

I WILL BE BACK



THE STORY OF MARY NICHOLLS

by Steve Tench

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THE AUTHOR

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FOREWORD

If you could be granted by some divine being the opportunity to step back in time and pass on one piece of advice to your younger self, when and what would that be? What exactly would you say to the juvenile or young adult version of yourself, and at what critical life defining moment might you have said it? I am assuming of course that you are now living in perhaps the late summer, the autumn, or maybe even the wintertime of your life here on earth. To put it another way, I am assuming that you are getting on for being old, and there is more sand in the bottom of the hourglass than there is left in the top half. Life has been trickling by. But perhaps you still have youth and vibrancy on your side. Either way, the question is still a valid one. Would it not be truly wonderful to be able to retake some of that time that has passed and to remake some of those former decisions, to be able to alter mistakes that you once made by venturing back and pointing your former self in a different direction at a particular and specific point in time.

All too often it is the simple, momentary decisions that can alter the course of a life beyond measure, and at the time you may have not the slightest clue just how important the decision will be. My father was a young British sailor obediently fulfilling his responsibility of national service in 1948. As a nineteen year old who had rarely ventured out from the Black Country area of central England, he was excited to be in the Royal Navy and hoped to see at least some parts of the world. He was equally excited to be able to spend a weekend of home leave before re-joining the HMS *Illustrious* and heading off out to sea. I doubt that he knew very much about the destination of the *Illustrious* or that he would have cared very much about that. He was heading out to the open sea as a young man who's previous life experience had seen only grim factories, glowing furnaces, and very little beyond the confines of Wolverhampton. The weekend had

been enjoyable for him as family and friends had visited the home of my grandparents to wish him well and to give him a 'decent send off' as they would put it. That would involve some drinking and a good old-fashioned family gathering of the kind that somehow disappeared just a few decades later amongst much of the indigenous population of the area.

On Sunday October 17th my father was due to return to the HMS Illustrious by train from Wolverhampton to Weymouth. There were no motorways in those days, and for ordinary folk, the ownership of a car was well beyond their means. Public transport was the only method of getting around, and my father would have to catch the bus to get into Wolverhampton from my grandmother's home village before stepping onto a steam driven train heading in the direction of Weymouth. The HMS Illustrious was anchored in Portland Harbour. The trip from his home would be quite a challenge in 1948. Public transport, like everything else, behaved very differently on Sunday in comparison to our modern and supposedly more enlightened age. They respected to some extent that Sunday was a 'day of rest', and even though greater numbers of people had no faith to speak of than had been the case just a generation earlier, they strongly defended the generic principle of the Sabbath. There would be limited bus transport to take my father into Wolverhampton, and then restricted Sunday trains thereafter. He would have had to change trains at least twice on the way down to the south of England. There would not be very much margin for error if he was to be present and accounted for and ready to board the liberty boat that would take him out to the ship at 10.30pm that evening.

An early family Sunday lunch had been followed by all sorts of back slapping and well wishing as the nearest and dearest had gathered. The whisky and sherry bottles had been opened and one toast after another had been given to 'Vic's voyage'. Now it was time for my

father to leave. His mother, my grandmother, was a highly intelligent, strong willed and diminutive figure. She was nigh on impossible to argue with, and ever more so when her glass had been emptied a few times.

“Have one for the road before you go,” she said somewhat assertively as she poured enough whisky into a glass to put the likes of me to sleep for half a day.

“I can’t Mom, I’ve got to get the bus. I can’t be late or I’ll miss the train.” She persisted, as she always did, where having another drink was concerned. “Oh come on for goodness sake, just one for the road.” The others present were also in ‘one for the road mode’ and held out their glasses expectantly. Decision time. What does Vic do? Does he take the extra drink, which in reality amounts to a measure of whisky equivalent to four normal glasses of the stuff, knowing that he might not get to the bus stop in time, and knowing what that might mean to his absolutely necessary journey? Alternatively, does he decline the drink, quickly bid everyone farewell, thus making certain that he catches the bus so that he can get to where he is going when he is supposed to be there? To be late would not be acceptable to the navy, nor to my dutiful father, nor to his shipmates. He would be disciplined for that. To leave without taking ‘one for the road’ would incur the wrath of his mother, who could be somewhat unforgiving in both the short and the long term. What does he do in that moment?

If an older version of my father had been able to skip back through the years to that precise moment and offer him just a small piece of advice that would have been the ideal time to do it. My father had absolutely no idea that this moment was to be pivotal, not only to his life but also to so many others. His sensible and logical decision was to decline the drink, to pick up his pack and go catch the bus. I often wonder what it was that caused him to do otherwise. Was there

some kind of guidance from somewhere? I have no idea, but for some reason, and perhaps it was nothing more than fear of his mother, he obediently took the drink. He was never a heavy drinker so it would take him a good number of minutes to consume that much whisky and to be out of the house. As the alcohol worked its way into his system his walking pace would have slowed down as his heart would have been thumping. Knowing that the bus was now due and he was still a few hundred yards from the bus stop would normally cause him to run that remaining distance, but whisky and running don't go together very well do they. He saw the bus pull away from a distance of about one hundred yards. He waved and shouted to try to get the bus driver's attention as he tried to pick up his pace. He was too late. He looked on despairingly as the bus moved away into the autumn afternoon. He had missed his bus, and now had to walk as quickly as he was able to in order to cover the three miles or so into Wolverhampton. He felt unwell with so much whisky inside him, and just could not run very far. He missed his train. As the other family members continued with their little get together, which would be the last one before Christmas that year, they had no idea that the young sailor was in trouble and he knew it. The next train was not going to get him where he needed to be at the time he needed to be there. He was distraught and feared the response that would be waiting for him upon his arrival at Portland harbour.

My father was no swimmer. There was nowhere to swim in his part of the world, unless you dared to risk your life by taking to the heavily polluted canal network, which generally wasn't done at all. I often wondered why he had chosen the navy rather than the other armed forces for his national service. As he approached Weymouth he became increasingly apprehensive of the welcome that would be waiting for him. He was more than two hours late, and with nothing by way of an excuse. The scent of whisky on his breath could hardly

constitute an excuse. The weather was looking pretty grim too, as one of those autumn howlers had picked up and was becoming more noticeable the further south he went. Heavy rain was driving against the windows of his carriage as it went on its way. The wind was strong from the south-west that night. It was strong enough to blow up a storm in Portland harbour. It was strong enough to send boats in search of refuge from its ill temper. It was strong enough to sink a liberty boat that had left the harbour at 10.30pm to return young sailors to the HMS Illustrious. It was strong enough to cause one of the worst peacetime naval disasters in British history. Twenty nine sailors drowned in the stormy waters that night. Most of them were in their late teens or early twenties. My whisky filled non-swimming father would not have stood a chance of surviving. One small decision to appease his determined mother had prevented the loss of his life and allowed for all that would come afterwards, including me!

How many of us make decisions that have far lasting importance for us and for others without being able to know what the consequences might turn out to be. My father got it right, but he could so easily have done otherwise. How much easier it would have been for him if an older version of himself had been able to turn up just at the right time and speak quietly to him. "Take the drink Vic, and take your time. You need to miss that bus, you need to miss that train, and you need to not be in Portland when that liberty boat leaves the harbour."

What a gift that would be for so many of us!

Recently, I had the pleasure of meeting the woman about whose life this story is written. Of those who live in the Cornish village of St Dennis it is cruelly said that "they eat their first born there." Gladly, there is no truth in such a harsh rumour, which no doubt abounds in

response to the 'off the beaten track' location of St Dennis a few miles to the north west of St Austell in the Cornish clay country. Here lived Mary, a seemingly ordinary woman in her seventies, and her adopted nigh on fifty year old daughter named Rebecca, who goes by the name of Becky. Not that Becky goes very far, nor is she likely to. Becky's life and the limitations brought upon it have been determined by her severe learning disabilities caused by Downs Syndrome.

In common with many other people, Becky's life was affected before she was born, by the simple presence of an extra chromosome. The impact of this condition is variable of course. For some people there is the ability to function at a relatively high level. For others, the opposite is true. Becky would comfortably fall into the latter category. Her learning disability is profound. She has little or no speech. She has epilepsy with regular and frequent seizures. She has a mental capacity that has been compared to that of an eighteen month old child. She also has an adoptive mother who took a decision to take in to her home a young and substantially disabled child who she has loved and cared for ever since.

Upon meeting Mary I am struck by an immediate sense of absolute respect and admiration for the way that she has provided a home for Becky. I find myself asking the question, "would I have done that, and if I had, would I have been so steadfast and loving?" In all truth, I find myself disappointed by the honest answer. I wonder, how does someone in their seventies find the strength and the on-going desire to keep on providing a home for Becky, who rarely sleeps through the night, and who's health is a constant concern with regular all night trips to the hospital being a feature of both of their lives? Is it reasonable to suggest that most of us upon reaching our seventies would not be able or want to continue to do this?

As I write these words Becky is today facing a heart operation that she knows nothing about, and Mary is taking up residence by her bedside once again. Mary, who herself had yet another stroke just over a week ago, and refused hospitalisation because of the effect it would have on her daughter, who would have had to have been taken into the care of the local authority. Mary, who herself has cancer in her liver, and has several secondary cancers to go with it. Mary, who has been told that there is no further treatment for the cancer, that there is nothing more that they can do for her. Mary, who shrugged off the stroke as if it was an annoying inconvenience, and barely makes mention of the cancer. She will not allow it to get in the way of the thing that she has promised to do.

I cannot help but wonder, what manner of woman is this? She appears to be a straightforward and relatively ordinary person tucked away in a small Cornish village, but she has an inner strength and determination that far exceeds that of any ordinary people I know. Mary is far from being an ordinary person. She has a story to tell, and I will try to tell it. A story perhaps of someone who may have set out upon the journey of life in a relatively ordinary way, but who has somewhere along the line come into contact with something that is different to that which we can observe in others around us, and perhaps in ourselves.

I asked Mary a question amongst many questions. "What advice would you give to your younger self if you could travel back in time?" Her reply was instant and required no thought. "That's easy," she declared, "I would tell myself to stop being DIM! That's a capital D, a capital I, and a capital M. I don't mean being dim as in being a bit stupid. I mean Do It Myself. I would tell the younger me to stop trying to Do It Myself." An intriguing answer that I felt sure would show itself in more detail as Mary took the opportunity to look back

over her lifetime and the many life-changing decisions that she has made.

Chapter 1 What are you worth?

If you had been arriving in England by the modern convenience of the airplane in 2019 there is a strong possibility that your mode of transport would have deposited you at London's Heathrow airport. Your flight path would have most likely seen an approach to the airport from the west, and if so, you would probably have passed near to or above the Berkshire county town of Reading. You may be forgiven for not noticing it.

Reading is connected to London by the noticeable M4 motorway that cuts heartlessly through the English countryside around the Thames river basin on its way in the general direction of south Wales. The motorway runs alongside Heathrow airport and I suppose it provides an easily accessible escape route from the busy capital city and the noise generated by human beings in this day and age. I have often driven along this motorway when travelling the three hundred miles or so to return from trips to London to my hometown in the inspiring county of Cornwall. The road is always busy. It makes no difference how many roads they choose to build. More roads equals more cars and with nothing to control the seemingly unlimited supply of vehicles I consider myself to be fortunate if I am able to drive along this M4 motorway in such a way that I can keep on moving. Sometimes you do, sometimes you don't, but even when the road is running well, it always seems to grind to a halt as it passes by Reading. How often it has taken me an hour to travel from Heathrow to the vicinity of Reading and then another hour to get past the place.

It probably isn't Reading's fault, but I have developed an experiential negativity towards the town that is based on nothing more than a clogged up motorway and my own general annoyance at the

crammed busyness of the times we are living in. I had no desire to go there, at least not until I met Mary.

Mary was born in Reading, having entered this world in April 1947. Life for the residents of Reading and most other parts of Britain was a hard scrap in those days. World War two was still fresh in the memory and the lives of the ordinary people for whom it carried none of the glamour that has been somehow attached to the memory of those years by people who mostly were not there. These were hard, hard times of austerity as the nation tried to steady itself along with the rest of Europe. One of the least desirable things for the British people would have been a harsh and bitter winter, but the early months of 1947 provided just that. December 1946 had been colder than usual with snow, but the real winter had taken root in mid January and held it's ground throughout February and well into March. Pack ice caused havoc with shipping in the normally clear English Channel in the February of 1947. The sun barely shone and food supplies became scarce, more so than they normally were with vegetables being stuck hard in the frozen ground. Stocks of coal were frozen hard together and could not be moved. People could not warm themselves in the midst of record freezing temperatures. Electricity supplies were subject to blackouts that affected everyone with even the staff at Buckingham Palace having to work by candlelight.

On March 5th Britain was treated to one of the worst snowstorms that anyone could remember. The Scottish highlands saw snowdrifts of seven metres in depth. Deep snow lay across the entire United Kingdom such that the recollections of those around at the time told of the winter that saw 'snow so deep that you could stand on it and reach the top of the street lamps.' They were not exaggerating.

Having a winter like that, one of the next least desirable things would probably have been the thought that it might be followed by perhaps the wettest March for over three hundred years. All that melting snow and rainwater on top of a ground that is hard frozen wouldn't be a terribly good idea really. Nonetheless, that is what came next as this awful winter passed by and was replaced by intensive flooding. The river Thames burst out of its banks and flooded many towns and villages, including Reading where many who had suffered through the winter now lost their homes.

These were not easy days for anyone, and would have presented a young pregnant woman entering into the third trimester with a tough, testing period of endurance. Living today, as I do, in an age wherein the British educational establishments will close because they think it might snow, and where physically fit and able people insist that it is impossible for them to travel the two miles to work with barely a centimetre of snow on the ground, I can be forgiven for wondering how a young pregnant woman in the early quarter of 1947 could have endured the prevailing conditions. Mary's mother lived through that time and we can only imagine the sense of relief for her and her husband as the harsh winter and the soaking wet early spring gave way to a warmer than usual May in which she delivered a healthy baby girl into the world at the aptly named Battle hospital. Welcome to the world young lady. In common with the rest of us, you had no choice as to whether you would come, or not, nor any say in where or to whom you would arrive. But you are here and here you will remain for a season. It may be a short season or it may be a longer season, but in any event it is your season.

Mary's family lived in the Whitley area of Reading, which is not exactly described as the posh part of town. It is however the original home of the somewhat famous comedian and actor Ricky Gervais, who like Mary, was born at the Battle hospital.

Mary had two older brothers with one being twelve years her senior and the other some eight years older, and a father who had returned from the war to the surprise of his wife and family having been reported as missing in action three years earlier. Imagine that. Your husband is away with the armed forces fighting the tyranny of German Nazism. You are trying to keep house and home together with two small boys to care for, and you don't even know whether or not your husband still exists. You have no way of knowing. You just plough on with each day as it comes, and then one day after this particular war has ended and you have just about given up on the expectation of hearing any news and are starting to think about how the future might look, this man who is your husband turns up at the house one day. Not only that, but he wants a 'victory baby', having promised himself that if this horrendous war was won and he ever did get home then he would celebrate by having another child. Mary was the 'victory baby' of the family, and was welcomed slightly more by her father than she was by her mother. She remembers very little of her older brother in the family home but she can recall him heading off wearing a uniform as he, like many others of his generation, saw the British armed forces as a means of gainful employment.

Mary was much closer in age and in relationship to Mike, her youngest older brother. How often he would stand up for her, even taking the blame for minor misdemeanours on her behalf. There is a saying that in those days 'men were men and little boys knew it', meaning that family discipline was in the hands of the father, or in his absence the alternative male relative or substitute. Mary's father was not unusual in that he had retained a large army belt upon discharge from the armed forces and this had become the symbol of correction in this and many other homes. Invariably, it was used as a deterrent as children were reminded that their father would be

coming home and that he had such a belt as this and that they would be introduced to it in no uncertain terms should their behaviour not immediately change for the better. "Wait 'til your father gets home," was a common declaration. Mother would report any concerns to father and if he went in search of 'the belt' then you knew you were in for it. Mary's brother was 'in for it' rather a lot and frequently on her behalf.

There is not a case to suggest that Mary's father was a cruel man. That is how things were done in that day and age. Rather, he was a mostly gentle man with a tendency to caring for others and he had a 'good streak' to him. His return to the civilian society of the day led to his working as a porter at the good old Battle hospital and he would sometimes go in to help out if he knew that the hospital was busy. Mary remembers one such occasion as a small child of five or six years. That curious British tradition known as Bonfire night had taken place the day before; a strange annual event celebrating nothing more or less than an historical act of terrorism. Every year in every town there would be bonfires, there would be fireworks, and there would be injuries sustained by children and adults alike through the use of fireworks in and around the home. The hospitals would be expected to take the strain. Mary's father went in to help out, and for reasons not known to her he chose to take his young daughter along with him. Perhaps he didn't think about it very much, but the sights that would be seen that day were not those to which one should nonchalantly expose a young child.

There was a boy who had been sitting in a box filled with fireworks when they had ignited. This poor lad was covered in burns that were left open to the air as he lay screaming next to another boy who had a firework in his pocket when it exploded. Someone must have lit it and put it there. Such things were done and worse than that, but the

suffering it caused was accepted almost as a form of collateral damage.

We cannot begin to know of those things that Mary's father experienced during his war. We know that he came back when many did not. We know that he 'did his bit' for king and country. In a later era he would most probably be identified as a man who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and maybe even given some help and support on a road to recovery. In his era he was viewed as being a 'bit weak', or a 'bit soft' when it came down to it.

Mary's mother was not weak in the same way but her generation was prone to struggling after the stresses of the war. She was a cold woman who suffered from periods of mental ill health. We would most probably think of it as depression in our more reflective era, perhaps post natal depression. She did what she needed to do but that seems to have been the extent to which she was either prepared or able to go. She would regularly tell Mary, her young daughter, that she was never going to amount to anything, and would blame her for being born in an unusual way, whatever that meant. She gave the child no encouragement of any kind, plenty of guilt, but no encouragement. Mary's father and brother tried to make up for what they could obviously see but were they unable to bring about alterations that would have any effect.

Mary began her school life at the local George Palmer Infants and Junior school where her academic career began well. The warmth shown towards her by her first teachers was noticeable in contrast to the warmth that was lacking at home.

Children of that generation were not transported to school by parents in possession of over sized motor vehicles. The 'school run' was a school walk and as soon as considered old enough children were sent to school alone or in the company of siblings. As a seven

year old Mary would walk to and from school alone. With her brother now at senior school there was no alternative other than to be accompanied by her mother, which in reality was not an option to be considered. Returning home one day she was accosted by two older boys, who themselves were of a senior school age. Mary had no understanding of what might be taking place as these boys made clear to her their intention to play with her as they led her away from the public footpath. She was confused and did not understand. She was subjected to a sexual assault by both of them in broad daylight. She did not know what to do but she did know two things. She knew that what had taken place had been a wrong thing, that it was very wrong. She also knew that she was frightened by the thought of telling her mother, for fear that through some unknowable process she would get the blame and the belt would come out. In her distress she told her brother Mike who as always, seemed to do the right thing as he helped her to relate the events to her mother. Mike insisted that Mary's indifferent mother took some action, telling her clearly, "if you don't do something about this then I will!"

Mary looked on in the hope that her mother would do something to set this matter right somehow, in the hope that she would stand up for her daughter. She went with her mother to the senior school and watched as the boys were identified and then watched again as not very much happened really. They were spoken to, and that was it. As they walked home in silence there was a young girl quietly feeling badly let down by one person she should have been able to rely and depend upon at such a time as this. But it had never been that way. A few days later Mary learned that the two boys who had assaulted her had been the recipients of a good old fashioned beating, with one of them having to be taken into hospital. Nobody seemed to know how this had happened but it was suggested that Mike had been seen in the vicinity of the said beating at about the same time. Nothing more

was ever said about the matter by anyone, but there lingered a strong feeling that Mary's mother had missed an opportunity to show some love and concern for her daughter. Just this once would have been nice. The person who should have stood up for her didn't while the person who did stand up for her was the one who had so often taken the blame and the punishment for her mistakes.

As an eight year old Mary was officially described as being very skinny in stature. In the early part of the twenty first century we see an almost epidemic of grossly overweight and obese children; the result of poor diet and next to no physical exercise. It is not a pleasing sight. In those mid 1950's years the opposite was very much the case as food rationing and dawn to dusk outdoor activity resulted in an overly thin generation of children. There were concerns about Mary's weight, or to be precise, about the lack of it. She was introduced to the delights of Virol, which was served up to many an unsuspecting child, who would either love or loathe this brown, gooey malt extract product that was filled with nutritional goodness but was not necessarily something to look forward to. It would be spooned into the mouth of the child whether or not it was wanted, and you dared not even think about spitting it out. Mary was effectively force-fed this stuff until she put on weight. Times were hard.

A year later Mary was declared to be overweight and her initial problem was replaced by an altogether different one. Children used to be and still are cruel to one another. Adults love to express that statement whilst neglecting to acknowledge that the grown ups are much worse to one another much of the time, which may well be the source of learning for children. Alternatively, it could just be that in each and every one of us there is a freedom to choose what we do, and so many of us so often choose to do those things which are in some beneficial to us rather than kind to others. Whatever the cause,

instead of having to swallow mouthfuls of Virol liquid, Mary now had to swallow her pride as she was taunted by others of her generation, for being what they saw as fat.

The concept of dieting in order to lose weight was practically unheard of in the Britain of the mid 1950's. Many food items were still subject to rationing. Mary wasn't over weight because of any leaning towards gluttony. Over eating and using food as a form of habit, comfort, or enjoyment, and even viewing food as some kind of an object of worship, these are modern traits of the over-stuffed western world, and not of the austere period in which Mary was growing up.

Her efforts to lose weight were unusual in those days. They were also unfruitful. As she grew older Mary's weight became more of a daily burden to her with the regular reminder ringing in her ears that "you will never amount to anything." Mary now became an enhanced failure because she could not lose weight.

"My younger life was not good," declares Mary, in an accepting, resigned, almost nonchalant way. There was nothing she could do about it as she moved towards her teenage years and continued through the post war education system and into that environment known as 'secondary school'. Here, there was one positive aspect for this growing girl. To Mary, the school meals were so much better than the dreadful food served up by a disinterested mother. At least now she was able to get something in the way of a balanced diet. Perhaps this would help her weight to stabilise and to reduce? It didn't. The taunts continued. The daily ridicule carried on. The only over weight child in a classroom filled with skinny kids was a hard reality for her. There was always one kid in the class who would 'get it in the neck' for being the fat kid. At the school I went to, it was Robert. The poor guy was relentlessly bullied and picked on simply

because he was fatter than the rest of us. We used to form a circle around him, with Robert at the centre of it and everyone else standing at a distance of around two metres. He couldn't get out of the circle and would be punched if he tried. Robert couldn't face all of us at the same time, so whomever he was not facing would run up behind him and launch a harsh and firm kick to his backside. Robert would of course turn against that direction so the person could not kick him again, but in so doing, would expose his backside to someone else, and they would run up and launch another hefty kick. Robert would try to protect himself with his hands but would only end up getting his hands kicked for his trouble. For almost the entire lunch hour, or until we became bored, Robert would endure this, with tears streaming down his face as he begged us all time and again, to stop. There would be fifteen, maybe twenty boys, continually kicking one simply because, in their eyes, he was fat. It only stopped because one lad who stood outside of the circle could see the wrongness taking place in front of him, and with maturity well beyond his years, did the right thing to get it stopped even though doing so placed him very much in harms way.

Mary would have endured in a similar way. Is it any wonder that she cannot easily recall the name of the secondary school she attended, but can, with a malignant sadness, remember the constant ridicule? Is it any wonder that she did not perform well within her education? Soon, the frequent reminders that Mary wouldn't amount to anything were joined by another destructive statement from the mouth of her mother. "You'll always be stupid you will!" Mary's mother endorsing the message being given to her through the education system of that day. Mary was now stupid as well as fat. Except she wasn't! Much later in life a diagnosis of dyslexia was made. "You just see things in a different way," she was told, but by that time it was far too late to change anything. It was certainly too late for Mary to retake those end of school exams that had resulted

in so little of any worth as she left school at the age of fifteen years with not very much to show for her efforts or her childhood.

Stepping into the adult world as a teenager can be a daunting prospect for anybody. This is especially so if the adult world is as unforgiving as it was in that society at that time. Confidence would be an asset to have. A measure of self-esteem would be even better. Mary had neither one as a childhood with only fleeting moments of family joy drew to it's inevitable close. A young woman was venturing out into the world with so little to draw upon that would sustain her in it. Her sense of self worth had been shaped by the extent to which she had been unwanted and unwelcomed and not nurtured by her mother; shaped by the extent to which she had been taunted because of her physical appearance, and shaped by the extent to which she was given to believe that she was of lower intelligence than others of her generation. Let down, you might say, by her mother, her peers, and the system. Of course, there was at least the consolation that Mary's father and brother Mike were always a source of comfort for her as a girl. Or maybe not entirely! It only happened the one time. Just the once. Years later, Mary's father with a deeply repentant heart and tears in his eyes asked with sincerity for forgiveness for what he had required her to do that night.

What are you worth if you cannot trust barely anyone? What is your apparent value if nigh on anything and everything and anybody leaves you standing alone and isolated at the centre of an ever-decreasing circle? Like Robert, there is nothing you can do. Only if someone steps up to bring about a change, only then is there hope of any worth for you. We look for the hope. We look for the better alternatives. But because of the position from which we are starting, we almost always look to the wrong places and to the wrong people.

Chapter 2 Single Parenthood

At the ripe old age of fifteen years, Mary found herself in search of employment along with a veritable army of school leavers. Furthering your education at college or university was not an option for the ordinary folk. These were the days in which most young people had to go out and earn money as soon as possible and there ended your choice. These were the days of which we are told 'you could leave one job on a Friday and get yourself another one on Monday'. Was it really like that, or is the memory different from the reality? Mary's reality was such that her memory tells her that it was not easy to find a job of work at all for a working class girl with very little going for her and not all that much to offer a potential employer.

She struggled to get a job in 1962, which of course provided further evidence, if any was needed, that this 'stupid girl won't ever amount to anything'. To give up trying was no option of any kind, and eventually Mary managed to get a job as a sales assistant working in a town centre shoe shop. Nobody was especially pleased for her at the time but she found that she came to enjoy the experience of helping people to make their purchase. The owners were kindly enough and Mary found that she dealt well with the work, even with those awkward types of people who are so rarely satisfied in any situation.

While the job was good for her, the pay was low. There was little you could do with three pounds a week, so Mary had to leave after not much more than a year, and took the high road into factory work as was the lot of so many young people. Monotonous, necessary drudgery was the order of the day. Taking up your position at the machine, safe in the knowledge that for most of the next eight, ten or

twelve hours you will be carrying out the same repetitive actions and movements for the privilege of your crust and the opportunity to do it all again tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that, with only the thought of a weekend trip to the pub to keep you going. This was life for millions of people. It still is. Life?

I remember Martha. She was a large well-structured, loud and powerful woman with the ability to strike fear into the heart of everyone at the mere sense of annoyance. Martha had joined the company at the age of fifteen; as soon as she had left school, and for just over fifty years had been packing manufactured fastening washers into hessian sacks of either half a hundredweight or a hundredweight. In modern parlance that would be either twenty five or fifty kilogrammes. The half a hundredweight bags filled with the dead weight of varied metal discs with holes in the middle could be picked up and loaded onto a storage pallet by one fit person easily enough. To move the hundredweight bags would take two of us to do it. The lighter bags were generally handled by anyone on the team, while we young men, working in pairs, moved the heavier ones. Except for Martha. She could handle the heavier bags by herself and resented any suggestion that she might need help. Fifty years of lifting these heavy bags and stacking them ready for delivery had resulted in the strong woman that I had come to know. Fifty years of working in that factory on the edge of a noisy thumping press shop. The machines would start up at eight in the morning and run through until around ten at night, depending on the volume of orders. You had to shout in order to communicate with the person standing next to you. Those who had been there any length of time could barely hear anything anymore. Martha and her team would move through the machine workshop collecting completed washers from the output trays at the base of the machines and would drag them to the packing area where they would weigh them into the bags and place them into the stock piles. I was close by one Friday

afternoon when the recently appointed works director stood in front of Martha, with his clipboard placed in front of him as if it gave him some level of importance that others did not have. I listened as his raised voice coldly told her that her services were no longer required. Just like that. Fifty years of this woman's life meant nothing to him or to the company owners. All that drudgery just to be cast aside as if she was nothing more than a worn out and unwanted tool. For the first time I observed the spark of life simply being sucked out of someone as Martha's purpose was removed from her without warning. Eighteen months later this mammoth of a woman was dead. She just went home and wasted away.

Mary could have been another Martha in the making. She had started factory work as a young woman of no more than sixteen years. She had no sense of real worth or value and therefore had no expectations. She would have been glad of her place there. She would have been unlikely to ask too many questions and would have been reliable, dependable, and honest in all her dealings. She would have been an ideal prospective long-term employee, someone that will keep on turning up until they don't want you any more. Fortunately, Mary was spared that fate altogether, though the means of that sparing presented no easier road.

Mary became pregnant. She had met a lad who was happy to take advantage in the way that some lads do. When you have so little in the way of self worth you are vulnerable. She was pregnant in a society that had yet to experience the swinging sixties. The young man who was to become a father expressed no intention of sticking around for the long road ahead. He was already involved with another girl. "She's got six brothers, you've only got two," he explained, closing the door behind him as he made his exit, leaving Mary with the consequences and all that lay ahead. Perhaps an older Mary would have liked to be able to flit back in time and tell the

younger version of herself to steer well clear of that particular young man, and to value herself to a much greater extent than she did.

By this time, brother Mike had married and left home. He had a son, and a family to support. Mary's usual pillar of strength in the family home was no longer available. Mother had to be told. It's not exactly something you can keep to yourself is it. "How many times have I said to you that you'll never amount to anything?" If that was a question, Mary could have possibly have given an estimate, but it was delivered as much more of a statement. "Well, you're not keeping a baby here." Mary's mother was thinking of the shame. Thinking of what the neighbours would think.

