

THE BEIGE BEETLE
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PROLOGUE

I was born on Saturday 20th March 1965.

I probably shouldn't have been, but I was - just.

Despite not being due to make my entrance for another couple of weeks, my mother Jenny went into labour on that Saturday morning, and I later learned there were two particular reasons for her to push like she'd never pushed before, and ensure I made my appearance before the clock struck twelve.

Firstly, 20th March was also my mother's birthday. Presumably the thought of mother and son sharing a cake instead of me having one all to myself somehow appealed to my parents. Obviously, I was none the wiser at the time, but I grew to like cake; and although I didn't go as far as resenting my mother for her physical exertions throughout that Saturday evening, part of me grew up to feel almost cheated...

Especially when I discovered that I arrived at just seven minutes to midnight.

The second, and potentially far more serious consequence, was that the date in question coincided with the broadcast of the Eurovision Song Contest in Italy. To my eternal shame, both parents were avid watchers of the annual sing-song and my apparent "reward" for denying them the chance to sit in front of a television set and enjoy the festivities was the very real possibility of being named after the competition winner - the singer, not the song I hasten to add.

The proviso was I had to be a girl, because they'd both agreed on calling me Matthew William - the latter being my father's name, although everyone knew him as Bill - if a little boy popped out.

Just for the record, I would have been called Isabelle, the real name of France Gall, the teenager whose song *Poupée de Cire Poupée de Son* provided Luxembourg with their victory. Quite a nice name, but nevertheless, I still think it's right and proper at this juncture to convey my gratitude to Dad for the Y chromosome.

But I digress...

Only two people play a significant part in what follows, and it is on those two people that I intend to concentrate. I don't want to detract from my story by dwelling on anything or anyone incidental for too long and, in addition, I won't be spending too much time on setting the scene.

Life doesn't always afford us the time we would like; so when fate throws you an all too rare chance of happiness and, if you're truly blessed, love, then it's up to you not to let that chance slip through your fingers, and do everything possible to make even the smallest positive difference to someone else.

That said it's important for me to let you know that on the day that I died, my parents Bill and Jenny Green were both fifty years of age. Dad was a recently-retired police officer; six feet tall, still in decent physical shape, with close-cropped rapidly greying hair. He was a kind man; a trait he hid remarkably well from those who meant little to him, and he had an ironic, dry sense of humour that I would like to think he successfully handed down to his only child.

Mum was a very caring woman, who worked as a part-time secretary for a firm of solicitors; she was slim and, from a slightly uncomfortable objective point of view, probably quite attractive for her age. I would have

described her as a redhead; she would have glared at me and snapped that it was actually “strawberry blonde”.

The fact that my parents only form a small part of the chapters to come must never detract from the way they brought me up; the life they wanted for me, their unfailing love and support. I was very lucky to be able to call them Mum and Dad.

Exactly where my story unfolds is irrelevant: it could have been pretty much anywhere. I suppose there will be some clues, but unnecessary description will only deflect my attention - and by definition yours also - from the events that are about to unfold.

INTRODUCTION

There was little outward sign of life in the motionless form lying by the side of the dimly-lit road. A slim brunette with mascara-tainted tears rolling down her face was kneeling next to the unconscious young man, gently stroking his hand.

The wailing siren of the approaching ambulance reached a shrill crescendo as it pierced the evening gloom. A small crowd had gathered, but the young girl's eyes never once strayed from the prone body before her.

18/06/1978

It was an absolutely glorious Sunday morning, with brilliant sunshine beating down from a virtually cloudless sky.

In the kitchen of our home at no.30 Sycamore Street, Mum handed over a creased one-pound note with a smile and a gentle touch on the arm.

“Hold onto the money Matthew! Remember it’s the *Sunday Express* you want. And don’t forget the change!”

I shuffled awkwardly. Dad’s Sunday morning newspaper - and in particular the crossword - came under the general heading of “institution”. He rarely worked on a weekend, and routine always dominated Dad’s time away from the station; never more so than the extra-large crossword, the first clues of which would always be mulled over amidst falling crumbs of brown toast.

This was the first time I’d been allowed to go to the shop on my own and, as I had only just entered my teens, this was pressure indeed.

“Don’t be long, son.” Dad’s voice drifted through from the dining room, followed almost immediately by the clink of tea cup being safely returned to saucer.

“Okay!”

I almost skipped past the dining room and out of the front door of our spacious bungalow. The front garden was relatively small and the path consequently short. The main road was lined with the trees that had presumably given the street its name.

After strolling along the road for maybe fifty or sixty yards, I became aware of just how quiet it was. I hadn’t seen anyone; no cars had passed me (in either

direction) and there weren't even any birds twittering away in the trees.

Weird.

The briefest, most peculiar feeling of unease suddenly swept over me, but a quick shrug of the shoulders and onward to the newsagent's; my sweaty left palm was adding yet more creases to the already crumpled note.

The shop was about a ten-minute walk from home - a ten-minute brisk walk.

It took me fifteen.

The newsagent was situated on the corner of a cross-roads at the end of a sweeping left-hand bend in the road - well it swept left on the way there - and as I neared the start of the bend, a familiar looking car appeared.

Funny, I still wasn't aware of any sound, but it was (or at least it looked like) my Grandad's car; an elderly beige Volkswagen Beetle. Surely there couldn't be another one?

I really didn't like the car: it was so stuffy. I had always found it difficult to sit on the back seat for longer than ten minutes without being overcome by the urge to throw up. In fairness, I suppose it was slightly more than an urge, as the upholstery and several roadsides would have readily testified.

By now the car had almost drawn level with me. Grandad's unmistakable smile shone through the windscreen, and he gave a cheery wave as he passed.

I glanced back over my shoulder but strangely, the car was nowhere to be seen.

Dad hadn't mentioned anything about Grandad popping down. He and Grandma lived over two hours

away, so a visit was usually something of an event. I quickly convinced myself there had to be a simple explanation and, with renewed purpose, I strode out towards the shop...

As I jogged back along Sycamore Street past numbers ten, twelve, fourteen, sixteen, *Sunday Express* folded neatly under my arm - not too tight, couldn't risk a crinkled crossword - I noticed there was still no beige Beetle outside our house. I involuntarily shook my head to clear the sudden shroud of confusion and uncertainty that had fallen.

The car, *that* car, the face, the smile; it *was* Grandad.

I arrived home, closed the gate behind me and raced along the narrow path, through the door that had been left open (by me), and into the hall. I peered into the dining room, which was the second room on the left (the first was the lounge) fully expecting Dad to be sitting at the table, toast chilling nicely on his plate, waiting ever so (im)patiently for his paper.

The dining room was empty.

"Matthew, is that you?"

"Yes Mum. Where are you?"

"Just in our bedroom. Can you come here?"

That strange feeling returned and my stomach began, inexplicably, to churn. My parents' bedroom was normally out of bounds. I racked my brains, but couldn't remember doing anything wrong.

Their room was at the far end of the lavishly carpeted hall. I reached the white-glossed door, which was slightly ajar and faltered for a moment. I was unsure whether to knock, or just walk in.

I tapped gently on the door.

“Just come in Matthew.”

Although Mum’s words were gently spoken; her voice wavered slightly, betraying the emotional scene that awaited me. Dad sat hunched on the edge of the bed; Mum had her arm around his shoulders, her eyes still glistening from the tears she had obviously shed and tried - not very successfully - to conceal. I placed myself to Dad’s right. Mum’s right arm was just long enough to give my back a consoling rub. Dad lifted his head.

He’d been crying as well.

“What’s the matter?” I mumbled feebly.

“We’ve just had a phone call Matthew and ... there’s no easy way to tell you: I’m so sorry, your Grandad passed away peacefully during the night.”

A brief pause.

“Grandad’s died? But he can’t have, I’ve just...” My voice tailed off. Whatever I’d seen, or thought I’d seen, now was not the time to mention it.

Dad leant over and hugged me. He was shaking though, and tears were starting to trickle slowly down his face. I sensed he probably wanted to be on his own, and when Mum got up from the bed, I clambered to my feet and shuffled slowly out of the room. Mum closed the door and whispered: “It’s a shock for us all Matthew. Dad will be fine; I just think he needs a few minutes to himself. Are you okay?”

“I ... I think so. Can I go out for a while?”

Mum closed her eyes and nodded her approval.

I needed to be alone too. Outside in the fresh air, I strolled down to the end of the garden path and peered over the gate out towards the main road. No beige Beetle.

Not that I expected to see one.

But I *had* seen one, and I saw who was driving it too.

I wanted to make sense of it, but I couldn't understand and although I wanted to be brave, the tears came nonetheless.

11/09/1983

The twin beams from the headlights of my father's car illuminated the side of the adjoining building. The vehicle crawled forward and the driver's window was wound down.

"Take care, young man," my Dad called, giving a mock salute.

"Remember to stay in touch Matthew; I love you," whimpered my mother, the ever-present tissue dabbing away the latest in what had been a steady stream of tears.

The car drew away; my father's arm emerged through the presumably open window to bid a final farewell and, as the accelerator was depressed, my parents disappeared...

And so there I was, standing on my own outside what was, for the next ten months or so at least, my new home: a basic room in a university Hall of Residence.

I checked my watch. It was just after half past nine; a long drive home for Mum and Dad. I was glad they'd come to see where I'd be living; to save me from lugging suitcases on a train, but most importantly to give me the reassurance that I so desperately needed as I was about to embark on this new adventure - my first tentative steps into a more adult world.

For all the apparent calmness I tried to display as we headed up the motorway, I was a mixed-up bundle of nerves below the surface. Much as I wanted to be independent (and believed I could be) I had always had the sanctuary of no.30 Sycamore Street.

That safety net, call it what you will, was no longer there and, much as I was prepared for what I thought lay ahead (I could cook, wash, iron etc), the reality was surely

going to be something of a shock to the system. I opened the main door to the building and went back into my room: number nine.

The room was a reasonable size; there was space for a bed, a desk - complete with inexpensive plastic chair - a cupboard and a sink. The walls were decorated (in the loosest sense of the word) a bizarre lime green colour. I don't know whether the grey curtains had arrived before or after the second coat of paint was applied to the walls, but I don't think the university's decorating department had spent much on the services of an interior designer.

My limited array of clothing had been hung up tidily in the cupboard and folded neatly into the shelves on the right-hand side - courtesy of Mum! Cooking utensils and food supplies had been safely deposited in my locker in the shared kitchen and fridge, and my state of the art (had it been 1970) record player was the sole occupant of the desk ... for now.

I sat on the bed, now resplendent in the green duvet cover that had made the trek north (and remarkably didn't look too out of place given the gaudy colour of the walls), and heaved a sigh; maybe of relief, but probably including a hint of nerves as well.

In many ways, the step from school to university was a logical one. I had studied hard and achieved pretty good grades and, from the perspective of academic ability, I felt that the move into further education could be justified. My parents certainly agreed and I felt incredibly fortunate that they were in a sound enough financial position to support me through the next three years.

Dad had recently left the police force (having completed his thirty years' service), so I didn't delve into the financial arrangements - at Dad's insistence - but I

knew only too well that I owed it to both my parents to work hard, and ensure I gained a degree that did justice to their generosity.

Perched on the edge of the bed, I gazed out of the window, the view from which was filled by the neighbouring Hall, and illuminated by the sporadic lights of newly-occupied rooms; some dimmed by closed curtains, but one or two revealing the latest arrivals.

I wondered if they were feeling as apprehensive as I was?

Over the past five-and-a-bit years, I'd spent many a long hour on the edge of my bed at home, just sitting in quiet contemplation whilst gazing out onto the suburban comings and goings in Sycamore Street.

Those periods of introspection seemed to dominate a significant portion of my teenage school years; I had never fully come to terms with Grandad's death, I guess. It wasn't the fact that he'd actually passed away - upsetting enough, but inevitable nonetheless - no, it was those bizarre events on that sunny summer morning that had become almost a burden caused, I suppose, by the fact that I felt I couldn't tell anyone what I'd witnessed.

Accepted truth and *my* truth were so totally different. Who else would have believed what I knew I had seen? At times I was consumed by guilt, perhaps selfishly, that the chance of a farewell was denied to my father, but given (in a sense) to me. There were times when my head felt like it was being squeezed by a force that I was incapable of withstanding, and as this phase coincided with the uncontrolled hormones of puberty and the blight of a certain amount of bullying, my transition into a stereotypical surly teenager must have seemed complete.

I struggled so hard to make sense of the confusion inside my head, but the descent from happy child to insecure and troubled adolescent was rapid and very evident to those closest to me.

Maybe a fresh start in a new place where no one knew anything about me, or my life, would be just what I needed?

Whatever the case, my reflection was interrupted by a loud knock at the door, which actually made me jump.

Leaping up (rather athletically given that it was nearly ten o'clock), I opened the door to find a brunette in a state of relative undress grinning at me.

“Hi! I’m Jodie! I’m from one of the other Halls, but we’re having a sort of pyjama party upstairs and I wondered if you wanted to join us? What’s your name by the way?”

“Er... Matthew... Matt.”

“Please to meet you Ermatthew!”

Jodie smiled and held out her hand, which I accepted as my face reddened.

“Pleased to meet you too! Look ... I’m sorry, I’ve only just arrived and...”

“It’s fine,” Jodie interjected. “Hopefully we’ll get the chance to meet you properly soon yeah?!”

“That would be really good; thanks!”

Jodie turned and headed towards the staircase at the end of the corridor, her diminutive frame - with shorts...very short shorts and a t-shirt being her apparent night attire of choice - quickly disappearing through the fire door and back upstairs to the party which, by the sound of it, was beginning to get into full swing.

I closed the door and flopped back onto the bed.

It wasn't long until I decided to bring a very long day to an end; my nightwear of choice was whichever pair of pants I happened to have on, which in fairness was another bloody good reason for giving the party a miss...

As it turned out, I actually slept better than I had expected; the noise from the party kept me awake, but only for a short while. I guess the fatigue from the journey (a serious case of "car lag") got the better of me, but I awoke to what seemed to be a reasonably bright morning - well as bright as grey curtains would ever allow.

It was a day for settling, or at least trying to settle, into my new surroundings. The lukewarm shower in the bathroom (strictly speaking it was actually in the bath) that was situated almost directly opposite my door was pleasant enough, as was the breakfast of cereal swimming in milk from a carton marked "Matt's KEEP OFF" in black pen. Not that anyone else along the corridor would have had a clue who Matt was.

Or maybe someone else shared my name and was about to be pleasantly surprised at his welcome present of just under a pint of semi-skimmed milk.

A stroll to the supermarket to stock up on the essentials - mostly coated in chocolate - was followed by a brief informal introduction to the bar of the Students Union. Whilst a couple of the girls from the upstairs floor had yet to arrive, all the male occupants of the ground floor were in situ. The good news was that none of them were called Matthew, so at least the milk was safe.

As I mentioned at the outset, I have no intention spending time telling you all about the new acquaintances with whom I was about to share a corridor, kitchen,

bathroom and (rather worryingly) toilet. Suffice to say they were basically several outwardly decent enough blokes with different names, from different places; none of whom would be even a minor player in my story.

In fact, the only person on my corridor that deserves a special mention at this stage is Hilda, our Hall cleaner. We were supposed to keep our own rooms tidy, but as I soon learned, one pathetic glance in her general direction was usually enough for Hilda - complete with apron and blue rinse - to come to my rescue.

If there was a price to pay, it would come in the form of her latest tale of woe from the bingo (“I only needed number twenty-seven, then Mary from Market Street shouted ‘house’ on fifteen. I mean it’s not like she needs the money; her husband died two years ago, he had a good job and Brenda from next door reckons she got a small fortune from the insurance. Not that I mind, of course.”)

In fairness, it was hardly a trial; while she was wittering away, I could indulge in a game of “spot the tooth.”

From a purely dental point of view, most of Hilda’s teeth could technically be described as missing and having a sneaky peep to see if one of the many gaps had widened always helped pass the time of day.

