

The S.O.D. Sequel

Kay Santillo

Foreword

As a continuation of *The S.O.D. Saga*, *The S.O.D. Sequel* lives up to its name, which is always a good start. It encompasses a very particular time of my life, namely the three years I spent as a mature student of psychology at The University of Plymouth, in Devon. Please don't hold this against me.

As before, the characters are completely fictitious – not a scrap of similarity to any of the people I met, oh no! I wonder how many authors can write about characters without basing any facet of personality on people they actually know, or have come across? Maybe they can, I'm not sure. Having spent three years studying psychology and well over half a century studying life as I know it, I still can't pretend to understand people.

However, I find people fascinating and I find life is full of gentle, humorous moments, even amongst the harsh, sad ones. Life is such a strange mix and this is just the story of a life (that I confess at times might happen to be a bit like mine) trying to make sense and occasionally a great deal of nonsense about its experiences.

So, off you go and may the force be with you!

Kay Santillo, February 2010.

CHAPTER 1

It was September 1993 and Sandra Olivia Dullkettle had recently succumbed to a 41st birthday. She had made a serious attempt to avoid the occasion altogether, by booking herself on a mystery coach trip to Paignton Zoo, but the trip had been cancelled at the last moment, due to the vandalism of the coach by the local *Left-Wing Animal Rights* group. Sandra had tried to redeem the situation by ringing around for an emergency triple hair and manicure appointment, but in the end had been forced to give in gracelessly.

The inevitable family birthday tea hadn't been quite as bad as she'd feared, though, due to the absence of her in-laws, Sybil and Basil. They had opted instead to attend a nearly-all-night vigil of the *Violence And Global Insanity Never Again* group that had been formed by their church after the First World War.

However, the presence of Sandra's cousin, Sindy Linda Grossbody, who had been staying with them on a week's holiday, had annoyed Sandra for at least two good reasons.

'She's younger than I am, she's got more clothes than I have and she calls me Sandy,' Sandra had thought petulantly. 'Actually, not only that, she can drive, she's taken a bigger piece of cake than I have and I can't see a grey hair anywhere. Also, she's not pathetically afraid of birds, she hasn't got a small mole on her left lower lip and Auntie Lavender gave her 2s 6d once when all I got was 6d.'

"Hi, Sandy!" Sindy had said at that point, coming up to Sandra and putting her arm around Sandra's waist. "I'm sorry I have to go back to Grimsford tomorrow, I've really enjoyed staying here. You will write to me, won't you? Osborn said he would write to me if you didn't mind."

"Oh, he did, did he?" Sandra had replied a little acerbically, looking across to where her husband had been fingering a salmon and nectarine vol-au-vent rather suspiciously. "I don't mind, what Osborn does is up to him. Yes, I'll write to you if you write to me, like we always used to."

That had been a week ago. Now Sandra was busy becoming incredibly nervous about her forthcoming start on a BSc (Honours) Psychology degree course at the University of Plymouth. She'd already bought a pair of jeans and a rucksack, but her blonde-haired, green-eyed 12-year-old daughter Madeleine had been slightly less than totally encouraging.

"Mum, those jeans are too new," she said, gazing critically at Sandra. "They do look sort of OK on you, but they'd look better with a couple of interestingly placed holes and a nasty little stain or two. And the *Naked Nudie Bare Bear* slogan on the rucksack doesn't quite hit the mark either." As she looked up and caught the expression on her mother's face, however, she relented. Giving Sandra a sudden hug, she added, "I'm sure you'll be fine, you're great for your age. It's funny you being a student at the same university where Dad works though!"

"If I manage to pass my A-levels and get into the university next year, just don't let on that you know me," said Sandra's dark-haired, brown-eyed 17-year-old son Gulliver, as he came into the room. Sandra couldn't help wondering why he didn't want to go away to university, but was secretly pleased that he'd so far opted to stay at home.

"I won't bother to run after you across the campus when you forget your lunch box, then," she replied, smiling.

"I'd rather starve, Mother Bitch," replied Gulliver smilingly, as he gave his mother a friendly shove against the wall. "It's bad enough with my father working in the Communications Department where I want to do my degree."

"Hey, you haven't called me Mother Bitch for ages," remarked Sandra delightedly, as she rubbed her elbow where it had banged against the wall. "You've been a bit distant lately."

"The camp was only 15 miles away, Mother Hell Fiend," replied Gulliver, "and I did bring you back all my dirty washing, like the old days."

"That's not what I meant and you know it," said Sandra, about to hit him with the

Naked Nudie Bare Bear pencil case, which had been a free gift with the rucksack. Just then though, dark-haired, follicly-challenged Osborn came into the room.

"Hi, I was just trying to get into the swing of things," said Sandra quickly.

"That's what I'm afraid of," said Osborn quietly, as he kissed her on the cheek.

'What did he mean?' reflected Sandra as she lay in bed that night. 'And why did he kiss me on the cheek and not on the lips or the elbows? And why do I still have trouble putting on duvet covers? And why do I always forget to look at lunar eclipses? And why do worms always leap out of the earth suicidally when I'm gardening? And why do I want to do a degree in psychology, for heaven's sake? Is it some fatalistic genetic trait that I'm powerless to fight because both my parents were psychologists? I wonder if they still think of themselves as psychologists, even though they're retired? What have I let myself in for? Actually, if the genetic trait hypothesis is true, Osborn by all rights should be a religious nutter. Thank God he's not, although it was a bit hit and miss a while ago with that Theresa episode.'

Sandra shuddered at the memory of their Lake District holiday a year ago, when she'd found a letter Osborn had written to Theresa, saying how when he'd made love with Sandra on a hill-cum-mountain, he'd wished it had been with Theresa. Incredibly, Sandra felt tears stinging her eyes.

'Even after all this time, it still hurts,' she thought wonderingly, as she reached across for a piece of *Painful Pink Mood Matching Toilet Roll*. 'I wonder if Osborn still feels hurt about Geoff and me, although all we ever did was talk – and hold hands – and kiss – and – oh, sod it.' She sniffed rather noisily.

"Anything wrong?" asked Osborn suddenly, turning over to face her.

"Oh! I didn't know you were awake," said Sandra, her heart suddenly racing without her consent. "I was just feeling a bit strange..."

"No difference there, then."

"I was feeling strange about starting university and about you and Theresa and me and Geoff."

"Sounds a bit like a second-rate film," said Osborn wryly. He wrapped his arm around her. "Look, all that's in the past."

"But you still remember it, don't you?" asked Sandra, although she was comforted to a large extent by his arm. He didn't have particularly big arms, but just the feel of another human being was reassuring.

"Yes, unfortunately I do," he said quietly. "Sometimes I lie awake at night and it eats at me. I know I should let it go, but just the thought of you wanting someone else..."

"I'm sorry," said Sandra, turning over to face him. "I do love you, really I do, and I meant it when I said we'd make a fresh start." There was a silence, which Sandra found herself filling with her own doubt. "Do you love me really?"

"No, not really," replied Osborn.

"Oh," replied Sandra with a small voice, hardly believing his reply.

"Joke," said Osborn sleepily. "I don't love you really, I just love you."

Sandra wondered if she was at last beginning to lose her treasured sense of humour as she scrunched up her piece of *Painful Pink Mood Matching Toilet Roll* and threw it testily across the room.

The next morning a letter from Sindy arrived on the mat, just as Sandra was making a slit in her new university jeans. The sudden noise of the letterbox caused her to make the slit somewhat longer than she'd intended.

'Oh well,' she thought philosophically, as she went to pick up the letter. 'All in the name of a modern front. I must say, I don't really fancy a slit in the back of my jeans – although why can't I just be me? Hmm, I must be backsliding. As long as it's not backsliding. Well, it's quite a while since I've seen Sindy's handwriting on an envelope. My God, it's for Osborn! She's written to him first, the sly cow!' Sandra sat down for a minute, turning the letter over and over in her hand and wondering why she had mentally called Sindy a sly cow.

'She's my cousin and we spent a few childhood summers together – which is no reason why she shouldn't write to Osborn, since she did ask if I minded. They definitely got on well when she was here on holiday, after all. She's written to him before me, though! I suppose she's allowed to, but I wonder what she's written to him about, there are at least a couple of pages in there. I wonder if she's written anything about me, the sly cow!'

As Sandra was holding the envelope up to the light to see if she could see anything of the letter inside, Gulliver came into the room.

"I thought you were above such things, Mother Slut Nose."

"Gulliver! When are you going to start being nice to me?" asked Sandra, putting the letter down quickly.

"I *am* nice to you. Honestly, as if I'd use such terms of affliction to anyone else."

"Terms of affection?" asked Sandra hopefully.

"No, terms of affliction. Have you got the photos for your student card yet?"

"Yes, but I don't like them much."

"Let's have a look."

"What about yours for the sixth form, you've never shown them to me."

"OK, I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

"You stupid thing!"

"Hey, Mother Dippy Chin, you shouldn't talk to yourself like that."

"Oh, go and destroy yourself. Are you scared of taking your A-levels this year?"

"Technically next year. Me? Scared? Of A-levels? Well, what do you think? Yes, I am, actually. Going to university and taking a degree sounds so grown-up. And scary."

"I'm scared," admitted Sandra. "Scared thingie-less now it's only three days away."

"Er – a small hint here, Mother Wimpy Cheeks. If you're at university, you're going to have to get accustomed to full and explicit forms of strong language."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of strong language, don't you worry. Why, golly gosh and hairy bottoms, I was using some damned awful strong language before you were even ruddy well born." Sandra frowned at her strange articulation. "God, where did all that come from?"

"I don't want to know," said Gulliver, smiling. "I'm off to play *Obuggerit* on the computer, before all my spare time gets taken up with A-level-type activities, plus the social side of things, of course."

"Such as?"

"Oh, drinking, clubs – you know, the whole hectic scene. Maybe even a spot of coursework here and there, as well."

"Are you sure you don't mean coarse work?"

"I don't know what you mean." Gulliver was untouched. "Are you going to any *Freshers' Week* events then, or any *Sex-n-Study Weekends*?"

"Good God, no! Oh, you're teasing me. Well, I was thinking of trying something on this programme they've sent me called *Mature Students Go Immature Night*, but I'm not sure your dear father would understand."

"Mother Hell Knees, I don't understand."

"Me neither, to be honest. Anyway, I'm not going, I'm probably too mature. By the way, how are you feeling about your driving test, it's only next week, isn't it?"

"Thank you so much for reminding me."

"That's OK. You'll do fine, you're a natural."

"Yes, definitely unnatural."

Later in the afternoon, Madeleine entered the front door, unceremoniously flinging her bag on to the floor.

"Hi, Mum. Do you know anything about King Arthur? I've got to do an assignment on him."

"King Arthur? Oh yes, he – umm – he – no, I don't seem to know anything definite about him, to be honest. I think what I know is all myth. I never did anything about King Arthur at school," finished Sandra lamely.

"Oh well, it's another trip to the library with Lucy, then. I don't mind, there's a new assistant there that we like."

"Fancy!" Sandra looked at Madeleine, thinking how much she'd matured in the last year or so.

"Yes, we do." Madeleine grinned suddenly and looked thoughtfully at Sandra. "It's really nice being able to tell you nearly everything. I'm so glad you're not normal."

"Thank you, darling." Sandra was secretly heart-warmed at her daughter's sudden observation.

"Oh, by the way," said Madeleine, picking up her bag again to go to the library, "I thought I'd better mention that slits in jeans aren't nessacelery in any more. You haven't made any slits, have you?" Madeleine regarded her mother wonderingly.

"Necessarily? Yes, I have!" exclaimed Sandra, reflecting for a moment on life's certain uncertainties.

"Never mind, Mum, just be yourself. That's what you tell me and that's what I believe is best. I hate conformity. Have you seen my blue jacket? I wouldn't be seen dead at the library wearing this old thing."

Two days later, Sandra called by in the afternoon to see her parents, Caroline and Leonard. It was her last visit before she was to become a student and would consequently be seeing less of them for a while.

"This is my last visit before becoming a student and consequently seeing less of you for a while," explained Sandra, sitting on the sofa with a mug of tea and a chocolate biscuit that Caroline had pressed into her hand. It had been a silly thing to do.

"Crumbs," replied Caroline. "Yes, I'll miss seeing you as frequently as we have been lately. Since Dad and I retired, it's it's brightened up our days." A poignant glance shot between Caroline and Sandra, but they both looked away in embarrassment.

"I'll still come to see you as often as I can," promised Sandra sincerely. "It's not as if I'm going away, or anything. Besides, with all your social activities, it's been hard sometimes to find a time when you're in!"

"Yes, that's true," chipped in Leonard. "I've enjoyed going out with the *Old Ramblers* since I had my bypass. I must say, though, I do feel all out of sorts today."

"Ah, you may feel all out of sorts, Dad, but you're not out of *All-Sorts* because I brought you some," said Sandra, putting down her mug to rummage through her bag.

"Why thank you, Sandra," said Leonard, taking the bag of *All-Sorts* a little shyly.

"Why not thank you, Dad!" quipped Sandra, then looked a little concerned as Leonard stood up slowly.

"Would you mind if I left you two on your own and went to lie down in my own room for a while?" he said. "I'll take a couple of pills before I do, I've got to knock this headache on the head. Ho – knock the headache on the head, get it?"

"Yes, Dad," said Sandra, relieved that Leonard still felt well enough to laugh at his own jokes. "I'll see you later."

"OK, love. Enjoy all the behaviourism," said Leonard, winking at Sandra as he left the room.

"Oh, never mind the behaviourism, just tell me if there's any new research on the self-concept," said Caroline, sniffing. "I used to be on top of it all in my day. Psychology is such a vast field, there are so many subject areas and it seems to be widening all the time. I'm sure you'll find it stimulating."

"As long as it's not too much of an eclectic shock," joked Sandra, privately feeling overawed and overnervous.

"You'll be fine – ouch!" said Caroline, shifting uncomfortably in her chair.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, just a few twinges. Old age or something, it's catching up at last," said Caroline ruefully.

"Mum, you'll never be old in your head," said Sandra, as much to comfort herself as her mother.

"Tell that to my body." Caroline laughed. "I've tried, but it just won't listen."

As she lay awake in bed that night, Sandra alternated interestingly between nervousness and rebellion.

'I'll show the world what I'm made of,' she thought, after her knees had stopped trembling at the thought of all the people she would have to meet the following day. 'They'll have to accept me as I am. So what if I'm not big, blonde, beautiful and young? I'm me, I'm Sandra Olivia Dullkettle and I'm small, dark-haired with traces of grey, interestingly wrinkled around the eyes and old.

'Hell no, I'm not old! What *is* old, anyway? It's all comparative – older and oldest, in comparison to younger and youngest. God, what am I on about now, I'm thinking gibberish. I must be getting old – ha!' She scratched her ear contemplatively.

'Mum mentioned age today, as if she's really beginning to feel older. The plain fact is that she *is* older. We're all older than we were a while ago.' She scratched her shoulder reflectively.

'Dad's beginning to look older, too. He's gone completely grey now. Well, it's rather a pleasant whiteish silver, actually. I like it. See, there are *good* things about being older.' She scratched her navel ponderingly.

'Osborn, of course, will always be two years older than I am, which is comforting. Then, of course, I shall always be two years older than Sindy. The sly cow, I wonder what she wrote in Osborn's letter? I think I'll ask him.' She scratched her knee agitatedly.

'Osborn's parents have always seemed old to me, probably because they've always seemed so rigid and unbending and unlistening and – no, I'm being cruel. I must be more open-minded myself, if I'm going to study for a degree. How exciting, I'm looking forward to it.' She scratched her big toe animatedly.

'Actually, how absolutely petrifying. I'm dreading it.' She scratched herself all over in confusion and a small and rather disturbing amount of pleasure.

CHAPTER 2

On her first morning at university, Sandra found herself waiting alone outside a lecture theatre, amid a throng of other new students, who all seemed to know each other and who were not wearing jeans with slits in them.

'How did I arrive here at this lecture theatre, at this point in time (09:54) wearing jeans with slits in them?' she thought wonderingly. 'I must have had an out of body experience on the bus here, or else I've simply been out of my mind with fear. God, I think I still am. Anyway, how come all these rather young people seem to know each other already?'

"Hey Zo! Did you make it with Jo last night?" shouted a girl with short blonde hair to another girl, as she made her entrance through the outside entrance doors. It was a good place to make an entrance from outside.

"Hey Mo! No, I didn't, but I made it with Ro!" shouted back the other girl, running her fingers through her long, dark hair.

"Who's Ro?" asked short blonde haired Mo.

"Rodney Bent, the guy with the nose stud," replied long dark-haired Zo, whereupon Mo and Zo shrieked with laughter. "Hey, there he is," said Zo suddenly. "Over here, Ro!"

"Hey Mo and Zo," said the brown-haired Ro, approaching the two girls. "Have you seen Bo?"

Sandra began to develop a headache and was glad when a small man with dark curly hair came staggering through the doors under a huge pile of paper. Obviously a lecturer, thought Sandra reverently.

"Thank you," he said with undisguised relief to the small chestnut-haired woman who stepped forward to open the door to the lecture theatre for him.

'Ah, another mature student,' thought Sandra excitedly. 'I recognise her from the interview day.' She propelled herself rather uncharacteristically through the group of students immediately in front of her as they began to move into the lecture theatre, desperately trying to make contact with the only face she'd recognised so far.

"Hi!" she said with triumph, as she bumped into the small chestnut-haired mature student. "I'm Sandra."

"Urgh – hi!" replied the small chestnut-haired mature student, startled. "I'm Nerissa."

"What a nice name. Do you mind if I sit with you?"

"No."

Sandra hesitated for a moment, uncertain whether Nerissa meant she minded or not. The lecture theatre was filling up rapidly, as Nerissa continued to walk down the aisle looking for a seat. Actually, there were plenty, but she was looking for a suitably empty one. As Sandra stood gazing at the sea of unknown faces, knowing she had committed herself to follow this course of study for the next three years, she felt a moment of pure panic rise up inside her. She turned to launch herself after Nerissa like a kamikaze firework, suddenly feeling sick as she realised she'd lost sight of her.

"Sandra, over here!" Nerissa's voice was the most welcome sound Sandra could have heard at that moment. She sat down beside Nerissa and managed to calm her rapidly beating heart.

'Don't be such a neurotic raving wimp, Sandra,' she said to herself nicely. 'You chose to do this. So what if you're feeling sick with nerves? The worst you can do is to vomit copiously all over the person sitting in front of you.' Sandra gazed in horror at the sophisticated looking woman in her early twenties sitting in front of her, but fortunately her mind was taken off the situation, as the small dark curly-haired lecturer began to speak with a strangely unidentifiable accent in a thin nasal voice (which nevertheless emanated from his mouth) while tapping nervously at the small microphone attached to his shirt.

"Good morning. Ahem! Yes, good morning and welcome to the start of your Applied Marine Science degree. Just a joke! I do, of course, mean your BSc Psychology (Honours) degree." A murmur of uncertain origin and intent rippled through the lecture theatre.

"My name is Simon Coe," he continued, tapping miserably on the microphone as it began to fail to work, "but don't let that worry you."

Sandra found herself spending the next hour and a half straining intently to hear Simon Coe's voice as he valiantly semi-shouted information following the complete demise of the microphone. Thankfully, a lot of the time was taken up with the distribution of countless photocopies and Sandra began to relax. She enjoyed receiving countless pieces of paper, especially if they imparted interesting information. Even semi-interesting information, to be fair.

In the lunch break, she and Nerissa ventured into the Student Union to collect their student cards and a *Free Fresher Goodie Bag*.

"Are you a free fresher?" joked Nerissa with Sandra, as they investigated the contents of their goodie bags.

"Oh yes, I've never charged," replied Sandra, feeling very much at ease with someone who made rather lame jokes like herself. At one stage, she'd tried therapy to stop thinking of herself as a lame joke, but the acronym of her name had, frankly, never helped. The initials SOD were enough for anyone to contend with, she and the therapist had finally decided.

"Good God!" exclaimed Nerissa, holding a small box of *Post-Curry n' Booze Fallout Settlers* in one hand and a spam-flavoured condom in the other.

"Are you religious then, Nerissa?" asked Sandra absent-mindedly, lifting a miniature container of *Lager Frangenced Correcting Fluid* from her goodie bag.

"No," replied Nerissa, equally absent-mindedly, investigating a voucher for a free pint of beer at a *Student Special at Sleazy Suzy's* night. "I just live up to my initials."

"Initials?" squeaked Sandra with a start.

"NUT – Nerissa Ursula Tripp," replied Nerissa, gazing at Sandra just a little disconcertedly.

"NUT!" shouted Sandra with delight, ignoring several raised eyebrows in her immediate vicinity. "Hey, that's not so bad. Mine's SOD! My mother had this hypothesis about people's names. She was a psychologist, you see, but she's over it now..."

Later in the afternoon, it was time to find out which personal tutor groups everyone was in. In the first floor Psychology Department corridor, Sandra joined the mass of students who were trying to view the allocation notice of personal tutor groups on the notice board. Being rather small, she was unsure whether she found the sensation of being in a confined space among so many young pulsating bodies mildly exciting or mildly claustrophobic.

"Gosh, this is friendly," she said aloud to an armpit by her left ear.

"Ow!" said the armpit owner. "Mind your elbow, mate."

Sandra checked her elbows, but was relieved to find the armpit owner had not been speaking to her. At last people began to filter away and she was able to scan the list of personal tutor groups.

"Marcus Lowe," she said aloud, as she found the group of five among which her name was included.

"It's an omen," said a man on her right. "I'm in his group, too."

"Oh?" Sandra looked to her right-hand side to see a fairly tall man, probably in his late forties, wearing glasses and a rather delicious purple corduroy jacket. "Oh good."

"How have you found it so far today?" asked the man politely.

"Well, I'm usually hopeless with directions, but I just sort of followed everyone else," replied Sandra. "Hey, I'm glad you're in my group, I've never felt so old in my life before as I have today among all these bright young things." She stopped, beginning to blush at her unintended inference about his age.

"Well, we're supposed to go and meet Marcus Lowe," said the purple-jacketed man, either not noticing, or ignoring her inference. He peered at the list again. "Let's see, room 223."

"Where's that?" asked Sandra, looking around her.

"On the second floor," he replied, looking at her slightly askance. "Shall we go?"

"Yes, sure," said Sandra brightly, as she turned to go the wrong way down the corridor, wondering dejectedly why her sense of direction was so abysmal. A few minutes later, walking up the stairs to the second floor, she suddenly felt incredibly glad to have met the purple-jacketed man.

"I'm Sandra, by the way," she said in a moment of bold gladness. "I'm glad I met you, or I could still be wandering around the first floor looking for room 223."

"That's OK," said the purple-jacketed man. "I'm Phil. Nice to meet you, Sandra. Aha, the famous room 223." He knocked and was answered by a distant "Come!" emanating from inside the room. Sandra suddenly had to fight an urge to giggle and wished fervently that Marcus Lowe had invited them to "Come in!" instead.

She entered the room behind Phil, to discover that three other first-year students were already seated in various attitudes of casual nervousness. Marcus Lowe himself was sitting behind his desk, searching through one of the piles of paper that almost covered the desk top. A man of rather indeterminate age, the first thing Sandra noticed about him was the long blond fringe which flopped, rather pleasantly she thought, above his blue eyes. He glanced up as she and Phil looked for somewhere to sit.

"Hi," welcomed Marcus Lowe in a strong clear voice. "Do sit down. There's another chair here and do use the comfy chair in the corner there."

Sandra found herself sitting in the comfy chair, wishing she could stop remembering the Monty Viper comfy chair sketch, as it had always made her want to laugh like an idiot. In the end, she'd decided she was an idiot anyway, so it didn't really matter.

"Let's introduce ourselves," said Marcus abruptly, abandoning his search through the piles of paper. "You know who I am, so let's start from the left. Just say your name and a few things about yourself. I can't find my list of your names, I'm afraid." He looked expectantly at the young male student fingering his nose stud.

"Oh. Yo. I'm Rodney Bent, known as Ro..."

Sandra looked up sharply from where she'd been poking her finger in and out of the slit just above the knee of her jeans, recognising the Ro who had apparently made it with Zo the night before. She gazed at him wonderingly, as she allowed her mind to wander. A wandering and wondering mind were two of her strong points, she decided.

'Gosh, I'm here in a personal tutor's room with a personal tutor and all his books and his computer and his table with a funny looking machine on it and his whiteboard and his carpet with a stain in the shape of Madagascar. I wonder what it is. The stain, I mean, not Madagascar. And these students – real live psychology undergraduates who are weird presumed intelligent and who wear nose studs and who make it with one another. Except probably the oldies, like Nerissa and Phil and me.' She looked at Phil, who had begun to scratch his wavy mid-brown, grey-streaked hair, in consternation that it was his turn to speak.

"Hello, my name's Phillip Potts – Phil preferably. Well, a few years ago I became disillusioned with going away to sea as a way of life, but when I came ashore, my wife left me for a peripatetic vet. I've had a couple of jobs since then, but none of them were remotely fulfilling. So here I am, having chosen poverty and stimulation." He laughed briefly and looked down at where his hands were folded in his lap. Sandra was also looking at his lap, thinking how interesting he made poverty and stimulation sound, when she realised it was her turn to speak. Her heart began to beat quickly.

"I'm Sandra Olivia Dullkettle." She almost bit her tongue in agitation, as she realised that nobody else had said their middle name. "Well, it's an acronym, you see. My mother had this hypothesis about people's names. She was a psychologist, but she's over it now..."

"How did everyone get on today?" asked Sandra, as the four Dullkettles sat unusually at the dining room table that evening. For some time now, they had usually eaten their evening meal in front of the television in the sitting room, but Sandra wanted to celebrate surviving her first day at university with her family and a bottle of wine.

"OK," replied Gulliver. "I had quite a bit of Home Study time today, so Damien and Nigel came back here."

"I'm glad they like to study in our home," commented Sandra, thinking that proximity to the school could sometimes be a bit of a downfall.

"Is this a home-thrown pizza?" asked Madeleine suddenly, looking rather suspiciously at some black bits on the underside of the mushroom and lychee pizza.

"Home-made topping, but I bought the base," replied Sandra. "I wish you lot would stop referring to that day when I was angry in the kitchen. I just saw red, that's all."

"So did my shirt," said Osborn said. "All that tomato purée – terrible looking stuff. I liked that shirt, too."

"Mum threw the pizza, but it was me who squirted the tomato purée, Dad," explained Madeleine patiently. "It was just an aimless mistake, honestly."

"I know, Maddy, I wasn't getting at you," said Osborn. "It was a long time ago, anyway. What do you mean by an aimless mistake, though?"

"I mean I didn't aim it at you, of course!"

"Oh, I see." Osborn smiled briefly, then looked enquiringly at Sandra. "How did you get on today?"

"Oh, not so bad," replied Sandra. "I've got a whole load of photocopied material to read before the timetable starts properly next week. I'm determined to keep on top of all this stuff. I can't cope with not coping."

"Hmm," said Osborn thoughtfully. "Did you meet anyone in particular today?"

"Yes, I sat with someone called Nerissa in the morning session and had lunch with her. Then this afternoon we had to meet our personal tutor and the others in the group who we'll be having tutorials with and I met this guy called Phil. They're both mature students – Nerissa and Phil, I mean. I just seemed to click with them."

"Click?" Osborn raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, click. You know, get on."

"Get on?" Osborn raised another eyebrow.

"Yes, get on. You know, rub along together well."

"Rub along together well?" Osborn wished he had another eyebrow to raise.

"You know what I mean!" said Sandra with exasperation. "I'd like to get to know some of the younger students, too, they look so interesting. Quite individual. I don't

understand why they seem hell-bent on piercing bits of their bodies, though. I can't imagine what pleasure they get out of it."

"They enjoy it," said Gulliver matter-of-factly. "I was thinking of getting my kneecap pierced. Hey, did you get one of those goodie bags I've heard about?"

"Did I just!"

"What, you just got one before they ran out?" Gulliver was wearing his boyish pseudo-innocent look, Sandra noticed.

"God, you're such a prat," she said, smiling.

"No need for blasphemy," retorted Gulliver.

"Oh no, they're off again," sighed Madeleine. "I'm going to my room. I want to finish reading *Taking the Myth out of Arthur* so I can take it back to the library tomorrow."

"Goodness, you're a quick reader," said Sandra. "Do you like that sort of thing – myths and history and what have you?"

"Yes, I do, actually."

"I suppose we're all unique," said Gulliver in passing.

"I'm not unique," replied Madeleine – a little dejectedly, Sandra noticed.

"Well, you're the only one, then," said Gulliver, as Madeleine got up from the table. "I must go, too. I'm going to Damien's, he's got a new computer game. Actually, it's his brother's, but his brother's going out on a piss-up."

"Gulliver! What awful terminology."

"Piss-up?" asked Osborn, as Gulliver left the room. "You'll have to get used to that sort of language."

"I know," said Sandra. "It's only words. I'm more interested in getting to know the real person underneath all the words. That's why I'm studying psychology, I suppose."

"Yes." Osborn looked thoughtful. "You like writing, though. You always used to write letters to people and that's only words on paper."

"Yes, but people have to communicate somehow," replied Sandra a little defensively. "That reminds me, what did Sindy have to say in her letter?"

"Oh, not a lot. Just stuff about her job and how she's having trouble adjusting after her divorce. She said she's in the middle of a letter to you." Osborn stood up, stacking the plates.

"She wrote to you first, though," said Sandra quietly.

"We all need friends," replied Osborn. "Even me."

"I'm your friend, aren't I?" asked Sandra, feeling a sudden chill.

"Yes. Well, you used to be, but you'll be so busy at university. You'll be overworked and underslept all the time."

'And you're afraid you'll be underlaid,' thought Sandra, wondering where such a thought had sprung from. 'Gosh, I'm having student-type thoughts already. I never used to have thoughts like that – well, not until Osborn's episode with Theresa, anyway. But I don't want to be someone who thinks awful things about people, not even about sly cows like Sindy.'

Sandra stood up with sudden tears in her eyes and hastily went to see if she could locate some of her newly purchased *Bitchy Bluebell Mood Matching Toilet Roll*.

It was the morning of Gulliver's driving test and the last day of Sandra's first week of university.

"How are you feeling?" she asked Gulliver, as he put on his jacket ready for his driving instructor to arrive.

"With my hands as usual," he replied.

"No really, how are you feeling?" she persisted.

"Scared thingie-less, as you so delicately put it the other day," he replied. "Ah, here he is, I'd better go."

"You'll be fine. You can only do your best. Knock 'em dead!"

"I sincerely hope not, Mother. Bye!"

Later that morning, Sandra sat in a lecture theatre next to Nerissa, wondering how Gulliver was coping. She felt that half of her was in the lecture theatre and half of her was waiting at home for Gulliver to come back from his driving test, either elated or depressed.

'It feels so strange to be doing my own thing here, in this lecture theatre, instead of being at home when he comes in from his test,' she mused. 'What *am* I doing here? Have I made the right choice with my life? How will it ultimately affect Gulliver and Madeleine? Oh, it's no good, I shall have to ring home after this finishes. Oh my God, why is everyone getting up and forming into small groups? I should have been listening properly!'

"I'm really pleased for you, Gulliver," said Osborn when he came home from work. "Thanks for ringing and leaving a message, I'm sorry I wasn't there."

"It hasn't sunk in yet," replied Gulliver. "I've been thinking about what you were saying about a car, though."

"Oh, you mean the one that Terry at work's putting up for sale? I thought you couldn't face the idea of a yellow Mini?"

"Well, there are certain reputation issues, but it seems an easy option and he's trustworthy and you said you'd help pay."

"Definitely. The sooner you get your own insurance and lots of experience on the road, the better."

"Oh my God," said Sandra, "it's just dawning on me that you'll be let loose on those awful roads out there with all those dangerous drivers..."

"In a yellow Mini," finished Madeleine. "You always liked *Bananaman*, didn't you?"

CHAPTER 3

It was early November. October had disappeared without trace among many strange and terrifying ordeals, such as learning how to access information in the university library, becoming acquainted with different lecture techniques, enduring sessions with computers and taking part in tutorials.

Sandra stood at the bus stop, trying to pretend she wasn't incredibly nervous about the presentation she was obliged to give to her personal tutor group later on that morning. She was fully prepared, but wished she hadn't volunteered to be the first one in her group to talk for 20 minutes on a psychological topic of her choice.

'Oh well, at least I'll get it over with soon,' she thought philosophically. 'I can't seem to stop thinking philosophically, it must have something to do with that GCSE I took in the damn subject. The A-level in psychology afterwards made more sense to me. God, where's this bus?' As God seemed unwilling to respond, Sandra continued her personal mental conversation.

'Hey, I'm really quite good at personal mental conversations,' she conversed with herself mentally. 'Of course, being personally mental helps. Actually, I haven't made too many idiotic mistakes at university yet. It's no good, I shall have to abbreviate the word 'university' to 'uni' in my personal mental conversations, it's taking up too much cognitive energy. Wow, I sound like a psychology student. Actually, I suppose the worst idiotic mistake was questioning that lecturer on the need for pilot questionnaires. How was I to know they weren't intended for pilots? "Do you fly often?" is a perfectly good question. Ho hum. I suppose the second worst idiotic mistake was sniggering about the reply choices in that tutorial about scoring: "always", "often", "sometimes", "usually", or "never". I think I'd choose the middle option...'

"Do you want this bus, love?" asked a middle-aged man who had been standing in the queue behind Sandra.

"Oh! Yes. Sorry, I didn't see it coming."

"You want to watch that. Deep in thought, eh?"

"Yes. I'm a psychology student..." Sandra vaguely noticed the shutters come down over the man's eyes before she stepped up on to the bus in front of him.

Three hours later, after her tutorial presentation, she sat alone with Marcus Lowe in his room. Thankfully, she'd managed not to giggle when Marcus had invited her to stay behind for debriefing, after the others in the tutorial group had left.

"Well, how do you think it went?" asked Marcus, raising his eyebrows rather boyishly up underneath his fringe.

"I was hoping you'd tell me," responded Sandra, noting the extreme blueness of his irises. It was the closest she'd ever sat to him.

"Oh, I will. I just wanted your response," replied Marcus, as he began to search for the piece of paper on which he'd noted his remarks.

"Well, I thought the academic anxiety of the first-year psychology undergraduate was a relevant subject that attracted everyone's attention," began Sandra confidently, "but I seemed to lose it when I asked people to say exactly which physical anxiety symptoms they'd experienced...she tailed off uncertainly.

"A little too personal, perhaps," said Marcus, frowning a little.

"Well, you *are* my personal tutor," said Sandra, immediately wishing she hadn't. "That was just a joke. I do understand your reservations. I'm sorry, I tend to joke when I'm nervous. It didn't go down too well in the presentation, did it – the joking, I mean?" She shifted nervously in her chair. Sadly, it wasn't the comfy chair.

"I think people didn't know whether they were allowed to laugh or not," said Marcus, gazing at Sandra, "but I would say that personally I enjoyed it. There, is that personal enough for you?"

"Yes," replied Sandra, feeling a blush erupting on her cheeks. It was probably the way she was sitting. She looked at Marcus, surprised to see the ghost of a smile leaving his lips. Smiling was not one of his more frequent expressions. In fact, Sandra had spent the last few weeks of tutorials not knowing how she felt about her personal tutor. He was quite chatty in an intellectual kind of way, but there was something that seemed to interfere when she tried to speak in tutorials. Consequently, she'd more or less stopped taking an active role.

"I'm sorry I haven't been talking much in tutorials," she said suddenly. "It's me, I have this shyness thing in some situations. I don't mean to clam up, it just happens and then the quieter I am, the harder it is to speak. Then when I do speak, like now, it seems to be a load of rubbish and it comes out all wrong." She shrugged defensively.

"I've never heard you say anything that's rubbish," said Marcus slowly, obviously thinking. "As for the tutorials, I had the impression you were holding back once or twice. I thought about asking you questions directly, but generally I prefer to take the line of least insistence." As Marcus paused, Sandra looked at him gratefully, noticing the half-smile, which disappointingly left his lips too soon for her to enjoy.

"I'll try harder," she murmured, wanting to carry on the conversation, but feeling an irrational fear of dubious origin.

"Don't worry, you're doing fine," said Marcus, moving his chair to indicate their talk was concluding. "And if you have anything you want to talk over, do come and see me."

"OK. I will, thank you." Sandra stood up abruptly, banging her knee on his desk, before she escaped at last from the almost overwhelming ordeal of her first presentation and subsequent debriefing.

She nearly careered headlong into Phil, who appeared to be loitering in the corridor outside Marcus's room.

"Oh! Sorry, Phil. Were you waiting to see Marcus?"

"Well, I was thinking of having a word about my presentation next week, but time's running on. We've got the *Clinical Issues* lecture soon. I think I'll go for a coffee instead. I – uh – don't suppose you want to join me?"

"Yes, I could do with something after all that!" Sandra laughed ruefully, then suddenly remembered. "Oh, I was going to meet Nerissa and the gang after I'd finished here – but they won't really miss me."

"Sure?"

"Positive." Sandra was finding the allure of Phil's purple jacket too overpowering. Besides, she justified to herself, she'd always preferred simple one-to-one conversations.

Two-to-two conversations were such a headache to follow and three-to-three conversations were an absolute pain.

Ten minutes later, they sat in one of the refectories, sipping something almost like coffee. Sandra suddenly felt stomach-boggingly hungry and remembered the sandwiches in her bag. She pulled them out and flopped them on the table between them.

"Well, this morning these were cottage cheese and blackcurrant jam and actually quite appetising. Now they're just a squashed mound of indeterminate calories, but you're welcome to have one." She opened the cling film enclosing them and pushed them towards Phil.

"Actually, I will, thanks. I'm starving. I hoped you wouldn't notice my stomach rumbling during your presentation."

"I didn't notice anything except my own discomfort, believe me," confessed Sandra. "I was standing there afterwards, wondering what on Earth I'd put myself through all that for."

"Well, I thought you did fine," said Phil encouragingly. "You always seem to be very well organised."

"I actually felt very badly organised!" Sandra laughed. "How about you, are you incredibly well organised for your presentation next week?"

"At the moment I'm incredibly well disorganised," said Phil, smiling. "I'm hoping to get it finished at the weekend, though. I'll be on my own in the flat. I usually see my two sons either Saturday or Sunday, but they're going to stay with their grandparents for half-term."

"How old are they?"

"9 and 11."

"Gosh, my two are older than that. My son's 17 and my daughter's 12. My son, Gulliver, hopes to be a student here next year." Sandra offered this information rather tentatively, beginning to wonder if she was perhaps quite a bit older than Phil. Not that it should matter, she felt, but all the same she rather agitatedly fingered the slit in her jeans.

"Hey, that's great!" Phil's response immediately calmed her. "You don't look old enough to be the mother of a student, though."

"You're just being nice," said Sandra teasingly.

"No, I'm not." Phil looked a little hurt, much to Sandra's amazement and secret delight.

"I'm sorry. Would you like an *Extra Low-Fat Quadruple Choccy Bicc*y? I've got two." Sandra delved into her bag again.

"Cheers," said Phil, smiling. His eyes met Sandra's and lingered interestingly.

'Oh wow, an easy 8.75 on the *Interestingly Linger*ing Look Scale,' thought Sandra with a certain amount of discomfiture, as her own eyes continued to linger interestingly on Phil's.

"Sandra!" Nerissa's voice interrupted the mutual interestingly lingering look, as Nerissa approached Sandra and Phil's table with the gang, which consisted of Jenny, Jill and Juliet. "We're off to *Clinical Issues*."

"Nerissa!" replied Sandra, beginning to blush furiously as the four walked past, smiling knowingly at her and Phil. It had always made her angry the way she blushed so easily on some occasions. "Phil, I think we'd better get going," she said uncomfortably, looking at her watch, "or we'll be late for *Clinical Issues*."

"That always reminds me of cleaning the toilet," responded Phil, as they both smilingly got up to go.

Three days later, Sandra found herself enduring a family birthday tea (her father-in-law, Basil's) within the sanctuary of her very own sitting room. Sandra had lately begun to realise how much she needed and valued her own sitting room and not only since it had been redecorated. Ambiguities aside, she understood how she had been used to her own space as an only child – space which had been badly eroded – or eroded very well, depending on how you looked at it – since being married and having children.

She gazed around the room, feeling somewhat detached, watching her parents and Osborn's parents enjoying a heated discussion about the efficiency of checkouts in supermarkets. Only her mother Caroline looked vaguely bored, but knowing her mother, Sandra thought with a smile, she was probably amusing herself by constructing psychological profiles with regard to the self-concept of everyone in the room.

"How's college going then, Sandra dear?" asked Osborn's slightly scatty mother, Sybil, as a prolonged lull in the conversation appeared to unsettle her.

"University," corrected Sandra mechanically. "It's definitely hard work, but quite rewarding, thank you."

"I must say, you're braver than I am," continued Sybil, nibbling at a hardboiled egg and curly kale vol-au-vent with delicate violence. "Although, I always say if the Lord had wanted me to go to college, He would have let me know."

'Oh Lord no, she's bringing the Lord into it again,' thought Sandra tiredly. 'Sorry Lord, no offence, but it's as if she doesn't want to think for herself. How can I change the subject?'

"How's your VAGINA group, then?" she asked politely into the prolonged lull.

"I take it you mean our *Violence and Global Insanity Never Again* group," said Basil coldly, placing his glass of *No-Alcohol Scrumpy and Cherry Juice* down rather forcibly on the occasional table (sometimes used as a foot rest). "We don't refer to it any longer in public by its shortened name since the court case. There's simply no need to use suggestive language willy nilly. Dirty language invites the devil."

"It's only a part of the female body, Grandad," said Madeleine, rising from her cross-legged position on the carpet. "If you'll excuse me, I have some homework to do. I want to finish this book, so I can take it back to the library tomorrow."

'I've got some so-called homework to do,' thought Sandra petulantly, as the conversation progressed to the fascinating subject of what Basil and Sybil had eaten for lunch two days before, 'but I don't suppose I could leave the room to go and do my own thing without raising some eyebrows. I'm allowing myself to be caught in the old role trap here, but what can I do? Osborn's siblings have opted out. Lawrence seems to be avoiding his parents altogether these days and Kirsty just pleases herself in deepest Cambridgeshire, so we've got the responsibility of keeping his parents happy.'

'I wouldn't mind so much if I felt they came from the same planet, but they never seem to understand or listen to a single word I say, so there's no point whatsoever in trying to communicate with them. God, I'm in such a bad mood. I wonder if it's got anything to do with feeling hot, dizzy and spaced out in the lecture on Friday afternoon. Maybe I'm getting a virus. It was frightening, though, sitting there and feeling like I might pass out. I can hardly remember anything of *Failures of Memory* at all...'

"How's Gulliver getting on with his A-levels, Sandra?" asked Leonard as he came to sit beside her. "He's in his room doing some coursework at the moment, I hear." Sandra looked at her father and smiled. There was no doubt about it, he'd become much more open and talkative since his heart bypass a couple of years before.

"He's doing OK, Dad," replied Sandra, "although I'm not sure he's doing coursework at the moment. I think he just wanted to escape from this family get-bored-together. Actually, the marks he's had for his coursework so far have been higher than mine and his social life is definitely better than mine, too."

"You wait till you retire, love," said Leonard, grinning. "You'll have loads of time to socialise then – clubs, outings, the *Old Ramblers' Holiday Group* – the world will be your lobster, as they say. Changing the subject slightly, I thought you might like to listen to this new tape I picked up at the last *Over Sixties' Roadshow*. It's pan pipes – you know, Andes music."

"Who's Andy?" asked Sybil, as she came to sit the other side of Sandra.

"Let's find out," said Sandra grimly, grabbing the tape from her father's hand and jumping up towards the audio system, in order to escape a fresh onslaught of rampant Sybilmania.

"My favourite piece is Handel's Water Music," continued Sybil undeterred.

"Mmm, that's a lovely drop of music," responded Leonard absent-mindedly.

A week later, Sandra sat at the dining room table amongst a pile of papers, consisting mainly of photocopied material for forthcoming coursework, bills to pay, birthday cards to send, Madeleine's essay to look at and several letters to answer. One of the letters was from Sindy. In the past, Sandra had enjoyed corresponding with her cousin, but for some reason now, the sight of Sindy's handwriting on the envelope jarred at her uncomfortably.

'Is it because she's writing to Osborn more than she is to me?' wondered Sandra for the umpteenth time, whatever that was. 'At one level, I don't mind her writing to him quite frequently at all, but at a deeper level, it seems to be upsetting me. It's not that I don't trust either of them, because I do. Besides, she lives hundreds of miles away. So what is it? Why am I being so small-minded? After all, Geoff and I used to keep in touch now and again with the odd note – the very odd note – although I haven't heard from him for months now.' Sandra thought of the man she'd made friends with on the philosophy course two years previously with a kind of detached pleasure.

'He was a nice person,' she thought warmly, 'and there was no real harm in it. I would never have deceived Osborn, just like Osborn would never have deceived me...' A shudder involuntarily passed through Sandra as she remembered Osborn's letter to Theresa about making love on the hill-cum-mountain. Thankfully, Gulliver stopped her train of thought as he poked his head around the door. 'It should be a disused line, anyway,' she mused, as Gulliver brought the rest of his body into the room.

"Hey, Mother Sad Nose, I've got a letter from the Reader's Digest," he said importantly, "inviting me to buy a book on dream analysis. I was thinking of getting it for myself for Christmas. I have these weird dreams, sometimes."

"Why, Gulliver..." started Sandra, wondering if she should ask exactly what sort of dreams he meant.

"I don't know, it's my age, I suppose. Or my incredible, stunning uniqueness."

"You're not very good at being modest, are you?"

"I'm absolutely brilliant at being modest!"

"Oh, I give in. Well, if you order something from Reader's Digest, you won't just hear from them at Christmas, you'll be hearing from them for the rest of your life."

"That's OK. I've always wanted the initials RDPC after my name, anyway."

"What?"

"Reader's Digest Preferred Customer."

"Gulliver, you're an idiot. Look, I'd love to continue this stimulating conversation, but I've got loads of work to do, so you're going to have to leave me alone."

"Why should I want to leave you a loan? You've got more money than I have."

"Gulliver!" shrieked Sandra, throwing her *Naked Nudie Bare Bear* pencil at him, as he grudgingly left the room.

It was Sunday evening. Sandra half lay on the sofa, comfortably nestled against Osborn's chest. The two of them had spent a pleasant day in each other's company, Sandra having decided to take a complete rest from university work. Now the idea of an early night began to appeal to Sandra very much.

"The idea of an early night is beginning to appeal to me very much," she said invitingly (she hoped) to Osborn.

"Ah, but Sandra, the night is yet young," replied Osborn playfully. It was the most relaxed Sandra had seen him in a long time.

"The day's a bit old, though," she insisted. "Come on, let's go upstairs. Gulliver and Madeleine are in their rooms, they won't know."

"Know what?" asked Osborn, playing with Sandra's hair.

"That we're about to indulge in a wild expression of our slowly rising passion," pursued Sandra, trying unsuccessfully to play with Osborn's hair.

"We are?" asked Osborn, abruptly letting go of Sandra's hair.

"We are! I'm just going to the bathroom," said Sandra, leaping off the sofa and banging Osborn's chin. "Oh! I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hit your chin."

"No, I know you meant to hit my nose instead," said Osborn, rubbing his chin. "It's OK, you go, I'll be right behind you."

The telephone rang in the hall just as Sandra was coming out of the bathroom. She heard Osborn go to answer it and wondered who it was, her heart sinking a little. It was obviously someone for Osborn, as he was continuing a conversation.

Ten minutes later, Sandra became fidgety and anxious to find out who was keeping Osborn away from her. She went up to the closed door and put her ear against it. A chill of suspicion immediately engulfed her, as she heard Osborn speaking in a low, soft voice. She was unable to hear the words, but the tone of his voice distressed her intensely. It was the tone of voice Osborn had used with Sandra in the early days of their relationship. A frown of concentration creased her forehead, as she tried to imagine who it could be. Surely not Theresa – that had stopped over a year ago. Or had it?

Twenty minutes later, hot with the pain of renewed mistrust, Sandra went to bed. Ten minutes after that, Osborn joined her.

"I'm sorry about that," he said impassively, his voice noticeably louder as he quickly began to take off his clothes. "It was Sindy, she was in a bit of a state."

"Sindy!"

"Yes. Some people are really getting on top of her."

"I bet they are. Why did she want to speak to you and not me?"

"I don't know. Maybe if you'd answered..."

"I doubt it. She clearly wanted you and you certainly had enough to say to her."

"I couldn't just let her go on crying."

"She was crying?" Sandra realised that any sympathy she might be feeling was overshadowed by anger.

"Yes. She was really upset."

'Well so am I,' thought Sandra, rolling over away from Osborn as he climbed into bed beside her. She shrugged away his questioning hand on her hip and felt her anger slowly subsiding into tears.

'Pathetic,' she thought, reaching for some *Hurting Heliotrope Mood Matching Toilet Roll*. 'And the worst bit is that I feel *I'm* being unreasonable.'

CHAPTER 4

The following Friday lunchtime, Sandra sat in *The Cosy Caffeine Café* with the gang – Jenny, Jill, Juliet and Nerissa. She liked them all very much.

'It's probably because they're all so-called mature students like I am,' she reflected, as she looked in the mirror on the wall by her chair. 'They're bright and friendly and I like them all – so why is it I feel their company slightly overwhelming sometimes? I wonder if I'm basically antisocial? No, I'm not *against* people, I just don't seem to have as much a need for affiliation as lots of others. God, I sound like a psychology student again.'

'I wonder if everyone thinks as much as I do? I wonder if it's healthy? I wonder if Sindy *would* have spoken, or cried, to me on the phone if I'd answered. Probably not, the sly cow. God, maybe I *am* antisocial. Individualistically antisocial – ha! I wonder if Phil thinks I'm antisocial? I hope not. I wonder if he really minded me saying I was going to have lunch with the gang today when he asked me if I'd have coffee with him again. The awful thing is, I really wanted to have coffee with him.'