Brian's mother was seventeen when she became pregnant. She had the same agonising conversation with her own mother as Mary was having with hers at about the same time. A plot to remedy the problem was hatched by Brian's grandmother-in-waiting. She and her pregnant daughter would both go away to the home of a geographically distant aunt having told the neighbours of two things. Firstly, they would tell of the long-term illness of the geographically distant aunt who needed two people to go and live with her and provide care for her as she suffered at the hands of a terminal disease. They might only be gone for a few weeks, but it could just as easily be a couple of months or even longer before they would be able to return. Secondly, they would announce the news that there was a pregnancy in the family. How pleased her husband was, having given up any thoughts of having a second child years ago, and what a shock it was to be having another child at this more mature time of life. How inconvenient it would be to have to manage a pregnancy whilst caring for a terminally ill relative, but these things have to be done. A year later they returned with stories of how they had tended the ailing distant aunt even after the baby had been born and how relieved they were to now be able to return to their own family

home. Brian's mother was presented to everyone as Brian's sister. Brian's grandmother was given to be Brian's mother. The only people who knew of this deception were Brian's grandmother, his grandfather, and his mother who lived their lives as if they were his mother, father and sister. No-one guessed. The boy looked just like his father they all thought. No-one knew. Not even Brian. The boy grew up with the understanding that his mother was his sister, that his grandmother was his mother, and that his grandfather was his dad. The levels people would go to in order to avoid the shame of a young pregnant family member in those days. Brian was well into his forties when he found out the truth.

Mary's mother hatched no such plot, but there was still the matter of how to deal with this unwanted intrusion. There was no support for Mary. There was no consoling embrace. There were no tears of either joy or sorrow. No understanding of why this had happened and what it might represent. "I don't agree with abortion so you're not getting rid of it." Here was something that Mary and her mother could agree on. Mary's thoughts were not for herself, but for the life being grown inside her womb. "I wouldn't do that, mum," she carefully replied. Mary always spoke carefully around her mother. "I know that there is something in the bible that says thou shalt not kill, and I won't do that." Mary's mother knew nor cared very little of what was or was not in the bible.

"I didn't get rid of you did I," she offered in agreement, "but you're not keeping it either. As soon as you have it, you put it up for adoption. There's plenty out there who can't have kids and you're too young to be having one." Mary refused. Without a moment of hesitation and regardless of the consequences she knew that she was not prepared to take part in anything that would separate a baby from its mother. Not if her life depended upon it, and certainly not her baby.

The debate continued as Mary's mother would accept no compromise or viewpoint other than her own. Brother Mike, with more than enough on his own plate, was in no position to support Mary's position this time. She was in all reality, very much on her own as she continued through the pregnancy while other girls of her age living in her street were much more interested in the music of Cliff Richard and Roy Orbison as a pop music culture began to make its way into the teenage lifestyle. Not especially wanted by her own mother, and bullied by her peers, it was no surprise that this pregnant seventeen year old had no-one to turn to. Her father just kept quiet and let it be as he tried to deal with his own unhappiness.

"I think it might be for the best, better for everybody, if you went into the mother and baby home." The expressed opinion and recommendation from Mary's doctor was not quite as she had expected. "I know your mother is also of the view that this will be for the best. You need to think about the baby as well as yourself," he added with just a hint of accusation. The awareness that her mother had already spoken with the doctor about this was not a pill so easily swallowed. What could she do? Simple working class girls were in no position to resist the recommendation of the local doctor. She had to agree to leave home even though she had not asked to do that. 'Maybe they know best', Mary thought quietly to herself as she walked slowly through the late spring showers. It was that time of year when you can never quite work out what to wear. One minute you're hot, the next you have goose bumps from the cold, then you are dry, then you are wet. Mary barely noticed the weather as her thoughts churned inwardly upon her. What was she going to do? What was going to become of her young life?

Life was not at all turning into anything that she might have hoped it would be. Why did everything have to be so difficult?

The mother and baby home turned out to be a hospital. They told her it was the best alternative available at the time. Somehow, young Mary seemed to have no choice. The hospital turned out to be of the psychiatric variety. Borocourt hospital was for those considered to have a mental handicap or a mental illness, and young pregnant single women would easily be considered to slot into either category.

"You're feeble minded you are, otherwise you wouldn't be in here," snarled Sister Clarke. This brutish woman was cold towards Mary upon arrival at the hospital but had managed to gradually become increasingly less kind as time had passed. Mary was pregnant and unmarried. For Sister Clarke and many like her this was evidence enough, if indeed evidence was needed, that Mary was witless, and who was she to argue. If you are constantly reminded of your general stupidity and the prediction that you will "never amount to anything" then you begin to believe it, or at least you don't object to it. "I am sick and tired of you," reminded Sister Clarke once again, "It's no wonder to me that they put you in here. Goodness knows what chance that baby is going to have if you keep it," she added spitefully, as if in some way it mattered to her. "You should give it to somebody else, that's what you should do. Now get on and clean this floor. I want to see my face in it when I get back." Mary had to do chores. They all did, but some of the others really were not able to do very much of anything. They were the ones who did have mental illness, whereas Mary and a couple of other girls had been placed there at the recommendation of their family doctor, seemingly for no other purpose than to get them out of the way.

Mary had never really come into contact with anyone whose life was affected by learning disabilities before. This environment was strange to her but she tried to settle in, to please those who seemed to be in authority over her, and to do what was asked of her. She

tried to do just as she had always done, but without any indication of success. It didn't matter how well or how badly Mary did the things asked of her, it was never good enough for Sister Clarke. Only on one occasion did she ever see a pleasant or even remotely nice side to this uniformed beast of a woman. "The poor lass. I did tell her to take it easy this morning but she wanted to keep at it," Sister Clarke told the passers by who had gathered around the collapsed girl in the hospital corridor. "There, there, my lovely. Just take a light sniff of this and you will be as right as rain in next to no time at all. Be careful now. Not too much. Gently does it." Mary saw the kindly looks of concern on the faces around her. Even Sister Clarke was being gentle with her. "Let's get you back into the ward and we can find a cup of nice sweet tea for you. You'll be resting this afternoon now won't you." As they re-entered the ward, with the large double doors swinging shut behind them, the real Sister Clarke returned to the room. "Get on your bed and stay there. Don't you dare show me up like that again or so help me you'll wish you hadn't done it you will!" Mary had not the strength to argue. Her efforts to sweep and mop the floor in the ward had not been at all satisfactory this morning. She had done her best, but she was six months into pregnancy and found the heavy work to be a little too much today. She had tried to explain, but the Sister was having none of it. "Well if you can't use a mop then you can clean the corridor with this instead," she snapped, holding out a small hand brush. "You can clean out there and not on my ward." It was now late in the season of Spring and the old hospital building, whilst cold in the winter, would quickly develop a sickly warmth as the temperatures increased. Mary had passed out in the corridor. She may have been there only a short while before the passer by had found her and called for help, which had arrived in the shapely form of dear Sister Clarke, who immediately portrayed herself as the epitome of nursing care.

Mary sat on her bed for a while. She didn't belong in here. She wondered what would happen next if she stayed in this place. They had sent her here because it was for the best. How is it for the best if you have to be found unconscious on the corridor floor before there is any sign of kindness in this place, even if it is false kindness of the kind intended to impress those passing through? Mary was suddenly mindful that she had been given a small brush with which to clean the floor in that corridor. Where was it? Fearful of the thought of what Sister Clarke might do if the brush was missing she stepped off her bed and went in search of it. In the corridor there was no sign of the brush. In a moment of panic and fear it did not occur to Mary that perhaps Sister Clarke had already removed the brush. Of course she had. This woman in her starched uniform would not have wanted anyone to ask the obvious question, 'why was this girl scrubbing a floor with a tiny brush when she is obviously pregnant?' Mary was not able to think this through as she stood in the corridor looking pointlessly at the floor in the hope that the brush would somehow materialise. She began to walk slowly along the corridor. She carried on until she reached the end. No brush in sight. A set of large double doors presented themselves. Dare she go through them? How long had she been here in this awful place? How is it for those others who will always be here and don't know very much of anything different? She went through the doors and into another corridor. Quickly, before she sees you and hauls you back into that prison of a place. Then through another set of doors and into a wider corridor. There are more people around now. It feels a little safer. Some of them are staring. An elderly woman stops as Mary passes by. She turns her head. "Are you alright dear?" she asks. Mary does not stop. She has to keep going. Through more of those huge doors with their darkened wood and heavy glass windows. Then she is outside. The freshness of the air is a surprise. Her head spins a little. It seems busy here. People. Cars. Noise. Keep walking. She leaves the hospital grounds and she keeps on walking. She walks for seven

miles. She sees the railway station at Reading. This is familiar. She knows this place. Someone gives her a few pennies. She goes into the telephone box and calls the one person upon whom she can rely. One person. Brother Mike has a car, and he happens to be at home today. He drives to the station. He listens, he hears, and he takes Mary back to the home of her parents.

"She could have died in there, or she could easily have lost this baby. That's your grandchild that is!" Mike was angry. His mother was listening. His father seemed to have so little by way of an opinion. "I never understood why you sent her there in the first place. It's a loony bin that is. There's nothing wrong with her. There's more wrong with you than there is with her. She's not going back there, and if I ever get my hands on the Sister from there." In the face of Mike's anger, Mary's mother relented. "Alright, alright, she can come back here for a while. It's not the best thing though," she added, unable to or unwilling to offer her teenage daughter a moderately permanent home for herself and the child due to enter the world in a little less than three months.

Mike was still there as the police arrived. "What do they want?" he wondered. Mary's mother stiffened her back as her demeanour took on an unusual aspect. "I'm not having the police coming to my house." She went to the front door and opened it before the officer had chance to knock. "What do you want?" she asked bluntly. "Madam, your daughter has absconded from Borocourt hospital today. We have to know of her whereabouts." Mike stood behind his mother at the front door. Mary stayed in the parlour. She could hear them. She began to quiver at the thought of the possibility that the police would take her back. 'Oh please don't let them.' It was as if she was communicating in thought, but to nobody in particular. "My daughter has absconded from nowhere," she heard her mother say in a firm tone of voice, "she will not put up with what goes on in

there any longer.” The officer understood that Mary was in the house. “Can I just see her for myself?” he asked. Mike brought Mary to the door. She felt a little more secure now, but had no words to say. “Are you Mary?” he enquired with a slight hint of gentleness. She nodded. That was enough. He was gone in an instant. “Useless they are,” said Mary’s mother as she closed the door. “Haven’t they got anything better to do than chase around as if my daughter was some sort of criminal? I’m not having it,” she ranted. Guilt? Perhaps it was. Fear of what the neighbours might say. That was a more likely reason. “You can stay here until we get somewhere better for you to have that baby,” she declared more out of annoyance than anything resembling compassion.

Mary stayed at her parent’s home; the place she had always thought of as her home, for six weeks. Her mother had again pursued the option of a mother and baby home as she considered that to be a better alternative way of dealing with this problem. This time, a place was found at a real mother and baby home rather than an institution. Did Mary want to go? That didn’t arise as a question for anyone.

Windsor is a town some twenty miles or so from Reading. Twenty miles is a long way if you have no form of transport and you rarely ventured out of your hometown. Windsor is famous for its castle that provides one of several residences for the British Royal family. It probably isn’t quite so well known for the mother and baby home, to which young women were sent by their families when an undesirable pregnancy came into their lives. Mary knew that she wasn’t wanted. Mike would have taken her in if he could, but he just didn’t have the space. Why didn’t her father say anything? It all just happened around him. Here she was, with others like her. At least this was better than the hospital. Some of the people were kind enough. Just a few of them were nice. That was enough. How would

it be if there were no kind people? What sort of a place would we be in then?

Mary was close to the end of her pregnancy. It would turn out to be her only pregnancy. She was surprised to see her parents at the home. Mike had brought them over in his car. Her feelings were mixed as she spoke with them, assuming that they were here to encourage her once more to give up the unborn child for adoption. Mary let it be known to them that if she was ever going to be forced to give away her child then they would have to be the ones who handed the child over. She just wasn't prepared to do it. "Keep it then if you want to," her mother said, as if she was speaking about an object. "I suppose it's alright if you keep something of your own," she added, with emphasis on those two final words. Was that some form of permission? The parent who has not loved her daughter, but has rejected her in the time of greatest need, now giving permission for something that is not hers to give? Or is it a veiled message to say that if Mary keeps this baby then she will have to fend for herself. She will be on her own.

As always, Mary's Father said very little. He had been even quieter these past three years since the day when Mary had returned from school to find that her mother had arrived home only a matter of minutes earlier to find her husband lying down on the floor with his head firmly positioned within the gas oven. Household gas in those days was very different to the relatively benign modern variety. They called it 'coal gas' or 'town gas'. They manufactured it at the local gasworks by heating coal in airtight chambers. The mixture of methane, hydrogen and carbon monoxide that was produced burned beautifully from the cooker, and as a side product it was a perfect material for anyone with suicidal inclinations. A few breaths of the stuff would reduce consciousness. Breathing it in for a good few minutes would kill you every time. Did he do it at a

certain time knowing that others would be home from school and would find him there, or had he lost all sense of perspective? Mary's mother had pulled him out, had switched off the gas, and was opening the windows as Mary strolled into the scenario. Quickly she ran to the nearest house with a telephone to call an ambulance. Everyone knew who it was that was well off enough to have a telephone in their house, and there would often be a steady stream of annoying neighbours seeking the use of it. On this occasion the proud owners of the domestic telephone were unable to resist helping the young woman who needed an ambulance and needed it now.

He was still breathing as the ambulance crew arrived at the house. They seemed less concerned than they ought to have been. This was clearly a suicide attempt, and there wasn't much sympathy with it. "We'll be taking him off to the hospital then," exclaimed one of the ambulance crew to his colleague. "Who's going to come with him?" came the reply in the form of both a comment and a question. "We can't take them all, and the old dear, well, she's just not coping is she." Mary's mother sat in her chair as she struggled to catch her breath. She could barely speak at all. She was indignant at having been referred to as the 'old dear'. "I will go with him," declared Mary, "he's my dad, and I'll go with him!" Her age, or to be precise, the lack of it, was not questioned. They seemed happy for her to travel with her father to hospital, perhaps not wanting the trouble of a flustered wife. After all, he'd been trying to get away from her hadn't he? That much was pretty obvious to them.

"A couple more minutes of breathing that stuff and we wouldn't have been driving so fast," expressed the ambulance man as they drove through the streets of Reading with the sirens sounding at full volume. "He's lucky your mother came home when she did." Mary didn't have time or perhaps the maturity of thought to

contemplate the possibility of what might have happened. What if her mother had taken just a few more minutes at the local shop? What if she had stayed chatting with the other women just for a little bit longer? It would have been Mary arriving at the house and it would have been too late. By contemplating the ‘what if’s’ we can sometimes see the blessing.

Mary’s father stayed in hospital for a few days as his body recovered from the trauma to which he had exposed himself. Despite the obvious fact that he had chosen a destructive course of action that had not been thrust upon him by others, he was nevertheless in a state of shock. For a while, he had little to say. Sitting beside his hospital bed, his daughter Mary was his main source of support and comfort.

As a day or two passed he began to share some of what was churning around inside him. “I can’t stand her love,” he said with deep and profound sadness, “I just can’t stand her.” What could he do? What more could he do? There was no softening with her. She wasn’t going to change.

Existing somewhere between a jagged rock and a cold, hard place, he returned home. Physically he was recovered, but there would be other consequences to be tolerated. Not least of all, the inevitable lack of sympathy from all who vaguely knew him. The reputation of being someone who had tried to kill himself wasn’t a desirable one. For a while he stood up for himself a little more but it was short lived. He still loved his wife, but how hard it was to like her. Mary had been there for him when his need was great. Here now in Windsor, her need was great. Would he take up the reins and be a father to her, or would he sit without input as his wife continued to play the tune that affected everyone so much?

Two days later, baby Jane came into the world. It was the August of 1964. Mary was immediately besotted with the beautiful baby girl that lay in her arms. How glad she was that she had not listened to the counsel of others who would have deprived this life of the opportunity to be, or would have considered it right for the mother and daughter bond to be broken apart. A child had been born; a healthy child whose young mother loved her deeply and was determined not to fail her. Life had changed, and whatever had gone before was gone. A new life was here, with a need for nurture and growth. 'It must be better for her than it was for me,' Mary determined to herself.

Chapter 3 Married

The descriptive term applied to the premises within which Mary had given birth to baby Jane, and where she found herself in those early days of nursing an infant could hardly be thought of as being accurate. A mother and baby home was in fact, not a home at all. It was a place of temporary residence. There was no option to lay down roots or much opportunity to settle into a routine. You were there to have your child, to care for it during those first few weeks, and then to clear off and make way for others. Mary understood that she had to make way so that those others would not have to be sent to the hospital. She didn't want anyone to have to endure that, but where was she to go?

Would she be able to return to her family home now that the baby girl was here? Would not the sight of this sweet innocent child be enough to melt even the coldest of hearts? Would Mary's mother not fall in love with her first grand daughter and desire to see her in a family home? No! She would not. She did offer to take them in, but there would be terms, conditions and rules. Impossible rules that could not be realistically achieved by anyone with a baby to care for. In reality, the offer was no offer at all, and the distance between Mary and her mother increased once again. Somehow, this became Mary's fault, and she was given to be responsible for yet another form of rejection. Her father's opinion was of no relevance, and his concern for his daughter and his grand child was given no airing. He chose only to watch and to hope for the best.

Taking her six week old baby into lodgings in the house of an elderly man in Reading was far from ideal. He liked the idea of rent for the room, but not the inconvenience of a small child. Soon after taking up residence Mary had to leave. She found lodgings again, this time

with a divorced woman also in Reading, but with a similar outcome. Another single woman took her in as she again lodged, this time in the Erleigh area of the town. Mary did what she needed to do. She cared for the young child as best she could, with no time to think of her own needs or wants. The needs of her daughter were Mary's needs. Summer descended into the season of Autumn, and then Winter beckoned. Mary hoped that it would be much less harsh than the previous winter season.

Occasional hopeful visits to her parents home brought little comfort. "You need to find a father for that child," was now the mantra expressed by Mary's mother. The distance between them had not quelled her ability to apply condemnatory pressure to her daughter. With the sound of her mother's taunting ringing continually in her ears, Mary came into contact with Keith. This local charmer lived near to Mary's lodgings. They spoke on the street. He offered sympathy and understanding. He showed interest in Mary and in baby Jane. Another one of those moments was fast approaching. One of those moments in which the older version of Mary would like to be able to travel back in time and give advice to her younger self.

Life was hard for any unmarried mother in those days and Mary firmly believed that she had fully and entirely deserved all the things that had happened to her. She had come to accept that she was not in any way good and that she didn't deserve anything good to happen to her. She was easy-pickings for a more sophisticated man in his late twenties and she gladly accepted his offer of marriage with little thought to the contrary. He would provide a home for Mary and her young daughter, now a toddler. Mary had barely turned eighteen years of age as they moved into the home he would provide. The home was a caravan that he had been able to rent in the Tilehurst area of Reading. With a positive view, Mary clung onto the thought that this was a new start, a fresh beginning. At least it was their own

place and they did not have to share it with strangers. In some ways, it was luxurious in comparison to the lodgings in Erleigh. Here there was space for young Jane to run around as the cramped indoor living environment gave immediate access to the outdoors. This was a start. She hoped that it was the beginning of a better way.

Gradually, the charming Keith began to give way to a moody version. Mary could get used to that. Nobody was likely to be perfect when all is said and done. At least she had someone now. There isn't much room in a caravan for two adults and a child. For an increasingly energetic little girl it can be a place of constraint. A caravan can be an exciting temporary abode from which to enjoy a warm summer holiday, but in the cooler months it will become a damp and cold place in which to be. There will be growth of mould and mildew clinging to clothing, bedding, and furniture. The windows and walls will stream with condensation in the mornings and you will have no choice other than to open all the windows in order to remove some of the dampness, even though it may be cold or freezing outside. For any relationship this type of living will present a test of endurance, and especially in that first year of marriage that is so often overrated as two people adjust to a new way of living. Keith began to show a temper with day-to-day things around him. Mary's complete lack of self-confidence, or any other kind of confidence, would present itself as timidity as he began to rage at things in general. It didn't happen all the time, but when it did he became angrier, it seemed, than the last time. She didn't tell anyone. She could have told brother Mike but she had to stand on her own two feet now. She didn't dare to retaliate in case it became worse. She had to make sure that it was just herself that his anger was focussed upon, and not Jane.

The first time he hit her Keith was deeply sorry. He didn't mean it. It wouldn't ever happen again. But it did. It was never quite enough to

do any lasting physical harm, but just enough to release the temper that had built up inside of him. She could tell when he was starting to get worked up, and would make an excuse to get Jane out of the way and hope that he would calm down. Sometimes he did, other times he didn't. He would sit at the table in the caravan and brood until the child was abed, then at the slightest hint of irritation he would begin to unleash his anger on this meek and defenceless eighteen year old who would weep as she received the blows from his hands and fists. It would begin with the shouting, the pushing, the shaking and slapping, then the punching. At least he wasn't like that all the time. That's what you tell yourself when you are in it.

"Pick up my tablets while you're out," Keith demanded. It was more of an instruction than a request. There was rarely ever a 'please' or a 'thank you'. "I don't need them until tonight so I can wait until you get back from your mothers." Mary was taking her increasingly active daughter out for the day to get her out and about and away from the caravan. She hadn't been to see her parents for some time and wasn't especially looking forward to it. Keith was tense this morning so it was better to be out than in. She took her time as she headed towards the local shops to get Keith's medication. It was good for Jane to practice her walking skills whenever the chance arose, especially as they lived in limited indoor space. She looked around a few shops and chatted to a few people. How different it was to have a baby when you had a wedding ring upon your finger, and how much more amenable people seemed to be. Mary loved it when elderly ladies would fuss over young Jane, and tell her what a beautiful young child she had. She would feel a sense of something that was almost pride as others derived and expressed joy as a response to her daughter. Jane was cute and easy to love. Her unsettled start to life did not seem to have left any obvious ill effects. A couple of hours had passed. Heavy clouds were building up from the west. Mary caught the scent of rain in the air. It didn't take much

to discourage her from the prospect of listening to her mother. It was a long walk from the bus stop to her parent's house, and they didn't know she was coming. What if it was raining heavily and they were not in? She decided to leave the home visit for today and to get some basic provisions. She could cook lunch for Keith, Jane and herself, and maybe take her daughter out again later if the pending rain passed by. She walked back up to the caravan park. There was no hurry, but she was keeping an eye on the surly, deepening clouds above. It had been so bright earlier in the day.

She arrived quietly back at the caravan. Jane had fallen asleep from her energetic endeavours and was resting in her pushchair. Mary would leave her by the door whilst keeping a watchful eye on the weather, rather than wake the child by lifting her out of the chair. She had been a good little girl. Not wanting to make a lot of noise, Mary crept into the caravan, carrying her small bag of lunch items. Keith was in. She could hear him in the living area that also served as a bedroom. He seemed to be talking to himself. Mary opened the door. Directly ahead of her is Keith. He is lying on the bed wearing only the slightest amount of clothing. The girl next to him, on his right hand side, could not be much above ten years of age. Mary has never seen her before. What? Nobody speaks. They just look at one another. Keith has photographs. He has pictures of children. Naked children. What? Mary cannot process this. What on earth is going on here? Keith just looks at her. He has no words. Not one. Mary turns away. She walks out of the caravan, she takes hold of Jane's pushchair and she walks back the way that she has just come. Keith does not follow her. He does not call her name.

Mary goes to the home of a young woman that she has come to know. It's not far from the caravan site. She leaves Jane in the care of this young woman that she knows, and walks for a while. She doesn't know it, but Mary is in shock. She walks the streets of Tilehurst and

beyond into the adjacent countryside. A car pulls up alongside her and the man offers her a lift. She gets into the car without a thought. Mary does not know him. He has an agenda that is not hers. She tells him something of her day. It's enough to change his thinking as he becomes sympathetic. He turns the car around and takes her back to the home of her friend, who agrees to look after Jane for longer. She can see that there is trouble in the life of her young friend. The man agrees to take Mary to her older brother's house. Brother Mike will be at work, but brother David is now out of the forces and back in Reading. He will know what to do. Mary goes to him, but finds that his wife is not helpful. "She can't stay here can she," David's wife asserts. "You'll have to take her to your mother's house." David thanks the man who has brought his desperate sister to his home. David knows something about shock and he recognises it in his so much younger sister, whom he barely really knows. As they travel to their parent's home, Mary tells David what has happened today. She had planned to go to see her parents today, but not in this manner. She asks David to tell them. She fears yet more rebuke from her mother and asks him to tell their father first. David deals with it. He tells his father what has taken place. For once, the man asserts himself. "I'm so sorry love. I can't imagine what you must be going through. You should have told us what he was like. He's a pervert he is. The coppers will have to deal with him." He shows compassion and sympathy for his daughter. He was never a religious man, but recently her father and mother had been going to a small church near to their house. He seemed better for it. "David will go to fetch Jane and bring her here. You can both stay here for a while." For once, Mary's mother gave no objection, nor offered any caustic remark.

That was the end of Mary's marriage. She simply could not go back to him. He made no effort to contact her or to show his face at all. Mary stayed with her parents for a while, but having now lived

independently she was keen to let this be a temporary arrangement. She went back into lodgings, getting a room for Jane and herself in a house in the London Street area of town.

Time trickled by, as it surely does. Mary's focus was towards her daughter upon whom she was prepared to allow no harm to fall. The baby that had become a toddler had now morphed into a 'steady on her feet' adorable three year old with a big wide world to discover. Jane was a delightfully innocent child. Mary wondered how the world would shape this precious young life.

Mary, by contrast, was rapidly becoming a scarred young woman as she entered into her early twenties. The divorce had not been easy to obtain. It had been necessary for Mary to prove that she had been abused to a disinterested Judge whose view of the collapse of the marriage was tainted by his opinion of her earlier status as an unmarried mother. Reluctantly, the divorce had been granted but without any support to be forthcoming from anywhere, Mary and Jane were officially on their own once again.

Chapter 4 If at first you don't succeed

As she recovered from the unpleasantness that had been her marriage, Mary was determined to settle and stay where she was for a while. She needed some consistency for herself and the growing daughter she adored so much. The room she rented in London Street became some kind of a home for them both for the time being.

Mary began to get to know a small number of young women in the area who had emerged from their teenage years. For the first time in a long time she began to find that she had at least a few things in common with some of her peers and this small group began to take an interest in the more experienced young woman they were getting to know. She had a child. She had been married. She was even divorced now. They had much to learn about life from Mary and invited her to join them for an evening at the local pub. A baby sitter was arranged to look after Jane. Mary could begin to develop a social side to her life. Mary enjoyed this opportunity to spend time with others of her generation. This was a new and unusual experience for her and one that she was eager to repeat. She was not able to go out regularly. She didn't have the money needed to do that and wouldn't have wasted it if she had. But she did spend time with this group often enough to become a part of their wider social circle, even though an occasional evening in the pub was the extent of it. In 1960's Britain, the pub was very much the focal point of most communities. It was the place in which people would meet to share life together, to laugh together, to cry together, to support one another in times of doubt and distress, to play games together, and even to have the odd punch up together. A couple of pints of the local brew for the men or a glass or two of gin for the ladies and the troubles of your world would seem much less onerous. Many people would be daily visitors to the pub, often returning home only to

sleep before heading out to work the next morning. At special times of the year, such as Christmas Eve for instance, the great majority of pubs would have standing room only, and after 8pm you might struggle to get in at all. The pub was a community within a community, and Mary had become a small part of it.

It was there that she met Kevin. He would come to talk with her group. He was maybe ten or eleven years older than she was, perhaps a couple of years older than Mary's brother Mike. Kevin was a nice chap. He was very gentlemanly towards her and to the others, and it was comforting to be around him. He seemed to be drawn to her, and the more he came to know her situation in life, the more supportive he seemed to be. A few months passed before Mary was delighted to learn that Kevin would be renting out a room of his own in the same house in which Mary and Jane lived. She liked having him around.

Kevin expressed his desire to support Mary and her daughter and waited patiently while she hesitated. Mary was frightened of any kind of significant involvement due to the experience of her first marriage, but she did become attached to Kevin. She began to sense that she loved him somewhat, and in keeping with the developing fashion of the times, they did what their parents would never have done. Mary and Kevin began to live together. Their relationship continued well. Kevin was good to have around, and was a fatherly influence for Jane who was beginning to show her own opinion about all sorts of things as she approached school age. The child needed a paternal influence. Mary needed a husband. Kevin needed to support a family and would have been thinking that as a man in his early thirties it was now or never for him. The fear of being 'left upon the shelf' was as real for a man as it ever was for a woman. After they had known one another for two years or so, Mary and Kevin married.

Together, they rented a house from a private landlord. Mary's first proper home as an adult was well timed with Jane now at five years of age. Things were better now. Surely things were better now.

As the married couple settled into a routine of living, and Jane moved into full time schooling Mary's role became that of a housewife and a mother. Kevin's task was to be the provider for his new little family. As they advanced into the marriage Mary found herself withdrawing from the social group through which she had met her husband. This was not uncommon as younger people met and married other younger people and had children of their own. They would often withdraw for a while and to a variable extent from the pub culture. That was true more for women than it was for men, and this small family group kept in step with the way of doing things. Mary spent less time in the company of adults at the pub and she would develop contact with others whilst waiting at the school gates to collect her daughter. Kevin continued to drop into the pub for a pint or two.

Perhaps it was enhanced by the fact that she was no longer going out quite so much, but Mary began to notice Kevin's tendency to drink a little more than she may have anticipated. Mary had never been a heavy drinker, nor had her family been especially inclined towards it, but it became the case that rarely would a day go by without Kevin taking a drink. She noticed also that he was becoming more frequently involved with the gambling activities of the working male. She knew, of course, that Kevin had always enjoyed placing a wager on the outcome of a greyhound or horse race, so it was no surprise that he placed a few weekend bets. It gave him a little bit of excitement, a little bit of something to look forward to.

As the months passed Mary could not help but notice that money was becoming tighter and did not seem to stretch quite so far. This

was partly due to the effects of inflation, but more worrying to her was the fact that the amount that Kevin would give her to provide house and home seemed to be reducing week by week. Workers would receive their wages each week, usually on Friday. With a fresh wage packet in their pockets many men would succumb to the temptation to step into the bar of the local pub that had conveniently opened at six o'clock in the evening. Just for a couple of drinks, and maybe a game of darts, cribbage, or even a card game. It was the card games that would cause much trouble in the homes of working class British families. Games of three or five card brag were a simple favourite. You could win a decent amount of money on the turn of a card if you were good at getting others to think that your hand contained very little when in fact you had enough to beat them. By the same token, you could lose. Kevin lost most of the time.

"I'm sorry love, but I lost my wages," he explained to his wife upon returning from the pub. "There's no money this week. I'll make it up to you somehow. Don't you worry." How could she not worry with a child to feed and bills to pay? The task of maintaining house and home had been getting more and more difficult as Kevin frittered away increasing chunks of the family wage on beer and betting, but this was a step too far. They sat down together as a couple to seek a solution to the growing problem. It was agreed that Mary would go to Kevin's workplace each Friday and collect his wages. That way she could take control of the family income and would give priority to those things that were needful. Mary was willing to work towards a better situation, and initially, so was Kevin. The plan worked well enough for a while, then upon greeting the factory wages clerk one Friday Mary was told, "He's beaten you to it today love. Kevin collected his wages half an hour ago. He seemed to be in a hurry this week." The inevitable apology was followed by a temporarily improved couple of weeks before he once again managed to slip the net with wages in hand. Her husband was becoming less reliable and

more adept at ensuring that he and his wage packet eluded his wife's searching grip. There was only one thing to be done. Mary would have to get a job and go out to work herself.

Jane was growing fast and could be picked up from school by a willing friend who understood what Mary needed to do and wasn't averse to getting paid a little weekly cash in hand for looking after her while Mary worked.

The butcher's workshop would not have been Mary's first choice for a job. It was bloody, mundane, and not especially well paid, but she was desperate. To her surprise she found herself to be well suited to the work and she became good at doing it. She would have liked to be able to become a full butcher. The extra income would have been a great help with Kevin becoming less and less reliable as the months wore on. Unfortunately, for a woman in those days the option to become a full butcher just didn't exist. That is how it was. There was nothing to gain by being angry about it. Mary had too much to think about. She was now more or less paying for the running of the family home as Kevin spent more and more of his time with his pints of bitter and his card games. On more than one occasion Mary walked into the pub and grabbed a handful of Kevin's money from the table in front of him as she went off to buy food. His mates were thoroughly entertained by the intrusion of 'Kevin's missus', while Kevin himself would be embarrassed at being the object of their humorous anecdotes and insinuations that it was she and not he who 'wore the trousers in that house'.

With regret and with the need for an increased wage packet Mary left the butcher's workshop to work in the more sanitised environment of a food and drinks factory. The prospect of spending the whole of each weekday doing the mind numbing work of preparing eggs for the pickling process was not an exciting one. The

beginning of each shift would seem like an eternity away from the end, but the extra money was needed, and Mary was able to finish earlier than at the butchers, so there was less child-minding to pay for. There was another bonus to be had. A food company would tell it's employees that they could eat as much as they wanted from the production line, knowing that they would quickly lose interest in whatever was passing in front of them. How often we would hear of the employees of a famous chocolate manufacturing company who would express repulsion at the mere thought of eating chocolate. They were thoroughly sick of the sight of it. Giving them permission to help themselves was an exceptionally good deterrent. Mary's employer gave her permission to "eat as many as you want," although these were not chocolate bars, but boiled eggs that she was invited to dine upon. Every day, Mary would go to work on the basis that boiled eggs would be her form of sustenance whether or not she could stand the thought of it. There is a story in the old testament of the holy bible. The people of Israel, having been led out of Egypt by Moses, are foraging in the desert. There are perhaps about three million of them and food is hard to come by. They seek the help of the Lord their God who delivers them from their hunger by supplying manna from heaven, a kind of wafer with a coriander flavour. At first they delighted in this daily provision as they were hungry no more, but before long they were crying out for something else to eat as they became bored with the manna. Mary knew how they would have felt. The manna in Mary's desert was boiled eggs. She had nobody to cry out to for anything different, so she chose to be satisfied and grateful for what she had.

Chapter 5 Beef Stew

Just one month before Mary gave birth to her beloved daughter, Gamblers Anonymous held its first meeting in the United Kingdom. The organisation had been established some seven years earlier in the United States. Over time it has spread to many countries and can be accessed without great difficulty by anyone for whom the curse of a gambling addiction has a major impact upon their lives, and upon the lives of others around them.

In those earlier days it was much less common. The concept of providing help and support to hopefully encourage someone to take control of a gambling problem was mostly unheard of. Perhaps less likely was the possibility that a man, for it was largely they who placed the bets, would begin to accept that he had a problem. To acknowledge a problem was to admit a weakness in a culture that did not offer any allowances to men in that regard. The working class element of society would see smoking, drinking, gambling and a few other pastimes as being just those things that were done. Mary heard about Gamblers Anonymous. The living situation for her family was not improving. It was becoming less and less manageable. Kevin continued to drink and to gamble heavily. More often than not he would have nothing left in his pocket by the time that the weekend had passed. He would become angry with himself and with the situation. There were times when he took out this anger on his wife. Times when he would push and shove her across the kitchen as they entered into yet another heated discussion or argument about the lack of money. There were also times when he would hit her. Times when he would be sorry for himself and for his behaviour. Times when he would be repentant. Times when he would do it again. Meanwhile, Mary brought up her daughter as best she could.

She kept on working. She kept on living mostly on boiled eggs and using her limited income to keep house and home together.

When Mary made a commitment it was not done lightly. She meant it, and would intend to see through, as far as possible, any responsibility she had taken on. With trepidation she approached Kevin and suggested that together, they should go to Gamblers Anonymous. She had learned that the nearest meeting was in London. She had no idea how they would get there, but was determined that something had to be done. Kevin thought about it for a while. This wouldn't be his ideal choice but what could he do? Week by week he was taking himself and everyone else through this cycle of wastefulness. He was failing in his duty to provide for his family, and was not doing what he knew he should do. Some of the other blokes at the pub saw some shame in that and had commented in his hearing that it was a man's place to provide for his household. Kevin wasn't, and couldn't. He agreed to go. "How will we get there?" he asked. "This is in south London. It's the other side of the river. I haven't got a clue where this is. I'll ask the lads in the pub. Somebody will have an idea where it is." Mary had no idea either. Her knowledge of the capital city and its surrounding areas was minimal.

With no money and only a rudimentary idea of where they were actually going, Mary and Kevin set off to hitch hike from Reading to south London, leaving Jane in the care of a trusted friend. Hitch hiking was not a perfect method of transport, but if you had no money the only other alternatives were to walk, or to take your chances and jump on a train in the hope that you wouldn't get caught without a ticket. That wasn't an option for Mary. There was trouble enough without inviting more by breaking the law.

Standing at the side of the road with your thumb pointing to the heavens to indicate your need for a lift would sometimes see a

speedy response, but at other times you could be waiting for hours before anyone stopped, only to find out that they weren't going very far. On this particular day, not only did Mary and Kevin manage to attract a lift quite quickly, they also attracted one from a driver who just happened to be going to the right part of London, and could drop them within a mile or two of their destination. Almost miraculously, they found Gamblers Anonymous and were there in plenty of time for the meeting that evening. Kevin stayed through the whole meeting, and engaged with it. Perhaps there was hope.

The meeting was a long one. They had no idea how long it would last and even less idea how they would get back to Reading afterwards. The reality was that a night spent on the streets of London beckoned to be followed by the hope of getting another lift when daylight returned. The meeting drew to its close as 11.00pm ticked by on the plain wooden clock sitting noisily on the wall. It had been a long evening. Kevin had admitted that he did indeed have a problem, and had expressed his desire to do something constructive about it. Mary did not know what she had been expecting, but this seemed to be a positive step forward. As they both said their farewells and prepared to leave the meeting Mary was approached by an older member of the group. He had been there alone throughout the evening, one of several men who had come along without their wives. Some had told of how their wives had left them and how badly they wanted to repair the damage they had done. Others were fearful that their wives would not take much more. Mary understood how that was, and hoped that Kevin was listening to them. This particular man had spoken very little. It was as if he had already previously said all that he needed to. He seemed to be more in control of himself somehow. "Here. Take this luv. It ought to be enough to get you two back home again. Make sure you keep it though. Don't get giving it to him will you." The money he gave to her was enough to get Mary and Kevin

back home on the early morning milk train. They were back in Reading before the sun came up to greet another day.

Things were better for a while. Kevin took a little more control with his gambling. A branch of Gamblers Anonymous opened up in Reading. Perfectly timed. Fewer bets meant a little more money in the house. With Jane heading rapidly towards ten years of age and outgrowing clothes and shoes at the usual rate a few extra pounds in the household kitty was well timed. If only he would stop drinking. The relative success of a visit to Gamblers Anonymous raised the possibility that perhaps Kevin would consider that his use of alcohol was also something of a problem. "I admit that I drink more than I should," he reflected as yet another discussion took place before he went out for the evening, "but there's plenty that's worse than me. I mean what's a bloke supposed to do if he can't have a drink?" The conversation carried on. Kevin was having a drink every day. He would be out until especially late on Friday nights. He would be out until late on Saturday night. He would go again for the Sunday lunch time session, returning to expect to find a dinner on the table and ready for him. In some form or another it usually was. Then he would sleep. Then it was Monday, and the cycle would begin again. Work, pub, bed. Work, pub, bed. How was this a life? Just because others do it, does that mean that he has to do it, and do they all do it or just some of them?

Reluctantly, Kevin agreed to give Alcoholics Anonymous a try. "I'm not an alcoholic though. You'll see," Kevin expressed as he left for the meeting. Mary quietly clung onto the hope that this would also bring a positive chink of light into her husband and into her household. She worried about him. All this drinking, all this time down at the pub. Why didn't he want to spend his time with her and Jane? They hardly ever did anything together. Would it change for the better?

“Will you stop your nagging? I’m sick of hearing it! Sick of the sound of your whining voice going on at me all the time.” Kevin’s voice was raised and raising. He had returned from the pub a little earlier than usual this night. The visits to Alcoholics Anonymous had only been a few, and then he had stopped going. “If I want to go out for a drink then I damn well will, and I don’t need your permission to bleeding well do it. Not today nor any other day.” Kevin was shouting into Mary’s face from a distance of just a few inches. “Why don’t you mind your own bleeding business?” He meant it. She tried to move away, but Kevin grabbed her by the shoulders. One burly hand on each shoulder. He shook her. “You ... are ... going ... to ... learn ... to ... leave ... me ... alone!” His eyes were red and raging. This was drink talking, and it spoke out aloud tonight. She struggled to get out of his grip. His anger reacted to that. His hands quickly moved from Mary’s shoulders to her throat. Kevin was strangling her. “You will not question me again. You won’t question me again.” He spat the words out with venom as he squeezed the breath out of Mary’s throat. She was losing the right to live. Thank goodness Jane isn’t here to see this. Jane! What about Jane? A final burst of energy was enough as she sought to preserve her life. Mary lifted her right hand and dragged her fingernails across Kevin’s left cheek. It was enough for him to relax his grip as his hand flew to protect his face. She pushed him away and only then drew breath. Coughing and spluttering, she faced away from him as she bent over to try and gather herself back together. The door slammed hard as Kevin left the building. Wherever he was going was fine by Mary, just so long as he wasn’t here.

Whatever happened to that nice, pleasant, and apparently considerate man who had said that he would support Mary and her daughter? She hadn’t asked him to do it. It was him that had said that she needed a husband and Jane needed a father. Never mind having a father, Jane had been just a minute or so away from not having a

mother. Mary stayed awake that night. Kevin did not come back to the house. She didn't want him too. Jane had come back from visiting her friend's house just around the corner and had gone to bed. Mary kept from her any sign of what had happened here this evening, but she knew, oh she knew, that Kevin had stepped well and truly over the line. She had no sense of being safe here any more. She was frightened for Jane and for herself.

Kevin didn't come home that night, nor did he return the following morning. The day wore on. Six o' clock in the evening came. The pubs would be open. Would she have to wait to see what would happen after closing time or was there something she could do? Mary walked to the pub and into the bar where Kevin was sitting in the corner, at a small circular table with others of his group. His comrades. The room was already filled with tobacco smoke. Four or five other men were sitting quietly at the bar accompanied by one another and the beer glass that sat directly in front of them. They looked around in unison as Mary walked across the room in the direction of her husband. There was a woman in the bar! What manner of intrusion was this? Women took their drinks in the lounge or the smoke room, and the only woman in the bar would be the one pulling pints of bitter. Women never entered the bar alone unless they were coming to work in it.

Kevin's table was littered with cigarette ash, empty crisp packets and dominoes laid out ready for the next game. Mary knew that she was safe here, even though she felt like an alien invading a strange and unknown place. If these men had any understanding that Kevin had hit his wife, not to mention strangling her, then they would set about him in an instant. She knew that. He would also know that. He could tell that his buddies had seen the marks that lay across her face that were obviously recently acquired, as well as the noticeable scratches on Kevin's cheek. They looked towards him enquiringly.

"She's a bit mad," declared her husband as he pointed knowingly towards his right temple. The men relaxed their look of concern. It had been sufficiently answered. Mary gave no reply. She was in their territory, and what could she say that would make any difference to them?

Kevin stepped away from the table and towards her with a defensive posture. A fake welcome if ever there was one. Whatever she was going to say, he didn't want these men to hear it. Was that fear passing fleetingly across his face?

"Hello love," said Kevin somewhat falsely, "what brings you here?" he asked with a nervous smile as he ushered her away from his group and across to the other side of the room. Not so far away that they couldn't see but far enough for them not to be able to easily hear. They sat down. "Can I get you a drink?" he asked with a note of hesitation that was sufficient to let her see that this was the last thing he wanted to do. Mary didn't want a drink. She wanted to protect her daughter. She wanted to protect herself. She needed a divorce. She had tried so much, and offered so much effort, but now it was a simple matter of survival. Kevin was not who he had been, or seemed to be. "You bleeding filthy slut" he hissed. She left with some security from the knowledge that the others had seen her there, and whatever story Kevin told them, there would be a seed of doubt in their minds. He would most likely keep his fists to himself from now on.

Depression took a hold of Mary. Not even thirty years of age yet and facing a second divorce at a time when divorce was frowned upon by the general population. Living in the same house as the husband she was no longer associated with took away any remaining sense of self worth and used up all the energy she had. They had been right after all hadn't they? Right all along. She wasn't going to amount to

anything was she? Nothing at all. Can't even be separated from your husband properly can you? What sort of a mother are you turning out to be? Apart from being a punch bag what do you have to show for two marriages? No money. A mind numbing, soul destroying job. It's pointless. You want more of this? What for? What good is it? How is it that you get every single decision wrong? Every choice you make brings about a bigger mess than the one you had to start with. She hadn't planned it. Jane was staying with a friend. Young girls like to do that from time to time, though none of them had ever stayed at Jane's house. The tablets came out. There were plenty of them. There was more than enough. This must have been how Mary's father had felt that day when she found him with his head in the gas oven. Rationality had gone. It wasn't a case of being selfish. It wasn't about being weak. It wasn't about having a reason not to live. It was none of those things. Another one of those moments in which you would like to be able to drop back in time and lead your younger self to a different decision, along an alternative path. Mary took the tablets. She took every last one. Then she waited.

There was a group of local older teenage girls. They had taken to Mary. Perhaps they knew something of her struggles from the local gossip. They saw her as an older sister. She had warmth and a kindness with which they were not so familiar. She would tell them things that their parents did not speak of. Mary was their agony aunt. They never came to the house if Kevin was at home, but would often visit while he was out, especially in the late afternoon or early evening. Jenny thought that she might have a problem and if she did it was going to be a big problem. She needed someone to talk to. Someone who knew what it was to be pregnant when you weren't supposed to be. She hoped she wasn't, but how could she know? She hoped that Mary was at home. Mary would know what to do. She stepped confidently through the garden gate, taking the path along the side of the house to the back door. There was never any standing

on ceremony here, so Jenny tapped on the back door as usual and then walked into the kitchen. "Are you in Mary?" she chimed, "it's Jenny." She stepped from the kitchen into the small parlour room. She stopped in her tracks and let out a muffled, fearful sound. Her breath raced but her voice had gone. She shook Mary gently. Was she dead? Jenny saw the empty bottle. Not knowing what to do, she ran to the house next door. They had a telephone and she used it to call an ambulance.

Mary woke up in the hospital bed. Her stomach was painful and her throat so very sore. There were other people around, lots of them. This was a big place. She vaguely remembered being in a smaller place, maybe last night. It was like a horrible dream. People had been doing things to her. "They brought you in here this morning," said the voice from the bed to her right, about six feet away. Mary looked across. She could see the young woman sitting on the next bed, but her eyes were blurring and her vision unclear. "I heard them talking. Said you tried to kill yourself," she said with almost an air of satisfaction, "like me," she added holding up two bandaged arms. "Not much good at it are we," she chuckled. "There's a good few of us in here done that. Reckon you'll be here for a while love. Most of us can't go until they say so." Mary just looked. Who was this? What was she telling her this for?

Mary's head was hurting. This was different to a normal headache. She kept feeling the need to take her head in her hands and close her eyes as she pressed her forehead with her fingers. It goes dark when you do that. Everyone goes away. She needed them all to go away.

"Do you remember taking the tablets?" asked the doctor with a hint of disinterest edging his voice. Was he a doctor? He had a clipboard with papers on it, so he must be somebody. She searched for an answer. She slowly nodded. "Did you intend to kill yourself?" he

asked rather abruptly and without feeling. He was very matter of fact about this. She nodded again. She had to tell the truth didn't she? Then he left, putting down the clip board but otherwise stopping only to say something to the older looking nurse in the blue uniform as he carried on making his way through the seemingly never ending ward that was filled with people.

She lay there all night listening to the noise all around her. People were wandering about. A young woman stood at the end of Mary's bed staring at her. Her eyes were dark but at the same time, they pierced through you. The young woman began to laugh, slowly at first, then increasing to a hysterical laughter that had no place in this world. Two nurses came along. "Come on Nora, let's get you back to bed." She went with them without a word of protest. A few minutes later there was a lot of shouting and screaming from another bed a little further to the left. In the half-light Mary saw an older woman run past. She had a cup in her hand and had taken off her hospital blouse. A nurse followed in pursuit. Mary heard the cup smash, or at least she thought it was that. Two more nurses ran down through the ward. They were carrying a blanket or something. There was screaming and shouting. There were voices telling them to shut up and other voices offering words of encouragement to the woman who had the cup.

"I can see you," said someone to her right. Mary glanced up at the woman who stood looking intently at her, or was she looking just beyond her. It was hard to tell. "I can see you and I know who you are." "Look," she said enthusiastically, "look, Mary Poppins is here." And so it went on all through the night and into the next morning.

Mary was now a resident at Fair Mile hospital. She was accommodated in a large Victorian building in the grounds of the hospital otherwise known as the Berkshire lunatic asylum, or the

'loony bin' as locals would have it called. Mary had tried to take her life, and she would have done it if not for the timely visit of her teenage friend and the quick response of the ambulance personnel. Whatever the reason, they weren't about to let her out of Fair Mile hospital so that she could do it again. She was certainly not free to go.

Was that the voice of Sister Clarke? She could hear that voice again. No! Please! Not her, please! She woke up with a start, a pounding heartbeat and sweat pouring out of her. Abject fear consumed her as she regained her senses. "Mary, wake up Mary. Come on, wake up!" As her vision became clear she was relieved to see not Sister Clarke but her mother standing next to the bed. There was, for once, some softness to her tone. Mary's father was with her, and though quiet, his gentle look of understanding spoke louder than many words could ever have done. "Jane is staying with us for a while," Mary's mother explained. "She seems to be quite happy. We just told her that you are poorly and in hospital. Its best if she doesn't come here to visit you isn't it." Mary nodded her agreement. She did not want her daughter exposed to anything that was here in this place. "You're going to be here for at least six weeks according to the doctor, but if you do what they tell you then it shouldn't be so bad. No running away this time eh." Mary hadn't even thought of it. Run away to where and to what? She had no reason to go anywhere. Jane was safe and sound. Anything else just did not matter. The visit lasted for an hour or so. No mention was made of Kevin. It was as if he didn't exist.

Time drew on and weeks went past. Mary became used to the hospital routine, as she learned to live with the endless human noise, and the bizarre words and behaviours exhibited by some of her fellow inmates. Others sat quietly as if their world existed only on the inside and they had no part in what was going on around them.

Mary felt like that. She wanted no part of life outside and had not the strength left to face up to what she knew was waiting for her. A seemingly endless cycle consisting of the relentless routine of work, childcare, housework, and nothing else; other than another divorce to deal with. She wondered if Kevin would still be at the house. He hadn't been to the hospital to visit her. That said much about what was left of their relationship but left open the possibility that he may have gone elsewhere. No. The pub is as far as Kevin would ever go to by himself. She knew he was still there.

"You can go home now," explained the doctor, who's name she had not come to know. "There's nothing more we can do for you here." Six weeks after being brought into Fair Mile hospital Mary was being given the expectation that she would leave today. Just like that. She had no choice other than to return to the house and to the life she had been living. Thankfully, her job was still available for her, though she had feared the loss of it. The people at work knew little of what had happened, though there had been a rumour that Mary had had a 'nervous breakdown'. The mostly female workforce would gossip in corners. Many of them were tolerating a similar life.

It was Kevin who applied for the divorce. He didn't move out of the house and neither did Mary. There was nowhere else for her to go, and while they waited for the wheels of separation to turn, they lived under the same roof, not as man and wife but as two people sharing a house, one with a child and one without.

There is an old saying in England. It refers to the straw that breaks the donkey's back. The saying reflects a certain reality in life. Often we take so much responsibility and burden. We carry a great amount of weight upon our shoulders; so much that we only just about manage to keep on moving and carrying it. Then, usually without warning, something very small and really quite insignificant is added

to the load. On it's own it would count for nothing, but somehow when added to the load we already carry, that little thing will break us, and like the beast of burden, we shed our load.

The divorce proceedings were moving slowly. There had been a hearing of some sort. Mary couldn't understand why the judge had seemed to sympathise with Kevin. She had been presented to be some kind of a mad person who was somehow the problem in all of this and Kevin seemed not to be at fault at all. He had been given permission to remain at the house until such a time as he could locate a suitable alternative place to live. He wasn't even looking for anywhere to go, but was biding his time until the divorce was finalised. Mary wondered if the men at the pub knew that this was happening, and whether or not his reluctance to move out had anything to do with the shame of it. Whatever it was that was causing him to stay, the tension in the household was becoming unbearable as they lived separately but together.

Mary did her best to focus upon Jane's needs and upon her daily work. She was providing only for the two of them now. Kevin was supposed to fend for himself, but of course, it didn't always work out that way. Often he would fail to provide food for himself and would expect to be provided for. They could barely speak to one another as the days dragged by with an air of acute discontent. Returning, as she did, to her home every day and feeling the internal clouds descending as she turned the key in the door whilst silently wishing that she was going out to work rather than coming back to this so called home. What life is this wherein your preference is to leave your home for the relative joy of spending eight hours or more pickling eggs? Tension. Fear. Anxiety. Trepidation. These were Mary's daily companions and tormentors. She was never without one or more of them as she bore the burden of living under the same

roof as this man whilst giving her precious daughter the best she could. Then came the straw.

Jane was coming home from school for her lunch today. With the annual stocktaking in full flow at the factory, Mary was not working and would be preparing Jane's lunch for her. It was nice to be able to do that. She had hoped that Kevin would be out of the house, but he wasn't. She didn't even know what he was doing for work these days. As lunchtime approached she needed to put a small saucepan on the cooker hob to cook a simple lunch. Kevin had placed a very large saucepan on top of the cooker. It was filled with a stew he had put together that morning. There was enough to keep him going for a couple of days. They had only a small cooker, and Kevin's stew pot took up most of the area of the hob. Mary moved his saucepan from the hob so that she could heat up the food for Jane's lunch. She would put it back after feeding her daughter. He knew that Jane was coming home for lunch today, so surely there would be no problem. Or perhaps there was.

Kevin came into the kitchen. He picked up the large pot of stew and placed it back on the hob after removing the small pot containing Jane's lunch. He left the kitchen, so Mary simply placed her pot back on the hob. A few minutes later, Kevin returned, and once again removed Mary's cooking pot and placed his stew back on the hob. Again, he left the kitchen. She stood silently staring at the large pot for a few minutes. She had no words. Quietly and gently, she again removed the larger pot from the hob and replaced it with the smaller one. Surely he would understand that the child's lunch needed to be ready and it would only take a short while to be done. Baked beans require only a short period of time to heat up in order that they may be served on a piece of toasted bread. As the beans began to show sign of acquiring the necessary heat needed to render them as ready for use, Kevin walked intently back into the kitchen. Mary reminded

him that Jane would be home soon, and that her lunch would not take very long to cook. It would probably take no more than five minutes to prepare. Without speaking he once again removed the smaller pot and placed his own cooking vessel on the hob. This time he sat down at the small kitchen table some six feet or so away from the cooker and fixed his eyes upon the hob. There were no words between them but he was daring her to move it one more time. She dared not.

As Kevin's stew began to bubble, steam could be seen rising from the pot. Kevin did not move from his spot, nor did he avert his eyes from the cooker. He had won. The stew would reach the point of boiling and then he would turn down the heat and leave it to gently simmer for the next two to three hours. Mary would not be able to provide the simple small lunch that Jane would need. Jane would be home in the next five minutes or so. She would need to eat lunch and have time to get back to school ready for the afternoon lessons. The proverbial donkey's back was broken.

As the stew boiled so the steam within Mary arose also, and the pressure increased until there was nowhere for it to go. Moving at speed she picked up the large pot of boiling stew, and without so much as a cautionary thought, she emptied it. She poured the contents of the steaming pot onto Kevin's head before he had the chance to move so much as a muscle. The pan fell to the floor as she dropped it and stepped back. Mary's load had been shed in the form of a pot full of stew now dripping over Kevin's shoulders and into his lap as he jumped from the chair in a shocked response.

"You're bloody mad you are," he screamed with a voice full of shock as he stood up grabbing for a tea towel. Mary just looked at the sight in front of her and the mess now gathering on the kitchen floor. All that effort, all that abuse, all the lonely uncomfortable hours spent

waiting, wondering, worrying, fearing, and here stood before her with his dinner dripping from his head stood the source of it. How ridiculous he looked.

Perhaps at this point in time she was mad, or perhaps she was becoming so.

Kevin stormed out of the house with small pieces of boiled carrot and parsnip to accompany him on his way. "You ought to be locked up," he bawled as he left the kitchen with towel in hand. "You're not safe to be out you're not," he shouted as he moved from the parlour to the hallway. "You need help you do," he yelled, for loud effect, as he slammed the door behind him on his way out into the street.

Mary did need help. She knew that. But right now there was a mess to clear up and baked beans to cook in the remaining minutes before Jane arrived. For the next half an hour or so, Mary was simply functional. She cleaned up what she could, made excuses to her daughter for the spillage in the kitchen, served that simple lunch, and tried to behave as if this was just like any other day when she wasn't at work.

After Jane had left to return to school Mary stepped away from the house and began to walk. She just went for a walk. She wandered the streets of Reading with no destination in mind or any sense of where she might be going. Her mind had closed down. She crossed busy roads without any recognition of doing it as she functioned on some kind of autopilot setting. Was there anywhere that she could go for help? She didn't know what help might look like, but she needed it. The donkey that has shed its load will wander until someone takes a hold of it and shows it where to go.

During these years that had followed the abrupt end to her teenage life and the onset of adult experiences for which she had not been prepared, Mary had done everything that she could do to make things work; to make the best of all those difficult situations. She had nothing left by way of an answer. Anything and everything that she could do in her own strength had been done. There was nothing left. No more energy. No more ideas. No more feelings. She was empty now. No anger. Just nothingness. She knew that what she had just done was wrong but there was nothing in her mind that mattered any more as she somehow negotiated a way through the streets of the town. Turning to the right, or to the left, or going straight ahead. It made no difference and mattered not to her or to any of the people she passed. If only they knew how this moment was. Would they help? Could they help? No, probably not.

To where do we turn when we have nowhere to turn? Mary had heard about God, as all of us do in one form or another, but she had no belief or faith of any kind. It surprised her a little bit as she called to someone she didn't know. "Will you help me Lord? If you don't then nobody can." Out there on the street and oblivious to those around her she cried out, "Please, send someone to help me."

Mary carried on walking and wandering. There was a building with doors wide open. She stepped into the building without recognising or acknowledging what it was or being especially aware of entering it, but she was strangely compelled to do so. She wasn't forced, or pushed. Inside, there were a few people. Some of the faces were familiar, or so they seemed to her. She didn't know these people, but it seemed as if she did know them. Perhaps she had seen them around and passed them by. She took a seat amongst a row of other seats. It wasn't a large place and there wasn't a large number of people inside but she was now with others. Mary didn't know how many there were. There was a man at the front of the room. He

seemed to be some kind of a speaker but she didn't know anything about him or what he was doing. After a while, though how long it was she could not tell, Mary became aware that this man was speaking directly to her. As he did so she began to re-enter into a state of some recovered awareness, and became a little more conscious of her surroundings. He said something to her but she didn't quite grasp what it was that he said. He spoke again to her. He was definitely not speaking to anyone else. "Have you come to your end?" he asked with a gentle enquiry. "Today, have you come to your end?" It was as if he knew. How could he know? He waited a few moments. It was as if he was taking instructions.

"Have you asked the Lord for help?" he enquired in a manner that suggested that he already knew that she had just done exactly that for the one and only time in her life. How could he know about that?

"Is there nothing left in your heart today?" He seemed to know how empty and bereft of feeling she was.

"Do you want Jesus in your heart?" Mary did not understand the question, nor did she did understand the tingling sensation from deep within that made itself known to her when she heard the question. This was no physical feeling. It was coming from somewhere else, somewhere altogether different.

"If you want to be born again then come here to the front?" This question carried with it an invitation. To be born again. To start again. To have a clean slate. How could she not want that? Here she was, in another one of those moments that require a decision. Does she step forward to whatever it is or does she stay seated and keep that which she knows. If only an older version of Mary could step back in time and advise her of what she should do. How

unexpectedly these life changing and life defining moments can be thrust upon us without warning.

Mary stood up from her seat and stepped forwards toward the front where the man was waiting for her. As she approached him she looked to a woman on her right; a woman with one of those familiar faces. "Did you tell him about me?" she asked. Of course she didn't. Neither this woman nor any of the other people here could know what this day had brought. Even if, by some chance, they knew something of Mary's life to date, they would not and could not have known where the circumstances of the day had left her. "No love," came the slightly bemused reply, "he's come down from up north today."

As Mary reached the front of the room she felt nothing but a sense of inner peace that was as beautiful as it was unexpected. The man gave his full attention to her and to her alone. "God loves you," he declared, with no hesitation or any hint of doubt. She began to feel something again; something that she had no experience of. She felt as if she was wanted.

"He has heard your prayer," the man continued. "He has been there through all that you have been through." Oh my. Somebody knows how much she has been through all this time. "He has been waiting for you to ask Him to help, and to realise that however hard you try, you will just keep on blundering it." Those last few words spoke so loudly to Mary because they were the words that she herself would have used. Whoever this was, and whoever was speaking to her was doing it in such a way that she could not doubt that they knew her very well indeed.

She felt more safety and security and belonging and trust in this moment than she had ever felt in her entire life if it could have all

been put together and made into one moment. As the man spoke a prayer she simply relaxed and opened her heart. She let go of all that she was and had been and she invited into her life one by the name of Jesus. To her surprise Mary realised that she could hear the birds singing outside beyond the building. How long it had been since she noticed them at all, but suddenly their voices were loud and clear and contained sweetness that she could not express words for.

The building that Mary had wandered into was a small mission building that just happened to have an event taking place that day. It just happened that there was an evangelist in the building on that particular day, a man who had never been there before. It just happened that this was taking place as a lost young woman with nothing left inside of her just happened to come aimlessly walking by.

As she left the building, perhaps no more than an hour later, Mary's vision of the world around her was so very different. She saw colours in a more vibrant way. She wondered why everything seemed to be in Technicolor? She no longer felt heavy and burdened as she found her way back home to the house that now seemed to be nothing more or less than a house. Gone was the feeling of dread and fear as she stepped back into her home. This was no longer all that there is, and just knowing that, made everything completely different. As Kevin returned to the house that evening, presumably having obtained his evening meal from elsewhere, he found a woman who wanted only to dance. "Have you been on the drink?" he asked as she bounced around the room with an unknown lightness of spirit and body. "I knew you'd gone potty," he added before scooting off out again as quickly as he could. Whatever this was, he didn't want anything to do with it, and he was strangely disarmed in its presence.

As the days and weeks progressed Mary's ability to keep this wonderful experience to herself deteriorated, whilst the experience itself did not diminish. She had to share with others and tell them what she had found. Some of her family, her friends, and neighbours were convinced that she had completely broken down and had lost all sense of reason, but at the same time they had to admit that there was now something different about the person they knew as Mary. The man who was technically still her husband had returned to the house and if he had thought that she was mad before he was beyond convinced of it now. She wasn't arguing with him any longer, but instead, pleading with him to do as she had done, and to accept the being of Jesus into his life. In very little time at all Kevin's previously determined intention to remain as resident at the house until the bitter end was replaced by a stronger urge to be gone and to be away from it as soon as he could. In a matter of weeks he had moved out and was barely ever seen again.

Chapter 6 Ron

Life had changed once and for all, and Mary had changed with it. As that became increasingly obvious, those who knew Mary well began to be pleased at the realisation that things were so much better for her even though they could not grasp what she was telling them. "Well, whatever the reason it's really nice to see you without a long face," Mary's father told her, "I don't know how it works but you're a new girl so you are."

Day by day she found that her new companions were joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and self control. Fear, anxiety, and worry had lost whatever hold they had on her, and contrary to the views expressed by the departing Kevin, it became clear that Mary was neither drunk nor was she crazy. She was a new and different person who, amongst other things, would never be lonely again.

Mary paid a few visits to that small mission building into which she had wandered as she sought to know more about this real change in her life. She came to feel the need to be baptised as an outward expression of the change that had taken place within her, and she began to go along to a Baptist church quite close to the mission hall. There she found a ready made family of people who were willing, ready and able to take her in as she and Jane became regular visitors to the church.

"We want a little bit of whatever Mary has," explained her father as she introduced both her parents to Barbara Mortimer as they joined her at the Baptist church one bright and shining Sunday morning. It was not long before they too were regular attenders. For the first time in a long time, Mary and her daughter were spending time with her parents and doing something together as a family. Relationships

that had been damaged long ago, or perhaps never had been anything other than damaged, were now healing beyond all recognition or expectation. Barbara had been a source of much help and comfort as she guided Mary and her family members, and showed by example that she has a quality within that is not of her.

The day of baptism was a cause of great celebration for Mary's father and mother and for all her family as they rejoiced together in a fellowship that would have always been otherwise beyond them. For her father, it was also a day of reflection and repentance. He spoke quietly to her as they stood well away from the others. "I'm so deeply sorry my love. We both know what I'm talking about. I've never understood it right up to this day. I'm just so sorry." Forgiveness can be so easily spoken of but very difficult to do. We make the mistake of thinking that in forgiving someone that we are doing something for that person. This is not necessarily so. In forgiving her father it was Mary who was freed, and besides, she knew in her own mind that he had been forgiven already.

The period that followed was a good time. With space in her house, Mary was happy to welcome her elder brother Mike and his small family to share the home for a while. It was good to live as a solid family unit. It was good to have adult company in the house. It was good to live in a relatively normal way at long last as they shared the cost, the chores and the childcare.

Eventually, Mike's family were able to get another house for themselves and shortly after they had moved on so Mary and Jane also moved to a slightly smaller and less expensive abode. As Mary continued to grow in strength and in her faith, so Jane began to thrive as she moved relatively peacefully into her own teenage years.

Mary began to wonder how it must be to have someone in your life that is good and decent and reliable. How nice it would be to have someone like that. As the thought progressed into a regular contemplation the new Mary recognised the mistakes made by the previous version of her and determined that she would do nothing of or by herself to look for a life partner. An older advisory Mary with the ability to nip back in time would have said, "it's time for you to stop being D.I.M," that acronym she uses of the words 'do it myself', "and time for you to start trusting the one who does get things right." The new Mary took her thoughts and feelings to her Lord in prayer, something she was becoming more and more used to doing. "Lord, I ask you to choose. If you want me to be with someone again maybe I could meet him in a particular place. Maybe on a bus." In all reality, the probability of meeting and getting to know someone on a bus whilst travelling just a couple of miles to and from work would not be especially high. It would be unlikely to happen, but if it did happen would it not be a response to prayer. If it didn't happen that would be fine too.

Mary would travel on the bus to her place of work and would often sit with her friend Doreen as they chatted, sharing stories of their daily lives. Mary always had much to tell and to share, and enjoyed their regular conversations. Doreen would get on the bus a few stops before Mary and was always on her own. One morning Mary got on the bus as usual and sat in the seat next to Doreen. A few minutes and a stop or two later, a slightly older man moved unsteadily through the moving vehicle and he sat in the empty seats immediately behind the two of them. He winked in the general direction of Doreen as he approached. "This is my older brother Ron," said Doreen as she turned to the seat behind them. "He's just started a new job so this is going to be his route for a while." Mary and Ron shook hands and greeted one another before the usual bus journey conversation with Doreen. "He's started working as a carer

in a home for old people,” Doreen added, “its a bit of an unusual job for a bloke if you ask me, but he’s wanted to do it for a while now so good luck to him.”

More often than not, Ron would now join them on their daily journey. He would usually sit behind the two chatting friends though slowly he became more likely to become included in the conversation of the day. Sometimes Ron would get on the bus and Doreen was not there. On such days he would automatically sit next to Mary if the seat were unoccupied. It usually was. They began to get used to one another. On other occasions Doreen would get on the bus, and Ron, who had perhaps been on a night shift instead of his usual daytime working, would not join them. Mary noticed that she was happier when Ron caught the bus alone than ever she was when he wasn’t there. The journeys continued for around six months and Mary could not help but notice that she was slowly but surely beginning to form an attachment to the brother of her friend. Just a gentle transition, barely noticeable, but significantly there.

Now into her thirties Mary found herself living in a society that was the regular victim of industrial action of one sort or another. This was a period of discontent across the United Kingdom with the Margaret Thatcher era being ushered in as a result of the failed attempts of a Labour government to bring some order to the nation. Strikes were an abundant nuisance throughout all walks of life, sometimes lasting only a few days but sometimes for much longer. Even the gravediggers put down their tools and withheld their labour. In Reading and many other towns and cities across England there was a public transport strike, and for several weeks there were no buses. Mary and countless others had to find other ways to get to work, assuming that they themselves were not on strike. For Mary this meant walking the distance to work which would add an hour to her travelling time in either direction. As she walked, she pondered,

and realised that above the inconvenience, the more noticeable impact of the bus strike lay in the fact that she was missing the regular contact with Ron. She determined to tell no-one, or at least no human being, that she was developing feelings for the brother of her friend, but as the transport strike began to draw to its inevitable close she wondered whether or not Ron would return to the daily bus journeys. Perhaps he would have found a more convenient way of getting to work during these recent weeks, or maybe he had changed his job. She felt a deep sense of disappointment at the thought that Ron would not be on the bus in future, and she began to fear that disappointment as irrational thoughts flooded through her mind. In the past, Mary would have made something happen. She would perhaps have gone to visit Doreen for some vague reason or another and used that as an opportunity to find out how Ron was and if he would still be catching the bus. She might have even told Doreen how she was feeling in the hope that Doreen would take it upon herself to act as a matchmaker for Mary and Ron. At such a time as this, the old Mary would have acted impulsively. Another one of those moments where an older version of herself with the ability to step back in time to give decision making advice would have been helpful. But Mary no longer made rash decisions. She no longer took critical steps in life quite so easily, and she no longer would have any need for the advice of an older version of herself. The new Mary had something so much better.

As she stood in line at the bus stop the chatter around her was all about the relief that people were sharing as they no longer had to walk several miles to their place of work. Some supported the bus drivers in their quest for better working terms and conditions. Others took the view that they were 'doing well enough as it is and shouldn't make life so hard for the rest of us just so that they can get a few extra pounds'. Mary was engaged in a different kind of conversation. "Lord", she prayed within her mind, "I trust you.

Whatever you want, I want. You know that I have missed Ron these past weeks. You know the way I feel. You know how he feels about me, which may be nothing at all. Lord, I'm not going to be DIM. I'm going to leave it up to you. Your will be done." The bus arrived to a mildly sarcastic cheer from some of the waiting line of a dozen or so people, and on they got. Some greeted the driver with enthusiasm as they paid their fare, while others were less vibrant. The driver seemed to be happy just to be back on his bus. You don't get any wages when you're on strike do you. He had rent to pay and mouths to feed. He didn't want the strike, but what choice did he have. If the union said 'out' then its 'out' and you don't have a choice unless you want to cross a picket line. Mary paid her fare and took her seat. Doreen didn't get on the bus this morning. Mary wondered what might be the reason for that. The thought provided a distraction as the bus approached the stop at which Ron would normally join them. She resisted the desire to glance to the pavement to see if he was there. She made a point of looking out of the window in the opposite direction, unable to see who was getting on. The bus began to move away from the stop and continue on its journey. Someone took the seat next to her. "It's nice to have the bus back again isn't it?" The kindly, gentle, familiar voice of Ron was speaking to her. A moment of joy entered her life and flashed through it as she looked to her left to catch his eye. A brief hesitation passed as they both waited for the other to speak next. "It's lovely to see you again," said Ron. "I've missed our chats on the bus in the mornings."

As the next few weeks went by and springtime began its annual course, it became obvious to anyone who might be observing the situation that Ron and Mary were attracted to one another and were getting on rather well. It was especially obvious to Doreen, who wasn't exactly slow in coming forward to express whatever might be on her mind. "I think its about time you two stopped messing about and got yourselves together," she bluntly declared one morning,

slightly miffed that they only had eyes for each other, but pleased for her brother who deserved to have someone in his life. Ron had never been much of a lad. He hadn't chased the ladies or been one for bringing assorted girlfriends to the family home.

They did as Doreen had urged. Mary and Ron did indeed get together. Ron had been so worried that his sister's outright declaration might have discouraged Mary. He was delighted to learn that it hadn't.

On October 31st 1980 they married. Mary was thirty three years of age and now married for the third time of asking. It wasn't a fussy wedding, but as they left the registry office as a married couple Mary felt a sense of security and warmth that comes with knowing that you have placed your trust in someone who does not let you down. "Fancy you two getting married on Halloween," Doreen joked as they stepped outside into the weakening autumn sunshine. "What's Halloween?" Mary enquired in all seriousness. They laughed at her perceived wit, but the reality was that Mary did not know what it was.

Like any new marriage, there was a time of settling and adjustment as they found their ways together as a couple. To embark upon a third marriage is no easy matter when you have already lost two, and like many others, Mary carried with her a sense of regret and failure. Wanting to go forward with the new marriage but so very much aware that being a double divorcee is no laughing matter. The great majority of third marriages fail. We may wonder why this is so. What is it about us that will bring about the loss of a marriage and all that goes with it? How can we be so intimate with someone and then end up so far away from them? In reality, for so many of us, the real cause lies not so much in the way we conducted ourselves, or didn't conduct ourselves. It can be found in the decisions that we made and

the way we made them. Decisions are always there at the root of whatever state we may find ourselves in. This time, Mary had left the decision in the hands of another, and this time it was different as she began to see what it was to share life with a decent, working man who has the capacity to care for others and has no need for external excitement or distraction.

They settled down. They went to church together and as a family. Ron had always held an interest in the bible, and had a belief in God. He saw the reality of the gospel in a way that so many people did not. He believed and was baptised. He would declare himself to be born again in a society that did not understand the meaning of that at all. Ron's life had permanently changed. Less dramatically than others perhaps, but changed nonetheless.

Some months later there was a knock at Mary's front door. Ron was working at his caring job as Mary took the opportunity to catch up on those household chores that so needed to be done. There had been a time when such duties would strain her and drain her, but now they were a simple joy to do. She was pleased to know that Ron would come home to a meal that they would share together this night, and that all would be clean and tidy. She wasn't expecting anyone, and assumed that she would open the door to find someone collecting for something or another as neighbours often did when someone had passed away in the street. It would often be someone you didn't know, but everyone gave something anyway. Maybe the local Jehovah's Witness people were out and about again. They had made themselves look and sound a little silly during recent years with those Armageddon predictions. They had been noticeable by their absence for quite some time, but more recently they were more visible again and would often tap on the door. Mary would invite them in but upon discovering that she herself had a real faith they would politely decline and withdraw. She felt so sorry for them and

was ready for the need to engage in a discussion as she opened the front door. "Oh my word!" she exclaimed at the sight of Charmian. "What are you doing here? How?" Two friends who had lost touch with one another a few years earlier at around the time that a new Mary had come to pass. "I had to come and tell you," Charmian said quickly with an excitement in her voice. "But I had no idea where you live. I had to come and tell you that I found what you found. I've been born again. I get it now. I understand what you tried to tell me before, and I felt I had to come and tell you. I got in the car this morning and I asked the Lord to show me where to go. I ended up in this street then I got out of the car and felt that I should ask a woman passing by which was your house. I felt ridiculous doing it but I asked her, and she pointed at this one. She knew you. So I knocked the door, and here I am."

The two women were overwhelmed with joy as they rejoiced together in their re-union and in how it had come to pass. You couldn't make it up and you couldn't make it happen. Reading had a population of around 130,000 people at the time and Charmian lived on the other side of town. She knew that Mary had moved from her old unhappy home but she had no way of knowing to where she had gone, and hadn't been trying to find out until that morning.

Mary told Charmian all that had happened to her these past years since she had seen her life change in such a profound way. Charmian was delighted to hear about Ron and could hardly wait to meet him. "No more hospital trips for you then," she joked. "Only the one," Mary replied, "they had to take my gall bladder out. I finally went to hospital and needed to be there."

They were delighted to renew their friendship. Forty years later it remained steadfast.

Chapter 7 Changes

Nineteen eighty four was a famous year in the United Kingdom as those well known in the music world were getting together to form a response to the appalling famine that was taking place in Ethiopia. Media images were by now a much more significant intrusion into the daily lives of ordinary people with both negative and positive consequences. Television news would show daily reports of malnourished, starving infants lying in a semi comatose state while flies crawled around them without rebuke. It wasn't as if there was not enough food in the world. There was plenty of food in the world for everyone, then just as there is now. How questionable it is that people blame God for famine when all the provision we need is there for us. Musicians of the day recognised that the problem lay not in a lack of food but in an unequal distribution of wealth, and sought to do something about it in a new and different way as they used the Band Aid and Live Aid initiatives to raise money needed to distribute food across a few thousand miles. Sadly the opportunity was missed to do something to resolve the matter in a permanent way. So long as there is greed so there will be famine. So long as food is seen as a means of profit and pleasure rather than a basic non negotiable right of provision for everyone, there will always be those who lose their lives for want of it and others who put their lives at risk through stuffing themselves with much, much more than they would ever need. We may ask whose fault that is?

With this happening in the background, Mary and Ron were fast approaching the fourth anniversary of their marriage, and all was well in the family. Jane was growing well and responding to a settled, secure home in which to live through her teenage years. Ron was a stable influence and a good man. They were never wealthy, but gone were those daily and weekly money worries for Mary. How long ago

those fearful days now seemed and how much they felt as if they belonged to the life of another person altogether.

They grew together as a family and they grew together in faith. Charmian was a regular visitor and a means of spiritual support and sharing in the midst of life. All was as Mary might have once dared to dream that it would be. There were no longer any questions of her sanity or lack of it. Why would there be? She was whole and wholesome. There was but one piece missing, a child for her and Ron.

They had set out to have a baby and tried hard to conceive but it had not happened for them. They had prayed and prayed bringing their request to God for a child but to no avail. They could have been forgiven for thinking that their prayers were not answered, but that would not be so. Every genuine prayer is answered, but sometimes, the answer is 'no'. We try, do we not, to understand reasons for this instead of simply accepting that which is, and taking the view that if God exists then it is His will rather than our desires that must prevail. This was the view that Mary and Ron shared as they continually brought this matter to prayer.

Praying people will know the voice. You don't so much as hear it; rather you are attended by it. The voice that comes from somewhere else and yet it is within you. Not a human voice. Not in your mind. It is gentle but firm at the same time. Some are more aware of it than others, the creator speaking with those whom He loves. Giving them guidance and always with a certain encouragement. There are, of course, many who think that everything they hear is from God. They see a spiritual message or a 'word from the Lord' in every little thing they come across. They are evident and easily spotted by the extent to which they so rarely do anything for any length of time, always moving on to a 'new season' in response to their latest revelation.

Such people are to be avoided and certainly not to be followed or given any credibility. Look for stability and purpose and meaning in the lives of those who are in tune with the one who brought them into being.

As they prayed together, Mary knew that she had been spoken to. "Be a voice for those who cannot speak?" she said with a questioning tone. "That's what He said Ron. Be a voice for those who cannot speak. I don't know what that means, do you?" she asked. "I don't know love," Ron replied, "but if it came from the Lord we can be certain that it's going to become clear soon enough. Let's just let it be. Wait and see."

They waited and they saw. Mary was always pleased to see her older brother. It had been a little while since Mike had visited her. He was so very relieved to see her in such a better way of living and he was happy for his sister. "Something I've come to tell you," he said as Mary poured the freshly made tea. "These tea bag things are alright I suppose, but you can't beat having it made in a good old fashioned tea pot can you," replied Mary as they temporarily spoke at cross purposes. Mike was here, and he was going to get a proper cup of tea. "What's on your mind Mike?" she asked, hoping that it was good rather than bad news. "We're adopting," he said, "a girl named Emma." How lovely. This wasn't something that Mary had expected to hear from her brother. It was quite the surprise.

"They're adopting a girl," she told Ron that evening, "and that's not all there is to it Ron. They're adopting a girl with a mental handicap. She's disabled and stuck in a children's home, the poor girl wasn't wanted by her family. The place she lives in is full of them."

They continued to watch and wait. They spoke at length with Mike and with his wife, as Emma became a part of their family in spite of

the severe impediment that affected her young life. They came to a sense of understanding that this was something that they ought to look into but that they should look at it with caution and with prayer. The more they considered it the more it seemed to be the right thing for them to do.

Mary had never contemplated the possibility of adopting a child. Ron certainly hadn't either. Yet here they were in the offices of the adoption agency having a serious conversation about the possibility of doing just that. "It's a huge responsibility," explained the pleasant man behind the desk. "And its not something anyone should ever take lightly," he added. "We don't look to provide children for adults who want them, but rather, we look to find families that are right for the children. That's how we believe it ought to be." Mary and Ron listened, they heard, and understood. "We are not the kind of people who do anything without taking a long hard look at it," Ron confirmed, "and we know that there would be no going back. We'd like to find out as much as we can and think about it for a while." As they heard more about the process and how it might work out they were both drawn to a framed photograph of a young girl positioned on the wall in the office. Her eyes seemed to be fixed upon you and seemed to follow you around. There were other photographs as well as that one, but none that seemed to have any significance.

They talked and prayed, they prayed and talked, and then they went back to the adoption agency. "That's Rebecca," the gentle man told them as they enquired about the girl in the photograph. "I think they call her Becky. She's very sweet. I think she just turned fourteen, and she's spent most of her life in the children's home. They tried to place her a few times but it didn't work out for her. She's getting to that stage where it will need to happen soon if it's going to happen at all."

“Does she not have family?” asked Mary. “Yes”, he answered, “her parents were both lecturers at university. The last thing they wanted was a child with a mental handicap. Said they couldn’t look after her so they put her into care. She was still a baby at the time. Her condition is what they call Downs Syndrome, but you might know it as mongolism. It’s obvious in even a small baby so they knew pretty much straight away.” Mary was aghast at the realisation that these people had given birth to a child and then not wanted her. “Did they ever see her again?” she asked. “Oh yes. They used to visit for a while, but as they had other children, the visits stopped.” “They had other children?” Ron asked with an element of curious surprise. “Yes, they did. Two more I think, but they were quite normal.” Mary and Ron sat in a moment of contemplative silence as they took in the reality of this situation. In the momentary silence, Mary briefly wondered. She wondered what exactly is this thing that is known as normal?

“Didn’t she ever ask why she couldn’t live with them or where they were going when they finished visited her?” Mary asked. “I’m afraid Becky has very little speech at all. She doesn’t have the ability to speak for herself.” Mary remembered the words ‘Be a voice for those who cannot speak’. Suddenly, those words, felt in prayer some months ago began to take on the form of a gentle instruction, a leading of some sort.

“It just feels so much like the right thing to do,” she told Ron on the way home that day, “but if we do it, we do it for life. We couldn’t let her down, and if this is some kind of an assignment from the Lord we can’t do half of it can we. Things would completely change for you, for me and for Jane too.”

Some weeks later they paid a visit to the institution in which Becky lived. The intention was to meet her and to get to know her a little

bit over a full weekend. They would visit the home in London on Saturday, then stay overnight in a guest house before going back to the home on Sunday. Surely that would be enough to confirm or deny what it was they were thinking to do.

The staff members at the home were all busy when Ron and Mary arrived, but they were welcoming. "Becky doesn't get visitors. Some of them do, but most of them don't. She's been here with other kids most of her life. Been away a few times but usually comes back," the officer in charge told them as she showed them around the building. There were other children here, all of whom with varying degrees of mental disability. Some could do no more than to rock backwards and forwards as they sat. Others came to look at the unknown visitors. Some spoke. Others could not. There was one especially handsome looking boy of about eleven years. Tall and slender with deep, beautiful azure eyes, strong blonde hair and the kind of facial features that would be seen as highly attractive by anyone. He walked across the room from one side to the other, stopping just ahead of the wall before turning to go back the way he had come. He was walking on his toes rather than on the balls of his feet. Occasionally he would look up whilst wringing his hands as if in some kind of pain, and issuing forth a not unpleasant highly pitched warbling type sound. "That's Paul", said the officer in charge. "Nobody knows what's wrong with him. He can't speak and he won't look at you or let you touch him. We have to of course but he doesn't like it. They said he might be autistic but I don't think they know much about it. He's lovely when he's in this sort of mood. He would have been one for the ladies for sure with those good looks." Mary wondered what might become of him. "Well to be honest, he's getting to be quite a handful as he gets older. I'm not sure how much longer we are going to be able to keep him here. He's alright like this," she added, but she stopped before saying any more. "Will they find a family for him?" asked Ron. "Goodness me, no" she replied

without hesitation, "you couldn't have Paul in a normal house. They'll have to put him in hospital when the time comes. That will be it for him I'm afraid." Heart breaking. Another boy came whizzing past. He wore a blue boiler suit that was secured at the top of the zip by a large hefty looking safety pin. He carried a piece of rag that looked as if it was being chewed. At the end of each arm and each leg of the boiler suit there was duct tape applied to secure his sleeves and trouser legs. A staff member followed him in hot pursuit. "Just taking him into the garden to try to burn off some energy," she said with a breathless smile. "That's David," the officer in charge offered before she was asked the inevitable question. "There's nothing in there at all. Nothing. His parents bring him here every month so they can have a break for a few days, and goodness me do they deserve one. I've been to their house. It's not nice. Not nice at all. Breaks their hearts he does. He was fine as a baby. Then he had the whooping cough vaccine and the next day his eyes were dead and dark just like they are now. It damaged his little brain. Sixteen he is now. Can't talk. Doesn't know anybody. Doesn't even know his mother. He eats anything he picks up, and I mean anything. Even eats his own clothes if he can get at them. That's why he's got that suit on. He can't tear it open. We have to tape up the sleeves and such so he can't get his teeth into it. He's hard work, but we've got to give his folks a break. I don't know how they do it."

As she led them upstairs to Becky's room they were under no illusions that this was not an easy place to be. It was clean and basic, but there were none of the little things that you might expect to see in a normal house. It was a place to keep people. "This is Becky's room just here," she said. There's someone in with her and they will stay there for a while to see how she is. We've been telling her that someone is coming, but it's hard to know how much she understands." She opened the door to show them into the room. You couldn't help but notice that she didn't knock the door or make any

effort to do so. As the door opened they could see that it was an average sized room. There was a single bed and a small wardrobe and a box with plastic toys kept in it. Sitting on the floor next to the box was a young girl. She was short and compact with striking facial features in keeping with her condition. She had shoulder length brown and very straight hair, and didn't look to be especially happy with the day so far. "Becky," said the officer in charge, raising her voice slightly to address the girl with a level of authority, "this is Mr and Mrs Nicholls. They have come to meet you and want to get to know you." A plastic doll was hurled across the room. It narrowly missed Ron, and was quickly followed by two other plastic items from the toy box. Becky's aim may have lacked accuracy but there was potency to the delivery. The bemused prospective adoptive parents were ushered out into the hallway. "Are you ok?" the officer in charge asked Ron. "She doesn't often like men very much. Our staff are all women, so she doesn't have much to do with men really." They could hear the staff member inside the room as she admonished Becky. "You must be nice to them," they heard her say.

They waited a few minutes before going back into the room again. Ron narrowly missed being struck with a plastic ball and two plastic ten pin bowling skittles. She meant it too. After a few more failed attempts to gain reasonable entry to the room they decided that it was perhaps a good idea to retreat to the relative safety of north London and their overnight guesthouse.

They were disappointed as they left. This was not what they were expecting to happen, and their 'welcome' had left them both feeling a little shell-shocked. The couple took a light evening meal and a gentle stroll before retiring for the night. It hadn't been such a long day, but it had been a tiring one. They had both been quietly contemplative during the evening. "What do you think love?" asked Ron, thinking he knew the likely response. Mary took a moment

before giving her reply. "I think we should go back tomorrow like we planned to do. I think she deserves another chance. I'm not giving up on her that easily." Ron was glad to hear it.

They visited a local church on Sunday morning before once more parking their car at the home. Walking tentatively towards the entrance they wondered if they would be there for very long or would it be another quick and fruitless visit. As they walked through the building, led by a younger and less senior member of staff this time, they noticed that Paul was pacing across the room as he had been yesterday. This time he was not warbling quite so much as he was growling. He carried a ferocious look and had been given a helmet to wear. The reason for that became obvious as he approached the wall at the end of the room and launched a ferocious head butt that was applied directly to the wall. 'How can he do that and not kill himself?' Ron wondered. Evidently, Paul wasn't so happy today. As they passed a small side room with its door wide open there was a young Chinese boy on the floor with two female staff beside him. One was rubbing his hands, and the other had her hands beneath his head. "Sorry about that," said the woman leading them, "he had a fit just before you came. His epilepsy is really bad. It's a bit worse than Becky's." This was news. Becky had epilepsy.

As they walked up the stairs to the first floor, they were surprised to see Becky waiting for them. They hesitated a little before progressing to the landing. Ron wondered if the staff had brought her out of the room to take away the option of throwing toys at him again. They stood on the landing some six to eight feet away from the young girl who appeared to be scrutinising them in some distant way. A few moments passed. It was hard to make out any reaction to their presence. Did Becky even remember that they had been there just the day before? There was no way of knowing. What would happen next? In an instant, and with nothing to suggest that she was

going to do it, Becky moved quickly towards Ron with her arms outstretched, and before he knew anything about it he was the recipient of an unexpected but most welcome hug. Ron smiled. Mary smiled. The young staff member smiled. "Dada" exclaimed Becky, demonstrating almost the extent of her entire vocabulary all in one go. That was enough for them both to know that Becky was to be going home with them. From that special moment onwards it was decided, and they both knew it.

There were other visits to the home as they became more acquainted with one another and finally the day came for Becky to leave the place wherein she had spent most of her life and to go to her new home. Ron carried on working of course, while Mary chose to remain at home and look after this highly vulnerable young girl.

"This is until death us do part," said Mary one evening during the early weeks of Becky's residence. "She's never going to be able to leave home is she? Becky is here for as long as we can do it. That's the task we must be faithful to."

It was as if Becky hadn't been taught anything thus far in her life. To all intents and purposes she was a fourteen year old girl with the intellect and behaviours normally associated with a child of around eighteen months to two years. Even the most rudimentary domestic abilities were not part of Becky's very limited skill set. It was obvious to Mary and to Ron that this young lady had been kept in the care of the local authority and given a place in which to exist, but that was about the extent of it. She just about knew how to use a toilet, but only sometimes. Most of the time she didn't. Food was scooped from a plate with her hands. Some of it made its way into her mouth, and some didn't. As she felt the need she would remove her clothing and head towards the door as if she was going out somewhere.

Becky had no real ability to interact in a simple human way. She could not speak of course, but had not developed much in the way of alternative communication methods. She could not cry or shed a tear. When frustrated or unhappy about something, her only response was to grab and throw anything within her reach. Mary, Ron and Jane worked together to patiently show this young lady how she may become more domesticated. They did so without any real guidance from anyone but sought wisdom through prayer.

It took six months or so, but Becky began to settle down and to settle in. She began to become part of a family. During a day trip to the seaside Becky was stung by a wasp, one of those seemingly meaningless malevolent creatures that could have stung anyone, but picked on a girl with no capacity to understand the reason for the sudden, sharp pain in her hand. Mary's instant reaction was to hug Becky. To give some comfort to her whilst trying to tell her what had happened without knowing if she understood at all. As she held her adopted daughter, speaking calm and soothing words, Mary could feel the girl beginning to judder in her arms. She could shake, but she could not cry. She hadn't learned how to cry.

Patiently, Mary endeavoured to teach the child how to do that one simple thing. She would hold her gently and closely whilst showing sorrowful facial expressions, and often bringing tears to her own eyes as she repeatedly tried to teach the girl how to express emotion and pain. It took a while. It took quite a while, but eventually one day Mary felt Becky beginning to shudder in her arms as she began to weep. "Ron, she's crying," whispered Mary. The expression of what is a simple, normal emotional response to most people was a major breakthrough in the life of this young soul.

The family continued to grow together. It began to feel as if Becky had always been there. Jane was comfortable with her new role as a

big sister. Ron was the solid, dependable man that he had seemed to be. They grew together in faith and in love. Mary would often reflect upon how very different life had become in comparison to what it had once been. She would reflect upon that one day, the day that had brought about so much change and had in turn led to a situation within which she was now able to care for a life rather than to be consumed by trying to survive within her own. She would also reflect upon the certain knowledge that she was now loved in ways that she could barely have imagined.

As time moved on they thought again about those other children they had seen. Other lives with nobody to speak for them. Ron and Mary thought and prayed carefully before they took steps to adopt another child, another life that would always be limited by disability. This time they contemplated the possibility of providing a lifetime home for a much younger child.

The day came when they would go to meet Claire. They went as a family and were uncertain as to how Becky would react when in the company of an eighteen month old. They need not have been concerned. Carefully, the child was placed in Becky's lap. Tenderly she placed her arms around this small, delicate child whose stature was more in keeping with a baby of three months or so. They all fell in love with the infant in an instant moment of time. "She was born without any disability as far as we know," explained the female social worker. "Her father was working away from home, as he often did. The child was in the care of her mother and grandmother. Mom was supposed to stay with the baby, but she went out to a nightclub instead. The grandmother is known to be an alcoholic. Something happened while mother was out, and the child acquired brain injuries. The full extent of that won't be known for a while but it looks to be severe. It was her father who raised the alarm after he got back. He's very angry right now, and was very violent towards

Claire's mother once he realised what had happened. She was in hospital for quite a while. Whatever damage was done seems to have affected her in physical ways. As you can see, she is very slight. She has struggled to grow and to put on weight. She is very frail I'm afraid, and will probably always need a great deal of physical care and attention. You should also know that there is an on-going criminal case against the mother and grandmother." Sometimes, it comes down to nothing more significant than where and to whom you happen to be born. You have no say in it and you make no contribution to it, but how much you are affected by it. Those who are privileged in this life would do well to bring to mind the fact that it could have been so very different for them. Those who look up to the privileged ones should ask themselves why they do that. "To whom much is given, much shall be required," said Jesus. We could contemplate the inevitable flip side and consider the possibility that 'from whom much has been taken away, much will be given'. Who then is it that we ought to look up to?

In 1986 Mary and Ron adopted Claire and brought to their home this fragile, damaged life that had so limited a prospect to it. Jane had moved into her early twenties and was progressing well. She was happy for her mother, and happy for these children to become part of her home. She accepted them into her life without question but was soon taking her own steps into adulthood. Jane married in 1987. She stayed in Reading with her new husband and remained close to her parental home as she began to build a family of her own.

Mary was determined to do the very best she could for the precious lives now placed in the care of herself and her husband. "It's not easy is it but I know that somebody has to do this job," she told Ron as they shared a reflective moment one day. Such moments had become fewer and further between as the needs of their adopted daughters were so prevalent within each day that came. "When I think of that

place Becky used to be in. Claire could have ended up somewhere like that, and then what. You know, I really do feel that God requires this of me, of us. This is our commitment.” So it was, and with a dogged determination to bring the greatest amount of love into the lives of these two girls, Mary became a true mother to them. It was never about material provision of any kind. It was about simple, unconditional love for them. Nothing less.

Claire’s hideously acquired brain injury was indeed subject to criminal proceedings. Eventually, she was awarded a significant compensatory sum through the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority. With the family living in a modest rented house with limited space to accommodate the needs of the children, Claire’s award provided the opportunity to acquire a home that would be more suitable for her. The family looked around for a better alternative for this increasingly frail child. Claire was growing but she was not becoming especially strong nor developing her cognitive abilities in any substantial way. It was becoming increasingly obvious to everyone that the damage done to her by those she should have been able to trust had indeed been severe. They considered moving the family to a location with cleaner and fresher air. They looked at the southern and eastern coast of England but were distracted from these by cost and the potential coldness of the biting eastern winds from the English Channel that would present difficulty for their youngest daughter. The West Country of England provided a milder and suitable alternative and they took steps to purchase a home in the county of Cornwall, known for its warmer winters and generally benign climate.

By this time, Mary’s father had passed away. For those whose faith is solid and whose belief is robust, such loss is a time for celebration rather than regret. The loss is mourned of course, but much greater is the awareness that for the one who has taken the step that we

must all take, there are no more tears, there is no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain. Is this an obscure hope built on the back of a fairy tale or is it a clean and clear promise derived from tasting and seeing that this is not all that there is? We each must decide. To ignore the question is to decide against it. There are no abstentions. Mary's father had ultimately chosen well, and she knew that as she had also chosen well, there would be a coming together again.

Meanwhile, as the family moved from it's home in urban Reading to the unfamiliar territory of the relatively rural Cornish town of St Austell, Mary's mother was added to their number. Their new home was much larger than they were used to, and for the first time in her life, Mary was no longer renting from anyone. The environment was exactly what they needed for Claire though they all knew that for her, and subsequently for them, life would always be a tenuous affair.

They settled into this very different part of the world, and found themselves coming to terms with an unfamiliar way of doing things. In Cornwall there is less of a tendency to travel through life as fast as you can. Sadly, this is changing as we progress into the twenty first century and people become less able to see that the hectic modern lifestyle is nothing more than a form of entrapment. The pace of life in Cornwall is beginning to increase as it has done elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Nonetheless, there still exists the concept that a thing will be done 'dreckly', which means that it will be done at some future point. Or it might not, but don't be worrying so much about it. To a family more used to the 'get it done now and get it done quickly' mentality that infects other parts of England, and especially inhabits London and the south-eastern parts the alternative less hurried mentality requires some getting used to.

As they familiarised themselves with a new home and surroundings, they found a local Christian fellowship to become a part of. They made friends there, some of whom would soon become an integral part of their lives.

Shortly after moving to Cornwall the family were followed by Mary's brother Mike, along with his wife, and their adopted daughter Emma. It was hoped that Emma also would benefit from the cleaner and warmer air. Jane remained in Reading where she would go on to have her own children in a good, well established family home.

In Cornwall, Mary's mother was taken ill with a serious stroke and became physically unable to care for herself as she had been used to doing. She needed care and attention and Mary's dedicated hands became filled to bursting. Professional carers nowadays are taught the art of safely lifting and manually handling a person for whom they are providing care. Even those who care for family members within their own home can have access to such training. In those days it was not so, and many carers received life changing injury to a vertebrae as a result of lifting someone. Mary sustained an injury to her back whilst trying alone to lift her mother, and found that she was no longer able to care for her in the way that she wanted to. With regret there was no choice other than for Mary's mother to be taken to live in a nearby care home for elderly persons.

As Mary recovered from her injury, Claire became ill with pneumonia and required intense care and attention for quite a while. Mary gave her all that she needed and ensured that she received everything that was required for her recovery both during and after hospitalisation. Claire regained some strength, but was never able to step out of the realms of vulnerability. In so far as she was able, Becky thrived in the warmth and security of a family though as she became older her limitations expanded only slightly. Even with

much greater levels and variety of stimulation she developed her mental capacity to only something akin to that of a young two year old child, but her personality became one of sweetness, gentleness, and peacefulness as she reflected the spirit dwelling within her mother. She became someone who people were comfortable to be with.

A family day out to the Cornish resort of Lands End was intended to be a time of simple fun and a temporary diversion from day to day activities. Claire was well enough to go and wrapped up securely against the inevitable sea breezes that prevail there even on the balmiest of days. Becky seemed to love the idea of going out as a general concept and would be enthusiastic without having any idea of the destination. Mary's mother was happy for them to take a day out as a family, though she herself was unable to join them. How changed she was in her latter days and how her disposition had altered since she also had found a way to faith.

The family travelled comfortably from St Austell to Lands End, weaving their way along the A30 trunk road as it passed through the tin mining heartland of Redruth and Camborne before veering away at Penzance to tail off through the Penwith Peninsula at Lands End. This was literally the end of the road as it came to the most westerly point of the mainland United Kingdom. It was a gentle day as they avoided the main holiday season and its associated crowds, but sadly, not destined to be a delightful one. As they strolled around the Lands End resort, they were blissfully unaware that Mary's mother had become ill once again.

They returned home at the end of a happy day only to learn that she had suffered another major stroke. The following day her mother was transferred to the local hospice while Mary felt the overwhelming weight of guilt. Of all the feelings and emotions that

we have, guilt is often the least useful and the heaviest to bear. Many times it is undeserved and unwarranted. Mary was burdened with it simply because she took one 'day off' to go with her family to the seaside, and wasn't able to receive the phone call at home and go straight to her ailing mother.

Four days later, Mary's mother died in the hospice. Shortly before the end she regained consciousness to the extent where she was able to open her eyes. Briefly, she squeezed Mary's hand and looked gently at her, as if to say, "it's alright, it really is all right." It was 1998. Mary was fifty one years of age. She had honoured her mother as best she could.

Claire was now the age that Becky had been when they had taken her into their home. Mary had been as good as her word and as strong as her promise. She had cared for these young people. She had fought for them and cried for them. In every way that matters they were her children, but unlike other children, they were not able to do as Jane had done and step into the adult world. Mary had always known that this would be a lifetime responsibility and so it was proving to be.

Chapter 8 Illness

The Millenium was a strange time for those who were there when it happened. In reality, it was nothing more than a change of date, but in practice there were great celebrations across the world as people strangely rejoiced in the departure of the twentieth century as a thousand year period drew to its close. How strange we can be. Linking arms with absolute strangers as we sing Auld Lang Syne without knowing most of the words or having much of a clue what it is they mean or where they come from. There were great firework displays and boisterous parties across the planet as the clock turned to midnight on 31st December 1999 to herald in a new year, a new century and a new Millenium. In many city centres only those with a ticket were allowed entry to exclusive zones set up for the occasion.

For months people were told to fear the worst as the microchips beating at the heart of their microwave oven, their personal computer, or their washing machine would not cope with the change of date and would grind to an unceremonious halt. Some merchants of doom claimed that airplanes would fall out of the sky as their computerised systems ceased to function. There were also those who predicted the end of the world. Even those not prone to such excitement did wonder what might happen.

In St Austell, in the home of Ron and Mary Nicholls nothing much happened. They had planned to do a little celebrating of their own, but Mary had been unwell throughout New Year's Eve. As the fireworks began to go off, she was doing her best to stop the vomiting that had plagued the day thus far. She had been unwell for a few days now. At first, a winter tummy bug was suspected. With the usual winter norovirus spreading through the adult day centre that Becky attended during the week, this was no surprise. The

immediate fear was that Claire might pick it up and this must be prevented if at all possible. It was always necessary to be extra careful to limit the possibility of Claire getting any kind of infection.

After a few days, the sickness had not abated. It was no worse, but it wasn't any better. "I shouldn't be surprised if it's down to tiredness," Ron suggested. "You never stop love. Sooner or later your body will make you stop and rest for a bit. Cyril said he would come over later on to see how we were. He knows that if you miss church then something is up." Cyril had become a treasured friend since they had joined the small fellowship in St Austell. A kindly, gentle, and deeply spiritual man who was blessed with a booming and melodious singing voice, he had developed a close relationship with Ron and his family. They were becoming like brothers.

As the first January of the new century took a hold, Mary continued to feel unwell, to the extent that she sought the counsel of her doctor. He was reasonably sure that it would be probably be a virus of some kind. There was so much of it about. Alternatively it could be as Ron had suggested, the effects of exhaustion, or maybe a bit of both. To be on the safe side he arranged for Mary to have some precautionary scans taken at the Royal Cornwall hospital in Truro. Mary was grateful that neither Becky nor Claire had shown any signs of falling foul of an infection and so long as they were not affected she could put up with whatever it was. She waited a while for the appointment at which the scans were taken, and nothing in particular seemed to come from them. They were just precautionary after all.

Another New Year came. Some argued that the transition from the year 2000 to the year 2001 was the real Millenium. Most people couldn't have cared less either way. New Year parties were experiencing a revival. Gone were the days of taking a piece of coal and a glass of sherry to wish your neighbour a 'happy new year.'

Instead, there was now a need for millions of pounds to be spent on fireworks by local authorities that could not afford to adequately house the homeless people who were squatting within their boundaries. Mary had struggled laboriously through the year 2000 and had generally failed to feel especially well for very long. There was a regular nausea and general lack of energy as she ploughed on regardless. "None of us are getting any younger," she would say, "and the menopause can start any time now can't it." That was true, but Mary was quietly concerned in a matter of fact sort of way. Ron was worried too, but he did his level best not to show it. Their greater concern was for Emma. The child adopted by Mary's brother and his wife had also been suffering with illness. In many ways she had seemed to be similar to Mary as she became lethargic, weak, and prone to vomiting. Emma was more able to express herself than either Becky or Claire would be, so they all knew roughly how she was feeling. As with Mary, scans and tests were done as a precautionary process. Nobody had been prepared or had expected to hear the news that Emma had leukaemia. The shock was intense. The sense of injustice was profound. Mary's general feeling of unwellness was minor in comparison to Emma's condition.

The family rallied around to support Emma and her parents. All for one and one for all. She became increasingly ill. There were a number of visits to hospital for further tests and treatments, but the reality was that there was little that could be done to prevent the disease from taking hold. Rather like Claire, Emma was not the strongest. She was fragile and tender of body and heart. She was a deeply gentle soul whose life of struggle was being taken onto another level.

With time ticking along, Emma deteriorated slowly but noticeably. The year turned from 2001 to 2002 and then into 2003. As Emma became weaker so Mary continued to be unwell. Her symptoms had

not dissipated. She had continued to visit her doctor in an unassuming manner, hoping that they could find the cause of it and produce the pill that would get her energy back. She didn't want to bother anybody and she hadn't the time to be ill. There had been prayers for healing both in the house and in the local fellowship but without any sign of improvement for either Emma or for Mary.

"Will I be here for long?" Mary asked the young consultant doctor. "I have to go to the hospice as soon as I can get there today. My niece is so very ill." Emma had been taken to the hospice a few weeks earlier. They had made arrangements so that someone could be with her at all times. Ron was already there on this warm June day. With Becky at her day centre and a close friend helping to care for Claire, Mary had been able to keep her appointment for another scan. "Hopefully we won't keep you for too long," he replied as he edged towards the door, "I will be with you shortly." Mary's scan had been completed and she assumed that they would shortly be discussing the results. As she waited, the consultant's assistant came in and placed what looked like a plastic envelope of some sort on the desk. She had operated the machinery to take the scan. "Anything I need to know?" asked Mary cheerfully, but not really expecting anything by way of a meaningful answer. The woman smiled. "I can tell you one thing," she said, "you have the largest gall bladder I've ever seen." Mary held her gaze for a few moments. "I don't have a gall bladder," she replied, "that was taken out years ago." The woman wasn't smiling any longer. She hesitated slightly before excusing herself. Mary remained exactly where she was and waited for the consultant to return. He was gone for a little longer than might have been expected, but that didn't matter. She knew already. It had been over three years since she first visited her doctor to report this un-wellness. Over three years to get a diagnosis and she didn't need them to tell her what it was. She already knew. The doctor returned to the room. As he looked at the contents of the envelope placed upon his desk he

nervously asked, "can I confirm that you had your gall bladder taken out in the past?" Mary affirmed that this was indeed the case. He looked at the scan in front of him before taking it with him as he left the room again. This time he was gone for only a few minutes. "My apologies," he said taking his seat once more, "I just needed to consult with my senior colleague." Mary thought he was mithering somewhat. She didn't have the time or the need for this. "Doctor, I know what it is," she said, "it's not hard to work out really. I'd prefer it if you would just come straight out with it please." A few minutes later she left his room to drive the short distance to the hospice.

She arrived to find Ron and Mike in distress. Emma was barely clinging on to life. Mary joined them at her bedside shortly before Mike's wife also arrived. She was exhausted and it showed as she wearily joined them. They sat with her through the afternoon as her harmless life drew to its end. Ron sang to her the song that she loved so much with the sweet lyrics speaking of a permanent journey rather than any temporal, limited state of being. "Seven tears have flown into the river, seven tears are running to the sea." Ron sang gently with his pleasant and tuneful voice that Emma loved to hear. His singing drifted around the hospice room as if it were heavenly in its origin. "If one day they reach some distant waters, then you'll know it's sent with love from me."

Emma never had the capacity to hurt anyone. She had brought nothing into the world except for a profound disability, and now she had left without it. They comforted one another as the tears flowed with a mixture of relief and sadness. There was relief in the knowledge that Emma no longer had to endure, yet sadness in that she was no longer with them. Great was the sorrow in knowing that her time here had been so spoiled for her, and yet even greater was the sense of joy that came from knowing her.

They stayed at the hospice for a few hours. There seemed to be a reluctance to leave, but it was time to head home. Claire needed them, and Becky was due to be home.

“How did the scan go?” asked Ron as they travelled the few miles to their home. “Have they found out what’s causing it?” She had kept the news to herself all through this difficult afternoon. “Well,” she said, “they thought I had a gall bladder.”

Chapter 9 Treatment

Mary's cancer was advanced and substantial. She was back in the hospital to find out what could be done to attempt to deal with it. Again, the young doctor was hesitant, and seemed reluctant to tell her what she needed to know. On this occasion Ron was with her.

"We probably don't have the facilities here to deal with this level of operation," he explained. "It's going to be a difficult treatment. It's a very serious operation. It will require the removal of the great majority of your pancreas. There probably won't be much of it left. I really cannot say whether or not it is likely to be a successful operation, but they will get you in as soon as possible. It's going to have to be done in London I'm afraid."

The necessary treatment was scheduled for September 2003. As the hot summer of that year was beginning to cool down and the American led coalition forces were hot in pursuit of the downed Iraqi leader Saddam Hussain, Mary was preparing for the necessary trip to London. She had come to understand something of the specialist nature of the operation she was to undergo. Surgeons with the skills needed to perform this level of surgery were not to be found any nearer to home, and there was no alternative other than to make the three hundred mile trek.

As her illness had progressed Mary had been greatly encouraged by the good wishes and the prayers of people she knew and loved, but at the same time she was disturbed by the sense of doom and gloom shown by some friends and neighbours. "I don't know what you're worrying about," she said to her tearful friend. "But they told you that there's next to no chance that you will come through this," came

the reply, “so what else can I do. You’re going to be getting on a train and I most likely won’t be seeing you again Mary.”

Some had been critical of Mary. They were of the view that she was taking this whole matter far too lightly; that she was not being serious enough about it. She had arranged for a pond to be dug in the garden to the rear of the house. “What on earth are you doing this for?” she was asked. Mary had five goldfish placed into the completed pond. “I’m calling them Meshack, Shadrack, Abednego, Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar. Just like those four men, who would not bow down to worship the statue of Nebuchadnezzar so I will not bow down to my ‘Nebuchadnezzar’. As God saved them from the fire of the furnace so I believe that He is going to save me from the furnace of this disease, and if He chooses not to, then I will be with my Lord.” Perhaps they had a point, but equally, perhaps they did not have Mary’s faith. “Let me tell you,” Mary said with a calm resolution, “I will not, will not bow down to worship cancer. I will not give in to it. God has given me a job to do here and it isn’t finished yet. So don’t you be worrying. I will be back!”

As the fellowship prayed together for her the day before the planned departure Mary cried out, “I will not bow down to my ‘Nebuchadnezzar’. I stamp on this cancer and the devil is a liar.” As she gave her praises to God and declared her faith in Him she was surrounded by a great and profound sense of peace. It was peace that had been sent from somewhere else. A peace that was beyond her ability to understand but which took away that understandable human fear and which was more relieving than any of the pain reducing drugs she had been given. In the midst of all this, Mary found herself to be nothing less than thankful. Whatever else this disease was doing, it was being put to use to make her stronger in her belief and more determined in her trust in the creator God she had met during one crazy and desperate afternoon in Reading.

As the day arrived, Mary prepared the things she needed for a stay in hospital. The good doctor had explained that, "if the surgery is successful, and you must understand that there is a far greater chance that it may not be, but if it is, the recovery period will be lengthy. You will be in hospital for quite some time, and you will have to be in the intensive care unit for a while." She knew that the odds were stacked up against her but she took not one bit of notice.

"I will be back," she said gently to Becky and to Claire as she made ready to leave them. There had been a strong suggestion that they would have to be taken into the care of the local authority while their mother and father were away, but Mary was having none of it. "They will know that something is wrong. They always know. I'm glad that they don't know what it is, but don't think for a minute that they don't know because they do. The last thing you're going to do is to take them out of their home at a time like this. What do you think that might do to them? It's enough for them to have to deal with the fact that we won't be here." The authorities eventually backed down and arrangements were put into place for carers to come to the family home and look after Becky and Claire. It even turned out to be people they already knew and were familiar with. People whose own daughter was a friend of Becky. Unexpected change is traumatic for anyone, but especially so for those who have not the capacity to comprehend the nature of it. Mary was happy that they were at least in safe hands as she stepped through the front door to get into the taxi that would take them to the Great Western railway station in St Austell. "I told them I will be coming back," she said to Ron, "and I will be." She felt protected by a force much stronger than any of them but at the same time, a force that was delicate and sensitive.

Ron had been stoic. He had been a source of quiet but solid support, a strong shoulder, a firm hand, and never once placing his own feelings in the way. He had a great friend in Cyril, a born and bred Cornishman and gospel believer who had taken on the role of companion and helper to those whom he saw as his brother and sister. Cyril was going to London with them. He knew that Ron would be alone in the capital city from the moment that Mary was taken into the operating theatre, and he was not going to allow for that to happen. Cyril shared Mary's great faith, but as a firmly practical man, he also knew that in the event that she did not survive then his friend would be a man in great need of a companion.

It was an early Monday morning as they left the house. The train that would take them to London's Paddington station arrived as it was expected to, at exactly 7.35am. There were commuters going about their ordinary business at the start of the working week as they headed to office jobs in the city of Plymouth. You'd look at them wouldn't you, as you boarded the train knowing that you were going to a very different experience to theirs today? You'd want so much to swap places but you'd feel maybe a little bit guilty at the thought of it. You'd linger philosophically around the contemplation of how many Monday mornings you had spent just taking the daily routine for granted and yet here was a very different prospect. You might consider the thought of how much better it would be if your train ride to London was the excitable beginning of a city break with so much to look forward to. Except today, it isn't. Mary did none of that. "These seats are a bit tight," she exclaimed as the train gently pulled away to continue its morning journey from Penzance to London. "I know I'm a bit bigger than a lot of people but they're tight these seats are." Ron smiled. "Don't worry love, you'll fit into them a lot easier on the way back." She laughed. "They're taking half my stomach away so you're right there," she replied.

The train slipped effortlessly through the Cornish countryside on its way to the rural station at Bodmin Parkway. Busy people were getting on board before heading over the scenic viaduct leading into Liskeard. More busy people getting on. Moving onwards to Plymouth, a relatively small city but big enough if you live in rural parts. Lots of people getting off, and plenty more getting on. The river Tamar has been crossed and the train is in the county of Devon now. It skirts the coast on its way to Exeter, running alongside the beach at Dawlish. On stormy days the sea will crash over the wall and splatter the train as it goes by. On really stormy days the trains will have to stop altogether. Today, it is calm and very beautiful. Mary enjoys the view as it passes by her window. All is well, until the train stops for a brief while at Newbury station in Berkshire. This is different. Reality begins to dawn. This is no longer a scenic train ride. The greenery gives way to built-up areas. Mary's heart begins to sink. Her faith remains strong, but the thought of what lies ahead is enduring. Ron and Cyril have become a little quieter as the capital city becomes more of a certainty. They pull in to Reading, a place that is so familiar to Mary and to Ron, and yet somehow part of a different life. It's as if they are looking back on the lives of other people. "Seven years since we left here," Mary reflects, "and goodness me I can see why. It's shabby. Nothing is green. Why would anyone want to live in a place like this?" The question lingers but is not answered. Every mile from there to London came with an increasing sense of sadness, not so much at the thought of what was to come, but at the sight of the mess that people have made of the land they have been given to live in. It makes no sense. Whichever way you look at it, it makes no sense to desecrate your own environment.

Leaving the train was a much greater challenge than getting on it had been. There were thousands of people, impatient people with hurry and nothing else on their collective mind. These people were

unable to wait for just for a few moments to allow someone to get off the train and onto the platform. Madness. 'Is this what hell is going to be like?' Mary quite reasonably wondered as they slowly picked a way through the crowds in search of some light sustenance. The obnoxious cheese sandwich purchased from the railway station café did nothing to raise their view of their new surroundings. "People actually eat this stuff do they?" asked Ron with a sense of bewilderment, wondering when it was that Londoners had decided to nourish themselves in such a way as this and why they had come to accept it.

Leaving the hectic world that was Paddington station the group made their way to the Middlesex Hospital where Jane would be meeting them later. Still living in Reading with a young family to care for, she had struggled much with the knowledge that her mother was so seriously ill but living such a distance away.

Mary was in no hurry to get to the hospital. Even now, she shuddered at the thought of her experiences at the hands of medical services as a desperate young woman in Berkshire. Nonetheless, she knew that there was no alternative. She prayed silently as the taxi approached the hospital entrance, "Lord, I place my trust in you. All my hope is in you, and I depend completely upon you. May this be an opportunity for me to show someone who you are as I was once shown."

The journey had been mostly pleasant but at the same time it had taken much energy from her. Mary was relieved to be shown to her bed and despite the strange and noisy surroundings she was soon resting. Ron and Cyril took the opportunity to head off and locate their temporary accommodation in a local bed and breakfast establishment. They quickly discovered that the term 'bed and breakfast' meant a very different thing in the city of London when

compared to the county of Cornwall. "My goodness me, what a dump," Ron exclaimed, "Whatever we do we ought not to let her know we're staying in a place like this." They agreed to tell her as little as possible about their lodgings. "For sure," agreed Cyril, "it's just a place to sleep, but let's not forget that our good Lord had no place to sleep most of the time." Encouraged by that thought they returned to the hospital to find that Jane had arrived and was chatting with her refreshed mother. Happy to see her mother but at the same time fearful of what was to come, Jane tried to focus upon saying and doing the right things. She feared the worst, but she dared not let her mother see it.

"So what sort of tests do you have to have?" she asked, as Mary repeated the news from the doctor who had briefly spoken to her just half an hour earlier. "I don't really know," she replied. "I can't remember half of it," she laughed. "They should have given you a list," said Ron with a wry smile, "let's hope it's not a memory test then." The group laughed together as Cyril discreetly left, partly in search of a cup of tea but also because he wanted to give them time together. He knew that as soon as the treatment started things would become difficult for each one of them. Mary would be undergoing an operation that has only a minimal chance of survival. He knew that the chances of her coming through were significantly less than the odds against it. Jane was trying to be strong for her mother's sake but was also facing the very likely reality that these would be their last times together. Ron, who had been so quietly supportive throughout, was now at the point where he had to acknowledge that he might soon be a widower and the caring father of two young women with severe learning disabilities, one of whom was especially frail at the best of times.

"There's one thing that does frighten me," said Mary. Ron looked up. He wasn't used to hearing any expression of fear from his wife. She

had such faith that there was no room for fear. "Really," he exclaimed without hesitation, "what would that be then?" "Well," Mary explained, "they're going to put me on a treadmill. I don't like the sound of that at all." The silence from her husband and daughter suggested that they were also not entirely enthusiastic with the concept. "But you're ill," replied Jane, "what can you do on a treadmill?" Ron was thinking the same thing. "You can't do that," he offered, "what's it for anyway?" "They said that would show them whether or not I'm fit enough for the operation," she responded. "What?" declared Ron, "what if you don't pass?" He wasn't a man who was ever prone to anger. His stoic faith resulted in an almost constant state of calmness, but for once he began to show signs of annoyance. It seemed that if she was unable to demonstrate a certain level of fitness then the family would have to return to Cornwall, and the whole trip would have been for nothing. "How does that make any sense?" he asked nobody in particular. "You could have done a treadmill test in Cornwall if you've got to do one, then we wouldn't have had to come all his way for nothing and what if you fail it? You're sick for goodness sake. We wouldn't be here otherwise would we? You're hardly likely to go home and get any fitter are you?" For the first time, a sense of hopeless despair entered into their situation, as Cyril returned with four cups of something that could have been optimistically described as tea. He had caught the tail end of their conversation as he walked slowly into the hospital ward, taking care to ensure that he neither spilt nor dropped the feeble brew. "It sounds to me as if we need to stop worrying and to start praying," he said, "now come on, if there's a problem there's only one place we can take it to get it solved." Other patients in adjacent hospital beds looked on as the group turned to prayer.

Over the following days Mary was given a number of tests, but knew next to nothing about the purpose. She was in the capable hands of trained people. She trusted them because she trusted God. Her heart

was tested. She was given a number of scans. She was prodded with needles, poked with all sorts of things, and placed on a more or less nil by mouth regime before the dreaded treadmill test came along. Due to lack of food she felt weaker than ever, but was now standing on a treadmill with sensors and wires attached to her. Mary had never used a treadmill in her life. "Lord, give me strength for this," she prayed as they prepared her. "Look ahead of you," said the technician, "and pretend that you are walking towards the place you treasure most. That should take your mind off it a bit. I will tell you when we have finished, but if you start to find it really hard to do, you must tell me and we will stop. Are you ok to begin?" "Well, as you can probably tell, I've never been on one of these before, but don't worry, I won't stop," Mary told him. She looked ahead of her, but instead of trying to think of any particular place she thought of Becky and Claire back home in St Austell, and imagined walking towards them as she silently prayed for strength.

Back in the ward, she waited anxiously for the results of the treadmill test. She had managed to get through it but had been wheezing desperately towards the end of what seemed like forever but was in reality perhaps five minutes at the most. Mary's asthma was an unhelpful problem to have under the circumstances, and she hoped that due account had been taken of it. "Be anxious for nothing," suggested Cyril. "The great thing about us is that we have someone who will take away our anxieties and any fears that might come along. We might be human, but He is not." Peace returned as they let go of the human tendency to worry, and placed their situation into the hands of a greater being.

It was the early afternoon the next day before the doctor came to visit Mary at her bedside. The visiting times on this ward were rigidly upheld, and it would be another hour before Ron and Cyril would arrive. "Good afternoon Mary," said the surgeon taking a seat

next to the bed, "I am Mr Russell. I want to speak with you about your surgery, which will be scheduled to take place on Monday." Mary felt a sense of joy from within; not in response to the news that the surgery had been planned but because she knew that God had answered their prayers and that He was with her in this. That was all she needed to know. The surgeon continued, "I have to ask if you would consent to our using your operation as a case study if it is successful. You see, I cannot know the exact extent of your cancer until I can actually see it with my eyes, but I do know that it is substantial. I am certain that I will have to remove most of your pancreas. A dangerous amount, unfortunately. I do not know how much will be left. It is possible that we may open you up and find that there is nothing to be done. If that is so, we will close you up and make you as comfortable as possible." As he left to continue his rounds, Mary quietly gave thanks. She must have passed the treadmill test well enough, and now she knew that the operation would take place on Monday. She could share the weekend with those who were here with her. She could even leave the hospital for a brief time if she wished to do so, but only for a few hours.

As Jane, Ron and Cyril arrived for the afternoon visit she shared the news with them. "I am so thankful," she said quietly and thoughtfully. Jane listened before she went in search of Mr Russell. She wanted to know something else, and found him quickly. "Please, can you tell me how much chance does my mother have of coming through this?" she asked this short, slim, kindly looking man. "I know you can only tell me so much, but I'd really like to have some idea of what we might have to deal with next week." He paused in thought before giving a careful reply. "Your mother is seriously ill. At best, I shall have to remove most of her pancreas. There is cancer in her stomach that will have to be removed, and she is certain to lose her spleen and probably some of her small bowel. That is the best situation we can hope for. There will be a chance of infection

afterwards and a difficult period of recovery if she is able. She is liable to contract diabetes, and will certainly have a greatly reduced ability to fight infections. She will probably need to take insulin and antibiotic medication for the rest of her life. I cannot really offer you anything better at this stage I'm afraid." Jane was grateful for his honesty as she returned to her mother's bedside now very much aware that the coming weekend could so easily be the last time that they would be together in this life.

"Some people have to pay good money to get their stomach stapled up and I'll be getting it done for free. That ought to help me to lose a few pounds," Mary told the nurse who attended her on Saturday morning. The young nurse was impressed with Mary's humour and good spirits, and had come to know her well these past few days. "I wish I had faith like you do," she said, "I mean, I do believe in God and I do go to church sometimes but I'm not sure I could have done what you have done." She referred to the adoption of Becky and Claire. "That's a real commitment that is." "I only did what I was called to do," explained Mary, "and so it is now. I am sure that He will be with me through all of this, and even though I feel sick so much of the time, it's a privilege to suffer. It helps me to think that our Lord suffered such a lot at Calvary. Makes me feel humble that does," she added. "You and me both," replied the nurse, "now let's get you ready to go out." Jane had arranged for her husband to visit with the children and was then taking Mary out of the hospital for a while.

The visit passed all too quickly and it was time for her grandchildren to say goodbye before returning to Reading. Mary had seen so little of them during their lives. How she hoped that this would not be the last time. She walked with her daughter to the hospital entrance and waved as the children disappeared into the car park. "Come on Mom, let's go for some decent coffee." They headed across into Goodge Street as the busy London Saturday evening played out in front of

them. "There's a Starbuck's just down the road." Mary had no idea what that was, but was happy to be with her daughter. Ron would be visiting afterwards with Cyril, but for now this was time alone with Jane. There had been so little of that for such a long time. How she had grown into a fine, upstanding, responsible and mature mother. Mary was pleased that her daughter had found herself a good husband and that she was being spared the younger life that Mary had experienced.

"How many types of coffee are there?" Mary asked with staring eyes. "I've never seen the like of this before," she added. In St Austell you could have either tea or you could have coffee or you could have drinking chocolate, and if none of those took your fancy then there would be water in the tap. "I don't know what a cappuccino is," she said expectantly, "but it sounds nice, so I'll have one of those please." Jane returned to the table with a cappuccino for Mary and a peppermint tea for herself. They sat together as only a mother and daughter can. Watching the busy streets on the other side of their glass partition, they shared memories that only they could share. Good ones and others. This was a time of joyful reflection. As they moved from the present to the past and then returned to the present Mary felt a great confidence about the operation that was now less than forty eight hours away. She knew that she would suffer for a while but would not shift from the certain knowledge that she would come back from this. She had learned to be thankful to God for everything, even something so rotten as a cancer spreading through her body. She had learned that when she gave thanks to God for it rather than to feel in any way sorry for her predicament, she would be overcome with a sense of eternal peace. She felt what could only be described as joy, but could see that it was not the same thing as happiness. Above all, she knew that she was loved in a way that goes beyond our limited human capacity to love. We always seem to expect something in return when or if we love, but this was entirely

different and unworldly. As they returned to the hospital there was contentment rather than dread.

"There is nothing for me to fear," she said to Ron as he pushed the wheelchair to the new ward that evening. She was being moved in preparation for the surgery. The Harold De Walden ward was to be her new home, albeit a temporary one. It was a surgical ward. They quickly noted the changed atmosphere. People in here were either preparing for surgery as Mary was, or they had very recently come out of it. As she settled in after visiting time had passed, a very young doctor came to take some blood. "This is only the second time I've done this alone," he shared, "so please bear with me if I'm a little slow." Mary's peace remained as he carried out his duties.

She was surprised to see Mr Russell that evening. "I'm surprised you two don't know each other already," he said nodding in the direction of the woman in the next bed. Mary thought her neighbour was perhaps slightly older, and she did look a little familiar. "Bugle isn't far from St Austell is it," he asked as he drew the separating curtain to bring some visual privacy. What a coincidence. She was in a bed next to someone who lived only a few miles up the hill from St Austell. He checked a few things and asked some general questions about how she was feeling this evening. "That treadmill test was a bit touch and go," he explained, "but you were just about over the line." She knew it had been a close call. "I'm not here tomorrow and I wanted to check on you this evening. I have much to do in the surgery on Monday. There are two patients ahead of you, but they have reasonably straightforward procedures so there should be no delay. They can be my 'warm up' patients for the morning, and we'll get you in as soon as we can. I expect to be removing about three quarters of your pancreas, the whole of your spleen, some of your stomach, and most likely some of your bowel. I have to tell you that the post-operative mortality rate for this level of surgery is perhaps

as high as ninety eight percent. There is a large risk of infection after the operation and a chance of bleeding, which we will try our very best to avoid. There will also probably be some leakage from your pancreatic duct. If all does go well you will be alert quite soon after the operation, and although we will need you to get up as soon as possible, you will have to spend some time in the intensive care unit. The anaesthetic we are using should ensure that you behave normally as it wears off. Any pain you have will be controlled at first by a local anaesthetic around the site and then by rectal vitriol every four hours. You will have a nose drain, a drip, another two drains and a catheter." Mary tried to picture the sight she would be. "May I ask when I will be able to go home?" she enquired. "With luck, that could happen in two to three weeks but we will have to think about how well you are for the journey. It will also depend upon whether or not there is any infection." Mary heard the words "two to three weeks" and hoped that it would be so. "Thank you doctor," she said as he arose to leave, "I will be going back home."

"I couldn't help but hear that," said the woman in the bed next to her, "are you from St Austell then?" They chatted before Mary drifted off into a temporary short-lived sleep. The night was uncomfortable and painful. She needed more medication to help to relieve the pain tonight. Breakfast arrived at around 7.30am that strange Sunday morning. Just a week ago she had been at home preparing herself for the coming train journey. How quickly that week had gone by. It was almost as if the time had been a gift of preparation for what was to come. She knew that there would be no breakfast heading in her direction tomorrow and that she would be consigned to a nil by mouth instruction later that day. The thought that this could be her last breakfast was quickly dismissed for what it was; a fleeting glance in the direction of doubt and a lie, a thought of no value and of even less purpose.

Ron called shortly after breakfast then she slept again until about 11am before taking a shower. 'This might be your last shower' came the thought. It appeared to arise from somewhere that was not of her. A malicious thought that was also dismissed.

Jane, Ron and Cyril arrived and shortly after they visited the hospital chapel. It was Sunday after all. It was still the Lord's Day even though the circumstances were different. After some time in the chapel and knowing that she would soon be unable to take food, the family left the hospital grounds and strolled out into the local area in the hope of acquiring Sunday lunch. "Think of it as the last supper," said Mary as they sat down to share a meal together, "with a difference," she added. "Jesus knew that he was going to his death, but I'm not," she professed to the agreement of all present. It is the British tradition to enjoy a 'Sunday roast' often consisting of roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, roast potatoes, roast parsnip, and vegetables with lashings of gravy. Often it can sound far more appealing than the meal turns out to be, depending on how well the food is prepared. On this occasion it was done well, and they all enjoyed a thoroughly good Sunday lunch followed by ice creams. For people who generally lived in a simple and unassuming way this was a meal to remember at any time.

They returned to the ward for an afternoon appointment with the anaesthetist, but he did not arrive and the afternoon progressed into evening. They had shared such a blessed time together this day. Mary reflected upon the difference between this Sunday and so many others in her younger life. If only she could have shared it with Claire and Becky today. How much she missed them both.

All too soon it was time for her visitors to depart. They seemed reluctant to go. They knew that the next time they saw her it would be after the operation had taken place. There was no fear shared

amongst them, but there was some reluctance. "Off you go," she declared. They left. Ron glanced back with a reassuring smile as he slowly walked away. She overheard Jane speaking with the nurse as they walked through the open ward. "My mother is like rubber. She keeps on bouncing back." It was reassuring to hear your child speak of you with such certainty.

Another uncomfortable night passed with short periods of sleep slotted in between seemingly endless hours of wakefulness. As the hours passed by she became increasingly thirsty but could take nothing by mouth. She became mindful of Jesus upon that cross, from which he declared his thirst. He knew right now how she was feeling, and there was comfort to be derived from that. As breakfast arrived for those well enough to partake of it, Mary was relieved to feel no hunger or any desire for food. She was calm and peaceful although decidedly tired and very much aware of feeling unwell. One way or another it was time for this to come to a close. All these months of nausea and sickness were about to come to an abrupt end.

"Good morning Mrs Nicholls," said the fresh faced young man. "You get to have the alternative breakfast today. Its reserved for our most honoured guests," he added as he produced three rather large needles. She didn't ask what they were for. It seemed to be pretty obvious. She felt nothing as he administered whatever it was that he injected into her. She thought of Jesus on the cross as the huge rusty nails were thumped into his hands and the needles paled into a pathetic insignificance. The young man stayed with her talking for a while. Then the lights began to fade.

Chapter 10 The Polite People

Mary slowly became aware that there were other people around her. Not many of them, but definitely a few. She was drowsy, and unable to really grasp where she was. Had she just fallen asleep again? Was it for just a few minutes or had it been for longer? She did not know. "She's coming round now," she heard the voice close to her saying, "that's just gone 8pm." Why would someone be saying that? Where was this and why is she here? The operation! That was it. The operation had been today hadn't it? She remembered being drowsy and taken from the relative comfort of the ward; not wanting to go but knowing that it had to happen. She remembered praying as she was moved along the corridor. That was it. Nothing else. She glanced briefly around without moving. She could see that she was in a bed and was connected to some kind of machinery. There were beeping noises to her left. A tube, or something like one, was attached to her. She was awake. She could see the nurses. "Hello Mary," said the voice, "it's good to see you awake. You were in there for a long time. You gave us quite a scare so you did." She wasn't able to speak. Her mouth was dry and there was numbness to it. She smiled slightly, or thought she had. She must have come through the operation or she wouldn't be here. This must be the recovery room.

A little while later, perhaps an hour or longer, the voice came again. "Your husband and your daughter are waiting in the ward," she said, "I will get someone to call the ward and tell them you're ok."

A couple of hours passed as Mary became more conscious and her head began to feel a little less fuzzy. She became less drowsy. A doctor had been to check on her but he didn't say anything to her. "Time for you to move to another ward," said the nurse gently as she patted Mary on the shoulder, "you've done very well my darling." As

her bed was wheeled along the corridor she spotted Cyril. He was leaning against the long, straight wall with a beaming smile directed towards her. "I told you, I would be back," she said as loudly as she could, though in reality it was a weak voice that he could barely hear through the oxygen mask that she was wearing. A few minutes later her bed was in another ward. This must be the intensive care one. It seemed quieter. This was a serious place. Ron and Jane were soon drawing up alongside her. They looked both weary and overjoyed at the same time. Mary moved her right hand to remove the mask just enough to be able to speak clearly. "I am back," she declared with a tightness of breath. "I said I would be." Ron gently placed the mask back to its original position. "We know," he whispered, "now get some rest. You've been in the wars a bit you have, but you're through the worst of it now love."

Mary slept throughout most of that night, waking only occasionally. As the next day dawned she noticed that the pain didn't seem to be as bad as she had expected it to be. Over the next couple of days she recovered a little at a time. She was taken back to the surgical ward and was soon able to sit up and slowly move around. "We need to get you up and about as soon as it can reasonably be done," explained Mr Russell. "The surgery was satisfactory," he added, "and there should be enough of your pancreas left for you to get along without insulin or medication. We had to remove quite a few bits of you Mrs Nicholls," he added. "Hopefully that should have given you a good chance of getting back on your feet again." It was all about recovery now. Gingerly, she edged away from the bed to take a step or two. She needed help but was able to move around a little. Jane had to return home for a few days. She was relieved to see that her mother had in fact returned from the operating theatre and was showing all good signs of a strong recovery. This was better than she had dared to hope for and much better than she had allowed herself to expect.

Cyril returned to his home in St Austell and Ron would have to go back in a day or so. "I don't want to leave you here without anyone," he said with regret, "but I've got to see to the girls haven't I." Mary agreed that he had. "They've been without us long enough Ron," she said, "they need to see one of us again to know that everything is going to be alright. I'll be fine for a while. I can't do much anyway except rest until I get stronger." They agreed that Ron would go back home the day after tomorrow if she could manage to get to the bathroom by herself. For some reason, being able to get to the bathroom by her self became an indicator of some sort. It was as if that was some kind of a mark of progress that meant she was going to be ok. Mary was determined to be well again. She hadn't come this far if she wasn't going to get better. She was going to get back on a train and go home to her girls just as soon as this body would let her do it.

Two days later, Ron came into the ward with his small suitcase in hand and a train ticket in his pocket. Mary was sitting in the chair next to the bed when he arrived. "You can go home," she said, "I even managed to have a bath by myself this morning. It was only a quick one but I did it." They were overjoyed that she was making such progress already. As Ron left the hospital there was a spring in his step. The next time he came here it would be to take his wife home to Cornwall and life could begin again, he thought as he went in search of a taxi to take him back to Paddington station.

"It's not unusual to feel a little bit weaker than you think you should", explained the nurse, "especially when you've been doing so well. I'm sure you'll be fine again in a couple of hours, but we'll be checking on you." Ron had been back at home for a few days now. She missed him, and maybe that was part of the reason she was feeling a little bit lower today. Perhaps she would cheer up tomorrow when Jane would be visiting. She was looking forward to

seeing those grandchildren again now that she was getting better. As the evening wore on and the visiting times were past Mary was attracting the attention of the nurse once again. The doctor had been called on his pager and would be here in a few minutes. She couldn't really say very much when he came. She had become dizzy. Had she passed out? She wasn't sure. Her head was spinning though, and she was hot. She was very hot. Then cold again like it is when you catch flu, the proper stuff, not just a cold or something. She felt the bed moving but that was all. Was she floating on water? It felt like she might be on a boat or something. Mary passed out.

She had hoped to be able to return home to Cornwall with Ron in a couple of weeks' time. Three weeks at the most. She so very much wanted to be with Becky and Claire once again and to be free from cancer and the effects of it. She had been doing so well after the operation. Had she been DIM again? Had she been relying on her own strength? She couldn't understand, but she knew that she was back in the intensive care unit now. She knew that she was connected to all sorts of equipment. They had a machine to keep her alive. There was a dialysis machine. Her organs had been shutting down. She was awake now but too weak to speak or communicate. She knew that there was an infection. She knew that she was in trouble. She did not know how long she had been unconscious. It could have been a few hours. It could have been several days, or even longer. She ached all over. She was just there on the bed. She was still alive but not living. Ron was in the room. There were others here. This was still a serious place. No chatter. No laughter. Only the sounds of people moving around as quickly and quietly as they can. "We're praying for you love," he whispered, "everybody is praying for you. Just have faith and you'll come through this. I know you won't ever give up."

The infection was intense, and Mary was gravely ill. She was on the edge. The family knew it and the medical staff knew it. Mary slipped in and out of consciousness. The dreams were memorable for their strangeness. She tried to tell them about the aliens who were landing in the supermarket car park, but the words would not come. Was she awake or asleep? Sometimes it was hard to tell. Where was reality? She could not be sure of that, but she was sure of one thing. There was one deeply sobering and worrying thing that she was certain of. For the first time in a long time, she could not feel the presence of God. Not at all. Nothing. No sense of that spiritual connection that had always been with her since that day in Reading when she had come to know Him. Why had He gone and left her here? She was devastated. Had he left her now? Had he left her at a time like this? Why would that happen? Mary made no connection with this spiritual coma and the strength of the medication that was being pumped into her in an attempt to fight the infection raging within her physical form. She was not aware enough to be able to contemplate any thought other than the very real fear that he had left her now. That was worse than anything. It was worse than the cancer. Worse than the operation. Worse than being put into a psychiatric hospital. Worse than Sister Clarke. Much worse. She was bereft. It was better to be unconscious than to be awake with this sense of despairing isolation. If there is no God then there is no life. If there is no God then there is no purpose. There is no dignity for the human being. It's all just meat and bones. But it's not. So where did He go?

She could not express the silent trauma that was taking place inside of her. She could not tell anyone, even during those moments when she did fully know where she was and could completely understand what was happening around her.

The suffering continued. It must have been weeks. She had no sense of time. She could sometimes see Ron and Jane as they stood beside her bed, looking patiently down towards her. They were her husband and her daughter, and they were deep in concern. Other times she could make out the shape of people standing next to her bed but could not be sure who they might be. She was alone. That's the way it is, isn't it? There might be others around the bedside, but you're all alone when it comes down to it. They're not going with you are they. It's just you. Mary felt that, but where oh where was God in this? She needed Him now, and He had left her to it.

Drifting away into unconsciousness once again, she could feel a distance opening up between her and the others in the room. They were still there. They hadn't moved. There was somebody standing right next to her. She didn't know them. They were there, and yet they were moving away. Yes, they were moving away, but without moving. They were not walking away, but she was not next to them any more. What was this?

Mary died. She died. There was nothing else that could be done for her.

Those dreams you have. The ones in which you find yourself falling. It's frightening but you wake up just before you hit the bottom of whatever it is you're falling into. It's a common dream that many of us have experienced at one time or another. There are many explanations to propose the meaning of such a dream as this. It is said that falling is an indication of our deeply rooted insecurities, our instabilities, and our current anxieties. It is an expression of the deep feeling of being overwhelmed and out of control in at least some aspects of our waking life. Others suggest that a falling dream may also often be a reflection of our sense of failure or inferiority in some specific circumstance or situation, or indeed in general. Whatever

the interpretation, and even though such a dream as this can be unsettling, you at least know that it is a dream. That it is not really actually happening to you. There are those who will tell you that if you have such a dream of falling and that you hit the bottom then that means that you just died, though quite how they are able to substantiate such a statement is open to debate.

Mary was falling. She was going downwards. She was not in control of that falling. It was simply happening and there was not one thing she could do about it. She was conscious and aware of it, and recognised that this was not a dream at all. She had spent some weeks slipping in and out of consciousness without any real awareness of the world around her. She was out of that now. She was fully and properly awake. She was certain that she could see clearly and that she could feel things normally. But there wasn't anything to see. There was just darkness, or to describe it more accurately, a blackness all around her. She strained her eyes to see but could make nothing of it, and yet she knew that she was not blinded. She looked towards her hand as she raised it in front of her face, but could not see it. It was there, but she could not look at it. She was aware of temperature. It was neither hot nor cold. Strangely, there was no sound. If you were falling would there not be a whistling in your ears as you moved through the air? There was no sound. Just falling through some kind of a void, through emptiness with nothing in it. Darkness. Absence of light. How long had she been falling? There was no sense of time here. Even the falling was different. It was more like floating downwards rather than being pulled downwards by any gravitational force. Somebody or something was in control of this. It was measured rather than chaotic. Maybe that was the reason she was not compelled to scream out or attempt to do so. She could have. She felt that there was strength within her again, like it used to be.

She continued to fall, down and further down. Without warning she was thrown against something that was hard and unyielding. She had not seen it coming but would not have been able to avoid it anyway. Was it a wall of some kind? The impact was profound. She didn't fall into it. She was hurled against it. Mary felt something like breath being forced out of her by the crushing blow that she received. It seemed as if her skeleton was disintegrated by the impact, and yet where was the pain? Mary knew pain as well as anybody and better than most, but there was none. Why was there none of the excruciating agony that we would associate with something like this? Surely she would be bleeding, but she could feel no moistness or warm dampness crawling across her skin. Then the falling began again. This wasn't the end of it. The temperature around her began to change. There was warmth. It was quite pleasant to begin with. Like those sunny summer days that start and end with a balmy, desirable temperature. It was like that. Nice. But as she continued to drift downwards a heat began to develop around her. The comforting warmth passed by and was replaced by a durable, intense and suffocating dry heat. The kind of heat that causes you to seek out some cool corner for respite from it. Mary began to feel as if her lungs would burn within her. She was conscious of her breathing in the sense that she became filled with acrid fumes that stunk of sulphur or something similar to it. Like burning rotten eggs. The smell was in every way vile and detestable to her but it was more than a smell. It was all consuming. She began to gag against it and heaved within herself as the falling continued although it had become a little slower perhaps.

The heat was oppressive in its arid dryness. She could barely breathe here and she struggled for each and every tiny stunted breath. She felt intensely nauseous, even worse than it had been these past months. Mary wanted to pass out. She wanted to be sick as the act of breathing and heaving became one and the same thing,

but she was unable to spit out so much as a morsel of the foulness that had invaded her. Of all the things that she had ever been through, this was so much worse than anything else. In desperation she screamed. With every ounce of effort that she could raise she yelled out “let me die please let me die.”

“But you are dead,” came the reply, “you wouldn’t be here otherwise.” She looked around. The falling had stopped. Had it? Yes. Yes it had. She was no longer drifting downwards. Beneath her feet there was something solid. She looked up from whence she had come. There was nothingness above her. She could see her hand again now. She could just about make it out in the gloom. Not quite a half-light but not quite darkness. She was intensely frustrated by this level of lighting. It wasn’t real light. She could see but not see clearly. Her hand appeared to be white with the heat. The flesh upon it was burning and it began to hang loose from her. There was pain again. This pain was almost cold in its intensity but strangely different to any pain that she had ever known before. This pain would not let you go. It would not allow you to have any relief from it. There was no unconscious state here. No respite to be had through the act of fainting or passing out. As the skin burned it also replenished itself in such a way that it was constantly burning and blistering. She stared in disbelief for what seemed like a few minutes but it was so hard to identify time. It could have been weeks. There didn’t seem to be any sense of time here. It just is.

Mary’s eyes were burning. Her head was burning. Her legs and feet were burning. She looked down at her feet and screamed. There was something crawling about her feet. Lots of something. More than she could begin to count. They were tugging at her loose flesh. “Dear God what place is this?” she squealed to herself. She reached to touch her hair but could only feel that there was none. Her fingers were not as they were. The sensitivity in her fingers should have gone but it was

still there. She could smell burning all around her. How could she be here and still live? Her ears were burning but she could still hear. There were others here. She became aware of their presence close by. Was she moving towards them or were they moving towards her? Some were crying, others were screaming just as she had been. Mostly there was moaning. It was a constant and continual relentless droning moan of a sound. She wanted them to shut up, but she also was weeping and whining. She knew that there would never be a moment of peace here, and that this awful sound would never diminish. The cries and the screams were to no avail. They were nothing more than an expression of suffering that was just going to go on and on and on without end, without relief, and without hope. Her lips were so dry. Thirst raged within her. Oh for just a drop, just one tiny drop of water. Just once. She knew there was none to find nor was there any meaningful purpose in looking.

Mary was filled to the brim with a terror that was not human. Like all people she had always to some extent feared the reality of dying. Even though she had come to have a faith that there was a better life ahead of her, she had, like everyone else, no desire to experience the process of death. Now, all of a sudden, her view was changed beyond all and any expectation. She desperately desired to die in order to quite simply not have to live. This wasn't living. This was some kind of an on-going death that would see no end. She would do anything to end this, anything at all. The burning and searing pain continued and she became aware of her own groaning being added to that of those around her. What about the life that she had come from. She could remember it, but it felt like that had been someone else's life. Whatever it was, it had gone. She knew that she had done things that she ought not to have done; that she had been sinful as a person. But had she not been born again? What was it that she had missed? Then the dawning of a realisation caused her to sob from the very depths of her tortured soul and body. She hadn't given everything to Him,

had she? She had kept back much for herself. He had given everything for her, all that He had, but she hadn't given everything for Him. The truth was that she had kept most of it for herself.

She looked around. Her eyes should have been filled with tears but they were filled with the touch of burning. There were crowds of people who had moved closer to her, or she had been drawn to them. They came closer and closer. All were standing. All were suffering as she was suffering. There were no seats to be had here. No place to rest. As the crowd closed in oppressively around her the heat seemed to intensify in the extent to which she was stifled by it. She could no longer move. The crowd was packed in so tightly that she could not lift her arms. She looked down but could only see the burning shoulders of others as they were squeezed tightly together in a throng of agonised people. Or things that used to be people. The crowd moved but she could not fight against it. As the crowd drifted to the left or to the right, so she drifted with it. She was powerless to even choose where she might go. There was no choice here.

Mary became part of this suffering, clinging multitude of people, or whatever they were. It didn't matter how long she had been there. Nothing mattered any more. Amidst the groaning she could hear voices. She could hear their lamenting words. She could detect their speech, and there was a familiarity to it that was hard to miss. They all spoke so nicely. So very politely. With manners and breeding, they spoke in a cultured and respectable way in their anguish. It became obvious that many of these people were pastors of some sort, or at least they had been. They were priests, elders, ministers, teachers and leaders. Men and women of the cloth were all around her, existing in a condition of relentless agony. She spoke to the shoulders against which she was crushed. They were, or had been, those of a man, who was now facing Mary. "What did you do?" she asked. "What did you do to end up here?" "Nothing," he replied. "We

did nothing. The reason we are here is because we did nothing. When we should have corrected our flock we watered down the words lest we were accused. We chose to tell only that which was comfortable for fear that we would scare new converts away or would cause offence. We did not tell them. We were busy doing nothing.”

Mary was overwhelmed with a sense of regret. Pain without and pain within. She did not know which was the worst of the two. She thought of those letters written to the early churches and shown to us in the early part of that mysterious book of Revelation. Had He not said to them that He would prefer them to be either hot or cold, but that because they were lukewarm then He would spit them out of His mouth? Here she was, amongst those who had been spat out. There were thousands and thousands of them. Although she could barely see beyond the bodies of those squashed against her, the droning background noise told her that in this confined space there were many souls who were condemned as she was.

She craned her neck to face another. Whimpering as she spoke, she asked “is this it? I mean, is this, is this hell?” She was speaking to a woman of about the same height. How she knew that it was a woman she did not know, because what she could see was beyond any recognition. The reply came through wheezing breath, hoarsely gasping for words. “That is where we are, but this is not the worst of it. These are the respectable ones, holy in our own view, but not in our ways. There are none here who were poor. We had always enough, more than enough, but we knew Him not. We looked down on others. We called them fornicators, alcoholics, and paedophiles, but we went home to our luxury and we worshipped it. Because of our ways they did not come to Him in their misery. Our good works were for ourselves and not for them. We have been judged and found wanting. Goats rather than sheep. Turned to the left, not to the

right.” The woman sobbed and wailed with a gut wrenching sound that Mary could not describe. It was borne of despair and sorrow but it spoke of something far, far beyond that. It was too late. It was far too late. The opportunity was gone. All opportunity was gone. The crowd swayed. People tried to move around in the limited space, constantly apologising to others as they went, and always the sound of moaning, of weeping. Mary would become used to it and then all of a sudden she would hear it as if for the first time, and the torment of the noise would begin all over again. The heat, the acrid and detestable smell. As she became used to them it was as if her senses were re-activated so that she was introduced to it all over again and again in a constant cycle of abject misery.

“I haven’t been judged,” Mary cried out. Another man spoke. He was close by but she wasn’t sure which one of the multitude he was. “You’re not supposed to get yourself right,” he cried, “I didn’t tell them. I didn’t do it. It was not what He wanted. They were desperate and they were lost.” His lament was abject but he was resigned to his apparent fate. He was speaking to nobody in particular.

The devastation around her made Mary feel sick. How joyful a thing it would be if she could just vomit, but she could not. She was stuck at the point of vomiting but not able to do it. Her eyes continued with their burning. How she wanted to be able to close them, but if she had eyelids any more they would not allow her to blot out anything that was around her and of which she was now a part. Her chest was seething with another wave of searing heat. How she wished that she had died to the flesh when she could have done so. Oh how she wished that she had gotten rid of that focus upon herself while she had the chance. Because she did not she was here, where the flesh was surely being killed time and time again with no hope of healing or recovery or any kind of respite.

She sobbed and sobbed and wept and sobbed for a long time. It felt to her as if it had been for centuries. In her deep and profound despair she cried out amongst all those other voices. "But I love you Lord," she screamed, "I love you! Oh, how I love you." She felt her arm, her right arm, lifting from her side. Somehow, she was able to raise it above her head. As she lifted it up above her, she felt the falling flesh upon her face. She felt a hand take a hold of her hand. It was gentle but firm. She began to move. By no effort of her own she was lifted above and away from the throng. Briefly, she could see them beneath her, thousands of them, and then they were gone. "I know you do, child". The words were spoken by a being who held her hand within his own. She looked to see that her hand was as it had once been. She could see it clearly. The being that had a hold of her was dressed in what seemed like a white garment, but it may have been otherwise because the radiance of His face made everything look white for what seemed to be miles around. Mary could not look upon His face. It was as if she was somehow not allowed to do so but without any force being applied to her. His gentle touch and the soft warmth of His voice made everything else fade to become just a distant and irrelevant memory.

She looked across to her right. She could see land, and beyond it a distant and most wonderful glow coming from what appeared to be a city. The colours were striking blues, and purples and pinks. They were of a clarity and vibrancy that was like nothing that she had seen on earth. She was reminded of the day she had first believed that she had a saviour. On that day she had been struck by her realisation of the colours around her, but they were bland in comparison to these. It was as if the very air was coloured around her. She could hear the most enchanting singing that she had ever heard. No voices on earth had been such as these. How different it was from the sounds that she had been listening to in the other

place, still so fresh in her memory. Were these the voices of angels perhaps, or the rejoicing of others who had gone before her?

She knew who this being was. Around him there was no sense of time or space. There was no need for it. He was enough. He was much more than enough. She longed to be nowhere else. He spoke to her for the second time. There seemed to be so little need for words with him. "I will take you home," he said, "but I ask, would you go back to finish the job of loving those girls and caring for them?"

Mary desperately wanted to be in that city. She had seen another place and she wanted to see this one. But she was being given a choice. Her reply came with a certainty that there could only be one outcome. She had made a promise some years ago to be the voice for those who cannot speak. She had provided a home and a family for two souls who are chained to a body and mind that constrains them. She could not. She just could not break her promise any more than she could let them down, any more than she could let him down.

She had also seen something that others needed to be told about. She had a job that was not yet completed. She had choice again. Mary chose to come back with the intention of finishing that job. She chose to return.

As she regained consciousness, she was once again in the hospital bed but completely and absolutely aware of it. She heard someone say, "we have the death certificate ready to be signed, but there is the husband and daughter. They should be here in a minute and the machines can be taken off." Mary tried to speak but the words would not come. There was a tube in her throat that was connected to a machine. She was unable to speak and could not attract their attention to tell them that she was alive in here.

A few minutes later she heard Ron and Jane arriving. She heard Jane say, "yes, turn the machines off now. If my mum was meant to live she would have survived and if not then its time to say goodbye." She pondered on the thought that she had a strong and mature daughter. Mary offered her thanks to God for her.

Her husband and daughter stood next to the bedside with the expectation that this would be the last farewell. The machines would go off and that would be that. As Ron looked down towards Mary's face she was staring straight back at him with eyes wide open. How good it felt to be able to blink, to have eyelids again.

Twelve days later Mary walked right on out through the front doors of that hospital. With Jane to accompany her she took a taxi to the hustle and bustle of London's Paddington station where a wheelchair waited to take her onto the train and home to Cornwall.

Chapter 11 On and On

The latter part of 2003 saw Mary recovering well. How different she was in comparison to how most of us would be. The operation was not the focus of her attention. She did not bemoan the inconvenience caused by the reduced quantity and quality of her internal organs, nor did she fixate upon the lengthy period of illness that had indeed taken her life, albeit temporarily. Rather, she concerned herself with the experience that she had been granted. She was keen to share the things she had seen and heard with any who were willing to listen. There were those who were excited to hear of her visit to another place and what it might mean. There were others who were less than convinced, suggesting that perhaps the whole thing had taken place inside her medication filled brain and that the only place she had been was in her hospital bed. Not so easily explained away, however, was the reality that trained medical staff had prepared the paperwork needed to correctly record her death. As far as they had been concerned she was gone, and all that had been needed was the switching off of machines. If only she could get out more and be in more places and tell more people, but her job and her role in life was to care for the two women who were considered to be very much her children. They could never grow into the independence associated with adulthood. They would always be dependent on others, and they would never be able to speak a word on their own behalf.

Throughout Mary's illness and the recovery period there had been an absolute determination that neither Becky nor Claire would be taken into care. They would be able to stay in their own home and live in the place they were used to and Mary would have it no other way. How easily those with the least amount of ability to grasp what is happening are moved around from one place to another in their

alleged better interests, and ever more so when they are unable to represent themselves.

Further tests at the local hospital towards the end of the year confirmed that Mary's operation had indeed been a great success. How blessed she was to hear that there was no sign of any further cancer, and that the curse of modern human kind, at least in the western world, had on this occasion been defeated. There was joy to be had. That fishpond seemed to take on a whole new meaning now.

As they stood in the garden of their house taking the evening air one crisp but not cold autumn evening shortly after the girls had taken to their beds, Mary was reminded of the names she had given to those fish. "Meshack, Shadrack, Abednego, Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar," she uttered quietly to Ron. "I gave them those names to remind me of a story of great faith when I needed to have great faith myself. How Daniel had stood so firmly in his belief in God and had refused to budge even though he and the others were threatened with being thrown into a fiery furnace. I never understood how it was possible for anyone to exist in a furnace. But I know now. Ron, they are still there. Those poor people are still there, and they will always still be there, and there's nothing anyone can do for them," she reflected. "It seems so harsh doesn't it," Ron replied, "but it's not our place to question things even though we think it is. They had their chance and like most of us, they didn't take any notice. I suppose they did worse than that didn't they?" he asked. "I can still hear that man," she said, "nothing, he said. We did nothing. That's what he said, but he's wrong isn't he. He's wrong. They did do something. The way those chose to be, it drove many away from Jesus. People look to the big churches and what do they see there? Well off people. Polite people. People that think that Jesus is a subject that you can study at university. People that hide behind their cleverness and respectability. They don't see people who know what it is to have to

struggle or to do without. I mean to really do without. They don't see people who are reflecting any kind of Jesus back to them. They see men in purple robes and they see all the paraphernalia going on. That's not who Jesus is. They did do something didn't they? They pretended to be something they were not, and they're still doing it. I've got to tell them Ron. Somebody has got to tell them. They've got to stop it before it's too late for them. But I don't know how. They won't ever listen to a little woman like me will they? They would never take any notice of the likes of me."

"You're right," Ron replied thoughtfully, "they never would listen to folk like us. We're just little people, but I'd rather be little people. From what you tell me, the little people weren't there in that place were they. We can only hope that God will bring about a way of telling them, but I don't reckon they would even hear him much less listen. They're too busy talking and making a racket."

A few minutes of contemplation passed between them. "I'm glad you're on the mend," said Ron with a trace of hesitation in his voice, "in fact, it's a good job really. I think you're likely to be busy love." There was a pause but not one of those that invited comment from the person to whom you are speaking. Somehow, Mary knew that Ron had something that he needed to say to her and that she needed to wait until he had said it. "I'm afraid I've got it now love." She knew in an instant what 'it' was. "I've known for a couple of weeks. Just didn't want to worry you. Knew I'd have to tell you sooner or later though."

There was another battle to fight. Another battle so soon after the last one. Neither one of them had seen this coming. Ron had thought that his own general feeling of un-wellness was the result of the struggle they had so recently come through. He had only gone to get checked up to be on the safe side. He hadn't expected them to find

anything. But they had. He didn't know how bad it was or how far it had gone. There were more tests to be done yet. He showed Mary the urine sample he had to prepare. She looked aghast at him. "Ron, you've not got blood in your water, you've got water in your blood."

They kept it to themselves for quite some time, but there was no escaping the fact that Ron had cancer. Having barely drawn breath from the severity and the impact of Mary's illness they were now faced with the reality of having to deal with it all over again.

They chose to cherish time together and time with Becky and Claire. Christmas came and went and they marched hand in hand into 2004. The year was a joyful and blissful one. They simply did simple things as a family. No fuss. No bother. No trips to expensive places that they were unable to afford. Another Christmas. Another year ahead perhaps? Probably not. They made the very most of each precious moment and gave thanks to God for each and every one.

On April 29th 2005 they sat with the doctor to receive the latest set of test results. The prognosis had been deteriorating but their joy had continued. "There's nothing to be done, I'm afraid," he said with regret. "It's likely to be months rather than years." Six weeks later, in the early part of June, Ron passed away. He took his last steps in this world and moved through into the next. It is said that we only live once, but like many sayings that we never think to question, that sounds very much like a deception. The truth is that we only die once, but up to and until that point, we live every day.

There was sadness at Ron's passing. There was rejoicing too. He was one of those who had accepted his Saviour in simple faith and had lived according to it with obedience. There was no reason to allow for anything other than recognition of the reality that he would be so

much happier now than he had ever been or ever known that he could be. There is great and enduring peace in that.

With the loss of her dearly loved husband, Mary in common with anyone else who has known that situation, found herself facing a future that was not quite as she had hoped for. In her case, there came the added complication of a lifetime commitment to two people with severe and enduring disabilities. Many of us would hesitate in the face of the challenge, but rather than fearing the future, Mary was quietly relieved that she had chosen to come back when everything within her had wanted to remain with the one who held her hand. If she had stayed, where would Becky and Claire be now that Ron was no longer here? She could see exactly why she had to come back. He had asked her to do it because he knew what she could never have known. She just had to finish the job that God had given her to do. To care for two people who could not care for themselves. He had not promised that the road would be an easy one to travel. He had never said that. He had just asked her if she would go back to do this thing. She drew great comfort that a being whose existence is so far and beyond anything that we can understand or contemplate would concern himself with the well being of two disabled women. Come what may, she would not let him down.

Faithfully, and without any regret, she cared for them. Mary was at that time of life when those of us who have been blessed with the opportunity to parent and nurture children are perhaps settling back into the less hectic role of 'empty nesters'. We do, of course, love our children, and we want to be a part of their increasingly independent lives. We enjoy a different kind of relationship with them, sometimes watching on with a sense of satisfaction if they show themselves to be better parents than we were. There is some joy to be found in that. We want to be with our grand children if we are blessed enough to have them, and precious are the moments

they bring. However. There is a big 'however'. If we are going to be honest, it is so good to have the time to do things that you always wanted to do but were never able to do. Whether or not you actually do those things is quite beside the point. The issue is that you can if you want to. You can choose to do something that is less demanding in this increasingly target driven, achievement-orientated world. You find that your desire for material things becomes less apparent. You don't need money in quite the same way anymore. You trade it for something called time and a little bit of freedom. Unless, of course, you have chosen to dedicate yourself to caring for someone who's need of a secure home and a simple loving environment presents a complete and total call upon your life. In that case, you continue to live a lifestyle that is in keeping with that of the parent with young children. Your life centres around and is responsive to their every single need every single day. Your life is their life. That is what is called for and that is what you must do while the need prevails. This was the life that Mary had chosen. She had sacrificed those golden years, and although she had not expected to be doing it alone just yet, her dedication to Claire and Becky was as intense as her love for them. They had a home. They had a place to be that was always going to be there. They had someone who was their mother. These things they would not have received from some long-term care home or the like. Though they would never comprehend it, they had much to be thankful for.

Mary ploughed on, as they say, until she was once again stopped in her tracks just over two years after Ron had passed on from this world. The cancer returned. Of all things that she did not need, this would have been high upon the list of undesirables. To survive it once had been a major thing, but she would have to face up to it once again. She became ill once more, though not quite as seriously as she had been before. Nonetheless, operations would be necessary and a further spell in hospital could not be avoided. This time, the

prognosis was not as serious, especially when you are coming from Mary's perspective. She was back into fighting mode once again. She determined that Claire and Becky would not be taken into care while she was in hospital, nor afterwards if she was blessed enough to recover.

She fought the local authorities, whose desire was to take both Claire and Becky from their home and place them into a care home until their mother was well again. Mary knew that Claire's fragility was such that she would deeply struggle to deal with this. The level of care she needed was increasing as she became older, and she was unable to trust that she would deal at all well with being taken from her home and not taken back. It would not be possible to explain that to Claire or to Becky. They would not be able to understand or prepare themselves. This was not an answer to the situation and Mary saw it clearly even if the social workers did not. Eventually, they agreed to provide carers who would operate in the family home while Mary was unable to care for them herself. She preferred the distasteful prospect of strangers coming in and out of her house at all hours of the day to the alternative. As always, her priority was given to that which would better preserve the well being of her daughters, and her own wishes, desires, or indeed her pride, would be sacrificed upon the altar. Every day, He said, every day, you must take up your cross, deny yourself, and follow me. Every day, this exemplary woman was doing nothing less than that.

Another stay in hospital is never going to be good news, but Mary was pleased that this time she did not have to travel to London for the pleasure of it. The surgery she needed could be done in Truro, a mere handful of miles away from home. Having satisfied herself that the carers were up to the task of looking after her daughters, this afflicted mother hen was off to the hospital once more. She hoped that this time, the stay there would be much shorter and a lot less

dramatic than her previous encounter. She booked in and began the pre-operation tests and needful routines. She had hoped that the operation would be done before the weekend, but this was not possible and she had to accept that there would be at least a few days more to the duration of her stay. There was at least the consolation that she was allowed out to pay a visit to home if someone was willing to take her. One of the joys of being part of an intimate church fellowship, assuming of course that you are attached to the right type of church, is that you instantly have access to a wider family, and when you really do need help it will usually come your way. There were plenty of good Christian friends who were willing to pick Mary up from the Treliske hospital and take her to see her daughters. It was also an opportunity to discreetly check that they were being properly cared for. She was satisfied that all was as it ought to be, although she had only been gone for a few days.

Returning to hospital via her church saw the relatively rare opportunity for Mary to attend an early Sunday evening service. She had little choice but to sit quietly as those around her lifted their voices in worshipful song and prayer. Mary could feel her fatigue, the presence of the enduring aches around her midriff, and her vulnerability as a human being. Of all the people in the room, she was probably the one upon who's plate was stacked the greater weight of responsibility for others, and she was without doubt the least strong amongst them. As she sat listening and reflecting upon the peace around her, a peace with which she was familiar and to which she was no stranger, she began to feel a stirring within her. She knew this feeling. The spirit was falling upon her. Suddenly and without expectation she had within her the strength to stand steadfastly upright and to speak out in clear and audible tones. "I am treading on this cancer," she declared. "It will once again be crushed beneath my heel. I refuse to listen to the devil of man, and I will not believe his lies. I declare that Jesus has a job for me to do and it is not

finished with yet." As quickly as it had come, so the feeling from within withdrew to another place, as those around her joined together in prayer and encouragement.

The operation went well, and Mary again set foot upon the road to recovery. A little more than a week had passed before she was once again able to return home to her daughters. She would need several weeks of recovery and had prepared herself for the reality that there would be care workers operating in her house.

"Oh dear," uttered Mary's friend as they stepped into the home. Becky and Claire had both gone to their adult day centre as they did most weekdays when they were well enough to go, so there was nobody at home as they returned that drizzly Cornish morning. The house felt like an institution. There was broken furniture. Chairs that had been perfectly good just a matter of days ago were now taped together with what appeared to be masking tape. "I don't know what's been going on in here my lovely," she added with concern etched across her face. Mary's heart sank. The house could have been worse, she thought, but it could also have been a whole lot better. How she could have done without this. As they looked around there was evidence of further damage to furniture and other items, and things were strewn around as if there had been an attitude of disregard for the fact that this was someone's home.

With barely the energy needed to deal with this, Mary called the family social worker to tell her what they had found. "I'm afraid that all agencies are pretty much the same," came the unsatisfactory reply. "Well I'm not having them back in here again," declared Mary in an instant, "anything could have been going on." The option of placing Claire and Becky into care was presented as the only alternative given that Mary was too weak to care for them in the immediate short term. She refused. She was told that there would be

no possibility of finding another care agency with staff available at such short notice, and that Claire and Becky would have to be taken into care tonight unless Mary allowed the carers to return. She refused. She prayed in her despair. Then she waited. The social worker called again. "We just had a care package cancelled by another agency," she said with enthusiasm, "and all of a sudden they have capacity and people ready to come in who would have been working somewhere else." The social worker was impressed at the sheer coincidence of it all. This just doesn't happen. It usually takes several weeks to find a care provider, and even then, there's no guarantee that one will be available with the right people at the right time. To find what you need within the hour just doesn't happen. Mary smiled to herself and quietly gave thanks.

The carers sent by the new agency were compassionate and respectful. They did what they needed to do and they did it well. Mary was able to get back on her feet once again, and for the second time, it seemed that cancer had been dealt with.

Claire was never going to be anything other than frail and vulnerable. The damage inflicted upon her as a baby had seen to that. Mary often wondered about Claire's parents back in Berkshire. What had become of them? She especially wondered about the father, who had been working away from home and had been so distressed at what had been done to his baby girl in his absence. How wicked a world it is in so many ways. How very quickly and how easily do we seek to blame God for the things that we see around us, and yet they are almost always the result of choices made by people. The life that was Claire had been broken by the choices and the actions of others. Because of what they chose to do, regardless of the circumstances leading up to it, her life had been blighted by severe learning disability, physical frailty, and a greatly reduced life expectancy.

Towards the latter end of 2008, Claire fell. It wasn't much of a fall, and would barely be noticed by most of us, but for her it was enough to dislocate a hip. She was taken to hospital and it became clear that there would be a need for surgical intervention. After much consideration the orthopaedic surgeon was reluctant to advise Mary, but he had little choice. "I really don't believe that it would be wise to operate. She is, as you can see, under great stress. Any operation would simply add to it, and would give no benefit to her mobility whilst at the same time putting her at extreme risk. She is most probably not physically strong enough to survive an operation. I wish I could offer something better."

Claire returned home as she was and would be housebound. A specialist reclining wheelchair would be the equipment needed to at least allow some opportunity to take her out and about, and Mary struggled and fought to get this for her. She had not the financial resources needed to pay for it, and was reliant upon the limited public facilities that were in such competitive demand. She knew that there would be others for whom the outcome might be greater and to whom the priority would be given. Mary was resolute as always and would not give in. They coped. Another year passed them by, and as the Christmas of 2009 approached, she took yet another call from the social worker, "Mary, I've got some good news. There's a recliner wheelchair available now. It will be with you in a day or two. I will let you know when it's coming." She was, of course, pleased to hear the news, but her joy was cooled by an awareness that Claire was becoming weaker as the festive season began to explode around her.

Claire died at home, early in the morning on Christmas Eve in 2009. She just slipped quietly away. Enough had been enough.

Mary had often contemplated the reality that this day would come, and whilst her sadness and loss were both profound, she could at least take some solace from the knowledge that she had done the job that had been required of her to the best of her human ability. Mary knew that the next time she would see Claire it would be within an immeasurably different set of circumstances. Indeed, she wondered out loud, “will I even recognise her?” She knew that she would but that the Claire she will see then will have a different name, a different mind, and a different body. The being that was Claire has not ceased to exist. Mary’s own experience reminded her that this is not all that there is. Indeed, this is very little in comparison to what else there is.

Mary’s devotion from here on would continue for Becky who was now forty years old. She would not advance her abilities any further, but her adorable peaceful personality was a continual delight. Mary still had a job to do, and she continued to do it.

The death of Mike, her dear brother, was a time of great struggle. He was the only one left who had always been there. He was the only one who had stood up for her, and who had been prepared to take a beating for her if needed. They had retained a close relationship throughout their lives, and in every and any struggle she always knew that Mike would be available if he was needed. Now he wasn’t. She mourned the loss of her brother, but even through this her faith was strong and resolute. How could it be anything else after what she had seen for her very self? She had not and could not forget the sound of holy music that she had heard leaking forth from that city, but she could not find words to describe it any more than she could find anything remotely like it in this life.

With Claire having been laid to rest there was no longer any purpose in maintaining this large house for just herself and Becky. Much of

the extra space had been needful for Claire, but was not necessary for the two of them. They moved from St Austell to the nearby village of St Dennis and into a smaller but adequate alternative home. Mary continued in her devotion to Becky and in her strong and enduring faith. Her expectation of life consisted of nothing more than a desire to serve and to be faithful to that which she firmly believed has been asked of her. She would not bend from it, although there had been many times of further testing and trial.

With almost fifty years behind her, Becky herself became ill and her life almost came to an end due to a heart condition. This delightful and incredibly lovely limited person had no idea what was happening to her at all, and yet she took in her restricted stride both heart surgery and the recovery that came with it. As Mary sat beside Becky's hospital bed throughout the night, herself beset by the re-emergence of cancer once again and plagued by brooding strokes that had caused temporary paralysis on several occasions, she wondered how much more there was that she could do. The race was almost over. Mary's cancer was spreading its malignancy slowly but surely throughout her vital organs, and this time there was nothing that could be done. She waited, and she wondered, and she carried on providing a loving home for this adorable innocent human being for as long as she could do it.

As the year 2018 drew to its close, Mary's physical health continued to deteriorate. Three or four emergency hospital admissions were needed in response to the strokes that she experienced, just as her mother had done before her. Carers were needed to ensure that Becky could remain at home during the periods of Mary's hospitalisation. Reluctantly, Mary accepted the need for that to be the case, though she ensured that the carers were well chosen and trusted.

Desperate not to fail to complete her task, Mary again returned home from hospital. She recovered from a serious stroke to an extent that left medical staff somewhat confused, but Mary was in no way surprised. "I haven't finished yet," she declared with her usual defiance, but in an attempt to have the final word, cancer took a strong hold and a firm grip on the life of this woman in her early seventies. She reached the point of no return. Needing to be cared for her self began to be the norm rather than the exception. Mary needed help herself to be able to do ordinary necessary daily things. Her pain level increased as the tumour became the focal point of her midriff. For the first time in her life, Mary found that she was losing weight but at the same time getting bigger around the middle.

She began to consider the question she had not wanted to think about. Had she now done as much as she could?

She was not the only one giving consideration to that very question. Social workers also began to wonder if Mary was now at the point wherein she could not safely care for Becky. Their concern had to be for the safety and well being of the nigh on fifty year old with severe learning disabilities who had so recently undergone heart surgery. They had a decision to make, and they made it.

At lunchtime on Christmas Eve a social worker contacted an agency that was involved in delivering care and support for Mary and Becky. The message was a simple one. They were taking Becky out of the home and placing her into a supported living environment, and they were doing it today. There would be no notice period, no time to get used to the idea, no opportunity for preparation. Sometimes we have to be cruel to be kind, but sometimes we don't have to be quite so cruel, do we? Was it really necessary to do it like that?

At 4pm a vehicle arrived at Mary's home, and a carer was given the task of coaxing Becky out of the house and into the car. It wasn't easy, and it wasn't fair. The carer was not there to do that. This was not a normal thing and Becky knew it. She usually goes out in the morning, and not when darkness is drawing in. It took some doing, but Becky did get into the car, and then she was gone.

As the local shops and businesses were closing down and the residents of the small Cornish village of St Dennis were preparing for Christmas, Mary sat in her room with the carer who should have gone home already but didn't quite know how to leave her there. Thirty five years of looking after someone who had next to no potential. Half a life time of giving of herself each and every day so far as she was able. All over and done with. Just like that. On Christmas Eve.

First Claire, and now Becky. Both of them had been taken on Christmas Eve.

Chapter 12 Time

Sometimes we wonder. We ask. We contemplate. We can even become angry as we seek to understand something that appears to us to be harsh, to be callous, to be absolutely and entirely utterly unnecessary. At the time, and for a while afterwards, we cannot see the good in it and we cannot see the reasoning in it. We want to lash out at someone. Anyone will do, and that includes God. Why does a supposedly loving creative being allow such hard things to happen? It's a big question. It's a question so often and all too conveniently ignored by churches and clergy and the like.

Well, sometimes what we see or experience as a hard thing can turn out to be a blessing of some sort or another. In the face of adversity where is that future version of us who can pop back in time and give us reassurance, and tell us what happens next and how it all turns out in the end? Of course, they're not there are they? But, and it is one mighty and significant but, perhaps there is one who does know what we need and when we need it, and whilst that one may not necessarily bring about the circumstances of adversity, there is surely reason to believe that he is able to use those circumstances for good.

Mary's entire life has been occupied. For her there was no gap year. There was no opportunity to move gradually towards adulthood and to do the things that older teenagers do. No time to chill. No time to kill. No time to scrutinise or to look philosophically at life. No time to challenge the mind or to expand the boundaries of understanding. There was a baby. There were duties and responsibilities and obligations to fulfil, more often within the context of hardship and endurance. Drudgery. There was constant work of some form or

another to be done. There was always someone else to care for and to be responsible for. There was no time.

Then there was. It hadn't been asked for, nor anticipated, but suddenly and without introduction, there was time. It began as a grieving, a pain filled emotional grieving loss. Then it channelled itself into acceptance before emerging as reflection.

"There wasn't any more I could do was there?" Mary's statement was also a question. It sought a reply from the carer who was once more spending extra time with her. Mary had been to visit Becky in her new home. She would not have known what to expect had the carer not taken the initiative to find out where Becky was and to look into the details of it. She had been able to find photographs on-line and was able to let Mary see how good the supported living scheme looked. It was too far away for Mary to visit more often, but at least Becky was still just about in Cornwall. Social workers had not thought to show this hurting and grieving mother something of the new home that her daughter was in. Would that have been so much to ask of them? It was left to the care worker who's minimum wage barely covered the cost of her travel to get to Mary's St Dennis home, to show her compassion so that she could have some sense of peace in knowing that Becky was living in a homely and pleasant place, and that it was not some morbid and forbidding institution. She had been fearful of visiting Becky. Fearful of what she might find. But armed with the pictorial foreknowledge she was encouraged to go while she was still just about well enough to travel. Use of public transport was out of the question now. Mary could barely make her own way to the bathroom any more. She was thankful for the transport provided and for the social worker providing it.

"It's a nice place. It's beautiful up there. She seems so well settled, and the people are so nice. I couldn't have wanted a better place for

her to move into could I,” reflected Mary. “I always thought that she might go to her rest before I did. When we adopted her they told us that her life expectancy wouldn’t be so great, so I thought she would go first, and then the job would be done. But it’s me that’s going first isn’t it, and if that’s the case then so be it. Who am I to question that?”

Mary was able to see that her daughter was in good hands and it was time for her to let go. Time to let go. She hadn’t expected to have time to let go, or to pass through the process of letting go, but here it was. She had been granted the time and the opportunity to see that her task was completed and that her daughter was going to be happy. There was strengthening and healing in that.

As cancer progressed and strengthened its grip on its hostess, Mary found that there was also time for preparation. Death held no fear for her. Why would it? She had already passed through that gate once before. She was happy to pass through it again, and happy to tell all who came to her home that she was more than content to take the journey as and when the good Lord has decided that it should happen. The social worker and the palliative care nurse rolled their eyes at one another as Mary once more declared to them that her God is at the controls and that all is well. For sure, she wasn’t looking forward to the process very much, and particularly as the pain levels continued to increase and she needed others to do intimate physical caring tasks for her, but she would endure whatever was needful for her to endure. Indignity is a humbling thing, but didn’t her Lord also suffer indignity.

“I’m looking forward to it,” she openly declared, “because I know what’s there. It’s not about me not being frightened of dying. It’s not that at all, because I’m not going to die. I just won’t be here any more.” Mary had settled down after a grumpy start to the morning

following a pain filled and mostly sleepless night. "I'm sorry if I was a bit tetchy earlier," she offered, "it's a bit sore just now." Her carer smiled to herself in the knowledge and awareness that Mary's version of a little early morning melancholy was incomparable to many of the other people who's home she has been to in the past. She knew that the strength of Mary's medication was such that there was little time left. For a moment she wondered how she herself would come to feel at the loss of this woman who's perspective so differs from that of most other people most of the time. She has something that the others do not have, and when she is gone that something would go with her.

"You know I've always had trouble with my weight don't you?" asked Mary as the carer prepared a light breakfast for her. "I could never do anything about it. I put weight on as a teenager in a house that had only basic food in it. Never managed to lose it. Didn't matter what I did. Nothing made any difference. Even when I had next to nothing to eat most days, I still lost no weight at all. It's just who I am." She paused. "Don't think I'd bother to change that now," she added thoughtfully. "There wouldn't be any point in being slim now would there. That would make this thing look even bigger wouldn't it," she said glancing down at the excessive growth resting in her lap. "Oh but how I'd love to be able to sing. Ron could sing beautifully. I adored listening to him sing, especially when we were in church together. What a voice he had. What a gift it was. Mine is terrible. I always wanted to sing out loud but I dare not do it. It would embarrass everybody if I did that. If there were one thing that I could change, even now, it would be that. I'd give myself a singing voice like Ron had." A few seconds later, she smiled, then she grinned, then she chuckled at herself. The carer looked inquisitively and enquiringly towards her. "What am I going on about?" asked Mary, still chuckling. "When I get where I'm going things are going to be a bit different aren't they. When I get there I'm going to have the

most beautiful singing voice. Better than I ever could imagine having here, and you know what", she said with a brief moment of pause, "it 'aint over until the fat lady sings!"

I expect that the fat lady is singing her head off right about now. Mary stepped out of this realm on 26th July 2019. No fear. No panic. No sense of dread or uncertainty. No sign of regret or loss. Her journey had been completed. Time to step off the platform with ticket in hand. Time to go. Time.

Chapter 13 Reflection

This time there was no coming back. There was no suggestion that there might be. There was no expressed desire to do so.

Leaving behind the physical body that had been the cause of such pain and difficulty, the real being that was Mary simply moved on. Alternatively, perhaps, she just ceased to exist any more.

I wonder which of those two possibilities is the more discomfiting. Would it be the thought that all of that living, and struggling, and facing up to things, and hurting, and aching, and loving, and caring was all nothing more than entirely and wholly meaningless within the context of a life brought about by a cosmic accident. A life brought about by some bits of filth or a heap of something sitting around in a puddle and somehow coming to life before eventually evolving into us as we are today. The contemplation that everything Mary did, all the small things, all the significant things, and all the things that were somewhere in between were just an irrelevance and nothing more or less than that. If so then the same can be said and must be said of every other life, whether it be current or past or to come. Including you! Yesterday and all that it holds within it has no meaning. The entire content of the world history syllabus could be summarised by the term 'so what'. Today contains no lasting value, and on the basis that nothing plus nothing equals nothing, then we must deduce that the future is equally pointless. If the whole thing is an accident then everything that makes up the whole thing is the result of an accident and can serve no ultimate purpose.

Would that possibility bring discomfort to you, or would it perhaps be the acknowledgement of the other alternative that leaves you feeling in some way unsettled? The possibility that Mary was never

here without there being a reason, and that she, like everyone else, was a part of something that was constructed and put into place by another being. The possibility that her life had a purpose and now that it has been completed she has moved into a form of existence over which she has no control and cannot of her own volition determine. Would that be of greater concern to you?

In putting together Mary's story, and simplifying it in order to stick to the facts without waffling endlessly on and padding it out with all sorts of detail, it increasingly seemed to me that when all is said and done, and up to a point, it comes down to decisions and choices.

To explain what I mean by that, let us for a moment consider the humble caterpillar, creatures of the earth who, as far as I know, offer no threat to me. I have seen people stamp on caterpillars and wondered why they would ever want to do that. They exist for a relatively short time. They spend most of that time consuming things and would happily do so until there is next to nothing left. They leave behind a trail of some sort of destruction and make no attempt to tidy up after themselves. Do I refer to the caterpillars or the people, or maybe it's both? They eat grass. Definitely the caterpillars. They munch on bark, twigs, and leaves. If you ever tried to grow cabbages then you will know that they eat leaves and if you don't pick the darn things off (without needing to stamp on them) they will most likely eat the lot. They will also digest flowers, bits of moss, lichen and other plant matter. Perhaps less well known is the reality that they will also dine on hair and the waste left behind by other animals. Caterpillars eat pooh! They eat constantly, and you will rarely ever see one that isn't attempting to stuff its face with something.

However, let us imagine for a moment a brief, hypothetical caterpillar conversation. Two munching, chewing insect Hoover bags pausing for breath halfway through a shared savoy cabbage leaf. "How's it going today?" asks the green fat one. "Not too bad," replies the slightly smaller reddish-brown one with a hairy back. The hairs make him look a bit scary but he's not. "Looking like rain again," says the green one, "reckon I might be getting under the leaves in a while. Can't be out here if it comes down heavy can we." "Too right," offers the hairy one, "always a bit of a problem when you're stuck down close to the ground isn't it. Before you know it you're in a puddle. Can't afford to be too exposed." A moment of contemplative silence passes between them. "Be nice to be able to fly wouldn't it?" he asks his chubby friend, "like he can," he adds, nodding in the direction of a passing butterfly. "Funny thing," replies his new associate, "I literally bumped into a slug the other day. Dirty, slimy things aren't they. Told me to get away from her leaf she did. I said I had as much right to be there as she did, but she told me again to clear off. She reckoned I hadn't got as much right because soon enough I would be a butterfly while she would still be a slug, so the leaf should be hers on account of the fact that it's all she will ever have. I asked her what she was going on about. Told me that I wouldn't always be like I am now, and that one day I'd be flying freely around. Up there, not down here." The hairy one laughed out loud. "Stupid slug. What a load of rubbish. I mean, you are what you are. That's it. Get your dinner down you and make the most of it. I hope you told her." "Well as it happens I didn't say too much. Just wanted to get away from her sliminess really. Urghh. Makes you wonder though doesn't it. I mean, where did she get that idea? Makes me wonder. Could it be possible that somehow we get to be something else?" he asked his spiny colleague. "Nope," came the firm and resolute reply, "I can't believe that for a minute. Trust me, this is all there is, and we've got some munching to do. Make hay while the sun shines, as they say." Off they went in different directions, one deep in thought and the other

spotting a tasty looking lettuce just a short distance away and crawling along as fast as he could to get there before someone else gets at it. One developing the view that he will be careful what he does and where he goes just in case there is something better to follow, the other charging relentlessly on with nothing by way of a thought for the purpose of it. One has heard something and made a decision not to exclude a possibility that seemed at first to be a little bizarre, especially given the unlikely source. He has chosen to take a path that is slightly different to the one that he was on, and he is starting to think that there might be something else and that it could be much bigger and much greater than this life even though he can't understand it. The other has, without any real consideration, decided that he has no need of such thought, and chosen to stay upon the path that he was on. No reason to be cautious. Just eat as much as you can get.

Not all caterpillars get to be butterflies.

Butterflies eat nectar.

In her life Mary made a lot of decisions and choices. She made them every day, and the older she got the more decisions there were to be made. Some were not especially relevant, while others would bring about a long lasting impact upon her and others around her. Some were good decisions and good choices. Others were not so good. She reflected that some were dreadful. With each decision and each subsequent choice the path upon which she travelled through life was changed, sometimes only slightly, and sometimes very significantly.

One day, as she had reached the end of her own tether she emptied a pot of stew over the head of a man who was supposed to be her

husband, just a couple of hours before finding herself faced with a decision and a choice that changed pretty much everything about her. Did she accept that there might be something more than this endless day-to-day drudgery or did she reject it as the babbling of idiots and walk on in the relentless pursuit of nothing in particular? As we know, she stopped. She didn't actually do anything. She just accepted something that came with no price attached. No bill of sale. No great expectations or explanations. Just a very simple but profound acceptance that ultimately changed who she was, how she was, what she did, and how she did it. The means by which she made decisions and choices was also changed, and strangely enough, the quality of her decision making was very different from there onwards. We know what became of Mary's life beyond that day, but what, I wonder, would it have been like if she had chosen not to listen to those few words in that small place of sanctuary. What if she had decided not to listen and chosen instead to walk away, returning back to her life, crawling around on the ground. What then? Gladly, we do not know, but I doubt very much that it would have been a story worthy of the telling.

As it turned out, there is a story to be told and it is one that may well give different meaning to different people. To some perhaps it will be a source of comfort or encouragement. To others a cause of reflection maybe, or a challenge, a sharp shock to the rear end. I really don't know. The story is told because Mary asked that it should be so. She was very clear that she had to tell someone but equally clear that she did not know how to do it.

At the heart of Mary's story there is an experience that is not shared by most of us. Is it an experience or a vision? What is the difference between those two things? There sits here an uncomfortable question of the type that is easily ignored or conveniently set to one side. Rather like those issues that most churches manage to

completely avoid without ever expressing an intention to do so, there is an elephant in the room, and it cannot be avoided. It seems certain that Mary died in that London hospital. There wouldn't appear to be any doubt about that, and given the extent of the surgery and the warnings given to her before the operation took place, it was hardly a surprise to anyone. It is equally certain that she came back to life and breathed again. No question about that. The debateable and questionable issue revolves around what took place between those two incidents.

She recounted an experience. She did so in some detail but at the same time she struggled to put into words some of the aspects of that experience. How do you describe something that is outside of your own level of understanding? We could quite reasonably come to the conclusion that Mary's experience was nothing more than a hallucination that was fuelled by medication and that took place within her mind while she was unconscious in the intensive care unit. People see all manner of things do they not, and ever more so when the brain is affected by external chemical influences. Did Ebenezer Scrooge not suggest that his vision was the result of an underdone potato, or something similar? If a bit of food poisoning or the like can affect what we perceive to see then ever more so a concoction of heavy sedatives and whatever else was being given to Mary at the time.

But if that is so, one wonders, would it not be reasonable to expect that the vision or experience would contain within it an element of randomness. Would there not be things that don't fit in or seem to make no obvious sense? Within Mary's experience there is an extent to which it appears to be controlled. Not by her at all, but by another force that is outside of her. There is a beginning, there is a central part, and there is an ending. There is order and there is a message contained within it; a message that is of relevance and potentially of

great importance to other people who have never been known to her and with whom she had no particular issue or any axe to grind.

She also remembered the experience in an orderly and detailed manner. Her recollection is that of a person who was fully conscious and alert rather than one who was completely out of it in a hospital bed.

Of course, we have no way of testing Mary's experience. Whilst recently interviewing a number of people and asking questions about how we react to a person who reports that they have had a supernatural experience there came an intriguing variety of responses. First of all there was uncertainty about what is meant by a supernatural experience. Upon consideration all agreed that such an experience is that which is attributed to some force beyond ourselves, beyond immediate scientific understanding and beyond what we consider to be the laws of nature. That would rule out any event that appeared to be instigated by a person, but would not exclude Mary's experience. We can accept the possibility that Mary did indeed have a supernatural experience. It is very possible. However, I am reminded that we have no means by which we can apply any scientific empirical testing to confirm that her words reflect an actual incident rather than a chemically induced vision of one. Maybe, just maybe, there is another question here. Who decided that scientific understanding and empirical measurement should become the agreed method of testing the validity of a thing? Such process is the invention of mankind and is built around our experience and only our experience. Within that there is a definition of that which is given to be natural and an assumption that our form of existence is indeed natural. An assumption, if you will, that has never been subject to any form of scientific evaluation or empirical testing. Is it not entirely possible that we do not know anything like as much as we think we do? Could it be that the greatest minds that

have lived and are around today can only function within certain parameters and that this represents a mere fraction of what really exists? Might it be that, relatively speaking, that our perception of life and what it consists of is really not much greater than that of the average caterpillar? With these profound questions I am like anyone else in that I don't know any more than anyone else does.

When you work within the field of homelessness, as I did for more than enough years, you come into contact with all sorts and any sort of people. You really do. The stereotypes given to homeless people will make you cross if you spend any real and meaningful time with them. There are those who have a story of a life that didn't begin to get started before it was ruined. There are many people involved in the field of homelessness. There are those who think they are making a difference by focusing on the provision of temporary accommodation. In reality they fulfill the role of a kindly landlord and we need more of them. There are also those whose efforts are intended to treat the cause of the problem rather than the symptoms of it, and such were we as we worked long and hard with individuals to ascribe to them a value and to seek to enable them to identify those aspects of themselves that were the reason why they were in this unwanted situation. In amongst those with whom we toiled were the permanently unemployed and unemployable who saw themselves as being well outside of the normal society. There was the serial offender. There was the one-off offender whose crime was a serious one. There was the tragic alcoholic who's loathing of his lifestyle was matched by his inability to resist it. There was the untreated schizophrenic, the drug addict, and the guy who could never keep his fists to himself. There was also the former company executive who had lost everything either through his own actions or those of others that were beyond his control. There was the ex-army Major who found that his family was far less proud of him now that his mind wasn't working quite as it used to before the incident.

There was the former professional boxer unable to do anything else but with nothing set aside to sustain him. There was the man whose life had been a contortion of sexual abuse, in which he had shifted from the role of victim to that of predator. For each one, and many more, there was a life story. Over time and through the building of relationships we would endeavor to release those stories, and in doing so, hope to pinpoint that which had never been resolved in order to hopefully get something done that would lead to permanent change. I heard so many stories. Most of them were true, and often frighteningly so as I was brought face to face with the harsh reality of the myriad of things that people do to one another. What they do to children. Other stories were not true. They were a coping mechanism. They were a fantasy that gave some importance to someone, or provided an alternative reality that was preferable to what was really in there somewhere. In some cases, they were simply lies designed to generate the sympathy needed to extract some kind of short-term material gain. As you go along, you develop the ability to know when you are being told a truth or a lie. Sometimes the apparently less than believable stories are the most truthful ones. You develop a sixth sense. You spot a tall tale from a mile away no matter how plausible is the delivery of it. No matter how close you come to accepting the story as being the truth, this sixth sense, once it is switched on, simply will not allow you to do so.

If Mary Nicholls had been sharing with me a story that was a figment of her imagination or a deliberate contrivance, I would have known it. I found no reason to disbelieve or to doubt that her account was the truth as she saw and experienced it. Often with such things, we find a story that engages our attention. An incredible story that may or may not involve a vision or experience of heaven or hell. There are many such stories in print and out there. I'm not here to question them, but I do often find that my acceptance of the genuineness of any such account is tempered by the opportunity to buy a book or a

DVD for a chunk of money. In many cases it turns out to be quite a chunk of money. That always makes me ask a question. Why the need to charge? If the experience is real then it is supernatural, and if so, then surely it would belong to all of us. By all means let me cover the cost of printing and distribution but if for one minute it looks as if there is some commercial venture in place then somehow I begin to wonder about the purpose of the story being told, and ultimately, I wonder about its validity. Mary just wanted her experiences to be shared in the hope that one day, somebody somewhere might benefit in some way.

All things considered, there is sufficiency for me to accept the validity of Mary's experience. Others may determine otherwise, but if so, I ask them to consider that she has nothing to gain, and neither does the writer.

So what of Mary's experience. What is the relevance of it? Is there really a distinction between one existence that we call heaven and another one that we call hell within the context of a different form of life compared to that with which we are familiar? There is no doubt that in this world there is good and there is evil, and that these two forces are constantly at odds with one another. It often amuses me to see those who choose to take the view that all around us has simply evolved through natural selection and then refer to certain things as being good or evil, right or wrong. If evolutionary theory is correct then how can there ever be anything that is good or anything that is bad? It cannot be so. If we have evolved from nothing and for no particular reason then my reality and my way of doing things is just as valid as yours my friend, and you have no right at all to determine what is acceptable for me.

Mary's experience is spiritual. To be true it requires the human being to have a spirit as well as a body, and it requires for that spirit

to live on after the earthly body ceases to function. The 'we' that exists today is not dependent upon this body. Does the bible itself not tell us that God is eternal, and that God made mankind in his own image? Does it not tell us that there is an on-going life for everyone? Does it not tell us that the temporary body will be replaced by a permanent one? I accept that the bible is a book, or to be more precise it is a collection of books, and that just because a book says a particular thing does not automatically render it to be factually correct. But if that collection of books is backed up by supernatural experience then that makes a difference. Even if it is only one such experience then it makes a difference. What Mary passed through indicates that you and I are a being that lives on, and as such we would have to be somewhere, to exist somewhere. The polite people that Mary saw were not in a good place, and were certainly not where they might have expected to be. Does the bible not tell us that there will be many, not just a few, but many, who will explain that they did all manner of things in his name, and yet he sends them away with the words "depart from me, I never knew you" ringing loudly in their ears. How much warning do we want?

The church is supposed to be, amongst other things, the representative of a creative and loving being that we call God. It is supposed to express who and what that being is, and it is supposed to be clear about its identity. Look at it. Does the church do those things as it ought, or has it become a home for respectability and comfortable repetition of familiar religious practices? Are there churches that resemble a place within which people largely do things that make them feel secure; in which they do things for themselves. Is the larger institutional church not rich in its land holdings and its investments? How do the bishops live? Does it welcome without reservation the one who will never fit in, or does it just apply an air of respectable tolerance? Does it ever stand in contrast to the prevailing worldview offered by a society that has

pleasure and gain at the heart of its objectives? Does the church look remotely like the man we can so easily read about in the New Testament? The one they crucified? Much of the church seems to exist within a vacuum of comfort that bears no reflection of the life of Christ or the early believers. Don't upset the applecart. Don't offend anyone. Blend in. Focus on the evening service and the Sunday school and the choir and the ladies fellowship group. Stick to hatches, matches, and despatches. Mary's experience suggests that lukewarm comfort and respectability will be the undoing of many who mistakenly take the view that their path is a good one upon which to tread. Many of them are gone already, and right now, outside of our concept of time, they exist in a hellish place that is devoid of goodness, and therefore devoid of God. If you take away the good then what are you left with?

It also occurs to me that in the experience that Mary had, these people were all packed together in a place reserved only for them. She gives no indication that there were others types of people with them. That suggests that within this godless domain there may be different levels. Really, that doesn't bear very much thinking about, and I'd rather not.

Am I one of the polite people? Are you?

Mary's tale, or rather the outcome of it, leads me tentatively to at least three questions that don't seem to want to go away. They are questions that require from me a response. I can ignore them if I like, but that constitutes a response in itself, and even then, they are still sitting waiting patiently for me to reply. Is this world that I can see, feel, hear, smell, and touch; is this everything that there is? That's the first question. Then there are the other two. What am I here for? What am I worth?

The easy, simplistic thing to do would be to just admit that I don't know and go to the fridge to reach for a beer or a chocolate bar or something. A bit of comfort food, except its not really food is it. Its just junk produced by manufacturers who have learned how to use my taste buds to extract money from me. Is that what its all about? Being a consumer; being part of a system that has gain at its very core? You live, you eat, you drink, you do a few other things, you strain yourself in all sorts of anxiety inducing ways to achieve this and that and the other, and then you die. Is that all that there is? If it is, then I just cannot see the point. It's completely and entirely lost on me. Survival they say, and procreation of the species. These are the purposes! Advancement and improvement of the human species is another. Yet the whole thing is an accident and it means nothing so these would be no purposes at all would they. But if we are not just temporary earthly beings but are in fact an eternal form of life, that brings about a different perspective altogether. Apart from anything else, it means that you can't die. Even if you want to, you cannot. You can't even kill yourself. You live.

Mary knew that. She didn't always know it, and it took a chunk of time and a whole lot of struggling before she came to see it, but once she did see it, her load lightened. Knowing what she knew somehow sustained her through an awful lot of suffering. There is no evidence that her life became easier as a result of her faith, but it did become so much easier for her to live, even in the latter days and with a tumour the size of a watermelon stuck in her lap. Coming towards the end of her time here, Mary was in need of help to carry out ordinary daily functions; the things that we go through life doing without a second thought. Her carer would assist at certain times of the day. On this particular day, having helped her to do what was necessary, Mary's carer asked, 'is there anything I can pick up for you from the shops later on?' She had some items to get for herself so she would be out shopping anyway. "Is there anything you need?"

“Dolly mixtures,” came the cheeky reply, backed up by a broad childlike grin. “Don’t matter if I stay fat now does it?” Racked with pain and with no chance of doing much of anything with the day, she could find humour in the small things. She could do that because she wasn’t bitter about her situation. She derived some kind of strength from the certainty that she had an assured future that was well beyond any of this. She had seen it for herself and she knew it was there. Waiting for her to move in.

So what am I here for? What are you here for? If life is not an accident then the question is relevant. If it is an accident then there is nothing for you to be here for. Just nothing. You can make up as many reasons as you want to, but not one of them has any meaning. What a thing it is to say that if life just emerged by itself then it is of no consequence whatsoever. You don’t hear that from the polite people do you? But if there is a creative force behind all of this and if there is another expanse of life into which we progress when we have completed our time in the earthly domain that is measured and constrained by time, then it follows that we must each have a purpose. I live in a society that has become increasingly dominated by the perspective of self. Funnily enough, the New Testament writers said that would happen. I watch with humour as people take photographs of themselves, often looking entirely ridiculous in the process. I did it once, and felt incredibly stupid. What would I want to take a photograph of me for? Having done that they ‘post’ the photograph onto whatever social media site they use and wait in anticipation for the likes and the comments telling them how beautiful and gorgeous they look today, even if they don’t. We talk about self-actualisation and achieving our potential. We seek to project ourselves, to market ourselves, and to sell ourselves. We use words such as ‘dedicated’ and ‘passionate’ in our job applications in an attempt to get ahead of everyone else. The strange thing is that there was a guy who, in response to such thoughts amongst those

who were with him, simply said, “he that is first shall be last, and the last shall be first.” He gave, and gave, and gave, and ultimately gave himself in a life that projected to us a message that we mostly do not see.

This is going to come as a shock to a lot of people. The reason you are here is not about you at all!

Is that not something to think about, or would you prefer to carry on munching leaves?

But if the purpose of my life is not about me, then of what value am I? Mary was told and repeatedly told that she would never amount to anything. She had this drummed into her by none less than her mother; the one person she ought to have been able to rely upon for nurturing her and building her up. Her story suggests to me, and especially so in those earlier days, that Mary had an understandably low sense of self esteem. She gave herself to others who had no concern for her. Others did not ascribe much value to her, so what logical reason would there be for her to ascribe any significant value to herself? There would be none that I can think of.

A great number of the homeless guys that I came to know so well demonstrated a similar lack of self worth, and for many if not most of them, that lay at the root of everything else that plagued their lives. Why allow yourself to think that you are ever going to be anywhere other than at the bottom of the pile when everything that you ever knew told you that was the place you belonged? That was where you deserved to be. When your first childhood memory is being thrown, by your father, through a first floor bedroom window that was closed at the time, and then you get thumped for complaining about the pain from the broken arms you got when you landed on the grass, and you are locked in a cupboard so that they

don't have to listen to your whining, how can you build a measure of self respect? When you are told that you are stupid, that there is no point in sending you to school, that you are a naughty little sod, and that your half a dozen siblings are much better than you are, then there has to be a reason for it. They can't all be wrong can they? You must be the reason. So you stay at the bottom. At least there is some safety there. Then forty years later, after much time spent in the relative sanctity of the state prison system in response to a lengthy catalogue of misdemeanours, you discover in a very unexpected way that the man who threw you through the window actually wasn't your father at all. The other siblings were his, but you were not and he knew it. He didn't throw your mother out, but somebody was going to bear the brunt of his anger, and that somebody was you. In a situation like that you might want to reconsider all of those negative messages and think again about what you are really worth.

Mary considered herself to be nigh on worthless and useless. She expected not to amount to anything. Then, one day, in a very unexpected way, she was brought face to face with something she had never come across before. She was being given to understand that the one who created all of this had made himself to be one of us and had taken upon himself the suffering and wrongness of the human race in order to provide a way back to himself. Not only that, but he did it for her, and he would have done it only for her. That is how much she is worth. That is how much she is worth to him. She is worth everything. She moved from useless to priceless in the blink of an eye. He asks nothing of her. Just holds out a hand for her to take, the same hand that lifted her out and away from the polite people.

She took that hand, and never again did Mary think of herself as being without value or purpose. She knew why she was here and what she was here to do, and she did it as best she could. She never knew loneliness any more. Isolation became a stranger to her. Fear

no longer had no hold over her. The girl who would never amount to anything would seem to have amounted to quite something after all.

The Bible is a long book, or to be more accurate, a set of books. In common with many folk I struggle to read some of it, and there is much that I don't understand. But you know what. That's ok. It really is. It was never meant to be an academic exercise. If it was, then why did he take his message out to fisherman, sheep farmers, and others who were unable to read or write? Sometimes, when I look at the bible it helps me to go straight to the end. There I find an incredible and heart warming promise in the book known as Revelations. We are told that 'he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying nor pain any more.' No more tears! No more pain! No more mourning. Wow!! Does that not imply that all of the things that are the cause of tears and pain and mourning will be no longer present in the place to which the writer refers. Now that sounds like real life to me, but let us not pretend that such a life is for everyone. Mary's experience, as well as the words of the one who gives value to her, tell us that there is also another reality.

A butterfly or a caterpillar?

I hope so very much that this story speaks to you. I know that Mary's hope is the same, though in reality, I think she is probably singing right about now. I look forward to being able to sing with her one fine day that is yet to come. Do please join us.

THE AUTHOR

Whatever I am or am not, I cannot claim to have any particular ability that might come to be remotely useful in the production of a written work. Putting it another way, I don't really consider myself to be much of an author as such. Not really.

I'm just an ordinary person who probably could and most likely should have done so much better in life, but who lacked a lot of self-control and discipline.

Most of my life has been lived in the delightful English town of Wolverhampton, which they tell me is a city these days. I never really understood the difference. Most of my time there was spent earnestly desiring to get away from it, as I felt a sense of belonging not there in the centre of England but down in the south western corner that is Cornwall. Eventually, some fifty four years to the good, I was able to make that transition.

I would think of myself as being working class and speak with one of those accents that nobody really wants if they are honest. Maybe partly as a result of that, I learned a long ago not to make assessments or judgements about anyone based upon the way they look or how they speak.

I'm just a guy who is finding that life does indeed pass you by rather quickly, and that we most certainly are like the grass of the field. Here one day, and gone the next. I have great children, adorable grand children, and as I will mention elsewhere, a patient wife.

I'm awkward and a bit cantankerous sometimes. I refuse to pay good money for a television licence, which in the UK means that you can't watch television. Well that's fine by me. Its mostly drivel anyway and

I can find a lot more to do with my time that is remotely interesting and useful. I refuse to pay to park my car if there is any possible way that it can be avoided, which presents a serious challenge in the summer time here in Cornwall.

I've had a look at a good number of places in this world, but by no means all, and I haven't given up yet on the hope of visiting a few more.

I have lost contact with good friends and shown myself to be pretty average when it comes down to maintaining relationships. It's a male thing I think.

I don't care all that much for money or for the pursuit of it. So many things are presented to us as being this, or that, or the other, but inevitably there comes a point at which money comes into the equation. I generally step aside. I believe in giving. I don't keep all of what I receive for myself, but choose to give away a percentage as seems right to me. How might the world be if we all did that?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My wife is a patient person. At least that is true most of the time. She has waited quietly while I have taken time to complete this humble work. It would be good to be able to say that I have taken time to reflect before completing the final section. It was necessary to hold back on that until Mary had passed on. She insisted that it should be so, having read and approved what was written up to that point. To be precise, it was read to her as her eyesight began to fail and the act of reading brought on a needless tiredness.

The final chapter should have been completed promptly but it was delayed not by any contemplative or preparatory reason, but by my tendency to procrastinate. To put off until tomorrow what I could so easily have done today. It annoys me, so it must surely annoy my wife. Not that you would have guessed as she has said little to suggest that she has been hoping that I will get on and finish the story so that it can be made available. It matters to her because it mattered to Mary. My wife was one of a small number of carers who served Mary during the latter stage of her life. She it was who brought to my attention the story that was to be told. She it was who shared the concern that Mary had expressed to her; that she had been unable to get the story written down. She had tried before but it hadn't worked, and she was worried.

Mary was worried because she had been given a task to tell the story of her experience. She knew that her health was taking its toll and that time here was in the process of running out. How could she tell what she needed to tell?

My wife knew that I had nonchalantly said on many occasions that for reasons that made no sense, I felt drawn to writing something without having a clue what it might be or how to do it. She made the link between Mary's pressing need and my vague sense of the necessity to write something.

Mary was also a patient person. As I visited her to discuss what it was that she was hoping for and to find out a little about this story that she had to tell, I was armed with all manner of questions to put to her. The purpose of those questions was partly to enable me to determine whether or not this was a genuine person or if she was the alternative sort. That would include people with a hidden agenda, people who are making it up, and people who are perhaps a

little unbalanced. I needed to know, to put it frankly and slightly unkindly, whether or not she was one of those Christian nutcases that you can't help coming across from time to time. The ones who see a major spiritual influence in everything they do, but they end up doing not very much really other than bouncing around from one amazing revelation to the next and generally managing to leave a trail of chaos behind them.

She wasn't of that ilk at all. Mary was generous with her patience and willing to be scrutinised. In the telling of her story she was open and honest and critical of herself. She gave no credit to herself for any part of it, and she laboured to make sure that nothing significant was missed out, and all of that at a time when she was seriously ill with cancer that was leading to death.

I am grateful to them both, but also to those that I have yet to come across who will help us to share this story. I am thankful to those who will assist me to get something into print and to make it available on-line, and to those who will take a copy and pass it on to someone else. I thank you all for being part of the story of Mary Nicholls.

Please do remember that this story is not intended for sale. It has not been written to be bought or sold for money, or to be traded for anything else. It is a gift. Please read it and pass it on.

Steve Tench asserts the copyright and the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

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Mary Nicholls had a story to tell, but she knew not how to tell it. She had a compelling calling to ensure that her story was told, not at all for any benefit to herself, but rather in the hope that one day in a certain place at a given time there could perhaps be one person who might greatly benefit from the hearing of it. With a terminal diagnosis and rapidly deteriorating physical health Mary began to worry that her story would not be told.

Steve Tench had, for several years, restrained an unexplainable compulsion to write a book. He had neither the story that would motivate him, the time that he would need, or much of a clue how to do such a thing.

Through a myriad of people and circumstances the two came together in July 2018, resulting in the construction and the writing of Mary's story.

It is a story that began for one who was not at all wanted. The unwanted became the unloved. The unloved became one of no value, whose daily purpose consisted of little more than drudgery. It is a story that begins with loneliness and worthlessness in a world that had no time for her. It is a story of decisions, simple everyday decisions that bring with them long lasting consequences. It is also a story that brings challenge for those who may think that their future comfort is assured.

But it is not a story of ultimate defeat.

Those who are struggling in the midst of a roaring and deafening silence can discover that they are not alone. They never were alone. This story is for them. For the one. At least one.

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