Anyway, Freshers’ Week came and went in a bit of an alcoholic haze, mostly because drink seemed to give me the confidence to try and mix. My course duly commenced, and student life was officially underway. I was studying History ... because I enjoyed it, but also because I hadn’t a clue what I actually wanted to do with my life.

It should have been fun; no one to complain if I stayed up or out late and plenty of free time to study or socialise, but I just couldn't seem to settle. I spoke to Mum more often than I probably should, and I suppose to the objective eye, I was homesick.

Maybe so, but it felt more than that. I made what was probably a mistake by constantly shutting myself away over the weeks that followed, in a vain attempt to try and work out why I was feeling so low. It was a scene that had been played out so many times back home; Matthew sitting on the edge of the bed, or standing in front of the mirror, staring at the reflection and wondering just who was the blond-haired six-footer gazing back.

After about three weeks, I was still unable to unable to unravel the tangled threads of negativity inside my head, and I could sense my mood was spiralling rapidly downward.

In more lucid moments, I knew that I should try and talk to someone, but knowing and finding someone were different things altogether.

I'd managed to cope (after a fashion) through school basically on my own, but the fact that I didn't - or felt I couldn't - speak with my parents or the few friends I had at school is perhaps missing the point. The truth was that had the situation been different, at least they were there; and now they weren't. I was surrounded by people that were essentially strangers, although I would readily concede that no one else but me was responsible for the lack of integration.

06/10/1983 (a.m.)

A couple more days passed - uneventfully. Then, for no apparent reason, I had a particularly restless night, although I did eventually get over for a couple of hours. I knew I'd had some sleep because I had an extremely vivid dream, hardly for the first time.

I was at school. It was under attack. Planes appeared overhead and soldiers were approaching the main buildings from across the sports fields. A plane would crash, as I always seemed to know it would: the dream recurred in exactly the same way every time. I'd be desperately trying to evade capture. I had to negotiate my way through buildings and more exposed parts of the school grounds, and I would always manage to avoid detection until I got to the very edge of the grounds; but every time I glimpsed a sight of freedom, I would be discovered and, with nowhere to run, I'd wake up...

I wasn't any good at interpreting dreams, but these repeated images almost always left me feeling heavy-headed. Not the ideal way to start a day.

That said, with a lecture-free morning, the plan (such as it was) was to grab breakfast, get ready and, well, the rest of the plan was work in progress.

Part one was easily accomplished. All was peaceful along the corridor and I still had enough milk left to drown a huge bowl of cereal. I was still hungry, so I decided to gamble on a couple of slices of toast.

The university had kindly supplied one of those bloody temperamental toasters that popped when the bread was barely warm then next time didn't ping at all. The first sign of trouble would be the tell-tale smell of burning and wisps of smoke rising gently from the charred remains of

what should have been part of the most important meal of the day.

Strangely, I always associated the smell of fresh white toast with my mother's parents. They never bothered with a toaster, but browned their bread under a grill that was ignited by a stream of gas and a spark from this spark igniter kind of thing that looked a bit like a pen.

It didn't always work first time and you had to be ever so careful to avoid the flame that shot out from under the grill if the gas had been on for a few extra seconds.

I found myself smiling at the memory. I hadn't been to see them for a few months, and made a mental note to get in touch very soon.

I would have been far better served making a mental note not to forget the toast.

My nostrils sensed the change from brown to black, and I had little choice but to chuck the second half of my breakfast into the bin and fling the kitchen window wide open in the hope that the smell might disperse before anyone else got up - or called the fire brigade.

Shower taken, teeth cleaned, hair ruffled back into place and before long, I was dressed and pretty much ready; sadly, far too early for the rest of my day to be mentally mapped out.

The measure of my lack of preparation for the hours ahead lay in the fact that I actually considered spending a bit of time on an essay that wasn't even nearly due for completion. Whatever happened to last minute?

I got as far as leaning across the desk to grab the half-used pad of A4 paper, but before I had the chance to choose from my assortment of biros (all with chewed tops) there was a gentle tap at the door. Given my fairly

reclusive existence, I wasn't usually inundated with visitors, but what was intriguing was not so much the fact that someone was outside my room, but that the sound of the knock was so soft it was barely audible. I dropped the paper onto my desk, crossed the room and opened the door.

My heart actually skipped a beat when I realised it was Jodie, a tell-tale, albeit totally unexpected reaction which caused me to inhale sharply. We'd chatted quite a few times since that initial, rather surreal, meeting. The exchanges had been brief, stilted, but important to me at least, because I was really attracted to her.

Jodie didn't notice. She was gazing down towards the floor, but as she raised her head it was pretty obvious that she'd been crying.

“Are you ok?”

Jodie smiled weakly.

“I was just wondering if you knew where Phil is?”

Phil occupied the room next door to me, at the very end of the corridor. I'd not spent a great deal of time in his company, but enough to know that he came under my general description of “prick”. He was loud and his attempts at humour were both near the proverbial knuckle and unfunny in equal measure. I can't quite describe his voice (although it did have a distinctive West Yorkshire twang), except to say that he spoke on a frequency that my ears just couldn't escape. Even in a crowded room, his voice seemed to scythe through any level of general buzz, and he clearly relished his self-appointed life and soul status.

“Sorry, no. Are ... are you okay?”

Jodie attempted a smile: “I'm fine Matt, thanks.” She then seemed to hesitate. I don't know who she was

trying to convince, but she looked so pale and fragile, something had clearly upset her. “Actually, I’m not really okay. Do you mind, if I, er, come in for a minute?”

“Yeah. Of course. Here...” I held the door open and Jodie shuffled in.

The door had one of those mechanisms that made it shut automatically, but for some reason, my door seemed to have a mind of its own. Normally it would close slowly, almost serenely, but without the force to shut completely, but if you ever left the room without your key - which I had managed twice in a matter of weeks - then the bloody thing flew back and slammed shut with a thud that was instantly followed by a string of well-chosen expletives.

Jodie sat on the edge of the bed - right on the edge. I plumped for the opposite end of the bed (the pillow end) and almost wedged myself into the corner of the room, trying but probably failing, to appear relaxed, because having an attractive girl sitting on my bed was the most natural thing in the world...

Which, of course, it wasn’t.

If you’re interested, I wasn’t exactly what you would call prolific in the young lady department. In fairness, I wasn’t prolific even if you’re not interested. As an adolescent, I’d attended biology lessons with the very real intention of learning and understanding all about the clinical process of reproduction, but although theory is all well and good, science books don’t teach you how to stop blushing whenever someone you like looks at you.

My early teenage years were, like most boys I suppose (although I never gave it any thought at the time), a period of change, of hormones, of self-satisfaction and of

preparation - gradually developing into desperation - for an experience of the “real thing”.

When that moment finally arrived, aged seventeen years, eight months and four days (roughly), my willing, but most definitely underwhelmed, partner was called Beth. She was good-looking, clever and the best wing attack in the school, all of which were ingredients in the recipe for disaster that was my first clumsy fumble.

It could only get better...

Actually, it didn't, as it very soon transpired that 1st XV blind-slide wing forward had slightly better credentials than yours truly.

Anyway, after a silence that probably last no more than a couple of seconds, but felt more like a minute, Jodie whispered: “I'm sorry Matt, this isn't really fair. I didn't mean to bother you.”

“It's fine,” I replied in my best upbeat voice. “Is there anything I can do?”

Jodie took a deep breath, straightened her back and flicked a hand across the side of her face, brushing some hair behind her left ear: “I ... I just wanted to talk to someone.”

“You can talk to me if you want,” was more of a plea than a reply.

“Really?”

“Well yeah, but only if I'm not getting in the way?”

“Phil?”

I nodded.

“No, it's nothing like that.”

Jodie suddenly seemed much more composed and assured. Although we were sitting several feet apart, she

moved slightly - which was a relief because she'd been pretty precariously balanced on the edge of the bed - and leant towards me: "Well I've just got one lecture this morning, so if you're free later, we could go for a coffee?"

"What about the Green Dragon? They do hot drinks, but we could have something a bit stronger if you wanted?"

"That would be great!"

"Is twelve okay?"

"Perfect. And thank you!"

"It's really fine. I could do with some company too."

Jodie glanced at me out of the corner of her eyes: "Really? Is everything okay with *you*, Matt?"

"Yeah," I fibbed. But it was a convincing fib. "I'll see you at twelve. Just meet you there?"

"See you there!" Jodie jumped to her feet and opened the door, flashing a smile as she left that caused my chest to instantly tighten.

As I heard the main outer door click shut, my brain finally lost control of a right hand that had been desperate to make a fist and punch the air. I was tempted to go over to the window and watch Jodie on her way back to her own Hall. Watch would be a bit of an exaggeration really because the buildings were situated quite close together and there was only a small bit of the main path through the campus that was visible from my room.

On the other hand, if I caught just the tiniest glimpse of her, then it would make what had just happened undeniably real; and at that moment, it didn't feel real at all. Yet there I was, sitting quite still, gazing blankly (it

was an expression that came naturally) at the opposite wall, as the realisation dawned that Jodie and I would be sharing a drink in just a couple of hours.

My mind was racing. Partly out of curiosity as to what Jodie wanted to talk about and (even though I wasn't her first choice) why she was willing to talk to *me*; but also, there was a feeling of anticipation that I'd maybe get the chance to reveal how low I'd been feeling.

Or was that a bit selfish?

I suppose much depended on what Jodie was going to say. So, why didn't I just bloody stop thinking and just wait and see? If only it were that easy; after all, thinking was the thing I did best.

I checked the time. It was just after twenty-to-ten.

Two hours and nineteen minutes ... one hundred and thirty-nine minutes. Hang on, one hundred and thirty-eight. Shit, so little time: so much thinking to do!

The Green Dragon was only about fifteen minutes walk from the campus, but it lay quite near a spacious park which I'd strolled round just the once. I had visited the pub several times more, but I would hardly have described it as my local.

I wasn't really the architectural type, but the building seemed very well presented: mock-Tudor, painted white, with dark wooden-beams and a huge oak front door. A large board carrying the words "The Green Dragon" sat incongruously above one of the antique-looking beams and, hung high above the door, a sign swayed imperceptibly in the gentle breeze; the rampant green monster staring down from its lofty position, threatening to breathe fire at anyone who dared cross the pub's threshold.

I walked straight through the open door (without being incinerated) and made for the bar. What I liked about this particular hostelry was the way that the interior had retained its character, being separated off into little compartments for smallish groups of people to sit and get smashed in relative comfort.

There was a more open plan area near the bar, dominated by a huge coal fire that, to the best of my knowledge, was still used (but wasn't lit on this particular October lunchtime). The bar itself was like most others, rows of pumps and bottles. Dry cider flowed from one of the pumps, so I approached the bar and ordered a pint from the lad wearing his Green Dragon t-shirt.

For a Thursday lunchtime - at the first stroke it would be eleven forty-seven precisely - it was fairly quiet, and I was able to find what I thought would be quite a cosy corner away from the where the other customers had congregated.

There was a sturdy wooden table flanked by four chairs that looked like they'd been recently reupholstered. The first one I sat on made a rather worrying squeaking sound and when the legs began wobbling from side to side depending on where I shifted my weight, I swiftly discarded it in favour of a more robust model. I pictured the image of Jodie coming over just as the chair waved the white flag and collapsed, leaving nothing but my arms and legs protruding from the wreckage.

This now meant that Jodie would have to sit opposite me, unless she wanted to gamble on the "seat of doom." I took a gulp from my pint, plonked it down on a beer mat and then became almost transfixed by the bubbles that fizzed up from the bottom of the glass.

A gentle hand on my shoulder broke my concentration; I jumped (embarrassingly) and turned to see Jodie looking down at me.

“Sorry Matt!” she grinned, her hand still resting on my shoulder. “You looked miles away. You haven’t been here long have you? Do you want another drink?”

“Er, no, I’ve only just got this one. Let me get yours. What do you want?”

“It’s okay. You can get the next one!”

Jodie headed for the bar and I watched her walk the few yards across the floor. She was wearing jeans and a loose-fitting blue sweatshirt and I immediately knew I was in danger of becoming transfixed for the second time in as many minutes.

I made a deliberate effort not to stare as Jodie returned; half pint glass in hand.

Thankfully, I didn’t have to explain about the collapsible chair. Jodie slipped into the seat directly opposite me, let out an exaggerated sigh of relief and smiled. She had a perfect set of white teeth, but those rich sparkling brown eyes were magnetic, almost hypnotic.

“Well here we are!” Jodie said brightly - and naturally. I reckoned if I’d have said those same words I’d have sounded like a complete arse.

“How was your lecture?”

“Yeah, good thanks!”

“What course are you doing?”

“Nursing. It’s what I’ve always wanted to do. You?”

“History. I’ve no idea what I really want to do!”

Jodie smiled again. So far so good!

She had a soft, but distinctive regional accent that probably wouldn't suit any attempt at written replication, and my guess was that she didn't live too far away. This was confirmed after I'd revealed my home town, and Jodie explained that her home was no more than a bus ride away; quite a long bus ride in fairness, but relatively speaking not that far. I wanted so much not to pry, but I couldn't help myself!

“What made you want to stay in Halls rather than travel from home?”

Jodie flinched, slightly uneasily perhaps?

“A few things I suppose. My Dad has recently remarried and, well I just wanted a bit of independence as well.” She paused for a second: “... I get on well with my Dad; and my stepmum is really nice too. They would have been happy if I'd decided to stay at home, but I just felt the time was right to make the break, even though it's only a few miles!”

The conversation drifted along far more easily than I could have imagined or expected: Dad was a police officer; Mum was a secretary. I enjoyed tennis and darts, which I played equally energetically: “Oh and I absolutely *hate* nightclubs and dancing!”

“Really?!” Jodie pulled a face of mock horror: “I love dancing. In fact, I have a bit of a confession to make; I had ballet lessons when I was young!”

My horrified face was genuine.

“Worse still, I enjoyed them too; although when I think about it, the teacher could be a bit of a cow!”

“In what way?”

“Oh, I don't know, she was this old fat woman, Miss Lefèvre they called her. I think the oldest in the group was

only about fourteen and some were as young as eight or nine, but she just used to sit there and tell us what to do in French: ‘Plié, jeté, entrechat. Oh très bien mes enfants!’”

“So where was she from?”

“Derby.”

I actually laughed out loud.

“Yeah, her name and accent were just so fake!”

I was building up a pretty scary picture of Miss Lefèvre: “So those words that you said: what do they mean?”

“Plié is a position where you bend your knees but keep your hips, knees and feet turned forward.”

“Does it hurt?”

“It probably would if I tried it in these jeans!”

A much more pleasant thought than Miss Lefèvre.

“The other two are types of jump. Jeté is from one foot to the other and entrechat is when you change the positions of your feet in mid air, but before you ask, I’m not going to demonstrate.”

“Shy?!”

Jodie laughed and shook her head, her right hand then flicking some stray hair from her cheek: “No Matt, just getting old!”

We chatted away until our glasses were empty. Maybe the alcohol had helped remove a certain amount of the unease I sometimes felt in female company (make that attractive female company), but this felt different. Jodie was definitely attractive and that would usually prevent me making even the most basic conversation, but not only was I able to string together a few sentences, I was able to do so without making a complete fool of myself.

“Do you want another drink?” I asked fully expecting a negative response.

“Yeah, why not! I haven’t got any lectures this afternoon; what about you?”

“Me neither,” I lied.

I bought Jodie another half of lager and myself a second pint of cider. I knew only too well that drinking it would take me to roughly fifty per cent of my pitiful alcoholic tolerance. I also knew that cider was a very effective tongue loosener.

All the time we’d been talking, I’d noticed that her eyes had kept gazing intently (almost unnervingly so) at me. It was a bit like twin hazel drills boring into my mind. That said, it felt nice to have someone paying me some attention, but she’d made me feel so relaxed I’d almost forgotten that I needed to find a way of asking the reason why she’d wanted to talk in the first place.

“So anyway,” I picked up the thread from before my trip to the bar, “do you still go dancing?”

“Not any more, although a couple more lagers and I might be tempted!”

We both smiled.

“No,” Jodie continued, “I stopped when I was about thirteen. I started playing netball at school, and I really enjoyed it. It kind of took up a lot of my spare time with training and stuff. Something had to give and, in the end, it was the dancing.”

“So, what position did you play?” I enquired using my most knowledgeable voice ... whilst praying she hadn't been a wing attack.

“Usually centre. I’d have liked to have been in attack, but I’m not really tall enough to be a goal shooter, and in fairness, the team had a brilliant goal attack who had trials for England in her age group.”

“Wow, that’s *really* impressive; you must be a good player. Funnily enough I’ve actually watched a few games of netball.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I went out with a girl for a while who played in the school team.” Then came the afterthought: “But she dumped me.”

“Awww.”

I wasn’t entirely sure whether that was an “awww” of genuine pity or the “yeah whatever” variety. I took it as the former, because ... well because she just looked like the sort of person who would care. And then two words spilled out of my mouth. I don’t why I chose that particular moment to go all serious; in truth, it just kind of happened: “Anyway Jodie...”

Bizarrely, in that split second, I sensed my heart miss yet another beat. Why was I suddenly so anxious? The tone of my voice had an immediate effect on Jodie too. In just two small words, the focus of the conversation was about to become serious; it was a fact that we both knew and Jodie’s face definitely betrayed.

I didn’t need to add anything, but I did anyway: “If there’s something you want to talk about, I just want you to know that I’m happy to listen.” My voice seemed to falter ever so slightly; a gulp of cider was urgently needed: “Look, I know we don’t know each other all that well, but I also know that sometimes it can be important to talk.”

“Do you?”

I nodded, looked involuntarily at the floor, then at Jodie. For a fleeting moment, she averted her eyes, but she was smiling soothingly and I had the weirdest fluttery sensation inside my chest as I smiled back.

“Are you finding it easy? Settling in I mean: are you finding it easy?” The question, rather unexpectedly, came from Jodie.

“Erm ... I guess it’s been harder than I thought,” was the understated response. “Why?”

“I’m actually finding it hard Matt. Really hard.”

“Is there any particular reason?” I sensed that my grip round the bottom of the pint glass tightened as I spoke.

“No ... yes ... I really don’t know.” Jodie curled up her face and frowned, seemingly irritated with the vagueness of her words.

The thumping in my chest was a strong and repetitive hint that I was on the verge of dipping my toes into potentially deep emotional waters, and it was a touch concerning that I seemed to have run out of probing open questions so early in the conversation.

“Do you think it might have something to do with still being reasonably close to home?”

Jodie paused for moment and shook her head: “No I don’t think so.”

“Oh, okay. I just wondered if the fact that you could pop home pretty much anytime you wanted is actually stopping you feeling totally independent?”

“I had never really thought of that. I do tend to call them every couple of days and I’ve been home most week-ends.”

“So, the change from being at school isn’t really as big as you’d imagined? Or hoped?”

Our eyes met. I was a hopeless reader of body language, but the look seemed to be one of acceptance. Maybe.

Jodie picked up her glass, but put it straight back down without taking a drink: “How have you coped, being so much further away from home?”

The question threw me, because it was - or at least it seemed - serious. It was almost as if Jodie had felt something that had made her decide to stop talking. Maybe she wanted to give herself some thinking time, or maybe I’d inadvertently steered her towards an invisible barrier. Whatever the case, even though I almost needed to talk - to offload - now wasn’t the time. I was in listening mode (whatever that was) and I simply wasn’t prepared for a moment for which I’d been preparing for years.

“I have found it tough at times ... but ... but well you’ve hardly said anything. I haven’t said something wrong, have I?”

Jodie shook her head, causing hair to flop across both sides of her face. She leant back and tucked the hair back behind her ears, then totally unexpectedly stretched her arms across the table and clasped my hands in hers: “You’re not in a hurry, are you?”

Those eyes...

“Er, no ... no, I’m not.”

“Well then! You first! You did say it was important to talk!”

“I know, but...”

Jodie squeezed my hands which were cupped inside hers, before letting go and relaxing back in her seat. Her apparent sense of relaxation certainly wasn't replicated on the opposite side of the table. The touch of her hands had reawakened the pounding in my chest, which had also been invaded by whatever was the collective noun for butterflies - my vote went for a "load".

This was going to go one of two ways: either I'd clam up completely, or suppressed memories and feelings were going to come tumbling out. The latter was likely to be embarrassing, but the former was cast-iron guaranteed to be awkward. Time for a deep breath.

"You were the first person I met when I arrived," was my less than convincing opening line. Jodie grinned at the memory. "I'd not long arrived and really didn't know how I was feeling; well apart from knowing I didn't feel like a party."

"I could tell!"

"That obvious eh?! The whole thing just felt weird. I've never really been away from home, certainly not for any great length of time. I've been on holidays and stuff, but even then, my parents were there, so things weren't much different to how they were at home. You go through your childhood, your formative years, then your teens, take a few exams, then all of a sudden you wake up one morning and you know that by the end of the day you'll be sleeping in a different bed, in a building where you don't know anybody. Basically, everything you've ever known changes just like that." I clicked the thumb on forefinger on my right hand, but nothing happened. I repeated the movement with my left hand, a loud click followed. "I never could bloody do that with my right hand!" I mumbled under my breath.

Jodie took a sip of lager. Her eyes widened, which I took as my cue to carry on.

“I didn’t really enjoy school. I worked hard, but I always found it difficult to make good friends and suppose I became quite withdrawn from time to time.”

“Was there any particular reason do you think?”

“A couple,” I hesitated. “I’ve never told anyone any of this before. Are you sure...?”

“Here,” Jodie offered her hand, which I clasped gently. Her hand was so soft. Mine was clammy.

“I ... I ... I was bullied Jodie. For most of the time I was in senior school.”

The pressure of Jodie’s grip increased noticeably: “Oh Matt. Why?”

“My Dad was a copper; simple as that. No one was ever going to say anything to his face, but his only kid was fair game.”

“How long did it last?”

“About four years, I suppose. It kind of eased off during my last year, mainly because all the older kids had left school. A lot of it was verbal stuff, a comment here, a comment there: doesn’t sound much now, but it chips away at you. You’d be surprised how many insulting words there are for a police officer; and I can remember all of them. It got to the point that I was almost ashamed of what he did for a living. More than that, I was even angry that he wasn’t just a builder or some bloke who worked in a shop, or a nine-to-five office job. Then one day I was just walking along one of the corridors in between lessons, when this lad who was coming the other way just stopped and smacked me. I wasn’t expecting it at all ... just wasn’t ready,” My voice tailed off. “The first punch was in the

stomach and doubled me over; the second hit me on the jaw. I remember all my teeth on one side of my mouth started throbbing. When I got my breath back, he had already walked off ... never said a word.”

“Matt, that’s awful. Why didn’t you say something?”

“He was older than me, bigger than me, and so were his mates, some of whom also decided I was fair game. I didn’t get hit in the face again, always somewhere where the bruises wouldn’t show. In the end, I suppose I thought this was what happened to people like me, so I just had to deal with it on my own.”

“People like who?”

I needed a moment to collect my thoughts. The pub was filling up with customers, mostly the collar and tie brigade taking an hour away from their desks. The hum of lunchtime banter had grown appreciably louder, but until that point, I simply hadn’t noticed. It was like Jodie and I had been sitting in our own private bubble where no one could hear us; and it took the rustling sound of a crisp packet being opened behind me, swiftly followed by a tell-tale waft of cheese and onion to burst that bubble. Now I needed to answer her question.

“The people that are all around you Jodie, but that you never really see.”

“I’m not sure what you mean?” A puzzled frown appeared on Jodie’s forehead, followed by a reassuring squeeze of my hand.

“It’s hard to put into words Jodie, especially since I’ve never tried to tell anyone before.”

“I know,” Jodie whispered.

“It’s like ... it’s like nobody notices you, like you’re ... not important. You bottle everything up and only let it out when the bedroom door is locked. I’d think, I’d cry, I’d think a bit more and I’d cry again - quietly though. Had to cry quietly. Sometimes there’d be this feeling, just a dark feeling, like a black sort of shroud had been put over me and invisible fingers would grab my head and press harder and harder until all the happiness was gone and just the tears were left.”

Jodie interrupted. If she sensed that hidden memories were rising too quickly to the surface, well she might well have been right: “Was it like that every night?”

“No, no, not every night.”

“There must have been some happy times though?”

“Oh God yeah!” At last, a smile to break the tension. “The holidays were always good. No insults or punches for a few weeks. I did have a few friends - good friends - but they never knew what was going on. They might have understood, but they might not, and to be honest Jodie, I was never brave enough to find out. The problem is the more you dwell on stuff, the harder it becomes to get things straight in your head, so you think even harder because you don’t want to feel like shit. The more you think, the worse you feel and so the cycle begins. Yes, there were good times, but they just get swallowed up: it gets to the point when you almost have to feel crap just to function ... just to get through the day.”

I looked at the table. If it had been possible, I would have looked through the table. Vivid images were dancing around inside my mind. The fists, the sneering faces; echoes of a past that I had fought so long and so hard to banish. But somehow, I felt different. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, lifted my head to look straight into

Jodie's eyes. I could feel the tears welling up, but I wasn't going to cry. Not this time.

"Wow ... I'm not sure I know what to say Matt. You've never told anyone about all of this?"

"Never."

"I can't believe you've kept this all to yourself for so long. I'm actually flattered that you felt able to tell me."

"Even though it was you that wanted to talk!" I managed a wry smile.

"I do Matt. And I will. Is it okay if I come and sit next to you?" Jodie raised her eyebrow in the general direction of the "seat of doom".

"Er ... it's probably best if you don't."

Jodie frowned again.

"No, it's nothing like that," I could spot sudden indignation a mile off, "I don't think the chair's all that stable, that's all." I gave the offending piece of furniture a shake to demonstrate the wobbly legs. "I'll come round there."

Jodie glided almost effortlessly onto the chair to her right. I skirted round the edge of the table, sliding my quarter-full pint glass along on its beer mat. I sat down - slightly awkwardly given our new proximity - and took a gulp of the now tepid cider.

Swapping seats had created a natural break in the conversation; and my concentration.

"Are you okay?" Jodie enquired.

I nodded.

"Sure?"

Another nod.

“Were you just expecting that things would be different ... better, now you’ve left school.” Clearly Jodie was not intending to allow me much respite!

“I was hoping so. I was actually quite looking forward to coming, you know, I thought I’d meet loads of people, none would know anything about me and maybe I could be judged for just being me. But after a couple of weeks I kind of realised I was starting to slip into old habits. And even though I think I would have seemed fine when I went to lectures or in company somewhere, it’s really hard trying not to give away how I was feeling most of the time, so I suppose my room became a sort of sanctuary where I could close the door and not have to fight anymore. I do seem to get on okay with everyone in the Hall, and I’m glad about that; but you can’t just keep locking yourself away and expect people to bother with you. Maybe I just need to fight a bit harder, but whatever I do, it needs to be for *me* and not what might suit those around me. I’m rambling now aren’t I?”

“Not at all Matt. Come here...”

With that, she shuffled across to the edge of her chair, leant in towards me and wrapped her arms around me. It was a sudden, but seemingly natural gesture that made me tingle from head to toe. Jodie released her grip and gently placed her left hand on my right cheek, before reversing the original shuffle back into the middle of her chair.

“What was that for?”

“Does there have to be a reason?”

I didn’t have an answer to that one.

“You said there were ‘a couple’ of things that had affected you: was there something else apart from the bullying?”

Her words prompted an immediate tight, almost sickly sensation in my stomach. I couldn’t talk about Grandad, at least not yet - and not here.

My silence was understood.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to push you. Do you want another drink?”

“I’d rather go for a walk. Do you mind?”

“How about the park?”

“I’d like that.”

“I’ll just pop to the loo.”

I got up to let Jodie past, and my eyes followed her as she meandered between the various tables and chairs towards the ladies’ toilet. I guessed Jodie was about five feet two or three, on the slim side of athletic and, if the truth be told, the back view was almost as nice as the one from the front. She was gorgeous.

More palpitations...

Actually, a quick visit was probably not a bad idea, so I followed Jodie’s example, but not her footsteps...

I was first to arrive at the main door; no nose-powdering for me. Jodie reappeared, beaming, with a small black bag swinging from her left shoulder. Funny, but I hadn’t even realised she’d brought a bag with her.

“Ready?”

I simply held the door open. I presumed the question was rhetorical.

We were greeted by a particularly pleasant October afternoon. There was one patch of blue sky, surrounded by

clouds of the white-edged lightish-grey fluffy variety, which were having little difficulty in obscuring the autumn sunshine. We crossed the road and ambled the couple of hundred yards to the park entrance.

A huge sign on the railings next to the gate showed the opening times: “These gates will be closed at six o’clock between September and March.”

Not surprisingly, given that it was a weekday afternoon, there weren’t too many folk milling about; a couple of young mothers pushing their offspring in state-of-the-art buggies, and several dog owners taking variously-sized canine companions for their daily constitutional.

The grassy expanse to our left was dominated by a giant oak tree, and on the other side of the path was a lake that was home to ducks, geese and a number of small (unoccupied) boats. Beyond the lake, there looked to be a kids’ play area, complete with slide, swings and a climbing frame.

Jodie headed for an empty bench, situated at the edge of the grassed area, facing directly out onto the lake. She turned and raised her eyebrows in the direction of the bench; she might as well just have bloody ordered me to sit down!

Getting away from the pub and into the open air seemed to relax me. Whether or not I was enclosed in the building, or the imaginary bubble, the claustrophobic atmosphere simply added to the mental strain of revealing long-hidden secrets. I suddenly felt that if I stopped now, I might never summon up the strength to talk about my grandfather.

“Have you been here before Matt?”

“To the park? Yeah, a few times. Can’t resist a slide!”

“Seriously!” Jodie laughed out loud.

“No ... I hate them. I think I’d probably get wedged at the top, blocking all the kids from having their turn. I am partial to a see-saw though!”

Jodie appeared uncertain as to whether I was telling the truth. I wasn’t; and I was momentarily (and totally inconsiderately) impressed with my own deadpan delivery.

That said, I felt just a trace of unease. A sense that now wasn’t the time for levity because we hadn’t got to the bottom of the serious stuff - actually in Jodie’s case we hadn’t even scratched the surface. One of us needed to talk, and I was suddenly overwhelmed by the urge to finish my story, however difficult it was going to be: “There is something Jodie; one of the biggest things that has happened in my life. Like with the bullying, I’ve never ever told anybody, but this is way more important to me. Don’t ask me why because I couldn’t explain, but I feel like I want to tell *you*. It’s something that has definitely changed the person that I am ... or maybe the person I’ve become.”

I took a deep breath; I could sense tears welling up even before I started relating events that had taken place five years earlier. I was finding it hard to look at Jodie. I was nervous, self-conscious, shy; but our eyes met (albeit briefly) and another involuntary tensing of my chest was all the confirmation I needed that she was genuine, even though I was all too well aware that I could be horribly wrong.

“Maybe it’s about time you did talk to somebody,” was Jodie’s soothing, yet matter of fact reply. “Maybe I’m the person that you need to talk to?”

“If I tell you, just don’t laugh, will you?”

Jodie closed her eyes and shook her head. The time had arrived...

“This sounds impossible but it happened and ... and ... I was thirteen and I was out walking - to the paper shop actually. It was dead weird because it was really quiet, no sound at all. Nothing. Then all of a sudden this car drove past and it was my Grandad’s car; it was like this rubbishy old car that I always threw up in.”

Jodie smiled: “Were you close to your Grandad?”

“Yeah I was; I was close to all my grandparents. But anyway, he grinned and gave me this big wave; I just waved back but when I turned round, the car just wasn’t there anymore. He lived away, so he didn’t often come down to visit and when he did, it would always be with my Grandma. So anyway, I got back from the shop, but everything felt strange; there was no car there, and Mum and Dad were in the bedroom and they were really upset. They called me in and told me that Grandad had died ... and he’d actually died the night before.”

Jodie’s right hand leapt instinctively to cover her mouth, which had opened slightly: “Oh my God, Matthew. What did you say?”

I closed my eyes and lowered my head: “Nothing. I said nothing. I just remember having to go out for a walk, to try and understand. I knew that people would say I’d just imagined it, but I didn’t know ‘til I got back home that something had happened to Grandad. For me to have absolutely definitely seen him, literally only yards from my

face, after he'd already passed away; how could I ever tell anybody Jodie? I couldn't just go over to Dad and say: 'Yeah I've just seen him driving past the house when ninety-odd miles away where he and Grandma lived, he wasn't alive anymore.'"

"And you've never told anybody?"

"Just you."

Jodie turned towards me, clasped my left hand and gently, almost tenderly, intertwined her fingers between mine. Her hand was cold, but the shiver that shuddered down my spine was nothing to do with the temperature of her hand.

"Please believe me Matt, I would never laugh at you; it's just not in my nature. I meant it; if you feel you can talk to me, then I'm happy to listen."

I squeezed Jodie's hand. She immediately tightened her fingers and softly caressed the palm of my hand with her thumb.

"I was only thirteen, but it's always there."

"What is it that's always there though?"

"The memory. The image of his face. I'm not sure I can explain, but everything that I saw, the implications of what I saw, they just stay with you. Do you understand what I mean?"

Jodie nodded and pondered for a moment: "If you haven't told anyone about your Grandad before, how did you cope with school and exams and stuff like that. Were you ever able to hide the memories - even for a while?"

"Maybe to a certain extent, but then I went to senior school and, well, you go from being the oldest kids in the

school to being the youngest; it's a big change and I guess you already know what followed."

I'd woken up that morning with two secrets I'd carried for years. The enormity of the pressure of keeping certain aspects of my life locked away was matched by the unexpected, yet huge wave of emotion that swept through me as I spoke the words. I screwed up my eyes in a pathetic attempt at hiding the tears that had now started to fall, the autumn chill making them feel icy against my cheeks. I managed a feeble smile.

"I actually felt guilty about Grandad."

"Guilty? Why?"

"Because ... he'd come and said goodbye, and..."

"It's alright." Jodie shuffled round slightly further, and placed other hand over our interlocked fingers.

"But nobody else ever had that chance. Why did I get the chance and not my Dad?"

There was a brief pause before Jodie replied: "You can't look at it like that though. You feel guilty and over the years you've beaten yourself up for something that was beyond your control."

"I know," my voice was little more than whisper by this point, "but it doesn't go away. You can't just magic the feeling away, or pretend that it didn't happen. It *did* happen, and for some reason, I was allowed to say goodbye. It just doesn't seem fair that other people weren't."

"If you look at it another way, maybe it was you that needed to say goodbye? Maybe that's why it happened?"

Despite having spent so much time thinking about the face smiling through the windscreen of that old beige

Beetle, Jodie's words really struck home: "I've never thought of it that way."

"Perhaps everybody else was where they needed to be; they could accept it easier? Perhaps you were the one that needed to say goodbye because if you didn't, you might have felt even worse than you actually did?"

I began to wonder how someone who in the scheme of my life was little more than a stranger could not only be so interested in listening to me pouring out my issues, but how she could have such insight: "I'd never really been aware of anyone dying before," I continued. "You know, no one I was close to, so you don't know how you're going to react - how you're supposed to react - and I just retreated inside myself."

"Matt you can't feel guilty for the fact that your Grandad came to say goodbye to you, but I know it's easy for me to say that. I'm no counsellor, but the two things you're putting together ... you feel guilty because you got to say goodbye and your Dad didn't, and then you got bullied at school, and do you ... do you see being bullied somehow as your punishment? Is that why you didn't speak up? Do you feel that you in some way deserved it because of the guilt you felt?"

I'd known Jodie for what, a couple of hours, yet she was right inside my head, and just seemed to get me in a way that I would never have believed possible.

"I ... I honestly don't know if I'd ever linked the two, er, the two things before Jodie," came the rather stilted reply. "I just thought that that's the way it was; that I was the sort of person who deserved to be called names, deserved to be hit. I didn't understand what I'd done wrong: like I said, maybe I just deserved it."

By now my emotional dam wall had been well and truly breached: “I just went even deeper inside myself and at that point I never thought I’d ever feel able to open up. You end up trying to deal with everything; growing up’s difficult enough at the best of times, but growing up feeling useless ... shit Jodie that’s hard.”

Silence followed. Not long, maybe only a couple of seconds, but when I glanced to my left, the expression on Jodie’s face had changed. A trace - an almost imperceptible trace - of what I could only describe as sorrow had drifted across her face.

“That’s so sad to hear,” she eventually replied, “because trust me I can relate so much to a lot of what you’ve said.”

Our fingers were still locked together and, was it me, or was her hand shaking ever so slightly? It couldn’t be the cold - although there was a chill in the still reasonably calm air - because our intertwined fingers were almost certainly the warmest bits of any exposed skin. Whatever the case, now was most definitely now Jodie’s time. One door had been unlocked; whatever lay inside the room containing my past had been revealed, but without illumination. The time to flick the light switch could wait; there was a second door to open...

I didn’t say anything. It was my turn to raise my eyebrows to show Jodie I was ready to listen, causing several wrinkles to appear on my forehead in the process. Gently, I tightened my fingers together. Jodie looked almost scared as she closed her eyes and took a long and deliberate gulp of air.

“Growing up has been so difficult for me too Matt. I’ve always self-loathed, and never felt worth anything.”

The immediate change in the tone of Jodie's voice was as noticeable as it was disconcerting - almost moving: "And I think I'll probably always feel like that."

In that split second, I was rocked by a feeling of being way out of my depth. I'd waited to offload for so long because I simply didn't have the ability to understand my own mind, but hearing a phrase like "self-loathing" was actually scary, and I really had no idea what was coming. But I knew that if Jodie wanted to talk, then I had to let her, and only hope that when I opened my mouth, I didn't go blundering in with some crass remark.

My hopes were in vain; crass comment alert: "That's really hard to understand Jodie, and I'll say sorry now because I'm about to go bright red, but from the outside you are really good looking, and seem as though you'd be dead popular and have loads of friends."

A resigned, yet forgiving smile followed: "It's a good front. Something I've learned over the years."

"Go on..."

"I don't really know where to start. Throughout my whole upbringing I was always pushed into the background by my Mum. She was a nasty woman. I was never ever good enough and I couldn't do right for doing wrong. My younger sister was always the one that got singled out for praise and that went on for years and when I was fifteen, my Mum left my Dad. I found out that she'd been cheating on him, and I suppose I've got a lot of guilt too because I totally took advantage of the fact that I was on my own with my Dad."

"How?"

I figured that I was less likely to say the wrong thing if my questions consisted of one word!

“I took the piss out of him really. I knew I’d get away with stuff; silly things like when he wanted me home, I’d stay out because I knew that even if he grounded me, he’d have to go to work so I knew I’d get out anyway. I actually ... I just feel like I wasn’t there for him when my Mum left and I think that’s something that’s always eaten me up. I used to get criticised by my grandmother - my Dad’s mother: ‘You should have been there to support him instead of acting up.’ I don’t know what he wanted from me though. I don’t know what I could have done at fifteen? So instead I just stayed out of the way and went off the rails. I got a boyfriend; and not a very nice one at that. There was a time I let him drive my Dad’s car; we went into a wall and I had to take the blame for it. And my Dad had money in his room as well, and I knew that every time he came over, he was pinching twenty quid. I knew, but I didn’t say anything; I couldn’t.”

“How did he treat you?”

“I don’t know ... he had this hold over me at first. He seemed really nice, but then started to get possessive and jealous. If we were out with friends, he always put me down; he’d tell me I’d never get anybody better than him. If he thought I was flirting with anyone, he’d get really angry and I was always worried what he’d do if he lost his temper.”

“He didn’t hit you, did he?”

“No thank God, but he threatened to. I wanted to be able to stand up to him, I really did; but I couldn’t. In the end, I genuinely felt that I wouldn’t be able to get anybody else.”

I became aware that I was stroking Jodie’s hand and the lower half of her (sweatshirt-covered) arm. I couldn’t remember starting to do it; I was so totally engrossed in

Jodie and the story she had to tell. She seemed quite composed - on the surface at least - but surely it couldn't have been easy to dredge up memories like those?

“How did it end?”

“My Dad found out about the money and sent him packing. He never bothered me again after Dad had spoken to him. I guess when it came to it, he wasn't as tough as he made out. The good thing was that right out of the blue I found I could open up to Dad and tell him everything. I felt like I'd been sort of blackmailed. He'd say all these things that he was going to do if I ever finished with him; he'd be sitting outside my house on a morning and when Dad went out to work, so I'd have to lock myself in. He'd threaten to tell my Dad things that we'd done if I finished with him, but when everything was out in the open, it was like such a release.”

Jodie looked straight at me; the gentle breeze that was drifting through the trees had separated her fringe and exposed a small triangular area of her forehead, a situation that was remedied with a soft shake of the head.

My own head was filled with questions, shooting round, fighting to be asked first. “Do you feel that you went off the rails not necessarily to punish your Dad, but maybe to try and deal with what your Mum had done? That she put her own happiness ahead of bringing up her kids?”

Jodie's gaze drifted across the park. “Maybe ... yeah ... she didn't even think about us; but she never had a good relationship with me in particular. It just showed how much she cared when she walked out a month before my ‘O’ levels.”

“So maybe it *was* all about her?”

“Uh huh. And then the one thing that hurt the most was when I went to see her from school; she told us to meet her from school on the day she left, but I didn’t know she was leaving. She lied to me and said she was keeping my sister off school to go to the doctors. I met her at my auntie’s and you could tell she had been crying; she took me upstairs and said that she needed to talk. She just said ‘I’ve left your Dad and I’m staying with your Auntie Jane for a while.’ Then she turned around and she said: ‘I’m keeping your sister with me and there’s not much room here, but if you want to come with *us*, then I’m sure we’ll be able to ... fit you in.’ Basically, she was saying I’m taking your sister and you can just go back to your Dad. I would have probably chosen my Dad anyway, but it wasn’t nice to feel like in a way I didn’t have a choice. It just reinforced the fact that I knew she didn’t care about me as much as she did about my sister. And that hurt.”

And at that moment, Jodie broke down.

I wasn’t sure what I should do; our fingers were still interlocked, but as she leant forward and hair covered some of her face, it was the movement of her shoulders which confirmed that the tears were flowing. I really wanted to hug her, but I sensed it was more important to let Jodie deal with this in her own way. I squeezed my fingers against hers, waited for a few moments until the rocking motion of her shoulders had subsided, and whispered: “I can’t imagine how painful it must have been; but looking back, do you feel that you almost punished your Dad for being the one who stood by you?”

Jodie sniffed and almost angrily wiped away the tears.

“Definitely. I had to take it out on someone, and I suppose I took it out on the person who was closest to me.

I took advantage of things. Dad was willing to let things go; you know, just for an easy life because he was dealing with so much rubbish. So, I do beat myself up to this day that I wasn't there for him more, and I became a bit selfish; just wanted to be away from it all. Out of it."

She looked up at me. Her eyes had reddened. Jodie took her hand away from mine, smiled, then wrapped her arms around me and held me much tighter than her size would have suggested possible.

"It's starting to get cold Matt; shall we head back?"

I nodded silently. I'd done a lot of silent nodding that afternoon.

As we stood up, I asked Jodie if she was okay. An affirming smile followed. We headed towards the exit; I was on Jodie's right and, for the first time since her arrival at the pub, the conversation ceased. I felt something brush against my arm and instinctively jumped and tried to draw away, only to realise that Jodie's hand was clasped softly around mine. I glanced first at our joined hands and then at Jodie. Her eyes, fleetingly closed, sprung open and gazed back at me. A smile, a squeeze of my hand and we walked on in silence.

I wasn't overly warm, but my palm was sweating. My chest was starting to thump and butterflies had suddenly appeared and were fluttering away inside me. I felt really weird. I wanted to say something, but no words would come. We passed the play area and neared the park's far exit. There were very few people around now and the breeze drifting through several overhanging trees lowered the temperature enough for me to feel a little less uncomfortable, although I was still very much aware of my heart pounding and the peculiar tingling in my stomach.

Then, entirely without warning, my legs stopped moving. I was convinced that I hadn't asked them to stop, but stop they had. I was rooted to the spot, seemingly powerless to move as Jodie shuffled in front of me. The fingers of both our hands were now interlocked and I was aware of the pressure of Jodie's gradually tightening her grip. Our eyes met and Jodie leant forward ever so slightly as she moved up on to her toes. Her face drew closer to mine and all I could do was close my eyes as our lips met for the first time.

The kiss was so soft, we barely touched, but in that instant, I felt ... actually I'm not sure how I felt. All the sensations of anticipation seemed to converge and then explode inside my mind. My head was a mass of uncontrollable darting electrical impulses, which rendered me temporarily incapable of coherent thought, but gave me a wonderful feeling of sheer excitement.

We kissed again, tenderly. Jodie unclasped her hands and fastened them around my neck; I placed my hands just above her hips and drew her gently towards me. Our mouths came together, lips parted, pressing harder, longer.

Our hands briefly relaxed their grip and we held each other close. Jodie nestled her head into my chest and I was able to run my fingers through her soft shoulder-length hair. A lingering embrace, then Jodie looked up and simply mouthed the words "thank you".

Our lips touched, briefly, one more time, and our stroll back to the campus continued hand in hand.

We soon arrived outside the door to my Hall; we had barely spoken since leaving the park. I don't know what Jodie was thinking, but I was trying to work out exactly how a knock on the door of an unoccupied room

could have led to; well I wasn't sure exactly what it had led to. What I did know was that I had, for the first time, to speak about long-hidden secrets, and the relief at having done so was palpable. In turn, an effective stranger had felt comfortable enough in my company to talk about some distressing parts of her past, and it must have taken a great deal of courage to do so.

Some of what I'd been told was emotive and occasionally distressing. To me, they were stories I was hearing for the first time, yet Jodie had lived through the grim reality of these situations and I couldn't begin to understand how she had managed to cope.

“Are you doing anything later Matt?”

“I've got no plans at all.”

“I'd like to carry on chatting later; but only if that's okay? You could come over to my room about ... say seven thirty?”

“I'd love that. Seven thirty it is!”

A grin, a peck on the cheek and she was on her way. I just stood and watched her running towards the next building. She was stunning; yet her looks and slim figure clearly hid a troubled past. All I knew was that in the past couple of hours, something special had happened and as Jodie disappeared out of view, I just wanted to learn more about her. There was clearly more that needed to be said (by both of us); and as for my chest and my stomach, well the butterfly invasion was gathering pace.

06/10/1983 (p.m.)

I suppose if I was being honest, I was in a bit of a daze when I reached my room. All was quiet along the corridor and, rather than spend too much time pondering, I decided to prepare an early tea. I potted through to the kitchen; I was sure I had the ingredients to rustle up something edible.

I rummaged around in the fridge and then my food locker: pasta, onion, a tin of tomatoes, a couple of rashers of bacon, a slightly shrivelled red chilli. Marvellous!

Well it was marvellous until I turned round and saw the pile of breakfast washing up that had been left in the sink. Hilda would sometimes help do the pots - even though it wasn't her job - but basically, it was up to every individual to clear up his own mess. And I wasn't happy.

“They have got to be fucking joking me! There's half a bloody week's pots here!”

Not strictly true.

“And look at the state of that frying pan! Jesus! It'll take a chisel to get all that shit off it!”

More accurately, it was the frazzled remains of some overcooked bacon.

I didn't really know why I was yelling. The kitchen was empty - as, presumably, were most of the bedrooms - but it was just so bloody infuriating being greeted by such a mountain of crockery that it made me feel a whole lot better to have a bit of a rant.

I needed to use the frying pan, so was left with little option but to reach for the washing-up liquid (and the toolbox) and scrub like I'd never scrubbed before.

Eventually, with the frying pan back to something like its sparkingly clean best, the tried and trusted meal was duly prepared with as much flair and finesse as I could muster. I stirred the sauce into the pasta and poured it into a dish, which I left to cool on the table in the middle of the room.

For the record, the food tasted pretty good and no, I didn't wash up afterwards.

I mulled as I ate; and the strange thing was that I couldn't really recall too much about telling Jodie about my Grandad and the crap I went through at school: I was totally preoccupied with those parts of her earlier teenage years that Jodie had disclosed.

It was heavy stuff and part of me felt a bit of a fraud for not having endured anywhere near as tough an adolescence as Jodie, but at the same time, there was a feeling of barely suppressed excitement based solely around the random fact that knocking on my door had not been Jodie's original intention. The word "fate" suddenly came to mind.

Half past seven couldn't come quick enough and eventually it was time to make the briefest of trips through the gathering gloom to the next Hall, up the stairs - the fourth and ninth steps creaked - and along the first-floor corridor to room no.14. I knocked.

"It's open!"

I nudged open the door and peered into Jodie's room. The colour scheme was no better than mine, but at least Jodie had made an effort to cover some of the garish green walls with a few posters and what looked like a selection of family photographs. She had also chosen the "own curtains" option, having discarded the two bits of

dangling grey material in favour of a predominantly red pair of curtains that certainly brightened up the entire room.

“Hi!”

Jodie seemed genuinely pleased to see me; a major relief because there was a part of me that would always be waiting for the dreaded “too good to be true” moment, as another carpet of potential happiness was unceremoniously tugged away from under my feet.

“Hi!” I replied. “You okay?”

Jodie flashed a beautiful smile: “Fine. You?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Come and have a sit down!” She motioned me over to the bed that was adorned with a duvet every bit as red as the curtains and a couple of cushions: “Do you want a can? I’ve got some cider.”

“Are you having one?”

“I’m gonna stick to lager.”

“Cider’s fine then; thanks!”

“Give me two seconds Matt; they’re just in the fridge in the kitchen.”

With that, she sprung from the bed, returning moments later with four cans, two for each of us.

“Glass?”

“No thanks, the can is fine.”

Jodie sat back down, cross-legged, at the head of the bed, and I sat across the middle of the bed with my back against the wall and legs dangling over the other side. We pulled the rings of our respective cans simultaneously, but I was the first to take a sip as some of Jodie’s lager frothed out of the opening and onto one of the cushions, which was

casually tossed across the room and presumably left to dry in its own time.

Jodie took a belated gulp, whilst I had a bit of a nose-ey at the photos that were stuck erratically to the wall behind me: “Is that your Dad?”

“Yeah, with my stepmum.”

“And her?” I pointed to a picture of Jodie posing drunkenly with a girl who had blonde hair, but definitely bore some resemblance to Jodie.

“That’s Jessica, my sister.”

“Older or younger?” I had evidently forgotten that Jodie had told me earlier.

“She’s a year and a bit younger.” Jodie stretched forward to have a look at the photo.

“You two get on okay?”

“Yeah ... most of the time.”

The family chit chat continued effortlessly throughout the first can. Nick and Denise (Jodie’s father and stepmother) sounded nice people, and Jodie certainly thought the world of Denise; in stark contrast to her real mother. However, as the second cans were opened (in a less frothy fashion), Jodie suddenly became more serious:

“You sure you’re okay Matt? It must have been so difficult opening up earlier?”

“I think so; just feel a bit weird.”

“I understand. I was a bit full on, wasn’t I?!”

“No, it’s not that; honestly. I don’t know; I’ve waited so long to find someone I felt I could talk to but when it happens it’s just completely by accident and it’s ... it’s just not like how you played it out in your head all those times.”

“Do you believe in fate?”

I bit my lower lip, and gently moved my head: “That’s almost scary; I swear I was thinking about that just before. Yeah, I do.”

“Me too, although it hasn’t always been kind to me. Well not until today!” Jodie’s face lit up as she grinned at me.

“I have been thinking about some of what you said ... about how you reacted to some of the stuff you had to face.”

Jodie leant forward and tugged my left hand to make me shuffle a little closer. She then intertwined her fingers with mine, just as she had done earlier. It certainly made me feel comfortable; but it also made my heart beat faster.

“I might be wrong,” I continued, “but I think you were able in some way to release your anger, or frustration. I just thought more and more, but all the thinking ever did was made me feel worse; I couldn’t understand the way I felt, so I could never find a way of releasing everything that was built up inside. There just doesn’t seem to be much I can put my finger on that I could say made me feel bad; but I just couldn’t understand why I felt the way I did, and before you know it, you’re dropping like a stone. I had nobody to pick me up; nobody at all to turn to. So, the only person left to deal with things was me, but it was me that made things worse. And I wish now that I could have lashed out, or shouted, or thrown something, you know?”

“Which is why you became withdrawn...”

“Pretty much.”

“It sounds like it was just a vicious circle of being alone - and thinking.”

“I wanted an escape Jodie; I wanted a way out. I wanted something that would allow me to feel better - even if it was only temporarily - but I just didn’t have it.”

“Did anything ever cross your mind? Did you think about doing anything? Like some people drink, some people...”

Her voice tailed off. The words seemed to have dark, sinister implications and although it was a direction I didn’t really want the conversation to take; and I tried, briefly, to lighten the mood. I was all too well aware that if Jodie was giving me the opportunity to open up, then I had to be transparent and honest, even though the speed of our descent into the realms of the deep and meaningful was scarily quick.

“I did try smoking when I was sixteen.”

“Did you?!” Jodie chuckled and took a swig from her can.

“But I couldn’t inhale the smoke; I just blew it out and thought I looked dead cool - for about ten minutes! Seriously though, the one thing I can’t explain is when your head makes you feel that you’re so useless, your mind takes you to places where you start to wonder what if I wasn’t even here?”

“Mmmm.” It was an almost knowing sound.

“Who would miss me? And you just think what’s the point? Why am I spending my life feeling like this? Because I don’t want to feel like this; I want to be happy. I want people in my life who care about me, and all I really wanted was to come away from home and with a bit of luck find friends; people who didn’t know anything about me, so I could maybe pretend to be somebody that in truth I’m not.”

“But it’s not working?”

“No, it’s not.”

My voice was barely audible, but I continued: “I so want to share, but I just never thought that the person I could share with would ever find me; or was even ever there. Maybe I was the only one who felt like this; everyone else was dead normal and just got on with their life and lived happily ever after, while I tortured myself.”

“To be honest I can’t believe how much I’ve opened up either,” Jodie responded and gave my hand a reassuring squeeze as she picked just the right moment to deflect the conversation away from me. “I barely know you but I think I probably felt the same. I didn’t think that anybody out there would kind of get me.”

“I’m flattered you’re prepared to talk to me, Jodie. You’ve been through an awful lot; far more than I’ve had to deal with.”

“It doesn’t matter how much you’ve been through. It’s the impact that even the smallest thing makes on your life.”

“But how did *you* cope?”

“At first I went off the rails a little bit; I started to go out a lot and ... I don’t know if it’s to do with feeling worthless, and maybe because of the relationship I had with my boyfriend - the way he made me feel - that my only way to sort of get attention was to be liked. I went out with a few lads, and it was nice to feel wanted, but it was very short-lived and, in the end, I probably felt even more worthless ... if that was actually possible. My biggest problem was I lost control of everything in my life, in a way. I would do almost anything to make others happy - to

be liked. But in private, I found my own way of dealing with things.”

Cue a sudden sense of foreboding. What was *her* way?

“How, er...?” I couldn’t even mumble a proper question.

Jodie closed her eyes then nestled up closer to me. When she looked up, her features somehow managed to betray a whole host of emotions, whilst betraying absolutely nothing. Did I detect one or more (or none at all) of sadness, embarrassment, determination?

“It was my eating...”

Just four words...

“At first I just started cutting back. Then everyone started taking notice: ‘Wow, you’ve lost weight’ - and it felt good. So, I kept doing it and doing it, and it sort of spiralled out of control really. It took over: something else controlling me again. I used to measure out all the food, getting out my calculator to check how much I’d had; going to the gym for four hours at a time nearly every day, weighing myself afterwards and feeling great when I could get into a smaller pair of jeans. By then, it was like I was finally good at something. I could do it and nobody was going to be able to stop me. It was a bit like maybe sticking two fingers up to the world. This is what I can do and there’s no way anybody can stop me. It felt good for a while, until I started feeling ill. The doctor was worried and wanted to send me to see a counsellor, but I didn’t go. Didn’t see the point. I just carried on and got lighter and lighter. At one stage, I reached five stone ten. I am nearly five foot three, and being so thin was having a really bad effect on my health. I suppose it was a sort of wake-up call

and I managed to put on a bit of weight, but then the same old feelings would come back. Now I can look back and sort of understand that I hadn't dealt with everything, but at the time I was just messed up. I'm doing really well at the moment, I don't know how much I weigh - which is actually a positive in itself - and I haven't made myself ill in weeks; but even though I might look healthy to you, I'm aware that I might do it again. I don't want to, but there are times when I remember the relief at getting rid of all the food after stuffing my face, and just how fantastic I felt when I looked at this pile of skin and bone in a mirror."

I had absolutely no idea what to say, but I used the quiet moment to lean forward and put my half empty can on the floor. Jodie did likewise. I raised my left arm, and Jodie accept the tacit invitation to be held close.

"I haven't embarrassed you, have I?" Jodie broke the silence.

"No. No of course not. I'm just trying to take it all in: you've been through so much."

"So have you."

"Not in comparison."

"Matt you just can't say that; your problems are every bit as real."

"Maybe ... maybe not."

"What do you mean?" Jodie tipped her neck back so she could see my face.

"Oh, I don't know ... it's just so hard to remember a time when my head wasn't filled with crap, but I dealt with it - or at least I tried to - because I felt that was what I deserved. You know, what I was worth."

"But you're worth so much more Matt."

“Easier to say than believe though, isn’t it?”

Jodie didn’t reply straightaway, but her next question was worryingly random.

“You must have had girlfriends though?”

My lack of response made Jodie sit up, causing my arm to flop down onto the bed. She twisted herself round and knelt down facing me: “You don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to. I can’t really explain what’s happened today, but there’s something about you Matt; something about the way you make me feel and I can’t believe that no one else has ever seen the person I’m seeing right now.”

I screwed up my eyes; there were no imminent tears, just the guaranteed shame of divulging more rejection.

“I have had a couple of girlfriends. One in particular. We did become sort of, er, close, but after we ... we, you know, and I thought she must have liked me, she announced she was seeing someone else.”

I didn’t see Jodie’s reaction because my eyes were still closed.

“It was like ‘let’s laugh at Matt’ all over again. Everybody at school would talk about the people they’d been with, and it was like being the odd one out again because you think you’re the only one who doesn’t know how it feels to be with a girl. But now I’ve come away, nobody knows ... nobody knows that I’m rubbish. Nobody knows I’ve got a mind that seems to enjoy making me feel down and worthless. I could pretend; I could be anybody - the funniest guy, the guy that all the girls like - because nobody knows the truth. Apart from you.”

Jodie’s gaze had never faltered. She was supposed to be laughing at me by now, but she wasn’t: “The thing

is,” I continued, “I can’t actually be that person. Sometimes I look at myself in the mirror on a morning and I try to see behind the eyes that are staring back at me, but all I see is emptiness.”

“But it’s still going on Matt. For you to be able to sit and talk like you have tells me that you haven’t dealt with everything.”

“I know you’re right, but it just doesn’t seem right that you’re prepared to listen to someone you hardly know give so much away.”

“You’ve just listened to me too remember!”

“Maybe if I could deal with everything, I might be able to be the person I want to be?”

“Or the person you want other people to see?”

“Why would they care?”

“I care Matt” She brought her face right next to mine: “I think we’ve talked enough.”

Butterflies going absolutely berserk.

Our lips touched. Briefly. Tenderly. Jodie then placed her hands on my cheeks and tilted my head to the left; she moved her mouth closer and we kissed, with lips parted, softly and slowly at first, but increasingly passionately. She pulled away, kissed me gently on my bottom lip, then my neck, then full on the lips, much more forcefully sending hormones raging round my body and elevating my head high above the clouds.

Despite how I felt, and how I hoped Jodie was feeling, now was the moment to bring an end to a magical evening; in fact, an amazing, albeit surreal day. We held each other for a while, a minute maybe; then I pulled away,

just far enough to be able to look into those gorgeous eyes, and push some loose hair behind Jodie's left ear.

"I, er, I'm not really sure what to say. It's been such a lovely day. Thank you!"

"Thank *you* Matt." Jodie seemed so self-assured; it was almost impossible to imagine how fragile she must have been. There was something I needed to know, but I stumbled over my words once again: "Do you, er, want to..."

"Meet up again? Yes of course I do! Did you really have to ask?"

Evidently yes.

A smile, a hug, one last kiss and it was time to go.

It was dark outside, fresh but not overly cold, but there was just a hint of rain in the air. Not that I cared. I just wanted to get back into my room, lie on my bed and simply allow the thoughts, emotions and sensations to flow freely round my head until sleep eventually brought down the curtain on just the best Thursday.

On arriving in my Hall, there was a fair amount of noise emanating from the kitchen; I nipped along the corridor to see what the commotion was about. I should really have guessed: alcohol. Phil - Castleford Phil - had evidently taken on a challenge to down something like the equivalent of the River Aire in lager. And he had lost. Spectacularly.

He'd apparently been sick over the toilet floor in the Union - the ladies' toilet. He'd slurred an apology before swaying out into the fresh air, only to throw up again. The ability to control any part of his body, but his legs in particular, had deserted the squat Yorkshireman, who had been carried back to his previously vomit-free bedroom...

Where he'd hurled for a third time.

Now though, he was in the post-puke phase: overly happy, loud, but only ever a moment away from spoiling for a fight. Phil saw me (or maybe two of me) peering into the kitchen and yelled: "Mattyyyy!"

"Yeah, alright. How many has he had?" My question was directed at John, Phil's corridor neighbour and fellow Yorkshireman.

"Not that many mate; he just thought it would be really clever to try and knock back three pints in a row."

"Not clever at all."

"But funny," John grinned.

Phil slithered towards me, arms extended; either there was a man hug coming, or he was doing some sort of elaborate balancing manoeuvre in case his next alcoholic lurch ended in a face on floor comedy moment: "What have you been up to pal?" ... is what I thought he said.

"Just been out for a chat and a couple of drinks?"

"Where?"

"Just a friend's room over the way," I nodded in the general direction of the nearby Hall.

"Male or female?!"

"Female, if you *must* know."

"Lucky bloody bastard!" Phil's exaggerated arm waving almost made him lose his footing but mid-wobble, his outstretched left arm somehow clung onto the top of the kitchen unit, thereby denying us the chance of watching him crumple in an ungainly drunken heap. I didn't answer, so Phil continued: "Is she a decent looking lass then? Give 'er one from me, won't you?!"

"Yeah, course I will. Dickhead!"

“What did you call me?” came the aggressive retort, but Phil’s attention was instantly diverted to self-preservation, as the removal of his hand from the stabilising influence of the work surface caused him to lose balance and stagger sideways into the table in the centre of the room.

“I called you dickhead mate. You’re a dickhead now, and you’ll still be one in the morning; but you’ll not remember me telling you!”

John chuckled in agreement, as Phil displayed the full range of his eloquence: “Wanker!”

Tempted as I was to stay behind and wait for the dull thud that would accompany Phil’s seemingly inevitable collapse, I was more bothered about the day’s proceedings in the Green Dragon, the park and ultimately room 14. With the pre-bedtime ritual of the toilet trip, quick wash and teeth clean soon out of the way, I lay on my bed, still fully clothed, as glimpses of the day’s unexpected events flashed randomly, but vividly through my mind. There was little chance of nodding off whilst my mind was racing, so I decided to relax, and just mull over a few things until I felt myself starting to drift.

I mulled well enough, but unfortunately I didn’t drift.

The harder I tried to understand how this most extraordinary day had developed, the more I began to question not only the speed with which everything had unfolded, but the sheer extent to which we had both bared our innermost secrets.

Outwardly, there was no doubt that Jodie was stunning, so why would anyone as pretty as her be interested in a mixed-up asshole like me?

As the minutes turned into hours and Thursday ticked into Friday, the only logical answer was that she couldn't be; and even though she had clearly opened up and been prepared to talk about some undeniably distressing periods of her life, I couldn't banish the nagging doubt that this was going to end as quickly as it started - basically as soon as Jodie had time to think and realised that she'd made a mistake.

I mean, why *wouldn't* she have second thoughts? I suppose I could gain a crumb of comfort from the fact that she hadn't laughed at me - well not to my face anyway. What about the physical stuff though? Yes, I was attracted to her, of course I was, but the truth was I hadn't been looking for someone to hug or kiss me, but I don't suppose Jodie had either. I mean she couldn't have been; she knocked on Phil's door for fuck's sake!

When I was with Jodie, everything had felt so natural, but now I was on my own, the self-doubt that had dogged my adolescent years took a firm hold and there was simply no way that my subconscious was ever going to accept that Jodie liked me: felt sorry for me maybe, but *liked* me?

No way.

There wasn't much point trying to imagine what was going on in Jodie's head seeing as I couldn't bloody well control my own, and by the time tiredness finally overtook me, I was totally convinced that despite however much evidence to the contrary, I'd made a huge mistake in opening up and laying myself metaphorically bare to someone who I hardly knew.

Maybe Phil wasn't the only dickhead?

07/10/1983

A shaft of reflected sunlight jinked through a narrow gap in the curtains and arrowed across the room and somehow contrived to hit me square in the eyes. I woke with a start and even through tired, squinting eyes, I could see the curtains weren't properly closed: "Shit ... SHIT!!"

I leant over to check the time, but as I moved, I nudged a pillow towards and over the side of the bed, knocking the alarm clock off the little bedside cabinet and onto the floor in the process, with the worrying clunk being muffled only slightly by the lumpy pillow.

The pillow was retrieved, as was the clock, which fortunately showed no outward sign of damage; the rhythmic ticking suggesting all was well inside too. Twenty-past eight. I'd slept longer than I thought.

There were times I would wake up with a brief feeling of happiness, euphoria even, perhaps following a really nice or calming dream; and then reality would slap me right across the face. Well that's pretty much what happened. It was like I was semi-consciously searching for the feeling of impending gloom that greeted me most mornings, becoming increasingly concerned that I felt fine, before the moment of realisation finally dawned. I had enjoyed those wonderful few hours with someone I just knew was special, yet all the new, almost literally breathtaking sensations had been squeezed, even wrung out by whatever was trying to control my thoughts; actually, it was more succeeding than trying.

I was so angry with myself, but with that inner fury, there seemed to be a determination to fight back. It wasn't the first time I'd felt this sort of resolve, but all too often, I wasn't strong enough to resist for long. But maybe, just

maybe, there was a glimmer of light at the end of this particular tunnel; not quite as bright as the ray of sunlight that had brought my reverie to a premature end perhaps, but a glimmer nonetheless.

In normal circumstances, I'd have been perfectly capable of wasting half a day in ultimately pointless contemplation, but although I was lecture-free - well, apart from the non-starter scheduled for a ridiculously early nine o'clock - I had a fairly lengthy essay to finish. I'd already done most of the preparation, but I reckoned I had a good two-and-a-half to three hours of writing and checking to do.

The plan was to write through the morning, have a break then go over the work later in the afternoon. However, the throbbing inside my head wasn't conducive to compiling an essay of high enough quality, so I thought the best thing to do would be to go for a run in the hope of clearing away the cobwebs. I wasn't exactly blessed with athletic prowess, but I was reasonably fit, and a run of five miles or so would normally take in the region of thirty-five minutes.

That said I wasn't quick enough to keep pace with the blue rinse brigade if they were late for bingo...

Anyway, my jogging stuff had been dumped unceremoniously on the floor of the cupboard after my previous excursion. It was a bit creased and ever so slightly smelly, but I wasn't planning on stopping long enough for anyone to have a sneaky sniff. I got changed, had a quick glass of water and then it was off out to sample the Friday morning air.

My time was pretty good - thirty-two minutes and twenty-seven seconds - all that was left to do was somehow measure the exact length of the route, although it

was probably in the region of four and three-quarter miles. Still, it was the fastest time I'd managed since arriving at university and if it hadn't been for the fact that I'd thought about Jodie all the way, I'd probably have had a nice clear head by the time I made it back to campus.

After freshening up and having a bite to eat, I finally knuckled down to work just after eleven; but the nagging pain in my head didn't subside. If anything, the nag developed into a throb and writing and throbbing heads don't mix, so midway through a sentence, the biro was casually flicked across the desk. I got up and turned towards the sink; perhaps splashing cold water over my face might make a difference, but a small white shape on the floor near the bottom of the bed caught my eye. I bent down to pick up what turned out to be a roughly folded piece of paper that had presumably been pushed (both unseen and unheard) under the door.

I opened the paper, an unevenly torn half of a lined sheet of A4, and read the note.

<I hope you're ok. Busy today but will pop over this evening. Jxx>

It was only one line of undeniably neat handwriting, but it was still enough for my lungs to feel instantly starved of oxygen, causing me to inhale unnecessarily dramatically as my chest began to thump.

As the afternoon wore on, I dredged up the energy to carry on with my work, but the little creased note lying on the desk was a constant source of distraction. I only became aware of the passing time when I realised that I could no longer read my essay - nor the note. I stretched over and clicked the button on the orange desk lamp which was positioned in the back right-hand corner of the desk, pointing down in the general direction of where I was

working. As the natural light faded, the bulb shone brightly and almost cruelly illuminated a spelling mistake; “supersede” does not have a “c” in the middle ... idiot!

Fortunately, a bit of crafty pen work resulted in the “c” being transformed into an “s” (of sorts). I was actually quite impressed with my handiwork, but equally irritated at the error, which I put down to a lack of concentration caused by... well, caused by me concentrating more on Jodie than the words I was committing to paper.

I decided to make myself some tea rather than use the campus canteen, which served decent meals - mostly something and chips. Admittedly that was always a bit of a draw, but I was preoccupied and just didn’t fancy the walk (which was no more than two hundred yards), nor any company. I ventured out into the dimly-lit corridor and along to the kitchen. Four of the lads were sitting round the table. There wasn’t much in the way of conversation, although two of them were midway through their beans on toast. Phil was one of the other two, and although each of the quartet muttered their respective acknowledgement of my appearance, Phil’s grunt simply served to confirm that he was blissfully unaware of our previous evening’s encounter ... as predicted!

I went down the toast route as well, but poached a couple eggs; partly because I liked eggs, but also because there was an unwashed pan coated in a rapidly drying tomato sauce and a few stray beans that had evaded the wooden spoon.

The kitchen chit-chat barely progressed beyond a few random mumbles. I polished off my tea, washed the pots - *my* pots - and disappeared back to my room. A few minutes passed, which became half an hour, then an hour and beyond. Jodie’s note was still on the desk, it said she’d

come over in the *evening* (in fact it had said the same thing every single time I had read it) and as the ticking sound from the alarm clock suddenly seemed to grow in volume, I began to question my definition of evening. After six o'clock - check, dark - check: basically, that was just about it, so why hadn't there been a knock on my door?

The constant ticking to my left started to irritate me, so I opened the desk drawer and rummaged through the various cassettes that had been carefully placed in neat rows when I'd arrived, but were now strewn around the inside of the drawer. I had far more records than tapes, but most of the cassettes were homemade compilations, or copies of vinyl LPs, rather than shop-bought albums, mainly because it was cheaper to replace a tangled tape than a scratched record.

I picked out a C90 cassette which had no song list inside the case and no clues as to the content scribbled on the side of the cassette itself. I held it towards the light, all of the brown tape was on the right side of the spool, so I flipped it over as I slotted it into my radio/cassette player, depressed the play button and waited to see what side-B had to offer. It started with The Ruts if you're even faintly interested.

After a while, presumably in the region of forty-five minutes given the type of cassette, there was a click as the tape came to an end. I pressed the eject button, and turned the tape round to play the other side.

Another forty-five minutes passed, and by the time a new cassette was inserted, the initial excitement in advance of Jodie's arrival had shifted to hope, and descended steadily through forlorn hope to the realisation that she simply wasn't coming. And the only logical reason was that she'd regretted some, most or all of the previous day.

As my mood darkened, I only word I could think of to describe how I felt was empty. There was anger that I'd given away so much so quickly, but that was quickly replaced by a kind of dull, draining ache of resentment that seemed to envelop my whole body.

If only Phil had been in.

If only I had been more guarded.

If only I'd said I was busy.

If only, if only, if fucking only.

All the heightened emotion of the last twenty-four hours was forgotten in a matter of moments; this was what I did. This was who I was. And I hated myself for it.

I could either sit and feel sorry for myself, or go over to the Union and drown my sorrows. I was likely to feel shit in the morning either way, but although the first option was cheaper, the second offered at least some small hope of enjoyment.

The Union it was...

08/10/1983

It was just after half past ten on the Saturday morning when there was the faintest of knocks at the door. I didn't have a fuzzy head - which was a pleasant surprise - so I had probably drunk just the right amount to lessen my ability to think and get a half decent sleep into the bargain. The magic number was four pints - and a bag of cheese and onion crisps.

I opened the door. It was Jodie.

"Hi," she said, almost sheepishly.

"Hi," was my less than convincing reply.

I beckoned her in. Jodie stood, awkwardly, for a moment then plonked herself on the edge of the foot of the freshly-made bed. I wasn't sure what to say or do. I *was* upset that she hadn't come round, but the reality of actually seeing her sort of made me relax. I hadn't allowed myself to consider if there'd been a reason why she didn't, or couldn't come; because if there had been an explanation, then there would have been no need to be miserable. The truth was that it took more effort to find and focus on a positive; so I didn't. "Do you want some tea? I've just boiled the kettle."

I hadn't, but Jodie nodded, so I disappeared to the kitchen and returned a few minutes later with two totally different-sized mugs, one of which I handed to her, and she duly leant forward and placed it carefully on the floor.

"Matt, I'm *really* sorry."

I smiled my most resigned smile.

"Have you been okay?" she continued.

"Confused."

After all the words I'd spoken on Thursday, I suddenly found I had little or no inclination to waste any now. Jodie closed her eyes and gently expelled knowing air from her nostrils. She shook her head, before lifting her head.

"Honestly Matt, I am sorry. I don't know why I didn't come ... actually, I probably do."

I tried to make my face say "go on", without saying the words. It seemed to work.

"I haven't had a great deal of sleep Matt; I spent most of yesterday thinking about Thursday and ... I just ... it ... it just felt so easy opening up to you. It felt nice and I really enjoyed being with you. But then I started feeling that maybe I'd told you too much, or maybe, that you'd kind of had second thoughts ... that you weren't all that interested in spending time with me. After all, it was me that knocked on *your* door."

"I never for one minute thought that," I replied almost instantly. "But to be honest Jodie, like I said to you on Thursday, when something good happens to me, it ends up being nothing, or somebody that I really like turns out to be someone completely different; and I had pretty much convinced myself that you were just feeling sorry for me, that you thought that what happened was a mistake so when you didn't call, well it was just a case of waiting for the inevitable."

I was still standing by the side of the bed, but at that point Jodie held out her hand. I hesitated, briefly, but took hold of it; she gently pulled me over and I sat down next to her, our hands still clasped together: "I was feeling exactly the same Matt. You needed support, not my life history. But you made me feel so relaxed. You seemed to care and

... and well the words just came. I've never opened up like that before."

"I do get that Jodie, I do. But inside my head, I wondered why someone like you would want to talk to *me*, or even spend time with me."

"Well I did - and I do," Jodie squeezed my hand in affirmation. "I came over to apologise; and to see if we ... *you* wanted to talk some more?"

I paused for a few moments in a vain bid to try and collect my jumbled thoughts, but simply repeated the headlong dive: "I would Jodie, but what I would *really* like is to hear a bit more about you. You mentioned that you'd kind of had problems with your eating; that it had changed the person that you were ... that you are, but you didn't say *how* it had changed you. You sort of hinted that you had to take quite, er, extreme measures to make sure you didn't get found out or to hide what was happening. It must have been so hard for you; I'm not sure I really understand; but I'd like to try."

Jodie looked slightly taken aback; she swallowed (almost in the style of a cartoon character facing impending disaster): "I don't know if you're prepared to hear it though. Some of the things are ... I find them quite embarrassing. But I do feel like I can trust you."

"You *can*; it's probably my lack of self-belief that makes me question why *you* would want to trust *me*. I'm more than happy to listen."

"Okay then. I just feel so bad for not coming round."

I leant over and kissed her gently on the cheek: "Honestly, it's alright; so long as you're okay."

“I’m fine. I just wish there wasn’t this part of me that expects things to go wrong, but even though we’ve only just met, I am starting to feel you there’s part of you that thinks the same.”

A feeble smile saved me from stating the obvious.

“Maybe by not coming over, I was basically doing the same; almost forcing a situation to happen?”

“Push them away before they get too close,” I nodded.

“And then when they do walk away, you got what you always expected so it’s not a surprise anymore.”

“Look Jodie, if you feel able to talk, I’ll gladly listen and I will try to understand.”

Jodie averted her gaze and started staring out of the window; it was a dull, murky morning, but the weather really wasn’t of any consequence as Jodie shuffled up close to me and linked her fingers with mine: “I don’t think I can tell you why I did what I did. I still don’t really understand why; why I was the way I was, and why I’m still not totally right. I was very extreme to the extent that I became significantly under-weight; I would wait until my Dad was in bed and get up through the night, binge and make myself sick. But after a while I couldn’t just make myself sick anymore; I’ve still got a ‘sick spoon’ - a baby spoon - and it became the only way I could make myself sick. And it’s that feeling ... that feeling of the bingeing makes me feel good; but once I’ve brought everything back up it’s such a relief. I’m in control and when I do make myself sick it’s like all the badness has gone again. It got harder to hide because obviously food was going missing, and there would be times when I’d be up during the night and if Dad got up there’d still be bits of stuff in the toilet, but I just

couldn't stop. On top of that I was spending four hours a day at the gym and if I didn't ... if I missed one single part of my normal routine, if I missed even one of the weight sets out, or if I came off the treadmill five minutes early, I'd be in pieces. I hadn't achieved what I'd set out to do that day and it was like I had failed. I always set really high targets for myself, but if I reached those targets, I just set the bar even higher. And, I don't know, I was in control, it was *my* thing. Nobody else could tell me how to do it and I knew I was achieving something. I was doing well. It was something I wasn't failing at."

Jodie paused; one look into her moist eyes confirmed just how hard this was for her. Not for the first time I didn't have a clue what to say (so I kept my mouth shut), but for someone hearing this sort of thing for the first time, the revelations were genuinely disturbing. It was the sort of stuff you maybe read about, but you never expect to meet anyone who has endured such obsessive and ultimately destructive experiences. I pressed my fingers together as Jodie continued: "I feel dead embarrassed about it. It's all the little things I feel embarrassed about, like when my Dad knew I was being sick, he would listen for me flushing the toilet; and in the end I used to actually go outside to be sick so that he didn't know what I'd been doing. Or, probably the worst thing was ... one of the worst things ... between being sick if I ate, or going to the gym for hours a day, if I hadn't managed to bring up everything that I'd eaten, I was taking laxatives. It got really bad; to the point that I had to phone the ambulance during the night because I had pains in my belly like you wouldn't believe. And trying to explain, to blag the fact that it was nothing to do with my eating disorder, I just had a bad stomach; but everybody knew. I had a history of panicking

and having problems with palpitations and stuff because I wasn't eating properly and they knew. It was that disapproving look I got off the paramedic as if to say 'we're being called out for something that you've brought on yourself.' I mean at the end of the day someone could have been having a heart attack somewhere and this was something I had done to myself. I feel guilty about things like that. The time I missed out on, going out with Dad, avoiding going out for meals or with friends because I *had* to do my time on the exercise bike, or I *had* to do my ritual of eating a certain way."

When Jodie stopped talking, it meant that I (in my own mind) needed to say something, but I had no words at all, so it was eventually left to Jodie: "I can't believe I've just said all that." She seemed to relax, finally turned her head away from the window and smiled. I felt obliged to say something, but I wasn't sure whether to try and take the conversation forward, or go down the sympathy route. The former may have been the more awkward option, but it was the one I chose: "At what point did, er, there must have been a change when you could control what you were doing but then you couldn't really manage it and *had* to do it?"

"Oh definitely. Even people started to notice that I'd lost weight. it was like 'you look well' and I don't know if it was an attention thing or what in the beginning, because everyone was noticing and giving me compliments, so I just kept going. But then it got to the point that I was being noticed for the wrong reasons. I was like a walking skeleton, but I couldn't see that and the cycle of binging, being sick and exercising basically became my life. I was living my life in a certain way, but missing out on everything else that was going on around me because that

was my only focus. That was how I was going to do it, and no one was going to stop me doing it.”

“So, to you, was it as simple as the lighter you got, the better you felt about yourself?”

I actually seemed to be getting the hang of this!

“Yeah. It took away all the badness that I felt about myself because I was *achieving* something. I had found the one thing that I was good at. Everything else I failed at, or felt like I was destined to fail at; and that was the one thing that I could do. But I sacrificed so much doing it. And I still punish myself in a way for that. I’m *much* healthier than I was, but it’s never completely gone away.”

“Do you still do it?”

“Like I said, I haven’t for ... well, quite a while now. But there have been times when obviously depending on how I’m feeling in myself, or things that are going on, it might come back. But at the moment, things are good.”

“I’m really pleased!” And I genuinely was. “It’s still hard for me to understand though.”

“I don’t think anybody can fully understand anybody’s problems unless they’ve experienced them to some degree themselves; and the same goes for you.”

I had this urge to delve a bit deeper: “I have spent some time thinking about some of the things that you said on Thursday, Jodie. I could be totally wrong, but from the way you spoke, I got a really strong feeling about what your Mum did, about the way that everything was kind of done behind your back ... to the extent that she’d almost planned leaving and planned a home for your sister but not for you. To me, that’s such a massive thing that it could almost trigger a change in behaviour.”

“I always thought I hit that stage when I had that terrible boyfriend and stuff; but looking back, I didn’t realise how much my Mum had affected me. You see my Dad worked all the time so it wasn’t that he didn’t spend time with me and Jess, it was the fact that he couldn’t; he didn’t have the time so Mum was probably the primary carer, but I still feel like I was always the black sheep, the one that got left out. I hate her to some extent. I don’t speak to her and I don’t want her in my life.”

Shit. This was really heavy stuff.

My turn ... hopefully. I knew what I wanted to say, but not how to phrase the question: “When someone has strong feelings for you; whether it’s love or even hate, at least you know that they feel *something*. The impression that I’m getting is that your Mum was almost like indifferent to you and that ... it might sound stupid ... it’s almost worse than being hated because hate to me at least suggests that you mean something. For someone to kind of shrug their shoulders as if they simply didn’t care, well that would hurt me a whole lot more.”

This prompted an immediate and definite response. It was like a nerve had been struck and when Jodie raised her head; a single tear was trickling down the left-hand side of her face. She made no attempt at wiping it away.

“I was always walking on eggshells with my Mum. I didn’t know whether I was coming or going. I tried so hard to get her to notice me. Sometimes it got to the point when I was trying to be too good and she still didn’t notice me. So, I tried to be naughty and ... do you know what, it was like she was jealous of me; but you shouldn’t be jealous of your daughter. If I wanted to wear certain things or if I wanted to go to a school party or anything like that, she just had to stop me. I wasn’t allowed; it was almost as if

I'd stopped her enjoying herself, so she was going to the same to me. It was like having a jealous best friend, or a squabbly little girlfriend. She was never the same with Jess, and I never understood why. All I know is that if I ever have kids, there's no way I would ever treat them the way my Mum treated me. Never."

Even though she was still crying, there was a barely restrained anger and resolve in Jodie's voice; even to a novice like me, the mere mention of her mother provoked a reaction that *had* to be significant: "Surely your Dad must have had some idea what was going on?"

By now Jodie had come away from the window and was sitting cross-legged on the bed.

"Sometimes my Dad would step back or actually go along with my Mum just for an easy life. Don't get me wrong, all the things my Mum was, all the things she did, it's ended up being positive in a sense for me because I know that I will always do everything not to be like her. I'm actually the total opposite. But I remember that now and again, when I was going through a bad time, Dad would say 'you're just like your mother'. That hurt me so much, because there's just no way I'm anything like her. There was this time when she got really ill; I'd have been about fourteen, so she'd have been 31, or maybe 32. It wasn't long before she left, but she ended up being frightened of being left on her own in case something happened, so she kept me off school for about six, or seven weeks. During that time, I did everything for her; I went through watching her have panic attacks because she kept thinking she was going to die. I actually started having panic attacks myself even Dad now says it was the wrong thing for her to do, but what really gets me is that I was there for her, and then she decided that life was too short. It

wasn't long 'til she moved out and basically it was 'stuff you Jodie, I'm just going to get on with my life.' Not the fact that I was going to have exams, and I had spent all those weeks off school helping her. I wanted to help her, I loved her, but it didn't make any difference. I just had to fend for myself; so long as she and my sister were alright."

"I'm an only child so I don't really know what it's like to have that relationship, but I can kind of see that if the two are treated differently, it must be so hard to try and deal with being the one who's almost rejected if that's the right word?"

Jodie was in full flow by now: "It wasn't just the rejection though. I spent from about eleven - when my Mum was still working - not being allowed to play out in the holidays because I had to look after my sister. I never went out with any of my friends. I suppose I didn't really have friends to go out with, but I kind of resented my sister anyway."

"But you said you get on okay now don't you?"

"We're quite loving, you know, cuddles and stuff when we see each other; but something else that hurt me was that I blame my Mum for taking Jess away from me. She wasn't just my sister, I was almost like her mother for years, but then all of a sudden, she wasn't there every day when I got up. I knew more about her than my Mum did. I knew more about what she liked than anyone - she was like *my* little sister. When she got her first boyfriend, I was so protective; I wanted to punch him!" Jodie laughed at the memory.

"How old was she?"

"Then? Fourteen. She's actually still with him, and he's lovely; but at the time I really disliked him. My family

hated how much my Mum put onto me. I should have been enjoying my childhood, but I wasn't. I became Jess's sort of guardian because Mum said she had to go out and work. And then, finding out that when she left, one of the people she'd been having an affair with was a bloke at work. It was bloody great really; to think that I was looking after my sister so she could cheat on my Dad, 'cos that's basically what she was doing. Have I said far too much?!"

"Not at all!" The words were delivered with by best poker face. "How much of all of this do you blame yourself for? Even though none of it was your fault, I get the feeling that..."

The answer came before the question was finished.

"A lot of it, because the only time my parents argued seemed to be about me. My Dad would try and stick up for me because he could see my Mum was wrong quite a lot of the time: so, was that my fault? If my Mum hadn't had me, obviously I wouldn't be here today, but would she have been the bitch she is? Would she and Dad have split up if they hadn't been spending their lives arguing over me? I always felt they argued *because* of me. Would my Dad have been the way he was, would he have been as down on me if I hadn't gone off the rails and done all that other stuff? It was the Jodie that always got it wrong; the Jodie that always failed."

"But now you've got a stepmum."

"Ahhh she's fantastic; if I could have picked my mother, I would have picked her."

"There you go," I whispered.

"She's lovely; she treats my Dad right too. And I love her; I love her to bits. She doesn't judge me and I can

talk to her about things that I could never have talked to my Mum about.”

“Maybe, if you look at all this from a slightly different point of view, your Mum actually did you a favour by cheating on your Dad. And she did you a favour by walking out and not taking you.”

“To be honest, I’ve heard exactly the same words come out of my Dad’s mouth. For me and for him, she did us both a favour really.”

“So, what you’ve all got now is...”

“I just wish we had got it sooner...”

How could she bloody know? I didn’t get the bloody chance to explain what *it* was?! Stability? Happiness? A nicely decorated front room?!

“... before everything went wrong.”

“True, but surely it’s better that your Dad found your stepmum later rather than not at all? I’m not saying that everything you’ve been through hasn’t been hard; I can’t begin to understand how difficult things must have been for all of you...”

“When I talk about it though, I don’t feel it’s ... I mean there are people in the world who are seriously ill, or have been through things that are so much worse than anything that’s happened to me; but like I’ve said before, you’re affected by what’s personal to *you*. Even so, it sometimes just feels like ‘pull yourself together Jodie’, it’s in the past and I should get over it, but obviously I haven’t because it’s always there.”

“But we both know how difficult it is just to forget things from the past, or to pretend that they’re not there,” I pointed to her forehead, “because sometimes they do seem to control the way that we think.”

“I know I feel awful, all I’ve done is talk about me.”

“I feel really awful too,” I belatedly seized a chance to interrupt, “that I’ve wasted a tea bag because your drink’s gone cold.”

“Sorry!” Jodie chuckled. “I feel like all I’ve done is vented and I’ve never given you the chance to talk, but I just sense some sort of ... some sort of connection if that’s the right word. I feel relaxed and able to talk, but I know you need to talk too.”

In fairness, just a word or two in edgeways would have been enough!

“Believe me I’m flattered that you’re prepared to share. Some of the stuff you’ve said is really tough to listen to, but it must be so much harder to have to sort of relive some of your darkest moments or feelings. I’m glad that your Dad’s happy and that he’s met somebody really special - special to both of you - and in my mind, it goes some way to justifying all the shit you endured. Maybe sometimes you take the crap on the chin in the hope that one day Fate is going to deal you a better hand, although I’m not at that point myself. Your issues seem so real, so tangible, but I just seem to have the ability to drag myself down, just like I did last night. I spent so long drifting in and out of sleep believing the person that’s not just talked to me, but held me and even kissed me doesn’t actually care. And I convinced myself of that because of the person I am, not because of who you are and that is so unfair Jodie.”

I was rewarded with a lovely hug. “Well I can tell you now that I *do* care. And I wouldn’t have opened up to you in the way that I have if I didn’t trust you. I know it’s been so quick, but there’s something there ... I feel like we can talk, and the way you are with yourself ... from some

of the stuff you mentioned, it's like ... you are very similar to me. We're both expecting the worst to happen all the time. You're expecting it to go wrong, but when you were talking about the bullying, it was as if you thought you deserved it - like a self-punishment - a bit like how I was because I blamed myself for so much."

"It's like you almost will something to go wrong; you almost want it to go wrong, because when it does go wrong, you can deal with it."

"Because it always has."

"And if something goes right..."

"You panic."

I briefly wondered if sentence finishing would ever become an Olympic sport, because I was almost certainly sat with a gold medal contender.

"Yeah. Exactly. I really wish I'd met you years ago."

In that instant, I realised that words which were supposed to have stayed in my head had actually come out of my mouth. That last sentence was toe-curlingly over-sentimental at any time, but I was only eighteen; how much earlier could I realistically have met Jodie?

"Aww, that's so sweet." Another disarming and totally convincing smile.

I decided to ramble for a bit in an attempt to deflect attention away from my rapidly-reddening face: "Yeah I always believed I deserved bad things, but how many of those things did I actually make happen? I can't change the past now, but I so want to be able to change the future. And then, all of a sudden, I find myself in a situation that I could never have engineered, but which has led me to you then yeah, it feels like it's too good to be true. I do feel I

can open up, even though I'm embarrassed about some of the stuff I've said because my issues don't sound particularly difficult to deal with, but I know I'm the sort of person who will think over something until I can find a way of making it bad enough to concentrate on."

"We're definitely both thinkers."

"Definitely! And I wish I wasn't! Or if I had to be a thinker, then why couldn't I be one of those who can think themselves happy?!"

"We're sort of our own worst enemy," Jodie added, as she clasped my hand.

"I guess so, but right now I do feel happy."

"What, even listening to me go on?!"

"It's lovely, er, I mean the subject matter might be difficult, but just to know that you're prepared to spend your time with me and actually talk about such important things. That's never happened before and even though I'll probably still worry that something'll go wrong, right now it feels really nice."

Jodie leant forward and kissed me on the cheek, which was still glowing, or at least it felt like it was. "I'd never have told you all the things that I have if I didn't hope that we could keep talking and being like this. Never." She raised our joined hands into the air before continuing: "But I want you to keep opening up to me as well. I feel like what I've done is talked about my problems and I think you're doing what I would normally do and you're focussing on me so that you don't have to think about yourself. But you still need to get your issues out."

"I find it easier to listen."

"I thought you would," Jodie grinned.

On the basis that it was clearly my turn: “But I’m not sure, deep down, what my problems actually are. I’ve got the ideal opportunity to shut my past off because nobody knows anything about me. Nobody comes from where I come from, so they didn’t know me when life was difficult, when I’ve burst into tears for no good reason, and just feeling the grip on my head tighten until all that’s left is tears that have to come out; but I can’t actually put my finger on what it is that’s made me feel that way. Is it still my past? Is it still the guilt over what I saw with my Grandad? The feeling of being the outsider or odd-one-out, so that people would think it was really clever to hit me?”

“But like I was telling you before, from an outsider’s point of view, it’s as if you being the only one that saw your Grandad, it’s like you feel guilty about that; and it’s as if you want to punish yourself for it for the rest of your life. You believe that you deserved to be bullied because you’re not a good person, but you’re worth so much more than that.”

“You’re the first person that’s ever said that; and hearing it, the words sound strange.”

“You may look physically well, but if there’s something still going on in your head from years ago, it’s never going to go away until you confront it. Listen to me; I’m a one to talk! It’ll not though; it’ll never ever disappear; it’ll always raise its head. Look we’ve spoken, and then straightaway you’ve thought that I wouldn’t want to know. You’re always going to get that. Over and over again, unless you find out why, or how to change it.”

“I think the biggest problem is that my mind almost controls me, and I don’t know if I’m strong enough to fight on my own? It’s almost as if every time some happiness comes into my life, my mind just kicks in and tells me I’m

not going to be happy. It changes me and makes me expect the worst. And when the worst comes, well that's just the way it is."

"But like you said yourself before, by doing that you're making the worst happen, because you're probably backing off more; not opening up and you're ready for the fall."

"I'm not sure I can do this on my own though."

For the second time in just a few minutes, a sentence tumbled unintentionally from my mouth.

"Well I'm willing to try and help you unlock your demons - if you want? If you'll let me?"

"On one condition ... that you'll let me do the same for you." I looked straight into those gorgeous brown eyes and hoped for a positive response.

"Yeah," Jodie smiled, "... yeah that's what I want!"

It was a surreal moment, possibly because Jodie actually said exactly what I would have wanted her to say. Maybe I'd inadvertently pushed situation, almost forced her hand, into giving the reassuring reply she would have known I wanted. I honestly hadn't done it deliberately; I'm not sure how capable I was of coherent rational thought when I was emotionally so out of my depth, but as we held each other, my mind cleared and I just felt ... well I felt happy!

That brought down the curtain on the serious stuff, and the change from the intensity of our conversation to much more light-hearted and inconsequential chat was stark, yet seamlessly achieved. Television, films, music, they were all meaningless subjects in comparison with the main topic of the morning's discussion, but important

nonetheless as we both began to fill in a number of proverbial blanks.

And it was *so* nice to relax and laugh together.

Throughout it all, our hands remained clasped together; clearly neither of us had any intention of letting go but eventually Jodie released her grip, only for her hand to touch the side of my face as she placed a gentle kiss on my lips.

“God, it’s half past twelve Matt!”

“You got to go?”

“I think I’d better, I’ve got a fair bit to do. Am I forgiven for last night?!”

“Of course!” I replied immediately, before those beautiful, persuasive eyes forced the words out of my mouth.

“I’ve said I’ll pop home to see Dad and Denise tomorrow. It’s been arranged for a while. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Course not!”

“Are you free on Monday?”

Now was surely the time for me to take advantage of the situation and play the hard to get card: “Yep, anytime is fine.”

Shit!

“I’ll come over around tea time then.” Jodie got to her feet with an exaggerated stretch. I clambered off the bed and put my arms on her waist. My hands covered the lowest part of her rib cage. The bones were defined, but Jodie was slim - athletically so - and definitely not too thin. I momentarily wondered quite how she would have felt when her weight had dropped to below six stone, but the

pressure of her lips against mine dispatched that thought in the best possible way.

With Jodie on her way back to her room, I had no real plans for the rest of the day. A quick drink and a few games of darts over in the Union later in the evening held considerable appeal, although my bank manager might have not been quite so thrilled - from the financial and not darting point of view.

My course work was reasonably up-to-date; there was always reading to be done, but I always found it a bit of a chore and if I had to put off reading a few pages, I was rarely short of an excuse - nails to bite and that sort of thing. The one thing I didn't want to do was sit around and do nothing, because the outcome was pretty much guaranteed; my mind would wander and would find some way of draining away the happy feeling I'd been left with after Jodie's visit.

My tummy let out an unexpected growl; just a gentle reminder that it hadn't been given anything to digest for several hours. The kitchen was a more than acceptable alternative to any text book and a sandwich was very much the order of the day (cheddar cheese spread and pickle). The sole occupant of the lads' kitchen was one of the girls from upstairs, Kerry. She was dressed in baggy grey jogging pants and matching sweatshirt, although the detail is of neither relevance nor consequence.

I didn't know her particularly well, but being a polite soul, I would always make sure she was okay, but shy right away from asking who she was waiting for, given her reputation in the man-eating department. Obviously I had no direct involvement in Kerry's nocturnal habits, but I was reasonably well-placed to offer an opinion, seeing as she occupied room number nineteen, meaning we were

separated by a ceiling or a floor (depending in which room you were at the time), but still, it was better than nothing I suppose.

Sadly, it wasn't enough to prevent the tell-tale moans and groans, or the sound of a muffled deep voice followed by girly giggles; just another lamb to the proverbial sexual slaughter and one more notch on the dangerously over-notched bed post.

"Hi Matt!" Kerry greeted me in her soft northern accent. It sounded Geordie to my untrained ears, but I had been reliably informed that Durham (from where Kerry hailed) and Newcastle were distinctly different places with distinctly different accents ... that sounded the same.

"Hiya!" Luckily, before my mouth disobeyed strict cerebral instructions not to mention any male names, there was the sound of approaching footsteps from the far end of the Hall. Who could possibly be the current object of Kerry's desire?

And the winner was ... John!

"Alright Matt! How's it going pal?"

"Yeah I'm good thanks. You?"

"Fine thanks mate."

John boiled the kettle and made coffee for Kerry before pouring himself a glass of orange juice from a carton in the fridge. He looked across at me, raised his eyebrows and nodded in the direction of the carton.

"No thanks mate. I'm going to have tea."

Love's young dream - well for that one day at least - departed and I was left to prepare my sandwich in relative peace and quiet.

Back in my room, sandwich safely devoured, I peered out of the window; it was a really miserable autumn afternoon. Why couldn't the sun be out?

The dull grey mass of cloud seemed able to almost suck out all the contentment I felt from being with Jodie. She was only yards away. I was staring towards the bloody building in which she was right at that minute for God's sake, but the mental descent was so quick and so dramatic that she might as well have been hundreds of miles away.

I turned away from the gloomy scene and assumed my customary contemplatory position on the edge of the bed and sighed. I knew only too well what was coming, the incoming tide, unstoppable waves of negative emotion that would leave me questioning my own worth.

Why the fuck couldn't I stop it? I had a choice. I didn't have to shut myself away in my room; but it was almost as if I *had* to - I *wanted* to - just so I could think myself bad.

At least I managed to temporarily divert the focus of my attention on to Jodie and, in particular, the mention of her sick spoon.

It was a truly distressing image that made me feel quite nauseous; how the hell could she put herself through that sort of self-abuse? Outwardly, she was funny, pretty, you name it; but I felt that I was getting a glimpse much deeper inside a troubled mind. So much of the resentment inside her stemmed from the way Jodie had been treated by her mother. I wanted to make sense of just why a woman could behave in such a seemingly callous way towards her own flesh and blood - but I couldn't.

My overriding emotion was not one of pity though; I didn't feel sorry for her; what I wanted was to spend more

time with her, get to know her better and to see what developed. There was just one big obstacle that might prevent that happening.

Me.

Jodie had come to my room because she wanted to see me and she wanted to talk (and she could certainly do that). While we were together, while our fingers were intertwined, while she was letting me have a glimpse into her past, everything felt right. However unusual our initial meeting and however quickly deep memories had been revealed, it felt right - yes, *right*.

But the moment her slender figure disappeared from view, it was like my mind knew it could regain a grip on my thoughts and on my mood; a grip that it seemingly struggled to enforce while Jodie was with me.

The logical conclusion was that despite widely differing experiences and issues, we shared some sort of emotional bond or connection from which I was able to gather strength; but only when we were physically together. A thought or an image was simply not enough; my subconscious realised that, and was in no mood to let happiness prevail.

To any objective observer, I had every reason to believe that Jodie was genuine and that (for whatever reason) she had some real feelings for me, but over the next hour or so - I wasn't counting the exact number of minutes - my mind systematically destroyed all those positive notions and left an eighteen year-old shell crouched over the edge of the bed, weeping uncontrollably and hyperventilating almost melo-dramatically; at least that's how it would have appeared.

But there was no one to witness the physical effects of my mind's control. Why would Jodie want to be with someone like me? Why would she tell me so much about her own life unless it was to poke fun when it was my turn to open up? Even if she kept a straight face in my company, surely she would be laughing inside?

There was no rational explanation for the way I viewed myself, but the overwhelming sense of sadness and what amounted to almost self-hatred was all too genuine. The tears that flowed were tangible and visible, and the panic attacks were frighteningly real. But the explanation as to why stayed safely hidden in the darkest recesses of my psyche, and there it seemed destined to remain.

This was the Matthew Green that no one ever saw.

The Matthew Green so ashamed of who he really was; wanting so much to fight the demons that were able to dominate so much of his life, but powerless to do so.

This was the Matthew Green who, as an eight-year-old, would stand in front of the bathroom mirror and try to imagine what there would be if the universe didn't exist. Where would "nothing" go if there was "nowhere?" He couldn't get his head round it then, no more than I could a decade later, but he would stand and stare back at the fresh-faced reflection and think ... and think ... until he sobbed at the hopelessness of the dark vacuum in which he existed.

But then ... something felt different.

I wrenched my head upwards, away from the hands that had been cupped round my tear-stained face. My teeth were clenched and I could sense my cheeks were starting to redden; I was quivering, but not because I was upset. No, I was angry - *really* angry.

So many times, I'd crumbled in floods of tears, but for the first time, my body was starting to fight back. I stood up. My heart was racing and my breathing was heavy, but controlled. My eyes were wide and fixed straight ahead, yet focussed on nothing. My expression probably resembled some weapon-wielding maniac, but if this was what it felt to confront a mind that had ruined most of my teens, then frankly I didn't give a shit what I looked like.

I closed my eyes for a few seconds and I could feel the adrenaline coursing round my body. My eyes flicked open and I aimed a kick at the cupboard door.

In that one moment, tensions that had accumulated over such a long period of time were released and the poor unfortunate door (that had never done me any harm) took the full brunt of my right foot. The effect was dramatic - and fairly impressive if the truth be told - as the bottom of the door caved inwards with a sharp crack, leaving a gaping hole and a scattering of splinters of what was admittedly cheap wood.

The surge of aggression was barely diluted and I proceeded to throw two left jabs at the damaged door. More damage was duly inflicted, to my hand; but there was no immediate pain, just a euphoric sensation that made my head almost tingle.

My breaths became slower and gentler; the muscles in my face relaxed and, as calmness was restored, I surveyed (and admired) the wreckage; first the cupboard door and then the grazed knuckles on the back of my hand ... which were now throbbing.

But I wasn't bothered. I probably would be in the morning, but right at that moment, I'd found the will to fight - or maybe it was Jodie that had somehow given me

the strength to no longer simply accept that I *had* to be unhappy.

And the hole in my cupboard was proof that this particular worm had started to turn.

And my bloody hand really hurt.

09/10/1983

I was in the habit of saving up my ten pence coins for a weekly telephone call home to my parents. Mum always said I could reverse the charges, but that essentially denied me the chance to impose a time limit on the conversation. Dad wasn't the greatest at chatting on the phone and he was basically happy to know there were no major problems, whereas Mum enjoyed a decent natter - well, she enjoyed asking a string of probing questions!

There was a payphone just inside the entrance to the Hall. It was glass fronted and an incredibly tight squeeze, but if you successfully managed to contort your body and somehow close the door behind you, then at least you were afforded some privacy; but no easy way out.

Despite having to watch on helplessly as the distant appearance of hundreds of subconsciously created soldiers preceded another plane crash on the sports field, I actually woke feeling unusually positive. A Jodie-free day presented the ideal opportunity to go for a run, then do a couple of hours work before ... well I hadn't thought as far as the afternoon.

Hopefully, whatever I did or didn't do, it would be a day without any self-analysis; maybe a bit of practice on the dartboard might be a decent distraction?

But first the call home. I checked the time, but I didn't really need to. My parents were early risers and, much as they had their Sunday routine, they knew I hadn't inherited their flair for organisation and while their phone would definitely ring on Sunday, that was about as predictable as it got.

All was well. Dad only had three clues left on his crossword, but he knew there was little point in asking me

to unravel anything cryptic; if I put letters in the gaps and made a recognised word, then it surely *had* to be right. Mum had been to the dentist - had I registered with a dentist?

Official answer: yes.

Correct answer: no!

Rather bravely I mentioned Jodie, although I stumbled badly over whether to call her a friend or my girlfriend. I erred very much on the side of caution and went for the former, partly to avoid any interrogation, but also because if I ever presumed, I would presume the worst: best not to tempt fate.

It was nice to hear their voices and in fairness the conversation was far less of a chore than trying to get out of the booth after I'd hung up. Some Houdini-style extrication was needed before I could return to my room, change into my slightly stale running stuff (which, interestingly, I could now pull *through* the cupboard door without actually having to open it!), and venture athletically forth into the autumn fog...

10/10/1983 (a.m.)

“Jesus! What happened here Matthew?”

Hilda’s jaw dropped and she stared open-mouthed at the hole in the cupboard door. Her momentary gape allowed me the chance for a quick dental count: one, two, three. f... damn, mouth closed.

“Er, I kind of lost my rag Hilda.”

Hilda looked at me. I felt sheepish, but she seemed to see beyond the embarrassment.

“Is everything okay?”

“Just a bad day, I guess. Sorry.”

“Are you sure pet? Look, I’ll go and see Jimmy. He does a lot of the odd-jobs on the campus; if he has a spare door, I’m sure he’ll swap it for this one and no one need know.”

“Thanks Hilda,” I smiled and gave her a cuddle.

“Eee get away with you Matthew!”

I blushed. Hilda grinned: four, five, six...

The rest of Monday morning was spent in lectures or in the library. Jodie kept drifting into my thoughts pretty much every time my concentration slipped (which became increasingly regularly as the morning wore on). It wasn’t easy to properly describe how I was feeling. It was a jumbled mixture of emotions; my chest tightened when I pictured her in my mind, then I got that heavy, sinking feeling when the destructive side of me kicked in, followed by a kind of rush as I tried to ward off all the negativity. And all of that happened in just a manner of seconds, over and over again!

Lunch was from the Union cafeteria. I wasn’t in the mood to sit down and have a proper meal, so I grabbed a

sandwich and a can of coke and went into the bar. My favourite sandwich filling (as I think I may have mentioned) was cheddar cheese spread, almost always with pickle, but seeing as the staff in the cafeteria were evidently blissfully aware of this particular delicacy, I went for the corned beef and tomato option.

I found a quiet corner in the bar, sat down, plonked my lunch on the extremely low table in front of me, but before I'd removed the sandwich from its cling film wrapping, Jodie popped into my head. The image caused my heart to start thumping and my appetite to instantly disappear, so I decided to nip back to our kitchen and leave what I'd just bought in the fridge for later. I bent forward, picked up the sandwich and the can and headed for the back exit, which was closest to my Hall...

With the sandwich safely deposited in the fridge, I opened the can of coke and had a few gulps. My throat seemed dry - that would be Jodie's fault! - and I was acutely aware that I needed a better distraction than some meat thrown in between a sliced bread bun to get through the afternoon. What price a semi-interesting post-lunch lecture?

Well, basically, it was shit; one of the dreariest hours of my whole life. I would have happily spent the time gazing out of the window and daydreaming about Jodie; unfortunately, I'd picked a seat next to the wall so my attention was diverted to various posters whilst the voice from the front of the room droned on.

After that, it was time to visit the library to do a little bit of preparation work for an upcoming essay; luckily nothing to do with the previous lecture that had completely passed me by.

There was a reasonably sized clock positioned on the wall at the end of the aisle that contained numerous medical books (to the left, as I was looking) and a history section to the right. The clock read ten to three; time to head back to my room and play a bit of music before Jodie came over. I winced as I looked at the state of my knuckles. I was left-handed, so using my good hand to hit a wooden door could only be described as “very stupid indeed” and I made a quick mental note to use my right hand for all future door punching.

The music for that particular Monday was an album called *Hypnotised* by The Undertones. For someone prone to occasion maudlin introspection, the desire to indulge in self-pity accompanied equally melancholy songs could at times be overwhelming, but this was undeniably feelgood music. I smiled as the tape started midway through the second track, *There Goes Norman* - who would ever call their kid Norman? A couple of tracks later came the foot-tapping intro to *Whizz Kids*, a blast of guitar then heralded the unmistakable voice of ... er ... me!

To the rest of the world, I was occasionally out of tune - okay, usually out of tune - but to my ears, I was giving Feargal Sharkey more than a run for his money. Even so, it was probably a blessing that the chorus was interrupted by a soft tap at the door; how I wish I'd employed a similar tactic on the cupboard.

I nipped across the floor and turned down the volume on the tape recorder before opening the door.

“Hi Matt!”

“Hiya!” I held out my arms and Jodie accepted my hug.

I ushered her into the room and she jumped onto the bed, adopting that painful-looking cross-legged sitting position that I would never have attempted. Unfortunately, from where she was, the hole in the cupboard was all too visible and before I had the chance to mention the “foot through door” incident, Jodie pointed: “Oh my God! What’s happened to the door?”

Before I started speaking, I knew the words weren’t going to come out properly, so my pitiful effort at constructing any sort of grammatically correct sentence wasn’t a surprise: “I, er, well ... I sort of ... kicked it.”

“Why would you do that?!” Jodie looked genuinely shocked and I realised that I was going to have to give her the honest explanation. I sat down next to her, but kept my legs well and truly uncrossed. I held out my hand, my left hand, bad mistake. She clasped it, I winced and she gently turned over my palm to reveal the marks on the knuckles.

“Matt ... what’s been going on?”

Jodie’s voice had a teacher-like authority about it.

“I’ll explain.”

“I wish you would.”

I turned my hand back over and Jodie took hold of it, more gently.

“It was after you left on Saturday Jodie. We’d chatted away for ages and it was all so easy, even the more serious stuff. But after you’d gone I kind of got myself, I don’t know ... my head just seemed to make me feel really ... low.”

This wasn’t going very well.

“All I wanted to feel was happy. I mean I *was* happy, but I found myself becoming dead upset and all of a

sudden, I was really worked up, crying and having a sort of panic attack. Shit, this is really embarrassing.”

Jodie turned so that she was facing me; she took my (bad) hand in both of hers and smiled: “It’s fine Matt. Just carry on.”

“I’ve had these attacks for years, ever since, well ever since Grandad died, but I’ve never let anyone see me like that.”

“But why were you actually feeling like that?”

“I don’t know if I can really explain, but it’s like my mind is almost telling me I’ve no right to be happy.”

“You mean it’s *you* thinking that way.”

I looked away. