should tell him, shouldn't I?"

"I sound like a terrible dark secret you're afraid of showing to him?"

"No you're not. Honestly, you're not. Sometimes I wonder if it comes from being an only child, this natural reluctance to talk about everything that happens to me. I'm simply not used to it. I can clearly remember sorting out problems in my own mind before talking about them – unless they became too big for me to handle, of course."

"Am I a problem, then? Or becoming too big to handle?"

"No. I just feel I have to sort out where you fit in my life, as a sort of casual friend who means a lot."

"Mm-hm."

"Of course, we may not see each other after the course ends. I don't want you to think I'm all intense, or anything like that, because I'm not. I most definitely, strongly and categorically believe in letting things take their own natural course. On the other hand, I feel as though it's worth having a go for what you want. You must think I'm talking nonsense."

"No, not at all. What *do* you want?"

"I'm not sure, I'll have to come back to you on that one."

"OK. I'd love to talk for longer, but I should have been doing something at least five minutes ago. I'll see you on Thursday, though."

"Right. Thank you for ringing, Geoff."

"I'm glad I did. Take care, Sandra."

"You too. Bye!"

Approximately 47 seconds later, Sandra realised she'd forgotten to ask Geoff how he was. However, he'd seemed fine and it didn't detract from the warmth she felt at the knowledge that he'd thought of her enough to ring her. 'It's a very powerful feeling when someone takes some notice of you as a real person,' she thought, 'rather than just as a role filler. I'm sure Osborn and I started out as being real people to each other, but I can't help feeling we're still trapped in our roles to a large extent. Pity. I wonder if there are any chocolate biscuits left.'

The kitchen door opened and Osborn came in, just as Sandra had picked out a Quadruple Choccy Nutty Bicky from the tin. She dropped it in surprise.

"You're home early? I didn't hear you come in."

"I thought I'd come home early to see how you are." He put down his briefcase, took off his jacket and hugged her. "Any news?"

"Yes, Mum rang to say Dad's OK and the operation went as planned."

"That's good. I prayed for him this morning."

"Mmm. Me too." Sandra sighed. "It's been a long day."

"Yes. Actually, I was thinking of going to a bible study meeting tonight. Theresa rang to ask if I – if we wanted to go. She asked how you were after last night."

"How kind of her." Sandra tried to fathom out why she suddenly felt prickles of cold.

"I tried to ring you twice today, but the phone was engaged."

"Oh. Yes, Isabelle rang, then your mother rang, then my mother rang – and then a guy from the philosophy class called Geoff rang." Sandra felt annoyed at the way her pulse had begun to race alarmingly.

"Oh? Why did he ring?"

"To ask about Dad. I'd told him about the operation, you see. He's very nice, I talk to him sometimes. His mother died recently."

"Oh. Well, I'd like to go to this meeting tonight. Are you coming?"

"No, I feel much too tired. Besides, I want to be near the phone, just in case."

"Your choice." He sounded cool suddenly, thought Sandra. "I must have a cold drink," he said, opening the fridge door. "OK, I give in – so tell me why this toilet roll is in the fridge?"

"Because I sodding well must have put it there!" yelled Sandra, snatching the offending toilet roll from him.

"Keep your hair on, I was only trying to be funny," he said in rather a hurt voice.

"I don't wear a wig," said Sandra tiredly, before launching herself at his chest. "I'm sorry. I'm so tired. I'm more than tired, I'm shattered." Her voice was steadily rising. "I'm exhausted! I'm pooped! I'm knackered! I'm completely and utterly SHAGGED OUT! Stop tapping your fingers on the window, for God's sake!"

"Sandra!" Osborn whispered urgently in her ear.

"WHAT?" She drew apart from him, then longed desperately for instant translocation, as she recognised the man with the colourful tie – Randy – standing outside the kitchen window. His hand (the fingers of which had just been tapping the window by way of announcement of arrival) was held frozen in mid-air, while a look of affronted amazement transfixed his face.

Sandra fled from the room, launching the toilet roll accidentally from her hand and sustaining another bruise from the still abandoned vacuum cleaner on the way. She sat crouched forward on the sofa in the sitting room, biting her knuckles in extreme agitation. A few minutes later, Osborn came into the room, winding up the toilet roll.

"Randy just came to make sure you were OK after last night and to ask if you wanted to come to the bible study meeting tonight. He got our address from Theresa."

"Has he gone?" whispered Sandra faintly.

"Yes. Are you sure you don't want to come tonight?"

"Sod tonight!" said Sandra, frustration and anger revitalising her energy. "I want to be alone! Sod Theresa! Sod Randy! Sod bible study! I'm going to go and lie down!"

She walked from the room, taking the toilet roll from his hand as she went. Osborn flopped on to the sofa and put his head in his hands. "Sod it," was all he could think of to say.

Sandra lay on the bed, her head throbbing. 'I cannot go back to that charismatic church,' she resolved. 'For a minister to say that anything you ask will be granted if you have enough faith seems like psychological blackmail. Also, I couldn't face Randy again if he was the last man on Earth – particularly with a name like his. What sort of parents...

'I feel as though they would try to suck me in at that church, with all the hype and sincerity, which I can't help thinking is pseudo-sincerity, fitting in with the religious

stereotype. Am I really becoming so cynical? Or is it honesty? I suppose they must sincerely believe they're being sincere. I really mustn't judge, but I really do feel I need space to get to know God in my own way.

'Mind you, I also feel I need help. Not psychiatric help, but some sort of spiritual guidance. I don't know where to get it, though, and I certainly don't want other people trying to foist their own beliefs on to me. I must be a spiritually stubborn case. Or is it a stubbornly spiritual case? Actually, I think I quite fancy the idea of meditating...'

She closed her eyes and tried to focus on the image of a lit candle – then on an unlit candle – then on a tree – then on a tin of biscuits. 'Damn!' she thought, opening her eyes. 'I wish I'd brought something upstairs to eat. I can't seem to meditate this way. I wonder if Osborn's ever thought of meditating? I'm glad he seems to have found something he can believe in. He seems happier, although I don't know where we are as a couple. Finding our own way for the moment, I suppose, with our own truths. We seem to be very suspicious of one another, though, we're too quick to jump down each other's throats – what a strange saying. I hate arguing, I'm basically a peaceful person. I shall think twice before I snap at him willy nilly – another strange saying.'

The door opened suddenly and Osborn poked his head around. Sandra jumped and glared at him.

"You startled me!" she snapped.

"Sorry, I crept up in case you were asleep. I just wondered if you had anything planned for tea tonight?"

"No! I can't think of mere food at a time like this!" An image of a biscuit tin re-entered Sandra's mind. "No, I didn't actually mean that! Come back? Please?" She groaned, as Osborn shut the door and went back down the stairs.

'It takes a little while for cognitive observations and ideals to filter through until they become actual reactive behaviour,' she thought slowly. 'Oh no, I'm beginning to sound more like my mother – or is it my father? I wonder how Dad's feeling right now?' She clasped her hands to her chest, just as she heard footsteps on the stairs and then someone knocking at the door.

"Mother?" called Gulliver's voice, somewhat hesitantly.

"Come in."

"Sorry to disturb you, Mother," said Gulliver, entering the room and standing there awkwardly. "Er – I can't find my watch and I wondered if you'd seen it?"

"No, I haven't. I'm sure it'll turn up in time."

"Dad asked me to ask you if you'd like a cup of tea. He seemed strangely reluctant to ask you himself. I don't suppose you've got anything planned for tea tonight, have you?"

"Oh Gulliver," said Sandra, sighing. "I just need to be on my own for a little while. Can't you just forget I'm here?"

"Who said that?" Gulliver smiled briefly, before he left.

Sandra smiled wanly, before realising she would love a cup of tea. She tried to resume her spiritual focus, but kept thinking how pleasant it would be to lift up the mug to her lips and sip the hot soothing liquid. She wouldn't even mind tea made by Osborn, who seemed to have an affinity with teabags and always put too many in the pot.

'He's over-generous with eggs, too,' she remembered fondly, 'like the time he made a 12-egg omelette and I got angry and cracked an egg over his head for being so wasteful. God, I could eat an omelette now, although maybe not a 12-egg one. It really seems that the spiritual can't exist without taking care of the physical – not in this life, anyway. I wonder if that's true of the vice versa situation, although it would seem not. Hmm, mind and matter – spirituality and science. Fascinating stuff.'

She sat up in bed suddenly. 'God, it's boring lying down!' She hugged her knees, as they were starting to feel lonely. 'How interesting, though, spirituality and science. They both seem to have their own separate understandings of the world. They're each necessary for a whole picture of life in the world, but neither is sufficient by itself. Two completely different, but complementary ideologies – the rational and the intuitive, I suppose you could say. Wow, my head is really throbbing now. It's no good, I'll have to go downstairs and attend to the physical part of my nature.'

She went downstairs and stood at the kitchen door, staring at the totally non-spiritual sight of Osborn and Gulliver preparing a meal. Then she noticed that Osborn was cracking egg after egg into a pan.

"Oh God," she groaned.

Gulliver turned around. "Yes, my child?" he asked, making the sign of the cross with the French stick he was holding.

CHAPTER 20

Three weeks had passed. The end of frail, misty April had turned into first of all a windy, wet fortnight, followed by an amazingly hot one. Life for Sandra had settled into a pattern of fitting in revision for the philosophy exam around other events in her week. She found she viewed housework as a sort of compulsory part-time hobby.

Her father was home and beginning to regain his strength. He had experienced a setback after the operation and had worried them all by his slow recovery. Since his return from London, Sandra had been to see him several times and although she hadn't yet spoken to him of what was on her mind, she was confident that it would happen when the time was right. In fact, Leonard seemed to have subtly changed – he was definitely more thoughtful and approachable.

"He's sort of personally and cosmically in tune, whatever that means," Sandra had said to Caroline.

"The humanist in him is coming out at last," Caroline had replied. She too, was tired and lacking energy, but happy that Leonard was over the worst and his prospects were now excellent.

Since he'd been home, Leonard mostly sat in his chair after doing his daily exercises, smiling quietly and showing off the long, impressive scar on his leg to anyone who came within his vicinity. Only two people had felt faint to date, although Leonard had joked that he'd been hoping for a higher score. The other scar, however, he'd kept closer to his chest.

Sandra and Isabelle had resumed their Monday lunchtime meetings, apart from one Monday when Isabelle had been away on a long weekend with Eric. She'd met Sandra the following Monday, still simmeringly angry that Eric's promise of a dirty weekend had turned out to be a package deal organised by a deviant section of the 48 to 60 Club, entitled *Mud Wrestling Can Be Erotic*.

The assertiveness group had been graced with Sandra's presents twice. She'd found that clearing out cupboards was both satisfying and therapeutic and had thereby discovered rather a lot of unwanted articles, which she was happy to present to the group's *Bring Your Own Rubbish and Buy Other People's at a Ridiculously Low Price* table. Apart from that, she hadn't had time to be an active member and hadn't even read any more books.

She found, however, that she was becoming increasingly aware of both gender stereotyping and the pervasive use of male dominated verbal imagery. 'How did I ever not notice the total overuse of the word 'man' and the totally feeble excuse that it's a generic term?' she'd thought angrily one day as she watched a television programme entitled *The Vaginal Birth Experience of Man*.

Philosophy classes had been hard work, as the exam loomed even nearer. The people who'd decided not to enter for the exam had mostly stopped attending, so every Thursday evening there was a hardcore of eight crazed students and one crazed tutor, gazing incredulously at the syllabus and all the material they still had to cover.

Sandra and Geoff had continued to enjoy conversations in Geoff's car after the class ended each week. Sandra found she looked forward to those few moments, not so much because of any intrinsic excitement, but because it felt like she and Geoff were able to reciprocally affirm one another as sensitive, intelligent human beings.

They simply spoke about what was uppermost in their minds at the time and listened to each other without judgement. Amazingly, what was uppermost in their minds quite a lot of the time was philosophy. Sandra also found herself wondering far more frequently about psychological issues – a fact that she found peculiarly disturbing

and didn't know why. She wondered briefly if it meant she was psychologically disturbed, but decided in the end to remain philosophical about it.

Geoff had mentioned his mother a few times, but on the whole seemed much more comfortable about her death. Sometimes he mentioned his wife, Helena, with a sense of confusion and conflict to which Sandra could easily identify. She spoke briefly of Osborn now and again, but mostly both she and Geoff seemed reluctant to delve into marital affairs too deeply.

'I wonder if marital affairs are essentially different from extra-marital affairs?' she found herself wondering one Sunday afternoon in the third week of May, when she was supposed to be revising Logic and Alternative Logics. 'I suppose some people would say extra-marital affairs are conceptually essential, while others would conceivably argue that they're not. The issue of children is always a great difficulty, though, despite the advancement of medical techniques. Talking of medical techniques, I hope Dad's up to Lawrence's birthday tea chez Basil and Sybil this afternoon. I suppose it's good that our two sets of parents get on reasonably well, though. What's the time? God, we'll be late! Why is it always me who has to get everyone moving?'

Two hours later, the birthday tea was in vague progress. Lawrence had opened his presents and been suitably underwhelmed. Gulliver was surreptitiously watch watching (there was no clock in the room to watch) and Osborn had been asked to go and fix a small leak in the bathroom. Madeleine, on the other hand, was in a sociable mood and enjoying herself. She was being very attentive to Leonard and Sandra couldn't help smiling to see her father and daughter getting along so well. It didn't seem to happen very often. In fact, Sandra wondered if the two of them had ever interacted quite that much before.

'It's good when a relationship allows room for change,' she reflected for a moment. 'People change, after all, and it's a kind of death to be constrained within old, rigid patterns of behaviour, with no movement and therefore no growth. I think Dad's close encounter with possible death has lifted many of his former personal constraints. What *is* Sybil talking about?'

"No Mum, battery hens as in the sort that are forced to lay eggs in horribly cramped conditions," Lawrence was explaining patiently to his mother.

"Oh, Lawrence!" Sybil laughed girlishly and put her hand on Lawrence's arm. "I thought you meant toys – little clockwork hens for youngsters."

'I suppose it takes a special quality to laugh at your own mistakes,' thought Sandra magnanimously. 'She may basically get on my tits (what a vulgar saying) but she means well. I really mustn't be so critical of her. Mind you, she never laughs girlishly and puts her hand on Osborn's arm. She's always openly favoured Lawrence. I don't know how Osborn puts up with it, it makes me so angry. I hate her dress as well, I thought crimplene went out with the Ark. And why is it always Osborn that's asked to fix things, not Lawrence? It's so unfair!'

"I've done the leak," said Osborn, rejoining the throng and sitting down beside his brother.

"I'm glad you did it in the bathroom," remarked Lawrence. "Did I tell you what Kirsty gave me for my birthday?"

"I can't remember, run it past me again?" said Osborn enquiringly.

"Nothing, as usual. Not even a card."

"Oh, I expect she's busy with work," said Sybil. "She rang the other day and said she couldn't visit for a while, because of pressure of work."

'Excuses, excuses,' thought Sandra wearily. 'Nothing but sodding excuses. I can't remember the last time she *did* visit! Goodness, Osborn and Lawrence are beginning to look very alike now they're getting older. They were always similarly dark-haired with the same black eyebrows. Well, they each had their own, of course. Oh, I'm so bored. They're reduced to talking about what's on TV tonight now. I wonder what is on TV tonight? God, all the revision I could be doing at home right now! Still, it's Lawrence's birthday and he did help us out a lot with babysitting when the children were small. They're very fond of him still. I hope we can leave early, though.'

"Do you not think though, Basil, that television and video recorders can be educational aids?" Caroline was clearly trying to delve into the psychology of a religiously constrained person, thought Sandra.

"I consider television and video to be channels of the devil," said Basil emphatically.

"But do you not consider that people have free choice," continued Caroline, "whether to watch an informative, mind-opening programme, as opposed to a mindless orgy of gratuitous violence?"

"No." Basil looked uncomfortable. "Yes." He looked even more uncomfortable. "People have free choice, as granted to them by God, but they are basically weak and persuadable."

"Would you like a chocolate, Mum?" asked Lawrence, passing his open box of birthday chocolates to his mother. "That's right, pass them around."

"Oh no, that's one of your birthday presents," said Basil when the box reached him, although he eyed the contents with interest.

"Oh, go on, Dad. I know you like those toffee in truffle swirls."

"Oh, very well then, thank you." Basil carefully selected a toffee in truffle swirl.

"Hey, Grandma," whispered Gulliver to Caroline. "Does your acronym thing apply to chocolates? It's just that Grandad likes toffee in truffle swirls."

"You naughty boy!" Caroline looked at Gulliver appraisingly. "Well, I like a nice piece of marzipan and nougat myself, but don't tell everyone."

"Can we play a game of cards, Uncle?" Madeleine was asking Lawrence. "I've got a new game at home for when you next visit called *NHS Operation* and you have to try not to kill patients."

"Hmm, sounds quite realistic," muttered Caroline. "Maybe a bit too close to home. How are you feeling, Len?"

"I'm fine" said Leonard. "Honestly I am, this outing is doing me the world of good. Have I shown you my scar yet, Sybil?"

Sandra paled temporarily on Sybil's behalf, as Leonard rolled up his trouser leg to reveal the famous scar. Then she found herself smiling to see her father relaxed and happy – and simply alive. 'Perhaps it takes a shock for us to see things in perspective again,' she thought soberly. 'We become so narrow-visioned in our outlook and so caught up in our own affairs.' She winced a little at her choice of word. 'It really helps to see life with eyes that are much wider open. I must have an optician's appointment coming up soon.'

The following day, Sandra and Isabelle were once again nestled in *The King's Buttock*. After they'd finished their half-open sandwiches, Sandra found herself unburdening to Isabelle several parts of her recent life that she hadn't quite realised were causing her such anguish.

"My belief is that any two people can be friends and love one another as such, but my actual feelings about Osborn and Theresa really don't subscribe to that. I think Mum would call that cognitive dissonance?" Sandra looked helplessly at Isabelle.

"You sound more like your mother every time I see you," observed Isabelle thoughtfully. "I'm sorry, I heard what you said. What do you feel about the two of them?"

"One moment I feel OK and understand perfectly well that they both need a friend and have found someone they feel comfortable with. I understand that because of how I feel about Geoff. Then I heard Osborn talking to her on the phone the other day and I felt gut-level, irrational jealousy. I didn't like myself one bit because of it."

"Can you identify why you felt so jealous?"

"I think it was because he sounded so happy and gentle and warm and kind and he was laughing with her, like he used to be with me in the early days." Sandra was re-experiencing the hurt she'd felt along with the memory.

"You wish he still sounded like that with you?"

"Oh yes! I don't know where it all went, except it became crowded out by commitments, pressures, responsibilities, failed ideals and expectations, to name a few."

"Would you like him to end his friendship with Theresa?"

"Yes. No." Sandra frowned. "No, that doesn't fit in with my beliefs at all. I think maybe what's happening now is that I'm grieving for the loss of the gentleness and the trust of our early relationship. The laughter and the pleasure of finding out who someone is. The gift of revealing yourself to someone else. The thrill of touching..." Sandra looked at Isabelle with tear-filled eyes.

"Yet Osborn might say you were the one to move away from him?"

"Yes, but I didn't mean to find someone else I cared for. When I joined the philosophy class, it was for the philosophy, not the male content." Sandra felt a little piqued by Isabelle's comment.

"Yet there may have been a subconscious need to find someone to listen to you, alongside the need to fulfil your intellect?" Sandra was aware that Isabelle was probing.

"I suppose so. The awful thing is that I think I took Osborn for granted. I just assumed he would always be there, so it felt safe to move away from him a little bit to find something in life for me – something totally disconnected with home and family – something that had nothing to do with being a wife, mother and daughter. I didn't realise that my moving away from him, even just a little bit, would upset the equilibrium of our relationship so much. Now his subsequent moving away from me has helped me to see that the unhealthy interdependence was happening because of both of us, not just him. Somewhere over the years, we'd melded into a finely balanced one-person act."

"So where are the two of you now, do you think?"

Sandra considered for a moment. "I think we're separating into ourselves again, very painfully. As much as I think separateness is a totally desirable state to achieve, it's very hard to disconnect years of emotional symbiosis. I must say, I feel kind of shocked and ashamed of myself for reacting so negatively to his friendship with Theresa, while expecting he would just understand my friendship with Geoff."

"You remind me a bit of myself, Sandra," said Isabelle, looking solemn. "Something I'm finding out at the moment is the reality of my own humanness. All the theory and beliefs in the world can't possibly be the same as living through an experience. Theories and beliefs have to be tried and tested. Does that make sense?"

"Oh yes, perfect sense. I've never been so aware of my own humanness in my life since my last birthday. I'd been deluding myself that I was this together person who understood herself and was in control."

"Ditto. I can remember my mother telling me to rise above it all, but I found with some things that you can't just rise above them. You have to work through them, which takes inordinate amounts of time and energy."

"Oh Isabelle," sighed Sandra, "why is life so complex?"

"I wish I knew. I think it's obviously easier if you pass through it passively with your eyes blinkered, but you certainly don't grow as a person that way. Knowledge costs – especially with this government. Learning is free in the good old existential sense, though, and it's one of the most worthwhile pursuits I know."

"Mmm. I suppose that by going to philosophy classes, I've learned things about myself, as well as about philosophy."

"Yes. It's true, we can learn so much about ourselves in relationship with others. It's a pity it seems to hurt so much sometimes, though."

"Agreed." Sandra sat back and smiled. "Thank you for being here, Isabelle. I think I'd go bananas if I didn't have someone to talk with who's not closely involved."

"More bananas than you are now?"

"A whole bunch more! I know I definitely need people to laugh with as well. My mother says that you'll always be all right if you keep your sense of humour."

"Yes, Caroline always had quite a well-developed sense of humour. She used to have great trouble stopping herself smiling when someone was diagnosed as having acute something or other."

"Really? Goodness, I can't imagine her being like that, she's always been a bit heavy and serious with me. She was the one who disciplined me, far more than Dad did. I suppose she did laugh at things, but I remember she always seemed quite intense about her acronym hypothesis, as if she had something to prove."

"Ye-es. I know she said Eric and I are a very well-matched couple by our names alone – Isabelle Dell and Eric Godfrey Overman. In fact, I teased her about it the other day when I told her I thought Eric was super."

Sandra lay in bed that night with a great many questions tumbling around inside her head. She began to feel like a washing machine and wondered what cycle she was on. Finally, the questions seemed to condense into two main ones – how much was Osborn attracted to Theresa and how much, if at all, was he still attracted to Sandra?

When she could no longer bear the stress of not knowing, she gave him an exploratory nudge in his buttock with her knee. He groaned and turned over slowly.

"Sorry, am I snoring?" he mumbled sleepily.

"No. Osborn, do you fancy me?"

"Oh, I'm tired, Sandra. I've got a headache and my buttock aches."

"No! I mean – do you still fancy me?"

"What? Nobody fancies you more than me." He turned over again and started to snore gently. Sandra found herself smiling at his verbal ambiguity. She remembered her mother's words of wisdom and laughed quietly to herself.

CHAPTER 21

Five days later, Sandra was walking along in the early evening to her final philosophy class. It was nearly the end of May and she felt a mixture of excitement and impending emptiness. The class was finishing early in order to adjourn to *The Queen's Uterus*. Sandra had mentioned to Osborn that she might be a bit late home. He had said, while liberally applying some *Slap-on Sex Fiend* to his chest that he didn't mind at all, as he would be going to a charismatic prayer meeting with Theresa. Sandra, while liberally applying some *Come and Get Me Quick* perfume to her cleavage, had fought for an instant with the now familiar stab of jealousy, until she remembered her own earlier words to Geoff: "You've become very special to me."

As she walked along in the warm, pleasant air, she wondered for a moment if God was exercising His warped sense of humour on them both, but felt that such an explanation denied too much of their own freedom of choice. 'You can't go along pushing everything in your life on to God,' she decided, as she turned into the college entrance. She saw Geoff walking along the corridor in front of her, wearing his purple jumper and his blue cord trousers. 'Oh God,' she thought with a sharp thrill of attraction, 'how can You do this to me?'

In the classroom, Philip stood chatting to the students already there, the thin end of his tie showing much longer from underneath the wide end. Sandra sat down next to Geoff and smiled.

"Hi!" She leaned close to him and lowered her voice. "I shall miss seeing Philip, he's so unaffected and so much himself."

"Hi! You smell nice. Yes, I'll miss him too, he's one of a kind. I'm not giving him a lift home tonight, by the way, so we're free." His eyes smiled meltingly at her, causing her a few moments of internal disarray.

"Sally? Hello?" Philip's voice filtered through the heat haze and Sandra moved away from Geoff guiltily.

"Oh, sorry Philip – yes, hello!" she said, immediately feeling angry with herself for feeling guilty.

"We were discussing plans for next year. Tanya here," – the girl from the card shop smiled at Sandra – "is hoping to go to university. Have you ever considered that?"

"No!" denied Sandra hotly, a millisecond before wondering why her reply had been so vehement.

"Perhaps it's an option you might consider?" Philip's full, rather charming smile at Sandra disarmed her completely, as well as the content of his words.

"I don't know." Sandra squirmed a little and looked down in order to terminate the conversation, which was a trick she'd used in her schooldays. The thought of the serious study that a degree entailed seemed outside the realms of possibility.

"OK then," said Philip, sitting down. "Let's start by quickly going over Logical Positivism once again."

By 20:30, when Logical Positivism, Ethical Theory and Existentialism had been exhausted, along with the whole class, they adjourned as planned to *The Queen's Uterus*. It was actually one of Sandra's favourite local pubs, the atmosphere was always warm and enveloping and she felt comfortable and safe inside.

This time she sat in between Geoff and Tanya and enjoyed talking with them both. Philip also was being amusing, with philosophical anecdotes and humorous tales of past classes he'd taken. Sandra sighed and sat back, thinking how she would miss all of this greatly – and should she perhaps, possibly, maybe think of going to university at some time in the future? The thought frightened her so much that she instinctively reached out and put her hand on Geoff's thigh. He was startled and spilt his drink a little on his trousers. Sandra whipped out her handkerchief and started rubbing the damp patch, ignoring the intrigued glances of the rest of the group.

"Er – Sandra, stop it, I like it," whispered Geoff to her rather urgently.

"Sorry!" Sandra looked into his eyes and saw the merriment there. She suddenly longed to be alone with him, to share her space with his. In his presence, she felt free to breathe in warmth and acceptance and to breathe out understanding and ... love? The thought of love entered her mind uneasily while the others talked. She smiled at them and nodded in the right places (she hoped) but her mind remained intent on exploring the concept of love.

Geoff was quiet too, she noticed. Their thighs were touching very lightly, but very tinglingly. Sandra felt relaxed and hardly noticed as the others gradually left. "Yes, best of luck," was her automated reply. "See you on exam day."

Finally, Philip was the last one who got up to go. "Best of luck," said Sandra. "See you on exam day."

"Well no, I shan't be there on exam day actually," said Philip. He looked at them both and extended his hand first to Geoff and then to Sandra. They both struggled to stand up quickly, but the table was too close to them and their bags were in the way.

"Sorry, Philip," said Sandra a little breathlessly, surprised at his unexpected gesture and also having hit her leg on the table.

"Don't stand up," he said, smiling, having shaken both their hands. Sandra was surprised again, having only expected him to shake one hand each. "I just wanted to say goodbye and to wish you all the best."

"Thank you, Philip," said Geoff. "I've learned a lot from these classes."

"Good – good! I've enjoyed helping you learn. Of course, the best sort of learning is what can be applied to life."

"Yes, I've learned much more than just about philosophy," said Sandra pensively. "I've learned a lot about myself, too."

"I'm glad," replied Philip. He too seemed pensive. "I rather think I learn something new from every class I teach. Even from every person I come into contact with, perhaps. In fact, I would say we can never stop learning from life and from each other." He paused and put one hand up to his chin. "Yet as a teacher, I can only ever lead anyone to the threshold of their own understanding." He smiled again and looked attractively embarrassed. Sandra immediately awarded him 9 out of 10 on her *Attractively Embarrassed Scale*.

"Well, I must be off," he said quickly. "Enjoy the rest of your lives and enjoy the rest of your learning." He stretched out his hand to Geoff again. "Bye, Geoff." Then it was Sandra's turn. "Bye, Sandra." He squeezed her hand and winked wickedly, before turning and walking out of the pub and Sandra's life forever.

Sandra sat quietly for a moment, experiencing the sadness of saying goodbye to someone you will probably never see again. She knew it was only a small attachment she felt for Philip, but she still had to unloose it and let it go. She turned to look at Geoff and found he was looking at her.

"What are you thinking?" she asked him softly.

"I'm not sure. A mixture. I was feeling more than thinking, I suppose. I find it hard to articulate my feelings, on the whole."

"Me too. I've realised I only usually talk about what's happening inside me when I've thought it through thoroughly and when I've resolved it to some extent, if I can. Whereas Osborn – well, some other people seem to be able to think aloud, as it were."

"Yes, Helena does that. I used to think it was a gender thing, to be honest. You know, men taught from boyhood not to talk about their feelings, but it can't be that, then."

"No. I wondered if it was because I'm an only child, but it sounds like it might be a personality trait."

"Perhaps we need to study psychology. Can I buy you another drink?"

"No, it's my turn." Sandra leapt up and hit her leg on the table again, somewhat alarmed at her reaction to the thought of studying psychology.

After she returned to the table with fresh drinks, they sat in silence until Sandra could bear it no longer.

"Will I see you again after the exam?" she blurted out. "Only I'd like to know. I need to know whether to let go of you and let you drift slowly into the past, or whether we can keep in touch sometimes?"

"Mmm." He looked at her seriously, with eyes that caused her a slight inner trembling. She was unsure whether she liked it or not. "Yes, I've been wondering about that too," continued Geoff. "What would Osborn think if we, say, met for lunch now and again?"

"I don't know." Sandra felt happy and alarmed at his words. "Until recently, I don't think he would have understood, but now I think he might understand. How about Helena? Have you mentioned me to her?"

"Yes, I have. I don't think she'd mind me keeping in touch with you on and off."

"Good." Sandra smiled at Geoff with a sudden leap of hope in her heart. "We can be casual special friends, whatever that means?"

"Yes, casual special friends it is. Although by definition, of course, all friends are special. Oh no, I think philosophy has warped my mental processes!"

"Well if yours are warped, then so are mine." Sandra found herself gazing into his eyes. "Geoff, I love the way we can laugh together – and the way we cried together."

"Me too." Geoff smiled at Sandra and put his hand on her leg. "It's getting a bit late, I just realised it's getting quite dark outside. I suppose we really should go."

"Yes." Sandra stood up with difficulty, feeling as though she really, truly, honestly and absolutely did not want to go – and feeling slightly peeved that he had mentioned it first.

They were soon sitting in his car in the mild, dusky evening. Sandra didn't have the slightest clue of what she was expecting, what she should do, or what she should say. She was dismayed to realise how uncomfortable she felt about not knowing. She looked across at Geoff, who was also silent.

Suddenly and quite spontaneously, she found she had opened her arms and leaned towards him. As he had suddenly and quite spontaneously opened his arms and leaned towards her, their embrace was a little precipitate and vaguely startling. However, Sandra was pleased at the reciprocal spontaneity and was definitely enjoying close contact with his upper body, particularly the slightly curly bits of hair at the back of his head. She was overcome with boldness and ran her fingers through his hair, enjoying the texture and the smell of it.

When Geoff ran his fingers through her hair, she was deeply and irrevocably grateful that she hadn't put any gel, lacquer or mousse on it to keep it in place. True, it had blown all over the place, but Geoff didn't seem to mind. He breathed in deeply.

"Your hair smells nice," he murmured, "and it's so soft."

"Oh, I washed it before I came out in *Wash-and-Get-It-Over-With* shampoo. The honey, almond milk and unnatural herb extract one," she murmured back. "What do you use?"

"Oh, I can't remember, *3-in-1 Wet, Wash and Wipe*, or something," he murmured back to her murmur back. "The coconut, nectarine and inessential lavender oil one."

They both laughed and drew apart in a moment filled with meaning. That it should happen while discussing hair shampoo seemed to Sandra absolutely typical of life

– the deep, meaningful communication amongst the trivial, everyday communication. She held out both her hands to him. He took them, then leaned forward and kissed her. It was neither a passionate nor a long kiss, but it was gentle and sincere and it was all that Sandra wanted.

They drew apart again and he drove her home in a comfortable silence. As the car stopped outside her house, he turned and smiled.

"See you on exam day."

"Here's to exam day! Geoff?"

"Yes?"

"I've just realised that Philip called me Sandra and he called you Geoff." She reached out and touched his cheek, smiling at him in the dark. "Take care."

Sandra spent the next four weeks immersed in philosophy, although she did take time out to write a poem describing a meaningful moment amid a conversation about hair shampoo. She even sent it off to a poetry magazine, before settling down again to Wittgenstein. Apart from that, and to her great surprise, life seemed comfortingly boring.

When she awoke just after dawn (with sunrise about 04:19 at that time of year) on the morning of the exam, Sandra was interested to see whether she was slightly nervous, normally nervous, or extremely nervous. By breakfast time, she had more or less decided on the middle option, but she'd also decided to try to ignore it.

To distract herself, she washed her hair (in *Wash-and-Get-It-Over-With*, naturally) and then set about some serious cramming. After cramming clothes into the washing machine and cramming herself into a rather tight pair of jeans, however, she decided she would carry on with her revision instead.

By the time she was due to leave the house, she noticed she was only eight days behind on her comprehensive, but completely unrealistic revision timetable. It didn't seem to matter, though, as she walked along in the heat of a June afternoon, knowing she would see Geoff again – even if only to say hello and to steal glances at him as he wrote his exam answers. With any luck, the invigilator would not accuse her of attempted plagiarism.

Tanya from the card shop caught up with her as she turned into the car park and started walking towards the Portakabin where the exam was to be held.

"Hi!" said Tanya brightly. "Are you nervous?"

"Hi! Yes, I am." They walked along together. "I should think most people are, though, an exam's an inherently tense situation, really."

"There you go again with your big words."

"Sorry, all this revision must have affected me."

"Oh, don't apologise. I only wish it all came a bit easier to me. I don't know how I'll get on at university, if I manage to get there."

"Do you need to pass this exam to get in? I remember you said you had an interview at the university a couple of months ago."

"Yes and no, I've been offered a conditional place if my A-levels are OK, but they said it would help if I get a B or above for this exam."

"Gosh, that's pressure. I hope you do well then. I'm sure you will, just try to keep calm and keep writing. I see some of the others are already inside, I suppose we'd better go in."

Sandra could see that Geoff was already there. She breathed in deeply, thinking how relaxed they all seemed and how nervous she suddenly felt. The others looked around as Tanya and Sandra entered. A chorus of friendly hellos helped to calm Sandra slightly. She looked at Geoff and felt even calmer as he smiled very pleasantly at her. She was smiling very pleasantly back at him when the invigilator entered and asked them all politely but firmly to take their places.

Sandra found herself gravitating towards the seat behind Geoff, but unfortunately someone else was sitting in it, so she forced herself to gravitate towards the nearest empty seat instead. As she arranged her pens, she noticed with pleasure that she could still see the back of Geoff's head if she craned her neck slightly.

The exam itself, she thought afterwards as the answer sheets were handed in, could have been a lot worse. She was pleased that she'd just about been able to understand every word of each question, which was something Philip had once admitted was no mean feat. She'd even actually managed to fit the phrase 'epistemological presupposition' into one of her answers and hoped it actually made sense. True, she'd lost a few precious moments when she'd knocked her question paper flying off her desk. Then a few moments more when she realised she'd mistakenly brought a small plastic bottle full of once used vegetable oil that had been standing on the draining board, instead of the diluted tropical fruit squash she'd made for herself – but on the whole she felt almost, sort of, fairly satisfied with herself.

When they were finally free to leave, everyone seemed to be talking simultaneously. Through the noise, Sandra realised both that she was very thirsty and that she was feeling unusually quiet. She knew the latter was probably because she might not see Geoff for a long while. She started to talk rather animatedly about the exam, in order to appear normal.

"What? You want to get pissed?" One of the up-and-coming twenty somethings looked at her with interest.

"What? Oh no, I was talking about epistemological presuppositions."

"Oh." The up-and-coming twenty something looked bored and turned away.

"How did you find it?" Sandra could hear Geoff saying amid all the other voices.

"Not too bad," she started to say, until she realised he was talking to someone else. She gave up the effort of being sociable and remained quiet.

"How was it for you?" Geoff's voice, close to her ear this time, was unmistakably meant for her.

"Oh, wonderful! The earth moved – or at least, my chair did when I knocked off my question paper."

"Right! Seriously, though, was it OK?" He touched her arm and smiled. "Shall we move outside?"

"Yes, let's. I sometimes wonder if I'm antisocial, because I don't like noise and crowds much, although you couldn't call this a crowd. I'm probably just being oversensitive."

"Post-exam reaction? I don't know, you seem fine to me." Geoff stopped and turned around as they were about to go out the door. "Bye, everyone!" he called. "Best of luck!"

"Bye!" was all Sandra could manage, as she escaped outside into the fresh air, which was still very warm and sunny. She stopped uncertainly.

"Shall we sit over here on the grass for a while?" asked Geoff. "Have you got time?"

"Yes, a little bit of time," replied Sandra, then laughed ruefully. "Time always seems to run out just when you really want some more, like when you're doing the last question of an exam paper."

"Weren't you thirsty?" asked Geoff as they sat down, noticing her full plastic bottle.

"No." Sandra looked at him, startled and defensive, then found herself relaxing in his crinkle eyed smile. "I brought the wrong bottle," she confessed. "I found I didn't really fancy drinking some *Slightly Impure Rape Seed Oil*."

"Sandra," said Geoff with laughter in his voice, "always be yourself."

"I keep thinking I might not see you again," said Sandra, feeling suddenly naked with vulnerability.

"You will – you *will* see me again," said Geoff, resting his hand on her arm. "What are you thinking of doing now philosophy is over?"

"I hadn't really thought," replied Sandra slowly. "I guess I've just been living in the present for probably the first time since childhood."

"That's good. I'm sure you'll decide what the next step is soon." His hand stayed warm and comforting on her arm, with his thumb making an occasional stroking motion. "You hadn't considered A-level psychology, had you? I rather fancy doing that myself. There's a course starting here in September."

"Really?" Sandra looked at him askance. Strange sensations were occurring in her mental processes. "I do – I am – I will – yes!" She looked at him with the sudden joy of discovery.

"You will what?"

"I *will* do psychology! I think I've always been put off it because of my parents."

"Why? They sound very nice to me."

"Yes, they are. I don't know, it goes right back to me feeling observed by them, I think. It's ridiculous, it's so long ago. But you saying you want to do psychology has cleared a block in my mind. The word 'psychology' has had negative connotations for me for so long until now, thanks to you."

"I'm glad," said Geoff, grinning. "Does this perhaps mean that we may be fellow students again?"

"Yes! Oh Geoff."

"What?"

"I was feeling sad today because all I saw and felt was an ending, but now I can see another beginning." She put her arms around his neck and hugged him, not caring two (or even twenty) hoots about the invigilator, who had just left the Portakabin. Geoff, however, overbalanced at her unexpected gesture and toppled over on to the grass, with Sandra still attached to his neck. They broke apart, laughing helplessly.

The janitor, who had appeared from around the corner to check the Portakabin was locked, saw them and tutted loudly.

"Bloody mature students," he muttered, passing them by with his nose in the air. "Can't keep their hands off each other."

CHAPTER 22

Three days later, Sandra was preparing for Gulliver's impending birthday tea. She had been very surprised that Gulliver had said he would like a family tea to celebrate his sixteenth birthday. However, the evening before, he had celebrated his birthday with Damien and Nigel and had arrived home the worse for wear (although his t-shirt hadn't been that bad) and had just made it to the bathroom in time. Sandra had been upset by this, while trying valiantly to justify it as a rite of passage.

'It may be a rite, but it's simply not right,' she'd thought morosely in bed that night. 'I don't like it at all and I never will, this idea that the only way to celebrate anything properly is to go out and pour alcohol down your gullet, until it's poisoning you and your body rejects it in order to survive. It's crazy and it nationally seems to be getting much worse. I'm surprised it's taken Gulliver this long, frankly. God knows what it'll be like when Maddy's older. I really don't want to think about that, it's way too frightening.'

The following afternoon, she was still musing while preparing a peach flan. 'I'm glad the family must still be a source of stability and identity for Gulliver, or else he just wouldn't put up with this family tea. Mind you, the family is also a source of material goods in the guise of birthday presents. It's good that Lawrence is coming too. Oh no! I've put cucumber in this thing instead of kiwi fruit! Oh well, the strawberry flan gel should overpower it.'

The family had arrived en masse. Gulliver had opened his presents and cards and counted his birthday money. He had successfully fenced off the inevitable questions about schoolwork and now sat with his head in the latest edition of *Unprofessional Photographer*. Now and again he actually lifted up his head to read it, but Sandra could tell he was horribly bored by the double-glazed expression in his eyes.

"Why don't you try out your new camera?" she asked him quietly. "It would be something to do."

"I don't really want to waste any film," he answered honestly, "but I suppose it's good practice."

Ten minutes later, he had exhausted all indoor photographic opportunities, passed around his *Quality Road* and refused to play *NHS Operation* with Madeleine.

"Oh well, into the kitchen, I suppose, to serve the birthday tea!" said Sandra brightly, sensing a lull in the proceedings. Osborn didn't take the hint, however, as he was busy reading the manual of Gulliver's new camera.

Gulliver followed Sandra into the kitchen and threw his empty *Quality Road* box into the pedal bin.

"Are those gone already?" asked Sandra, more in passing than anything else.

"Yes, but I shared them around," replied Gulliver defensively, kneeling on the bin.

"I know you did, I wasn't telling you off," said Sandra quickly. "Get off the bin, please." She thought how sensitive Gulliver could be to her remarks sometimes, although he would probably deny all knowledge of that. "No, I'm glad you share things, I think it's an excellent quality of yours. Maddy's too. To be honest, I found it hard to share my things with you lot at first, simply because there had only been me as a child. I soon learned, though and it's second nature to share things now. Hey, please get off the bin, you're depressing the lid."

"No I'm not, it's feeling very happy."

"Oh, insane boy! Hairy idiot bum! Total git nose!" Sandra was approaching Gulliver playfully with the bread knife, when Basil came into the kitchen.

"Ah – yes." He looked momentarily nonplussed, then put a hand to his forehead. "Sandra, could I trouble you for an aspirin, or something of that sort? I have the devil of a headache coming on. I must say, that peach and kiwi flan looks very tempting."

Ten days later it was Madeleine's eleventh birthday and Sandra had just managed to put the finishing touches to another poem. She found there were times when the words just flowed out of her – her feelings literally transformed into word images on paper. Of course, she had to spend hours coaxing the words into a poetical form of some kind, but she enjoyed every minute of it. After the constraints of philosophy, poetry was a freedom. The best moment of all, she discovered, was when she was typing out a finished poem to the accompanying sound of Vivaldi's *Five Seasons*. In those few moments, she felt fulfilled, high, out of this world, as if she was truly being herself.

In fact, mixed in with Madeleine's birthday cards in the post that morning, Sandra had received her first poetical rejection.

"Nicely worded with a pleasing melodic lilt," she said aloud as she read the note accompanying her returned poems. "Not bad for a poetical rejection at all."

"Is that what they said about your poetry?" asked Madeleine, pinning a large red badge saying *Legs 11 – Bingo!* to her t-shirt.

"No darling, that's what I'm saying about their rejection comments," explained Sandra. They said my poetry was neatly evocative, but rather too close to the contents. Gosh, I'm a real rejected poet!"

"Unreal," said Gulliver, entering the room. "Are we still going out for lunch?"

"Of course we are, it's my birthday treat." said Madeleine. "Mum, what does this badge mean? Are my legs OK?"

"Your legs are terrific, Maddybelle," replied Sandra, "and you look lovely today."

"Do I look lovely today?" asked Gulliver. "Is Dad still in the bathroom? Is there life on Mars? And how about Galaxy or Milky Way? And what is that strange pink fluffy card over there, Mad?"

"Don't call me mad! It's a Barbie doll card with a badge from Grandma and Grandad Dullkettle. They didn't listen when I told them I don't play with dolls anymore."

"Only Action Man," replied Gulliver, ducking expertly as Madeleine threw a selection of days of the week knickers at him. "Who gave you these?" he asked, placing Wednesday on his head and Friday and Sunday on his wrists.

"You did!" Madeleine set about retrieving her knickers.

"Oh yes." Gulliver had just caught sight of the frantic face Sandra was making at him. "It's all coming back, I remember now."

"It's OK, I know Mum bought them for you," said Madeleine.

"No, they're for you, honestly."

"You're the mad one, Gully!"

"Don't call me Gully. I did buy you the CD, though, because I know how much

you like Donovan O'Jason. True, I had to heavily disguise myself when I went into the shop to buy it, but all in a relatively good cause, I suppose."

"Is Dad in the bathroom or is he still outside checking the tyre pressures?" asked Sandra. "I need to get ready if we're all going out to lunch. I'm still a bit tired after your friends came here for a birthday tea last night, to be honest, Maddy, but I shall rev up in a minute. I'll have to if the family's meeting here. I wish the Dullkettles weren't always so early, they're a pain in the – oh hello! I didn't hear you come in. You're early!"

"Osborn let us in," said Sybil. "Sorry we're early, Basil had to pop into the chemist and didn't want to go home again."

"Right," said Sandra testily. "I'm not even dressed yet. Sit down, anyway. Ah Osborn, you're out of the bathroom. Maybe you could make your parents some coffee, while I go and see to myself?"

"No coffee for me, my dear," said Basil, entering the room. "I'm off stimulants. Do you have any camomile tea?"

"I'm afraid not," replied Sandra. "I really must go. Osborn will look after you." She gave Osborn a pleading glance.

"Lawrence is coming today, isn't he?" asked Sybil. "He always livens up the proceedings."

"Yes, Uncle's coming," said Madeleine politely. "Thank you very much for the birthday card and the money."

"That's all right, dear, I know you like Barbie," said Sybil, "I was going to buy you another doll, but your mummy said you were growing out of them. The card is so pretty, though, I thought. We never had anything like that in my day."

At lunchtime, the family sat around a large table in *The Prince's Knee*. They were awaiting the dessert menu and looking rather flushed.

"I'm full," said Caroline, "but I love desserts, so I think I'll force myself."

"I'm not sure whether I should," said Leonard, "but I don't see why I shouldn't."

"I'll have a meringue, that's not too heavy on the digestion," said Sybil. "With some clotted cream, of course."

"I'll just have some fruit salad," said Basil. "With some clotted cream, of course."

"The wine's gone to my legs," said Sandra, grinning inanely.

"The wine's gone to my head," said Osborn, grinning provocatively.

"The wine's gone to my lips," said Madeleine wonderingly, "and I only had a sip or two!"

"The wine's gone to my..." Gulliver broke off abruptly, as the waiter lunged at him with an armful of dessert menus.

"Sorry, sir! I seem to have slipped on something – ah, it's a badge – *Sweet Sixteen and Never Been Fondled*." He handed the badge to Gulliver, who blushed alarmingly and stuffed it back in his pocket.

"Damien gave it to me," said Gulliver in reply to his mother's questioning gaze.

"That's nothing," said Lawrence. "Last birthday I had a badge saying – oh gadzooks, I'd better not say."

"That's a funny badge, Uncle," said Madeleine, smiling impishly. "Wow, look at these desserts! I don't know what they all mean, but they sound good. I think I'll have *Green Forest Gateau*."

"Well, I've found something that rocks my boat," said Lawrence delightedly. "It's *Double Apple Dumpling Delight* for me."

"Hmm – *Blueberry, Blackberry and Green Redcurrant Idiot* sounds like my kind of dessert," mused Gulliver.

"Well, it's got to be *Passionate Encounters of the Plum Torte Kind* for me," said Osborn. "How about you, Sandra?"

"No contest," muttered Sandra from behind her menu. "I'm going to have a *Quadruple Orgasm by Chocolate*."

As she lay in bed that night, Sandra was aware of feeling heavy. It was a heaviness of mind and body that seemed to be stopping her from being free and happy. 'I'm not

constipated, am I?' she wondered for a moment. 'What is happiness, though – and is anybody truly happy? Surely happiness is relative – but not some of my relatives!

'I mean, if somebody were starving, they'd be happy to eat any food at all, even my custards. Or if I'd been on my own for six months, I'd be really happy to be living with Osborn. God, that doesn't sound fair.' She turned to look at Osborn in the semi-darkness. He seemed to be asleep, but then she noticed the corner of a pretty lilac lace-edged handkerchief poking out from underneath his pillow.

After a stab of jealousy had sliced its way through her heart, Sandra found herself in pain. 'I gave Geoff's handkerchief back,' she thought with a rush of nostalgic poignancy, as anger began to take the place of pain. 'I'm trying to be myself, to be honest and upfront. I'm trying not to rely on anyone else, to give Osborn and me a chance...'

"ARE YOU IN LOVE WITH THE BITCH?" she shouted suddenly at Osborn, sitting up in bed and startling herself almost as much as him.

"What?" he mumbled, opening his eyes and looking shocked. "What?"

"Are you in love with her?" repeated Sandra, too far gone to stop now. "Theresa! Do you love her? Do you love her more than me? Do you dream about her? Fantasise about her? Do you want to screw her?"

"Oh, Sandra," groaned Osborn, as he sat up and reached across sleepily to touch her arm. She moved away abruptly and reached for some *Aggressive Aubergine Mood Matching Toilet Roll*.

"Her handkerchief is still under your pillow," she said in a broken voice.

"Sandra! I love you."

"Yes, but *her!* Do you love *her?*"

"I – I'm not in love with her, but I do love her, as a friend. A special friend."

"Why? What was wrong with *me?*"

"I needed someone to talk things over with. I was hurting so much. You must have noticed I was depressed?"

"You told me to go away!" To her chagrin, Sandra found she was sobbing noisily and uncontrollably.

"Sandra, I'm sorry. You – we – we're too emotionally involved to be objective about each other's problems. At the time I was having trouble separating my own problems from what I perceived as our problems – even as your problems, I must confess."

"So you turned to *her.*" Sandra blew her nose in the *Aggressive Aubergine*. "Do you talk to her about me?"

"Not directly. You naturally come up in the conversation sometimes, but I don't talk about our personal stuff."

"Good, because if you did tell her things about me, I would never speak to you again!" Sandra immediately felt ridiculously vulnerable at the ineffectual childishness of her words.

"I'd like to talk with you about how I feel. I thought you weren't interested."

"Of course I'm bloody interested, who do you think I am? Some heartless snow queen bitch from the deep freeze of hell?"

"No. I just thought you were more interested in talking to that guy Geoff."

"No. Yes. I don't know." Sandra sniffed loudly. "Tell me, why do you keep her handkerchief under your pillow?"

"I – er..." Osborn hesitated for a fleeting moment. "I'll get rid of it."

"But *why,* Osborn?"

"I suppose I wanted some sort of comfort."

"Why couldn't you ask *me* for comfort? Or don't I comfort you at all anymore?" Sandra lost her fight against a fresh outburst of tears.

"You do – you do comfort me." Osborn reached out and held her. She leaned against his chest, feeling lost.

"I'm so alone," she whispered brokenly. "So deeply, dreadfully alone."

"Me too," whispered Osborn, so low that she completely failed to hear it.

For nearly four weeks, Sandra wondered whether Osborn was in love with Theresa; whether Geoff would ring; whether she might have the courage to ring him; whether Gulliver would pass his GCSEs; whether Madeleine would be happy with her move to the comprehensive school in September; whether she would ever summon up the courage to speak with her father; whether God really wanted her to go to church; and whether daisies and buttercups felt pain when you decapitated them with a lawnmower.

Since the night of Madeleine's birthday, Osborn and Sandra had been unusually considerate, but somewhat wary with one another. Osborn seemed afraid to ask Sandra to talk. On her part, Sandra was afraid to broach the subject and thus open the possibility of further confrontation and all the hurt that might ensue. Osborn continued to go to church with Theresa, but no longer stayed out late.

As Sandra stood in the kitchen with the morning sunlight streaming on to a huge pile of ironing, it occurred to her that this was the last day she would have to herself before the school summer holidays began. There would then be one week before the four of them went to the Lake District for a fortnight.

Sandra was unsure whether she was looking forward to the holiday or not. Would being thrown together with Osborn be good for them both, or would it be a trial of nerves that would drive them further apart? What about Gulliver and Madeleine? Would Gulliver rather be elsewhere with friends of his own age and would Madeleine pick up on any underlying tension?

A dismal ache manifested itself in Sandra's heart. She slumped onto a chair at the kitchen table, just as the phone rang. Her heart jumped at the hope that it might be Geoff, before slumping again at the sound of Jasmine's voice.

"Oh ya, hi Sandra. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Yes. Er - no."

"Right. Only I'm afraid I'm having to cancel the assertiveness group's *Silly Holiday or Loony Experience* evening on Tuesday."

"The what?"

"Oh, you weren't at our last meeting, were you? Right. Ya, we thought we'd have a break from the serious stuff for once and swap personally meaningful anecdotes instead, with wine and fondue. Only I can't seem to lay my hands on a fondue set and people drive to the meeting and can't drink anyway. Also, my ex-partner came back two days ago and we've decided to go backpacking in India together."

"Good God."

"Ya, it'll take a bit of arranging, but neither of us is getting any sex - er, any younger - and neither of us feels spiritually fulfilled in any real sense and we have no immediate ties."

"Good on you, Jasmine. A part of me envies you."

"Well, basically life's too short, Sandra."

"Yes, you're right. The group will miss you. Will they continue to meet elsewhere, do you think?"

"I don't care - er, know, to be honest. I think some of them probably need more support than others."

"Yes. Sorry Jasmine I didn't mean to start off a no-bra trend, but I was caught in a stupid stereotyped idea of what a feminist group would be like, I suppose. You know, militant lesbians and all that dreadful garbage one hears about and imagines - although I must say that one of my friends is a lesbian and I have the utmost respect for her as a person. As far as I know, she's never gone braless - but I must confess that I didn't really know how to respond when she told me she was a lesbian and I think I handled it very badly - although I was in the middle of a stressful period myself - still am, actually. I'm beginning to wonder if it's an early menopause - but I've definitely learned a lot from your group, albeit a little indirectly sometimes. I was afraid at first that you - everyone - would think I was a little strange - well, I am really. We all have to find ourselves, though, don't we, and be who we are, be it strange, braless, lesbian, married, multisexual, ambidextrous..." Sandra felt reality slipping away.

"Ya. Well, I'll miss seeing you now and again Sandra. I always rather enjoyed your - uh - contributions."

"Gosh. Well Jasmine, take care and enjoy your life."

"Thank you, Sandra. Remember to let the light of past and future wisdom brighten up your present."

"Thanks, Jasmine – and up yours."

Later that morning, Sandra sat at the kitchen table with a mug of coffee. She remembered Jasmine's phone call with a flicker of a smile, thinking how communication with another person usually uplifted a downward mood, or at least seemed to shift its direction somewhat. In a burst of positive feeling, she leapt up and dialled Geoff's work number. Her hopes were dashed, however, when she was told he was in a meeting. She said she would try again later, while resolving not to bother. She realised she felt too guilty at bothering him at work for no particular reason.

She resumed her position at the kitchen table, feeling that she was untidily wasting her time. She tidied up the remnants of breakfast that had still been on the table and wondered briefly if that constituted tidily wasting her time. In a burst of somewhat frantic optimism, she jumped up again, having decided to ring Isabelle.

"Hi, it's Sandra. Can we meet?"

"Hello, Sandra! I was thinking about you the other day. I'd like to see you, but things are a bit hectic at the moment, for at least a week or two. How about the beginning of August?"

"I'm on holiday then," replied Sandra, feeling that her disappointment was disproportionate. "Oh well, never mind," she continued brightly. "I'll give you a ring when we get back."

She slumped back down at the kitchen table, loneliness and aloneness merging catastrophically into a totally overwhelming, completely devastating and really rather awful feeling. She went to the cupboard containing the symbolic chocolate liqueurs, took out the box, opened the lid and picked one out. She fingered the silver paper, considering what the contents would taste like. She jumped guiltily as the doorbell rang, squashing the chocolate liqueur stickily onto her fingers.

'Wow! This person at the door has saved me from symbolic self-sabotage,' she thought wonderingly, as she quickly washed her fingers. 'Maybe God is looking after me all the time after all and this person has arrived to guide me on my spiritual way.' She opened the door in heady anticipation.

"Good morning, madam! *Bestwear* at your service. I remembered your previous interest in my brushes and thought you might appreciate a demonstration of our latest advances in drain hygiene?"

The following Friday, the four Dullkettles were preparing for their holiday. Sandra was a little alarmed that she was the only one who hadn't yet packed her clothes.

"I suppose it's about time I went through the wardrobe," she said resignedly, opening the wardrobe door and delving inside. 'God, what are these doing here?' she wondered, picking up something bright pink and dusty. 'I thought I'd got rid of these flaming fuchsia open-crotch panties ages ago.'

"You won't get to Narnia by going through the wardrobe, Mum, because I tried it once and it didn't work," said Madeleine, appearing with an armful of clothes. "What shall I do with all these? I've grown out of some of them and some of them are much too childish now."

"But you're..." began Sandra, before tuning into Madeleine properly. "Put them in this bag here and I'll sort them out and give them to charity later. Put these awful knickers in too! Are you looking forward to the holiday?"

"Yes, I like holidays. I've packed some games we can play."

"Oh good," said Sandra, smiling at Madeleine's enthusiasm.

"Oh God," groaned Gulliver, appearing in the doorway. "Games! I'm really too old for all this, you know. I'm only coming because I really want to see the Lake District."

"I understand," said Sandra, feeling suddenly bereft at the thought that this was possibly their last holiday as a foursome. "Oh no, who's that at the door? Could you answer it, Gulliver?"

"Yes, I could," replied Gulliver, still standing there.

"Er, Gulliver..." Sandra looked up and caught his grin. "Would you go and answer the door right this minute, please?"

"Maddy's already gone," said Gulliver, still grinning.

When she heard the sound of Basil and Sybil talking in the porch, Sandra almost wished nobody had answered the door. However, she chastised herself mentally and went to say hello.

"Hello," she said noncommittally.

"Hello dear," said Sybil, going into the sitting room and sinking onto the sofa beside the bag of charity clothes that Madeleine had flung there. "We just popped by to say we hope you have a safe journey, because the motorways are such dangerous places. We wanted to let you know we're praying for you."

"Thank you," said Sandra, as sincerely as she could. "Osborn's here, I'll call him. Gulliver's here too, but I won't call him - ah!" Sandra saw too late that her flaming fuchsia open-crotch panties had fallen out from the top of the bag and Sybil was picking them up.

"They do make some colourful panties these days," said Sybil, holding them up to see them properly. "So skimpy, though. Oh dear, these have come unstitched. If you've got a needle and thread handy, I'll sew them up for you. What's wrong, Basil?"

An hour later, after Basil and Sybil had gone, Sandra sat wearily in the chair. She looked across at Osborn, who was looking similarly weary. It suddenly struck her as very odd and not at all right that since her outburst on the night of Madeleine's birthday, they hadn't talked of Theresa - or Geoff - or even the implications of the Common Market or the current great variety of breakfast cereals.

She got up in a moment of reconciliation and sat down on Osborn's lap, intending to put her arms around him and kiss him. He yelled and threw his keys across the room. Sandra felt rejected. How was she supposed to have known he'd still have his keys in his pocket? She decided she might as well go to say au revoir to her parents.

"Do you want to come with me to see Mum and Dad?" she asked him, as he wincingly rubbed the top of his thigh.

"No, you go," he answered restrainedly. "I've still got a couple of things to do."

By the time that Sandra arrived at her parents' front door, she was tired of wondering what it was that Osborn had to do. It was almost certainly something to do with Theresa, she imagined, while a flame of irrational jealousy licked its way scorchingly around inside her mind.

"He shouldn't have kept his keys in his pocket anyway," she said aloud miserably, not noticing Caroline open the door. "He's just a sodding, miserable git!"

"Are you talking about that husband of yours again?" asked Caroline, looking at Sandra rather curiously as she let her in.

"No, of course not! I..." Sandra launched herself uncharacteristically into her mother's arms as words deserted her. Neither of them spoke for a moment until Sandra, sensing her mother's awkwardness, disengaged herself.

"Cup of tea?" asked Caroline, looking slightly discomfited.

"Yes please. I might even have a chocolate biscuit if you've got one," replied Sandra rebelliously. "Where's Dad?"

"He's out on his daily walk, but he should be back soon."

As she sat in her parents' sitting room half an hour later, soothed by tea and biscuits and what she construed as unconditional positive regard, Sandra frowned.

"It must be so awful not to feel loved by your parents," she announced.

"Yes, it certainly causes a lot of self-esteem problems," responded Caroline.

"I'm thinking of doing A-level psychology at the CFE in September," said Sandra suddenly with a hint of embarrassment.

"Really? That's great! I hope you enjoy it. I'm sure you will, as long as they don't keep pushing behaviourism at you. Don't tell Dad I said that."

"One of the people from the philosophy class said he would be going too, so I'd have company." Sandra felt the beginnings of a blush at the thought of Geoff.

"Uh-huh. It'll be good to already know someone there, I suppose."

"Yes, he's a nice person, I've talked with him a bit." Sandra stopped, realising that no matter how much she might want to talk with someone about Geoff, her mother was not the right person. This realisation caused her some sadness.

"Is there something on your mind? You look a little pensive."

"Things are still a bit difficult between Osborn and me at the moment, that's all. Is that Dad I can hear?"

"Yes, I think so. Maybe the holiday will do you and Osborn some good?"

"I hope so. I'd better be going soon, I have some serious packing to do."

"As opposed to some humorous packing?" asked Leonard, poking his head around the door. "I'm sorry I've missed your visit, love, but I'm glad I caught you." He stopped, looking a little embarrassed. "I bought you a present the other day, it reminded me of you."

"Gosh, it's not a pig, or a mouse is it?" asked Sandra, laughing. 'Please don't let it be a mouse,' she thought. 'Please don't say I remind you of one of your experimental mice I always used to identify with. Good God, did I? Did I really used to identify with mice?'

"Well, there's a thing," she said aloud, wonderingly.

"No, here's a thing," said Leonard, handing her a small box. "I hope you like it. It reminded me of when you were young. I've been thinking about those days recently and when I saw it, I had to buy it for you."

"Thank you," said Sandra, smiling, as she opened the box to see a small silver tortoise with brightly coloured gemstones embedded in its shell. "It's lovely!"

"It's to say I'm sorry for my insensitivity over that unfortunate incident with the tortoise and the washing machine," said Leonard, suddenly enfolding her in a brief, intense hug. "Although I suppose, all things considered, I should have bought you a washing machine instead."

CHAPTER 23

The following morning, the four Dullkettles were in the car on a long and tedious journey to the Lake District area. They had risen at the unearthly hour of dawn (aptly phrased, thought Sandra, seeing dawn happened in the sky – with sunrise at about 05:10 at that time of year).

The time Osborn had spent pouring over the map the previous evening had not been in vain, mused Sandra, as the journey progressed smoothly. Luckily, it had only been diluted lemon squash, which Osborn had wiped up quickly and which had led to an inspiring conversation about the semantic differences of pour, pore and poor. Gulliver had attempted to include pauer as a kind of inherent adolescent sexual characteristic, but had been quashed by Sandra immediately, as Madeleine had been within hearing distance.

"You're quiet," said Osborn, glancing across at Sandra.

"Oh, I was just musing," she replied, caught a little off-balance. She did hate it so when Osborn suddenly decided to overtake.

"How can you be amusing when you're quiet?" Gulliver's voice questioned alertly from the back seat regions.

"Musing – pondering – reflecting – contemplating – cogitating – meditating – thinking!" replied Sandra loudly, in a somewhat defensive attack.

"Oh no," groaned Osborn. "Traffic delays possible on this road from May to December."

"But that's ridiculous," said Gulliver. "What if it's true? We've only booked the accommodation for two weeks!"

"You're silly," said Madeleine.

"It's a gift," said Gulliver. "I'm getting a bit hungry, to be honest. I don't suppose we could stop at a *Happy Vomiter*, or a *Vertically Challenged Chef*, or something soon, could we?"

"Oh God," groaned Sandra.

"Yes?" enquired Gulliver, as Madeleine attempted to hit him across the chest.

"Do I have to sit next to this mad boy all day?" asked Madeleine. "I'd like to try one of those *Veggie Freakout* places, Lucy says they're good. Actually, I need to go to the toilet."

"I wouldn't mind trying a *Veggie Freakout*, either," said Sandra. We haven't passed one for quite a while, so there should be one soon, they seem quite reasonably spaced out."

"It's all those magic mushrooms and stoned dates," said Gulliver nonchalantly.

"Gulliver, do you think you'll ever be normal?" asked Sandra, turning around briefly to look at him.

"You brought me up," he replied, before making a rather realistic vomiting noise. "Ha!" he said, looking at Sandra's momentary look of horror. "Good joke, eh?"

"It was a bit sick, actually," said Madeleine, looking disgusted.

"That's quite good, Lil Sis!" said Gulliver, looking at Madeleine appraisingly.

"I need a pee myself," said Osborn. "We can stop here, I could do with a break. You lot never seem to speak normally, I'm beginning to suffer from a total language comprehension deficit."

"I'm sorry," said Sandra, putting her hand on his thigh. "I wish I could share the driving with you. I really should have learned when I was still young and not freaked out by traffic. God, I'm hot."

"That's a matter of opinion," said Osborn, looking at her with a smile that didn't quite make it to his eyes.

Sandra felt herself go cold inside. For a moment, Osborn had felt like a stranger – if only she knew what a stranger felt like. She withdrew her hand from his thigh in confusion as they drew up alongside some public inconveniences, which had been closed for refurbishment.

The rest of the day passed in mind-boggling boredom, so much so that when they finally stopped at the last *Rest-Your-Weary-Ass* services and walked past the Baby Changing Room, Sandra found herself composing a letter in her head about the illegality of swapping babies.

"Are you OK, Maddybelle?" she asked, after they'd relieved themselves yet again.

"Well, I'm trying not to be too complainative, but I'm really tired," replied Madeleine, as they washed their hands.

"I do love your creative words, darling," said Sandra fondly, gazing at her daughter. "You're special."

"Mum, be quiet!" said Madeleine hotly, gesturing at the other people nearby.

"OK, I won't embarrass you – but you just don't know what it feels like to be a proud mother of 39, that's all."

"So where are the other 37, then?" asked Madeleine, grinning broadly as they went to dry their hands. On leaving the building, she allowed Sandra to put her arm through hers and they walked companionably back to the car.

'It feels so good to be relaxed and open like this with someone you love and feel utterly comfortable with in your close family,' thought Sandra. 'Of course, it means you end up showing them all your dodgy bits – your not so nice irritable bits – your downright bad-tempered bits. Is it fair, I wonder, that we're usually ourselves in such revolting abandon with those we care about the most? Is it a sort of backhanded compliment, or simply a decline of decent human civility? Hmm. It could be either, or both. In a way, I think I feel honoured that Osborn lets me see all his dodgy bits. Well at least, he used to...'

Sandra's heart sank as she opened the passenger door and sat down. She looked across at Osborn as he was adjusting his sunglasses in the mirror. He seemed so distant, despite their physical proximity. Tears sprang to her eyes.

"I want to see your dodgy bits again," was all she could manage to say.

"You show me yours and I'll show you mine," he replied coolly as he turned the ignition key and looked in the rear-view mirror, steadfastly ignoring the two pairs of raised eyebrows emanating from the back seat.

Two days later, they had settled into their self-catering accommodation and had already explored the surrounding area. Gulliver, however, was seriously disgruntled at the fact that they were some distance away from the actual Lake District.

"I'm really sorry," Sandra apologised to him, "but Dad and I honestly didn't realise how much you wanted to spend the whole time at the Lake District. You know how I am with maps and geography. How can we make it up to you?"

"Go to the actual Lake District tomorrow," he replied, "and go walking up a mountain and see real views with real ridges and peaks and escarpments and scree and valleys and real lakes with real lake water in them, so that I can take lots of great photos with my new camera."

The following day it unfortunately rained, but the day afterwards dawned bright and sunny. By late morning, they'd actually made it about thirteen-sixteenths of their way up a hill-cum-mountain in the Lake District. Sandra found she was feeling strangely spiritual. 'Or is it spiritually strange?' she wondered, as she took off her sweatshirt.

"God, it's hot," she said. "This sweatshirt is really making me sweat."

"It's doing its job, then," remarked Osborn. "Yes, my legs feel as if they might burn in these shorts, I'm glad we brought sun cream. I wish I'd worn my walking trousers instead, they might have helped me along – ha!"

"You're feeling happy today," Sandra said to him, slipping her hand into his. He squeezed it momentarily as he tripped over a large stone.

"Ouch!" he said. "Let's stop here and have a sandwich. I'm shagged out. At least, I'd like to be. Madeleine's enjoying herself, walking up ahead with Gulliver. I thought she'd be tired by now."

"I'm glad they're getting on today," said Sandra. "They often don't seem to, probably because of the five-year gap between them. Can you call them? I think we all need some food."

"Look at those craggy faces," said Madeleine, looking out at the view between some trees, as they all sat down for lunch on a flat piece of grassy ground between some rocks.

"It's their age," said Gulliver, grinning at his parents. "They're getting on a bit, poor old things. Oh, you mean those hills. Yes, they're really impressive, they give you a sense of – of – something."

"God?" asked Sandra, daring to hope that her son, too, might be a little spiritually aroused.

"Yes, my child?" replied Gulliver, immediately dashing Sandra's hopes.

"Oh poo," said Sandra, before curiosity overwhelmed her. "No Gulliver, stop hiding behind your humour. What *is* your concept of God?" She arranged herself beside Osborn and started to unpack the sandwiches.

"Umm..." Gulliver attempted to articulate after a few moments. "I really can't say. I kind of used to see God as an infinite, all-knowing, all-seeing being, but that scared me, so I went into my anti-God mode. However, that kind of scares me too, so I try not to think about it too much."

"Fair enough," said Sandra benignly. She noticed Madeleine was looking at her expectantly. "What about you, Maddy, how do you see God?"

"God is love," replied Madeleine, "but can you hurry up with lunch, I'm so hungry."

"Oh no!" Sandra's face registered horror. "I remember now, I forgot to finish making the sandwiches! I was thinking about – things." Sandra broke off abruptly, fiddling with the bread furiously to hide the guilt she felt in remembering she'd been thinking about Geoff that morning. In fact, she'd been imagining a scenario involving Geoff and herself about fifteen-sixteenths up a hill-cum-mountain, in a secluded nook with a bottle of wine, a sense of heady freedom and some rather interesting underwear.

"It's OK, I don't mind a bread sandwich," said Gulliver magnanimously. "Anything will do. It'll have to!" He took the proffered bread and started to eat ravenously.

"Me too!" said Madeleine. "Food! Drink! Anything! Thank you."

"I did put some scones in as well. Oh no, I forgot to butter them." Sandra began to feel hot inside as well as out.

"Never mind," said Osborn, stretching his legs. "I'm sure they'll taste good with nothing on." He whispered in Sandra's ear. "Just like I remember you used to."

Sandra was unable to react outwardly according to her inner reactions. She knew she was experiencing a reaction somewhere in her depths, but a recently learned cautious reaction to Osborn's remarks stopped any spontaneous reaction. She abandoned any semblance of a relevant reaction whatsoever.

"I've got some apples and some ginger nuts," she said brightly, looking at Osborn, who raised his eyebrows and then winked.

After they'd revitalised themselves, Gulliver and Madeleine were restless and started to wander around.

"I want to take some photos of that lake from over there," said Gulliver, pointing into the near distance, as Sandra and Osborn sat languidly among the picnic remains. "It's not too far away. Is it OK if Maddy and I go, while you two clear up here?"

"That's fine," said Osborn. "Take as long as you want. We're nearly at the top. In fact, Mum and I might just go for a bit further up. We'll see you later."

"Well now," said Sandra to Osborn, as Gulliver and Madeleine walked happily away. "Here I was feeling all spiritual and here you are feeling all..."

"Randy as hell, actually," he murmured. "It must be the view up here, or wearing shorts, or the sun..."

"Do you think they'll be OK?" asked Sandra, watching as Gulliver and Madeleine disappeared from view.

"Gulliver's done orienteering," replied Osborn. "He won't let any harm come to her. Do you fancy walking on a bit further?" he asked, sliding his hand inside her t-shirt. "We can come back and pick all this up afterwards."

"You mean...?" Sandra looked at him questioningly, her pulse suddenly quickening at the thought of a possible imminent sexual encounter of the outdoor kind. "Oh God..." She slid her hand inside his shorts. "Oh God!"

Osborn grabbed Sandra's other hand and stood up. Sandra stood up also – she had to really, she was still attached to him. They walked quickly upwards for a short while until they found a secluded little nook. Unfortunately, it was already occupied by a pair of engrossed birdwatchers, so they carried on until they came across a secluded little cranny with no other occupants.

"What if someone comes?" asked Sandra in a low voice, as she frantically unzipped Osborn's shorts.

"I have every confidence we both will," replied Osborn in an even lower voice, as he frantically unzipped Sandra's shorts.

Five minutes later, they lay gasping in an intimate muddle, as Sandra fought an overwhelming release of emotion that she could only identify as sadness. She wept as silently as she could, not wanting to alarm Osborn.

'What's happening to me?' she thought, as she lay facing away from him. 'I feel so moved. Physically, that was wonderful – so why do I feel so sad? It's beautiful up here, like being plugged into a different set of spiritual parameters. A sort of spiritual satellite television network ... possibly. The smells, the sounds, the feel of the air on my... God, I'd better cover myself up. Oh God. Help me. Save me. Love me!'

She closed her eyes, breathing in the atmosphere and a now familiar feeling of existential aloneness. Suddenly, however, she no longer felt alone, but was aware of a loving presence. She turned and looked at Osborn, but he was breathing peacefully and regularly, with his eyes closed. Wherever he was now, he was not lovingly present with her just at that moment. She looked up at the sky, then looked away again quickly, as the sun flashed blindingly into her eyes. She shut her eyes and looked inwardly, in an attempt to discover the origin of the loving presence. It seemed impossible. 'Time to experience, not to analyse,' she thought suddenly and her whole being relaxed.

The rhythm of her own breathing became soporific, as peace slowly washed over her in waves. 'I'm still here,' seemed to resonate in her mind from nowhere, as if she'd suddenly realised in words what she'd always known in subconscious thought.

"God is still here," she said joyfully, opening her eyes and sitting up. Osborn looked startled as he reached down to pull on his clothes.

"Are you OK?" he asked carefully.

"Oh yes! Osborn, I do love you." She wrapped her arms around him tightly, completely missing the look of deep sadness that passed momentarily across his eyes. "Osborn?"

"Yes?" They drew apart.

"I think I've just had a peak experience."

"There's someone coming," he said suddenly, leaping up and hastily fastening his clothes. Sandra did the same, just managing to make it in time to stand nonchalantly beside Osborn, looking as if they were admiring the scenery.

"Afternoon," said a sprightly man in his sixties.

"Lovely up here, isn't it?" said Osborn.

"It used to be," replied the man, "but have you noticed the litter people leave lying around these days? They just can't be bothered to clear up and take it home with them. Disgusting! Why, back there, it looks as if there's a whole bloody picnic just left behind to rot and blight the landscape."

A week later, Sandra was wondering what they could do with the rest of their holiday. Somehow, the novelty of hill walking seemed to have worn off slightly. This could possibly be due to exhaustion, thought Sandra, not to mention sore feet. However, Madeleine seemed to be enjoying herself and Gulliver had said he'd be happy to go out for a walk by himself, if the rest of them wanted to go somewhere touristy.

As for Osborn, he seemed to be alternately high and low. Sandra couldn't make him out at all, even when she put on her glasses. Even the high times seemed to be a little over the top for comfort and because of that, not quite real. She held on to the memory of her peak experience, though, as a valued expression of being loved for herself. Plus the spiritual encounter with God (she presumed). Plus the sex, which had been quick but exhilarating. She sighed deeply and looked at Madeleine and Gulliver, who were playing a rather unfriendly game of *Hump the Queen*.

"I suppose we could try the Tourist Information Bureau," she mused aloud.

"What good would that do?" asked Gulliver. "You don't need any information about tourists."

"Oh, Gulliver," said Sandra, sighing again. "Sometimes I really can't decide whether you're inherently thick, innately funny, or desperately afraid of being serious."

"Tell me when you've worked it out," he replied, "and I'll tell you when I've worked out what your big words mean."

"It's your turn, Gulliver," said Madeleine. "I think you're hairily thick, by the way."

Sandra left them to verbally abuse one another, while she went to look for Osborn. She heard him in the bathroom and decided on the spur of the moment to go and wait provocatively on the bed for him. As she wondered which provocative position she should attempt, she noticed he'd recently been sitting on his side of the bed, writing a letter. Curiosity shamefully overcame her as she opened the writing pad almost before she knew what she was doing. Her mind reeled in disbelief as she read a part of what he'd written:

...while climbing up this hill-cum-mountain, I was overcome with longing for you. I felt so passionate for you that I made love with Sandra and pretended it was you. I hope God will forgive me for this. I hope Sandra would forgive me if she knew, although I can't bring myself to tell her. I don't know what to do...

Sandra heard Osborn coming and shut the writing pad quickly. She felt as if she couldn't breathe, as a tidal wave of shock washed across her heart. She wanted to run and hide from him, but seemed rooted to the spot. As she heard him enter the bedroom, she knew she couldn't face him, so she lay down quickly on the bed and closed her eyes.

"Having a rest?" he asked with what she interpreted as suspicion, as he picked up his writing things from the bed.

"Mmm," was all she could reply, as he lay down beside her and put his hand on her leg. She moved away involuntarily, still battling fiercely with what she'd just read.

"Sorry," he said, taking his hand away. "You seem jumpy."

"Yes," she replied in a small voice, opening her eyes. She sighed and spoke with a voice that seemed to belong to a stranger. "I was wondering what we could do today, what's left of it. You seem preoccupied with what you were doing in here."

"Me?" He looked away to examine his toenails. "No! You don't seem especially warm or welcoming today."

"Not warm or welcoming? I suppose *she* is always warm and welcoming to you?" Sandra almost spat out the words, as some of the shock began to manifest itself as anger.

"She?" Osborn's voice was controlled, as he looked guardedly at Sandra.

"Yes – *she*! Theresa! Ms Special Person – Ms Spiritual Know-it-all – Ms Wonderful Cook – Ms HGV Licence Holder – Ms Fantastic Knockers – Ms Everything that I'm sodding well not!"

"What's eating you?" Osborn's voice was so cold, it hurt Sandra just by listening to it, knowing it was directed at her. "What about your Mr Great Guy? Don't think I don't know about all the hugs and kisses. You left a certain poem in the typewriter once when the *Bestwear* man called. You're not so fucking innocent!"

"I – it's not like that. I really didn't mean..." Sandra almost choked with pain, as it came rising up from depths she hadn't quite successfully suppressed. She began to weep copiously, speaking only semi-coherently. "I didn't want to – I tried to – I only wanted – Maddy and Gulliver can hear – I don't know where this pain's coming from – you've never said that word to me before..."

Sandra broke down completely, as sobs racked her whole being. She felt utterly alone and almost as utterly misunderstood. She sprawled on her front on the bed, groping helplessly for a tissue – a handkerchief – some underwear – anything, in fact, in which to blow her nose. In a moment of optimism, she'd foolishly not packed any *Mood Matching Toilet Rolls*. A fresh wave of complete despair overtook her, as she reached out desperately for Osborn's hand, or any part of his anatomy. Any kind of human contact would do.

She reached out to nothing. He had gone. She opened her eyes incredulously, before curling into a foetal position and drowning in new depths of pain. He had never left her to cry alone before.

CHAPTER 24

The following week it was Osborn's birthday, but to Sandra's great relief there was no family birthday tea. Caroline and Leonard were away on a short five-day break, Lawrence was visiting Kirsty in Cambridgeshire and Osborn had said he couldn't face it anyway. He'd taken the day off work and the four of them had gone out for a pizza lunch, followed by a trip to the cinema. They'd even gone inside and paid to see a film.

True, there had been a small contretemps about which film to see (Gulliver had wanted to see *Dwayne's World* and *Madeleine Sister Pact*) but in the end they'd settled on *Batperson Returns*. Sandra hadn't cared what film was chosen in the end, she just wanted Osborn to have a good day and to smile at her and be reasonably happy. It might be a pretence, but it was what she found herself longing for.

'I can't bear this animosity between us,' she thought as she sat in the cinema. 'I don't know where I am and I don't think he does, either. It's not doing us any good at all. I wish I'd never met Geoff and I wish he'd never met Theresa. God, this film is weird. I suppose Basil and Sybil will call by with Osborn's card and present when we get home, although they haven't rung, or anything. I wonder what we can do this evening? I'd like to do something special, but God knows what. Speaking of God, I suppose I'm lucky that Osborn's not going to some church meeting with Theresa tonight.' At that thought, Sandra put her hand on Osborn's thigh, in a moment of heightened insecurity.

"Mother!" hissed Gulliver, swatting her hand away.

"Oh! Sorry, I thought you were Dad," she whispered. She'd forgotten that Osborn was the other side of Gulliver, sitting out of reach.

It was nearing the end of August and GCSE results day. Osborn was at work, Madeleine was on a day trip to *Guinea Pig World* with Lucy and her parents and Gulliver was preparing to go to school to collect his results. He seemed remarkably calm, as indeed he'd seemed when taking his GCSEs.

"Well, I'm off then," he said casually. Sandra was surprised to notice a small tremor in his voice.

"Good luck," she said, smiling at him. "Whatever your results are, they'll be fine by me." Unpleasant memories of her mother's tension when her own GCE results had been due were flooding back. She found herself spontaneously going up to Gulliver and uncharacteristically putting her arm around his back. He put his arm uncharacteristically around her back for a moment, before they both laughed a little nervously and he left.

'I suppose if an uncharacteristic gesture keeps happening, it eventually becomes a characteristic gesture,' mused Sandra. 'I wonder how long it takes? How long before I would consider myself a natural toucher instead of an unnatural toucher? No, actually, a want-to-be-but-feel-inhibited toucher. It felt so natural to hold Geoff's hand, though. Oh my God, Geoff – philosophy – results – I haven't rung the CFE yet.'

The CFE was engaged for about ten minutes, but when Sandra got through, she was delighted and amazed to learn she'd been awarded an A.

'Wow!' she thought, dancing a little jig. A big jig would have been inadvisable amongst the furniture. 'I know it was only a GCSE, but it was hard. I wonder how Geoff's done?'

The sudden thought of Geoff reminded Sandra of the hurt inside. It was a hurt that seemed to have been a part of her for so long. 'It must be a characteristic hurt by now,' she thought tiredly. 'Oh dear, I do want to speak with him very badly, although it would be better if I could speak with him very nicely, of course. Coherently, intelligently, warmly, sincerely. Oh Geoff, I miss you!' An intense pang of longing pulsed its way throughout Sandra's being, as she found herself in front of the telephone, dialling his work number.

"Good morning, Geoff Brett speaking."

"Oh!" Sandra almost put down the receiver in panic at the sound of his voice, but managed to maintain control. "Good morning Sandra, it's Geoff here. Ah! The other way around, actually."

"Sandra! How lovely to hear your voice. How are you?"

"Oh – well - how are you?"

"I'm fine. I'm not sure you answered my question?"

"You could be right. I think it's because I'm not sure what to say. I rang you on an impulse, spontaneity got the better of me. I hope I'm not disturbing you?"

"No more than you usually do. No, you're not disturbing me at all. I'm on my own at the moment, so you can say anything you like and I can say anything I like in return."

"Oh, Geoff." Sandra's voice quavered, as she realised how much she longed to see him, to feel the comfort of her hand in his. "I'm sorry. I'm feeling rather low today. I had a bit of a shock on holiday..."

Ten minutes later, Sandra was beginning to feel relaxed and listened to, as she and Geoff talked over some of the conflict she'd experienced on holiday. She wasn't sure why she found it so easy to open her soul to him, but reasons didn't seem to matter anymore.

"Geoff, I really want to see you again. I want to find out more of who you are. I want to know what makes you tick, apart from your watch. I want to touch your spirit. I want to know you in every way." As she uttered those words, Sandra felt released from past constraints. She had spoken the unspeakable. She held her breath, anticipating his reply. To her surprise there was silence. "Geoff? Are you still there?"

"Yes, I am. Sandra, I think you ought to know that Helena and I have made a fresh start. I'm not saying I don't want to see you again, because I do. I'm just saying that I – you – we – it wouldn't be OK for us to know each other sexually."

"No! Oh, good heavens no, of course not, I didn't mean that." Sandra wished she could instantly transcend into another world. This one was far too excruciatingly painful. 'I want to die,' she thought dully and dramatically.

"Will I be seeing you at psychology classes next month?" she continued, pretending the previous topic of conversation had never happened.

"Well, no. I'm so sorry, Sandra. I feel dreadful about this, but Helena and I have talked a lot recently and feel we need to spend more time together. We need to stop rushing around so much and going out nearly every evening."

"That's OK," lied Sandra, as she felt a portion of her immediate future turn dark and meaningless. "It's all right. Everything's cool. I hope everything works out well for you both."

"Thank you. Sandra, I *will* see you again. We can meet soon, can't we?"

"I expect so. I'll give you a ring. I must go."

"OK. Take care of yourself."

"You too, Geoff. Bye."

The tears began to drip steadily even as she replaced the receiver. Torrents of reality seemed to be streaming down her face. 'I never even asked him about his philosophy result,' she thought miserably. 'Well, at least I know how things are now. Geoff wants Helena, Osborn wants Theresa and nobody wants me.' Luckily, a *Suicidal Scarlet Mood Matching Toilet Roll* was close at hand.

Two hours later, Gulliver entered the house without a sound. Sandra heard him and looked up from the poem she was writing entitled *Reality Accepted – Life is Pure Shit*. 'He can't have done very well,' she thought with dismay, as he came quietly into the room.

"Hi," she said as nonchalantly as possible, trying to assess the situation from his demeanour. Unfortunately, she couldn't quite see his demeanour from that angle.

"Hi," he replied, just as nonchalantly, coming over to the typewriter. "Great title. It has a sort of basic feel to it, unlike some titles that are unadulterated crap."

"Gulliver! Darling!" Sandra found she could contain herself no longer.

"Who? Me?" Gulliver looked over his shoulder in alarm to see if anyone else had come into the room.

"Gulliver, you can tell me, for God's sake! I can take it, I'm your mother. I told you it wouldn't matter, however you did. I've got to find out sometime."

"Tell you?"

"Did you fail them all? I don't care, honestly. As long as you're happy."

"Oh, GCSEs. No, I did OK really. 5 Bs, 2Cs, 1D and 1E."

"That's fine. Well done, you! You can do A-levels now. Are you going to ring Dad, like he asked?"

"Yes, but you never said how you did?"

"Me?"

"Philosophy, Mother."

"Ah, that would be a A, then." Sandra smiled. Gulliver smiled. They both made a slight movement towards each other, then veered off nonchalantly in different directions.

It was early September and Sandra Olivia Dullkettle was having a 40th birthday. She wasn't entirely depressed, just prone to wetter than usual eyeballs and surreptitious snuffles amid the birthday cards.

'I really don't care that some people forgot I'm 40, or even that two people think I'm 45,' she thought, looking at her cards arranged neatly on the fireplace. 'For a whole year I've tried to live my life according to my true self. It's been a bit difficult discovering my true self, that's for sure, but I think I'm getting there.'

'Am I, though? Am I getting anywhere at all? I suppose I passed the philosophy exam,' she thought philosophically. 'I must confess I was pleased I had an A, because although I'm not a perfectionist anymore, anything less would have definitely niggled me. I must enrol on the psychology course.' She moved one of her cards, so it was perfectly in line with the others.

'It was nice of Geoff to send me a birthday card, I must have mentioned my birthday once and he actually remembered. He's a lovely person and I shall miss him so much, but the truth is that I don't need him to find out who I really am.'

A few minutes later, after Sandra had finished crying into a *Lonely Lilac Mood Matching Toilet Roll*, Osborn came into the room. Since the holiday, there had been a new distance between them, which Sandra had found hurtful, but strangely necessary. She looked at him mistrustingly, as he sat down beside her and took her hand in his.

"Sandra, I need to tell you that I won't be seeing Theresa again."

"Really?" Sandra's heart jumped alarmingly. "Why not?"

"Oh, reasons."

"Tell me why not!" Sandra tried to move her hand away, but Osborn was holding hers with an iron-like grip.

"She got together with Randy and they're going to move to Leighton Buzzard," he said quietly.

"I see," replied Sandra coldly. Her heart had plummeted to new depths. "I was hoping it was your choice, not hers."

"I've been feeling very unhappy about the whole situation for a while," continued Osborn. "You really did turn my world upside down by suddenly changing, by searching for yourself and all that. Well, I've changed too. I had to, in order to survive. I'm not happy in my job anymore. I want to find out who *I* am. I want to do things for myself and not for everybody else all the time. I want to grow things in the garden and take photos of flowers. I want to travel and learn to speak French. I want to play a musical instrument and I want to remember passion." He looked at Sandra and stopped speaking. Several moments of silence passed between them.

"Do you remember passion with me?" she asked finally.

"Yes. I used to feel passion from you. Oh God, Sandra, it's your birthday today. Believe me, I didn't mean to get into all this. I just meant to put your mind at rest about Theresa and to tell you that I love you."

"What about church? What about God?"

"I don't know. I've got to feeling lately that the God of the church is too contrived. I've begun to feel like I'm playing a part. I don't see how I can be true to myself and still go through the motions. I've no idea what to do, but I don't think I can go there anymore."

"Oh Osborn, can we just start again?" Sandra heard the doorbell ring and sighed.

"I'll get it," said Osborn, smiling in a serious sort of way.

The birthday tea hadn't really been a disaster, more a scene of unrelieved conventional game playing, mused Sandra as she lay in bed that night.

'No, that's cruel. Basil and Sybil did their best with that pink birthday cake in the shape of a cross. Mind you, I can't *believe* they totally forgot Osborn's birthday. How can you forget your own child's birthday? I feel so sorry for Osborn, but I can understand why he didn't want to say anything about it to them. I suppose it's easier just to let some of the painful things go. I was glad Gulliver told them he not only rejects organised religion, but disorganised religion as well.

'I don't think Sybil liked those *Farty Poppers* that Dad brought along. Come to think of it, neither did I.' Sandra moved her arm so that it was touching Osborn's chest. She brushed her fingers lightly across his left nipple in a sudden passing hope that he would turn towards her and hold her in his arms – or even his legs, if necessary. To her disappointment, he lay there completely unmoved and unmoving.

'Well, I didn't cry as much as I did on my last birthday. That reminds me, I must get some more *Mood Matching Toilet Rolls*. It's a weird marketing idea, they should have names like *Constipated Cream*, or – well, not to worry. I seem to be in a much better frame of mind now. I wonder if it's anything to do with Theresa leaving the scene?' Sandra felt a rush of acutely unpleasant emotion as she wondered what would have happened if Theresa hadn't got together with Randy and decided to leave the scene.

'I won't think about that. Maybe the wine helped today. Or the presents. That was a lovely bright, long, ethnic scarf Maddy gave me, I'll wear it when I want to cheer myself up. Trust Gulliver to give me blank tapes and say it was mute whale music! It was sweet of Isabelle to give me that *Zing-along-a-Zen* CD, too. Pity I haven't got a CD player. I suppose one has to move along with the times, or one becomes a has-been.

'Actually, I don't feel as though I'm a has-been anymore. More a might-have-been, really. Might-have-been what, though? And if I'd become what I might have been, does that mean I wouldn't essentially be who I am now? God, that sort of thinking makes my brain hurt.' She squeezed Osborn's left buttock gently and unthinkingly.

'I wonder what Geoff's doing and thinking. I really miss talking with him. He had such lovely eyes – and hair – and hands – oh God.' Sandra sighed deeply. 'Hmm, God. Do I know You anymore? I'm not sure I do, but I'm sure You were there on that hill-cum-mountain. Oh God!' Sandra remembered the clear, bright air, God, the sex, Osborn's letter to Theresa and the pain, all in one massive sensation. Tears slid from her eyes as she reached dejectedly for a *Sad Cerise Mood Matching Toilet Roll*.

'How absolutely annoying,' she thought inanely after a few moments. 'It should be *Sad Serise* or *Cad Cerise*. No, it shouldn't, I'm being silly.' Osborn grunted as she pressed herself hopefully against his back, then he continued to semi-snore.

'Life is too much,' she thought. 'Passion, he said! Most of the passion I know now seems to be inside. Hmm, how interesting. Maybe I ought to externalise a bit more. Maybe some *Triple-Extra-All-Fibre-Bran*. Ha! Oh, I don't know. I still don't know where I am, although I pretend I'm on my way to somewhere.

'I do know I can't just go with the flow, though, that seems an easy way out for people who don't want to take full responsibility for themselves. I like to think I'm a responsible person, all people ought to be by the time they reach my age. God, I've started my fifth decade now. Help, I'm too young to be old!'

She crept quietly out of bed and down the stairs to check how old she looked in the mirror. In the artificial light, she saw a pair of rather pink eyes with rather swollen eyelids. 'I've really got to stop crying,' she thought, as a tear slid down her nose. 'It might be a good emotional release, but it plays havoc with my face.' She switched off the light quickly and walked through to the kitchen in the near darkness.

'I'm really thirsty, it must be the wine. I'll get some water and go back to bed.' As she opened the cupboard door for a glass, a rectangular box fell out. She picked it up and recognised it immediately.

"My symbolic chocolate liqueurs!" she said aloud delightedly. "I said I would eat them after I finished the philosophy course and I actually made it!" She picked one out of the box and tried to remove the silver paper, but it stuck obstinately to the chocolate. She slowly put it back in the box and sucked her sticky fingers, as she went to put the box in the pedal bin.

'I've moved on,' she reflected sombrely, holding on to the box for a moment in mid-air, 'and I don't actually want them anymore.' She put her foot on the pedal of the bin and opened the lid. As she dropped the box inside, her emotional attachments to the past year seemed to drop into the bin as well. She took her foot off the pedal and the lid jerked down rather noisily.

'How interesting,' she thought, as she washed her hands and started to walk slowly back upstairs. 'Was that a truly meaningful experience I've just had with the potpourri patterned pedal bin, synonymous with the meaning of life? Or was it just a load of sodding symbolics?'