"Hey Sandra, are you coming?" asked Jill, nudging Sandra's elbow. "We're going to go and buy a big bag of *Pig-n-Mix* to help us through *Cognitive Psychology* this afternoon."

"Oops!" exclaimed Nerissa, as Juliet tripped heavily over Jenny's bag as she was leaving the table, with the result that Juliet's own bag emptied its contents on the floor.

"Hey, the *Happy Crappy Student Special* range is quite good, your *Happy Crappy Student Special* pencil case is the same as mine," said Jill, picking it up to give to Juliet. "It's identical, only a few small differences." Sandra found herself helplessly laughing with the others, as they noisily left the café.

"Psychology students," she overheard one of the café assistants tutting knowingly to the other one.

It was a Saturday morning in early December and Sandra was beginning to worry about Madeleine. Over the past few months, Madeleine seemed to have become progressively more withdrawn and had dark shadows under her eyes.

'Not that she could exactly have light shadows under her eyes,' mused Sandra, as she sat at the dining room table staring at where a so far non-existent essay entitled *To what extent is abnormal behaviour merely the exaggeration of normal but infrequent behaviour?* should have been. 'She's not OK, though, and I should be doing something about it. This essay can wait. Well no, it can't, actually. Oh God, I'm being split in so many ways – coursework, Madeleine, Osborn, Mum and Dad. At least Gulliver doesn't seem to need me any more, which I have to admit is rather a relief.'

"Hey, Mother Mad Woman," said Gulliver, startling Sandra by his sudden appearance at the dining room door. "Could I bother you?"

"You always bother me, Gulliver," replied Sandra, smiling without actually having intended to. "What is it?"

"I was wondering if you could take up the hem on my new *Happy Crappy Student Special* jeans. I've tried, but even *I* wouldn't wear them the way they've ended up." He picked up two satsumas from the fruit bowl on the table and absent-mindedly moved them around in the palm of his hand as if they were Chinese stress balls.

"Do you need stress balls that much?" asked Sandra, sighing, as she gazed at the unfortunate satsumas.

"No, I've got enough stress and I've got enough balls, I just need your help." He grinned rather endearingly at Sandra, who dropped her pen reluctantly on the table.

"OK, but stop rubbing those satsumas together."

"Why? They like it."

"*Gulliver!* Do you need help or not, because I feel as if I'm being pulled in all directions."

"Wow, your social life is on the up, then."

An hour later, as Sandra sat with Gulliver's trousers turned inside out on her knees, and remembering exactly how much she loathed sewing, Madeleine came quietly into the room.

"Hi Mum."

"Hello Maddy." Sandra looked up, her heart sinking as she saw the pale face of her unhappy daughter. "Mad, what's wrong?"

"Don't call me that. Nothing's wrong."

"I *know* you're not OK. It hurts me to see you looking so unhappy. Please won't you tell me what's bothering you? I won't shout, or anything, I promise."

"I'm fine," repeated Madeleine, but she sat down all the same and began to twist her hair around her fingers, the way she had always done as a small girl, whenever tired or upset.

"How's school, then?" asked Sandra, saying the first thing that came into her head.

"It's OK," replied Madeleine, "although I haven't got any friends."

"What about Lucy?"

"She's gone off with Natasha and they talk about me behind my back."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, I heard them say my name and caught them looking at me."

"But that might not mean anything."

"It's not only that," said Madeleine so softly that Sandra could hardly hear her.

"What is it – shit!" exclaimed Sandra, simultaneously pricking her finger and noticing tears forming in Madeleine's eyes.

"You know, that smelly waste product..." Madeleine valiantly tried to joke, but her feelings betrayed her.

"What is it, Maddy?" Sandra tried again.

"It's the boy at the library with the nice bottom," Madeleine blurted out, failing to notice Sandra's surprised expression. "I really like him, I've even dreamt about him and it's not because of his bottom. He looks so sensitive and interesting and I'm sure he likes me really, but..."

"But what?" asked Sandra, as Madeleine faltered.

"But he said he couldn't go out with me when I gave him the note I'd written, because he's gay and it was all so embarrassing and I felt like a complete idiot because the other library assistant was there and she was listening and she smirked, I'm sure of it, so I just ran out and forgot my library book and ticket and now I can't go back there ever again – and I'm just so fat and ugly and nobody likes me!" Madeleine was completely unable to control her tears, as Sandra put down the sewing and went over to put her arms around Madeleine.

"Maddy, there's no way you're fat and you're not ugly one single iota and people *do* like you." Sandra stroked Madeleine's hair softly, unfortunately becoming entangled where Madeleine had been twisting her own hair.

"Ouch! They don't like me!" sobbed Madeleine. "Nobody at school likes me and *he* can't like me, either. Ouch!"

"Sorry, darling. Well, he doesn't know what he's missing," said Sandra, finally extricating her finger as she reconsidered. "But Madeleine, even if he's gay, he may still like you – just not in the way you want him to."

"Anyway, I still haven't got a boyfriend," continued Madeleine. "What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing's wrong with you," replied Sandra, wondering how she could enhance Madeleine's self-esteem. "You're a lovely, intelligent, interesting person, who's always known her own mind and cared actively about everything and everybody and you've got lovely blonde hair and beautiful green eyes and absolutely great legs..." Sandra found herself beginning to be lost for words.

"Shame about my nose, thighs, arms, belly, forehead, knees and toes then!" spluttered Madeleine wildly, searching unsuccessfully for a tissue.

"Maddy, nobody's perfect," said Sandra, handing her a piece of *Deflated Daffodil Mood Matching Toilet Roll*.

"Well I should be perfect then, because I'm a nobody," cried Madeleine, turning around and flinging herself rather wetly and noisily into Sandra's arms.

That evening, Sandra waited for an opportune moment alone with Osborn, so she could tell him how low Madeleine was feeling and enlist his help in trying to make Madeleine feel cared for and special, at least at home. Madeleine finally got up from where she'd been sitting watching the television and twisting her hair, saying she wanted an early night. Gulliver had left earlier that afternoon for Nigel's house, where there was to be a party. Sandra had been a little alarmed about this, but ultimately felt there wasn't much she could do except to explain her fears to Gulliver and to slip her free spam-flavoured condom into his wash bag.

"Osborn," she began, after Madeleine had said goodnight and closed the door. "I'm concerned about Maddy..." Almost as if on cue for maximum annoyance, the phone rang.

"Oh God, not *her* again!" exploded Sandra. "Why does she always ring so late in the evening? And why do you always get up to answer it?" she finished rather lamely, as Osborn went into the hall, shutting the door behind him.

'And why don't *I* answer the phone and give the sly cow a shock,' she thought, as she felt her heart beating quickly with anger. 'I'm scared, I suppose, but of what?' She slumped on the sofa in sudden exhaustion. 'God, what a mess today's been and I haven't even touched my essay. I seem to be living it instead. There's more than enough abnormal behaviour in this house for at least ten sodding essays.'

"Are you going to the pub tutorial next week?" Phil asked Sandra, as they sat in the refectory, sharing Sandra's peanut butter and banana sandwiches.

"Yes, I am," replied Sandra, licking her fingers. "When I started this degree course, I planned to enjoy the whole experience of it, not just do it for the qualification at the end."

"I guess a pub tutorial counts as quite a university-type experience, then," said Phil, licking his fingers. "I'm not sure what to think about Marcus Lowe, though."

"Oh, I like him," said Sandra without thinking. "Gosh, that's quite interesting, I didn't know I did."

"Lucky him." Phil pushed his glasses further up his nose (on the outside).

"Don't be daft," said Sandra weakly, feeling somewhat hot and dizzy for a moment.

"Are you OK?" asked Phil, noticing her slight discomfort.

"Yes," replied Sandra, smiling a little too brightly. "I think I've been fighting a virus or something, or else I'm just plain tired. Things at home are a bit difficult, really."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Oh no." Sandra offered Phil an *Extra Low-Fat Triple Choccy Biccy*. "Sorry, they didn't have any *Quadruple Choccy* ones," she explained distractedly. "It's my daughter, Madeleine," she blurted out suddenly. "Her self-esteem seems so low, but I really don't know why, because we've always affirmed her. My husband Osborn has always been there for the children, although they're not exactly children any more. He's always been supportive, especially once he got over his authoritarian stage, when he was emulating his father, but didn't know it. He seems to be preoccupied with his own life now, though, which is perfectly understandable because heaven knows I'm preoccupied with my own life at the moment with this degree." Sandra found herself pouring out her recent troubles to Phil, who listened with a gaze that Sandra eventually began to find strangely perturbing.

'Wow, a straight 8.5 on the *Strangely Perturbing Male Gaze Scale*,' she thought suddenly, interrupting her own outpouring.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to go on so much," she apologised, wishing she could cool her flaming cheeks down a little. Her flaming neck was a little flushed as well. "You must be bored."

"No, I'm not," replied Phil, smiling. "What you need is some diversion. There's not a whole lot of fun in your life right now, is there?"

"No, not really," replied Sandra thoughtfully.

"Come along to the *First-Year Psycho Ravers' Bang* at *Sleazy Suzy's*," suggested Phil. "It's not such a bad place, I've been there a few times."

"Is that the get-together I've heard people talking about, to celebrate the end of this semester's lectures?"

"That's right. It should be fun, just what you need!"

"Right. I think the gang said they wanted to go. When is it?"

"17th December."

"OK," said Sandra, making her decision on the spot. It was only a blob of melted chocolate, she could sponge it out later. "It'll save me from another meaningless evening at home," she said rebelliously. 'And maybe it'll save me from hearing Osborn speaking to the sly cow on the phone in his soft voice,' she thought sadly.

"Well, this is nice, all of us sitting around the dining room table again," said Sandra the following evening, which happened to be a Friday. This was actually because the previous day had been a Thursday. "God, life is so predictable," she said suddenly. "Wouldn't it be interesting if Wednesday followed Sunday for a change?"

"Are you OK, Mum?" asked Madeleine, looking a little worried.

"Oh yes," replied Sandra. "It's just that I had a double *Cognitive Psychology* session today."

"Well, I had a triple session with King Arthur," said Madeleine wearily.

"Well, I had a quadruple session of maths, further maths and even further maths," said Gulliver impressively (and untruthfully).

"Well, I had an interminably long staff meeting about the future of the Communications Department today," said Osborn, cautiously poking his knife into a pork chop.

"I hope it's still there next year for my degree," said Gulliver, also investigating his chop.

"Hmm," said Osborn, grimacing. "The place is rife with the funny handshake people. I was even asked if I wanted to join. It's not what you know, but who you shake

hands with, if you ask me. I don't know how long I can carry on working in a place which every day seems to present me more and more with a personal moral dilemma."

"What about a personal immoral dilemma?" asked Gulliver pseudo-innocently.

"Oh, shut up, Gulliver!" said Sandra, feeling as though Gulliver had inadvertently touched a raw nerve. "Isn't it better now you've moved more to the academic side of things, with the part-time teaching?"

"Yes, a lot better, but not better enough."

"Well, you've still got your eyes open for a change of job, haven't you?" asked Sandra a little anxiously.

"Yes, but there's nothing around here," replied Osborn, "and you don't want to move."

"All our family is here," said Sandra wanly, not wanting to re-open an old argument. "We lived away from here for years when we were first married."

"I wouldn't mind moving," said Madeleine quietly into the silence. "I could do with a fresh start."

"Well, you lot move and I'll stay here and look after the house," said Gulliver.

"Be realistic," said Sandra tiredly. "We can barely manage paying the mortgage on this house."

"I suppose so," reflected Gulliver. "That means we wouldn't be a nuclear family any more."

"Nuclear things frighten me," said Madeleine, giving up the fight with her chop.

"They're beginning to frighten me too," said Osborn a little darkly. The evenings had really drawn in lately. He also decided to give up the fight with his chop and placed his knife and fork on his plate with a jarring clatter. "I'd love to leave and have a fresh start."

"You would?" asked Sandra weakly, suddenly horror struck at the thought that Osborn might want to leave her.

"I so would," replied Osborn. "I'd leave tomorrow if I could."

"Osborn..." gasped Sandra, incredulous tears filling her eyes.

"Well, how do you think I feel getting up every morning and going to work all day in a place I feel more and more at odds with?" asked Osborn.

"I'd never thought of that," said Sandra, her mind a whirlpool of black humoured relief. "You mean you want to leave your job, not me?" She felt an urgent need to clarify. It must have been the wine, they'd been unable to afford any of good quality recently.

"Things aren't that bad, are they?" asked Osborn, looking at Sandra with surprise. "I had no idea you felt so..."

"Insecure," Sandra finished for him. 'Just like Madeleine,' she realised suddenly. 'Oh God, I hope she hasn't inherited that from me, I can't cope with another guilt complex. Actually, I wonder why guilt is never easy to untangle. Why is it such a complex issue?'

"Mother Hell Thighs," said Gulliver, peering into Sandra's vacant gaze. "I'm off out to Damien's. We've got to sort out arrangements for another party at Nigel's tomorrow night. Er – is that OK, Dad?" he asked.

"Ask your mother, she calls the shots," replied Osborn, looking suddenly morose.

"Oh Gulliver, I'm getting worried about you drinking," said Sandra, gazing maternally at Gulliver. "You're under age, but I know what it's like out there these days and I don't want you to be laughed at. Alcohol's a dangerous, addictive substance. Please try to keep it down."

"I've only ever thrown up once," said Gulliver, "and you know about that." He looked vaguely offended as he left the table.

"Osborn, would you mind if I went to this end of lecture psycho evening thing that my lot are going to next week?" asked Sandra in a rush.

"I don't own you," replied Osborn rather bleakly. "By the way, don't give me any more bloody chops, I think I'm going vegetarian."

"Oh. I'm sorry they were underdone," said Sandra in a small distracted voice.

CHAPTER 5

Just before midday on the third Thursday in December, Sandra sat ensconced in *The King's Legs* with her tutorial group, consisting of Rodney Bent (Ro), Vernon Hailstorm (Vo), Phil Potts and Marcus Lowe. The only other female in the group apart from Sandra had decided to leave the degree course after three weeks, due to a breakdown apparently brought on by the compulsory module in statistics.

'The poor girl,' Sandra had thought when Marcus had told the rest of the group. 'Fancy going over the edge because of statistics. I wonder if she'll have any therapy, like I did when I had my identity crisis. Although I was doubtful at first, all the personal analysis was definitely beneficial. I wonder what benefits there can possibly be from statistical analysis, though?'

"So, how have you found your degree in psychology so far, Sandra?" asked Marcus Lowe's voice, filtering slowly into Sandra's consciousness.

"Oh! Sorry, I was thinking about statistical analysis," answered Sandra, a little flustered.

"Wow," said Rodney Bent, sipping his *Student Happy Crappy Lager*. "Far out."

"Not way in at all then, Ro?" Sandra asked Rodney, smiling. He was a gentle character, she'd decided, after observing him in tutorials. Definitely intelligent. Even, quite possibly, indefinitely intelligent, she had mused once to Phil in rather a musing moment.

"Actually, I've sort of enjoyed it so far," continued Sandra, "except for the presentation."

"Ah well, presentation isn't exactly the forté of some of the lecturers," said Marcus. "They're obliged to present material in lectures as part of their contract, but their real interest is in research. The education cutbacks haven't helped, either."

"Oh no! I meant I didn't enjoy having to do my tutorial presentation," explained Sandra, feeling rather silly. "Also, I'm not looking forward to the exams next month."

"Yo," ventured Vernon Hailstorm suddenly. He looked as if he was about to expand, but it must have been a suppressed yawn, decided Sandra, as she looked at him thoughtfully. She was thinking how wonderful it must be to be so laid-back. She was never able to achieve such a state of laid-backness, even in the comfy chair.

"Yo," continued Vernon, "I'm scared I might cock up the multiple-choice questions, they're so easy. I much prefer the challenge of an essay question."

"Really, Vo?" chipped in Phil, looking askance at Vernon. "I like multiple choice myself. I like the excitement of having to choose just one answer – the thrill of decision – the power of rejecting all the other answers. Ha!" The *Student Happy Crappy Lager* appeared to be going to his head.

"Isn't that Simon Coe over there?" asked Sandra, trying to divert attention from Phil.

"Is it?" replied Phil, rejecting the diversion. "I wonder if his friends call him Si? You've got a thing about names, haven't you, Sandra?"

"Well, I suppose so," said Sandra, beginning to feel very uncomfortable as four pairs of eyes turned to look at her wonderingly. She clutched her glass of *Special Student Diluted Gin with Six-Up* for support. "I like meaningful acronyms."

"Mmm," said Marcus into the silence. "That's interesting. Meaningful acronyms. They seem to be popping up all over the place. MIND, ACT..."

"VAGINA," said Sandra, thinking of her in-laws. "Oh! That stands for *Violence and Global Insanity Never Again*," she blurted out, wishing the ground would swallow her up so that the four pairs of eyes would no longer be able to stare at her. 'That would be too claustrophobic, though,' she thought, standing up and looking wildly around the table.

"Excuse me, I have to go," she muttered, before stumbling unseeingly from the quadruple gaze in a miasma of pure embarrassment.

The wall of the ladies' loo was wonderfully cool as she rested her flaming cheeks alternately against it. 'I'm in a cubicle,' she thought tiredly. 'Nobody can report me. God, I made a perfect fool of myself – or an imperfect fool, really. Yes, that's me all over, an imperfect fool.'

She finally let herself out of the cubicle and ran her wrists under the cold-water tap, still thinking. 'I don't mind being in an all male tutorial group, I really don't, gender just isn't an issue. No, it's me, I get so embarrassed and say stupid things and then I get even more embarrassed about saying the stupid things. I feel as if I don't properly belong anywhere, or even improperly belong anywhere, come to that.' She sniffed loudly, as tears formed in her eyes. It was the best place for them.

'The worst of it is, I care what Phil thinks of me – and Marcus, I suppose. And Ro, to be honest – and yes, even Vo, when push comes to shove. What a strange saying. Oh God, I care what everyone in the whole sodding world thinks of me!' She reached into her bag for some *Mood Matching Toilet Roll*, but discovered to her horror that her bag wasn't there.

"Oh no, I've left it under the sodding table," she said angrily, as two females she recognised as library assistants came into the loo. "Sorry," she said in explanation. "My bag. I need some *Mood Matching Toilet Roll*."

"Psychology student," she overheard one library assistant explain knowingly to the other one, as she hurled herself out of the door.

Outside, Phil was standing with Sandra's bag, looking somewhat uncertain. He approached her with relief as he saw her emerge rather precipitately.

"Sandra! I didn't know what to do with your bag. I thought you might be here, but I didn't like to come in. I asked the two girls who just went in, but they looked at me like I was a dirty old man."

"Oh Phil," said Sandra, wiping her eyes on her hand. "I feel so utterly STUPID."

"Why?" asked Phil, putting his hand on Sandra's shoulder. She realised it was the first time he had ever touched her. She also realised she rather liked it.

"Because I'm me!" she replied, taking her bag and extricating a *Miserable Melon Mood Matching Toilet Roll*. "And now you know what crazy things I carry around in my bag."

"You're interesting, Sandra," said Phil softly, smiling. To her regret, he took his hand away.

"That's probably one of the nicest things anyone has said to me for a long time," replied Sandra, smiling in return, as she blew her nose miserably and aptly into the *Miserable Melon Mood Matching Toilet Roll*.

At lunchtime the following day, Sandra sat in the *Cosy Caffeine Café* with the gang. The conversation was mostly about the forthcoming *First-Year Psycho Ravers' Bang* at *Sleazy Suzy's* that evening.

"I haven't got a thing to wear," said Nerissa, attempting to mount a *Doorstep Double Decker Sandwich*. "What are you going to wear, Sandra?"

"I haven't given it a thought," replied Sandra, "but I expect I'll wear my black velvet leggings with a red sort of see-through over-blouse, which will actually be over a low-cut silky white top."

"Who are you trying to impress, then?" asked Jill with a wink. "Oh no, I think I've dropped one of my contact lenses."

"I'm not trying to impress anyone," replied Sandra, sipping her *Student Special Crappy Coffee*. "God, this coffee's awful, but I'm broke because of all the photocopying I've done for exam revision."

"Nothing would induce me to drink that utterly revolting stuff ever again," said Jenny resolutely, sipping her *Non-Student Copiously Creamy Coffee*. "I think I'd rather fail my exams. No, that's not true. Is Phil going tonight?"

"I think so," replied Sandra, nibbling some *Carrot and Gooseberry Crumble Cake*. "Who else is going, do you know?"

"Loads of people. Even some lecturers, so I've heard," replied Juliet, scraping the last morsel of gooseberry and mango jam from a little pot with her finger. "This *Lunchtime Teacake* was really nice, with loads of jam. Have you found your contact lens yet, Jill?"

"No," came Jill's muffled voice from the vicinity of the floor. "I can't see what I'm doing very well."

"Here, I'll help you look," said Jenny. "I used to wear contact lenses, so I know what to look for."

Sandra sat finishing her coffee, managing not to gag. She'd decided to give up telling jokes a number of years ago, when she'd realised a few of her neighbours had stopped speaking to her. 'Some people don't understand my sense of humour,' she'd thought with a grin, remembering the joke about the vicar and the inflatable cassocks.

"I've found it!" shouted Jill suddenly, poking her head up above the table. "Oh no, it's fallen in a nasty blob of butter, or cream, or custard, or something. I'll have to wrap it up or put it in a container, my contact lens case is in the car."

"Do you want a little pot?" asked Juliet, picking up her empty pot of jam. "Sandra, what's so funny?"

"Do you want a little pot," sniggered Sandra. "You know, marijuana."

"Oh!" shrieked Nerissa. "A little pot!"

"Well, we are students," said Jenny, smiling broadly.

"I always wanted to be a hippy," mused Sandra happily. "I was a free spirit child of the Sixties, you know."

"I don't suppose there'll be any free spirits tonight," said Jill, spluttering daintily.

"No, only *Student Happy Crappy Anything That Remotely Resembles Alcohol*," said Nerissa with a grin, as they all prepared to go to the last *Cognitive Psychology* lecture that year.

They seemed to be leaving the *Cosy Caffeine Café* even more noisily than usual, noticed Sandra, but she didn't care. It was good to feel as if she almost belonged to this happy, noisy group of people. She didn't even mind when, as she was closing the door, she overheard the manager apologising to the remaining customers for the raucous behaviour of the psychology students who were just leaving.

Sleazy Suzy's wasn't as bad as Sandra had envisaged. Jenny's husband, who lived (with Jenny) fairly near Sandra, had given them both a lift, so Sandra hadn't even had the ordeal of finding the place and walking in on her own.

The atmosphere, especially after they'd been there for over an hour, was definitely very warm. Sandra sat at a table in the corner with the gang, sipping her *Very Alcoholic Vodka*, watching the general melée and overhearing snippets of conversation. She herself had long ago given up the idea of trying to hold a conversation with the gang above the noise. Contrary to what her family said, she'd never been much good at shouting.

"Hey Vo, there you are – the face that launched a thousand shits!" Sandra heard Jo shout, as she gave Vo a resounding clap on the back.

"Oh yuck, it's all wet!" she heard Mo shriek as Ro spilt most of his *Student Happy Crappy Lager* down her front. "Oh Ro, I want to have it off!"

"Bo, hi-leg knickers do *not* go over your shoulder!" she then heard Zo explaining to a bemused looking Bo, just as she heard a familiar voice.

"Hi Sandra! Can I get you a drink?" semi-shouted Phil, rather pleasantly and warmly into her ear.

"Oh, hi there Phil, I wondered where you were. No thanks, I've already had – uh – several, I think."

"Hey, you look great!"

"Thanks, you don't look so bad yourself! Where's your purple jacket, though?"

"On the back of a chair over there. Guess what, Marcus Lowe's here, come and say hello."

"Oh no. Oh all right, then," said Sandra, excusing herself quickly from the gang.

Marcus, dressed in a checked over-shirt and jeans (with slits in them) appeared to be the centre of attention of a small group of students.

"He's telling them about the time he met Hans Eysenck," explained Phil. "It's fascinating, come and have a listen."

"Oh no, Phil – I – uh – gosh, I'm experiencing a *Very Alcoholic Vodka Effect*. It's really gone to my head – and my legs – and my lips – and – oh!" She leaned against Phil for a moment, her head swimming. "I think I'll get some fresh air."

"Shall I come?"

"If you like."

"Wow. I'll just get my jacket."

It was too cold outside, so they found a corner that was inside the building but outside the main room and sat on some steps in comfortable semi-darkness, leaning against each other while Sandra's head tried to clear itself.

"Oh Phil, I feel such an idiot. I was OK until I stood up. Actually, I feel fine now. Shall we go back in?"

"Do you want to?" Phil seemed to be gazing deep into her eyes, she realised through a hazy warmth of euphoria and *Very Alcoholic Vodka*.

"Umm..." Sandra leaned towards him to look more closely at his eyes. To her astonishment, Phil began to kiss her. To his astonishment, she responded. To her astonishment, he put his hand inside her red sort of see-through over-blouse. To his astonishment, she put her hand underneath his sweatshirt.

"Oh, naked flesh," she squeaked. "It's all warm!"

"Hi Sandra and – er – Phil," said Marcus Lowe, as he walked past them. "I'm off now," he added almost as an afterthought, looking back. "Carry on having a good time carrying on. And don't forget to revise."

"Oh God! Oh Marcus! Hi – er – bye, Marcus." Sandra sat up so suddenly that Phil fell against the step.

"Bye Marcus." Phil's voice was rather deep and husky, Sandra noticed with interest.

"How embarrassing," said Sandra, after Marcus had gone. "Do you think he saw us?"

"Of course he did, he said hello!" said Phil, rubbing his elbow.

"No, I mean do you think he saw us – you know."

"I don't know. It's not very private here. Would you like to come in my flat?"

"For coffee? OK. I don't like crowds, anyway."

"Me neither," said Phil, hoisting himself up. "Yes, you can have coffee if you like."

The coffee was rather good, thought Sandra, as she took her first sip – although anything would be better than the *Student Special Crappy Coffee* she'd drunk at lunchtime, she mused. She still felt very warm and rather hazy in a visually perceptive kind of way, which was not at all unpleasant. Phil sat next to her on the sofa. His warmth was not at all unpleasant either, in a physically perceptive kind of way. Sandra felt detached and relaxed. She put her coffee down and snuggled up to Phil almost without thinking.

"Your hair smells nice," he murmured.

"Your armpit smells nice," she murmured back.

They were kissing again before she realised. Phil's hands were warm and firm as he slid them underneath her low-cut silky white top.

"Oh, naked flesh," he said, smiling, before he lifted up Sandra's top to kiss the naked flesh. He gently manoeuvred them both so they were more or less lying on the sofa. Sandra could feel Phil's hardness against her thigh. Tentatively, she reached towards it.

"Sorry, is my glasses case in the way?" asked Phil, taking it out of his pocket and placing his glasses into it. Then almost without blinking, he smoothly unfastened her bra and she felt his nose in between her breasts. "Oh Sandra, you're so soft and warm," she heard his muffled voice say.

"Oh Phil, you're so hard and hot," she then heard herself say, as if from a vast distance. Positive that the hardness was no longer Phil's glasses case, Sandra's hand seemed to fasten itself curiously around it.

However, as Phil was easing himself out of his jeans a few moments later, an image of Osborn suddenly popped into Sandra's head. As Phil guided Sandra's hand back towards the naked hardness (which was not his glasses case) she held it without thinking, her mind in a whirl.

"Oh Phil, I'm so sorry!" she suddenly blurted out, as his hands were pulling down her black velvet leggings. "I can't do this. I really am so very sorry."

"Oh God no," moaned Phil defeatedly, making a somewhat feeble quarter-hearted attempt to pull up her black velvet leggings again.

"Please forgive me, Phil," said Sandra. "I really never meant to lead you on."

"Sandra," he breathed, with a huge sigh.

"Here, you'd better have this back," she said tearfully, as she guiltily and quite clumsily disengaged herself.

CHAPTER 6

"Gulliver, this Bonsai Christmas tree looks very pretty, but it's difficult trying to put presents underneath," said Sandra on Christmas Eve evening, "let alone hang balls."

"Oh, hang the balls, I thought it was unusual because you're always saying you hate all the mindless Christmas convention," said Gulliver. "Don't you like it as an unusual present from me?"

"Gulliver, *any* present is unusual from you," replied Sandra, before noticing the expression on Gulliver's face. "That was a joke, by the way. Of course I like it! It's very you and very thoughtful. Where shall I hang the chocolate decorations, though?"

"You bought some in the end then," remarked Osborn from the depths of the sofa. "I thought you were trying to opt out of Christmas as much as possible."

"I was. I hate it, but Madeleine kind of hinted that she'd like some and she certainly still needs cheering up lately. Hi Maddy!" Sandra smiled at Madeleine as she came into the room holding an envelope. "Oh no, that's not another card from someone I've forgotten to send one to, is it?"

"No, it's for me," replied Madeleine. "I just found it on the doormat. I don't recognise the handwriting, though." She ripped open the envelope and looked at the card inside, her eyes widening. "Oh! It's from the guy at the library. He's written a little note saying he's missed seeing me there recently. He got my name and address when I left my library card at the library that day and he's given me his phone number."

"That's nice of him. What happened about your library card, by the way?" asked Sandra, noticing a pleasant pinkness in Madeleine's cheeks.

"They sent it back a few days later," replied Madeleine. "I don't know whether to ring him or not."

"What have you got to lose?" asked Sandra softly. "He obviously likes you."

"Mmm." Madeleine was deep in thought. "I like him, even though he'll never be my boyfriend. Still, he'll be my friend who's a boy. I think I'll ring him later."

"Good. Hey, let's just eat these chocolate decorations," suggested Sandra. "I want to sit down, I've been fiddling around for hours." She threw everyone a chocolate decoration, then sat down on the sofa beside Osborn, turning around slightly to cuddle him. Since her incredibly close encounter with Phil, she'd begun to realise exactly how much Osborn was a positive factor in her life – in all their lives. The years they'd been together suddenly seemed very precious to her. She'd always thought the two of them were basically compatible and had made an Old Year's Resolution to spend more time with Osborn during the Christmas holiday – to listen to him, to enjoy his company, to have more sex with him – in between revision sessions, of course.

"Oh! What's that lump?" she asked suddenly, her hand on Osborn's trousers.

"I'll move it," replied Osborn swiftly.

"Mother Raving Eyeballs!" exclaimed Gulliver from behind a photography magazine.

"I put my hand on Dad's screwed up hanky, that's all, oh screwed up one," retorted Sandra, throwing another chocolate decoration at Gulliver, then Madeleine.

"Ouch. Well, no more hanky panky for you then," said Gulliver, throwing his chocolate decoration back at Sandra with lightning speed.

"Ouch. Hey, a little respect for your darling mother," said Sandra, throwing the chocolate decoration back to him.

"Ouch. Yes, a little respect. A very little respect." Gulliver was grinning as he finally unwrapped the chocolate decoration and ate it.

'It's been a pleasant evening,' reflected Sandra later, as she gathered up some empty glasses and took them to the kitchen, thinking of going to bed. Just then the phone rang. 'Oh God no, not *her* to ruin the evening,' she thought tiredly, her heart plummeting like a stone. 'Shall I answer it before Osborn gets there? No – I'm tired and I wouldn't know what to say.'

Osborn came out into the hall and answered the phone. Sandra looked at him from the kitchen doorway, knowing the instant he spoke that it was Sindy at the other end. All the warmth of the evening drained away, leaving her empty and cold inside. Even Osborn mouthing to her that he was sorry as she moved past him to the sitting room did nothing to comfort her.

43 minutes and 29 seconds later, Osborn came back into the sitting room and sat down beside Sandra.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Have Gulliver and Madeleine gone to bed?"

"Madeleine has, but Gulliver's in his room getting ready to go out with his friends," she replied. "Osborn, I don't know why all this upsets me so much, I have no right..."

"All what?"

"You and Sindy. The letters, the late-night phone calls, the soft voice you use. Maybe it's because she's my cousin, or maybe it's because I've always secretly thought she's selfish and spoilt and sets out to get what she wants."

"Do you want me to stop the relationship?"

"What? You and her?" asked Sandra rather stupidly, secretly disturbed that Osborn had actually referred to it as a relationship.

"Yes. It's getting out of hand," said Osborn, looking away.

"Oh." Sandra found she didn't know what to say, as a picture of her and Phil grappling on the sofa came into her mind. She had spoken to Phil once since then and they'd agreed to put it behind them as experience (albeit an embarrassing mistake of one) and to continue as they had before, as casual friends who shared unusual sandwiches now and again. Sandra was pleased at what she considered to be a mature attitude of hers and Phil's and suddenly felt there was no reason why Osborn and Sindy shouldn't continue their friendship.

"I don't want you to stop it with Sindy," she said, looking into Osborn's eyes. "At least, I *do* want you to stop it, but there's no need. You were right when you said everyone needs friends. I don't want to deprive you of that."

"Are you sure?" asked Osborn, looking somewhat unconvinced.

Instead of a verbal reply, Sandra turned around and placed herself snugly against Osborn's chest, her arms around his waist.

"I can hear your heart beating," she said softly. "I do love you. It's getting late, though – don't you think we should go to bed?"

"It's nice and warm in here beside the fire," said Osborn, smiling as she looked up at him. "Besides, we can always have a decent lie-in tomorrow."

"Or an indecent one," murmured Sandra happily.

It was New Year's Day. Sandra and Osborn had asked their parents around for tea, as they'd already been invited to both sets of parents for lunch and tea over the Christmas week.

'I can't face doing lunch for everyone as well, though,' Sandra had thought. 'My exams are lurking with intent around the corner and nobody seems to be noticing except me. I've hardly been able to do any revision. God, it's so difficult doing a degree and family-type stuff as well. It's no good, I'll have to make some mince pies. Oh no, I forgot to buy the mincemeat! Damn! What can I put in its place? I suppose *Brown n' Lumpy Sandwich Pickle* is about the same consistency and I can bung in some sultanas as well. Oh no, I haven't got any sultanas! Oh well, some chopped up satsumas will have to do, with a drop of rum to hide the flavour.'

Having galvanised herself into action, Sandra was almost in danger of enjoying herself in the kitchen, making the pastry and being creative about the mincemeat. 'Perhaps there *is* a small part of me that likes being domesticated after all,' she thought,

as she dolloped the tarted-up *Brown n' Lumpy Sandwich Pickle* into the tart cases. 'Oh, that reminds me, I must *Domesticate* the toilet.'

Four hours later, the family had arrived to embark on their usual polylogue of inane conversation. Firstly, though, Sybil and Basil had almost fallen over themselves to impart their news as soon as they'd stepped inside the door. Sandra made a mental note to buy a new, completely flat door mat, while they acted like two children vying for attention.

"Kirsty's bought a house!" exclaimed Sybil.

"She's bought it with another girl called Karla!" exclaimed Basil.

"It's in Hunterdon!" exclaimed Sybil.

"They've asked us to go and visit!" exclaimed Basil.

All the exclamations had given Sandra a headache. 'God almighty!' she exclaimed inwardly, as she dealt with their coats. 'Kirsty, Kirsty, Kirsty! They really don't give a damn about Osborn. They never ask how he is, they just assume he's always fine and always ready and available as their own private Mr Fix-anything-and-everything. They take it for granted that they'll be invited here for every family occasion, but it's not the same with Lawrence and Kirsty. Oh no, it's excuses all the way for those two. I'm surprised it's Lawrence who's practically not speaking to them now and avoiding them like the plague, because by rights, it should be Osborn.'

Sandra mentally braced herself to enter the sitting room where the inanity was in full swing. 'I haven't got any physical braces anyway,' she thought foolishly. 'Oh dear, I need to be magnanimous.' She passed around some *Forcefully Fruited Jellies with Extra Non-Sugar Sweetener*. 'After all, it's good that they take an active interest in so much around them. I hope I shall be as mentally alert when I'm 70ish. Talking about mental alertness, I feel so dull. I really do need to revise. I wonder if I could slip away for half an hour, I'm sure nobody would really notice...'

"Did you like the book we gave you for Christmas, Sandra?" asked Sybil, pinning Sandra to the spot with her mother-in-law-type gaze.

"Oh yes. Yes. Mmm, yes. *Religion as a Way of Belief* is so – interesting. I haven't actually looked at it yet, I've got revision to do."

"It must be quite an impressive book," said Sybil, "I noticed the copy we gave you was the seventh impression."

"Religion, of course, should take precedence in one's life," said Basil, trying unsuccessfully to chew a *Passion Fruit Forcefully Fruited Jelly*. "There's nothing really more important than religion."

"Don't you mean God?" Osborn asked his father. "Surely God takes precedence over religion?"

"In my mind, God is religion," continued Basil, digging his finger violently at his teeth.

"But isn't that sacrilegious?" pursued Osborn.

"Oh Osborn!" Sybil butted in. "You always were such a one for arguing with your father. I'll never forget that time you wanted a do-it-yourself nuclear chemistry set for Christmas, it set the both of you off for weeks."

"Better than a nuclear explosion in his bedroom," said Basil to Sybil, unsmiling. "I'm surprised he didn't work in the nuclear field just to get his own back."

"Why didn't you say that directly to me?" asked Osborn, looking with rather a hurt expression at his father, who broke away from the gaze uncomfortably.

"Anyone like a *Flemish Delight* or *Marzipan Date*?" asked Sandra brightly into the ensuing awkward silence.

"No thank you, Sandra," answered Caroline quickly. "That drop of sherry is really hitting the spot."

"You always did have a soft spot for sherry," said Leonard, smiling at his wife. "Not to mention a few other things."

"Oh, you old devil," replied Caroline. "Er – sorry, Basil, just a saying. I know you have problems with the devil."

"I'm sorry?!" spluttered Basil, giving up at last and taking out his plate.

"Oh, that's alright. I mean, you're aware of him – it – the evil force. Oh dear, I

think this sherry's gone to my cognitive spaces, I feel quite spaced out! What else did you have for Christmas, Sandra?" asked Caroline, desperately changing the subject.

"Oh – uh – some *Scanty Panties*. I thought they were going to be too small, but I was pleasantly disappointed," replied Sandra. "I seem to have lost a few pounds since I started university."

"What about taking one of those bottom bag things to college?" asked Sybil. "Your money would be safer in one of them, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, you mean a bum bag," said Gulliver, suddenly joining the conversation. "Mum's already got a fanny bag, that's more or less the same principle."

"Gulliver!" hissed Sandra. "What was your best present, Madeleine?" she asked in a louder voice.

"A *Swinging Sisters' Greatest Hits* CD," replied Madeleine, raising an eyebrow.

"Greatest tits?!" exclaimed Basil. "That's disgusting! I'm afraid the devil is certainly having a field day with the young generation."

"What did you have for Christmas, Dad?" Sandra asked Leonard, trying to avert attention from Madeleine and Gulliver's mutinous expressions.

"I say, these mince pies are very interesting," responded Leonard distractedly.

"Indeed!" interjected Basil for no apparent reason.

"What did I have for Christmas, Sandra?" continued Leonard. "Let me think – oh yes, I had an excellent brace for my wheel nuts."

"What about your false nuts, Grandad?" Gulliver asked Leonard, grinning.

"Ah, a chip off the old block, I see," said Leonard, giving Gulliver a friendly slap on the back.

"Despite his GOD acronym," said Caroline, smiling. "I don't suppose there's a drop more sherry, Osborn?"

"Yes, there is. I think I'll join you," replied Osborn, looking glad to get up.

"Basil looks a bit flushed," remarked Sandra quietly to her mother. "Oh no!"

"What?" Caroline looked concerned at Sandra's concern.

"I put rum in the sodding mince pies, I completely forgot that Basil and Sybil are teetotalers!"

"Well, Sybil's about to take one," observed Caroline to Sandra.

"Here, have a *Gingery Nutty Surprise!*" exclaimed Sandra, leaping up to thrust the first box she could lay hands on underneath Sybil's nose.

"Oh! Thank you, Sandra," said Sybil, looking surprised. "I must say, I do love all the nuts and goodies at this time of year." She gingerly extricated one from the box. "It's such a lovely season, what with the birth of our Lord and all."

'Oh God,' thought Sandra, 'You seem as remote from this mindless charade as a timeshare holiday on Pluto. It's not the season of goodwill, it's the season of unchecked hedonism and repulsive buying.' She gazed at the corner of the room where someone had knocked over the Bonsai tree. 'I think I'd actually rather revise *Wundt and the Structuralists* than take part in one more sodding Christmas event.'

Two weeks later on a rainy Wednesday afternoon, Sandra was deep into *Wundt and the Structuralists*. 'God, I think I'd actually rather be at a sodding Christmas event than revising this,' she thought in exasperation, as she read the same page for the third time without taking any of it in. 'It's no good, I can't stand it any more, I've just got to talk to another human being.' Just then, Gulliver poked his head around the door.

"You'll have to do," said Sandra. "How's your revision going?"

"Revision? Oh, great. I haven't been bothered by it at all."

"Really?" Sandra was nonplussed.

"We-ell, actually, I haven't bothered about it at all – but I will."

"When's your first exam?"

"Tomorrow, I think."

"Gulliver, you're incorrigible! Is that Dad's key I hear turning in the lock?"

"Dunno. Shall I go and ask it?"

"No, you mad prat, I'll go. I need some exercise other than mental."

"But Mother Putrid Ankles, you *are* mental."

"Shut up, Gulliver. What did you want, anyway?"

"Oh yes, can I borrow your hole punch, please?"

"No."

"Just part of it, then?"

Sandra went to greet Osborn in the hall and to apologise for not having prepared any tea yet again.

"That's OK," he said, giving her the usual hug. Sometimes, if she was lucky, he gave her the unusual hug. "It's been a good day. I've been asked to go to Birmingham on a course."

"You have? What sort of course?"

"Some new radio frequency stuff and other current research in communications. It always pays to keep up."

"I suppose it'll help with the part-time teaching?"

"Yes. Anyway, it's for three days, later this month."

"Oh well, that's good. It'll be a change from work."

"There might be more scope to look for a different job, although that's not the idea, naturally. I might be able to find work as a technical engineer in a company, for instance."

"I thought you said there wasn't anything much at all in this area," said Sandra, feeling a headache coming on.

"Well, you never know, prospects change all the time. In communications, the odds of finding employment really are on the odd side."

'It was good to see Osborn quite vitalised by that forthcoming course and his career prospects,' thought Sandra, as she lay beside him in bed that night. She put her hand on his shoulder and he murmured indistinctly.

'But I feel so devitalised myself,' she thought, rubbing her other hand across her forehead. 'All this revision is making me feel like a floppy wet sponge. I only hope that I'll be able to squeeze out the relevant information at the exams. Why does Osborn sleep with his back to me so often now? He never used to, I'm sure.'

She lay still for a while, but sleep was far away. Thoughts of *Wundt and the Structuralists* kept infiltrating her addled consciousness, closely followed by *James and the Functionalists*.

'I wonder if the others are finding it hard to sleep?' she mused, scratching her nose. 'I wonder if Phil's awake right now – and Nerissa, Jenny, Juliet and Jill?' She scratched her chin.

'I wonder if Osborn is asleep? I could really do with a cuddle.' She eased herself into a potential cuddling position facing his back.

"Osborn," she whispered loudly. "Are you asleep?"

A muted grunt was the only reply. Sandra stroked the back of his neck tenderly. After a while, he swatted her hand as if it had been a fly. Sandra scratched her sternum in disappointment. Her unhabitual strong need for physical contact seemed to be escalating out of all reasonable proportion. She began to long desperately to be held and to be loved.

"Osborn," she said, tearfully now. "I want you."

"Urrgghhmm," explained Osborn.

"Osborn? Please?"

"I'm asleep," he managed to articulate, curling himself up into a ball.

Sandra sighed heavily, scratched her knees in resignation and reached over to the bedside cabinet for a *Rejected Ruby Mood Matching Toilet Roll*.

CHAPTER 7

It was the third week of January and the afternoon of the fourth and last exam until June, which seemed ages away. Sandra sat in the examination hall five minutes before the exam was due to end, sucking her last polo mint and deciding she couldn't face reading back through her answers.

'I'm glad I've finished in time,' she reflected, sucking her pen. 'Wow, Phil's still writing. I do like the way his hair curls at the back of his neck. Wow, Nerissa's still writing, too. Wow, so's Jenny. Wow, so's Juliet. Ah, Jill's not writing – she seems to be fiddling with her eye, I think she's lost a contact lens again.' Sandra looked at her watch again, sucking her pencil.

'Four minutes to go. I hope Osborn got on OK at Birmingham. It'll be nice to see him again tonight when he comes back. I know he's only been away for three days and two nights, but I've missed him. He should have given me a telephone number where I could have contacted him, though. I wanted to tell him how awful the *Background to Psychology* exam was. I suppose he did ring me from that phone box, but it was annoying the way I wanted to tell him that I loved him and the words just wouldn't come out. That was strange, I don't usually feel inhibited like that.' She sucked her ruler.

'Three minutes to go. Osborn must be on the train by now. I'm glad he didn't drive at this time of year, the roads can be so dangerous. Oh God! I think I made a mistake in the second question!'

"Please stop writing." The voice of the invigilator resounded menacingly throughout the examination hall.

'What? He's early, the swine!' Sandra looked wildly around her, sucking her pencil case in frustration. 'Oh, I remember now, my watch is three minutes slow. Damn! Oh well, it's too late now. At least the sodding exams are over. I much prefer sodding coursework. Well, it's off to *The King's Legs* with the gang now for a quickie, then home for a slowie with Osborn, if he's not too shagged out. God, I sound just like a student.'

"How did it go, then?" Sandra asked Osborn, as he dropped his overnight bag on the floor and took off his jacket. It was the beige one, she noticed, which he hardly wore nowadays.

"Fine," he replied tiredly. "I think I'll have a bath."

"Can I have a hug?" asked Sandra rather diffidently. "You seem a little far away."

"OK." Although his arms opened automatically, Sandra momentarily sensed an unidentified strangeness.

'Perhaps it's the smoked haddock we had for tea,' she thought, nestling in his arms. 'Or the aftermath of my exams.' She continued to nestle. 'Or maybe the course was very demanding and he's simply shagged out.' She stopped nestling and looked up at him, noticing there were dark shadows underneath his eyes.

"Go and have a bath," she said quietly, "you look shagged out. By the way, my exams were OK."

"Good," he replied, focusing his eyes suddenly on Sandra as if he had returned from a vast distance. "I'm glad."

"Mum," said Madeleine, as the four Dullkettles strode out across Dartmoor in a light snowfall the following Sunday afternoon. "Would you mind if I brought Guy home one evening?"

"You mean the gay guy, Guy?" asked Sandra, enjoying the crunching sound her boots were making on the snow.

"Yes," replied Madeleine. "We get along so well, he's so much friendlier than people in my class."

"Of course I don't mind if you bring him home," replied Sandra, glad that Madeleine seemed to be recovering gradually from her loss of self-esteem. She was eating noticeably more as well. "You don't expect me to cook for him, though, do you?" she wondered aloud, at the thought of food.

"No, I don't want to put him off," said Madeleine quickly. "Sorry, Mum!" She linked her arm through Sandra's as they walked along.

"Mother Frozen Knockers?" Gulliver caught up with them, after he'd finished throwing large stones into a big frozen puddle. "There's this girl I met once at Nigel's house. Well, I've met her several times now. She's doing A-levels this year at college. She doesn't even mind my yellow Mini. I was wondering if I could bring her home, but then I remembered what home food was like, so I thought maybe I could cook for her?"

"What's wrong with the food I cook at home?" asked Sandra, rather hurt.

"Oh nothing – much – I don't know. Maybe I'll bring her home later."

"What's she called?" asked Madeleine.

"Hazel," replied Gulliver. "She's a bit of a nut, too. She's organising a sponsored jump for people who are afraid of heights. She asked me to join in, but I told her to go jump."

"Are you having me on?" asked Sandra, looking at Gulliver and suddenly realising he was looking definitely less skinny and slightly more hunky.

"God no, wouldn't dream of it," he replied.

"No, God wouldn't dream of it," said Sandra, smiling as she disengaged her arm from Madeleine's. They both stooped to gather some snow from the ground.

"Ah, it's balls, is it?" asked Gulliver, also stooping to the ground.

"Yes, it is!" replied Sandra, compressing the snow together into a ball.

"Got you!" called Madeleine to Gulliver, as her snowball hit Gulliver on his back.

"Osborn!" called out Sandra (to Osborn) who was walking along in front of them, aiming her snowball too high at his chest as he turned around. He looked startled as the snowball disintegrated on his chin. Sandra felt guilty and ran up to him to brush the snow from his face. She reached up and kissed his cold snowy lips. He responded, but he was unsmiling.

"I'm sorry I startled you, I was only playing," she said. "Are you OK?"

"Yes," he replied. "Sorry, I was miles away."

"What were you thinking about?"

"Oh, life, the universe and everything."

"Have you come to any conclusions?"

"No, I don't think so. The future seems so uncertain." His words reverberated in her head, as a snowball from Gulliver caught her straight on the left buttock.

It was Monday 14th February and Sandra was preparing to go back to university the following day. 'God, it's cold today! Mind you, it's really good having Mondays off this semester,' she thought, as she placed an *Overworked Orange Mood Matching Toilet Roll* in her bag, just to be on the safe side. 'It helps me to get my head in order after the weekend. Is that the mail? It's late this morning, not that I'm expecting any Valentine cards.' She went to investigate the familiar light thwack of mail dropping through the letterbox.

"Well, there's one for Gulliver, two for Madeleine, none for me and Sindy has written to Osborn again." Sandra felt her mood alter perceptively. "It's a thick envelope," she said to nobody in particular, since nobody in particular was home. "What the hell's she writing to him about now? She hasn't replied to *my* letter for ages." She held up the envelope to the light, but could see nothing through it. She felt the edges curiously. "It feels like a card – oh God, not a Valentine card, surely?"

Sandra was aware that her patience and trust had snapped inside her in an instant, as she actually saw red. In a split second, she ripped open the envelope and pulled out a Valentine card. Her heart began to beat wildly and her hands trembled as she opened it.

"To Osborn, with all my love, Sindy." Sandra slid onto the floor in disbelief, holding the card in front of her as if it might explode. "The sly cow," she whispered, slowly opening the four enclosed pieces of A4 paper, which were covered in her cousin's handwriting. As she read, the words blurred and a metaphoric knife slowly began to twist in her heart.

Ten minutes later, feeling that she was locked inside a nightmare, she found herself standing in front of the telephone, dialling Osborn's work number. He seemed surprised when he realised it was her.

"Sandra?"

"You've ruined my life."

"What? What's going on?"

"I know about you and Sindy. I opened a letter she sent you."

"You shouldn't have done that."

"I know. I almost wish I hadn't."

"I'm coming home."

It was probably the shortest phone call they'd ever shared – and the saddest, thought Sandra, as she wiped her eyes in some *Collapsing Cornflower Mood Matching Toilet Roll*. She mechanically went to make herself some coffee, pushing Sindy's letter deep into her cardigan pocket. She leaned weakly against the kitchen cupboard as the kettle boiled, wanting with a dreadful fascination to read Sindy's letter again – to torture herself with fine details, to analyse the terminology, to read between the lines. Heaven knew there were enough of them.

She made the coffee, but stood staring out of the window, watching a woman walk past with a dog. She looked so ordinary. Everything looked so incredibly ordinary in such an extraordinary situation. Then she saw Osborn's car drive up to their house and her heart began to race. He came in and looked at her questioningly.

"Do you want some coffee?" she asked, in such an ordinary way that it began to frighten her. Maybe she was going to lapse into even more insanity than usual.

"Yes," he replied, waiting quietly as she poured the water into the mug. "Come and sit down."

Sandra forgot the coffee and followed him into the dining room. It was the room where she did all her coursework, where all her familiar books looked down kindly at her from the bookshelf.

"Did you sleep with her?" Sandra's unnecessary question seemed to rupture the atmosphere with penetrating intent.

"Yes." Osborn's reply was piercing in its honesty. Sandra gave a small cry and tried to run away from the room, from all the pain, but Osborn caught hold of her and held her. "Don't go," he said quietly, "we have to sort this out. I love you, Sandra."

"You love me, but you had sex with *her*!" Sandra had stopped struggling. The pain of the knife in her heart was so extreme that it was comforting to be held even by the person who had betrayed her. "Do you love her?" she asked dully, as Osborn led her gently to a chair, where she sat rather incongruously on his lap.

"I thought I was in love with her. She was in low spirits and in need of someone after the divorce and I – well, I never got over you and that guy Geoff."

"Whose idea was it to meet in Birmingham?" asked Sandra sadly, pushing away an image of her and Phil grappling on the sofa.

"I can't remember. It just seemed to happen. It all just seemed to be happening to a different person, but that different person was me."

Sandra found herself asking endless questions, some that Osborn answered and some that he avoided. She found herself alternately shouting in anger and crying bitterly, as lunchtime came and went. Softly and gently, snow began to fall outside, as the roof was fortunately in a good state of repair.

"I've got towels on the washing line. I'll have to bring them in." Sandra suddenly and desperately needed the ordinariness of everyday life, if only for a few moments.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" asked Osborn, letting go of her at last.

"Yes," she replied, looking in wonder and hate at the falling flakes of snow. They seemed so beautiful and so deathly cold. She brought the towels in from the line. They weren't dry, but stiff and semi-frozen. 'Just like my heart,' she thought, sinking on to a chair, sobbing again and watching her tears as they fell on to the towels she was still clutching.

"Are you OK?" Osborn entered the room with two mugs of tea, placing them carefully on two coasters on the table. For the first time in her life, Sandra couldn't have cared one jot if he'd put the hot mugs straight on to the table.

"How can I be OK? The bottom has dropped out of my entire world and you ask me if I'm OK?" The anger was rising again. "How can I possibly be OK when what the two of you did has gutted me? When between you, you've carelessly spread out my guts on the floor and fucked all over them?" Analytically, as if from a great distance, Sandra realised that the shouting and the use of the word 'fuck' in context had helped her to release a minuscule amount of anguish. The resultant pause was a break from crying – her face was a real mess, not just a made-up one.

Osborn suddenly turned horribly pale and rushed to the bathroom. To her surprise, Sandra heard him being sick. She picked up a *Vomiting Vermilion Mood Matching Toilet Roll*, wondering briefly how on Earth vomiting could be considered a mood, and took it to him.

"Here, you're almost in as bad a state as I am." As she walked back to the dining room, she found the fact that he was upset enough to throw up strangely comforting. Osborn came back into the room a few moments later.

"Sandra, do you want me to leave you? I don't want to, but I understand if you want me to."

"I don't want you to go," replied Sandra immediately, wondering exactly where her answer had sprung from so strongly. "No, I've always thought we were built on solid rock." The tears began to flow again. "But you'll have to finish it with her, or there's no hope."

"I will. I'll ring her tonight," said Osborn, touching Sandra's arm as she reached for her third *Sodden Sapphire Mood Matching Toilet Roll*. "Sandra, I think Gulliver or Madeleine has just come in."

"Oh God, it'll be Madeleine. I don't want her to see me like this."

"Mum, where are you?" Madeleine's bright voice broke the pain-filled atmosphere. "Mum, Guy met me from school because it's snowing. He's here. We're going to build a snowperson." Madeleine peered around the door as Sandra was picking up pieces of *Mood Matching Toilet Roll* from the floor. "Oh!" Madeleine gazed at her ashen-faced father and swollen-faced mother. "Shall I go and make some tea?"

"Yes please," murmured Osborn and Sandra in unison.

"OK," said Madeleine, picking up the two mugs from the table, "but you haven't drunk these – and there are two mugs of cold coffee in the kitchen. What's been going on?" Madeleine's eyes looked wary and frightened, Sandra noticed with dismay.

"We'll tell you later, I promise. Go and see to Guy," said Osborn, attempting unsuccessfully to smile.

"Don't worry, Maddy, everything's going to be all right," said Sandra, trying to put her daughter's mind at rest.

'Is it?' she wondered, as she surveyed her depleted supply of *Mood Matching Toilet Rolls*. 'Can anything be all right ever again?'

As she lay awake in bed that night, Sandra felt as though she would never be able to sleep peacefully for the rest of her life. She kept imagining what had taken place during the two nights Osborn had been away on the course – nights when she'd revised until past midnight, then gone to bed alone, missing Osborn's warmth beside her.

The thought of him sharing a bed with Sindy seemed almost impossible to comprehend, like a bizarre nightmare. She thought about Osborn's answers to her questions. Yes, they had shared a double bed. Yes, he had bought condoms. Yes, Sindy had been with him when he had rung Sandra from the phone box. Every thought of the two of them together was a fresh twist of the knife in her heart. It became agony to lie there beside him, so she crept downstairs to escape and to be alone.

"Oh God," she whispered, curled up on the sofa in the sitting room with a *Gutted Grape Mood Matching Toilet Roll* clutched to her chest for comfort. "Where are You? Do You understand what I feel? I can't believe they did it, when I didn't do it with Geoff, or even Phil. I can't stop thinking about them together. Him touching her, being inside her..." Tears cascaded down her cheeks in rivulets of misery.

"God, where is all this water coming from? Where is all this pain coming from? I believe Osborn loves me, but her – oh God, I want her to suffer and die!" Sandra began to find the knife in her heart was restricting her breathing. She sat up in alarm, but it didn't help.

"I can't breathe properly," she said aloud, sobbing and gasping for air. "Oh God – help me – get her out of my head!" For an instant, Sandra felt that God, or a loving presence of some sort, was with her and understood her pain. Then the sitting room door opened and she looked up startled as Osborn came in and sat down beside her.

"Can't you sleep?" he asked sleepily.

"I can't breathe," she said with difficulty, at first flinching away from his touch, then leaning against him. He was still warm from their bed. "I hate her – I hate what you did – I hate the feeling that nothing will ever be the same again."

"It won't be the same," he said softly, stroking her hair. "But one thing has really changed for me, for the better. I realised today for the first time that you actually do love me. It's the first time I've ever *felt* love from anyone."

"A pity it's costing me so much," said Sandra, her breathing slightly calmer. "What do you mean, anyway? I've always loved you."

"I never recognised it," he replied wonderingly. "Unconditional love, I mean. My parents never gave it to me, so I didn't know what it was."

"So I pay the price for their failure! Well, unconditional love costs and right now, the price feels way too high."

"I'm sorry," said Osborn in a broken voice. After a few moments, Sandra realised she could feel him shaking.

"Osborn?"

"Oh God, what have I done?" he moaned. Sandra reached up and felt tears on his face. "I never meant to hurt you," he cried, holding her to him.

"I never meant to hurt you, either," she replied, as they clung to each other in the early hours of the cold, snowy morning. To her horror, though, Sandra found that a small detached part of herself was thinking: 'That's right, you suffer too – just like I am.'

CHAPTER 8

Sandra heard the bedside alarm ring the following morning with almost a sense of relief, because the worst night of her life so far was over at last. She hadn't been able to sleep at all, but towards morning had managed to find a semi-comfortable place of escape by reliving happy memories of her earlier life with Osborn. Osborn reached over to switch off the alarm, then moved up closer to Sandra in the bed, his bodily warmth painfully pleasurable to her.

"Sandra," he said gently, "I want you to know that I want to make love with you."

"I feel sick," said Sandra truthfully, not knowing whether she was pleased or revolted at what he had just said. "I know we've made love since you were inside *her*, but I didn't know that then. Now it's different. I don't know how I feel, except sick."

"I'll wait until you want to make love with me again," he said softly. "I don't care if it takes a year – two years – I'm so sorry I hurt you."

"I've got to go and start the second semester at university today," said Sandra, deliberately changing the subject. 'I can't say it's OK you hurt me,' she was thinking, 'because it's *not* OK. Nothing in the whole sodding world is OK at this moment.'

"Would you like me to give you a lift? I can be late for work for once."

"All right," she replied, "or I might throw up on the bus."

When they went downstairs a while later, Gulliver and Madeleine were already up to Sandra's surprise. They were standing side by side in their dressing gowns, looking out of the window at the snow.

"The snowperson Guy and I made is still there," said Madeleine, looking at Sandra with penetrating eyes. "Are you OK, Mum?"

"Yes," replied Sandra. 'I can't explain now, Maddy,' she thought, 'but I will soon, when I've managed to survive a day or two with this incredible pain.'

"Hey, what's that sticking out of it?" asked Madeleine indignantly, gazing at her snowperson.

"Aha, you've noticed my attempt at snowperson authenticity," said Gulliver. "I did it last night when I came home from Hazel's."

"But it's a *snowperson*, not a *snowman*," retorted Madeleine.

"Exactly. If you look closely, you'll notice not only the interestingly-shaped quite thick twig, but also the two large fir cones," replied Gulliver. "Oh, the snow must be melting, the left fir cone has just dropped off."

"Don't you two have to get ready?" asked Osborn, noticing that Sandra was rubbing her forehead.

"It's half-term, Dad," said Madeleine. "I'm going to the library later to investigate Guinevere. I've had enough of Arthur."

"Why aren't you getting ready for work, Dad?" asked Gulliver, looking askance.

"I'm giving Mum a lift," replied Osborn. "She's not feeling very well."

'I'm feeling *too* well,' thought Sandra, deciding she might be able to manage a cup of weak tea. 'I wish I could stop feeling altogether for a while, just so I can get through this day.'

"Osborn has had an affair with my cousin," said Sandra to the gang in rather a shaky voice, before the first lecture of the second semester began. It helped, in a very painful way, to be able to say the words aloud. The gang were immediately supportive and suggested going for coffee after the lecture. Sandra felt comforted by their presence, but noticed that she seemed to be deliberately avoiding Phil.

She found she could write notes in the lecture as she normally did, amazed that she was able to concentrate for minutes at a time on the *Introduction to Integrative Topics* with Simon Coe, when the veritable bottom had dropped out of her world.

'Why do I have a veritable bottom in my world when other people have ordinary bottoms?' she wondered for a moment. 'I wish I could stop feeling sick – and I wish I could get my head around this stuff, I can't see how it fits together at all.'

Two days later, Sandra sat in Marcus Lowe's room for the first tutorial of the second semester, no longer feeling quite as sick, even though Marcus had just handed them their exam results. Sandra noticed with a sense of dull relief, which quickly turned into a sense of relieved dullness, that she had passed all the exams reasonably well. Marcus seemed to be talking animatedly with the others as he returned their last semester's essays, but Sandra sat quietly in her own little hurt-filled space, seemingly millions of miles away from the others.

"Can you tell me what a hypothetical construct is, Sandra?" Marcus's voice was asking, eventually cutting through her isolation. Sandra looked straight into his deeply blue eyes through a haze of pain.

"Umm – it's something abstract that can't be directly measured," she replied, from a place in her brain with which she didn't feel remotely in contact.

"Right." Marcus looked as if he might be about to say something further on the subject, then stopped. "Good essay, but a couple of references missing. Watch out for that." He handed Sandra back her essay, but she avoided further eye contact.

'I have to tell him what's happened to me,' she was thinking, suddenly and clearly, 'but not today. I might burst into uncontrollable tears and completely flood the strange looking stain in the shape of Madagascar on his carpet. And I can't tell Phil either, for the same reason (except the stain). Not yet.'

'It was comforting to tell the gang over coffee on Tuesday. God, was that only two days ago? It was different with them, though. I have no idea why, except they're a different gender, of course, but gender doesn't come into it for me.'

'I want to go home, but it still feels painful there. Nobody there will ask me what a hypothetical construct is though, for God's sake. Mind you, they're likely to ask me all sorts of bizarre questions that I don't feel like answering in the slightest. Maybe I'll just stay here like I'm supposed to, after all.'

It was the weekend. The deathly beautiful snow had melted and a hint of spring was infiltrating the air. Osborn was out for the afternoon on a previously arranged visit to a retired colleague, while Gulliver and Madeleine were doing their own things (separately, of course). Sandra stood at the back of the garden by the compost heap with a box of matches in her pocket, placing all Sindy's letters and photos in a pile of forthcoming destruction, including the letter and Valentine card that had caused her such pain.

"I'm burning you out of my life, you sly cow," she said, as she struck a few matches and finally got one to catch the letters alight. A thrill of positive energy leapt inside her chest. "Yes! You're being burned away, just like Osborn symbolically burned you away when he set fire to all your letters the other evening."

Sandra's mind went back to Thursday evening, the day of the tutorial. Osborn had come home from work looking uneasy, but had resolutely pulled a letter out of his pocket to show Sandra it was unopened. Sindy had written to him at work. It hadn't been the first time, Osborn had confessed. She had also rung him at work.

"I'll burn all her letters," he'd told Sandra, as she stood white-faced at the sight of Sindy's handwriting. "I'll do it now." Then, much to Sandra's intense and immense relief, he had.

'These photos are more difficult to burn,' realised Sandra, striking yet another match. 'And all this smelly smoke is ghastly. The neighbours will complain in a minute, but I don't care, I *need* to do this.'

The last of the photos finally blackened into non-recognition. Sandra stirred the remnants of Sindy's tangible existence in her life deep into the compost heap with a handy twig (the snowperson's interestingly-shaped quite thick twig). She then threw the interestingly-shaped quite thick twig on top of the compost heap with finality, picked up the box of matches and returned inside the house triumphantly, feeling marginally better. She noticed that the pain in her heart was becoming insistently familiar.

That same night, Sandra dreamt Sindy was attacking her with a kitchen knife, trying to stab it into her heart. Strangely, Sindy's parents were holding her back, stopping her.

Sandra awoke with a small yelp of fear and distress, clutching tightly on to Osborn's chest.

"Ouch, you're hurting my right nipple," said Osborn sleepily, then he was instantly awake. "Are you OK? Are you crying?"

"I had a bad dream," wept Sandra. "She was trying to stab me in the heart with a kitchen knife."

"Oh Sandra," Osborn took her in his arms (and his legs) enfolding her completely. Slowly and wonderingly, after she had fought wildly to extricate herself in a moment of claustrophobia, she realised she wanted him to make love to her. The lovemaking began slowly and painfully, but it was fundamentally healing.

"These are *my* breasts," she whispered to Osborn, as tears slid down her face and on to her breasts.

"I know," mumbled Osborn, being as gentle as he could.

"And this is the place where our son came out and then our daughter," she sobbed later, as he entered her slowly and carefully.

"Yes, it is," he whispered, holding her tightly and stroking her hair.

"This is *me* – this is where you belong – not inside *her*. You've been making love with me since I was 17 – you're the only one who ever has!" Sandra's sobs were racking her body.

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No! Make love to *me*. Ease my pain!"

Sandra began to calm down at last. For a while longer, pain and pleasure intermingled, then pleasure slowly began to take the upper hand.

Afterwards, as she reached across for some *Crucified Crimson Mood Matching Toilet Roll*, Sandra realised she had wept her way throughout the entire experience.

'I have a deep wound,' she thought analytically, as she began to drift into sleep, 'but it isn't festering, it hasn't turned septic. Each burst of pain is being faced, looked at, experienced, shared. This process is healing.' She sat up and blew her nose, hard. 'I still hate her fucking guts, though.'

The next day, which was a Sunday, Sandra and Osborn cooked a roast lunch. This was an occurrence that hadn't been a feature of the Dullkettle household for quite a considerable time. 'It's so good to be doing things together again,' thought Sandra, as she and Osborn piled a nut roast, potatoes, swede, broccoli and peas on to four plates.

"Food's up!" Osborn called out to Gulliver and Madeleine, who were missing presumed hiding out in various locations around the house.

"It's not that bad, is it?" asked Gulliver, as he appeared in the kitchen doorway. "Wow, roasted nuts."

"There's something wrong," said Madeleine suspiciously, as she also appeared in the kitchen doorway. Luckily, it was quite a roomy doorway, opening as it did on to a room. "You haven't cooked proper food since you started your degree, Mum. Dad's helping you, too. You're not getting divorced, are you?"

"No Maddy," replied Osborn, looking fondly at his daughter. "Oh, I don't believe it, I've mashed the swede with the leftover brandy butter from Christmas. It's not too far past its sell-by date, is it?"

"Who knows – who cares?" said Sandra, flustered and flushed at the same time over the dish of roast potatoes. "God, cooking is so hot!" she exclaimed. "You haven't turned the burner off, Osborn."

"Oh sorry. I usually turn things off."

"I usually turn them on," said Gulliver listlessly from the doorway, "just by looking at them."

"Moron," said Sandra, flopping the last of the peas on Gulliver's plate.

"No thanks. I don't think anything else would fit on, anyway."

After they'd finished eating the nut roast, Sandra brought in a curaçao trifle. "Sorry, we didn't have any sherry left," she apologised, dishing out the strangely blue dessert into four dishes. She was beginning to feel nervous at the explanation she and Osborn proposed to make to Gulliver and Madeleine.

"Shall we start on our proposed explanation to Gulliver and Madeleine?" asked Osborn, startling Sandra into dropping a blue blobby mound on to the tablecloth.

"Yes," she replied, trying to sit down pseudo-nonchalantly. She had completely given up the idea of sitting down nonchalantly.

"You're getting divorced, aren't you," said Madeleine abruptly.

"No Maddy, we said we weren't," replied Osborn, almost patiently.

"Whatever it is, you can tell me, I'm adult enough to take it," said Gulliver seriously, poking his finger into the blue sponge before licking it.

"You're a dolt, you mean," retorted Madeleine.

"That's what I said," replied Gulliver.

"Gulliver! Madeleine! Mum and I just want to say we're sorry for the recent upsets you must have been aware were going on between us," started Osborn. "All the shouting, the tears..."

"The copious use of *Mood Matching Toilet Rolls*," Gulliver finished for him.

"Exactly. The thing is, it involved Mum's cousin, Sindy." Osborn faltered.

"Oh, I quite liked her," remarked Gulliver.

"I don't want anything to do with her again," Sandra said, wondering if Gulliver would still like her if he knew. "I've stopped communicating with her."

"What about Auntie Lily, her mother?" asked Madeleine, frowning slightly.

"Yes, she sends us money for Christmas and birthdays," chipped in Gulliver.

"You mercenary toe rag," said Sandra. "There's no reason to involve her. She's my mother's sister and she would be upset if she knew we've ... fallen out."

"Things at home will be much better from now on," said Osborn, reaching out to cover Sandra's hand with his own. "Oh, you're all sticky."

"Better in what way?" asked Gulliver. "Better home comforts? Better cooking? Better laundry service?"

"Don't push your luck, tit-nose," said Sandra to Gulliver, relieved that it had been so much easier than she'd feared. "OK, Maddy?" she asked.

"Yes," replied Madeleine, finishing her curaçao trifle. "Sindy's got much fatter legs than you, anyway."

'Thank you, Madeleine,' thought Sandra, as she and Osborn began to clear away the dishes. 'What am I going to tell Mum, though? She knew I was fed up with Sindy's phone calls and letters to Osborn. Perhaps I can tell her half the truth. I don't want to upset her. God, this is all so dreadfully, mind-piercingly sordid. Why did he have to pick Sindy Linda Asshole Grossbody, of all people? Why not somebody from behind the delicatessen at *Safebury's*? Surely it wouldn't have hurt so much then?' Sandra prepared to wash the dishes, feeling the metaphorical knife still piercing her heart.

"This is nice, Sandra," said Caroline, sitting opposite Sandra in *Ye Moderne Coffee Shoppe* in Plymouth and, strangely enough, sipping coffee. "I'm glad you asked me to meet you, we must do this more often."

"Yes, we must, definitely. But Mum, there's something I was going to tell you, about Sindy." To Sandra's horror, her voice had begun to shake and her hands to tremble slightly.

"Oh?" Caroline looked at Sandra with a small frown.

"You know I told you I was unhappy with her writing to Osborn and ringing him so much?"

"Yes."

"Well, on Valentine's Day she sent him a letter with a card and I saw red (although the card was mainly blue and yellow with only a small amount of actual red) and I opened it and read it and it upset me. Osborn and I had it out and he's stopped their – relationship and I've stopped communicating with her as well."

"I see. Does Auntie Lily know anything about this?" Sandra noticed her mother's cheeks had flushed.

"No. At least, I don't imagine Sindy would tell her mother anything about it."

"I hope not, it would upset her terribly."

"Like it's upset me terribly." Sandra had finally managed to control her trembling.

"Oh Sandra." Caroline finished her coffee, still frowning slightly. "Gosh, it's bitter at the bottom. I don't think there's any need to tell Dad, do you? I don't want to risk upsetting him, he hasn't seemed quite the same since his bypass operation."

"OK. I had to tell you, Mum, I couldn't let a secret like this come between us."

"Hmm. I'm glad you felt you could tell me, but I'm a bit shocked, that's all."

As Sandra and Caroline left the coffee shop and Sandra was about to return to university for an afternoon session of *Case Reports*, Caroline touched her daughter on the arm.

"Don't give up," she said, before opening her arms to give Sandra a hug. "You never know what's around the corner."

It was unfortunately a dead pigeon, Sandra found with distaste, as she left Caroline and turned the corner in the direction of the university. 'Poor bird,' she thought, as people walked by ignoring it. 'It's dead forever, it won't be spreading its wings to fly ever again. God, death is such a killer. Come to that, life is such a killer, too.'

Two days later, Sandra fidgeted throughout the entire tutorial, avoiding the gaze of both Marcus and Phil. As a result, she found herself gazing alternately at Rodney Bent, Vernon Hailstorm and the stain in the shape of Madagascar on the carpet. Eventually, the tutorial ended.

"Er – could I have a word with you?" Sandra asked Marcus, finally looking into his eyes.

"Sure," replied Marcus. "Bye, guys." The door closed behind the others, leaving a rather pregnant pause in the room that was luckily not Sandra's. "What can I do for you, Sandra?"

"I – umm..." Sandra felt tears forming and gulped hard, but when she'd recovered from the resultant choking fit, she found she was emotionally in control once more. "My partner has had an affair with my cousin," she continued relatively calmly. There they were again, the dreaded words that caused her such anguish, but were definitely better out than in. "I thought that as my personal tutor, you should know."

"Yes – oh yes." Marcus leaned forward thoughtfully. "I'm very sorry to hear this, Sandra. I have some idea of what you might be going through, from my own personal experience."

"Oh?" Sandra looked at Marcus in something approaching wonderment. 'He knows,' she thought with a sudden unexpected feeling of comfort. 'He understands.'

The sudden unexpected feeling of comfort remained with Sandra in a sudden unexpected way for the next 15 minutes or so, as Marcus asked a few questions in a sensitive, caring, yet practical way.

"I'm here if you need to talk," he said finally, as Sandra went to leave his room.

"Thank you, I expect I will," replied Sandra, smiling weakly. A ghost of a smile lingered on Marcus's lips as Sandra left the room, feeling lighter than she had for the past week.

"Oh no, I've left my bag in there!" she said aloud to Phil, who appeared to be loitering a little way down the corridor.

"Sandra, your bag?" came Marcus's voice as he opened his door, holding her bag.

"Thank you," said Sandra, under-reaching slightly to retrieve her bag from Marcus's outstretched hand. The bag fell on the floor, as a *Pissed Off Poppy Mood Matching Toilet Roll* unrolled itself along the corridor.

"Oh, sod it!" gasped Sandra in horror, as further up the corridor in the direction of the liberated toilet roll, some people were emerging from the conference room – from a conference, as it so happened.

"I'll get it," said Phil quietly, stooping to roll up the trail of paper. He stuffed it quickly into Sandra's bag, just as the conference room contingent approached.

"Did you want to see me, Phil?" asked Marcus, his eyebrows still faintly raised.

"Yes, but I'll try tomorrow instead, if that's OK?"

"Fair enough," replied Marcus, disappearing back into his room.

"Phil, Osborn has had an affair with my cousin," began Sandra sadly, as they walked together along the corridor to the stairs.

That weekend, Sandra stood in front of the fireplace in the sitting room, with a duster in her hand and the metaphorical knife in her heart.

'We bought this ornamental sheep on our honeymoon,' she thought mournfully, picking it up to dust. 'And this demented figurine was an anniversary present, although I never really liked it. In fact, I think I'll take it away, I need to recreate life in a way I positively like.' She moved along the fireplace, picking up reminders of the past, dusting but not replacing them. As she idly picked up a small glass vase from the very end of the fireplace, the knife in her heart twisted sharply and she threw the vase to the floor with a small cry.

'She brought that back for us from a holiday once,' she thought savagely. 'It's broken. Good.' She sat down on the sofa, her knees trembling.

'Everything's changed,' she thought sombrely, looking at the fireplace, now devoid of everything but the ornamental sheep. 'Everything. I can't even look at those ornaments the same way I used to before. They used to be a symbol of our life together and its security to me, but now they just remind me of Osborn's betrayal of our past. My life is tainted by what they did.'

She sat thoughtfully, her eyes surprisingly dry. 'But I can overcome betrayal. Osborn and I are worth more to each other than all that's gone wrong. I believe that we love each other at a very deep, fundamental level and I believe that love *does* overcome all things in the end. Our love is bigger than any amount of furtive lust in a hotel bedroom.' She winced and stood up, still looking at the fireplace.

'The ornamental sheep will have to go, though, it's simply had its day. Osborn and I can go out one day and replace it with – with a brand new ornamental sheep.'

Later that day, Sandra felt a burning need to find a pen and some paper and to let the words flow. She felt that if she didn't find some way of expressing herself, something detrimental would happen to her emotions. As she tuned into herself to find out exactly what it was she wanted to express, she was acutely aware of the pain and the deep wound she had been carrying around with her since the day she'd discovered Osborn's betrayal.

'Oh God,' she breathed, as tears clouded her vision. 'I feel as if I'm bleeding somewhere inside from the knife in my heart. Where else is there to bleed safely, except onto this clean, white, soothing paper that accepts every word I give it without question? Bless this paper, it's a lifeline.'

Unsurprisingly, the poem that emerged was mainly about Osborn, although it was impossible not to mention Sindy as well. In the end, she entitled it *Pain and Pleasure* and found it did indeed give her enormous pleasure amid the pain to tell the paper exactly

how she felt, using whatever words she wanted (including 'fuck'). The added bonus was that she was being creative in the process.

'There's more to come, though,' she thought sadly, as her pen ran out of ink. 'So much more. I feel as if I might have to write for ever.'

CHAPTER 9

Another week had passed. Sandra sat on the bus on her way to university, thinking how life in some ways was actually better, but how in other ways it seemed an irrevocable nightmare of emotional confusion.

'The sex is wonderful now, though,' she thought, remembering the previous evening when both Gulliver and Madeleine had been out, 'but I wonder how much of it is desperation? For me, at least. And I wonder how long it will last, this being hungry for each other, like it was when we first met? Still, I'm not knocking it! I now have a good source of poetry material too. It's funny that despite the really awful things that devastate us in life, there are always consolations, like sex, the smell of orange blossom, a good book, *Creme Eggs* – God, it's hot in this bus. I wonder if I've got the nerve to open the window?'

She stood up and fumbled with the catch, which was rather stiff. She was putting most of her weight into pushing it open, when a man from the seat behind tapped her shoulder.

"These windows open inwards," he explained quite kindly.

"Oh! So they do. Silly me, I'm a psychology student..." Sandra sat down abruptly, having noticed several pairs of eyes fixed on her with a not quite so kindly expression. Although the breeze from the open window was fresh veering to cold, she continued to feel uncomfortably hot and got off the bus one stop early.

She had arranged to meet Phil for a coffee in place of the usual Thursday tutorial, which had been cancelled due to Marcus Lowe being away at a conference.

"Well," she said, as Phil sat down opposite her in the refectory, "this feels strange. I'm sorry I didn't feel like talking last week or the week before. I wasn't sure how I felt about you."

"Strewth," said Phil, spluttering slightly. "I do like your honesty. I really do, actually, it helps me to feel I can be honest with you in return."

"Good. I still feel bad about what happened before Christmas," said Sandra, the image of her and Phil grappling on the sofa springing inevitably to mind, "but it kind of got pushed into the background in view of what happened with Osborn."

"I can understand that," said Phil, "although I was pretty pissed off with you at the time." He looked at Sandra intently, gauging her reaction. "You don't mind me talking straight, do you?"

"No. Why, no!" replied Sandra, trying hard to cover up the slight shock of Phil's straight talking. "It's better than talking bent, which plays havoc with your back."

"Mmm. Anyway, I met someone the next day in the pub. She's a first-year in Oceanography. We kind of hit it off."

"Great!" said Sandra. 'The next day,' she was thinking. 'He didn't waste much time. Just as well I didn't lose a lot of sleep over the whole stupid affair.' She found herself wincing involuntarily again at the word 'affair'.

"Yep. Anyway, how are you? You've been looking so tired. I noticed something was wrong the first lecture of the second semester, when you seemed to be avoiding me. I didn't like to ask, though, in case I might have been the cause of it. Or a contributing factor, at least." Phil fingered the white plastic coffee spoon. "How are things with you and your guy?"

"Osborn? Pretty good, amazingly, although sometimes I still can't believe he actually did it with her."

"Is it worse because she's your cousin?"

"Definitely. I'm meeting my mother for lunch today. I only told her half the truth, but it was still incredibly difficult talking to her about it, being part of her family. My cousin's mother is my mother's sister. It still hurts so much."

"Have you told Marcus?"

"Yes I have, but only fairly briefly. He said I could talk to him about it more if I wanted to. I think I might try to see him next week."

"Right. We're supposed to be telling him the proposed title of our tutorial presentation next week, aren't we?"

"Oh God, I'd forgotten. Oh Phil, now you've really depressed me."

"I'm sorry." Phil placed his hand on Sandra's arm, which was quite a comforting gesture, thought Sandra, smiling at him. 'But he's not quite the same with me as he was before,' she thought. 'There's a distance. Well, I'm sorry about that, he's a nice guy, with a great purple jacket, but the most important relationship in my life at the moment is with Osborn.'

"I hope we can still be friends," said Sandra thoughtfully.

"Of course. Besides, I've kind of missed your whacky sandwiches."

Sandra sat in *Ye Moderne Coffee Shoppe* with her mother, sensing that something was wrong. Caroline looked pale and there were dark shadows under her eyes. Sandra, although feeling concerned, didn't know quite what to say.

"Would you like something to eat? Jill says they do a great *Chocolate Mondae* in here."

"No, I'm not hungry," sighed Caroline. "Sandra, it's no good, I have to ask you. Did Osborn go all the way with Sindy?"

"Ah. Well, do you mean...?" Sandra considered feigning ignorance about what Caroline meant, but then realised she was completely unable to lie to her mother. "Yes," she said in a small voice.

"You didn't say, but I thought he must have, the way you looked when you told me." Caroline sighed deeply again. "Oh Sandra, why did he have to do it with someone in my family? It's like he didn't care about me or my family at all. No, it's worse than that, it's like it was a personal slur in my direction."

"I don't think he fully realised what he was doing," said Sandra shakily, feeling uncomfortable at the thought that she seemed to be defending Osborn's actions.

"I've had nobody to talk to about this all week," continued Caroline. "I've felt so ill and alone. I was afraid Dad would be wondering what was wrong."

"Has he said anything?"

"No, he's got himself more involved with the *Old Ramblers*. He's arranging a series of spring walks."

"Aren't they a bit old to do that springy walking thing?" asked Sandra dully.

"What? No, walking in the spring," explained Caroline with a slight frown. "Anyway, how did Osborn and Sindy actually meet? I've had so many questions running around in my head. Perhaps we ought to get another cup of coffee."

"Do you want another cup?"

"No."

"Right." Sandra gulped, feeling the metaphorical knife again in her heart as she was forced to relive the pain of Osborn and Sindy's betrayal. "They met when he went away on that course in Birmingham."

"Is that the only time?"

"Yes." The metaphorical knife began to hurt more acutely, as Sandra was forced to remember one of the many parts in Sindy's letter which had particularly upset her, including where Sindy had said she was so happy that Osborn had asked to meet her again in the spring. It was something Sandra had completely failed to come to terms with. It hurt so much that Osborn had wanted to do it again. It also prevented her from justifying his action in January as a sordid mistake, which he'd regretted as soon as it had happened. The living nightmare feeling began to close in on Sandra and her heart started to beat wildly.

"So, you've obviously forgiven Osborn?" asked Caroline insistently.

"I'm trying to," replied Sandra, finding Caroline's voice was a stabilising influence.

"What about Sindy?"

"No." Just the mention of Sindy's name caused an unpleasant inward shudder.

"Well, I take it you want me to forgive Osborn, as you're obviously making a go of it with him, which is good. If I forgive him, though, I have to forgive her as well."

"OK." Sandra wanted to tell her mother everything, including the contents of Sindy's letter. Despite the fact that she'd burned it, the memory of Sindy's words was like a poison in her system, which she hoped would dissipate in time. She wanted to tell her mother how wonderful it was with Osborn in some ways at the moment – how she knew in her heart that Osborn had never meant to hurt her so badly, but that Sindy obviously hadn't cared in the slightest how Sandra felt. However, Sandra was finding that she needed all her current available energy to prevent herself from breaking down completely in *Ye Moderne Coffee Shoppe*.

"I'm sorry this is upsetting you, Sandra, but you really are the only person I can talk to about it." Caroline's voice broke into Sandra's misery. "I presume you haven't told Basil and Sybil?"

"God, no. They'd probably excommunicate Osborn from the Dullkettle family."

"And you don't think Auntie Lily knows?"

"I wouldn't think Sindy had told her mother, no!"

"This all seems so unfair, that I'm the only one to know. I suppose that's selfish of me. I *am* glad that you talk to me honestly, but this particular thing is just so hard to take in."

"I don't think it's selfish of you to feel like that. *I* think it's all terribly unfair, too. I've suffered this enormous pain and I can't talk to the people I care for in my family about it. And his family get away totally free, in blissful ignorance. It's a nightmare and I'm never going to wake up from it." Sandra hastily brushed away a tear that had escaped.

"You will, Sandra, really you will. Life was never fair, but we'll survive. You've got your degree to think of, as well as Gulliver and Madeleine."

"I know. I won't do anything stupid."

Sandra said goodbye to Caroline with a heavy heart outside *Ye Moderne Coffee Shoppe*. She took a few steps in the direction of the university, then turned back to look at the retreating figure of her mother. A lump came into her throat at the sight of Caroline's slightly stooped shoulders that were usually so straight, as she walked through a group of people.

"I have to look forward, not back," she said aloud, taking a step backwards, reluctant to relinquish the sight of her mother. Then she noticed the stares of a nearby middle-aged couple.

"I'm a psychology student!" she said assertively, before turning around to walk forward.

Sandra sat in Marcus Lowe's room (with Marcus Lowe) feeling slightly ill at ease in a slightly pleasurable way. 'I know I was scared about talking to him,' she was thinking, as Marcus answered a telephone call, 'but I was kind of looking forward to it, too. Is it different being nervous of something you ultimately want, like talking to someone interesting, as opposed to something you ultimately don't want, like a boil on your nose? God, I'm glad I haven't got a boil on my nose. Ah, he's off the phone.'

"So, Sandra," said Marcus, fixing Sandra with his very blue-eyed gaze. "How are you?"

"Er – how am I in what way?" asked Sandra, considering. "I mean, academically or personally?"

"Let's try both," replied Marcus.

"Well, academically I'm just about coping, I suppose. I've been doing some group work on schizophrenia and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which is very interesting. On the other hand, though, I'm dreading this semester's tutorial presentation. I was going to ask you if I could delay it for a couple of weeks?"

"Mmm. What's your proposed title?"

"*Is Marriage Psychologically Necessary?*"

"Any alternatives?"

"*The Mind and Motivation of Men with Ponytails.*"

"Right." Marcus cleared his throat a little harshly. "Interesting. The former sounds a good bet. I'm concerned that it's a bit too much on the sociological side, but it should be fine if you stick to the psychology. It would be better not to put off your presentation for now, though, perhaps. Let's just see how you go, yes?"

"OK." Sandra was a little surprised at his answer to her request, but she respected his possible wisdom in the matter. 'It's better than impossible wisdom, anyway,' she thought wisely. 'That's a real no-know.'

"How are things at a more personal level?" continued Marcus.

"It's quite difficult answering that honestly," replied Sandra after a moment. "The sense of shock has gradually lessened. I mean, the acute pain isn't there all the time, thank God. But I still get acute moments, like the other day I was walking around *Marks and Spender* and I suddenly felt heartache."

"The clothes were that bad?" asked Marcus with a smile. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to belittle your experience."

"Oh, I like joking," said Sandra, smiling in return. "It strikes me as really funny. It's uplifting. It makes me laugh and it makes a change from crying," she finished ruefully.

"Yes," said Marcus and was silent.

"Anyway," continued Sandra, slightly unsure of his silence, "the thing that seems to upset me at university is that apart from the few people I've told, nobody knows how I've been hurt. It sounds a bit childish, but if I'd broken my leg, people would know. They can't see this gaping wound I have inside, though. They don't know unless I tell them and that seems unfair – to me, I mean. It sounds like I want sympathy, but it's not that. It's something to do with having to cope with the coursework as if everything's OK when it isn't."

"You're still having a hard time, by the sound of it?"

"Only in some respects and only at some levels. At one level, I'm afraid the pain will never go away, but at another level, I'm actually enjoying – er – life with my partner."

"So you're reasonably happy?"

"Even unreasonably happy at times, it's very weird."

"I expect things will take a while to settle down. Have you considered counselling?"

"As a career move?"

"No, for yourself. It helped me."

"I don't think I could cope with it at the moment on top of everything else," said Sandra, feeling secretly pleased that Marcus had divulged a piece of rather personal information to her.

"Fair enough. If you do feel a need, though, don't forget there are student counsellors."

"I'd prefer a fully qualified one, I think."

"They're counsellors for students."

"Oh God, I'm so stupid!"

"No, you're not."

"OK." Sandra was at a loss for words and was glad that Marcus's phone rang at that moment. "I'll go," she said quickly, standing up. "Thanks for the talk, it's helped."

"Come again," said Marcus, his hand hovering above the phone. "My door's always open."

"Thank you," replied Sandra, closing the door behind her as she left.

Another weekend had thankfully materialised. Sandra stood in front of her wardrobe with Madeleine, desperate to throw away some old clothes that reminded her of painful times.

"I don't want this denim shirt any more," she said. "I wore it so much last semester, it just reminds me of – things. I don't suppose you want it, Maddy?"

"No," said Madeleine thoughtfully. "What things does it remind you of?"

"Oh, stuff. Just a very difficult time, which I'm glad is over," replied Sandra, wondering about her casual use of the word 'just'.

"What about your jeans with slits in?"

"Oh dear. I hate them, but I can't afford to buy new clothes. God, I wish I could! I'd like to replace my wardrobe completely and start all over again."

"Me too," said Madeleine. "What do you want, Brother Bony Chest?" she added, as Gulliver appeared in the doorway, knocking in a strangely polite fashion, or possibly a politely strange one.

"Hello Gulliver," said Sandra absent-mindedly, holding up her jeans with slits in. "Hey, this slit in the seat isn't meant to be there, I must have split them by mistake." She gazed at the slits and the split with distaste. "Oh, sod it, I'll have to buy a new pair somehow." She threw the jeans on to a lurking pile on the floor. "More rags!" she said, almost triumphantly. It definitely felt therapeutic throwing away old things.

"Who's Morag and why does she want old clothes?" asked Gulliver wonderingly.

"You idiot!" exclaimed Madeleine. "More clothes for old rags."

"Oh. They'd be new rags, though, wouldn't they?"

"Gulliver, precisely why am I honoured with your delightful presence in this room?" asked Sandra, looking critically at an old skirt.

"I came to ask if I can bring Hazel back here tonight."

"What, to sleep?" squeaked Sandra.

"No, she wants to look at my computer," replied Gulliver.

"That's a new one," said Sandra. "Of course you can bring her back."

"Do you mind if I put a pizza in the oven for her?" asked Gulliver.

"Are you being funny?" asked Sandra.

"No I'm not, funnily enough."

"Yes you are! Oh, OK, you're not. Yes, there's a pizza in the freezer. You're obviously not eating with us, then."

"Lucky you," said Madeleine with raised eyebrows, which was actually quite a feat of ventriloquism.

"Anyway, thank you, Mother Slab Cheeks," said Gulliver cheerily. "I must go, I need to put some petrol in the Mini. I think you'd better give that old skirt to Morag by the way, I never liked it."

"Me neither," said Sandra laughing, throwing the skirt on to the floor as Gulliver left the room.

"Mum, would you say I was a fashion victim?" asked Madeleine suddenly.

"No! Why?"

"I was accused of being one," said Madeleine, holding up a t-shirt saying *Ban the Bimbo*. "Hey, when did you get this?"

"Oh, when I belonged to that assertiveness group," replied Sandra, taking it from Madeleine and throwing it onto the pile. "Anyway Maddy, who accused you of being a fashion victim?"

"Tatiana Smithsky in my English group."

"She sounds like she comes from the Eastern bloc?"

"No, she's half Russian."

"Er..."

"Anyway, I told her I'm *not* a fashion victim," said Madeleine vehemently, her voice rising. "There's no way I'm a fashion victim. I just want a lot of clothes, that's all."

Ten minutes later, after Madeleine had left to go to the library, Osborn came into the room to find Sandra standing in front of his end of the wardrobe.

"What's wrong?" he asked, having noticed a *Lamenting Lime Mood Matching Toilet Roll* clutched in her hand.

"It's this beige jacket," said Sandra quietly, afraid to look at Osborn. "I hate it because you wore it when you were with her. I remember how you looked when you came home wearing it. I thought how shagged out you looked and I felt sorry for you..." She broke off, deliberating for a moment whether to change the *Lamenting Lime Mood Matching Toilet Roll* for an *Angry Azure* one, but Osborn took hold of her shoulders and sat her down on the bed beside him.

"I'll get rid of it," he said softly.

"Pardon?" Sandra felt miles away.

"I said I'll get rid of the jacket," he said, a little less softly.

"Thank you," replied Sandra, looking appreciatively at the way his hair was curling at the back of his neck.

"But we can't go on getting rid of all the stuff that reminds us of bad times," he said, stroking her elbow, "or we'll have nothing left."

"I don't care about material things any more," she said, pulling him down on the bed on top of her. "Hey, mind my shirt, you're creasing it!"

CHAPTER 10

"Out, out, Tory shit, give us back our benefit!" shouted Sandra lustily as she walked along the city's main street with Nerissa behind a banner saying *Relief for Students Now*. She felt rather daring and in the student groove, as she noticed several police persons along the route.

"What do we want?" suddenly came the rousing cry from one of the leaders.

"Grants, not loans!" came the rehearsed response.

"When do we want them?" shouted the leader.

"Now!" roared the entire body of students – at least, the ones who were in hearing distance of the leader.

"This is great, isn't it," said Nerissa to Sandra, as they continued to walk.

"Yes," replied Sandra, smiling. "Hey, there's a TV camera crew over there."

"I hope my mother-in-law sees me on the news tonight," said Nerissa happily.

"Mine too," replied Sandra. 'I wonder what she'd really think of me if she did?' she thought suddenly. 'I know she's been on one or two VAGINA nearly-all-night vigils with Basil, but I don't think she's ever been on a demonstration. I must say (or think, actually), I'd rather walk behind a banner saying *Relief for Students Now* – oh God, they've spelt it wrong – than a banner saying VAGINA.'

"Out, out Tory shit, give us back our benefit!" yelled Nerissa suddenly beside her. "Oops, nobody joined in."

"Don't worry," said Sandra, grinning. "Oh! There's Phil!" She waved frantically to him, slowing down slightly in the process and unfortunately knocking the arm of the banner-holding girl directly behind her. The girl lost her balance and the banner went crashing down on the head of a small dark curly-haired man behind.

Luckily, the march had almost reached its destination (which happened to be where a Tory party conference was taking place) and the resulting chaos was able to sort itself out without too much bother. Sandra tried hard to apologise to the banner-holding girl behind her, but she was busy apologising in turn to the small dark curly-haired man. With a sense of shock, Sandra realised it was Simon Coe, who would no doubt be succumbing to a banner induced headache that night.

'Oh no,' she thought in panic. 'If I identify myself, he really will fail me in *Integrative Topics*. What's he doing in a student demonstration, anyway? He's a lecturer.' She looked around furtively. Nerissa had stopped a short distance away from her and was listening intently to the first speech, from the local Labour party group. This was to be followed by a speech from the local Liberal Democrat party. Sandra began to feel somewhat trapped in a situation from which she wished she could escape.

Feeling a little dizzy – from the embarrassment of the banner episode, she presumed – she edged her way out of the crowd, glancing guiltily at Simon Coe, who was rubbing his head. She walked back to the university on her own, having decided to spend the afternoon doing penance in the library, looking up copious references for the *Integrative Topics* essay.

About two hours later, as she was having an expensive encounter with the photocopying machine, Nerissa came into the library and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Hey Sandra, you disappeared without trace?" she said questioningly.

"Not quite. Did you see Simon Coe?" asked Sandra rather guiltily.

"Yes, I saw him going into *The Chamber Maid's Knees* at lunchtime with a student from Environmental Science. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I wondered why he came on a student demonstration when he's a lecturer, that's all," replied Sandra, busying herself with the photocopying machine.

"Oh. Well, I think I overheard him saying to the student that in his country demonstrating was an important part of student life – of the freedom to express political beliefs, or something."

"Gosh. What's his country?"

"Dunno, but I think that student was demonstrating more than her freedom to express political beliefs. I saw her giving him a fix of something."

"A fix?" Sandra looked up interestedly.

"Well, it looked like a small white tab of something and he swallowed it rather surreptitiously."

"Ah! It was probably a painkiller. I accidentally hit him on the head with someone else's banner," explained Sandra, pushing the wrong button on the photocopying machine in her agitation.

"You did? Wow! Is it suppressed anger, or something, after your Valentine's Day Massacre?"

"Ha! I like that name – oh God! What's happening to this machine? I don't want all these copies of *Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivators of Work Behaviour!*" Sandra danced around in horror, as the machine relentlessly churned out copy after copy.

"Press the stop button! Take out your card!" shouted Nerissa helpfully.

"Aagghh! Oh, it's stopped – my money's run out. Thank God for that." Sandra whipped out her photocopy card from the machine as fast as she could and grabbed her pile of paper. "I'm getting out of here, I've had enough," she said to Nerissa hotly. "I've just wasted £2.95 on sodding *Integrative Topics*."

"She's a psychology student," explained Nerissa to the bemused queue that had gradually formed behind them. "Hey Sandra, wait for me! I'll buy you a coffee to cheer you up. You look as if you could use one."

"Thanks," said Sandra, turning to smile into Nerissa's dark brown eyes, as they began to walk out of the library. "Although to be honest, I'd kill for a *Creme Egg* right now. I think I'm becoming addicted to them. Nerissa, I liked the way you referred to my Valentine's Day Massacre. I think it's the first time I've been able to see anything remotely funny about it. Thank you."

"I was afraid I'd overstepped the mark," said Nerissa, looking at Sandra with a direct gaze. "Even with you."

Easter was approaching quickly, but Sandra was glad it meant a break from university. She lingered over breakfast the first morning she was free, musing over her mug of tea.

'Well, I've survived so far,' she thought, enjoying the peace. Osborn was at work and Gulliver and Madeleine were still in their bedrooms.

'Life is changing all the time. Gulliver takes his A-levels soon and Madeleine seems to be growing up incredibly quickly. Oh well, I suppose I should start blitzing this house, it's been ages since I had a good go at it. Or maybe I could leave it for a bit and write another poem instead? Ah, that sounds like the mail.'

She went to pick up two envelopes lying on the mat. One was addressed to the homeowner and clearly junk. The other, however, caused Sandra's heart to jump painfully, as she stared down at Sindy's handwriting. 'Mr & Mrs O Dullkettle. The bitch has sent us an Easter card!' she thought incredulously. 'After all that pain and betrayal and total disregard of anyone's feelings but her own, she thinks she can carry on as always and still send us cards, as if nothing's happened.'

She carefully opened the envelope, took out the card inside and gazed at a pink rabbit in front of a church spire amid some very yellow daffodils. Inside was a £5 note for an Easter Egg for Gulliver and Madeleine. 'Amazing,' thought Sandra, her heart racing. 'Totally fucking amazing. Is she in denial, or what? *What is she thinking?* I don't want this! Oh God, I don't want this!'

She fetched some paper, then sat down at the kitchen table, knowing there was no way on Earth she could start with *Dear Sindy*. She resolutely wrote:

Sindy

You have helped to cause the greatest pain of my life and yet you imagine you can carry on as if nothing has happened? You obviously have no concept of what you've done and clearly were only thinking of yourself in your own selfish world. I understand now that what we shared together throughout our lives meant nothing to you at all. Well, what I really want to say to you is this: Fuck off, Sindy, and stay out of our lives forever.

Sandra.

Her heart beating rapidly with a strange exultation, Sandra put her note along with the Easter card and the £5 note into an envelope, sealed it and wrote Sindy's name and address for the last time ever. She considered not putting on a stamp but was afraid that it would never reach its destination.

As soon as she was able, she walked quickly to the post office. As the offending envelope left her hand and dropped inside the post box, she felt undeniably good, almost as if a demon had been cast out.

'God, how biblical,' she thought as she walked back home. 'If only Sybil and Basil knew what their son had done, their handy, reliable Mr Fix-it son. I wonder what Lawrence or Kirsty would think if they knew. What would my old school friends think, or my other cousins, or other people I know? It's all so difficult.'

'In a way, it would have been easier if Osborn and I had split up, because the truth would simply be out and would have to be dealt with accordingly. How devastating for Gulliver and Madeleine that would be, though! God, how excruciatingly complex and agonising betrayal is, although sex is really so trivial. On the other hand, the greatest pain seems to emanate from the fact that sex between Osborn and me was ours and ours alone, but he just gave it away to *her*. I can't work it out, I only know it hurts.'

It was Easter Saturday and a family get-bored-together was unfolding in glorious tedium at Basil and Sybil's house.

"Oh no," Gulliver had groaned that morning. "I don't want to go there! Can't I tell them I have an ulterior engagement at Hazel's?"

"It's entirely up to you," Sandra had replied. "But you won't only get fed up, you'll get fed well because Sybil thinks all decent men are continually hungry."

"Yes, but what about *me*?" Gulliver had retorted. "Ouch!"

Later, in her in-laws' sitting room, Sandra sat hungrily eyeing the Easter Egg that Basil and Sybil had given jointly to her and Osborn.

'Gulliver and Madeleine got one each,' she thought sulkily. 'God, how childish of me. Still, it would have been nice to have been given one each – just a small one. I sometimes think Sybil thinks Osborn and I are joined at the hip (which would be tricky) because we're married. God, how petty I am. How hungry I am! I really couldn't eat that stuffed marrow. And I was only given one roast potato. And you'd think after all these years that Basil and Sybil would realise I don't like red peppers, or green celery, or purple blanchmange, or pink curry sandwiches. Oh dear, I'm lapsing into insanity again. Ho hum. I should be doing my *Is Aggression an Innate Drive?* essay instead of sitting here. Of course, it's natural that I should find it a little difficult, not being personally acquainted with aggression.'

"Gulliver, leave my Easter Egg alone, you thieving monster!" she cried vehemently.

"There was no need to hit me over the head with that *Religious Woman's Twice Fortnightly*," said Gulliver in an aggrieved voice. "Anyway, the Easter Egg is yours *and* Dad's."

"You can have it all, Sandra," said Osborn, coming back from the kitchen, where he'd been helping to wipe dishes.

Sandra looked at him gratefully, not so much for his offer of extra chocolate, but more for his spontaneous kindness. 'I wish we could have sex,' she thought warmly. 'After I'd eaten some Easter Egg, of course. I wonder when it's going to stop, this desire for rampant lovemaking? Never, I hope, I rather enjoy it. I think I *will* open this Easter Egg, though.'

"I've got a good game we can play," said Sybil, as she returned from the kitchen to the sitting room. "It's a pity Lawrence couldn't come today. Never mind, we're going to visit Kirsty and Karla next week. Your mum and dad should be joining us soon, though, Sandra. Ah, speak of the – er – there's the doorbell!"

Sandra was undeniably pleased to see Caroline and Leonard walk in, although at the same time she was very apprehensive about Osborn and her mother meeting for the first time since the Valentine's Day Massacre had become known to Caroline. She knew that Osborn was extremely nervous also. When Sandra had told him her mother knew, he'd visibly paled. For a moment Sandra had even wondered if he might need a *Vomiting Vermilion Mood Matching Toilet Roll* again, but he'd accepted the situation stoically. Sandra looked across the room at him. He seemed to be hiding his nervousness by talking to Madeleine, who was definitely not amused.

"Dad, I really don't understand about your electronic stuff. I hate wires and plugs and sockets and..."

"Your new CD player with its wires and plug that fits in a socket," chipped in Gulliver.

"Shut up. I just find it boring, that's all, Dad. Don't look so upset, it's not that big a deal. What's the matter?"

"Nothing! Hello Mum," said Osborn quietly, as Caroline entered the room. Sandra held her breath.

"Hello Osborn," replied Caroline. "Happy Easter."

'Thank God,' thought Sandra, as tears of relief threatened to appear in her eyes. 'They're OK together. He's still calling her Mum and she's still calling him – well, Osborn. Oh Mum, thank you!'

"Hello you two," said Basil to Caroline and Leonard as they sat down in the sitting room. "Oh, not there, Leonard. Sorry, that's my – umm – that's a chair with a special cushion."

"Whoopee?" asked Leonard with a twinkle.

"I'm sorry?" said Basil, having missed the twinkle.

"Never mind, Basil," said Leonard, sitting in another chair. "What have you been up to lately, then?"

"Sybil and I organised a very uplifting *Penultimate Supper* celebration last week," replied Basil, sitting down heavily in his chair.

"*Penultimate Supper* celebration?" asked Caroline wonderingly.

"Yes. Sybil and I couldn't make it to the *Last Supper* celebration, because I had a hospital appointment, so we hit on the idea of a *Penultimate Supper*. It went down very well."

"It was a shame it came up again later that night though, Basil," said Sybil, "but I suppose it was a good thing only three people came."

"Did the hospital appointment go well?" asked Caroline, noticing Basil's barely disguised discomfiture at Sybil's remark.

"Yes, thank you," replied Basil curtly.

"Prostrate," whispered Sybil loudly to Caroline.

"What?" asked Gulliver, frowning. "He had to lie down?"

"Prostate," whispered Caroline to Gulliver. "Behave yourself."

"What was that game you mentioned earlier?" Sandra asked Sybil, hoping for a diversion.

"Oh, in a moment, Sandra dear," said Sybil. "I wanted to ask your mother something. Caroline, you've been on a float, haven't you?"

"A float? Oh, a float. Yes."

"You were raising money for some charity or other, weren't you?" prompted Leonard.

"*Promotion of Relationship Normalisation*," muttered Caroline. "We wanted to ensure that secondary school children were taught realistically about adult relationships and sex." Caroline glanced at Basil, who had twitched a little at her last word.

"How did you ensure they were taught realistically?" asked Madeleine. "You never told me anything about this, Grandma."

"Well, I retired before it actually came to fruition," replied Caroline. "When I left, they were preparing a video for national distribution."

"Would I have seen it?" asked Madeleine.

"No, it was dropped for being too realistic," said Caroline. "I ask you! Instead, children are sexually educated by images that are either purely clinical, or sugar-coated in a fantasy of idealism."

"Quite," said Sybil sagely. "Of course, I was never sexually educated by video."

"Well I am, constantly," said Leonard. "Soaps, travel programmes, comedy shows, plays, films, *Breakfast With Clint and Lolita*..."

"Anyway Sybil," interrupted Caroline, "why did you want to know about me on a float?"

"Oh yes. My *All Religious Sisters Everywhere* group have decided to take part in this year's carnival procession, but none of us have much experience. In fact, I have no carnival knowledge whatsoever."

"Right," said Caroline, smiling. "Well, the best I can do is to put you in touch with the woman who organised our float. I think I've still got her telephone number at home. Are you going to be on the float yourself, Sybil? They can be real bone shakers, you know."

"Oh no, dear, I'm going to help make costumes for some of the younger members. My friend Elsie Primm is only 74."

"I see. Is this *All Religious Sisters Everywhere* group an ecumenical one, then?"

"Oh yes, but you can only join if you're a member of our church."

"Let's play the game," suggested Osborn, in response to Sandra's suppressed convulsion of laughter. "What game is it, anyway?"

"*Trivial Dispute*," answered Sybil proudly. "I got it at one of our VAGINA jumble sales the other day."

Two weeks later, Sandra and Osborn were looking at each other questioningly one early Sunday afternoon, when the doorbell rang.

"Thwarted!" announced Osborn with a rueful smile. "I'll go."

As Sandra tidied away the coursework she'd just finished, she heard the unmistakable sound of Sybil's voice. 'Oh no,' she thought. 'No, no, no, no!'

Basil entered the sitting room first, followed by Sybil, who was sniffing and holding a handkerchief to her nose. Her eyes looked suspiciously red.

"We've just come back from Lawrence's," explained Sybil with a quavering voice. "We thought we'd drop in and tell him about our visit to Kirsty and Karla, but he never asked us in. He still doesn't want to speak to us!" She gave a sob and blew her nose.

"Oh dear," said Sandra. "I'll make some tea."

When she took the tea into the sitting room, Sybil was calmer. Osborn was holding her hand and making soothing remarks.

"Lawrence will sort himself out in time, I'm sure of it, Mum," he said. "I'll talk with him and try to find out what's wrong. I'm sure he's just going through a difficult phase in his life for one reason or another and he'll come out of it soon."

"Thank you, Osborn. I can always rely on you to put things right."

"How was your visit to Kirsty and Karla?" asked Sandra, trying to change the subject and give Osborn a break.

"Oh!" Sybil's face crumpled again and she dabbed her handkerchief to her nose. "Not very well, I'm afraid. She and Karla are – are – are living together!"

"Ah, you mean?"

"Yes!" Sybil blew her nose.

"Well," said Sandra, wondering how straight she should be. "Well, if she's happy, isn't that the main thing? I know that's how I feel about Gulliver and Madeleine."

"I'm afraid the devil is running riot in the world today," said Basil. "Happiness is immaterial."

"Actually, you're right," said Sandra, knowing that what she meant and what Basil meant were two entirely different concepts altogether.

"Osborn, do you know why Lawrence is avoiding your parents?" asked Sandra that evening, as they were undressing for bed.

"He hasn't got anything against Mum, it's about our father."

"Yet it's your mum that's most upset! What's he got against your dad?"

"Well, I know he's upset because our father says things to him sometimes about being single," replied Osborn.

"That's not too bad, surely? Your mum keeps dropping hints about him finding a woman, too."

"Yes, but our father accuses him of being gay. "A raving queer" to be precise."

"No!" Sandra was genuinely shocked. "That's diabolical – and your father professes to be a man of God? Oh, it doesn't make sense at all. I guessed Kirsty might be gay, but Lawrence certainly isn't. Anyway, what does it matter, for heaven's sake, they're people! What a mixed-up family you come from."

"Dysfunctional, I'd say," said Osborn frankly. "I'm not dysfunctional, though." He winked, but Sandra missed it. "By the way, I forgot to tell you that Kirsty's invited us all to stay with her and Karla in the summer if we want to. Are you up to it?"

"I really don't know, I'm too exhausted to think about that."

"Oh, you don't have to think, you can just lie there and close your eyes..."

"What?" Sandra looked up and noticed the twinkle in Osborn's eyes.

"I just want you to be nice to me, that's all," said Osborn invitingly.

"I'm always nice to you, so you need to sodding well appreciate it!" said Sandra, leaping on top of him as they got into bed.

CHAPTER 11

It was June and the morning of Sandra's first summer exam. The time since Easter had flown by in a haze of *Creme Eggs*, lectures, coursework, coffee, sex, two poems and some hasty but therapeutic spring cleaning – although not all at the same time. Her second tutorial presentation had taken place without too much trauma, either for Sandra or the people who'd been forced to listen to *Is Marriage Psychologically Necessary?*

It was a beautiful morning. Sandra had decided to go to the university early, to try to catch Marcus Lowe. Although she'd seen him at tutorials, she suddenly felt as though she would very much enjoy a talk with him alone.

'If he's not there, or if he's busy, I can revise in the library,' she thought, as she sat on the bus in the direct sunlight. 'Gosh, I love the sun. Actually, it's very hot. Far too hot, I think I'll move to the other side of the bus, in the cool shade.'

As she got up to move, the bus went around a corner and Sandra veered uncontrollably into the seat behind the empty one she was attempting to sit in.

"Sorry," she said apologetically to the old man, whose eyes had widened considerably as she'd been launched into his lap. "Sorry, I'm a psychology student."

To Sandra's slight surprise, Marcus was in his room and able to see her for a while. She sat down in the familiar room, wondering what was different.

"It's your desk, it's tidy," she suddenly realised aloud. "I can see more than just your chest and head above the pile of papers."

"I hope it's not too much of a shock," said Marcus, smiling.

"No," replied Sandra, thinking how nice Marcus looked when he smiled, which wasn't often enough.

"Which exam have you got this afternoon?" he asked.

"*Biological Bases of Behaviour*," replied Sandra, grimacing, "but I'll get over it." She wondered briefly what to say next. 'Why have I come here?' she wondered. 'I don't need to talk about anything.'

"What will you do in the summer break?" asked Marcus.

"Oh, I – well, I'm enjoying writing poetry at the moment and actually, I feel like writing a book," she blurted out, to her own amazement. "A book about what's happened to my partner and me. It's like we've been through a pain barrier and come out the other side in a much more honest sort of relationship." She looked up at Marcus with slight embarrassment and caught him looking straight into her eyes.

"You should write it," he said quietly.

"I think I might try," she said, thinking how she liked Marcus for his thoughtful quietness, or possibly his quiet thoughtfulness.

"How are things now?" he continued.

"Oh, still a bit up and down," replied Sandra. "There was one day a few weeks ago when I felt dreadful. I felt vulnerability oozing out of me from every pore. All I wanted was to be held." She stopped, thinking that what she'd said might have been inappropriate, but Marcus simply nodded. "Anyway, luckily it was a Saturday, so I wasn't at university," she added, bringing another smile to his lips.

"That's one of the downs, what about the ups?" he asked.

"Oh. Well, I can remember I had my first feeling of pure hope not long after that. I wanted to ring Osborn and tell him about it." Sandra smiled nervously.

"Did you ring him?"

"No, I waited until he came home."

"Well at least you told him eventually. I learned the hard way how important it is to communicate."

"I'm sorry, I've been talking about myself a lot. When ... when did your troubles happen?"

"Oh, about four years ago. I remember I wrote a lot of poetry afterwards."

"You wrote poetry?"

"You're surprised?"

"A bit. I'm sorry, I shouldn't be surprised. I find it a bit difficult to write poetry in between all the coursework, but I find that when it's ready to come out, it almost begins to happen of its own volition."

"Do you write for yourself, or with a view to being published?"

"Well, I guess it's for myself, but I'd like to be published. I even tried for a while a couple of years ago, but no luck. What about you?"

"Purely for me, I think. That is, I showed the poems to other people, but what they thought of them didn't really matter to me."

"I think I know what you mean. I like it when people like my poems, but if they don't, then that's OK. It's their prerogative and it doesn't diminish me at all – in my eyes, anyway."

"Right! Some people find it odd for someone with a scientific bent – strange expression – to do an arty thing like write poetry."

"Oh, I don't think it's odd at all. Even if it might be a little bit on the odd side, I like odd things and odd people, probably because I feel odd myself."

"It takes one to know one?"

"I suppose it does. Anyway, why should someone have to be either an artist or a scientist? It doesn't make sense."

"People like people to be in boxes. Black and white. Dichotomised." Marcus was smiling again.

"Sounds painful." Sandra was thinking how amazing it was to have seen Marcus smile three times in one visit. "Marcus, I must go, I have an exam." She was aware with a strange little feeling almost like pleasure that it was the first time she'd said his name aloud to him.

"Of course. Well, good luck, but you don't need it, do you?"

"Yes, I do! I'm looking forward to this exam as much as I did to the *Cognitive Psychology* exam last semester."

"You passed, though."

"Not very well, it was my worst mark."

"Pity. It's my subject area, as you know."

"I do know. That makes it kind of worse."

"Don't worry about it, we all have our specialities." Marcus flicked his long blond fringe back with his hand. "I'll see you in September, then. Have a good summer."

"Thank you. You too," said Sandra, leaving his room with a glad heart.

An hour later, she sat through the *Biological Bases of Behaviour* exam with the words of her conversation with Marcus still floating through her head.

'This is silly,' she thought, struggling for the second time to draw an illustration of Lorenz's Hydraulic Model of Aggression. 'What a time to have the idea for a poem about science and poetry.'

She scrawled a line through her second attempted illustration and started again. 'And what a time to wish I could be writing a book instead of thinking about the ridiculous frustration-aggression hypothesis. God, I can't draw to save my life!' Her frustration finally got the better of her, as she scrawled a line aggressively through her third attempt, breaking the lead of her pencil with a resounding crack.

"This is great," said Sandra to Osborn, as they sat in the garden with mugs of coffee in the late morning sun. It was a Saturday in early July and Sandra's exam results had arrived the previous day. They'd been quite pleasing, with the exception of *Biological Bases of Behaviour*, which had been little more than a pass. However, Sandra had come to terms with this, by deciding that behaviour itself was inherently more interesting than its biological bases.

"Mmm," said Osborn, sipping his coffee. "I'm kind of sorry we couldn't afford to go away anywhere special this summer. I know it'll be a change to visit Kirsty and Karla in August, but that's not really what I'd have chosen. Still, I'm enjoying relaxing in the garden. It's the first time I've properly enjoyed it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, before I knew you really loved me..."

"You mean, before the Valentine's Day Massacre?" interrupted Sandra a little sorely.

"Yes." Osborn winced slightly. "Before then, I never exactly thought of home as a permanent place – as *my* place, where I could relax and enjoy myself. It was just a place I came home to after work. It was a place where there always seemed to be jobs that needed doing, but jobs that I didn't really have my heart in."

"I never knew," said Sandra, sitting up to look at him.

"How could you if I never said?" continued Osborn. "I never fully admitted it to myself, it was all too painful."

"I thought you loved me all that time," said Sandra, a little pitifully.

"I did love you," replied Osborn. "I never stopped loving you."

Sandra sipped her coffee and decided to savour Osborn's words, rather than say what had come into her head – how could he have loved her when he was screwing Sindy? She chased the thought away by looking around the garden at the roses, the campanulas, the ericas and the gladioli. 'I'm getting better at names of flowers,' she thought idly. 'What's that over there with the funny leaves?'

"I've decided to apply to be a chartered engineer," said Osborn, interrupting her reverie. "It feels like a new start, a new direction in life. It'll definitely be something to get my teeth into."

"That's great!" said Sandra, genuinely pleased for Osborn. It was pointless being falsely pleased. "What will it entail?"

"I'll have to prove that I've attained a certain level of skill over a certain period of time and I'll also have to do a thesis. It'll mean a great deal of work, but I'll probably be able to do most of it at the university."

"Mmm," said Sandra, thinking. She'd been practising talking and thinking at the same time all her life. "Maybe I could meet you for lunch sometimes this coming academic year?"

"That would be good," said Osborn, reaching over to stroke her knee. "What are you going to do for the rest of the morning?"

"Mind my coffee. I don't know. I might do some weeding, or work on a poem, or – I don't know. What about you?"

"Oh, I might cut the grass, or do you fancy taking some sandwiches for lunch and going out in the car somewhere?"

"No, I don't really want to go out for lunch and have it in the car," said Sandra slowly, trying to ascertain what she really did want to do.

"You don't have to have it in the car," Osborn said, grinning.

"What?"

"We can go upstairs if you want to?"

"Oh yes." Sandra rose from the garden seat, trying not to appear too eager. 'The desire for rampant lovemaking is obviously still going strong,' she thought with a wry smile, as she began to unbutton her top. 'The desperation is still lurking underneath.'

Four weeks later, the four of them were staying in Kirsty and Karla's house in Hunterdon. It was a bit of a squash, but it all seemed to be going well. Sandra had been surprised but pleased that Gulliver had wanted to go with them, even though the main reason was that Hazel was away in Tenerife with her parents.

Sandra found it difficult to get along with Karla. She looked rather dark and menacing and they seemed to have nothing in common. Sandra was secretly glad that Karla had said she hadn't been able to get time off work to be with them.

Kirsty was easier to talk with, but she seemed to dislike doing any cooking, or dish washing, or grocery shopping, or anything much at all in the house. The day they'd arrived, she was sitting in a chair complaining about the heat and saying she hadn't got around to changing the sheets on the bed. In the end, Osborn had volunteered to do it.

Consequently, during their five-day stay, Sandra found herself clearing up and washing dishes a great deal, while Osborn prepared meals and found himself fixing things here and there around the house. It was often difficult to find anywhere to sit down, as the house was so cluttered. The cats and rabbits also made life much more complicated and messy.

'It's really good of them to put us up, though,' thought Sandra magnanimously, as she was preparing to go out one morning. I do love the scenery around here. I can't help wishing this house was cleaner and tidier to stay in, but Kirsty is my sister-in-law after all. I've always wanted a sister – and a brother, come to that. Lawrence doesn't exactly fit the bill, but he has a good heart. I think Kirsty means well too. The main thing right now is that I feel safe with her. I can trust her never to hurt me in the same way that Cindy did. God, what's that? Yuck, one of the cats has peed here!

September seemed to arrive without warning, except that August had preceded it, of course. Gulliver had passed his A-levels sufficiently well to go to university and was incredibly happy that Hazel had also chosen to study for a degree in Marine Biology at the University of Plymouth. Sandra reluctantly began to realise that the relaxed and comfortable days of summer were ending and the second year of her degree would no doubt throw her into an unrelieved round of lectures, seminars, coursework and exams, interspersed with bouts of family life.

'Bouts of family life sounds rather weird,' she thought analytically, as she vacuumed behind the sofa, 'as if it's a fight, or a touch of fever. I suppose it is sometimes. Oh well, that's the last time it'll be vacuumed behind here until next year. Housework is so boring. I'll have to think about what to cook for tea soon, I'm definitely ready for a bit of seriously horrendous coursework. Ah, who's that just come in?'

"Mother Knobbly Nose!" called out Gulliver gaily from the porch.

"Yes, Gulliver Nosy Knob!" called back Sandra gaily to him.

"Er – Mother, is it OK if Hazel and I make ourselves some cheese on toast?" he asked, entering the room.

"Oh! Yes," replied Sandra, winding up the lead of the vacuum cleaner. "Is Hazel here?" she whispered to Gulliver.

"Of course," whispered Gulliver back.

"Good," said Sandra aloud. "Would you like me to whip you up something?" she asked in a pseudo-maternal tone.

"No thank you, Mrs Dullkettle," replied Hazel, having followed Gulliver into the room. "We only want something light, we've just been for a swim."

"Did you enjoy it?" asked Sandra conversationally.

"Yes, the pool was nearly empty," replied Hazel.

"Oh? You'd think they could keep it full of water, wouldn't you," said Sandra, looking askance. "After all, we haven't had a drought this year."

"Umm..." began Hazel doubtfully.

"Are you looking forward to going to university then, Hazel?" asked Sandra, continuing unawares.

"Yes. Gulliver and I are looking forward to *Freshers' Week*. It should be great fun, we've been looking at the programme of events. We're going to a *Wham Slam Sham Night* at *Sleazy Suzy's* to kick off with."

"Gosh," said Sandra, almost lost for words.

"Mother – uh – dear, I was going to ask you if you had any big bits of cardboard I can have," said Gulliver, fidgeting slightly.

"Go on, then."

"OK. Mother, have you got any big bits of cardboard I can have?"

"No, sorry. I think Madeleine might have, though. Is it for some forthcoming coursework?"

"No."

"What's it for, then?"

"There's a game competition for the *Wham Slam Sham Night*, actually. The rudest entry wins a case of lager."

"I had no idea such things happened, I must be leading a very sheltered life as a mature student! I dread to ask, but what game are you entering?"

"*Pin the Penis on the Bishop*."

"You're not!"

"We are. We considered *Find the Fanny on the Nun*, but..."

"Gulliver! For God's sake go and make your cheese on toast. For my sake, actually. Ah, here's Madeleine by the sound of the door slamming."

"Hi," said Madeleine. "The library was packed this morning with all these stupid people looking for books."

"That's actually what a library is for," said Sandra smiling, as Gulliver and Hazel disappeared to the kitchen.

"I know, but what really annoyed me was this group of giggling girls who kept making fun of Guy."

"Perhaps they fancied him?"

"One of them was Claire."

"What, Claire who hit you once?"

"Yes, her. I haven't seen her much since she went to a different school, but she still looks down on me. I hope I grow a bit taller. It brought it all back really, Mum."

"Oh, Maddy, you're doing so well without her, don't let her get to you again."

"I still get teased for getting good marks. Anyway, the library supervisor came and told Claire and her mates either to stop making a nuisance of themselves or to leave."

"What did they do?"

"They went all quiet and left. Then after his shift, Guy asked me if I'd go to this youth club with him. He says there's a great group of people there. They do loads of things, but the only drawback seems to be that they also go to church."

"Do you want to go to this youth club?"

"I'm not sure. I just want to belong and not feel disappointed by people."

"Oh Maddy, do you feel disappointed by Dad and me?"

"No, you're my safe people and home's my safe place. Except..."

"Yes?" Sandra found she was holding her breath.

"You'll all be going to the same university now Gulliver's passed his A-levels and I'll be stuck at the same school, all alone."

"I'm so sorry, darling, I don't know how to change that. It won't be for all that long and I'll be home as much as I can, I promise. You know you can go to Grandma and Grandad's whenever you want to after school and they said they'd give you tea once or twice a week."

"I know. Your mum and dad are lovely to me, but it's not the same as coming home to you." Madeleine launched herself into Sandra's arms for a prolonged hug. Sandra felt her heart being torn in two.

"I love you, Maddy," was all she could think of to say.

"Hello you two!" called Osborn brightly, catching sight of them as he opened the front door and entered the porch. He immediately put down his bag and joined in the hug. "Oh, I love you two!"

"I love you two too!" said Madeleine, giggling a little and then disengaging herself to go in the direction of her bedroom.

"I thought you were going out with your colleagues for a drink today," said Sandra, wondering if anything was wrong.

"I did have a quick one with them," said Osborn, giving Sandra a hug, "but I kept on thinking how much I'd rather be having a quick one with you, so I left them to it."

"Wow," said Sandra. "I'm quite whelmed. I think we could manage a quickie before I peel the potatoes?"

"Actually, I'd love to have a cup of tea first," said Osborn. "Do you mind?"

"No, I was just going to make one," said Sandra, smiling, as she walked into the kitchen. 'Maybe the desire for rampant lovemaking is beginning to decline slightly at last,' she thought a little sadly, as she poured water into the teapot. 'Still, it's been great and there's no reason why it can't go on being good.' She put a teabag in the kettle.

"Sandra?" asked Osborn questioningly.

"What?" replied Sandra questioningly.

"Don't switch the kettle on."

"Oh!" Sandra turned around expectantly. 'He doesn't want to bother with tea after all,' she thought triumphantly, launching herself at him with outstretched arms.

"Give it to me, big boy," she said huskily, running her hands boldly through the remains of his hair.

"Sandra!" said Osborn urgently.

"Mum!" said Madeleine worriedly.

"Mother!" said Gulliver astoundedly.

"Mrs Dullkettle?" said Hazel non-plussedly.

"Oh. Sorry. Where did you all come from?" muttered Sandra, leaving the kitchen to go and hide herself in the bathroom for an hour or so in acute shame-induced misery.

That night, Sandra dreamt about a big family gathering, where from a distance she saw Osborn laughing and joking with Sindy. Although devastated to see them together, she started to run towards Osborn. At that point, Osborn looked up, saw Sandra and started to run towards her.

Sandra woke up with her heart thumping, but she felt strangely comforted. 'He was running in the right direction,' she thought warmly. 'He wanted to come to *me*.'

She put her arm around Osborn tenderly, but he moaned slightly and turned over on to his front. 'Oh well,' she thought philosophically, 'it was only a dream.' She kept her hand rather dangerously on his bottom for a while, then took it away sharply as a stray thought assaulted her peace. 'I wonder if he ever dreams about *her*?'

CHAPTER 12

"Hello Phil," said Sandra, standing in front of the second-year notice board on the first day of her second year as a psychology undergraduate.

"Hi Sandra," replied Phil, smiling a little tiredly. "How are you?"

"I'm OK," replied Sandra, smiling in return. "Are you ready for all this?" she continued, perusing the timetable. "A statistics lecture on Monday afternoons and a statistics workshop on Thursday afternoons?"

"Wonderful," groaned Phil.

"How's the love life?" asked Sandra brightly.

"Bloody awful," replied Phil, looking at Sandra a little woefully.

"It didn't last, then – the girl from Oceanography?"

"No. I found her too deep and she found me too way out. She said she couldn't stand the questionnaires I kept giving her."

"I didn't think you went out with her that long?"

"No, only three days. I needed the data from the questionnaires, that's all."

"A mismatch of sorts, then?"

"A mismatch of shorts, actually. That is, my shorts and my – uh – Freudian zip."

"Oh? Tell me more."

"Hey Ro!" a voice interrupted loudly along the corridor.

"Hey Bo!" another voice came loud and clear.

"Hey Zo!" a third voice proclaimed.

"Hey Mo!" a fourth voice joined in.

"Hey Ro, Bo, Zo, Mo, Vo, Jo!" a cacophony of voices swelled along the corridor.

"Oh God, here we go," said Phil to Sandra, touching her momentarily on the shoulder. "See you later, maybe."

"Yes," said Sandra, looking at the notice board in distaste. "We seem to have been put in lots of different groups for lots of different subjects."

Two and a half hours later, Sandra was feeling depressed. She sat in the refectory with Jill, sipping coffee gloomily. They had just endured their first group session of *Methods in Psychology*, which basically involved splitting into smaller groups, doing an experiment (psychologically based, of course) and reporting on it back to the rest of the group in the form of a presentation.

"I hate presentations," moaned Jill, sinking her teeth into a piece of carrot cake.

"I detest them," groaned Sandra, sinking her teeth into a piece of swede cake.

"Ugh, this tastes funny."

"Did I tell you I'm leaving my husband?" asked Jill nonchalantly, continuing with her carrot cake.

"No!" answered Sandra with surprise, abandoning the swede cake.

"It's been brewing for a long time," continued Jill. "Just like this coffee. No, I mean me doing this degree has kind of moved things along. Oh, here's Nerissa. She looks upset."

"Hey Nerissa," said Sandra, as Nerissa placed her cup of something unidentifiable and a piece of strange looking cake on their table. She had rather obviously been crying.

"I've just been to see my personal tutor," said Nerissa, still sniffing a little, "to tell her my husband said either I leave this degree course or he's leaving me."

"No!" Sandra said in horror. "That's blackmail."

"That's what my personal tutor said," replied Nerissa. "She said it might be a good idea if we considered counselling."

"Would your husband go for counselling?" asked Jill.

"I don't know," replied Nerissa, "I'll have to ask him tonight. I bought myself a piece of parsnip cake to cheer myself up."

"Oh dear," said Sandra, wrinkling her nose.

"Yuck!" exclaimed Nerissa, having taken the first bite. "It's horrible." Tears started to form in her eyes. "All this and a statistics lecture this afternoon. Just what is life all about?"

"Here, have this," said Sandra kindly, pulling a *Bewildered Buttercup Mood Matching Toilet Roll* from her bag and handing it to Nerissa.

"Come on then, Maddy," said Sandra kindly. "Let's get you to the surgery. It's probably infected tonsils again."

"I hate going to see the doctor," said Madeleine thickly. "I always feel like there's nothing much wrong with me and doctors frighten me."

"Oh Maddy, they're there to help you."

"I know. I don't know why they frighten me, it's just the whole thing of injections and hospitals and stuff."

"But you've never been in hospital, except to be born."

"I don't remember."

"Come on, let's get it over with. You've probably got a touch of White Coat Syndrome or something. Anyway, Dr Effingham's quite human, despite being Welsh. Mad as a pot plant, though."

"Pot's still illegal," said Madeleine, smiling weakly.

"Ah, there's life in the old girl yet," said Sandra, putting on her jacket. "If we go early, we might just be seen early."

"Sorry to keep you waiting," apologised Dr Effingham an hour later, as Sandra and Madeleine sat down in his room. "What can I do for you, Madeleine?"

"My throat hurts," replied Madeleine.

"Let's have a look then," said Dr Effingham, as Madeleine obediently opened her mouth. "My God, those are the worst tonsils I've ever seen. Ha! No, they're not actually, I find joking helps – sometimes. Not much of a joke, I expect you're thinking. You're looking very pale."

"I'm frightened of doctors," said Madeleine. "I don't feel very well."

"Yes, of course," said Dr Effingham kindly. "I'm sorry, my Welsh humour got the better of me."

"I think Madeleine has a touch of White Coat Syndrome," said Sandra suddenly, trying to ease the atmosphere.

"Got a thing about white coats, have you?" said Dr Effingham in his sing-song voice. "Well, there's nothing wrong with that, I've got a couple of white coats myself." He looked at Madeleine and smiled. "There's no need to be frightened, I'm almost human, you know."

"Ah," articulated Madeleine uncertainly.

"It's just that doctors and patients are forced into this bipolar role situation," explained Sandra, "and doctors are naturally at the more controlling, influential end. Well, some more than others, I suppose. Some more unnaturally than others, maybe. Anyway, therefore they can seem distant, rather all-powerful and scary. Oh dear. Sorry, I'm a psychology student."

"Hmm. Well, psychology student, I find using first names helps with some of my patients. I'm Dai, by the way."

"OK, Dr Dai. Oh." Sandra giggled a little.

"Try the full version."

"Dr Dai Effingham!" Sandra screeched a little.

"I'm feeling rather sick, if you don't mind," interrupted Madeleine, as her badly named GP began to sort out a prescription. 'Mad as a pair of pot plants,' she was thinking tiredly.

"What can I do for you, Sandra?" asked Marcus, as he looked up from his computer, brushing his blond fringe away rather impatiently.

"Hello Marcus," said Sandra a little breathlessly, having run up the stairs. "I wondered if I could have a chat? I think I mean a talk, I can't seem to identify with the word 'chat'."

"Is it urgent?"

"No, not really," replied Sandra, finding that Marcus's blue eyes were unnerving her somewhat.

"Ah. I'm sorry to put you off, but I really am positively inundated with work." He indicated the desk, which was without doubt, positively inundated.

"OK, sorry to bother you," said Sandra quickly, longing to escape from his room and his blue eyes.

"Don't worry, people are interrupting me all the time," he grimaced. "I feel as if I've got people coming out of my ears."

"Right! Well, don't work too hard," said Sandra, walking towards the door. She turned around as she placed her hand on the door handle. "When is there a hope I can see you?"

"Not for the next two years at this rate!" Marcus semi-smiled. "But try again, it's just hit or miss, I'm afraid, whether I'll have a few spare minutes."

"OK then. Bye." Sandra smiled half-heartedly and left. She found she was walking back along the corridor with a sense of aloneness. 'Was he joking about the two years?' she wondered glumly. 'Was he only being nice to me last year because of my problems? Oh well, maybe I can have a talk with Phil sometime.'

A week later, Sandra sat with three other second-year students, of the young variety, in a university refectory. To her extreme and intense disgruntlement, she had been put in a *Case Report* group instructed to prepare an assignment on the Internet.

"I still fail to see what any of this has to do with psychology," she said to Vernon Hailstorm (Vo) after he'd explained to the group what he already knew about the World Wide Web and the Information Superhighway.

"Yo. This isn't your scene, then."

"No Vo, it's not. I came here to learn about people, not bloody computers. This assignment is more relevant to my son's degree in communication engineering."

"How did you get on with the first-year computing assignment?" Mo (the only other female in the group) asked, trying to fling back her short blonde hair.

"That was OK, it was easy – just word processing, spread sheets and data bases." Sandra decided not to mention the begrudged help she'd received from Gulliver.

"Right," said Vo. "Well, seeing we've got to prepare a blurb about the Psychology Department to go on the Internet, maybe you could get on with writing the intro?"

"I can help with the hardcore stuff," offered Boris Summerday (Bo).

"Far out, man," replied Vo. "What about graphics?"

"Oh, I can do that too," replied Bo, leaning back in his chair.

"Yo Bo! That gives us a good picture of things," said Vo. "How about you, Mo?"

"I can help you guys," replied Mo. "Hey, have you heard about Phil?"

"What, Phil Potts?" asked Sandra rather sharply.

"He's dropped out," replied Mo.

"Are you sure?" Sandra impatiently flipped aside her mental picture of herself and Phil dropping out together on Phil's sofa.

"He took an overdose."

"What?" Sandra could hardly believe what Mo was saying.

"It didn't work, though. He's OK, but he's had enough of psychology, he said it sent him over the edge."

"Oh God, poor Phil," said Sandra quietly. "How did you find this out, Mo?"

"I met his latest girlfriend from Marine Studies," replied Mo somewhat guardedly.

"I see. He had lots of girlfriends, then?"

"Quite a few, for a mature student. Oh – sorry, So."

"Sandra. That's OK," said Sandra abruptly. "Is he still living in his flat?"

"No, he's gone to live with his ex-wife and her peripatetic vet," replied Mo. "Bad mistake, if you ask me. Hey, what is Cyberspace – and Netscape – and HTTP?"

"It's a nightmare," said Sandra. "How strange that I'll never see his purple jacket again." She looked up defiantly and saw three pairs of eyes focused on her wonderingly.

Sandra was standing in the library queue, feeling hot and bothered, when she caught sight of Osborn. "Osborn?"

"Sandra?"

"Fancy meeting you here!"

"Is the queue in the library always this long?" Osborn smiled at Sandra through his slight harassment.

"No, it's usually longer. How's your morning gone?"

"Too quickly. I'm only just beginning this thesis and I feel bogged down already. I'm so unused to all the theory."

"You didn't mention this at home," said Sandra, raising her eyebrows. She still felt somewhat in shock from the news about Phil.

"It seems hard to talk at home sometimes, I'm not sure why," said Osborn, wrinkling his forehead.

"All the comings and goings, I suppose. Hey, that reminds me – oh, maybe not. I don't suppose you've got time for a coffee, have you?" asked Sandra hopefully.

"Umm – yes, I could really do with one."

"Good," said Sandra, smiling. "Well if this queue manages to keep moving at the rate it's going now, we'll have time for a quick one."

Sandra lay in bed that night, completely unable to sleep, as thoughts of various people jumbled around in her head.

'I can't believe Phil tried to kill himself,' she thought sombrely. 'I hope to God it had nothing to do with me and that ridiculous scene in his flat. It actually seems so long ago, as if I've lived through another mini-lifetime since then. I hope it was nothing to do with my awful sandwiches. I hope his life works out for him, he's a nice person. Just a bit lost, really. Aren't we all? Well, I would have been, if he hadn't shown me where Marcus's room was that first day. Good luck, Phil, you deserve a break.' She turned over on to her right-hand side.

'What about Marcus, though? I feel rather let down, I must say, at the way it's so difficult to see him while he's so busy. I hate bothering people, there's no way I can keep knocking on his door on a hit or miss basis. It's true that I haven't missed yet, the door's quite big, but – oh, I'm just being silly. He seemed so affable and available at the end of last year, but now he seems so unavailable and distant. I wish we still had weekly tutorials with our personal tutors, like we did in the first year. They used to feel like a solid base in an uncertain new situation. Now we're in the second year, we do have the academic tutorials with different tutors, but they don't have that feeling of a solid base in an uncertain not-so-new situation. I do feel slightly abandoned, although it's not Marcus's fault.' She turned over on to her back.

'Poor Nerissa, I'm sure she feels more abandoned than I do, now her husband's actually walked out. She looked so small when she was telling the gang and me yesterday. How on Earth is she going to cope with the coursework and everything? And Jill leaving her husband is bound to be an upheaval for her, even if it's been brewing for a long time. God, what with Osborn and me, I think doing a degree in a subject like psychology should carry a relationship warning.' She turned over on to her left-hand side.

'It probably forced the issue with us all, I suppose, because there must have been pre-existing factors in every case. It still hurts, though. I know I feel better with Osborn a lot of the time, but it doesn't take much to make me remember – like watching television programmes of people betraying one another – hearing someone speaking with an accent like Sindy's – meeting someone with the same name as hers – seeing handwriting that looks like hers – Mum talking about Auntie Lily. God, there's so much that still reminds me, it's quite incredible. It feels like it's out to get me everywhere.' She turned over on to her front.

'Madeleine seems a bit low again recently, even though the tonsillitis has cleared up. She hasn't been eating all that much and she looks so pale. Gulliver seems to spend more time doing things with Hazel than he does doing his coursework. I can't stop worrying about him let loose on the roads with that little yellow Mini, either, no matter how hard I try. I haven't got time to see as much of Mum and Dad as I used to and I know Mum in particular doesn't like that, because she goes rather distant sometimes and asks when she'll see me again. As for Basil and Sybil and Lawrence and Kirsty and Karla – God, I can't breathe.' She took her nose out of the pillow and turned over on to her right-hand side.

'Yes God, it all feels like such a weight. I haven't even put the winter duvet on yet, either. As for You, God – you're being elusive again.' She turned on to her back.

'Osborn's a bit restless, he's tossing and turning almost as much as I am. It was nice having a quick coffee with him today in the refectory. I hope his chartered engineer thing isn't too much of a strain, I don't think we can collectively stand it.' She turned on to her left-hand side, just as Osborn turned on to his right-hand side, which left them face to face in the bed.

"Hello," said Osborn. "I can't sleep, I keep thinking of integrated circuits and phase delays."

"Wow. It keeps you awake, this intellectual pursuit."

"I know, it's catching."

"I went down with it years ago."

"Could I integrate your circuits at all?"

"Why not? Don't delay my phase, though."

"You're strange."
 "Life's strange."
 "Never mind, we'll get over it."

Sandra stood in front of a group of twenty students, reading from her notes about the psychological experiment she had earlier undertaken with two others. Black spots began to dance in front of her eyes and she was aware of her heart beating like a manic metronome. Still concentrating on saying her words, she tried to breathe slowly and calmly until the black spots disappeared. When she had finished speaking, she walked back to her seat with trembling knees, feeling she was being weak and ridiculous.

'I'm being weak and ridiculous,' she thought angrily. 'What's wrong with me? Everyone else seems so normal. I bet nobody else in this entire room feels the need to keep a flaming *Neurotic Nutbrown Mood Matching Toilet Roll* deeply secreted in the recesses of their bag.'

CHAPTER 13

"You look drawn," said Osborn to Sandra, as he carried two mugs of coffee into the dining room, where she was revising on a cold and windy January day.

"You look a bit pencil sketched yourself," she answered, twiddling with her hair.

"Oh, I'm sick of visual pathways and feature detection."

"What's that got to do with psychology?"

"Beats me. It's part of *Perception*. It's interesting, but I simply don't see it. How's your thesis going?"

"Not too bad. I'm glad I took a few days off from work, even though I've got lots of work to do. Can I join you for five minutes?"

"You might as well. If I read another word about Fourier Analysis, I'll scream."

"I know about Fourier Analysis," said Osborn casually, sipping his coffee.

"You do? You, in your communications field? God, what with that and the bloody Internet coursework (which I'm really glad is over, incidentally, with a not too horrific mark), I'm wondering if there's anything at all that's not included under the vast umbrella term of *Psychology*."

"You sound fed up."

"I am. Hi Gulliver."

"Hi. I heard you and Dad talking. I'm sick of revising."

"You only started half an hour ago," said Sandra grumpily.

"Well, it's my young brain, I don't have to work as hard at remembering things as you so-called mature people."

"I may be so-called mature, but I'm not stupid," retorted Sandra.

"That's controversial," retorted Gulliver back.

"Oh, shut up, you immature git," retorted Sandra back to his retort back. "I do very well with computers, seeing I don't understand them. You were practically brought up with the damn things, it's got to be easier for you."

"Yes, I don't know why I've got such an affinity with computers," mused Gulliver.

"It must be a throwback from a previous life."

"Are you utterly and completely mad?" asked Osborn conversationally. "Of course, I wasn't brought up with computers either, but I manage to get along with them pretty well."

"As well as can be expected," quipped Gulliver.

"Don't patronise your father," snapped Sandra.

"Why not? It makes perfect sense," replied Gulliver. "Are you jealous because I can only matronise you?"

"God, you're on the ball," commented Sandra tiredly.

"No I'm not, it would hurt."

"Oh, sod off, Gulliver!" exploded Sandra. "You're too sharp for your own good. Go and blunt yourself on some more revision."

"OK," replied Gulliver good-naturedly, leaving the room.

"You seem a bit tense," remarked Osborn to Sandra, touching her arm.

"Yes, I am," she replied. "It's all this revision and the time of year. I hate it."

"What, Christmas and all that? I thought it wasn't too bad this year. My parents were quite – well, almost bearable."

"Yes, they were. No, it's not just that." Sandra fidgeted and slurped her coffee slightly in agitation.

"What is it, then?"

"I don't want to say." Sandra put down her mug and sighed. "I don't want to remind you. It's just that a year ago today you were with *her*. I remember the date, you see. I wish I didn't. I *really* wish I didn't, but I seem to remember dates well and it's all come back to me. The pain of thinking what you were doing when I was all alone, trusting you. The snow. The utter, utter awfulness of it all. I want to forget it so much, but I can't."

"I'm sorry." Osborn looked into Sandra's eyes. "There are some things that I find painful to remember, too."

Sandra found she was unable to reply. 'I didn't actually do it with anyone,' she was thinking. 'You only had the pain of imagining what I might have done, but you crossed that irrevocable line between thought and act and I *know*. Nothing in the whole world can ever change that knowledge. I have to live with it and carry on forgiving you every single time I remember. But I still can't forgive *her*. I don't know if I ever will.'

Later that day, Madeleine came home from school, flinging her bag down heavily on to the floor in the porch.

'Oh no, Maddy's had a bad day again,' thought Sandra, as she gave herself a *Creme Egg* break from the mental representation and recognition of 3D visual objects.

"Hello," she said morosely, walking to the porch, where she found Madeleine inspecting herself in the mirror. "How was your day?"

"Awful," replied Madeleine. "You're in a bad mood."

"It's revision," explained Sandra not quite truthfully. "At least, I wish it was revision. Half of the stuff I need to know, I feel as though I've never come across before. What was so awful about your day?"

"I made a complete and utter idiot of myself," said Madeleine. "We were talking about the pros and cons of radiotherapy in general studies."

"Well?"

"I said it was a readily available form of therapy nowadays as most people have a radio in their home."

"Oh..."

"Exactly. Everyone laughed and I went bright red and wanted to die and kill everyone for laughing."

"That would have been difficult. Poor Mad." Sandra realised what she'd said. "Hey, you didn't tell me off for calling you Mad?"

"No, I've given in. It seems to suit me now, especially living in this house." Madeleine looked at herself again in the mirror. "I still feel all hot and angry and stupid. I feel so different to everyone else. Maybe that's why I get on so well with Guy, he feels the same way about himself."

"What, hot and angry and stupid? Oh, I'm sorry darling, take no notice."

"I don't."

"So you like it at this youth club you've joined with him, then?"

"It's OK. The people there are more tolerant than the people at school."

"I'm sorry you haven't always been wonderfully happy at school."

"Well, only a few years to go, then I have to decide what to do."

"You want to go away to university, don't you?"

"Actually, I'm not sure now. I was thinking of going to yours, where I could do a law degree, or maybe business studies."

"That would be amazing, Mad! I'll be finished by then, though, Gulliver too. What a shame, it would have been fantastic with four of us there! Time seems to pass so quickly. After these exams, I'll have half a degree. Wow, I feel better already."

"It must be nice to have your life sorted out," said Madeleine wistfully.

"Oh darling, if only you knew," said Sandra without thinking. "It doesn't feel like that at all. I thought that finding psychology and then going to university was finally what I wanted to do, but now I'm not so sure. I wish I'd done the degree twenty years ago and made a career with it. I honestly feel as if I'm doing it too late, because there are other things I want to do. Life suddenly seems so short, as if I might not have time to do all the things I want to do. Or the energy."

"What about just being?"

"I've been there. No, I know what you mean. You *are* a wise young bird, aren't you?" Sandra gazed at Madeleine appraisingly. "Just being is OK. Necessary even, but I need to do something that's been fundamentally inside me for years. I need to write." Sandra still felt surprised at this admission.

"Well, do it then. At least you're sorted out with Dad, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"You've had your children, you've done the mothering bit. I don't even know if I want any children. Besides, I haven't met anyone I really want to go out with yet. It just all feels so uncertain."

"You're still so young, though, you shouldn't really be worrying about all this at all. It'll come clearer in time, don't worry." Sandra was rather perturbed at Madeleine's apparent despondency.

"Don't worry, God!" exclaimed Madeleine.

"Oh, God can handle it," said Sandra, smiling in return. "And so can you," she added encouragingly.

"Thanks, Mum." Madeleine opened her arms for a hug.

"Thank you too, my beautiful girl." Sandra opened her own arms. 'If only *I* knew I could handle it,' she was thinking.

"Shall we play dive bombers instead?" said Madeleine suddenly, displaying one of her swift mood changes as she began to run around the room making aeroplane noises. She stopped and looked mischievously at Sandra's surprised face. "I may as well live up to my name. Wheeee!"

'Maybe Mum's old hypothesis about self-fulfilling name acronyms was right after all,' thought Sandra, smiling. 'Well, at least my middle name doesn't begin with A.'

Sandra knocked on Marcus's door, half hoping he wouldn't be there. She was lucky, as half of her hopes were instantly fulfilled by the ensuing silence.

'Oh well,' she thought, as she walked quickly away. 'It doesn't matter that I've only seen him for five minutes this academic year to collect my more or less reasonable exam results. It doesn't matter that today is the first anniversary of the Valentine's Day Massacre and I just wanted to tell someone. It doesn't matter that I've made a hole in this new pair of tights. It doesn't matter that I see homeless people in the streets every time I'm in the city centre. It doesn't matter about crimes of violence, global warming, nuclear waste and the possibility of a meteor colliding with Earth. It doesn't matter...'

"Is anything the matter?" Sandra heard as if from a distance, as she brushed a stray tear from her eye.

"I don't know where that came from," she joked feebly, as she realised she had almost walked straight past Marcus in the corridor. "Everything's the matter," she replied to his question.

"Do you want to come and see me?" Marcus's blue eyes were being very blue again, she noticed.

"Yes," she answered quietly.

"Will five minutes do for now?" asked Marcus, looking at his watch.

"Yes."

"Come on, then," he said, leading the way back along the corridor to his room.

"I'm sorry about this," said Sandra, as she moved a pile of papers from the comfy chair, so she could sit down.

"I'm sorry I've been so busy," said Marcus. "For myself, actually, I'm knackered!" He sighed, then looked at Sandra intently. "What can I do for you?"

"I just wanted to tell you," said Sandra, faltering a little, "that today is Valentine's Day." Her voice tailed off.

"I didn't know you cared," said Marcus, smiling unevenly.

"Today is the first anniversary of the day I found out my partner was having an affair with my cousin," Sandra managed to blurt out, before having to scrabble around in her bag for a *Maudlin Magenta Mood Matching Toilet Roll*. Marcus was silent while she blew her nose and wiped her eyes, but not in that order.

"I understand," he said quietly, as she wondered what to do with the soggy bits of toilet roll. "It does get better."

"Thank you," she said, as she got up to go.

"Is that all?" asked Marcus, looking a little surprised.

"Yes," replied Sandra, with a watery smile. "Thank you, Marcus."

"Any time," he said, untruthfully.

As she walked back down the corridor for the second time that day, Sandra was aware of feeling lighter. 'What is it?' she mused. 'I haven't left my bag in his room again. No, it's the mere fact that I've told someone who's been through the same sort of experience. Someone who when they say they understand, they actually do. Well, some of it at least. Thank goodness I bumped into him. Well, he bumped into me really. Oh well, I can face *Individual Differences* with only a semi-heavy heart now.'

"It's good to see you, Mum," said Sandra to Caroline on Easter Sunday at a family-get-together, as she stood in her mother's kitchen at teatime, wiping dishes. "I'm sorry I've been so busy. I can't believe a whole year has gone since – well, since things were so difficult."

"I know what it's like doing a degree," said Caroline, "although I didn't have a family to contend with when I was doing mine."

"You must have been unusual in your day," mused Sandra.

"Pardon?"

"Well, you still are unusual, of course," joked Sandra, "but I mean there were far more males than females in the psychology field when you did your degree, weren't there?"

"Yes, I was definitely in the minority," agreed Caroline. "It was rather gratifying really, with all that male attention. Before I met your dad, anyway. They all seemed to back off a bit then."

"It was unusual for a woman to pursue a career at all, wasn't it?"

"Yes it was, but I knew I could never be contented just staying at home and Leonard was very understanding."

"Good old Dad. He's all right these days, isn't he – his heart, I mean?"

"Yes, he's mostly all right. That cold and cough he had at Christmas knocked him for six for a while, but he went walking again with the *Old Ramblers* last week, so I know he's feeling a lot better."

"You're OK, aren't you? Fit and healthy, I mean?"

"We-ell, I wasn't going to mention it, but I'm taking more pills for high blood pressure now and I've got a bit of arthritis creeping in."

"Mum, you must tell me these things! I'd much rather know than not know, you know."

"I know. I usually end up telling you everything anyway, despite my intentions not to worry you. It seems to come out whenever I see you."

"Well, I'm glad. I worry sometimes that you worry about worrying me."

"Don't worry, I won't keep anything serious from you, I promise."

"OK. Hey, do you think Osborn's dad's all right? He seems rather pale and quiet. He hasn't picked fault with anything all day."

"Basil? Yes, you're right. Well, I suppose we'd better go in and join them all. I can hear Basil talking now, he can't be that bad."

"No." Sandra spread out the tea towel to dry and followed her mother.

"Gosh, what's all this?" asked Caroline, as she went into the sitting room to find Leonard and Basil sitting with their heads together, poring over a letter.

"They're doing some mail bonding," said Gulliver, grinning. "I mentioned that letter I had about a Personal Protection Plan and not knowing whether it was about insurance or menstruation, but they didn't seem to find it funny."

"I'm not surprised," said Madeleine, "it's as bad as your juvenile reaction to that letter Mum had about the cooker guarantee that said 'malefunction' instead of 'malfunction'."

"I like a bit of mail in the morning," said Sybil suddenly, fingering the *Incredibly Low-Calorie Easter Egg* which Sandra and Osborn had given her.

"Yes, Sandra likes a nice bit of male in the morning, too, don't you," said Osborn, ignoring Sandra's frown and frantic mouthing of the words, "Shut up!"

"We've got a postlady now," continued Sybil. "Our last postman should have been given the sack, because he certainly didn't take enough care."

"In what way?" asked Caroline conversationally.

"He bent lots of birthday and Christmas cards, he kept delivering letters to the wrong houses, he let the mail get all soggy when it was raining and once he must have dropped a letter with a cheque inside, because I found it on the pavement outside our house. Anyway, there were lots of complaints, so by all rights he should have been given his cards."

"Some people simply aren't suited to some jobs," remarked Caroline.

"Well, I heard he's got another post now," continued Sybil. "In the sorting office."

"That'll sort him out," said Caroline, smiling.

"Yes," responded Sybil blankly.

"You don't think they're being rude about my mental health then?" Sandra heard Basil asking her father.

"No, a mortgage counsellor is someone who advises on the best plan of action with a mortgage," explained Leonard, "not someone who – er – offers therapy. Anyway, this letter is a standard one, they've obviously made a mistake if you haven't got a mortgage anyway."

"Not at my age," said Basil tiredly. "It's worrying, though, all the letters you receive these days offering you money, credit, good financial terms, extortionate rates of interest. If you ask me, it's the devil rampant in society."

"Right," replied Leonard. "I'm glad I could help."

"I don't like to bother Sybil with financial affairs," said Basil, lowering his voice.

"Are you all right?" asked Leonard, as Basil put his hand to his forehead.

"I feel a bit queer," replied Basil. "It'll pass, but I think it's time to take the wife home. Come on, Mrs!"

"I'm a bit worried about my father," said Osborn later that evening, as he sat beside Sandra on the sofa. "He suddenly seemed so old today and sort of weighed down. Financial matters never used to get on top of him before."

"Yes," replied Sandra, breaking up the *Desperately Low-Fat Easter Egg* which her parents had given her. Although she had secretly wanted a *Creme Egg Easter Egg*, with thousands of calories, she was very grateful for the lower calorific value of the *Desperately Low-Fat Easter Egg*. "Do you want a bit?"

"Uh..."

"Of chocolate," said Sandra, raising an eyebrow.

"It's OK, I've got the one your mum and dad gave me," said Osborn, picking up his *Diabolically Low-Fat Easter Egg* and opening it. "Sorry, I thought you meant..."

"No, I know you're tired. I am, too. I feel kind of guilty sitting here in front of the television. Shall we turn it on? I've got essays to do, but I'm too exhausted. There's always so much to think about. Too much. Too many people to worry about and be responsible for. Children at one end and parents at the other end."

"Hey," said Osborn, "you've got me."

"I know," said Sandra thoughtfully. "Well, I feel as if I know I've got you about 80% at the moment – as much as anyone has ever got anyone else, that is – which conceptually embraces the rather dodgy issue of possession. The 80% does fluctuate. It's just that we seem to be in the middle of – oh God, this is middle-age, isn't it!"

"Looks like it," said Osborn, "but I'm not going to go flabby with middle-age spread." He put down his *Diabolically Low-Fat Easter Egg* abruptly.

"Madeleine hasn't touched her *Naughtily Nutty Easter Egg* yet," said Sandra. "That's unusual, she loves chocolate nuts. So do I, actually."

"Wow," breathed Osborn.

"Oh dear."

"What?"

"I think I've eaten too much chocolate." Sandra got up and turned on the television. "Good God, what's this programme about? The *Creme Egg Addiction Helpline*? How ridiculous can you get! I wonder if I should give them a call?"

CHAPTER 14

Sandra knew it was bad news from the way Osborn was speaking to his mother on the phone.

"It's your father, isn't it," she said, after he had put down the receiver.

"He's in hospital," replied Osborn, sitting down in rather a daze. "He collapsed in church. It's his heart, he's in the Cardiac Care Unit."

"Oh no," said Sandra quietly, experiencing a flashback of her own father lying in a hospital bed, looking as if he might be about to die at any moment.

"Mum's already rung Lawrence and Kirsty," continued Osborn, frowning.

"Kirsty?" Sandra was surprised.

"Yes. It must be serious if she's rung her."

"Or else she's panicking," said Sandra. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that."

"She rang her before she rang me," said Osborn thoughtfully. "After all I've done for them. I just get all the responsibility of all the little jobs, all the big jobs, all the medium size jobs..."

"All the family get-bored-togethers."

"Yes. Then she goes and rings Lawrence and Kirsty first."

"Oh Osborn," said Sandra, going over to where he was sitting to give him a hug.

"It's not your fault. You don't know what it's like, though, you were the only one and your parents loved you."

"Your parents loved you," said Sandra, a little uncertainly.

"That's why they wouldn't let me do anything I ever wanted when I was young," continued Osborn. "I wanted to learn to play the guitar, join the school rugby club, go to see *Jesus Christ Mega-star*, represent the shooting club – the list is endless. When Lawrence wanted to do things, they just seemed to let him."

"Did you ever challenge them about all that?"

"They said times were hard and they didn't have enough money for me after they'd spent it on Lawrence. By the time Kirsty came along, they were apparently fine."

"It could be true, of course?"

"Even if it is, it's unfair. Lawrence has always been their golden boy. I'm just their on the spot Mr Fix-it, Mr Do-it-all, Mr Dump-it-all-on-Osborn."

"Oh Osborn." Sandra dumped the dirty washing she was carrying on to Osborn's lap, so that she could hold him lovingly against her chest.

"Sandra, I can't breathe very well," said Osborn faintly, moving his head a little frantically. "Oh, that's better. Anyway, I said I'd go to visit Dad, then take Mum to her friend's house, then get her some bits and pieces from *Safebury's*, then cut her grass, then mend her flaming washing machine. I think she must have got something jammed in the drum..."

"Mum, it's the concert at school tonight," said Madeleine, as Sandra was trying to put the finishing touches to a piece of coursework. "Do you think it's still OK for me to go, even though Grandad's in hospital?"

"Yes, of course," replied Sandra. "You've been looking forward to it, haven't you?"

"Not really," replied Madeleine glumly. "Natasha Waymore and Lucy were funny with me at school today, talking behind my back and saying I looked thin."

"I thought you wanted to look ... like that," said Sandra, warning bells going off in her head. 'Not a touch of tinnitus, surely,' she thought with alarm.

"They're only saying it," replied Madeleine. "I know I'm not really thin."

"Why do you have to be labelled anything?" asked Sandra kindly. "Why not just be happy to be yourself, with a lovely body that's uniquely yours? You've got great legs, a great..."

"OK Mum," interrupted Madeleine. "I know what you're saying, but it's in here." She tapped her forehead. "I don't know why I feel like I do about myself, but at least I can talk to you about it. I'm glad you're doing psychology, it feels as if you know about things."

"I wish I shared that feeling," said Sandra, smiling, "but I'm kind of glad that you're kind of glad."

"I'm glad," said Madeleine, resting her cheek against Sandra's for a moment. It was an unusual stance. "Is Dad upset about Grandad?"

"Yes, he is," replied Sandra. "He also seemed upset about Grandma and Uncle Lawrence, not to mention Auntie Kirsty."

"Families are a pain, aren't they," said Madeleine, sighing.

"Yes – and no. Yes and no! Are Dad and I a pain, then?"

"Sometimes," replied Madeleine distractedly. "I wonder what I ought to wear tonight?"

"Something you feel good in."

"I'd better not wear nothing." Madeleine gave a weak smile. "I'm going to look in the wardrobe."

"Madeleine!" called Sandra after her, but then she heard the front door opening and closing. "Is that you, Osborn?" she called out.

"No, it's me," said Gulliver quietly, coming into the room.

"Are you OK?" asked Sandra, having immediately noticed his air of melancholy.

"Hazel's dumped me," he replied, leaving the room as quietly as he'd come in.

'What a lot of dumping is going on today,' thought Sandra, wondering if she should go after him, while feeling instinctively that he wanted to be alone. 'I must go to the loo in a minute. No, I know *I* generally want to be alone when I'm hurting and I have things to sort out. Oh, poor Gulliver!

'Relationships can be so painful, they pull out your very insides. Not to mention your very outsides. I can quite understand how some people don't want to become involved with other people, it's simply too much of a risk. But you don't really live if you don't open yourself to love, pain, misunderstandings, companionship, petty arguments, snide comments, horrible annoying habits, always having to consider someone else, power struggles over the remote control. God, it's endless – and yet what's it all for at the end of the day? Or the beginning of the day? Or the middle of the afternoon?

'You die anyway, like Basil might be doing this very minute. God, I hope not, although it's bound to happen one day. It's just that I don't think I can face the inevitable emotional upheaval of Osborn and the fact that Sybil will be on her own. Oh God, I'm depressing myself. God, You are there, aren't You? I so much want to believe, but I can't do it mindlessly. Actually, nobody could do it mindlessly, or brainlessly, anyway – with the exception of the Yahweh Witnesses, maybe. Why does everybody pick on them? Oh dear, I'm lapsing into insanity again. Oh, who cares! Besides, what *is* insanity? Anyone who thinks they have the right to say what's insane and what's not insane must be completely around the bend!'

Later that night, Sandra lay in bed beside Osborn, who was understandably restless. Sandra herself was rather more misunderstandably restless.

"You can't sleep, can you," she said unnecessarily, reaching out to touch him in the dark. She knew he always liked to be touched there.

"No," he replied, also unnecessarily. "Even though they say my father's stabilised – and I quite honestly wonder if he's ever been stabilised – no, I don't mean that. I mean, he was OK when I left him, but I feel so unsettled."

"Are you worried about your mother?"

"Yes, although she seems to have quite a few friends who are already rallying around. She's certainly got a backup of people she knows from belonging to her church."

"A social network," murmured Sandra. "That's good, it can be a buffer from psychological distress. I did some coursework on that subject."

"She was still talking about Lawrence a lot, though," continued Osborn, fidgeting abruptly. "I suppose at least he's relented and actually gone to the hospital. Kirsty says she can't come yet. I was beginning to wonder whether it would all be left to me."

"It seems siblings can bring their own problems," mused Sandra. "I always felt a bit envious of you having a brother and sister, although I hardly ever saw them. It's just that you have someone there – even when they're not actually there – someone who's shared your life at home when you were young. I had nobody. When my mother and father die, there'll be only me who remembers all the silly little things, like watching *Juke Box Jury* on a Saturday teatime in front of the fire (except in summer) and making our own decisions and our own daft noises about whether we thought each song would be a hit or a miss."

"My father never let us watch it," said Osborn resignedly. "He regarded it as the devil in song."

"A bit like Acid Freaks Rave 666," observed Sandra.

"Mmm."

"Do you know, I've noticed you often talk about your father, whereas I nearly always call my father Dad."

"I never had a dad," said Osborn quietly. "Only a father."

"I love you," said Sandra, rather inadequately. 'It doesn't really touch it,' she thought sombrely. 'The hurts of childhood go so deep, they seem like a big tumour of dodgy memories buried forever, with tendrils that grow all over the place, winding themselves insidiously all amongst your vital insides – and your non-vital insides – and your vital outsides – and your non-vital outsides. Like Cindy and that ridiculous scene when Auntie Lavender gave her 2s 6d and I was given 6d. It wasn't Cindy's fault. It was her fault, though (or her wilful choice, anyway) to screw Osborn. Of course, it was *his* wilful choice as well. Oh God, I don't want to go into all that. It still hurts so much when I think about it. Hearing certain songs still sets it all off again. I think I'll be stuck with a metaphorical knife in my heart for ever, although it's gradually getting smaller.'

"Gulliver's late home," said Osborn, interrupting her train of thought. She was glad, it had been a bad track.

"Yes, he is," she replied. "I hope he's all right, he was really into Hazel."

"Literally, I suppose. What can you do these days, apart from encourage them to be responsible? At least he didn't get her pregnant."

"No," said Sandra, unconvinced. 'There's always something or someone to worry about,' she thought worriedly. 'How I can possibly concentrate with any depth on *Anthropometrics and Human Factors*, I haven't the faintest idea, it's positively inhuman.'

"You were late home last night," remarked Sandra to Gulliver the next morning, as they converged in the kitchen.

"Yes," replied Gulliver, a faint flush creeping into his cheeks. He was definitely late dressing that morning.

"Aren't you having any breakfast?" asked Sandra, as Gulliver uncharacteristically poured himself a cup of black coffee. Characteristically, he usually poured himself a cup of white (or a sort of pale brown tea colour) tea.

"I'm not sure I feel like it," replied Gulliver.

"A heavy night, was it?" asked Sandra. "I was young once, remember."

"I wasn't there, Mother," said Gulliver grimly. "Thank God."

"Anyway," said Sandra to her son, looking at his face furtively, to spot any signs of emotion. "How are you feeling?"

"OK," replied Gulliver. "Why?"

"You seemed listless when you came in yesterday, that's all," replied Sandra, searching desperately for the right words to say.

"I've never been one to make lists, you know that," said Gulliver pleasantly.

"Mum means are you feeling OK about Hazel dumping you," said Madeleine as she entered the kitchen.

"Yes. Shit happens."

"Yes, it does." Sandra privately considered that Gulliver's reply was a bit brusque. 'He could have explained himself a bit more fully,' she thought.

"Don't expect a fuller explanation," said Madeleine, looking astutely at Sandra. "He won't put us out of our nosy misery, that's him all over."

"I'm sorry about your noses," said Gulliver, having an accident with the box of *Shreddie Munchie Wheatie Oaties*. "Oops! All over you, as it happens. Sorry."

'Oh well, he seems perky enough,' thought Sandra, as she poured herself a bowl of *Extra-Bran Extra-Fibre Bran Fibre*. 'So does Maddy, which is good, although these days I feel rather unsure about both of them.'

A few hours later, Sandra sat in the university refectory with Nerissa, having survived the final *Human Factors* lecture.

"How are you doing, then?" she asked Nerissa, who was bravely assaulting a *Cut and Don't Come Again Nelson Trapezium*.

"OK, I suppose," replied Nerissa, still battling with a knife. "I just live from one day to the next, you know, as you do. I keep taking the headache pills and my hair seems to be falling out, but so what? I'm tired of staying awake worrying all night. Hey, are you coming to the pub crawl to celebrate the end of this semester's contact time?"

"What pub crawl's that?"

"Haven't Jill, Jenny and Juliet told you?"

"I haven't seen much of them lately, to be honest."

"Well, we're going to go to the Barbican this Friday night to let our hair down a bit before revising for exams. I must say, I'm in the mood for it, I feel like doing something reckless. How about it?"

"I don't know. I seem to be full of reck at the moment."

"Oh, go on, it won't be the same without you."

"OK then." Sandra smiled uncertainly, wondering why she felt so strongly in four minds about wanting/not wanting/half wanting/about seven-eighths wanting to go. 'I don't know about dualism of the mind and body, I've got multi-ism of the mind alone,' she thought tiredly. 'I wonder if Marcus is in? I suppose I could go and say goodbye for the summer, or something.'

Marcus was indeed in his room, as Sandra found herself sitting once again in the comfy chair.

"Are you confident about exams?" asked Marcus questioningly.

"No," replied Sandra confidently. "They seem kind of remote at the moment, with all that's going on at home."

"Oh?"

"Just normal things. Well, nearly normal. Well, nothing seems particularly normal about my life, actually. I'm not normal, anyway, so that figures. My son and daughter are giving me slight cause for concern, my father-in-law is in hospital and there's this pub crawl I don't really want to go on with my friends here." Sandra stopped abruptly at the sudden internal articulation of a thought that astounded her.

'I'd rather go to the pub with you,' she'd thought astoundedly, looking (with astoundment) at Marcus. 'Gosh, would I? With *Marcus*? What does that mean? I'm not harbouring a secret fancy for him, am I? No, I haven't got a secret fancy. Anyway, he's not my type. I'm not his type. I'm too old for him. He's too young for me. He'd find me boring. I'd find him too hard to keep intellectually challenged...'

"Deep in thought?" Marcus's voice asked interestedly.

"Oh, yes, nothing. I was only thinking how I don't want to go on this pub crawl. I'm hopeless in group situations, I'd much rather go out and talk with someone in a pub on a one-to-one basis."

"Where shall we go, then?"

"Sorry?" Sandra blushed helplessly.

"Only joking," said Marcus, his blue eyes twinkling. "I don't much like social shit chat, either – and no, I didn't make a verbal faux pas. In fact, I'm not good at doing it – social shit chat, that is – and I don't really want to do it anyway. I suppose it must feel good if one is able to talk about most topics to most people on a social level that keeps the wheels of polite conversation oiled, but I prefer that deeper contact that one can achieve with certain people in one's life."

"Oh, me too," breathed Sandra, sitting forward in the comfy chair at his words. "I had no idea someone like you would feel similarly to the way I feel."

"Someone like me?"

"Well, someone who's intellectually confident like you are," explained Sandra.

"Intellectual confidence and social confidence don't necessarily co-exist."

"No, of course not. Marcus?"

"Yes?"

"Were you able to forgive your wife when she betrayed you?"

"Ah. At some levels, yes. At a rather more fundamental level, I would have to say no, although it's supposed to be noble to forgive and all that crap. Why do you ask?"

"I don't think I've fully forgiven my partner and I don't even want to forgive my cousin."

"Don't beat yourself about the head for that. Give it time. I'm not saying you should forgive them, only you can sort that out, but don't worry at it like a dog with a bone. It'll happen when it's ready to happen. Goodness, you think *I'm* intellectually confident!"

"I think you're good to talk with. You're honest with me. Thank you."

"My pleasure."

'It was my pleasure as well,' thought Sandra with pleasure, as she walked away from Marcus's room. She suddenly remembered Phil, with a jolt of something that felt surprisingly like guilt.

'Oh Phil,' she thought with a rush of emotion. 'I hope you find some pleasure in your life. There's so much pain in the world, or in people's minds. No wonder we all seek relief in little pleasures, or big ones, or ones a tiny bit bigger than the little ones, or in anaesthesia, or in annihilation. Dear Phil, you were kind to me. I hope you can be at peace with yourself.'

She got to the end of the corridor and started to walk unseeingly and dangerously down the stairs. 'Where did all that come from?' she wondered wonderingly. 'Somewhere deep within me, I suppose. One day, I'll have the time to explore the deep places inside myself. Right now, though, I really don't have the strength.'

Two weeks later, Sandra had managed to survive the pub crawl without actually having resorted to crawling, had started revision and was already sick to death of *Cognitive Neuropsychology*.

'I feel as if I have my own impaired cognitive performance to contend with,' she thought dully, standing up to stretch her arms. 'I think I'll do some housework instead, seeing there's nobody here to talk with. I must be bored, or cognitively impaired!'

She went into the sitting room. 'No, I can't face cleaning this room, it's too big. I'll try the bathroom – no, it's too small. I'll try our bedroom – no, it's too boring moving the bed and all the little bits and pieces on the dressing table. Anyway, I did it last year. I'll try Gulliver's room. No, I won't, I don't want to induce a major depression. I'll try Madeleine's room – gosh Mad, this is a mess. I didn't know you still had Action Man. Or this diary. Or these old *Care Bare* magazines – oh Maddy!' Sandra picked up the packet of three assorted flavoured condoms in disbelief, only vaguely registering that the packet was unopened.

Sandra sat down on Madeleine's bed in a daze, her mind racing uncontrollably in many directions. 'Has Madeleine had sex? She's only 13! Well, nearly 14. Oh God, she's only nearly 14! Where's her calendar? I know she writes a little *M* on the day her period starts. Let's see. Oh Mad, the last little *M* is two months ago. I'm her mother, she needs me – but what should I do? How can I broach the subject? Well, that's it, *Cognitive Neuropsychology* is completely out of my head now.'

While still sitting there, Sandra happened to notice a writing pad lying open on Madeleine's desk. She stood up and went across to look at it, her eyes starting to read the words without her consent:

Dear Guy,

I've done something really stupid and you're the only one I trust not to judge me. I can't tell you face to face, so I'm writing this letter. Last week Mum and Dad thought I was going to a sleepover at Lucy's, but we went to a party at her sister's friend's house and I got a bit drunk. I nearly ended up having sex with a boy I hardly know. It scared me so much. I'm so glad I can confide in you...

Sandra stood completely still in shock. What seemed to be hurting most of all was the fact that Madeleine felt able to confide in Guy rather than in her. 'My baby's gone,' she thought melodramatically, before leaving the room with a heavy heart to locate some *Gobsnacked Gold Mood Matching Toilet Roll*.

CHAPTER 15

"That was Mum," said Osborn quietly as he put down the phone. "My uncle's dead."

"Oh no," said Sandra, not actually knowing what to say next. "You mean your Uncle Bill?"

"A massive heart attack, there was nothing they could do."

"What about your father in hospital, they'll have to tell him his brother's dead, won't they?"

"Yes. I hope it doesn't push him over the edge. Mum said she'll tell him, but I feel I should be there too."

"Oh Osborn."

"Uncle Bill lived on his own, of course, so there'll be the funeral and everything to arrange. Mum said she'd rung Lawrence and he's going to stay with her for a few days. Thank God Lawrence is speaking to them again. Mum said she tried to ring Kirsty earlier, but she was out. She rang them before me again."

"Oh Osborn, I'm so sorry." A sudden dreadful thought had entered Sandra's head. 'Suppose Mum or Dad died and Cindy came here for the funeral. Osborn would see her again and it might reawaken things.' A shiver passed through Sandra's body.

"Are you cold?"

"No, someone just walked over my grave. I'm really sorry, though, I know you liked your uncle."

"Don't worry, I'm not going to break down into noisy sobs that'll rack my entire body," said Osborn a little acidly. "It's an awful thing to say, but he had a good life and basically pleased himself, whereas some of us don't seem to have that luxury. Does that sound selfish of me?"

"I don't think it's selfish," said Sandra, going to give him a hug. "I think it's human. Is there anything I can do?"

"I don't think so, just be here. I'm glad you *are* here, despite my – you know, despite all that. I'm glad we didn't split up and everything's OK." Osborn held on to Sandra as she made a move to release herself from the hug. "Everything *is* OK, isn't it?"

"Yes, everything's OK," replied Sandra. 'I can't tell him now how I still have dreams about the two of them,' she thought sadly. 'How I feel as if the pain and the memory and the memory of the pain will never go away completely. I'll be left with the aftershock in my heart for the rest of my life, although it *will* get better – lesser – quieter. It's got to, or it'll jeopardise my quality of life. I wish I could talk to someone about it. Really talk, right down to the sordid nitty gritty and all the sad and silly things that trip me up when I think about them.'

"I'll tell Gulliver and Madeleine," said Osborn, disengaging himself from the hug at last. "Do you think they'll be upset?"

"I expect so," replied Sandra, "although they won't overtly show it."

"Oh Mum," sobbed Madeleine in Sandra's arms. "Death is so awful! It's so final and so frightening."

"It's always a shock, I think, when someone dies," said Sandra, still somewhat amazed at Madeleine's overt show of emotion. She hadn't immediately cried when Osborn had told her, but had sought Sandra out on her own about an hour afterwards.

"Mum, there's something I've been meaning to tell you," said Madeleine suddenly, as if she'd just made a decision. "My period hasn't come for two months now."

"Oh Mad," said Sandra. Her mind began to race, wondering what she should do or say next. She made a huge effort to remain calm and not focus at all on the flavoured condoms she'd found in Madeleine's room. "There isn't anything else you want to tell me, is there?"

"What?" Madeleine looked surprised. "No."

"OK, well it could be something or nothing, darling. Look, let's get the funeral out of the way – I mean, let's get it over and then we'd better go to see Dr Effingham."

"OK," said Madeleine, more calmly. "I'm glad I've been able to tell you at last. I feel a bit better now."

"That's what I'm here for," replied Sandra, as Madeleine sniffed loudly and went to her room. 'Is it what I'm here for?' she began to wonder dejectedly. 'Am I here mainly to be a stable influence on this family? Well, I don't want to be *just* that. I've never even been inside a stable as far as I know. I set out to do this degree for *me*, to find out more about myself, as well as finding out more about other people and about humanity in general, but I'm beginning to feel swamped by other people, like I did years ago. I don't mean to be selfish, I really don't, but that little voice inside me is beginning to scream 'What about me?' again.'

"What about me?" asked Gulliver from the doorway.

"Pardon? Sorry, Gulliver, did you say something? I wasn't really listening."

"Well, you'll all go to the funeral, but what about me? I've just been talking to Dad. I'm anti-religion and surely it'll be all those religious nuts from Grandma and Grandad's church? I don't think I could stand it."

"Oh God, I hadn't thought about that," said Sandra, surprised at how her heart had plummeted. She hadn't thought it could go any lower. "It's up to you, Gulliver, I'm sure Uncle Bill would understand."

"Great Uncle Bill," corrected Gulliver, looking genuinely confused.

"Look, in the end I think you should do what you feel is best, otherwise you might resent it."

"Will Grandma Dullkettle mind me not being there? I know he was Grandad's brother and not hers, but she must be having a hard time with Grandad in hospital and everything. Would she want me to go?"

"Probably, but she has all her friends from their church to support her, as well as us. If you really don't want to go, perhaps you could ring her up and say you're sorry but you truly can't face it."

"I'm sorry, I don't do apologies," said Gulliver distantly. He looked at Sandra's face. "I was only joking," he muttered. "I'll go. I have this thing called a conscience. Besides, it might be a good excuse for not doing very well in exams."

"Hello Lawrence," said Sandra. "Hello Kirsty. Hello Karla. It's a pity it takes a funeral for us all to be together. Oh God, I didn't mean it like that. Sorry Sybil, I didn't mean to blaspheme." Sandra decided to keep quiet at all costs.

"I'm sure the Lord understands," replied Sybil. "Thank you for coming here to the house, I thought it would be a good idea to gather together before the funeral. You know, when two or three are gathered together in my name. I mean the good Lord's name, not mine. I need to go and powder my nose. I wonder where I left it?"

"I hope she means her powder," commented Lawrence, raising his still black, bushy eyebrows with their few extra long, wiry escapees.

"Karla and I have been talking," said Kirsty slowly when Sybil had left the room, "about what we would we do if Dad – you know."

"Died?" said Osborn.

"Yes. What would we do with Mum? She seems so old suddenly."

"It's not a question of doing anything with her," replied Osborn quickly, glancing at Sandra. "She's quite capable of making up her own mind what to do. Anyway, there's absolutely no need for her to go into a home yet, if that's what you were thinking. For one thing Dad's not dead yet!"

"I know, it just crossed our minds that if Mum was left on her own, you might have her to live with you," said Kirsty brightly. "You know, a nice normal homely atmosphere. She might get depressed living on her own."

"That's not possible," blurted out Sandra. "I mean, it's not possible for her to come and live with us, not that it's not possible she might get depressed. In fact, if she did come to live with us, *I* would get depressed. Probably suicidal. Besides, there's no room and we've all got exams coming up. Who's to say it would be what she wanted, anyway? And what makes you think we have a nice normal homely atmosphere?"

"Just a thought," said Kirsty, looking at Sandra wonderingly.

'A pathetic, dreadful, very convenient thought,' thought Sandra angrily. 'I am *not* going to play the dutiful daughter-in-law just to appease anybody's conscience. Besides, Sybil might just as well be on another planet to me. My house, my home, my entire life wouldn't be mine any more. Who gives anyone the right to think they can mentally rearrange people's lives and wellbeing?'

"Have we got time for a quick coffee?" asked Lawrence suddenly. "I'll make it." He seemed uncomfortable, thought Sandra, probably at what Kirsty had said.

"I'll help you," said Osborn.

"I'll join you," said Sandra. "Not to mention myself, because I'm slowly and surely falling apart."

Sandra sat in church, staring at Uncle Bill's coffin with a feeling of unrealness. 'Is there such a word as 'unrealness', I wonder?' she thought, as a fresh wave of unreal sensations washed over her in a very real way. 'I think I mean unreality. I don't feel very good at all. Better than Uncle Bill's feeling, but who actually knows? It seems so difficult simply being alive sometimes. Trust me to have an exam on the day of the funeral. How on Earth I'm going to cope with *Human Factors* this afternoon, I really don't know. Now if it could be an exam on *Inhuman Factors*, I'd be in with a chance! God, how awful of me to be laughing to myself at a funeral...'

Sandra jolted herself out of her reverie to try to concentrate on the service, which Sybil had asked her church fellowship to arrange. So far there had only been two hymns, which Sandra had tried hard but unsuccessfully to sing, plus a reading during which she'd lost concentration, or possibly consciousness.

'Ah, the talk is happening now, that should be a bit more interesting,' she thought dully. 'I'm dying to know – oh dear, I didn't mean that – I mean, I really want to know what they'll say about Uncle Bill's life.'

Sandra nudged up to Osborn beside her, as a gesture of emotional support expressed in the physical form. Osborn covered her hand with his, which was rather comforting. On the other side of Sandra, Madeleine was looking very uncomfortable. Gulliver, next to Madeleine, was simply there in body, if in no other part of himself.

'That man leading the service is talking more about their religion and their church than about Uncle Bill,' noticed Sandra after the first few minutes of his talk. 'I know Uncle Bill didn't come here, but plenty of ministers have to lead funeral services for people they don't know and they don't end up giving a sermon about their religion. How awful, we're here to say goodbye to Uncle Bill, not to be converted.' She listened intently for the next five minutes, vainly hoping to hear some recognition of Uncle Bill.

"Now, brothers and sisters, we'll ask a representative of each of the special groups of the church to come to the front and say a little piece," the leader of the service said solemnly.

'I don't believe it,' thought Sandra tiredly. She looked at Osborn. He looked drained of all emotion, she thought with concern.

"I'm from the *Christian Undertaking to Teach Everyone* campaign," a man with an abundant supply of nasal hair began. "I'm sure if William had been a CUTE member..."

'Oh dear,' thought Sandra with discomfiture. 'I hope I don't want to laugh inappropriately at this self-important bunch of lunatics. No, I didn't really mean that. They're all good at heart, acting out what they believe in.'

"I'm from *Holy Evangelism in Latter-day Lyrics*," a sprightly white-haired lady said a few minutes later from the front of the church. "Although we're singing traditional hymns today, the members of HELL have been very active lately."

'Surely they realise what they're saying?' wondered Sandra in amazement. 'Or are they too engrossed in their own religiosity to be able to think outside the narrow cognitive schemata which they inhabit? Oh God, that was rather hellishly psychological. Oh dear, here's another speaker. Where's he from, for God's sake?'

"Although he can't be with us today, William's brother Basil has been a very staunch and upright member in VAGINA," a self-important overweight man in his seventies announced. "No! My apologies, I should have said *Violence and Global Insanity Never Again...* At that point, Sandra was forced to close her ears as much as was humanly possible, to avoid making an unseemly and embarrassing social spectacle of herself.

'It would be absolutely dreadful of me to laugh out loud at this funeral,' she thought, looking intently at the coffin in order to sober her thoughts. 'This funeral has been a farce, as far as I'm concerned. I'm dying for a pee, I wish I hadn't drunk that coffee. I wonder what Osborn is thinking – and Gulliver – and Madeleine? Oh dear, the time's dragging on, I'll have to rush home and get ready for *Human Factors* in another forty-five minutes.'

Sandra sat staring at the exam paper, feeling tired and still somewhat unreal. She had spent the last hour forcing out what knowledge she could in response to the questions which stared at her mockingly from the exam paper. She knew she hadn't done her best. Every time she closed her eyes, she could still see Uncle Bill's coffin where it had rested not far away from her in the aisle of the small church. She wished she could be at home with Osborn. It was where she wanted to be and where she hoped he wanted her to be.

'Of course, he's not actually at home,' she realised dully, looking at the other students around her, all of whom seemed to be writing furiously. 'Why are they angry?' she pondered for a moment, before resuming her train of thought. 'Yes, Osborn will still be at his parents' house with Lawrence and Kirsty and everyone. I wonder what sort of spread they managed to put on the table? I hope they remembered to use those biscuits I gave them. How uncomfortable those après funeral get-togethers can be. Of course, there won't be any alcohol to deaden the pain, being a teetotal church. Well, at least I missed all that, thank God.'

"Mum," a small voice said into Sandra's ear, as she wearily unpacked her bag on returning home from the exam.

"Hello Maddy, how are you?" asked Sandra, trying to smile.

"Well, I tried to tell you this morning, but I couldn't get you alone," began Madeleine hesitantly.

"What is it?" asked Sandra fearfully.

"My period came this morning," said Madeleine uncomfortably. "But not only that – I was talking to Lucy and she said that her periods stopped once. When she went to see her doctor, she was told it was probably because it was early days and things hadn't settled down yet."

"That's good," replied Sandra. "I'm glad you're OK, darling. I know you don't like to talk much about these things, but you can honestly talk to me about anything. Goodness, I'm exhausted. I need a stiff drink, or a floppy lie-down, or something." She managed to smile weakly at Madeleine.

'It doesn't explain the assorted flavoured condoms, though,' she thought with a sigh, 'but I'm simply too tired to think about it any more. I love you so much, Madeleine, but I'm running on empty right now. I think I'm even too tired to go and cry with pitiful abandon into some *Relieved Rose Mood Matching Toilet Roll*.'

CHAPTER 16

"This is great," said Sandra to Osborn, as they sat in the garden with mugs of coffee in the late morning sun, "although I'm experiencing *déjà vu*." Her exam results had arrived that morning and had been quite pleasing, with the exception of *Human Factors*. After taking the exam, she had considered reporting extenuating circumstances to the Psychology Department, but couldn't make up her mind whether her uncle-in-law was extenuating enough. In the end she'd let it pass, fortunately (as she'd found out that morning) doing the same thing herself.

"Mmm," said Osborn, sipping coffee. "I'm kind of sorry we couldn't afford to go away anywhere special this summer, but it's nice to relax in the garden. Hey, I know what you mean about the *déjà vu*."

"Are you feeling OK about your uncle now?" asked Sandra, leaning across to stroke his knee.

"Yes. Mind my coffee. I'm still worried about my father, though, I hope he has his bypass operation soon."

"At least Kirsty can have your mother to stay with her and Karla for a while in Cambridgeshire," said Sandra, "which seems like poetical justice after what she said at Uncle Bill's funeral. I guess it's good of her, it certainly takes the heat off you while Lawrence is on holiday." She sipped her coffee. "He has quite a few holidays," she mused aloud. It was a habit she had unsuccessfully tried to break.

"He's got more money than we have," said Osborn slowly. "There's only one of him – thank heavens! I don't mean that. He's bound to have more ready cash."

"You could have been like him," said Sandra softly. "I mean, just you. Single and able to spend all the money you earned on yourself."

"I couldn't stand the loneliness," replied Osborn. "I like having you to talk to, to laugh with, to moan at when you tidy my things away..."

"We can joke with each other more and say exactly what we mean more than we used to since – you know – can't we! I used to be so afraid of upsetting you and you never seemed to find anything funny, anyway."

"Mmm. I wasn't joking, by the way."

"You weren't? Oh... Your mother's been quite good about bothering us, or rather not bothering us, do you think?" said Sandra, changing the subject as quickly as possible.

"Yes. Kirsty really had a nerve suggesting that she comes to live here, though. I'm not sure whose idea it was, to be honest. Lawrence told me it was Kirsty's idea and vice versa, but I don't think Lawrence would have suggested it? Anyway, it was probably one of those stupid things said in the heat of the moment. I don't know, though, I just feel used by some people sometimes."

"Not by me?" asked Sandra rather anxiously.

"No. Well, only in the nicest possible way."

"Oh? You mean ... that's a nice thought."

"Only a thought?"

"Do you want to make it more than a thought?"

"Well, it's quite relaxing sitting here," said Osborn lazily.

"Yes." Sandra finished her coffee thoughtfully. 'That desire for rampant lovemaking which consumed us so much after Osborn's affair seems to have run its course,' she thought with interest, although the word 'affair' still caused her to wince. 'Maybe we're more sure of each other now and don't need to confirm it physically as much. Maybe sexual passion always reverts to a particular couple's norm after the initial surge or urge – or a renewed surge or urge in our case. Maybe I'm too much of an odd shape these days. Maybe he's going off me.'

"Let's do it!" exclaimed Sandra, jumping up abruptly.

"Mum, I can't believe you're 70," said Sandra to Caroline a few weeks later, as they both sat in the garden. "Are you having a nice birthday? Are you really sure you didn't want to do something a bit more special today?"

"Yes, I am," replied Caroline, sipping a glass of sherry. "Thank you for asking me here for the day. Anyway, I'm looking forward to going to Tuscany with Dad, that's my real birthday present."

"Oh – OK."

"How are things with you?"

"I've been feeling a bit overwhelmed with Osborn's family recently," confided Sandra, "although I felt more or less duty bound to ask Sybil and Basil to join us later for an hour or so. I'm amazed at how quickly Basil's recovered from his bypass. No, it's just that the four of us don't seem to have spent much time with you as a family since I started university."

"I expect the family of four unit is waning anyway," said Caroline, sniffing. "I'm surprised Gulliver's here today, actually, instead of doing his own thing. What a strange modern idiom. Gulliver and Madeleine will both be leaving home before you know it."

"Oh, I will know it," joked Sandra, "but Madeleine's only just 14. She's growing up so quickly though, it seems true that girls grow up more quickly than boys. In one way I can't wait for them both to be independent, but I'll miss them so much. Lots of other sons and daughters Gulliver's age have already left home. If he's still here, there must be something we're doing all right. Or all wrong, depending how you look at it! As for him being here today – they've both got a soft spot for you, I think."

"I've got a soft spot for them both, too," said Caroline quietly. "I do miss seeing you regularly, like we used to, but I'm all right. I've got my friends, I keep active. I've no intention of popping off yet, like poor old Bill, if that's what you're worried about."

"No. Well, I don't want you to die, naturally," replied Sandra. "Actually, I *do* want you to die naturally, but not for a long while yet! By the way, I've applied to do *The Psychology of Ageing* as a course option next semester, it should be interesting."

"Let me know what you find out," said Caroline, smiling briefly. "Sandra, since we're alone at the moment, there's something you ought to know. Your Auntie Lily rang me a few days ago and told me that Sindy's getting married again."

"Married? Well, good luck to him, whoever he is," said Sandra abruptly. 'The poor sod, he'll need it,' she was thinking. 'Well, at least she's not fanny free any more, although that probably wouldn't stop her. It didn't stop Osborn, although he hasn't got a fanny. Oh God...'

"I'm sorry I had to mention it," said Caroline rather defensively. "I'm in a very difficult position, you know, it's so hard for me knowing about it when Lily doesn't."

"I'm sorry," replied Sandra, not knowing exactly why she'd said that. "I had no idea how much it would hurt. People who make jokes about affairs and who laugh about them as if it's clever to deceive someone who trusts them at a very deep level don't know what's involved." As she said this, Sandra remembered with almost a sensation of shock that her mother and father had separated for a few years in 1972, after her father had discovered that her mother had been having an affair.

"Things are all right between you and Osborn, aren't they?" Caroline was asking with more than a trace of anxiety.

"Yes, they're OK," replied Sandra, not wanting to dwell on past pain, particularly on her mother's 70th birthday. "Ah, here are Dad and Osborn. What have they been up to?"

"I've just been showing Leonard how our video works," said Osborn to Sandra and Caroline. "He should be able to program his own machine now."

"Hi," said Gulliver, having appeared in the garden with a can of lager. It was unfortunately one of the *Student Happy Crappy* variety. "I've just been showing Dad and Grandad how to program the video properly."

"How interesting," murmured Sandra, looking quizzically at Osborn.

"Leonard and I are just going to pop out to the video shop," said Osborn quickly. "It shouldn't take two minutes."

"It'll take at least 60 minutes if Leonard's involved," remarked Caroline, still sipping her sherry.

"No, you can't go!" shrieked Madeleine, streaking suddenly across the lawn. It was an extremely hot day. "Grandma and Grandad Dullkettle have just arrived and my

mango and aubergine mousse is looking a bit funny. You'll have to eat it right now!" She streaked back across the lawn.

"What were you going to get at the video shop?" asked Sandra curiously.

"Oh, a surprise," answered Leonard curiously. "Something special your mother and I could watch tonight. *Decent Exposure*, I think it's called."

"Really?" asked Caroline curiously. "Not one of those dirty videos, I hope. You know how I feel about them. I'm sick of sex and violence."

"You don't have to put up with it, Grandma," said Gulliver.

"Gulliver!" exclaimed Sandra. "Anyway, *you* watch all those terrible films like *Pulp Fornication* and *The Aggressive Nymphomaniac*."

"I know, I know," replied Gulliver. "Give me good clean filth any day. God, have we really got to eat that stuff Madeleine's bringing out?"

"Hello, hello!" Basil's voice could be heard booming into the garden ahead of him. "Happy birthday, Caroline! The old lady's on her way. Come on, old girl."

"Hello Sybil," said Caroline, as Sybil appeared somewhat breathlessly in the garden. "Come and sit next to me, dear. How are you? Basil seems fine."

"He is, he's been wearing me out, but I'm bearing up," replied Sybil, bearing down haphazardly on the garden chair. "These things are so flimsy nowadays. It was nice having Lawrence around, I missed him when he went on holiday."

"You still have Osborn around," said Caroline kindly.

"Yes. Lawrence was such a tower of strength, though, he kept my spirits up no end."

"Would you like a cup of tea?" asked Sandra quickly.

"Oh, yes please. What about you, Basil?" Sybil looked enquiringly at where Basil had rolled up his trouser leg. "Mind you don't get sunstroke," she said worriedly.

"Oh no, they're comparing scars!" exclaimed Sandra, as Leonard also rolled up his trouser leg.

"It's ready!" shouted Madeleine from the patio door. "Come and get stuck in!"

"Literally, probably," muttered Gulliver, wandering off in the direction of the patio door.

"Madeleine seems a bit on edge today," observed Caroline quietly to Sandra.

"Yes, she's been a bit tense lately," replied Sandra. "I don't think she's very happy about going back to school next month."

"Oh, she shouldn't worry, she comes from a clever family," said Sybil, looking towards the mousse. "You, Gulliver, Caroline, Leonard, Basil..."

"Osborn," prompted Sandra.

"Didn't I mention Osborn?" asked Sybil, looking at him.

"No, you didn't," replied Sandra a little forcefully. "He's doing very well with his thesis."

"What was that for again?" asked Sybil.

"He's applied to be a chartered engineer," reminded Sandra, her anger rising almost against her will.

"Oh yes. Did I tell you Kirsty's going to do Open University?" asked Sybil, failing to pick up on Sandra's risen anger. "I'll have some mousse," she said, looking interestedly towards where Madeleine was dishing out her creation.

"I won't," said Gulliver, having wandered back from the direction of the patio door with another can of *Student Happy Crappy Lager* in his hand.

"I'm not sure I will, either," said Sandra. "I think I've got middle-age spread."

"Is that margarine or butter?" asked Sybil. "They have so many new things out now. When Lawrence took me to *Safebury's* while he was staying..."

"I've spent all this time making a mousse and you're not even going to try it?" asked Madeleine, looking at Gulliver and Sandra with a hurt expression.

"Careful with that knife, Maddy," said Sandra. "Yes, I'd love a bit, please."

"OK, I give in," said Gulliver. "I'll have a bit as well."

"I'm glad Lawrence has gone on holiday," said Basil, dealing stickily with his mousse. "He deserved a break after looking after Sybil and organising Bill's funeral. Everyone needs to step back sometimes and take a good look at God's wonderful Earth."

Sybil and I must make the most of our lives now. I'm glad I never went into the ministry. I'm going to book a few holidays for next year, it does you good to get away."

"I'm sure it does," said Sandra, "but Osborn and I have responsibilities here."

"Yes, well anyway, we're going to the Scilly Isles first."

'Best place for you,' thought Sandra testily. 'Osborn helped with the damn funeral too, not to mention all the trips in the car because Lawrence doesn't drive. I know you gave Kirsty money for petrol, but you never gave us any.'

"Er – Madeleine," said Gulliver, poking around in his dish of mousse.

"What?"

"Ask a silly question..."

"Why don't worms have elbows?" snapped Madeleine.

"Ha! No, I was wondering why this piece of nail clipping was in my mousse."

"What! I didn't intend you to find that," said Madeleine, looking flustered.

"You were planning that I should be rushed to hospital?" asked Gulliver.

"Yes, I was planning to choke you to death," retorted Madeleine.

"Oh, Madeleine dear," Sybil suddenly wailed. "Don't say that word. Poor Bill!"

"Oh Grandma," said Gulliver. "It was only a joke."

'Oh God,' thought Sandra tiredly. 'This is turning into a nightmare and it's Mum's birthday.'

"Come on Sybil," said Leonard encouragingly from his garden chair. "Have some more mousse. It's quite..."

"Quite a disaster," said Madeleine, frowning.

"No, it's great, actually," said Gulliver. "Is there any more?"

"You're just being kind," said Madeleine uncertainly. "It's the lager speaking."

"No, it was definitely me," replied Gulliver, examining his lager can.

"That's a lovely plant you've got there, Caroline," said Sybil, having calmed down in the interim, whenever that was.

"Yes, it's a *Maximus Floribundus Extremis*," said Caroline. "Gulliver gave it to me for my birthday. I'm not wonderfully good with plants, but I shall look after this one. How would you look after it, Sybil?"

"Well, I treat all my houseplants once a week with *Mummy Bio*," replied Sybil. "Only a few of them die. Oh, poor Bill!" Her face began to crumple alarmingly.

"Let's have the birthday cake now!" said Sandra, jumping up, alarmed. "Is that OK, Mum?" She looked across at Caroline with an apologetic expression.

"That's fine, Sandra," said Caroline, smiling.

"Great!" said Sandra, almost running into the house. She came to a sudden halt at the patio door, as a terrible thought struck her. "Oh my God," she shrieked disbelievingly, "we haven't got a birthday cake!"

'It was good of Mum to say she enjoyed her birthday,' mused Sandra as she lay in bed that night, 'because it seemed like a right old shambles to me, not to mention a left one, which I just have. Oh well, we did our best. Maddy's mousse was good, I'm impressed. Sybil was really annoying, though, by eulogising about Lawrence so much.' She picked a small spot on her toe.

'I hope Madeleine's OK when she goes back to school. Apart from wanting her to be OK for her own sake, I'm not sure I could cope with another great emotional upheaval. Actually, I wonder if anyone can ever cope with a great emotional upheaval? I suppose some people get high on that sort of thing, but all it does is bring me down, I have enough emotion of my own to contend with, thank you very much. That's interesting, I wonder who *you* is?' She picked a small spot on her knee.

'I wonder how Gulliver will cope with his second year of uni? I hope he gets another girlfriend soon – I think. Of course, he'll be on placement for his third year, I'm glad I didn't have to do that. I hope he'll enjoy the experience of the working environment. I should think he would, he's never really been a lazy person.' She picked a small spot on her elbow.

'I wonder how I'll get on back at uni for my final year? God, where's the time gone? I must think about my third-year project. I've hardly thought about my degree at

all this summer. I wonder how the gang are getting on? I wonder if they've thought about their third-year projects? I suppose I really ought to plan my project proposal, or at least think of a subject area. I must say, I really get a buzz from the scientific genre. Just think, this time next year, I should have a BSc (Hons). A real live Bachelor of Science degree – wow! I love being a scientific sort of person and working within all those groovy scientific parameters of null hypotheses and all that stuff. It's interesting how science has become such an integral part of my persona. Interesting – I think I could write a wild and free little poem about the constraints of scientific dogma.' She scratched a small spot on her back. 'Ouch! Sod it, I've made it bleed.'

CHAPTER 17

Sandra stood at the kitchen sink, washing dishes and intermittently gazing out of the window.

"I don't want to go to school," said Madeleine quietly as she came into the kitchen. "I feel sick."

"Did you eat much breakfast?" asked Sandra worriedly.

"A bit," replied Madeleine. "I feel scared and horrible and I never know what my so-called friends are going to be like with me."

"Oh dear, poor Mad," sighed Sandra, giving her daughter a hug. "Sorry, I've made you a bit wet on your back, I'll wipe it off."

"Do I have to go to school?" asked Madeleine plaintively.

"Yes you do, darling," replied Sandra, feeling uncomfortable that she was being harsh. "If you don't go and face what you're afraid of, it'll only get worse. Besides, I'm pretty sure that once you're there, you'll feel better. Honestly."

"I want to believe you," said Madeleine resignedly, as she picked up her bag.

"Hello Nerissa," said Sandra two weeks later, as she waited outside the lecture hall for Third-Year Induction Day to begin. "Have you thought about your project?"

"Yes, I have," replied Nerissa. "I've even got my project proposal ready. I've just got to find out who my project supervisor is and then I'm off."

"Wow, you've done well – I'm impressed!" said Sandra.

"It gave me something to do to take my mind off the situation at home," said Nerissa, grimacing a little.

"How are you?" asked Sandra. "I meant to ring you, but the summer seemed to fly by."

"That's OK," replied Nerissa. "I meant to ring you too. Oh, here come Jill and Jenny."

"Hello," said Sandra as they approached. "Have you thought about your project yet?"

"Yes, I've even got my proposal ready," said Jill. "I've just got to find out who my project supervisor is today and then it's go, go, go!"

"Me too," said Jenny. "It's going to be non-stop once the semester starts properly next week, so I thought I'd better make some headway. Ah, here's Juliet."

"Hello Juliet," said Sandra rather agitatedly. "Have you thought about your project yet?"

"Yes, I've even got my proposal ready," replied Juliet. Sandra's heart plummeted on the spot. 'Oh God,' she thought despondently, 'how could I have been so complacent? The semester hasn't even started properly yet and I'm already feeling all behind.'

"I've lost all feeling in my behind," complained Nerissa one and a half hours later in the lecture hall. "These seats are so hard."

"My bum's gone numb, too," said Jill. "When can we go for coffee?"

"When we've found out who our project supervisors are," replied Juliet. "Ah, the list is going up on the overhead projector now."

"Oh my God," exclaimed Sandra, "I've got Simon Coe."

"He's OK," said Nerissa. "I've got Marcus Lowe."

"Oh, he's nice," said Sandra warmly. He's my personal tutor, you'll like him."

"Good," said Nerissa. "I'm going to go and see if he's in his room. See you!"

"See you!" called Sandra to Nerissa's disappearing figure. 'She's lost a lot of weight over the summer,' thought Sandra with concern. 'I wish I was going to go and have a chat with Marcus,' she thought suddenly. 'In a rather strange and uncertain place, he almost seems like a rather strange and uncertain friend. Actually, we've been allotted time today to see our personal tutors. I'll go in a half hour or so, after Nerissa's finished with him, if he's there. I'm not going to see Simon, I haven't got enough of an idea about my project yet. I'll have to think about it over the weekend and go to see him next week.'

Jenny, Jill and Juliet seemed to be wandering away together from the lecture hall, so Sandra hung back, not wanting to intrude. 'They're very much a threesome,' she thought in a sad, detached way. 'I feel a bit de trop when I'm with them sometimes, although that's probably in my head. So, what shall I do for half an hour? I wish Phil could be here.' A moment of mourning for the passing of Sandra's brief friendship with Phil moved through her being. 'God, you never know when you're going to have a moving experience,' she mused briefly, moving towards the lecture hall door. 'Oh well, I think I'll move towards the library and think about what I might do for this glorious sodding third-year project.'

An hour later, she found herself sitting in front of Marcus Lowe. It would have been counterproductive after all to sit behind him.

"I've decided to explore the concept of introversion-extraversion and subjective wellbeing across the lifespan," she began to explain with what she hoped was an intelligent air.

"Right," said Marcus, fingering his chin. "Who's your project supervisor?"

"Simon Coe."

"Right. What sort of design had you thought to use?"

"I'm not sure."

"Right. What sort of subjects – sorry, participants?"

"Human. Sorry. I only really decided what I wanted to do during the last hour." Sandra began to feel rather slightly stupid and rather greatly unprepared.

"Left," said Marcus for a change, tossing his blond fringe from his eyes. "Well, don't fall behind with your project. I don't mind tossing ideas around with you when you're a bit clearer about your aim."

"Gosh, I didn't think of you as being a tosser," said Sandra distractedly, inexplicably aroused for a nanosecond by the thought of tossing ideas around with Marcus – intellectually aroused, she realised with interest. "Oh no! I didn't mean to call you that! My aim is actually to get a good mark. Sorry, am I being a bit flippant?"

"No, I'm probably a bit preoccupied with work."

"Sorry. Shall I go?"

"No, not yet. You keep apologising when there's no need."

"Sorry – no, I mean I'm not sorry. Oh hell."

"Speaking of hell, how's everything else in your life?"

"Oh, not too hellish, actually. My daughter's not too happy with school and some mornings are a bit of a trial, but my son seems OK. He's in his second year here."

"How's your partner?"

"Osborn's kind of OK. His father had a heart bypass operation and his uncle died during the summer, but he seems to be coping with everything quite well. Marcus, we're always talking about my stuff. What about your stuff?"

"What do you want to know about my stuff?" The personal tutorish eyebrows raised a little in a personal tutorish way, noticed Sandra.

"I don't know. I just feel the personal disclosure's a bit one-sided, but I suppose as an academic here, you have to maintain a sense of apartness?"

"I'm not sure if the academic bit has anything to do with it," replied Marcus, fingering his chin again.

"Well, you're a personal tutor and in any one year you have 14 or 15 personal tutees – is that really a word? You must get tired of us all."

"I see more of some than others. Shall I rephrase that? I see some of you more

often than others. Besides, everyone's different. I see it all as a learning experience for myself, as well as for my tutees – interacting with different people and different ideas."

"I wish I did," said Sandra. "Interacting with people seems to wear me out sometimes. I'm tired. I must go, I'd forgotten how exhausting it is being in this place. The university, I mean, not your room. Anyway, I know you're busy. Thank you for giving me your time."

"That's OK. Don't forget, the door's open."

"Is it? Oh sorry, I couldn't have shut it properly when I came in."

"So, Sondra," said Simon Coe, opening a folder on his desk. "Have you a proposal for your project?"

"It's Sandra. Well, I've written this," said Sandra, handing him the notes she had made so far.

"Thank you," said Simon, taking the piece of paper and screwing up his eyes slightly. "I'm glad you've done this on a computer, I used to have dreadful trouble reading some students' handwriting in the past."

"Yes, I don't think people take enough trouble to write neatly these days," said Sandra, noticing Simon's handwriting on the folder. It was barely decipherable. He was frowning slightly as he read her notes, she noticed with a sinking heart.

"OK, Sondra. You have the bare bones of a reasonable project here, but you need to think much more deeply about your design, your hypothesis, your participants, your dropout rate, your questionnaires and your statistical analysis, for starters. Shall we make an appointment for the same time next week, by which time you can give me a much more well-defined and in-depth proposal?"

"Right," replied Sandra, noticing that her heart – or was it her mind – was doing strange plummeting things again.

"Sorry to rush you away a bit, but I have to take my goat to see a vet," said Simon conversationally, putting the folder with Sandra's name on away.

"Your goat?" asked Sandra, in an effort to be polite, or possibly conversational, she wasn't quite sure which.

"Yes, Zy. He's been off his food for over a week now, I'm quite worried."

"Oh dear. I hope he recovers soon."

"Thank you. Well Sondra, see you next week."

Sandra sat in the university library gazing depressedly at a journal article. It was Monday morning and she felt as if she'd spent the entire weekend worrying about the third-year project. A tear dripped on to the open journal almost without her noticing. 'What's that?' she thought dully. 'Is the roof leaking? Oh no, it's me leaking.' She reached into her bag for some *Adled Amber Mood Matching Toilet Roll*, wondering what on Earth was wrong with her.

'What on Earth is wrong with me?' she wondered. 'I can cope with this wretched project, I know I can. I'm a bit scared of Simon, but anyone who calls his goat Zy can't be completely terrifying, so there's no real problem coping with him as my project supervisor.'

'I'm not looking forward to *Developmental Psycholinguistics* this afternoon, but it's only three hours of sheer hell a week, so I can cope with that. I actually quite like *Social Psychology of the Lifespan* on Thursdays, so I can cope with that, too. I know that the first year of this degree was incredibly difficult with the trauma of Osborn's affair. I still hate that word. I think I coped with it all quite well, the worst of it is definitely over. I don't have that feeling any more of needing to go around doing new things in old places to override the old memories, almost like an animal leaving a scent.'

'I know that last year I became totally disillusioned with feeling like a lump of raw sausage meat being forced to go through the sausage machine system of the Psychology Department. Having to churn out all that coursework and doing all the exams, until I came out the other end like a perfectly formed second-year sausage (well, with a few little bumps, splits and wrinkles) was life-sapping, but I coped with that. Now I only have nine more months of the degree left until I can finally relax. I can't give up now, I'll just

have to cope womanfully with it all.' Another tear dropped on to the still open journal. 'Oh God,' Sandra wailed in her mind, groping for some more *Addled Amber Mood Matching Toilet Roll*. 'I can't cope!'

"How were your parents today?" Sandra asked Osborn, as they sat sharing a *Double Individual-Sized Microwave Mushroom Melt* in front of the television that evening. "I'm sorry I didn't come with you, I really had to get on with my project."

"They were OK," replied Osborn. "They were talking mostly about a recent VAGINA meeting."

"Is your Dad OK about his brother's death?"

"He didn't mention him, actually. They were all full of themselves as usual. Mum showed me a pineapple right-way-up cake she'd made."

"That's nice. Did she give you a slice?"

"No, it was for her revered VAGINA."

"Oh, never mind," said Sandra, feeling sorry for Osborn. 'I bet Sybil would have given Lawrence or Kirsty a bit,' she was thinking pettily. "Osborn, I'm sorry about my cooking, or rather lack of it. I'm finding it quite hard to cope at the moment, although I'm not sure why. I could hardly get the microwave packet instructions right."

"Yes, you did seem to find it harder than usual," remarked Osborn.

"Disgusting," said Gulliver, as he came into the sitting room with a puzzled look on his face. It would have been difficult to have a puzzled look anywhere else.

"Shut up," said Sandra.

"OK," replied Gulliver, "but Dad, I wanted your advice."

"You did?" asked Osborn, looking at Gulliver with a startled expression. "It's not the Mini again, is it?"

"No, although there *is* a strange clunking noise sometimes. No, I need to ring up about the CD ROM I ordered that should have arrived last week, but it hasn't yet. I've got two telephone numbers here, one for sales and one for after-sales. Which one do you think I should ring?"

"Work out the average of the two numbers and dial that," said Madeleine from the corner of the room, where she'd been partly doing some homework while part-watching *The Annual TV Drama Award for the Most Realistic Vomiting Scene*, while part-painting her fingernails, while part-reading a *Today's Babe* magazine.

"Don't be stupid," said Gulliver exasperatedly.

"Sorry, I'm doing maths homework about statistics," explained Madeleine.

"Not you as well," said Sandra and Gulliver, sighing.

"Yes," replied Madeleine, sighing.

"God, I hate statistics," said Sandra, sighing.

"So do I," said Madeleine and Gulliver, sighing.

"Try the sales number and if that's no good, you'll have to try the after-sales number," suggested Osborn.

"OK, thanks Dad," said Gulliver, amazingly politely, on his way to the door.

"How's school, Maddy?" asked Sandra. "I haven't had much time to talk with you lately. I've got this third-year project that's bugging me, amongst other things."

"That's OK," replied Madeleine. "School's not too bad at the moment. I like the work, apart from science and statistics and Lucy's being nice to me. Don't forget, I'm going to the youth club with Guy tonight."

"I'm glad he's a friend," said Osborn. "I never had many friends."

"Sorry, I forgot to say," said Gulliver, poking his head around the door. "I'm going out later to the *First-Year Funk Night at Sleazy Suzy's*."

"Are you sure it's 'Funk'?" asked Sandra suspiciously. "You're a second-year, though! Oh well, try not to be too late back, I'm not sleeping very well lately."

"Are you OK?" Osborn asked Sandra, as she finished her share of the *Double Individual-Sized Microwave Mushroom Melt*.

"I think so," replied Sandra quietly. "It's probably just a phase, or something. Could you possibly hold me tightly for a moment, though? I'm feeling rather fragile."

Later that night, Sandra lay awake waiting for Gulliver to come in, while wondering if introversion could be conceptually the same as non-extraversion. She began to drift into an uneasy sleep, but was jolted awake by the sound of Gulliver trying to shut his bedroom door quietly and the sudden and rather disturbing thought: 'Who the hell is *Sleazy Suzy*, anyway?'

CHAPTER 18

'It's getting worse,' thought Sandra tiredly, as she sat a month later in a *Developmental Psycholinguistics* lecture, only hearing the odd word or two that the lecturer was saying. 'Some of the words he uses are really odd, but it's not that – it's me. I feel so unreal. I don't know what's wrong with me. Simon has approved my project proposal at last and I've got the questionnaires organised. The coursework this semester is almost bearable, with no horrendous subjects like *Anthropometrics*, *Perception* and *Behaviourism*, or a half-module on the Internet.

'Life at home is OK, although we're all busy and I still get to do most of the ironing, the cleaning and washing the dishes. It's true the others help with the cooking, my ploy of burning everything really seems to have worked. Actually, it wasn't a ploy. No, it's me, I don't feel normal anymore. Did I ever feel normal, though? Maybe normal isn't the right word?' A wave of dizziness flashed frighteningly inside Sandra's head, as her heart began to beat very fast and she found herself suffused with unnatural heat.

'Oh God, how awful,' she thought in an uprising surge of panic, rolling her sleeves up past her elbows in an effort to cool herself. 'What if I fainted? Everyone would look at me and I'd feel a right idiot. No, I'd feel a complete idiot. I wish I could escape from here, but everyone would look at me then and wonder what was wrong with me and they're all sitting there looking so sodding normal.'

She sat through the rest of the lecture in a cold sweat, while still feeling unnaturally hot, trying to breathe slowly and calmly. It felt like a battle to stay both conscious and sane and she eventually left the lecture room with shaking legs, feeling completely exhausted.

'I know I'm slightly mad, but I want it to be in an individual, creative sort of way,' she thought as she walked shakily to the library, where she planned to hide in one of the study cubicles. 'God, this daylight is bright, it's dazzling me. This is different madness, though, the feeling of it and the threat of it becoming stronger is very frightening. Thank goodness Osborn's going to give me a lift home today.'

"You look tired," remarked Osborn later, as Sandra flopped gratefully into the car.

"I feel awful," she replied, trying hard not to cry. "I haven't felt right since I came back to university this semester. I think I'll have to see Dr Effingham."

"Poor SOD," said Osborn, putting his hand on her thigh for a moment. "Do you mind me calling you that? It's a term of endearment. Your very own special term of endearment, from me to you."

"I don't mind," replied Sandra. "I just want to feel normal again, to be myself and to wake up in the morning without feeling a weight of dread come crashing down on top of me. I want not to feel the outside world reaching right inside me and squeezing its insistent fingers around this fragile little egg shell that's my heart."

"I'll cook you something you like for tea," said Osborn encouragingly, secretly worried at her air of depression.

"Good," sighed Sandra, putting her hand on his thigh, "although I couldn't eat a thing. Actually, how about making an omelette like you used to when we were first married? We haven't had one for ages, I quite fancy one. Not as many eggs, though."

"What can I do for you, Sandra?" asked Dr Effingham politely, looking at the computer screen on his desk.

'It's really a monitor, of course,' thought Sandra nervously, wondering how to explain her vague and pathetic symptoms as she perceived them. 'How can I say I feel as though I'm falling apart, without him thinking I'm a neurotic middle-aged woman?'

"What brings you here?" prompted Dr Effingham again hopefully.

"I don't know how to tell you I feel as though I'm falling apart, without you thinking I'm a neurotic middle-aged woman," said Sandra in desperation.

"What's making you feel as though you're falling apart?" asked Dr Effingham, kindly enough.

"I've been feeling hot and dizzy and unreal lately. That is, I've felt like this once or twice in the past, but now it's become much worse," began Sandra in a confidently hesitant tone. "I'm in the third year of a degree and I'm finding everything inexplicably difficult."

"What subject?"

"Psychology."

"I see. Are your periods regular?"

"What? Yes. Well, regular enough, although I'm fed up with the bloody things. Actually, they haven't been all that regular lately..."

"Hmm. I don't normally ask this question, but what do you imagine is wrong with you?"

"What?" Sandra looked at Dr Effingham, startled. "Well, I think I could be suffering either from a virus, or anxiety, or menopausal symptoms."

"Hmm. You think the anxiety is getting out of hand, with the dizziness being part of the anxiety?"

"Yes, I suppose so," replied Sandra. "But if that's the case, why did you ask about my periods?"

"Oh, I always ask questions about periods," replied Dr Effingham. "It makes the men sit up and take notice." He smiled. "That was a joke. Well now, your oestrogen level might be low and I'd like to check how your thyroid's working as well, so I'll need to take some blood."

"All right," agreed Sandra resignedly.

"Also," continued Dr Effingham, "do you think you would benefit from talking to someone about the anxiety? I could refer you to a cognitive behavioural therapist. Ian Probe is a nice guy, you'd probably get along with him very well, with your knowledge of psychology and behaviourism."

"Yes, I'd like to talk to someone about it," replied Sandra, hope suddenly beginning to lighten up her interest.

"There's a bit of a waiting list, but you should have an initial appointment with him in a few weeks."

"Thank you," said Sandra, smiling at last. "Thank you for treating me like a real person and not a neurotic middle-aged woman, it means a great deal."

"That's OK. Right, let's see to the blood letting."

"Of course I'll let you take some," said Sandra distractedly, wondering if Ian Probe would have a beard and wear glasses. Somehow it seemed fitting for a cognitive behavioural therapist to have a beard and to wear glasses.

"Sorry?" Dr Effingham looked puzzled. "Ah, a joke!"

Sandra looked at him non-plussed for a moment, before she realised what he meant. Unusually for her, she had been completely minus her sense of humour all day.

"Bye," she said a short while later as she opened the door on her way out, feeling as though an insidiously heavy load had begun to uncouple itself from her body and soul.

"I *must* start on my essay this afternoon," said Sandra, as she stood in the kitchen one Saturday morning in late November, stirring vigorously. "God, November is such a dead month and I hate kitchens and I've made a hash of this cake..."

"Hash cake? Wow, you're really into this student thing, aren't you," said Gulliver, looking at his mother strangely appreciatively. He didn't often look at her appreciatively at all. "I must say, I look at you with different eyes these days."

"You need to see an optician then," said Sandra distractedly.

"I don't see the point if my eyesight is perfectly all right, or even binocularly stable," said Gulliver. "Also, I don't have much time as a second-year undergraduate."

"What about your third year?" asked Sandra, as she stopped stirring the cake mix. "Have you found a placement yet?"

"Yes, I forgot to say," replied Gulliver, poking his finger in the mix. "I've got an interview at *Fischer & Chipmann*, a local electronic firm."

"Well, that's good," replied Sandra. "Take your finger out."

"Are you telling me to pull my finger out, Mother?"

"Yes, I am."

"I can't taste any hash. Yes, I think I'm finally seeing my future."

"I'd like to see into the future," said Madeleine, entering the kitchen. "Gosh Mum, is that a cake?"

"It will be, with any luck," replied Sandra. "I'm not sure I'd like to see into the future. What are you doing today, Mad, you look as if you're off out somewhere?"

"No, she's just off," said Gulliver.

"Shut up. I'm going to nip out to the library to see Guy," replied Madeleine. "He's got an interview at the university library next week."

"Life is always changing," mused Sandra.

"Like Madeleine," said Gulliver. "So many clothes..."

"I'm not always changing!" retorted Madeleine.

"No, I just said it to get you going," said Gulliver, ducking expertly as Madeleine threw a tea towel at him.

"Careful you two," warned Sandra. "Mind my cake."

"I do, Mother, I do mind your cake."

"Gulliver! Seriously, I need to finish this and start an essay."

"My degree's rather different to yours, isn't it! I've forgotten all about essays."

"Did you ever know about them?" asked Madeleine. "Bye, see you later!"

"You were saying you can see your future?" asked Sandra, as Gulliver played with the cake tin. "Give me the cake tin."

"Yes. I need to complete my year's placement, finish my degree, get a good job with *Fischer & Chipmann*, leave home, buy my own place, sell the Mini and buy a Land Rover, go on a fantastic holiday and find someone to share it all with."

"Someone?"

"A female, Mother."

"Mothers are usually female."

"You know what I mean."

"I do. Do you miss Hazel?"

"Sort of yes and no. Nes and yo, really. She was a bit overpowering sometimes. Yes, a bit too much of a nut, but I miss the – you know."

"Oh." Sandra gulped. "Oh well, I'm sure you'll get some soon."

"Thanks Mother Grot Bottom," said Gulliver, pushing Sandra playfully on the back.

"Mind!" yelled Sandra, overbalancing into the cake tin. "You tit, look what you've done!"

"It was your tit, actually," said Gulliver, peering at the squashed cake mix, then at Sandra. "What a mess. Sorry."

"Oh, go and destroy yourself," said Sandra good-naturedly. "You'd better have a piece of this cake after all the trouble you've caused, though."

"I just told you I wanted a bit," said Gulliver. "Yes please," he added meekly, having seen Sandra's face. "I'd love some of your hash cake."

"Hash cake? Really?" asked Osborn, coming in from washing the car. "Where did you get it?"

"Take no notice of your son," said Sandra exasperatedly.

"What son?" asked Osborn, looking around.

"Ha!" exclaimed Sandra. "What are you going to do this afternoon, Osborn?"

"I've got to work on my thesis," replied Osborn with a sigh.

"Our life is such an unending round of fun, isn't it," said Sandra.

"Self-inflicted fun," replied Osborn, holding her around the waist. "In which case, I wish we could have some self-inflicted non-fun."

"Speaking of fun (or non-fun, or whatever), the date of my initial appointment with Ian Probe came in the mail this morning," said Sandra casually, although her heart

had started to beat rather quickly. "The cognitive behavioural therapist I told you about? It's for Friday morning next week. Luckily, I don't have to go in to the university on Fridays, so someone must be on my side."

"I am," said Osborn quietly. "What will this guy do? Will he live up to his surname?"

"No, he's not a psychotherapist," replied Sandra, "although he's sent me several weird questionnaires to fill out. It seems psychologists can't function without questionnaires. That reminds me, I must remember to collect my project questionnaires from the department office on Monday."

On Friday morning the following week, Sandra found herself sitting nervously opposite Ian Probe, who was about 35, had a beard and wore glasses.

'Oh no, someone else who's younger than I am,' she'd thought on seeing him. 'I'm not an ageist, but so many people are beginning to seem so young. Dai Effingham is younger than I am, so is Marcus Lowe and so is Simon Coe. Oh God, I'm so old!'

"So, what do you think cognitive behavioural therapy entails?" asked Ian Probe kindly.

'Aha, an open question,' noted Sandra, 'although he has his legs crossed in a defensive body position.' She uncrossed her own legs in order to display her natural non-defensiveness, before panicking for a moment about whether to give the answer of a got-it-together student of psychology, or a definitely-not-got-it-together anxious middle-aged woman.

"It's about changing behaviour," she said finally, having decided on the latter option.

"Yes, basically," replied Ian. "I asked because some people get mixed up with counselling."

"I know someone who got mixed up with counselling," offered Sandra, having relaxed a little. "Although you'd think people went into counselling to get unmixed up."

"Mmm," replied Ian thoughtfully. "Well, let's talk about anxiety."

Almost an hour later, after Sandra felt that she and Ian had more or less exhausted the subject of anxiety, as well as exhausting Sandra too, Ian stood up to indicate he was bringing the session to a close.

"OK. Well, I think we can make some good progress together," he said. "Thank you for filling out those questionnaires, by the way. That reminds me, I have some more to give you." He went to his briefcase and searched through the pile of intriguing looking papers inside. Sandra mused how any papers of a cognitive behavioural therapist would be intriguing.

"Ah yes, here we are," said Ian at last. "Also, it would be helpful if you kept a note of your automatic anxious thoughts, like we talked about, on this sheet of paper. Is that OK?"

"Yes," replied Sandra in rather a daze.

"Excellent. Am I right in thinking you don't mind filling out questionnaires like some people do?"

"Oh no, I'm used to them. We do loads at university. Also, my mother and father were both psychologists, but they're over it now. Over the questionnaire stage, I mean. I wonder, though, if once you study psychology to a certain degree (to a BSc Honours degree, hopefully, in my case) – I wonder if you can ever stop thinking in terms of psychological analysis?"

"Ye-es," said Ian, fingering his beard. "I should think one's cognitive processes would be conditioned to work within the particular psychological schemata to which one had become habituated, although to what degree of reliability would be prone to misinterpretation."

"Gosh," responded Sandra. 'Was what he just said really clever, or was it a load of bollocks?' she was wondering. 'God, I'm tired.'

"Anyway, you look tired," continued Ian. "I've kept you for a long time today. Well, I'm pretty fully booked up at the moment, so I'll have to let you know when we can start on proper sessions. They would have to be on Friday mornings, though."

"That's fine." Sandra smiled tiredly as she put on her coat ready to leave. "If this wasn't a proper session, does that mean it was an improper one?"

"Ah, a sense of humour, that's good," said Ian smiling and stroking his beard, "although some people tend to hide behind humour. It's funny, really, but there are worse things to hide behind."

"Yes. Ha! Thank you. Bye then," said Sandra, heading towards the door.

"Bye Sandra," said Ian, leaping towards the door to open it for her.

'What a very nice man,' thought Sandra, as she started to walk home. 'I'm beginning to feel better already.' She had walked only a few more paces before a terrible thought assailed her. 'Oh my God, I wonder if he held the door open for me simply out of respect for my age?'

CHAPTER 19

"I can't believe it's almost Christmas yet again," remarked Sandra to Marcus Lowe, as she sat in the comfy chair. "I hope you don't mind me popping in. I just wanted to wish you a happy Christmas, really."

"Happy Christmas to you, too," said Marcus, with one of his rare smiles appearing momentarily. "How's the project?"

"Oh, now you've spoilt the atmosphere," said Sandra cheerily. "It's OK, I'm gathering data at the moment."

"Aren't we all? Good luck with it."

"I also wanted to mention that I'm seeing a cognitive behavioural therapist," threw in Sandra quickly.

"Do you mean you're having an affair?" asked Marcus, carelessly brushing his blond fringe away from his eyes. It flopped down again immediately.

"No! I mean I'm seeing one on a professional basis, as a client."

"Oh, I see. For any particular reason, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Anxiety," replied Sandra in a small voice, feeling rather anxious and small. The comfy chair tended to dwarf her a little. "Now you really know I'm a nutter."

"I've always known," said Marcus, smiling more than momentarily this time. "Seriously, I hope it will be beneficial and there's no need to feel embarrassed. How's it fitting in with your coursework and contact time here?"

"Well, I've only had the initial interview so far, but my sessions will be on Fridays when I don't have any contact time here, so it's fine, really."

"You sound slightly unsure?"

"I just feel so ... not normal, as if everyone else has normal problems, but mine are weird and stupid."

"Why weird and stupid?"

"Well, the word 'anxiety' sounds acceptable, but the way it's manifested seems really silly and I'm ashamed of it."

"In what way is it manifested?"

"I don't want to say, it's too silly," said Sandra faintly, as a wave of dizziness darted through her.

"OK, but you can be sure that other people have different manifestations of different problems that seem just as silly to them as yours do to you."

"Yes, I'm sure you're right – but mine are *really* silly." Sandra began to feel a little tearful and shifted uncomfortably in the comfy chair.

"Maybe you need to externalise more," said Marcus softly.

"I can't, I'm an introvert," replied Sandra. "I scored zero for extraversion on the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire."

"I won't say what I think about the EPQ," said Marcus. "There's actually no such thing as introversion or extraversion."

"They're both hypothetical constructs, right?"

"Exactly."

"But I'm using the introversion-extraversion dimension in my project."

"That's all right, you can pick it to pieces conceptually if you want to."

"I'd love to! Some of the so-called extraversion questions are pathetic, they depend on whatever situation or mood a person is in at the time they answer the question."

"Right on! How are you getting along with Simon Coe?"

"Actually, I haven't seen him much since my project proposal was accepted. He helped a lot with putting me on the right track with my project at first, but it's a bit tricky now because he often seems preoccupied with his sick goat, Zy."

"There you are, people's manifestations of their problems are just as silly as you think yours are."

"But *he* doesn't think it's silly to worry about a sick goat called Zy."

"How do you know?"

"You're right, I don't know," replied Sandra, sighing deeply (but not both at the same time). "It's all in the mind, of course."

"Try telling that to a behaviourist!"

"My father was a behaviourist."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"It's all right, he's over it now – I think. So am I. Actually, thank God my therapist is a cognitive behavioural therapist, or I think I'd tell him where to stick his behavioural tactics."

"That's a bit more like you, a touch of the old fighting spirit. That reminds me, I'm afraid I must go, I'm off to *The Archduke's Groin* with my first-year tutorial group."

"Ah, I remember my first-year tutorial group pub session with you," said Sandra nostalgically, rising from the comfy chair.

"We should go again."

"Yes, we should. Well, bye then Marcus. See you next year."

"Bye Sandra."

As Sandra walked back down the corridor, feeling at least 50% better than when she'd walked forward up the corridor, a sudden thought assailed her. 'Did Marcus mean 'we' as a third-year tutorial group should go to the pub, or did he mean 'we' as just him and me? We're not actually a third-year tutorial group, because we don't have tutorials any more. Interesting.'

Christmas had inevitably arrived with all its strange and less than wonderful traditions, including another family get-bored-together at Sandra and Osborn's house.

"It's been another strange and difficult year really," observed Sandra quietly to her mother, as Sybil sniffed into a potpourri scented handkerchief at the mention of Basil's dear departed brother.

"Yes, it has," replied Caroline, "and feelings especially seem to come to the fore at a family gathering like this. Sybil never used to mention Bill all that much, but maybe the strain of Basil's bypass at the same time took its toll."

"There are times when I'd like to bypass Basil," remarked Sandra. "No, I didn't actually say that!"

"Hey Mum, it's all right," said Osborn, putting his arm around the still sniffing Sybil.

"I wish Lawrence was here," said Sybil in rather a strangled voice. "Your arm's too tight, Osborn. I don't know why Lawrence is refusing to stay with us at Christmas like he used to. Kirsty said she's too busy to be here again, too."

"Did Kirsty send you a Christmas card?" asked Osborn, having abruptly removed his arm.

"No, but I expect it's got delayed by all the Christmas mail," replied Sybil, before blowing her nose into the potpourri scented handkerchief.

"It wouldn't have been if she'd sent it in time," put in Sandra, her ire having risen considerably at Sybil's consistent non-acknowledgement of Osborn and consistent excusing of Kirsty.

"Can't we play a game?" asked Madeleine suddenly into the pregnant pause. It was fortunately not Madeleine's – although it wasn't Sandra's either – and it definitely wasn't Caroline's or Sybil's – and no way was it Leonard's, Osborn's, Basil's or Gulliver's.

"Have you finished your drink already?" Sandra asked Madeleine in a strangely motherly moment.

"Yes," replied Madeleine, looking at Sandra oddly. "Hey Grandad, this Jaffa orange gin you brought is really nice. Could I have a little bit more, please?"

"I thought you used to make sloe gin rather than Jaffa orange gin?" Sandra asked her father, as she sipped appreciatively from her own glass.

"I did," replied Leonard, "but it has to stand for so many months. Jaffa orange gin is much quicker to make."

"That makes sense," chipped in Gulliver, having sunk his own glass of Jaffa orange gin. "Could I have some more too, please?"

"I wouldn't mind another glass as well while you're at it," said Caroline, joining the bandwagon, wherever it was.

"What game do you want to play, Mad?" asked Gulliver, his boredom level having hit the roof.

"That new one Grandma Dullkettle gave me for Christmas, I suppose," replied Madeleine nonchalantly. "*You're In!*"

"Where?" asked Sandra in a shocked voice, scanning the carpet in horror.

"No, that's the name of the game," said Madeleine, giggling a little.

"I don't want to play it, it sounds like a piss-awful game," muttered Gulliver in the direction of Sandra and Madeleine.

"Gulliver!" hissed Sandra, her eyes widening. "What do you want to do, then?"

"Oh, I don't know. Go and commit dodecahedronogamy, or something," replied Gulliver, rolling his eyes.

"Ha!" exclaimed Sandra, having noticed that Caroline, Leonard and Sybil had gone quiet. Basil had apparently gone to sleep. "He's 20," she said by way of explanation, smiling pseudo-affectionately as she cuffed him lightly across the back of his head.

"I don't mind playing that *Dodeca*-something game," said Sybil, having brightened up considerably in the past five minutes.

"Oh no, it's not a game, it's – uh – were the potpourri scented panties we gave you all right?" asked Sandra, desperately changing the subject.

"Oh yes, they were lovely, dear," replied Sybil. "They do such lovely potpourri things now."

"I saw some potpourri flavoured condoms in *The Body Part Shop*," said Gulliver, his cheeks slightly flushed from the alcohol. "Sorry Mother," he added, having glanced at Sandra's face.

"You'll be telling me they do personalised condoms next," whispered Sandra to her son.

"Oh, that's nothing, I saw some the other day with safety holes in them to stop children choking," replied Gulliver, ignoring Sandra's face.

"Would anyone like some *Festive Nuts*?" asked Sandra brightly, her own cheeks flushed from the alcohol and from being caught hopelessly in the middle of two very separate generations. "I found them in *Safebury's*. There are pecans, pistachios, potpourri flavoured sugared almonds." She sank on to the sofa in exhaustion.

'This is exhausting,' she thought exhaustedly. 'I can't stand many more of these occasions, especially at our house. I love all these people dearly – well, Sybil and Basil at a stretch – but all of them together like this is killing me.'

"Are you OK?" asked Osborn softly into Sandra's ear, as Sybil and Leonard launched into a conversation about what they'd bought recently at *Safebury's*.

"No, I'm not," replied Sandra emphatically. "The next time a family thing like this is planned, just count me out."

"I thought our family planning days were over," said Osborn, smiling. "Sorry. This *Jaffa Orange Gin* seems to have gone straight to my brain."

Three weeks later, Sandra sat uncomfortably in the exam hall, seriously wondering if she would manage to survive the next three hours. She felt nauseous, panicky and unreal, although after three years, the exam hall was now disturbingly familiar.

'I think I'd actually rather be at a family get-bored-together than sitting here in a self-induced anxiety state,' she thought wretchedly. 'Why am I putting myself through all this? And why am I reacting so badly now? I used to quite like exams in a funny, masochistic sort of way. Now I'm just afraid of everything.'

"You may start writing," said the disembodied voice of the invigilator suddenly, causing Sandra's heart to thump even more absurdly.

'Oh God,' she thought anxiously, 'I want to escape from here. Everyone else has started to write. Well, almost everyone. Ro is staring into space – Bo is staring at the floor – Zo is staring at the ceiling – Mo is staring at the wall – Jill is staring at her feet – Juliet is staring at Jill's feet – Nerissa is staring at me – oh! Maybe I'm not the only one who's absurdly nervous. I'd better read the questions.'

"Are you going to the pub with the gang?" asked Nerissa, after Sandra had somehow managed to survive the dreaded three hours.

"I don't know, I'm tired," replied Sandra, before she noticed the dark shadows under Nerissa's eyes. "All right, then."

"Don't sound too enthusiastic," said Jill, joining them. "I'm only going for a quick one, then it's home to revise for the next exam."

"Thank God we've only got two exams this semester," said Sandra 19 minutes later, as she sat with the gang in *The Cardinal's Jockstrap*.

"Two three-hour-long-bastard exams, though," said Juliet, sipping her *Rum n' Purple*. "Did you notice how many people got up to go for a pee?"

"I was too scared to go," confessed Sandra, as the warmth of the *Vodka n' Slime* hit her inner spaces.

"Why?" asked Juliet, looking at Sandra wonderingly.

"Oh, I don't know," replied Sandra, wishing she hadn't intimated anything about her current almost overwhelming horror of being the centre of attention. She looked around wildly in the hope of some distraction. "Hey, there's Simon over there with a young student and there's Geoff..."

"Who's Geoff?" asked Nerissa curiously. Her *Drambuie n' Raspberryade* had apparently affected her vocal cords.

"A guy I studied philosophy with once," said Sandra weakly, her desire to go and speak to Geoff fighting precariously with her desire to hide away from him.

"Well, go and say hello to him, then," said Nerissa encouragingly.

"No," replied Sandra. "I'm going to the loo."

"It's called *Gentlemen* and *Tempresses* in here," said Jill. "Over there."

"Thanks," said Sandra gratefully, as she got up quickly to go. "I don't like the word 'loo', anyway, it's too crappy."

"Sandra!" Geoff's voice halted Sandra's planned escape.

"Oh, hi Geoff," replied Sandra nonchalantly, as if she'd seen him only yesterday, rather than over three years ago. She wandered over to where he was sitting as if in a daze. To be fair, she was in a daze.

"What brings you to *The Cardinal's Jockstrap*?" asked Geoff conversationally.

"My friends and I are chilling out after an exam," replied Sandra in a student-like manner, not knowing whether to sit down in the available space. She had learned many years before not to sit down in unavailable spaces. "What brings you to *The Cardinal's Jockstrap*?"

"I've got the day off work and I arranged to meet Helena after her exam this morning," replied Geoff. "Sandra, this is Helena, my wife. Helena, this is Sandra. I did philosophy with Sandra," he continued to Helena rather awkwardly. "Sit down, Sandra, I'm getting a crick in my neck."

"I remember the name," said Helena. "Are you doing a degree?"

"Psychology." Sandra sat down, noticing the almost imperceptible shutters coming down over Helena's enquiring eyes. "Are you doing a degree?"

"Sociology." Sandra could see that Helena was eyeing her up and down.

"Right." Sandra tried to hold back the almost imperceptible shutters, which she knew were coming down over her own eyes. "Well, I must be going," she said, standing up to attempt a second escape.

"How are things with you?" asked Geoff, his eyes locking with Sandra's in a challenge. The knowledge of their slightly intimate friendship in the past suddenly seemed to flash into being between them again.

"Oh, a bit up and down," replied Sandra, regretting the old cliché as soon as she'd uttered it.

"I'm sorry I didn't keep in touch like I think I said I would," said Geoff. "Life got a bit hectic."

"Tell me about it!" said Sandra with feeling. "Oh. No, I don't mean that literally. I mean life got a bit hectic for me, too. It still is."

"You look the same as ever," said Geoff, smiling.

"I don't feel the same," said Sandra quietly without thinking. "You don't seem to have changed much yourself."

"Ah, that would be telling. It seems a long time ago..."

"It seems half a lifetime ago," said Sandra, noticing Helena's bored expression. "I'm sorry, I really must go."

"Take care," said Geoff, his eyes meeting Sandra's again.

"You too – and good luck, Helena," Sandra managed to articulate, before she finally escaped into the *Tempresses* room.

'What did I feel today when I met Geoff?' wondered Sandra as she lay in bed that night. 'Did I still feel that personal attraction that was so evident over three years ago? Isn't all attraction personal, though? Or was it simply embarrassing to see him again? I'm honestly not sure. I would have liked to talk to him on his own, I think – but then again, I wouldn't have, because it might have reawakened old feelings that are basically counterproductive.

'He *did* still look attractive and I would have liked to shake his hand – or hold it, if I'm honest. Still, things are so much better between Osborn and me now and there's no way I want to jeopardise that, ever. But does that mean I'm being motivated by fear? God, it's so complicated. This psychology stuff really gets inside your head.' She wriggled her feet in agitation.

'I felt incredibly nervous today. It really upset me, both emotionally and physically. I feel like I'm beginning to fall apart again, which is depressing. I also feel pretty bad about the gang. They make friendly overtures – although I don't think undertures exist – and although I like them all and would really like to join in with them more often, my initial reaction is usually to turn away and make excuses, because I'm afraid of being involved in a social round of social events and social expectations that I can't live up to, socially speaking. Which I was, of course.' She wriggled her legs in agitation.

'I'm so tired and stressed out these days, I know I'm not paying very much attention to Madeleine and Gulliver, even though I have a sneaking suspicion that all is not well with Madeleine. I do feel guilty, but they're older now and I'm not sure they need me as much, except as a sort of emotional backup whenever life gets a bit tough. Which frankly seems to be all the time – definitely for me, anyway.

'I can't believe I keep forgetting to ask Osborn how his thesis is going – and I forgot to ask Madeleine how her exam went today – and Gulliver the day before. I'm so preoccupied with myself, I'm becoming seriously selfish.' She wriggled her arms in agitation.

'I've got my sessions with Ian Probe to contend with soon, which seems a bit like stepping into the unknown. My periods are peculiar and I suppose I ought to pay Dai Effingham a visit, but I don't really feel well enough to see him. Besides, the blood test didn't show anything awful.

'I haven't had a decent talk with Mum and Dad since Christmas, when the talk was rather indecent, really – and Osborn's parents are still a pain. I've got another three-hour-long-bastard exam the day after tomorrow and I didn't mean to make that microwave meal explode.' As Sandra felt a sob rising, she reached out resignedly for some *Certifiable Cinnamon Mood Matching Toilet Roll*.

CHAPTER 20

"Did you write down your automatic thoughts?" asked Ian Probe kindly, as Sandra sat opposite him for their first proper session.

"Yes," replied Sandra, fishing in her bag for the 20 or so sheets of A4 paper she'd filled during the past six weeks.

"Good heavens," said Ian, paling slightly. "Oh well, let's have a look at a few."

Sandra felt herself go hot with embarrassment as Ian read out some of her innermost fears, but once she'd grown accustomed to the heat of the hotness, she found it strangely comforting that some of her innermost fears were being shared with someone else who was treating them with respect. Furthermore, Ian was helping her to see the importance of checking out the reality of those thoughts.

"Establish the facts," he said, stroking his beard affectionately – it was a friendly beard. "Gather lots of data."

"I'm sick of gathering data," remarked Sandra, stroking her own beard affectionately – or where it would have been. "I've just been scoring 80 questionnaires and now I've got to statistically analyse them all."

"You poor sod," said Ian sympathetically, "no wonder you're – I'm sorry, I should have asked if my language or anything I've said so far offends you in any way?"

"Oh no, I'm not one to take offence," replied Sandra, smiling. 'Fancy calling me a sod, the cheeky sod,' she was thinking. "No, I like freedom of speech," she continued aloud, "it seems more honest somehow, as if the speaker is being truly her or himself. Don't forget, I'm a student."

"Indeed. I remember my student days," reminisced Ian. "The counselling was really helpful. Well, we've established that you don't like being the centre of attention and that you're afraid people will think you silly. Behaviourally speaking, the best way to deal with this is to attack it. So, if I ask you to stand up on your chair and say the time aloud, will you do it?"

"No!" exclaimed Sandra, horrified as her now lukewarm embarrassment became incredibly hot once more.

"All right, but what if I do it as well?" asked Ian, immediately leaping agilely up on his chair and revealing verbally to Sandra that it was 12:15 and 19 seconds. "Will you join me?" he asked encouragingly.

"Oh, all right then," said Sandra grudgingly. "I can see I'm not going to get away with this."

"Er – on *your* chair, Sandra."

"Sorry. It's 08:23 and 52 seconds. Oh dear, my watch seems to have stopped."

"That's not important right now," said Ian. "Are you anxious standing on your chair like this?"

"Yes."

"On a scale of one to ten?"

"Three."

"Good." Ian leapt down from his chair. "By the way, you can get down now. What about if I were to ask you to kneel on the floor and bark like a dog?" To Sandra's astonishment, Ian proceeded to kneel on the floor and bark like a Yorkshire Terrier.

"I wouldn't do it," replied Sandra emphatically. 'I'd think you were barking mad,' she thought, as a grin erupted madly on her face.

"It seems strange to think this is our final semester," remarked Sandra to Nerissa, as they sat in the refectory after a *Cognition and Emotion* seminar, trying to think why they felt so emotional. "I suppose that may be why we feel so – you know – emotional."

"It could be that we were the oldest in the entire seminar," said Nerissa emotionally. "All the suppressed energy of that young lot – Maz, Raz, Baz, Kaz and Daz – was wearing me out. It seems wonderful that this is our final semester," she continued, "although I can't exactly imagine what life will be like afterwards."

"No, it's been such a concentrated time," mused Sandra aloud. "So many subject areas we've had to focus on whether we wanted to or not, like that wretched Internet

coursework of mine. So many deadlines, so many worry lines, so many photocopies, so many appalling group work experiences, so many late nights, so many atrocious presentations..."

"I hate presentations!" exclaimed Sandra and Nerissa in unison, causing some people at the next table to look at them reproachfully.

"It wasn't my fault my presentations were atrocious," said Sandra defensively. "I'm just not an extraverted sort of person and all that public speaking stuff really isn't my bag."

"Speaking of your bag," said Nerissa, "those people at the next table are looking at it rather strangely. I think it might have something to do with the *Demented Dandelion Mood Matching Toilet Roll* that's nearly fallen out of it."

"Oh God," said Sandra, reaching down to shove the toilet roll back into the deepest recesses of her bag. "Thanks, Nerissa. It was good therapy, anyway."

"What do you mean?" asked Nerissa, gazing at Sandra with the characteristic frank expression that Sandra had come to think of fondly as the characteristic Nerissa expression.

"I'm seeing a cognitive behavioural therapist," explained Sandra, blushing a little. "That is, I'm not having an affair or anything. No, I've been suffering from anxiety."

"You never said."

"Well, that's one of my failings, really. I need to externalise more," explained Sandra, looking down and laughing a little embarrassedly.

"Don't we all," replied Nerissa. "How's it going?"

"Very well, although I've only actually seen him twice so far."

"Oh. I hope it goes well. I – umm – I'm having a few counselling sessions at the moment," confessed Nerissa suddenly. "I've been falling apart ever so slightly. Well, quite a lot actually, since my husband walked out. It's really helpful having someone to talk to who's essentially objective."

"Yes, it is essential," agreed Sandra, thinking of Ian Probe. "How long have you been seeing him?"

"Her. About two months. I'm sorry I never said, I need to externalise more! By the way, I'm sure she won't mind me telling you, but Jill's seeing a counsellor as well. She's been depressed recently – and Juliet had a panic attack in the library loo the other day – and Jenny seems to be drinking rather a lot."

"Really? God, we're all cracking under the strain in one way or another, aren't we!"

"Still, only a few more months to go, we just can't give up now."

"I agree," said Sandra. "I've made a *Cross Off Each Terrible Day Calendar* at home and it actually does help me to cross off each terrible day."

"It's that bad, is it?" asked Nerissa, smiling.

"Well, some days are worse than others, of course. I meant to enjoy this degree, I really did, but I didn't know how much energy it was going to take. I can't seem to do even simple things these days without an effort, like making an appointment to go and see the dentist, or making an appointment for my hair – it needs cutting badly."

"In that case, go to that *Shaggy Student Happy Crappy Hairdresser* place," suggested Nerissa, grinning. "They cut hair incredibly badly there."

"Gulliver, are you OK?" asked Sandra worriedly that night, as she looked at Gulliver lying on his bed with a raging temperature.

"No," he croaked pitifully. "My throat's still sore and every time I get up, I want to throw up."

"Oh God, I'd better ring someone."

"No. Wait till the morning," Gulliver continued to croak. "I just want to sleep now. I'll be fine. Go to bed."

'I hope Gulliver really is all right,' thought Sandra, as she lay in bed that night. 'I can't bear it when he and Madeleine are ill. Even though they're older now, it's as if there's still a direct emotional line from them to me. All they need to do is to be ill or unhappy and that line is jerked into action.'

'God, what a silly little neurotic jerk person I must be, Hans Eysenck would have a field day.' She jerked around in bed for the next two hours, 16 minutes and 39 seconds, trying vainly to fall asleep.

'It's no good, I can't sleep,' she thought two hours, 16 minutes and 40 seconds later. 'What if Gulliver needs hospitalising? He hates hospitals. What if he's lying there delirious, unconscious, or dead?' She leapt out of bed and crept fearfully into Gulliver's room. He was snoring like he always had done when suffering from a sore throat as a child. Sandra put her hand gently on his forehead. It was hot, but not disastrously so.

'Thank God for that,' she thought, as she made her way back to her own bed in the dark. 'I mean it, thank You, God. I'm really sorry I only seem to remember You when I need You, although I do say Your name a lot. It comforts me, I hadn't really realised that before. I guess it's the idea of You that comforts me, because Your name's a bit short and nondescript. It spells Dog backwards and it's Gulliver's acronym. But anyway, thank You, God! Oops! Sorry, Osborn,' she whispered, having accidentally poked him in the eye with her elbow as she'd clambered back into bed.

"My son has a throat infection," said Sandra to Simon Coe, as she spread out the first attempt at statistical analysis for her third-year project on his desk.

"Ah, my commiserations," he said, glancing distastefully at the computer printout. "It's worrying, isn't it. My goat is gradually recovering from his lower intestine problem, but it's been a messy time. Poor old Zy."

"Yes," Sandra said. "Poor old Zy. Er – am I on the right track with all this?"

"At a glance, I would say yes," replied Simon, much to Sandra's relief. "Although at this junction, I think you've got the wrong end of the wick." He jabbed his finger on Sandra's printout rather forcefully. "Hmm. Something seems wrong."

"Oh dear, I did what you suggested," said Sandra, her heart dropping. It was a very lowering feeling.

"No, I mean I think I mixed up my metaphors, yes?"

"Oh, I see! Well, I've got the wrong end of the stick at this juncture, if that's what you mean," said Sandra, jabbing her finger rather forcefully on the printout (at the juncture, as it happened).

"Ouch!"

"I'm sorry!" said Sandra, blushing. "I thought you'd taken your finger away."

"No matter," said Simon, sucking his finger. "Hmm," he continued when he'd removed his finger from his mouth. "Well, at this juncture, I quite dishonestly wouldn't analyse the figures this way at all."

"I made a right idiot of myself with my project supervisor," said Sandra to Ian Probe at her third cognitive behavioural session.

"Did he say so?" asked Ian.

"Well, no – but I *felt* a right idiot."

"That's an important distinction you just made, the change from a state of being into a state of feeling."

"God, I feel a right idiot," said Sandra without thinking. "Oh God, that was a stupid thing to say, I'm such an idiot!" Tears came idiotically into her eyes.

"You seem a bit tense today," offered Ian kindly.

"I know," replied Sandra, trying to sniff delicately and failing. "My son has a throat infection, my daughter has started saying she doesn't want to go to school again, we've got a problem with our drains, I thought I was going to faint in *Safebury's* yesterday, I have to take part in a *Cognition and Emotion* group presentation next week and you're looking at me. I hate people looking at me." Partly to escape from Ian's gaze, she searched in her bag for the *Confused Coral Mood Matching Toilet Roll* she'd placed there earlier.

"Let's take all these issues separately," said Ian, stroking his beard as he gazed at her. "They won't seem so overwhelming then. You said you thought you were going to faint in *Safebury's* yesterday..."

"I felt really stupid with Ian Probe today," confessed Sandra to Osborn as they lay in bed that night. "I more or less burst into tears and said all these stupid things that were worrying me."

"What things? Things you haven't told me?" asked Osborn. Sandra could sense the slight unease in his voice.

"I didn't want to worry you," she said truthfully.

"Well, I know you've been worried about Gulliver, but he's getting better now. His immune system is dealing with the throat infection very well," said Osborn.

"I know," said Sandra, running her hands up and down Osborn's chest for comfort (hers), "but it did worry me, dreadfully. I've also been worried about you being worried about your thesis and your parents, as well as all that stuff about Lawrence and Kirsty and you've got work to contend with as well and then there's Maddy."

"She's all right, isn't she? She hasn't said anything?"

"No, but she's been distant lately and she's consistently not liking school, so I'm starting to wonder. But I know I've been distant too. So has Gulliver, until he was ill. You've been very distant too, but I know your thesis is hard and takes a lot of time. Oh, I don't know, everything seems too much. Too many people, too many problems, too many pitfalls."

"Pitfalls?"

"The alliteration with people and problems was too good to resist," explained Sandra, chuckling a little.

"I haven't heard you laugh much lately," said Osborn softly.

"Me neither – you either – or whatever it is I mean," replied Sandra, chuckling again.

"That's better," murmured Osborn, running his hand up and down Sandra's chest for comfort and pleasure (his and hers).

"We've forgotten how to have fun, haven't we?"

"Fun? What's that?"

"Exactly. I want to be free and do something stupid just for the fun of it."

"I thought you didn't like being stupid," said Osborn, beginning to concentrate on his hands more than his words.

"Oh, you know what I mean," said Sandra stupidly.

After the lovemaking later that night – since it would have been a pity during it – Sandra dreamt that she was a strange and alarming mixture of Ian Probe and Sigmund Freud. She sat at a desk while a steady stream of people came to sit in front of her.

"Tell me about your childhood," she said to each one, stroking her beard affectionately.

The replies were disturbing. Madeleine said her mother was always trying to mother her and when she wasn't, she was too busy to listen; Gulliver said he'd wanted to leave home for the past six years; Osborn said he used to have a childhood Octopussy complex; Caroline said she'd never meant to upset her parents by being a psychologist; Leonard said he *had* wanted to upset his parents by being a psychologist; Sybil said something incoherent; Basil said he hoped his parents would be nice to him when he was dead; Geoff said Sandra reminded him of his mother; Phil said Sandra reminded him of his father; Simon Coe said his mother had always called him her Precious Little Goat; Marcus Lowe said he regretted his parents' ridiculous sense of humour; and Dai Effingham said he was sorry Mummy for playing doctors and nurses so much when he was a boy.

By that time, Sandra had begun to feel a sense of suffocation from the weight of other people's problems. She went to lie down on the consulting couch, but everyone she'd seen came back into the room and got up on the couch with her. She was particularly squashed on one side by Gulliver and Madeleine and particularly squashed on the other side by Caroline, Leonard, Basil and Sybil.

"Help you lot, I don't like being particularly squashed!" she said aloud, waking with a jolt.

"What? Sorry," said Osborn sleepily, removing his arm from around her navel.

CHAPTER 21

"I quite enjoyed *The Psychology of Ageing* this afternoon," commented Sandra to Juliet, as they walked along the corridor of the Psychology Department.

"Yes, Oliver Dimm isn't a bad old lecturer," replied Juliet. "He's got quite a sense of humour, which helps."

"It certainly does help," agreed Sandra. "*The Functional Disorders of Older Age* would be quite depressing without his jolly little quips. You wouldn't happen to know what his middle name is by any chance, would you?"

"Why?" asked Juliet, looking strangely at Sandra.

"I just wondered," replied Sandra. 'It's strange,' she thought, 'how many people look at me strangely.'

"Oh, it's not that strange acronym hypothesis name thing of your mother's, is it?" asked Juliet, regarding Sandra strangely.

"Yes! Anyway, it doesn't matter."

"Oh, excuse me, Oliver," said Juliet suddenly, as Oliver Dimm came striding alongside them from behind. "Sandra was wondering if you had a middle name."

"Juliet!" exclaimed Sandra in horror.

"No, it's not Juliet," said Oliver. "But why do you ask, Sandra?"

"My mother had this acronym hypothesis about people's names, that's all," replied Sandra, blushing furiously. At that moment she willingly could have strangled Juliet, except that she'd never considered herself a violent person.

"Well, well," said Oliver thoughtfully, "that rings a bell. How nice, a rhyme. Yes, I remember hearing about a female student with an acronym hypothesis about names. She used to be at the same university as I was when I was an undergraduate. She wasn't a relation of yours, by any chance?"

"It sounds like she was my mother," replied Sandra. "Well, she still is, if it's her," she continued swiftly, as they reached the end of the corridor. "She's over all that now, though. I mean she's retired."

"She was engaged to Leonard Watercress around that time, who not long afterwards was implicated in the Watercress and Swede scandal, if I remember rightly."

"Oh," said Sandra, familial loyalty shooting to the surface. "That was my father. Still is, actually."

"I meant no disrespect," said Oliver Dimm hastily, looking at Sandra curiously. "He was a splendid fellow, despite the behaviourism."

"Thank you," said Sandra, desperate now to escape from the whole embarrassing situation. "I must go and collect my exam results from my personal tutor. Bye." She turned back along the corridor and stopped outside Marcus Lowe's room. As she raised her hand to knock on his door, she suddenly felt extremely nervous – whether of finding out her exam results or of seeing Marcus, she wasn't quite sure.

"Ah!" she articulated spontaneously, as he suddenly opened his door.

"Ah!" Marcus was a touch startled, as Sandra had almost rapped him smartly on his chest. "Hi."

"Sorry," said Sandra, also a touch startled by the narrowly missed touch. "Is my timing bad?"

"Good or bad, it depends how you look at it," replied Marcus. "I was on my way home, but what can I do for you?"

"I wondered if you had my exam results?" asked Sandra, her heart beating much too rapidly for comfort.

"I have indeed," replied Marcus. "Come in for a moment and don't look so frightened. Now, where did I put them? Oh yes..."

"Oh God," muttered Sandra, as Marcus surveyed the important piece of paper. 'Stop teasing and give them to me, you wretched man,' she was thinking wretchedly.

"Very consistent marks," said Marcus, handing the piece of paper to Sandra. "What do you think of them?"

"Gosh," said Sandra, as she glanced at the three sets of marks. "They're completely even. How very odd."

"Are you pleased?" asked Marcus, his right eyebrow raised.

"I don't know," murmured Sandra hesitantly.

"You're not being indecisive again, are you?" asked Marcus, smiling.

"I'm not sure," replied Sandra, not noticing Marcus raise his left eyebrow. She was, in fact, feeling relieved that she hadn't done worse, but disappointed that she hadn't done better.

"Is everything all right?" asked Marcus uncertainly.

"I think so," replied Sandra, looking with a full gaze into Marcus's full gaze. "Your eyes are very blue," she said without thinking. "Oh God, I didn't exactly mean to say that. I feel as though I can say almost anything to you and it comes out a bit strangely sometimes, because I'm basically peculiar."

"Everyone's basically peculiar in one sense of the word," said Marcus, "but I think you mean peculiar as in strange. Well, I like peculiar as in strange people because I identify with them."

"I like that," said Sandra, strangely bothered because the words 'I like you' had popped into her head without warning.

"How's the project?" asked Marcus.

"It's OK," replied Sandra, sighing. "It's funny, I don't want to spend time talking to you about that. I see you so rarely that I'd rather talk about interesting things with you."

"Your project isn't interesting, then?" asked Marcus, smiling. "I must say, I'm intrigued that you want to talk about interesting things with me. I'd love to know what sort of things you mean, but I'm giving someone a lift home. Come and see me some other time?"

"OK, but can't we make a date? I mean an appointment? You know, a specified time?"

"Yes, we can. Come in!" Marcus looked towards the door, as a female colleague entered with her coat and briefcase. "Hi, I won't be a moment," he said familiarly to her.

"I'll see you later," said Sandra, suddenly embarrassed. She stood up and walked to his door.

"Right," said Marcus, also walking to his door. "Make a date with me," he said to Sandra, touching her for the briefest moment on her shoulder.

'He touched me for the briefest moment on my shoulder,' she thought as she walked away with a feeling of excited anticlimax. 'Maybe it's remotely possible that he does actually like me after all?'

"All this chocolate," groaned Sandra to her mother on Easter Sunday. "I love it!"

"Me too," said Caroline, "but I wish it didn't make me fat."

"My excuse is that it's helping me to cope with writing up the glorious third-year project," said Sandra. "Mum, I'm sorry Gulliver didn't come here today, he usually loves your roasts. He's been kind of different lately."

"Different?" asked Caroline, her hands deep in the washing up bowl.

"Withdrawn, morose, dark, rebellious, difficult, subterraneously angry," said Sandra, trying to explain. "We don't joke any more," she continued sadly.

"Have you asked him if anything's wrong?"

"Yes, of course. He just says living at home is getting him down, but he won't say any more. It's kind of hurtful, after all the years of love and worry. I hate to use the old cliché, but I feel as though I've given him the best years of my life. Him and Madeleine, that is."

"I expect it's time he left the nest," said Caroline, her hands busy in the bowl.

"I understand that, but I do think he could think of Osborn and me now and again as real people with feelings, instead of just some obstacles who thwart him – what a lovely word – because we're not actually thwarting him. We want him to go and be free to live his own life as much as he wants to go. We'll miss him horribly, of course."

"Do you think he senses any of this?"

"I'm not sure," replied Sandra, feeling inexplicably uncomfortable. "Anyway, it's not as black and white as that. It just feels so weird."

"He'll miss you too."

"No, he said he won't come to see us for at least six months."

"He was joking, Sandra!"

"He may have been joking, but it still hurts," replied Sandra, feeling herself ignominiously close to tears and wondering whether her mother actually understood any of her feelings at all.

"Well, it's only a stage. In fact, all the world's a stage, to quote the old bard. Did I tell you I was joining the local Shakespeare Society? You'll get through it all, you always do. I must say, I can see both sides," said Caroline, busying herself with the dishcloth.

"Mmm." Sandra stood still, aware of surfacing emotions. 'You don't know what it's like to be me, Mum,' she was thinking, 'full of little anxieties and responsibilities. You only had me, then both Dad's and your parents were dead by the time you were 40. Oh God, that's an awful thought! I don't mean it like that, really I don't. I love having you and Dad alive and there'll be a huge gaping abyss inside me when you die.'

'But I'm so tired, Mum. Life seems nothing but work and worry. My body's tired and my mind's tired. I think you've forgotten what it's like. You expect me to go on coping and sorting out everyone's little problems just like I've always done in the past, even though you know how the bottom fell out of my world because of Osborn and Sindy.'

'Gulliver and Madeleine are allowed to have life-stage crises because they're young, but I should just get on with mine and not complain. I wanted some sympathy about Gulliver, but it feels like you were responding to me as Gulliver's mother, rather than to me as Sandra.' She gulped noisily.

"You're quiet," observed Caroline, ignoring the noisy gulp.

"I need to get something," muttered Sandra, heading towards the spare back bedroom. Once there, she let the tears escape for a few moments, before swallowing them back firmly and blowing her nose into a handkerchief. She would have felt very much better, she reflected, if she could have blown her nose into a *Misunderstood Mulberry Mood Matching Toilet Roll*.

"Are you all right, love?" asked Leonard, as she walked into the sitting room later.

"Yes Dad," she replied. "Well no, I'm not. I'm tired."

"Ah, you shouldn't be tired at your age," said Leonard. "You should have come on the walk the *Old Ramblers* did on Thursday. You should have seen us in action! Only six people brought their walking sticks this time and we had a really good lunch in *The Three Bosoms* afterwards. Walking's very good for you, you know."

"I know," replied Sandra. "I look forward to doing lots of it when I'm free."

"Free?" asked Osborn, poking his head up from behind *The Sunday Mammoth Mail*. "Free?"

"Free as in when we're retired," explained Sandra, looking at him with forlorn eyes. "When we have more time, energy and money."

"You've got enough money, haven't you?" asked Leonard. "You've got food, clothes and a roof over your head? I can remember going hungry quite regularly when I was younger. The *Old Ramblers* were saying the other day how young people expect so much these days."

"We're middle-aged," said Sandra shortly, beginning to long desperately for some solitude and the missing *Misunderstood Mulberry Mood Matching Toilet Roll*.

"Sandra!" hissed Caroline later on, emerging from the bathroom. "Over here!"

"What?" asked Sandra, looking at her mother as if from a distance of more than years.

"There's an IFO in the toilet that I can't flush away," whispered Caroline into Sandra's disbelieving ear.

"An IFO?" asked Sandra dully.

"An Identified Floating Object," replied her mother, still in an urgent whisper. "It must have been all those roast potatoes. What do you think I should do?"

"How should I know?" replied Sandra, exasperated. "Flush the bloody thing again, or something." She sighed and relented. "I'm sorry Mum, I'll deal with it."

"You're always in a bad mood lately," observed Madeleine, after Sandra had dealt with the unimaginable. She had partly witnessed the scene between her mother and grandmother. "No wonder Gulliver wants to leave home."

"Has he said that to you as well?" asked Osborn, joining in the affray.

"Yes and he said he's going to get a tattoo too."

"A tattoo?!" Sandra and Osborn expostulated together. It was the first time they'd managed to do that sort of thing together for quite a long time.

"Only a very small one on his hip," explained Madeleine.

"His hip?!" Sandra and Osborn expostulated together for the second time.

"Yes," replied Madeleine evenly. "He said he met this tattooist at *Sleazy Suzy's* and was talked into it."

"Talked into it?!" Incredibly, Sandra and Osborn managed to expostulate together for the third time.

"What's up?" asked Caroline, entering the sitting room from the kitchen to see what the multiple expostulations were all about.

"Gulliver's going to get himself a tattoo," replied Sandra heatedly. She felt the beginnings of a mega-hot flush erupting from her middle regions and rising.

"Dear me, what you young people get up to these days," said Caroline, smiling conspiratorially at Madeleine. "There was an undergraduate at university who had a tattoo of a rat on an unmentionable place."

"It was me," said Leonard, looking up with interest. "Wasn't it?"

"Yes, so it was!" said Caroline, smiling at him. "Sorry, this sherry's gone to my head. My legs too, as it happens. I haven't had any for a while, with those pills I've been taking."

"You've got a tattoo, Dad?" squeaked Sandra incredulously. "Of a rat?"

"Only a small one," replied Leonard reminiscently. "A big one wouldn't fit."

"Good God," said Sandra weakly. "What pills have you been taking, Mum?" she asked suspiciously, remembering her mother's words.

"Oh, just for the arthritis, the sleeplessness and the dizzy spells," replied Caroline. "Didn't I mention them? Dr Buttman seems to have found some pills that suit me for my high blood pressure now, as well."

"You still don't take as many as I do since I had my bypass," said Leonard, almost proudly. "Although even I was astounded when Sybil dropped her handbag on Wednesday and all those pills and potions fell out."

"Sybil? You mean Mum?" asked Osborn, giving up *The Sunday Mammoth Mail* at last.

"Yes, she and Basil came on the last *Old Ramblers* walk with us, didn't they tell you?" enquired Leonard. It made a change from asking.

"I haven't seen them for a few days," answered Osborn. It made a change from replying. "My thesis is at rather a crucial stage and I've had extended meetings at work, it's been hell on wheels."

"Oh," said Leonard amicably. "Yes, they came with a friend of theirs, the one with the gammy leg."

"Winnie Somebody?" asked Osborn tiredly.

"No, Arthur Somebody," replied Leonard. "He goes to their church, apparently."

"Do you mind them joining your group?" asked Osborn.

"Not really," replied Caroline. "I just make sure I walk with someone else. Anyway, it's up to them, people have a right to their own life."

"They do indeed," replied Sandra to her mother, but she found herself looking at Osborn instead, as they both raised their eyebrows enquiringly.

"I feel as if nobody is interested in how *I* really feel," said Sandra to Osborn as they lay in bed that night.

"Me too," said Osborn. "I mention work and everyone switches off. Those extended meetings were a pain in the ass, I hated every minute of them. I actually felt as if my head might explode, the tension buzzing around in them was so great."

"I mean, I've got university to cope with on the one hand and housework still to

cope with on the other hand," said Sandra. "Does anyone ever clean the toilet except me? Do they shit! Well, they do, of course, which is the problem."

"The chartered engineer mature candidate route is all very well," said Osborn, "but it's like being pulled in two different directions. I never seem to have any time to relax at all."

"I hated being at odds with Madeleine today, but she's been so weird lately. Not to mention Gulliver, which means I just did."

"My father wants me to dig over his back garden and plant hundreds of things – plants, actually – but I don't have the energy. I think he thinks I'm still in my vigorous twenties, but I'm in my clapped-out forties and my knee keeps playing up."

"Our financial situation is still a constant worry. Madeleine does what Gulliver used to do, she keeps asking for things while pleading poverty. Gulliver was always telling me students need to survive, but so do parents of students – and especially student parents of students."

"I'm so sick of hearing about my parents' flaming garden. My father has a dig about it every time I see him now."

"I really thought I was doing all this to find out who I am. At least, that was the intention at the beginning, but now I feel as if I'm being submerged as much as ever. The worst of it is that half of it – the university half – is my own doing."

"I feel like dropping out of the whole ridiculous rat race sometimes, but I wouldn't know where to go or what to do and my conscience would prick me."

"Talking of pricks," said Sandra, "but no, it doesn't matter, I'm too tired. The trouble is that everyone is only interested in their own little world."

"I used to be a person once," said Osborn sadly, "but now all I am is a mere existential convenience."

"A public one at that," said Sandra irately. "God, listen to us. We're moaning our heads off."

"So what? It's nice to talk to someone who actually listens."

CHAPTER 22

"I think it would be helpful for you to try some Shame Attack Therapy," suggested Ian Probe to Sandra, as she sat opposite him for her fourth session.

"How do I attack shame?" asked Sandra fearfully. 'Don't ask me to go and do or say anything in public,' she was thinking fearfully. 'I'd be too afraid and ashamed.'

"Well, I have this friend who often wears odd things," said Ian, stroking his beard. "Clothes mainly. He doesn't really mind what people think of him and the thing is that people tend to accept him exactly the way he is. So perhaps if you were to wear something that might make people notice you in some slightly odd way, you'd discover that people would accept you as you are."

"So you're saying I need to wear odd clothes to make people notice I'm slightly odd?" asked Sandra fretfully.

"Well yes, as a way of inoculating yourself against your fear of shame and embarrassment," replied Ian. "You could do other things as well, like – let's see – wear only one big earring, or ask for something outlandish in a shop."

"But people always look at me anyway," said Sandra, trying to think of a way of getting out of what she considered a difficult assignment. "It makes me very self-conscious."

"Have you ever really looked at how many people look at you?" pressed Ian. "How about walking down the main street in the city centre and looking deliberately to see how many people actually *do* look at you? You'll probably find they're all intent on their own personal agenda."

"OK then, I suppose I can do that on the way home today," said Sandra bravely. "I've got to buy a birthday present."

"Ah, an ideal opportunity to ask for something outlandish in a shop," encouraged Ian, raising his eyebrows enquiringly.

"Oh God," said Sandra. "Everyone will see I'm anxious."

"Are you anxious now?" asked Ian, fondling his beard.

"Right now, yes, anxious at the thought of what you've suggested," answered Sandra truthfully.

"Do you think I can see you're anxious?"

"I don't know. Can you?"

"No. When I first saw you, you were rather hesitant, but generally I wouldn't have known you were anxious at all. You show no strong overt signs of anxiety."

"I can act well then."

"Some would say it's all an act, the presentation of self."

"Well, I shall be presenting myself in some peculiar ways, if Shame Attack Therapy is anything to go by."

"Right! Yes, that's a point, write it all down. Try to do something every day so you don't lose ground. I'll see you in say three weeks and we'll talk about how you got on then?"

"OK," said Sandra, her heart thumping at the thought of a question she wanted to ask. "Er – could I ask you a question?"

"Sure. Is it something outlandish?" asked Ian, smiling.

"No. That is, I hope not. I was wondering if you could possibly write a note addressed to my personal tutor, to say that I'm seeing you because of anxiety. Then, if my final degree mark is borderline, the powers-that-be might give me the definite of the bout. I mean the benefit of the doubt." Sandra blushed a little at her mistake.

"Yes, I could do that," said Ian, twisting a few strands of his beard around his index finger. "Would three weeks' time be all right? Things are slightly frenetic at the moment."

"That will be grine – fate – fine – great," stuttered Sandra. "Oh God!"

"Don't worry, you're doing grine – er, fine," said Ian, trying unsuccessfully to untwist his finger from his beard.

"Thank you."

"Bye Sandra. Give it hell!"

"What are you going to do on your birthday?" Sandra asked Gulliver as they coincided in the kitchen on a rainy Sunday afternoon.

"Oh, cannabis, or a bit of smack."

"You're not serious, are you?" asked Sandra seriously.

"I don't know," replied Gulliver. "What's it to you?"

"But I – oh, forget it," said Sandra, hurt and confused by his distant tone. He was already on his way to the bathroom.

"It's *Father Hamish of Dibleykisrector* tonight," said Sandra conversationally to Madeleine, as they coincided in the kitchen slightly later on a rainy Sunday afternoon.

"Ah," said Madeleine. "I wondered if it was OK for me to go to Lucy's to watch it?"

"Oh. Yes, I suppose so. I was just looking forward to a family Sunday evening in, that's all," said Sandra. "But you go, darling. You're still getting on all right with Lucy, then?"

"Kind of," replied Madeleine. "She wants me to try out her hair in different styles and then she wants me to paint her nails."

"Really? Oh well, I guess Dad and I can watch it on our own."

"What are you doing?" Sandra asked Osborn, as they coincided (a planned move on Sandra's part) in the bedroom even later on a rainy Sunday afternoon.

"What does it look like?" replied Osborn with a sigh, from where he was lying on the bed reading a book about electronics. "I'm lying on the bed reading a book about electronics."

"Do you remember our favoured diversion on wet Sunday afternoons?" asked Sandra, placing herself provocatively (she hoped) on the bed beside him.

"Yes," replied Osborn, looking at Sandra wonderingly.

"What are you wondering?" she asked him wonderingly.

"I was wondering whether you were propositioning me."

"Yes, I am."

"Great. I could do with a break."

"I'm so behind with this thesis," complained Osborn an hour later. He and Sandra were sitting up in bed reading, after having played with each other's interesting bits for a while.

"I'm sorry," said Sandra, affronted. "I didn't force you to have a close encounter of the sexual kind, or a brief encounter of the close kind, or a sexual encounter of the brief and close kind..."

"OK, I get your point," said Osborn. "You may not have forced me, but you've been in such a strange mood lately that I never know how you're going to react."

"What? That's not my fault," said Sandra, even more affronted – in fact, feeling as though she had been stabbed in the back, or perhaps poked in the non-frontal regions with the prongs of a toasting fork. "You shouldn't do anything and then say it's because of me."

"You've always got an answer for everything, haven't you," said Osborn sharply. "Ouch, I've bitten my tongue."

"I don't know what to say."

"I've got my own pressures, you know, life doesn't revolve around you."

"I can't cope with this," said Sandra, leaping off the bed. "I'm going."

"That's right, run away," shouted Osborn. "Just like you always used to!"

'Oh God,' thought Sandra, as she sat on the toilet (with the lid closed) crying into a *Let-Down Lavender Mood Matching Toilet Roll*. 'What did I do or say that went wrong? Why did Osborn react so angrily? Has something happened? Has Sindy contacted him again? Oh God, no, I can't even contemplate the awfulness of that. It's still with me, like the way it took me right back to the snow and the pain of discovery when I heard that song the other day. I really have no idea why they were playing *Hey Mr or Ms Snowperson* in May, for heaven's sake.

'I suppose I'm overreacting, but we've both been so stressed out with everything. It really wasn't meant to be like this. It's *got* to get better after I've finished my degree, hasn't it?' She sniffed and gulped as another thought assailed her. 'Oh God, this is our first row since I discovered about him and Sindy. I suppose it's inevitable in a realistic everyday living sort of way, but that doesn't make it any more bearable.'

Sandra pulled off an extra long strip of *Let-Down Lavender Mood Matching Toilet Roll* to deal with the fresh flow of tears. 'So this is another alternative meaning of wet Sunday afternoons,' she thought with a slightly damp hint of humour.

Two weeks later, Sandra stood haggardly at the office entrance in the Psychology Department of the university, finally handing in her third-year project. She had tried to hand it in previously, but had been told to take it away and prepare a word count statement. After experiencing a strange reluctance to hand it over at the second attempt, the girl in the office had been forced to prise it out of her fingers. Sandra then walked away from the office with a sense of relief that was similar to that of having given birth.

'Only one essay and three exams to go now!' she thought elatedly, as she found herself walking in the direction of Marcus Lowe's room. She knocked on his door almost automatically, wondering what she was actually going to say. However, there was no reply, although she heard the telephone ringing inside.

'What a pity,' she thought as she walked away. 'Someone else wants to speak to him, too. It's nice of him to say his door is always open, but today it's definitely shut, like the promise of this visit. Oh well, I'll go to the *Student Union Happy Crappy Shop* and buy a *Creme Egg* instead.'

On her way to the shop, Sandra recognised several third-year students. They were all identifiable by the haggard expressions on their faces, the dark shadows under their eyes, their pale complexions and the way they were carrying their projects to the office as if they were holding a bomb.

'It's qualitatively different being a final-year student,' mused Sandra thoughtfully as she made her way out of the Psychology Department. 'In the first year, everyone has lectures together and they walk around in groups with time to talk and joke. It's more or less the same in the second year, but in the third year it's as if you're suddenly on your own. It's just you and your project supervisor battling over the project, and the third-year study options are split into so many sections that you never have any lectures together as one big group ever again. So the third-year students end up walking around on their own, looking incredibly tired and worried all the time.'

"Hi Sandra," said Jenny, approaching Sandra while carrying her project like a bomb. "You look incredibly tired and worried."

"I've just handed in my project to the office, so I'm relieved, actually. You look a bit incredibly tired and worried yourself, Jenny."

"I am," agreed Jenny, "I can't wait to hand in this wretched thing. By the way, you've lost an earring."

"Oh, no I haven't actually..." began Sandra, but Jenny was already hurrying away in the direction of the office.

'She's the first person to notice my feeble attempts at Shame Attack Therapy,' mused Sandra, as she entered the *Student Union Happy Crappy Shop*.

"Hey Sandra," Rodney Bent (Ro) said, as she headed for the *Creme Eggs*. "You're wearing really odd socks – with sandals – far out!"

"Yes," said Sandra, trying desperately not to blush as Ro, Zo, Mo and Vo, along with half the people in the crowded shop, seemed to stare at Sandra's feet. "It's therapy," she said wildly, turning away to dig her hand into the *Creme Egg* box. It was empty. 'Sod it,' thought Sandra testily, 'although I suppose it's quite a while after Easter. Oh well, I'll just have to have an *Extra Thick Chocolate Uranus Bar* instead.'

A week later, Sandra awoke on Thursday morning with a feeling of fate. 'What the hell is a feeling of fate?' she wondered as she lay in bed. 'Is it a sense of something happening at last which you knew was always going to happen? Well, whatever it is, I'm feeling it. I think it must be because today is actually, unbelievably, my final contact day at university. Wow! It's almost over!' She leapt out of bed and went downstairs fatefully.

"Hello Mother," said Gulliver dolefully from the sofa in the sitting room, as Sandra was on her way to the kitchen.

"Hello Gulliver," said Sandra, slightly alarmed. "Aren't you going to uni today?"

"No," replied Gulliver, pointing to his nose. It was only then that Sandra noticed the plaster, the swelling and the bruised and puffy left eye.

"What's happened?" she asked, sinking on to the sofa. She had meant to buy a new three-piece suite with her last grant cheque.

"Someone hit me last night," replied Gulliver. "Punched me in the face for no reason whatsoever. I think my nose might be broken."

"Oh Gulliver," said Sandra, his past recent strangeness with her forgotten in an instant. "You'd better see Dr Effingham."

"Yes," said Gulliver, looking pale and tired. "I was hoping someone could give me a lift, I feel a bit shaky."

"Oh Gulliver," said Sandra. "I'd give you a lift, but I can't drive. Why don't you give my dad a ring? He'd take you. I'm pretty sure he doesn't do any old rambling on Thursdays."

"OK," said Gulliver, grinning slightly. "Ouch. By the way, the police will be calling around later to take a statement."

"Oh Gulliver," said Sandra. "Do you know who did it?"

"No," replied Gulliver. "It was a group of three. After one of them hit me, they all legged it. I'm not sure if I passed out for a moment, but I remember sitting on the ground with blood pouring out of my nose – from the outside as well as the inside."

"Oh Gulliver," said Sandra. "How did you get home?"

"By taxi in the end. The police came, but after they'd taken a few details, they were called away somewhere else more urgent. They said I probably ought to go to Casualty to be checked over, but I just wanted to come home."

"Oh Gulliver. Why didn't you wake us?"

"I didn't want to worry you. I tried to clean up all the blood, but there's still a lot on my jeans and t-shirt."

"Oh Gulliver." Sandra was moved by the thought of him all alone in his blood and distress the night before. "I'll buy you a new t-shirt."

"Jeans?"

"No."

"OK."

'All the recent overt rebellious behaviour, the covert rebelliousness, the strange moods and the cold silences don't matter at all,' Sandra was thinking, as Gulliver began to talk in more detail about the previous night. 'What really matters is the fundamental caring that I believe we have for each other. At least, I *want* to believe that we have that – no, I'm sure we do. He was bleeding and hurt and frightened and he didn't want to worry us.' Sandra felt tears rising and wanted very badly to hug Gulliver wordlessly, but something held her back.

'I wouldn't know what to say,' she thought, 'and I might hurt his nose. It's not really that, though, it's who we are. We'd both be embarrassed by a hug, which is such a pity. How does Gulliver know how much I feel for him if I don't show it?'

"...so I just couldn't go into uni today," Gulliver was saying.

"Oh Gulliver," said Sandra. "I'll stay home with you if you want to talk."

"No, it's OK," he said. "I want to ring Damien, he was with me last night. Then I'll go to the surgery. Then of course the police will be calling at some stage."

"Oh Gulliver," said Sandra. "I feel pulled apart."

"Oh, don't go falling apart again," said Gulliver, grinning. "Ouch. Go on, Mother Sad Eyes, go to university. I'm a big boy now."

"I'm sure you are, but I really don't need to know that," said Sandra, trying very hard to force out a smile.

Sandra sat in *The Psychology of Ageing* final session, courtesy of Oliver Dimm, feeling as old as the hills. What the hills had to do with it, she wasn't entirely sure. She only knew that she felt so incredibly distant from the rest of the other students in the room that she might as well have been engaged in some extreme hill climbing on a prolonged emotional trip.

The three hours dragged endlessly, except of course that they did eventually end. All Sandra wanted to do was to go home to see if Gulliver was all right. She even found herself declining an offer of a pub visit to celebrate the end of contact time.

'It really is qualitatively different being a so-called mature student,' she thought, as she packed her notepad and pen into her bag. 'Compared to the others, I've hardly been to the pub at all. That reminds me, I wonder what Marcus actually meant about fixing a date?'

"Sandra, is it?" asked Oliver Dimm hesitantly, as Sandra passed by him on her way out of the room.

"Yes?" replied Sandra rather impatiently.

"Did you happen to mention anything to your mother and father about our little conversation the other day? I really didn't mean to be insensitive, you know."

"No, of course not," said Sandra ambiguously.

"Good luck with the exams."

"Thank you. I'll need it." Sandra smiled, having relented a little.

"By the way, my middle name is Lionel."

"I'm sorry?"

"Lionel. Oliver Lionel Dimm."

"Oh, Mum's acronym hypothesis."

"Yes. Did she lumber you with an acronym?"

"Yes. First of all I was a SOW and now I'm a SOD," replied Sandra obligingly.

"Good heavens," exclaimed Oliver, his eyes widening. "I'd never have guessed. You've always seemed quite pleasant to me."

CHAPTER 23

"How did you get on with Shame Attack Therapy?" asked Ian Probe as Sandra sat down opposite him for her fifth session, feeling tense and irritable.

"OK, I suppose," replied Sandra, trying to force herself out of her miasma of negative emotion. "I've made a prat of myself on several occasions."

"Good," said Ian thoughtfully. "I mean, how did you feel about it?"

"Embarrassed – but now I really don't seem to mind as much what people think of me, I do feel somewhat immune from it all."

"That's good! Did you walk down the main street of the city centre looking to see how many people actually looked at you?"

"Yes, but I don't want to talk about it. I'm still having hot flushes about all the stares and the sniggers," said Sandra, experiencing a sudden hot flush.

"Oh?"

"I somehow managed to do that awful thing of getting my skirt caught up in my knickers and not realising," said Sandra, blushing despite herself – although she was actually blushing because of herself. "It was only when I happened to bump into someone I knew from the Psychology Department on his lunch break that he had the decency to tell me why people were laughing at me. It was Oliver Dimm, dear old soul, he's really gone up in my estimation. I hope I never see him again, though, because it would be far too embarrassing."

"Well, a bit of inadvertent Shame Attack Therapy won't go amiss," said Ian kindly. "I do it all the time myself. And you survived, didn't you?"

"Yes, but at what cost?"

"True. Well at this point then, perhaps we could talk about your core beliefs."

"They're inside apples," said Sandra facetiously, still suffering from the memory of the skirt inside the knickers incident.

"Right," said Ian, beginning to fondle his beard a little desperately. "You seem a little unrelaxed today?"

"It's been a difficult week," explained Sandra, also a little desperately. "By the way, did you manage that letter I asked if you could write to my personal tutor? I need to take it to him, because exams are coming up in a few weeks."

"Yes, I did write it," replied Ian, opening his briefcase. "Here we are. I made a copy for you, so read it now and let me know if it's what you wanted."

"OK," said Sandra, surprised at the length of the letter. 'Sodding hell,' she thought as she read it through. 'He thinks I have a passive personality style – a strong sense of inferiority – I'm deferential towards others – I doubt my own abilities – this is simply not true!'

"Is it all right?" asked Ian, watching her face. It was somewhere to look.

"Yes," replied Sandra deferentially. "Although I don't think I'm passive, but I'm not sure I *can* be more assertive." She simmered gently for a few seconds. "This makes me feel as if I'm a failure."

"Well, that's why I thought it would be a good idea to discuss your core beliefs."

"Oh, stuff my sodding core beliefs," said Sandra miserably. "I'm not surprised I'm halfway around the bend with what I've had to put up with in the last few years. My partner did have an affair with my cousin when I was struggling in the first year of my degree, you know. Anyone would go to pieces if that happened to them. Everybody seems to want me to keep it stuffed underground as though I'm all right now, I'm over it and I don't need to talk to anyone about it, because it's two and a half years ago. I *do* want to talk about it, though, I do! I can't forgive her. I have dreams in which I'm terrified of seeing her again. I want to say things to her, but at the same time I never want to set eyes on her for as long as I live. All this can't be helping me now, can it?" She felt like banging her fist down on the desk.

"No," agreed Ian. "We can spend a session talking about it, if you like?"

"Yes, I *would* like," replied Sandra, close to tears after her outburst.

"There are a couple of suggestions I have which you could prepare for that particular session," said Ian thoughtfully, massaging his beard. "You mentioned being

afraid to see her again. Perhaps it would help to write down a few worst scenarios. By that I mean what exactly you're afraid of, what the outcome might be, how you might respond, etc."

"Yes," replied Sandra hopefully. "I'd like to do that."

"You also mentioned there were things you wanted to say to her," continued Ian, "so how about writing her a letter that you don't actually send? You could read it out to me instead if you wanted to and then tear it up. That might give you a sense of dealing with your feelings, of resolving the issues you seem to need to deal with."

"Yes, I'd definitely like to do that," said Sandra, perking up a great deal.

On her walk home, she was already composing her letter to Sindy. 'You sly cow,' she started in her head, feeling better already, 'did our childhood time together mean nothing at all to you?'

"You sly cow," she said tentatively, trying out the feeling of saying the words aloud. "You bitch of the first order," she said a little more loudly. "You nasty piece of flesh," she said much more loudly, enjoying the sensation of release. "You deceiving selfish wretch, you rancid little slut, you sleazy little slapper..."

"I beg your pardon?" said a voice, as a woman stood up irately in her garden, from where she'd been bending over picking the dead heads from her daffodils. Sandra looked at her in astonishment and carried on walking as if nothing had happened.

'Sodding Shame Attack Therapy,' she thought with chagrin, as she sighed with gross humiliation. 'It's beginning to work, though!'

For the next two weeks, Sandra wasn't sure whether she was immersed in a surreal or subreal existence, as she revised frantically for her final exams. She tried not to complain about it too much to anyone. Osborn had his thesis to contend with, Gulliver had his own exams and Madeleine had hers too.

'Although Gulliver's are only second-year efforts,' she thought condescendingly. 'Well, I *am* a third-year student, I've earned the right to think condescendingly,' she thought haughtily.

However, on the day of her first exam (*The Psychology of Ageing*) she felt not at all haughty or condescending. 'I feel sick,' was her first waking thought. 'Oh God, I've got to sit in that huge intimidating hall for three solid hours, dragging out knowledge that I may or may not know. Does one actually know knowledge, though? Hmm. Oh God, why am I putting myself through all this?'

She managed not to throw up (either the two cornflakes she'd forced down for breakfast, or her hands in horror when she read the exam questions), but after the three hours were over, she felt as if she'd been ageing at twice the normal rate. 'Quite appropriate, I suppose, for that particular exam,' she thought wryly, as she dragged her ageing body home to revise for the next exam.

The next exam four days later (*Current Psychological Literature*) wasn't quite as awful, even though there were no questions on the book Sandra had read thoroughly. Instead, she was forced to answer a question on the book she'd ploughed through reluctantly, entitled *Rationality* – a subject with which Sandra unfortunately didn't feel very familiar.

The third and final exam was another three-hour-long-bastard one, for which Sandra became nervous at least three days previously. By the time she sat in the exam hall waiting for the exam to begin, she felt so tired that she could have fallen asleep, if only she hadn't felt so nervous. 'It's a good job I feel so nervous in that case,' she thought wryly. 'I wonder if anyone has ever fallen asleep in an exam? I wonder if anyone has actually thrown up? I wonder if anyone has run screaming from the room?'

"You may start writing," announced the invigilator suddenly in his Godlike fashion from the front of the hall.

'What if I don't want to?' thought Sandra rebelliously for an instant, as she turned over the exam paper. 'Ah, a *Cognition and Emotion* question on anxiety. Well, I can answer that one all right!'

'I think I've got that anxiety question wrong,' she thought anxiously three hours later, 'and I could hardly think straight for the other two questions I attempted.'

"Please stop writing," announced the invigilator suddenly and emphatically. As soon as he had finished speaking, a cheer rose up from various points in the exam hall. Sandra half wanted to join in, but was too tired and self-conscious.

'How nice, though,' she thought tiredly and self-consciously. 'They're excited about the end of exams – the end of this academic year – the end of the degree – the end of life for the past three years as we've known it. God, it's really ended! As long as I pass, I've really, actually, finally done it!'

Once outside the exam hall, Sandra looked with interest at all her fellow third-year students. Bottles and cans of alcohol seemed to have materialised from nowhere and everyone seemed incredibly high.

"Hey Sandra, it's over!" said Nerissa, approaching Sandra with an elated expression. To Sandra's surprise, Nerissa opened her arms and gave Sandra a hug. Sandra was decidedly touched, by emotion as well as by Nerissa's arms.

"Yes, it's over!" she said, as they disengaged. "Nerissa, why is everybody still hanging around?"

"For a group photo," explained Nerissa. "It was on the notice board."

"Gosh, when did they take a group photo?" asked Sandra in surprise. "I must have missed it."

"No, the notice that they're going to take a group photo was on the notice board," explained Nerissa patiently.

"Ah, I didn't notice the notice board this morning," said Sandra. "I was too nervous."

"Hey Ro!" shouted a voice from behind Sandra.

"Hey Mo!" shouted a voice from in front of Sandra.

"Hey Vo, Zo, No, Bo!" erupted an indistinguishable cacophony of voices around Sandra.

"Hey Maz, Raz, Baz, Kaz, Daz!" came another cacophony of voices.

"I shall miss all this, I think," remarked Sandra to Nerissa, rubbing her forehead.

"Yes, life will be qualitatively different now our academic parameters and motivational forces are about to change," replied Nerissa thoughtfully. "We might remember how to speak simply and unpsychologically again. Are you coming to the pub?"

"Oh yes," replied Sandra. "It's my last time to behave like a student."

An hour or so later, after the group photo had taken place – a rather wet and windy experience on a grassy bank outside the library – Sandra stood in *The Cardinal's Jockstrap* with Nerissa, Jenny, Jill and Juliet.

"I feel psychologically changed," said Nerissa, sipping her neat *Western Comfort*.

"I feel psychologically confounded," said Jenny, sipping her untidy *Crème de Menthol*.

"I feel psychologically confused," said Jill, sipping her *Triple Strength Cider*.

"I feel psychologically compromised," said Juliet, sipping her *Gin and Artichoke*.

"I feel psychologically challenged," said Sandra, choking on her *Rum and Brandy Special*. "But I've really and quite amazingly actually enjoyed the whole sodding experience."

"Me too!" agreed Nerissa, Jenny, Jill and Juliet in unison.

An hour and several drinks later, Sandra began to feel light headed and desperate for something to eat. She decided it was time to seek out a final *Extra Thick Chocolate Uranus Bar* from the *Student Union Happy Crappy Shop*. After saying goodbye to the gang and wondering if she would ever see them again, despite their plans to meet up at a later date, she headed rather unsteadily towards the door of *The Cardinal's Jockstrap*. It was at that point she saw Geoff sitting down in the corner with an empty seat beside him.

"Geoff!" she said, approaching him on impulse.

"Sandra!" responded Geoff, not particularly on impulse. "I wondered if I'd see you here again."

"Did Helena have another exam today?" asked Sandra conversationally, looking enquiringly at the empty space beside him.

"No, I'm here with a colleague," replied Geoff. "He's celebrating his fifth divorce. He's at the bar over there."

"Oh right," said Sandra, sitting down rather precipitately beside Geoff. She seemed to be having a little trouble with her legs. "Well, I had my last exam today. My degree is now over, unless I have to do re-sits. I thought I was going to have to do one just then – ha!"

"Hey," said Geoff, looking into Sandra's eyes. "I'm pleased for you."

"So, how's life?" asked Sandra, not really knowing what to say because Geoff's direct gaze was unhinging her a little. Since she was already a little unhinged, the result was rather unhinging.

"It's OK," replied Geoff, "except I'm feeling a bit weighed down by various responsibilities."

"Me too," agreed Sandra. "I should think it's a middle-aged thing with children at one end and parents at the other. I mean, no matter how much you genuinely and deeply love them, they're people you have to consider constantly. And on top of that, society seems uncompromising in its expectation that you consider them to the detriment of yourself. Sacrifice yourself for your children and take on the duty of looking after your parents without complaining. Never mind if you're tired, depressed and have lost sight of your needs, hopes and dreams in the process."

"I know how you feel. Have you lost sight of your needs, hopes and dreams?" asked Geoff softly.

"Pardon?" asked Sandra. It was even noisier than usual in *The Cardinal's Jockstrap*.

"Have you lost sight of your needs, hopes and dreams?" repeated Geoff more loudly.

"Well, doing this degree was a dream," replied Sandra, "but the psychological cost has been much higher than I ever thought it would be. I – uh – I'm sort of seeing a sort of psychologist because of anxiety. Ironic, isn't it."

"You're human," said Geoff, "but I'm sorry it's been so hard."

"Oh well, I've survived," said Sandra, beginning to feel self-conscious. "Are you really OK, Geoff?"

"Yes. Work is bearable, home life is OK, I haven't got too much middle-aged spread, my car still works, my brain still works, my – yes, everything still works. But I kind of miss those conversations we used to have in the car after those mind-boggling philosophy classes. Do you remember?"

"How could I forget?" responded Sandra, smiling. "It was a long time ago, though. I seem to have lived another lifetime since then. Oh, here's your colleague." Sandra struggled to her feet.

"Give me a ring?" asked Geoff, as he put his hand on her arm to help her up. "Have you still got my number?"

"Yes," said Sandra quickly. "Bye then."

"Bye Sandra. Take care."

'Take care – those are nice words,' thought Sandra, as she tripped over her own bag and banged her thigh heavily on the table.

Ten minutes later, she found herself sitting in the comfy chair in Marcus Lowe's room, having failed to locate an *Extra Thick Chocolate Uranus Bar*. After extricating herself from *The Cardinal's Jockstrap*, her feet had propelled her without her conscious knowledge towards the comfy chair in Marcus's room, rather than towards the *Student Union Happy Crappy Shop*.

"How do you think you've done in your exams, then?" asked Marcus, still looking a little bemused after Sandra had almost fallen in through the door.

"Not very well," replied Sandra. "I don't know why, but I was incredibly nervous this time."

"The fact that these exams were third-year finals may have helped your nervousness, perhaps?"

"Oh, I didn't need any help," said Sandra, laughing nervously. "Yes I did. I don't know. I feel weird. It's beginning to sink in that the last three years are over and I'm not

sure how I feel about that – apart from exhausted and a bit squiffy, to put it politely. I do know I seem to have lost my passion for psychology somewhere along the line."

"Ah, passion," said Marcus, leaning back in his chair. "Yes, I clearly remember the feeling of suddenly realising psychology was what I wanted to do. It was *my* subject, it belonged to me."

"Belonging doesn't seem like passion," said Sandra. "It's too possessive between people, or things."

"Then maybe I'd found something I'd been looking for. Something I needed. Maybe passion reflects need?"

"That's more like it," said Sandra.

"So what do you need now?" asked Marcus.

"Oh, many things – understanding, money, a holiday, good exam results, loss of memory about my cousin and partner's affair, something gorgeous to wear, to lose weight effortlessly, to write a bestselling book, to recover my emotional equilibrium and an *Extra Thick Chocolate Uranus Bar*," replied Sandra, "but not necessarily in that order."

"An interesting selection," said Marcus, smiling a little.

"What do you need, Marcus?" asked Sandra boldly.

"Less stress at work – damn!" Marcus's blue eyes clouded over as the phone rang. "This bloody thing hasn't stopped ringing all day and I'll have to answer it. Excuse me for a moment."

Sandra sat feeling rather uncomfortable in the comfy chair, not knowing whether she should leave Marcus to speak privately. Luckily, it proved to be a short phone call.

"Sorry, I didn't know whether to go or stay," she said, as Marcus replaced the receiver.

"That's OK, but I really should plough on. How about that pub meeting you mentioned?"

"Did I?" said Sandra, feigning nonchalance and fidgeting badly in the comfy chair. Last time, she remembered (when she'd given Marcus the letter from Ian Probe) she had fidgeted in the comfy chair very well. "Oh. Marcus, do you really want to go to the pub with me? Honestly? You know how I value your blatant honesty."

"You want my blatant honesty? Well, I'm not indifferent."

"Mmm. I like that, it's a typical Marcus Lowe thing to say. How about next week?"

"Let me look in my diary – Friday OK?"

"Yes. Which pub?"

"How about *The Queen's Uterus*?"

"OK, see you then then – ha! Well, bye Marcus. Hey, this is your last time as my personal tutor!" Sandra stood up and uncharacteristically held out her hand. Marcus looked at it wonderingly for a moment or two, before placing his hand momentarily in hers and smiling. He said something which Sandra unfortunately failed to understand as she opened the door, but somehow she didn't have the nerve to ask him to repeat it. Besides, her legs were giving her conflicting messages again.

That night, Sandra dreamed she was back at the university, where she saw that Oliver Dimm had aged prematurely. Sandra felt very sorry for him, but when she looked in the mirror, she found that she, too, was wrinkled well beyond her years. At that moment Simon Coe came into the room to say he had decided to act according to his name and fail Sandra's third-year project. Sandra was about to ring Osborn to tell him the awful news, when Marcus came into the room and said that meaningful names were meaningless.

Sandra began to feel terribly confused and anxious, so she went to sit in the comfy chair, which had materialised miraculously in the corner of the room. However, she found it was already occupied by Nerissa, who was sitting on Jenny's lap, who was sitting on Jill's lap, who was sitting on Juliet's lap, who was sitting on Geoff's lap. Sandra tried to run away, but was stopped at the door by Ian Probe, who suggested to Sandra that it was time to do some Shame Attack Therapy.

CHAPTER 24

"Have you written the letter to your cousin?" asked Ian Probe, after Sandra had been discussing the Sindy situation with him for the past 20 minutes.

"Yes, I have. I wrote it on the day I last saw you, to be honest. It felt like it was ready to come out then, so I let it." Sandra had been feeling nervously at ease with Ian since the beginning of the session, when he had very politely asked her what her cousin's name was.

"Sindy," Sandra had replied, still hating to say the name aloud. She wondered if Ian was monitoring her reaction at having to say the name, but decided that was simply a manifestation of the reprehensible suspicion of a former student of psychology.

"How have you felt about it – or her – I mean Sindy – since you wrote the letter?" asked Ian, stroking his beard softly.

"I haven't really had time, what with final exams and everything," said Sandra, wondering briefly what she meant by 'everything'.

"No, I can understand that. When I was at university – but no, you don't want to hear about that," said Ian, stroking his beard hardly. "Are you ready to read out the letter? Do you still want to do that?"

"Yes I am and yes I do," replied Sandra, her heart suddenly practising strange manoeuvres inside her chest. It would have been catastrophic anywhere else. She found she couldn't speak for a moment.

"Take your time," prompted Ian. "When you're ready."

"Sindy," began Sandra in a rush. "I still can't believe you did what you did with Osborn. It seems obvious to me that our childhood summers meant nothing at all to you, which hurt me a great deal. I know what it's like to want someone else," (at this point a vision of both Geoff and Phil flashed through Sandra's mind, causing her to squirm a little) "but when it came to a head," (here Sandra squirmed a lot, remembering the scene on Phil's sofa) "I couldn't do it because of the people I would have hurt." (Sandra meant Osborn and Geoff's wife.)

"I don't suppose you have any idea of how difficult it is for me to see other members of my family who talk about you, not knowing how much you hurt me," continued Sandra, after a gulp. "They talk as if I still care about you – as I once did – and as if you still care about me – which I don't believe you ever did. The very worst thing is that they say we're so much alike. We may have been once, you sly deceiving cow, but now we're worlds apart. You're no longer my cousin in anything but pretence. In my mind, I'm divorcing you from this moment. So fuck off, Sindy. I hope you get what you deserve. Whatever it is, it has nothing to do with me. Sandra."

Sandra had read fairly fast in a low voice, not taking her eyes from the letter. Now she looked up at Ian's eyes, wondering what he was thinking. His hand was supporting his chin, the table was supporting his elbow and his eyes were open and understanding. She momentarily considered that his eyes couldn't be understanding if they were shut – but her perception had been that his eyes were open as in listening. Then, after a moment wondering about the feasibility of listening with one's eyes, she remembered the letter.

"Do you want to rip it to pieces?" asked Ian, stroking his beard wonderingly.

"Yes!" replied Sandra emphatically. She had noticed as soon as she'd entered the room that a waste paper bin had been placed strategically close to her chair, a point which had endeared Ian to her rather a lot. She tore the letter into several pieces and dropped them into the bin with a sense of satisfaction. She felt as if she'd successfully disposed of a number of counter-productive emotions, as well as the piece of paper itself.

She talked this over with Ian for a while, feeling relieved and at ease. 'I wish you lived next door, so I could have conversations with you over the garden fence,' she thought suddenly. 'Goodness, I wonder if that indicates I've wanted to keep a safe distance between us throughout these sessions?'

"Well," said Ian, as they came to an almost natural break. "I'm wondering if you need another session?"

"I don't know," replied Sandra hesitantly. "I certainly feel better now than when I first saw you."

"Good." said Ian, rubbing his beard. "We seem to have covered the subject of your social anxiety quite well. You know how to tackle your automatic thoughts, by identifying them and then questioning the evidence for them. We've talked about social skills. You certainly have the know-how. You just perhaps need to practise the do-how a bit more assertively."

'He's winding up these sessions,' thought Sandra sadly. 'He doesn't want to see me again.'

"We've talked about your core beliefs and how you can explore them by using the downward arrow method," continued Ian. "We've talked about normality and agreed it was crap. Then there was the Shame Attack Therapy. So-o, I think you're quite well equipped to deal with your anxiety now – to be your own therapist, if you like. Do you agree?"

"Ye-es," replied Sandra reluctantly, gauging how she felt. "Yes, I do."

"Good. Well, if things do happen to go wrong again, give me a ring and we can arrange another appointment."

"OK. Thank you, Ian. Thank you for being you," said Sandra somewhat lamely. She had suddenly become aware of terrible pins and needles in her left leg.

"You're welcome," responded Ian, standing up. "Oh, I have something for you..."

"You have?" asked Sandra, with a slight feeling of pleasant anticipation.

"A couple of questionnaires," said Ian, handing them to her. "Could you send them back to me in this envelope, please?"

"Yes of course," replied Sandra, smiling. "Well, goodbye!" She held out her hand.

"Goodbye Sandra," said Ian, taking her hand. "All the very best."

"Thank you. You too." said Sandra, glancing back as she went to close the door behind her. Her last sight of Ian was as he began vigorously to scratch his beard.

"What seems to be the problem?" asked Dr Effingham, looking questioningly at Sandra as she entered his room and sat down.

"It's my bleeding uterus," replied Sandra baldly (though not literally, of course). "It's gone completely erratic. It must be taking after me."

"Right." Dr Effingham looked at Sandra's notes. "How's the anxiety?"

"It's fine," replied Sandra a little anxiously, wondering what he was driving at. "I've finished with Ian Probe."

"Good. Well, let's talk about your bleeding uterus then."

"Are you sure you want to?" asked Sandra guiltily. "I feel so sorry for you doctors having to deal with the vagaries of uterine activity."

"You do?" Dai Effingham looked startled. "Well yes, it does get a bit bloody overwhelming at times..."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"What? Oh no!" Dr Effingham resumed his professional air. "It just makes me appreciate my maleness, that's all."

Five minutes later, Sandra found herself lying prone on the couch in Sister's room wondering briefly (briefless, to be precise) if the male equivalent of Sister would be Brother, while Dr Effingham carried out an internal examination.

"I haven't seen much of you lately," said Dr Effingham conversationally as he pushed, prodded, palpated and pummelled Sandra's personal interior with his doctor-like hands.

"Well, you're seeing a lot of me now," replied Sandra, grimacing a little.

"Are you all right, Mrs Dullkettle?" asked Sister, having noted Sandra's grimace.

"Yes thank you," replied Sandra through gritted teeth. "I love this sort of thing."

"You do?" asked Dr Effingham, looking perturbed for a moment.

"No, it's a joke," replied Sandra tersely. "I'm worried that I'll have to have a hysterectomy."

"Ah," said Dr Effingham, looking into Sandra's eyes for a moment. "Let's not jump to conclusions. Is there any pain with intercourse?"

"Only social intercourse," said Sandra, thinking of her social anxiety. "No, there's no pain," she added, returning Dr Effingham's gaze.

"Good."

'What a humiliating sensation to have a strange man look you straight in the eye with his hand up your vagina and ask you whether sex hurts,' thought Sandra. 'Although I must say, in the past it's actually been worse to have doctors not look me in the eye. I can remember feeling like a lump of meat on a slab on several of these body-boggling occasions.'

"OK, I'll just do a smear test," said Dr Effingham, "although I don't think there's anything to worry about. I suspect it's your age, Sandra. Have you been noticing changes in your cycle for long?"

"Yes, I suppose I have," replied Sandra, forcing herself not to say something facetious about bicycles, "but I've been so busy at university and with Ian Probe and everything that I put it all to the back of my mind. I simply diagnosed myself as being pre-ante-peri-menopausal and then just forgot about it all until now." She gave a small laugh of embarrassment.

"Well, it looks like you've progressed to being peri-menopausal," said Dr Effingham, smiling. "Congratulations!"

"Thank you," responded Sandra, then wished she hadn't, as Dr Effingham had just inserted the smear test instrument.

"As I said, I don't think there's any cause for alarm at the moment," said Dr Effingham when he had finished, "so I don't think you need worry for now about a hysterectomy."

"Well I do worry, with the National Health Service being in the state it's in," said Sandra worriedly.

"Oh, I quite understand. It's funny you should be mentioning this, actually. I heard only this morning that an ex-colleague of mine has started his own gynaecological business. *Hysterectomies-R-Us*. Frightening, isn't it!"

"You think it's frightening?" exclaimed Sandra. "Imagine how you'd feel if you had a uterus!"

"Quite. Well, do come and see me again if you're at all worried about your periods and do ring up for the smear test result."

"Yes of course aahh! will," said Sandra, as the instrument of torture was suddenly withdrawn.

The following morning as she was getting dressed, an envelope from the university plopped through the letterbox. Sandra heard the plop and immediately went to investigate, having eagerly anticipated the arrival of her results for several heart-stopping days.

"Have they come?" she said aloud on her way to the porch. "Have they...?" Her speech was momentarily arrested as she recognised the university's franking mark on the envelope. "Oh my God," she said dramatically. "They've come!"

"Who's come?" asked Gulliver, having appeared from the deepest regions of his bedroom. "Oh, your results. Mine haven't come, that's not fair."

"Yours will come soon," said Sandra reassuringly, her hands actually beginning to shake slightly. She needed some reassurance herself. "I can't open this," she said pathetically.

"I'll do it," offered Gulliver, stretching out his hand for the envelope.

"No, I'll do it," said Sandra, ripping open the envelope resolutely. "Oh!" Her eyes had travelled immediately to the vital place on the paper. "It's a 2:1. I actually made a 2:1!"

"Well done, Mum!" said Madeleine, who had come to see what the noise was about. She hugged Sandra and started to spin her around. "Oh, I feel dizzy."

"You don't eat enough lately," said Sandra maternally. "I feel sick. It's only excitement. Actually, I see I got 59%, that letter from Ian Probe to Marcus about my anxiety must have done the trick. Oh, thank you Ian and Marcus, you gorgeous people!"

"Ring Dad," said Madeleine. "He'll be at work by now."

"OK," said Sandra, then she suddenly remembered her state of undress. "I'll be standing at the phone barely covered, but so what?"

"No, you won't be barely covered," remarked Gulliver. "That's a contradiction in terms."

"Oh, clever clogs!" retorted Sandra happily.

"No, you're the clever clogs," said Gulliver, as he and Madeleine turned to go back to their bedrooms. Sandra smiled. It felt so good to be friends with Gulliver again and the tattoo was only of an innocuous looking eel, after all. She had also been very touched by Madeleine's response to her results.

After Sandra had said goodbye to Osborn and put the receiver down, she felt strangely gregarious, as though she still wanted to talk to people. She rang her parents, but after the tenth unanswered ring, she remembered they'd gone on a coach trip to *Mashed Potato World* with Basil and Sybil's VAGINA group. She wondered about ringing Nerissa and the gang, but suddenly became overcome with Thin Excuse Syndrome.

'What if they've got firsts? They'll feel awkward about my 2:1. Or if they've got 2:2s, they'll feel depressed or embarrassed because of my 2:1, although to be fair I only scraped it. Oh well, maybe one of them will ring me.' Sandra realised she was failing miserably to behave assertively, but felt too unassertive to do anything about it.

'What about ringing Geoff?' she thought suddenly, her heart skipping a beat. 'I wonder if I should mention that to Dr Effingham, I've had a lot of palpitations lately.' She went to find Geoff's work number. It was a few years since she'd rung him at work, she remembered quite warmly. As she came to stand by the phone again, however, a barrage of doubts assailed her.

'Why am I doing this?' she wondered, fingering the piece of paper on which Geoff's phone number was written. 'Do I really want to start this off again? I don't think I do. I still like Geoff and I would like to talk with him again, but it all takes too much effort. I'd have to tell Osborn, which would be difficult for us both and where would it be leading anyway?'

She pushed and prodded and finally poked her finger through the piece of paper. 'Oh, sod it, life's too complicated. It should be much simpler, but it's not. I don't understand if I'm putting constraints on myself, or whether they're inherent in Osborn's and my relationship. If they are, it's a pity, but I'm really too tired to challenge them right at this moment – which is ironic, because I started out when I was 39 to rediscover myself and to live life honestly.

'So much for existential freedom! I'm not sure it exists and I'm not sure I really want it anyway. I know existential aloneness exists, though, because I live that daily in my head. Oh well, I suppose I'd better finish getting dressed. God, I've really trashed this piece of paper, I can hardly read his phone number now. In fact, I don't think I can. Oh well, maybe it's a sign.' She threw the piece of paper in the bin and went back upstairs with a sense of anti-climax. It wasn't that she was totally against climaxing, she just thought it was slightly overrated sometimes.

"It's called let-down," explained Marcus, as Sandra was explaining how she felt to him in *The Queen's Uterus*. "Don't worry, it's a common phenomenon."

"But I don't want to be common," mused Sandra aloud – the *Bacardi and Tangerine* had already gone to her head. "I don't want to be normal, or usual, or like everyone else. Not just for the sake of convention, anyway."

"You're unique whether you want to be or not," said Marcus, taking a small sip from his glass of *Legless Lager*.

"I don't mean I want to put myself above other people," Sandra tried to explain, "even though I seem to be shorter than most people, but I do want to be my self. I've spent a great many years thinking primarily of other people. Now I'd like to think secondarily of them a bit more! How about you, Marcus?" she asked, trying to divert the conversation away from herself.

"Yes, I agree about the need to be oneself," he replied. "As a personal tutor, I always used to put my students' needs first. If they knocked on my door, I'd see them, but that simply became too much. I began to lose sight of my own inner agenda, which

began to affect my health. Now I'm more circumspect. If I've got time to see them I do, but if I'm busy with my own stuff, they have to come back and try later."

"It seems funny that you're already speaking as if you're not my personal tutor any more," remarked Sandra. "It's very good of you to spare some of your time to have a drink with me."

"It's good to get out of the office for a bit, I mean for a while," said Marcus, smiling. "So, what are your plans for the future?"

"I don't know, the future seems too far ahead," replied Sandra. "I can't stop thinking how good it would be to write a book, but I know lots of people say they want to write a book."

"I'd like to write a book," said Marcus. "Actually I have, but it's an academic type of thing I wrote with some colleagues. I'd like to have more time for writing poetry and I'd like to try writing some fiction, too."

"Life's a fiction," said Sandra, sighing. "I wish I could write my own life."

"That would take the challenge out of it and diminish the learning process."

"Mmm. You're right as usual."

"You're not endowing me with God-like qualities, I hope."

"God no, I have enough trouble with my son, but that's a different story and we're not here to talk about him."

"I can definitely see you ending up as a novelist," said Marcus magnanimously.

"Mmm. I've always enjoyed the idea of new things. Marcus?"

"Yes?"

"I don't really know anything about you! I mean, I don't know how old you are, if you're married, whether you're a father, or gay, or an Eighth Day Adventist – but I've realised it doesn't actually matter. I've just enjoyed being my self with you and even if I never see you again, I'll always remember my old personal tutor with affection." Sandra sipped her *Bacardi and Tangerine* to hide her embarrassment, but unfortunately she gulped and made a funny little throaty slurpy sound.

"I thought you said age didn't matter," said Marcus, ignoring the funny little throaty slurpy sound. "I'm glad you feel good about the personal tutoring, but I don't know about never seeing me again. You could drop in for a chat once in a while?"

"Yes, I'd like to," said Sandra. "I'd really like to keep in touch because I'm afraid of losing track of psychological matters and psychology really does matter to me. I'd hate to get out of touch with the psychological world."

"It seems out of touch with itself sometimes," said Marcus thoughtfully. "It's certainly a growing concern."

"I think it's good that it's growing," said Sandra, "but gosh, I really have to go..."

"Oh. Well, don't lose touch and forget all about me, or psychology."

"I'd never forget all about you, or psychology, or the comfy chair, or even the stain on your carpet in the shape of Madagascar."

"Ha! Well, bye then Sandra. Good luck and write that book!" Marcus stood up politely and offered Sandra his hand. She took it, but reasoned that he'd need it back. She was feeling a bit put out. By saying she had to go, she'd only meant to convey that she euphemistically needed to use the facilities.

CHAPTER 25

"Madeleine, you've hardly eaten anything all weekend," noticed Sandra on a Sunday afternoon in mid-July. "You look very pale."

"I'm fine," replied Madeleine, walking away. Something in her demeanour, though, alarmed Sandra.

"Maddy, come back!"

"Why?" Madeleine looked almost frightened as she instinctively turned back, but Sandra felt resolute.

"You're not fine, I know you're not. Tell me what's wrong." The two of them stood facing one another.

"I *am* fine."

"Mad!" Sandra's voice was gentle but firm as she looked into her daughter's eyes. "I haven't been your mother for 15 years not to know when you're not fine."

"Too many negatives." Madeleine tried very hard to smile, but failed miserably.

"You weren't fine on your birthday last week, I know that. You hardly touched your birthday cake and you love birthday cake. You didn't want to go out for a meal, either. Is something worrying you?"

"No." Madeleine's gaze dropped to the floor.

"I don't believe you, darling." Sandra went to Madeleine and put her hands on Madeleine's arms. "You need to tell me, I can help."

"You can't help, nobody can help!" Madeleine flung herself into Sandra's arms and sobbed uncontrollably.

"It's all right, my darling, it really is. Whatever's wrong, Dad and I can both help you," soothed Sandra, stroking Madeleine's hair and beginning to conjure up all manner of strange and horrifying situations.

"I hate myself," said Madeleine, once the sobs had subsided a little.

"What?" Sandra steeled herself not to manifest any shock at whatever Madeleine might be about to say. "Come and sit down with me."

"I hate the way I look," continued Madeleine as they both settled on the sofa, "and nobody really likes me, they all laugh at me. They copy my work at school and then talk about me and laugh about me behind my back when they're out of school."

"I thought things had become a lot better," replied Sandra sadly. "Why didn't you tell me they were worse again?"

"Dad told me not to worry you," said Madeleine in a small voice. "It was that time when you told us about your cousin, when you and Dad were all upset."

"Oh God, I'm so sorry," said Sandra, tears forming in her eyes. "It was never my intention ever to let any of that affect you and Gulliver. I know Dad would never have meant to make things harder for you – he loves you so much, like I do!"

"I tried to diet so I'd be thin and they'd like me better," continued Madeleine. "I fainted once in school, do you remember, when they rang you up?"

"Of course I remember. Your class had been watching that *Threads* video and I explained that you were very sensitive and scary scenes about nuclear bombs were bound to upset you." Sandra suppressed a very embarrassing memory of the phone call, when she had at first assumed *Threads* had been about a needlework demonstration and had needed an explanation of its actual content.

"It wasn't just the video, I hadn't eaten all day."

"What, not even breakfast?" Sandra tried not to frown.

"No."

"Oh Maddy!" Sandra hugged Madeleine and became aware of how thin her body felt. "I can't believe I've been so blind. I'm so, so sorry." She let go of Madeleine and sat back and tried to calm her racing thoughts.

"That's not all, Mum." Madeleine looked acutely uncomfortable. "My periods have stopped again."

"They have?" Sandra felt stupefied, but realised deep down that her reaction to this news was crucial. "Well, there must be a reason, darling. You haven't...?" To her chagrin, words failed her.

"No, I haven't had sex, it's not that."

"Well, it might be because your body weight is too low." The words seemed unreal to Sandra even as she was saying them. 'How could I have let this happen?' she was thinking. 'How did I not notice? What sort of mother am I? I studied eating disorders in my second year at uni, for God's sake.'

"What shall we do?" Madeleine looked at Sandra with tears in her eyes again.

"We really should go to see Dr Effingham," replied Sandra slowly, her thoughts still trying to adjust themselves.

"I don't want to! I promise I'll eat more. I'll be sensible, I will!" Madeleine clutched at Sandra. "If you'll help me?" she whispered.

"I'll do anything in my power to help you, anything." Sandra wiped away an escaped tear. "We're going to the Isles of Scilly in two weeks. Why don't we both do our

best to eat sensibly from now on and then go and enjoy our holiday. Then, if we have to, we'll go to see Dr Effingham when we come back. How does that sound?"

"OK." Madeleine blew her nose. "I'm sorry, Mum."

"You've got nothing to be sorry for, my darling, absolutely nothing." Sandra rested her hand on Madeleine's knee for a while and managed a smile. "Now, what shall we have for tea tonight?"

"You're not nervous at all, are you Gulliver?" asked Sandra the following week, as Gulliver was preparing to leave for his first work placement day at *Fischer & Chipmann*, looking a little pale.

"I've spent the last hour trying not to throw up," replied Gulliver ruefully.

"Don't be full of rue, darling, I'm sure you'll be fine," said Sandra without thinking. 'Good God,' she thought (with thinking), 'did I say that? I'm not sure he likes to be called 'darling', it's a bit too emotionally girly for him. I couldn't help myself, though. It's so strange how my maternal bits pop up sometimes without warning.'

"Do I look OK?" asked Gulliver, turning around as he was finally ready to go out the door.

"You look great," replied Sandra, her maternal bits still obviously active. "You *do* look great in a shirt and tie."

"And trousers," added Gulliver.

"Yes! Look, I should think everyone is nervous on their first day at work. I know I certainly was."

"Yes, but you're you, Mother," said Gulliver semi-smiling, a vestige of his old self returning.

"Thank you," said Sandra, semi-smiling in return. "Have a good day!"

"So long and thanks for all the fishfingers."

"So long. Bye. Don't worry, just be yourself." Sandra gazed after him as he shut the door behind him. 'Should I have said that?' she wondered, as she prepared to wash the dishes. 'God, washing dishes is so boring.'

Osborn opened the front door and flung his overnight bag onto the floor tiredly. He went to where Sandra was standing in the kitchen and hugged her for a long time. It was the first night they'd spent apart since his affair with Sindy and Sandra couldn't help but compare the different homecomings. 'I wish with every fibre of my being that I could stop noticing so many instances that remind me of the stark, cold, agonising dreadfulness of that day I found out,' she thought sadly, as Osborn disengaged her.

"How did it go?" she asked pseudo-brightly.

"They gave me a total grilling," he replied dramatically.

"Yes, you do look a bit hot and bothered."

"I'm exhausted, any chance of some tea?"

"Of course. Did you have to talk about your thesis much? I've never known exactly what a viva is. I haven't got a clue what spread spectrum receivers are, either. When will you know if you're a chartered engineer?"

"Questions, questions! Let me take off my jacket and go for a pee first!"

"Hey Dad, how did you get on?" asked Gulliver, as Osborn emerged from the bathroom.

"They grilled me good and proper," replied Osborn. "I'm knackered."

"Hi Dad, I heard you were back," said Madeleine, entering the sitting room from the direction of her bedroom, where she seemed to spend a lot of time. "How was it?"

"They gave me a real grilling," replied Osborn. "I didn't know which way was up."

"Are you sure they didn't roast you alive?" asked Gulliver.

"Or put you in the frying pan?" asked Madeleine.

"No, I was definitely grilled," replied Osborn, smiling. "It's so good to be home. I should know within a month whether it was all worth it."

"A month!" exclaimed Sandra. "They keep you hanging on, then. You must be starving, I'll get on with tea. What shall we have, something under the grill?"

It was an early evening in late July. Sandra, Osborn and Madeleine were waiting on the quay at St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, for a boat to take them to the island of Samson. Although Sandra had been very much missing the company of Gulliver, who said he was so far enjoying his work placement at *Fischer and Chipmann*, it felt good for Sandra and Osborn to be able to spend time with Madeleine.

She had kept to her word and was doing her best to eat well, starting with small portions, which were now almost normal. Her colour had returned and only the previous day she'd mentioned almost shyly to Sandra that her period had arrived. Sandra had hugged her in a very moving moment, even though they had both been standing still at the time.

"Here's our boat," said Osborn, guiding them both towards where a number of passengers were preparing to embark. "It's such a lovely evening."

"It's such a lovely place," replied Sandra. "I can't believe we live so close to these islands and have never visited them before. Thank goodness you discovered them when you came here for Enrichment Week with school last year, Mad."

"It's that boatman I like in our boat," muttered Madeleine. "Please don't call me Mad and show me up."

"OK darling, I mean Maddy. Oops, nearly slipped!" Sandra grabbed at the hand of the boy, endearingly called the boatman by Maddy, who was seeing everyone safely onto the boat. "I didn't mean to touch you there, I'm so sorry."

Despite Madeleine's ensuing mortification, the boat trip to Samson was idyllic and the three of them stepped on to Samson with a strange feeling.

"Do you know what," said Osborn as they walked along the fine sandy beach that was edged in marram grass, stopping occasionally to pick up small, pretty shells. "I feel happy. I was wondering what this strange sensation of lightness was in my chest and it's happiness! I miss Gulliver being here with us, but it's so good to know he's doing OK."

"He's 20 now anyway, he wouldn't want to be on a family holiday," said Sandra. "I miss him so much too, though. Life is strange, but it's so good, right here and right now. This is really a wonderful island, even though it's uninhabited. Maybe *because* it's uninhabited."

"I never came here with school," said Madeleine. "Shall we go up there and sit on the rocks and look at the view?"

"I'm glad you appreciate the natural beauty of our wonderful planet Earth," said Sandra in a moment of planet awareness.

"Ye-es, but I can also see if that boatman's still on the boat," said Madeleine coyly.

"He should be so lucky," said Osborn, smiling appraisingly at his daughter. "That new top you're wearing suits you down to the ground, by the way."

"It's not too long or gaudish, is it?"

"It's lovely," said Sandra. "Just like you and your unique words."

The still very warm air, the sound of the gulls and the buzzing of the insects all added to the heady experience of the evening, as they wandered higher up the island along a narrow pathway.

"Look at the colour of that sea," sighed Osborn. "So many different shades of blue and green. It really is beautiful." He grasped Sandra's hand and they walked along companionably for a while until the path became too awkward.

"Shall we head for those rocks over there?" suggested Sandra. "We haven't got a great amount of time here and it would be a shame to have to rush back."

"I can't see the boatman at all," said Madeleine, "but I don't mind. Look at all the other small islands, I didn't realise there were so many."

"It's an archipelago," said Sandra. "Here we are. Phew! It's good to sit down for a while."

"Look at that strange bird over there, I've never seen one of those before," said Madeleine, squinting slightly.

"Where?" asked Sandra.

"Over there, follow the direction of my finger."

"No, it's no good, I can't see an unusual bird."

"What bird is that, Mad?" asked Osborn.

"Over there! I tried pointing it out to Mum, but it's pointless." Spontaneous laughter erupted from all three of them.

"This is so good," said Osborn, "and guess what I've got in my bag? A bottle of red wine for us and a small bottle of cider for Maddy. We need to celebrate. I'm not sure what, but we definitely need to celebrate."

"We can celebrate life," said Sandra, "and natural beauty, because it does it for me. Pass the wine, please?"

"I'll take a photo of you two together," said Madeleine, "and then maybe someone can take one of me."

As Sandra sat posing with Osborn, she felt what she could only describe as a wave of pure happiness washing through her entire being. 'It reminds me a bit of my peak experience at the Lake District that time,' she thought suddenly. 'I wonder why. I thought it was God then, but now I just feel connected to the whole of Creation. I think that's the best way I can describe it. These rocks, those noisy birds, the heather, the other islands, the sea, the wonderful sky and these people who mean so much to me. Even though Gulliver's not here, he's still a part of it all. It's like love. Yes, love – pure and simple!'

The rest of the allotted time on Samson passed quickly and they were soon back on the boat, heading towards St Mary's once again. 'I can't believe how beautiful this sky is,' thought Sandra, close to tears. 'That deep, deep turquoise and the setting sun turning those clouds into a fiery wonder. Osborn's right, this *is* happiness.' She put her arm around Madeleine and linked her other arm through Osborn's.

"Mum!" whispered Madeleine urgently in Sandra's ear. "That's not Dad! He's sitting the other side of me!"

On arrival home, Sandra was pleasantly surprised to see the house looking cared for. She had been wondering how Gulliver would cope and half expected to see the house in a mess, with piles of dirty laundry, dirty mugs and plates all over the place.

"He's even done all the dishes, bless him!" she said, looking into the kitchen.

"Bless me? Are you sure?" asked Gulliver, having opened the sitting room door. "Welcome home," he said a little shyly. "Do you want a cup of tea, or something?"

"That would be wonderful," said Sandra, sighing. "Perhaps I should put a load of washing on now. I'll have to unpack it all first, though. Any phone messages? Any problems? Any bills? Any..."

"I've done it!" shouted Osborn delightedly and rather loudly. "I'm a chartered engineer!"

"That's brilliant!" said Sandra, smiling.

"Well done, Dad!" said Madeleine, also smiling.

"Wow!" said Gulliver, joining in the smile fest.

'I'm so happy to be home and I'm so happy for Osborn,' thought Sandra as they lay in bed that night. 'Gulliver seems to be doing well and Maddy seems OK. I'm sure she really enjoyed the holiday and it did her a load of good. It was a great holiday! Maybe I shouldn't have bought quite as many fridge magnets, but I find myself attracted to them. Anyway, we had to buy our parents something. It's not that I mind buying them a souvenir, but it feels expected, like postcards. Oh no, the postcards! I never posted them, they're still in my bag!' Sandra spent a few moments trying to recall whether she'd got as far as sticking stamps on the postcards, but her mind wandered.

'I suppose we'll have to go and visit my parents and Osborn's parents and Lawrence soon, to give them their fridge magnets. I wonder why we carry on these silly little traditions, like souvenir buying, that probably everyone would like to stop. I suppose nobody wants to hurt anyone else, or be the first one to say the truth about how they really feel. It does take courage to be honest sometimes.

'Mind you, I was a bit put out that Osborn never bought me that pottery seal from St Mary's that I kept hinting about. Still, he did pick up a special pebble in the shape of a heart from Samson and give it to me. Oh no, I left it under my pillow!' Sandra

felt a jolt of sadness that she had lost Osborn's spontaneous gift to her. She could still feel him pressing it into her hand as they'd stood gazing out over the sea. He'd then slipped the pebble into her other hand, all damp and sandy.

'I suppose a pebble is only a thing,' she thought, trying very hard to console herself. 'I wonder what the owner of the holiday accommodation will think when she finds it under the pillow? I expect she's found worse things under pillows, though. Or in drawers, like that time I left my red see-through bra in the drawer when we stayed at Weymouth. Bloody nuisance that was, I liked that bra. Oh God, I think I left my purple satin knickers in the fruit bowl!'

CHAPTER 26

Sandra Olivia Dullkettle was having a 44th birthday. She wasn't at all depressed, but was keeping a *Hysterical Hyacinth Mood Matching Toilet Roll* close beside her, just in case.

"This is nice," she said brightly to Osborn, as he brought her a mug of tea in bed. It was on a tray, surrounded by a few cards and presents. "Now what can this be?" she asked, opening a small package from an old school friend. "A tube of *Foaming Minty Shower Cream*. It's a pity the shower's broken, but never mind, it was a lovely thought."

"I know you've had some funny birthdays in the past," observed Osborn, having climbed back into bed beside her, "so I wanted to make this one a good one, even though we haven't got any spare money."

"Money's not everything," said Sandra benignly, as she opened the small package from Osborn. 'Is this all he could afford to spend on me?' she thought with disappointment, as she held up a small jar of *Oil of Daisy Anti-Wrinkling Cream*. "Thank you, it's lovely," she lied, kissing him on the cheek as he bent over to retrieve a card which had fallen off the tray.

"Come in!" called Osborn, as a small knock was heard on the door.

"Happy birthday Mum," said Madeleine, entering the room with a card and present. "It's not much I'm afraid, it's all I could afford."

"That's OK darling," said Sandra, smiling, as she opened a small bottle of *Strawberry Scented Eau de Toilettes*. "How lovely! Shouldn't the word *Toilette* be singular, though?"

"I don't think so," replied Madeleine. "I bought it from the market. It's supposed to be a unique product."

"Gosh," said Sandra, putting the bottle down wonderingly. "Come in!" she shouted, as Gulliver knocked on the door.

"I heard you lot talking, you woke me up," he said grumpily. "Happy birthday, Mother Degree Features."

"That's not up, or is it down, to your usual abusive level," remarked Sandra.

"It's too early in the morning," replied Gulliver, yawning. "Here you are." He handed Sandra a small package.

"Gosh, what can it be?" she said, smiling knowingly. "Some *Cow Parsley Fragranced Foot Cream*?"

"I'm deeply offended," said Gulliver, sitting on the end of the bed next to Madeleine. "I spent my last week's earnings on that. Well, not all of it, obviously. God, I'm dreading my final year as a student, I'll be poor again."

"Yes, but that's a whole year away. Anyway, you said that *Fischer & Chipmann* have implied there's a job for you there after your degree," comforted Sandra. "Oh Gulliver, this is lovely! Isn't it a bit small for a neck chain, though?"

"It's an ankle bracelet," replied Gulliver. "You said you liked Hazel's once."

"You remembered from all that time ago?"

"Yes," said Gulliver. "Don't kiss me, though."

"I'm not *that* grateful," joked Sandra. "No Gulliver, it's lovely. So are all the other presents," she added, smiling at Madeleine and Osborn.

"I wonder what my parents have bought you?" said Osborn, grinning wickedly.

"Oh no," said Sandra, "now you've put the kybosh on it."

"On what?" asked Osborn, winking at Sandra.

"On anything you like," replied Sandra, winking back.

"I'm going!" exclaimed Madeleine and Gulliver together, simultaneously jumping up from the end of the bed.

"Oh – sorry Mother," said Gulliver, as Sandra's half-drunk mug of tea tipped over on to the bed.

"Never mind," said Sandra, sighing inwardly, as she watched the tea soak into the bedclothes. "It's a fine day for washing a duvet."

"This is very civilised," said Sandra to Osborn later that morning, as they sat in *Ye Moderne Coffee Shoppe*. "I know we can't actually afford any food, but I need to lose a few pounds anyway. I seem to have been putting it on lately, despite all the activity and stress I've had in the last few years."

"I hope I don't get middle-aged spread," said Osborn, patting his stomach. "I don't want you to go off me."

"I'm afraid you'll go off *me!*"

"Why ever would I do that?"

"You did once."

"Oh Sandra, that's in the past."

"I know. I'd be lying if I said I didn't hurt about it any more, but it's a whole lot better. The metaphorical knife in my heart has gradually changed from a big lethal looking carving knife into an ordinary looking butter knife. I expect one day it'll be an inoffensive fruit knife, and then a small blunt child's knife, and then a tacky little plastic knife. But I don't know if it'll ever disappear completely."

"Sandra, I've never asked you this, but have you forgiven me?"

"It's funny you should ask that. Well, not funny in the humorous sense, of course, it's just that I was thinking about it the other day. I was remembering that soon after I found out about you and – her – I began to look forward to the day when I could look you in the eye and tell you I'd forgiven you. I wanted it to be a special moment. On a cliff overlooking the sea on our wedding anniversary, perhaps. Not that I'm a romantic..."

"But have you forgiven me?"

"The thing is, I've decided that the state of forgiveness versus non-forgiveness isn't a dichotomy. It's a continuum and I've been gradually, almost unconsciously, working my way along it. In the right direction, of course. Some days when you're really getting up my nose, or when something particularly reminds me of the pain, I'm about two-thirds along the continuum. On days when I'm really appreciating you and we've just had rather wonderful sex, I'm nine-tenths along at least."

"Well, I'm glad you can be so honest with me." Osborn sipped his coffee thoughtfully. "I've forgiven you about Geoff."

"Oh, that *is* all in the past," said Sandra, wondering for a moment whether to tell Osborn that she'd seen Geoff again, but deciding it served no purpose whatsoever. It seemed completely irrelevant to their lives together now. 'Should I have told him about Phil, though?' she suddenly wondered agitatedly. 'I didn't tell him at the time because it was just a stupid blip, but does the act of not telling (although it doesn't exist) constitute a lie by omission? God, it's all still so complicated. How far along in the honesty journey have we progressed at all?'

"You're quiet," observed Osborn verbally.

"Mmm. It's nothing. Really, it's nothing."

"That means it's something, but I trust you to tell me if it's something I really should know." Osborn looked at Sandra over the rim of his coffee cup.

"Just as I trust you to tell me if there's something I should know."

"Yes."

"We have such power to hurt each other. It frightens me."

"There's no need to be frightened."

"I'm not frightened really," replied Sandra. "Not even of what your parents will give me for my birthday." She smiled a little uncertainly. 'I *am* frightened,' she was thinking. 'Sometimes I'm frightened of the whole sodding world.'

"Happy birthday, Sandra," said Sybil, as she and Basil arrived at the Dullkettles' house that afternoon. "I'm sorry this little gift isn't much, but I thought they were such a good idea. I even bought some for myself."

"Oh no. I mean, thank you very much," said Sandra as she unwrapped the paper with trepidation. "Potpourri scented vacuum cleaner bags. How original." She bravely tried to fake a smile.

"Are Caroline and Leonard coming?" asked Sybil. "I was wondering if they would be going to the next VAGINA event? They seemed quite intrigued with our VAGINA activities the other day."

"Yes, they're coming," replied Sandra, managing not to raise her left eyebrow. She could never manage to raise her right one, for some strange reason. "It's only a piece of birthday cake, though," she added quickly. 'I know you've usually been invited to a birthday tea in the past,' she thought, 'but I'm sick of them, sick of the whole conventional farce and seeing it's *my* birthday, you're lucky even to be having a piece of cake. So there, you boring old goat – which reminds me, I wonder how Zy is?'

"It's very sweet of you to ask me to your birthday tea," said Sybil. "You're a lovely daughter-in-law."

"Oh, thank you," said Sandra. 'Stop it!' she was thinking. 'I don't *want* to be a lovely daughter-in-law. Is she mad? I just want to be Sandra.'

"Here are your parents," said Osborn as the doorbell rang.

"Happy birthday, Sandra!" said Caroline, giving Sandra an awkward kiss as she handed her a bag of several individually wrapped presents.

"Thank you," replied Sandra, always pleased at one of her mother's rare kisses, but slightly embarrassed too.

"Happy birthday, Sandra!" said Leonard as he came into the room. "Give me a hug then."

"Thank you, Dad." Sandra was always delighted at one of her father's rare hugs, but slightly embarrassed too.

"Where's Gulliver?" asked Caroline, as Sandra unwrapped the presents rather self-consciously, but with pleasure, because Caroline seemed to have a good idea of what Sandra actually liked. The comprehensive lists worked well.

"He popped out to see a new friend of his called Almond, but he should be back soon," replied Sandra. 'Not if he's getting along well with her, though,' she thought realistically.

"Where's Madeleine?" tried Caroline.

"She went to say goodbye to Guy, a friend who's going away to university. She should be back soon, as well."

"They'll be back to sing the birthday song to their mother, though, won't they, Sandra?" chipped in Sybil. "Especially Madeleine. Being the youngest, she'll always be your baby and have that special bond with you. Kirsty is still my baby."

"Hmm," said Sandra. 'What utter shite,' she was thinking. 'I'm sure my birthday isn't at all uppermost in either Madeleine's or Gulliver's mind right now.'

"They've grown up a lot, haven't they," remarked Leonard. "Things are bound to change, the whole of life is a process of change. Of course, behaviourally speaking..."

"That's enough Leonard," butted in Caroline.

"God!" muttered Sandra surprisedly, as Gulliver suddenly materialised in the doorway.

"That's me," he said.

"You frightened me! Didn't it work out?" Sandra asked him quietly.

"It did, actually. I'm meeting her tonight," said Gulliver. "You don't want me to be in for your birthday evening, do you?"

"No. I want you to be happy doing your own thing."

"I've been doing that too much lately," replied Gulliver. "With any luck, things may soon change for the better in that respect."

"Oh Gulliver, you're being rude," said Sandra brightly. "Stop being a genital idiot!" she hissed into his ear.

"I'm not, I'm just trysexual, that's all," he hissed back.

"Shut up!" hissed Sandra again. "They're listening!" She looked up, smiling brightly at the several pairs of eyes watching her and Gulliver. "Would anyone like to play a game?"

"Yes, I would," replied Leonard. "As a matter of fact, I've brought over this new game I found at a car bonnet sale, although I did pay for it. It's called *Usurp!*"

"That sounds interesting," said Gulliver. Sandra waited a few seconds for the inevitable. "What's a surp, Grandad?"

An hour later, after everyone had grown tired of usurping one another, Sandra heard Madeleine come in the door – or come in via the doorway, to be absolutely accurate.

"Just in time dear," said Sybil, as Madeleine slipped into the sitting room. Sandra had been meaning to remove the rug in the doorway for ages. Madeleine tried valiantly to suppress a sob, before leaving the room as quickly as she'd entered it.

"Shall I go and see what's wrong?" Osborn asked Sandra.

"No, I'll go," said Sandra. "Carry on without me."

"Ha!" exclaimed Osborn to himself, as Sandra left the room.

"What's wrong?" she asked Madeleine, who was lying on her bed sobbing.

"Guy," said Madeleine with difficulty, looking up at Sandra through swollen eyes. "I'll miss him so much! I'm sorry Mum," she said, sitting up and flinging her arms around Sandra. "I know it's your birthday, but I feel so – so empty."

"You'll fill up again," murmured Sandra into Madeleine's hair, knowing that Madeleine's ear was lurking there somewhere. 'At least she's not pregnant,' she thought with relief.

"I know. I find it so easy to cry these days," said Madeleine, reaching for a tissue. "Mum, you do trust me, don't you?"

"I – well, I think I do," replied Sandra as truthfully as possible. "I really, really want to, but I know what a dangerous world it is out there and I don't exactly trust the people out there in it. You've grown up so incredibly quickly these last few years. I know how easy it is to get carried along and end up in a situation you don't really want to be in. That's all. But I do trust you in the sense that I know you're a kind, good-hearted, sensitive, caring person, who would never deliberately hurt anyone else."

"Oh Mum," said Madeleine, still holding on to Sandra. "I've made some silly mistakes."

"I should think everyone alive has," replied Sandra. 'What mistakes? What have you done?' she was thinking in a panic. 'Have you got AIDS, or are you hooked on alcohol or nicotine or drugs or sex?'

"Oh Mum, you're so understanding and I know you do trust me deep down," said Madeleine. "I'm so glad you're you."

'I'm not,' thought Sandra quietly. It was impossible to think loudly. 'I mean I *am* me, but I'm not glad I'm me. I wish I could be far less afraid of people and able to trust Madeleine and Gulliver and Osborn more, like I always used to. I wish the poison in my system from reading Sindy's letter to Osborn on the day of the Valentine's Day Massacre would dissipate more quickly than it is. I wish there wasn't a seeming choice between Madeleine having no friends (so she says) and being unhappy, or having the potential to go out there and be slightly wild. I wish I wasn't going grey. I wish I'd got 60% for my degree instead of 59%. I wish we would win the lottery...'

"Come on," said Madeleine, disengaging herself from Sandra and blowing her nose. "You'll have to go downstairs, I can hear them singing happy birthday to you. By the way, can I go out tonight?"

"Thank you for everything," said Sandra smilingly to her mother, as she was seeing Caroline out of the door.

"You're welcome," replied Caroline. "See you next week?"

"Yes. Mum, I mean it, thank you for everything."

"But I don't do very much," said Caroline, looking surprised.

"You're my mother. You've been my mother all my life. You went through it all with me, all the teenage hell years and I never really realised."

"Ah." Caroline sniffed. "Nothing lasts forever, you know."

"Thank God for that! In some ways, that is. Bye Mum."

"Bye Sandra."

"Bye Sandra," said Leonard, patting Sandra on her arm.

"Bye Dad. Thank you for everything too."

"Even the behaviourism?"

"No, everything except the behaviourism," said Sandra, laughing. Luckily, her father was laughing too, as he stepped outside the door.

"Well, it's just you and me this evening then," said Osborn, as he and Sandra walked back into the sitting room. "What would you like to do?"

"Escape somewhere."

"Can I come?"

"Yes."

"What do you really want to do now?"

"Have a bath."

"Can I come?"

"No, I want to get clean."

"Can't you come clean?"

"No."

"OK. What do you want to do after your bath?"

"Go and have a lie-down."

"Can I come?"

"I thought you'd never ask!" Sandra looked up at Osborn and smiled. It was one of their rare but worth waiting for coming together moments.

As Sandra lay in bed later, her mind seemed to revert to its habitual state of wondering.

'What is the meaning of life?' it (Sandra) wondered. 'Is there one? Maybe there are several meanings. Yes, that sounds more like it. A whole array of different meanings of life. We all certainly live on many different levels – some of us more than others maybe – physical, emotional, spiritual, and downright trivial. It all feels like a multi-level journey, but where is it heading? Fulfilment? Enlightenment? Both, I hope. How much have I been fulfilled or enlightened over the past few years, I wonder?' She scratched her eye, which was itching.

'I must say, I can't bear the thought of a life like Sybil's and Basil's, so utterly constrained in roles and stereotypes. To imagine that Madeleine's baby role would continue throughout both our lives is ridiculous and horrible. It would stop Madeleine and me from ever being real people to each other. It speaks of a need on the part of Sybil, I should think. I suppose it's the same sort of need as people who have pets they dote on. Perhaps they need to be needed. God, there's not much enlightenment in a life driven by underlying factors like that.' She scratched her chin, which was itching.

'As for enlightenment, I sought knowledge at university and I've certainly gained some, but not quite in the way I thought. It was all so hectic, with so little time to think about anything deeply. I also went to university to gain some self-confidence. I suppose I have in some ways, like intellectually, but that's about it. I certainly haven't gained self-confidence socially. Not that I'm aware of, anyway. I did fulfil an ambition, though, which feels good.' She scratched her shoulder, which was itching.

'As for relationships – because we *do* find out who we are in relation to others, no matter how much I disliked that idea at one stage – well, they're all continually changing. Osborn and I are still very much OK after our desperately painful but meaningful upheaval. We seem to have found a way of being who we really are with each other. We have our own space, but we share lots of things, too. We look forward to a future together, which is what I want. I think Gulliver's preparing to leave the nest – what a stupid cliché. I wish I could feel more settled about Madeleine, I'm not sure how she really is, deep down. I want so much for them both to be happy! I do wish I could stop worrying about them, though.' She scratched her elbow, which was itching.

'I also worry a bit about Mum and Dad, but not as dreadfully as I do about Madeleine and Gulliver. Does that mean I worry about Mum and Dad nicely? I seem to

have got over that feeling I had at Easter of being misunderstood by Mum. Maybe it's because today was my birthday and she gave me some really thoughtful presents – and I like the little pottery pig Dad gave me as well – but I'm sure it's not just that. No, I think there's a deep bond between us that surpasses all sorts of everyday little pains. At the fundamental core of my being, I feel that Mum is on my side, which is a tremendous gift to give anyone. I hope I've given it to Gulliver and Madeleine. I *feel* as though I've given it to them both. I know I couldn't love either of them any more than I do.' She scratched her armpit, which was itching.

'Mum and Dad do seem to have become older in the past few years, which is natural, of course. That's if ageing *is* natural. But our souls or spirits don't age, surely, they just become wiser, hopefully. I wonder if my spirit is wiser? God knows. I hope so, if there *is* a God. I'm sure there is. I want there to be. Well, a Source of all Being, anyway, because I need some help!' She scratched the bony bit in between her breasts, which was itching.

'Of course, that would mean Sindy comes from the Source of all Being, too. That feels awful. It feels awful of me to feel so unforgiving towards her, as if it diminishes me as a person. But she hurt me so much. I just can't forgive her yet. Although ... maybe I want to want to forgive her, which is progress. God, these spiritual journeys are so exhausting.' She scratched the soft squishy bit in between her torso and her thigh, which was itching.

'Where exactly am I heading now, though, apart from careering rapidly towards older age? Talking about careers, I ought to look for a job, I suppose, but what I really want to do is write. It's been lurking there inside me for some time. Yes, I want to write about life as I know it. My spiritual journey so far, within the context of a fictional set of characters. How exciting, I'm going to be a writer!' She sat up in bed and scratched Osborn's neck, which wasn't itching.

"Mum?" Madeleine's voice came softly through the closed door, after she had given a small knock.

"What is it?"

"I forgot to give this to you earlier. Next door gave it to me, it was wrongly delivered to them." A white envelope slipped in underneath the door.

"OK. Thank you, Maddy. Goodnight!"

Sandra slipped out of bed and went to pick up the envelope, wondering if it was a birthday card from someone rather interesting and special. She opened it carefully, trying not to rouse Osborn. Once was enough. It wasn't a card, though, it was a letter. She finished reading it with a grin.

"God, life is such a scream," she said aloud as she got back into bed, forgetting all about rousing Osborn.

"What?" he asked sleepily.

"Two of my poems are going to be published in a poetry magazine," said Sandra, still grinning, "I've finally been accepted. I'm a real, live, about-to-be published poet!"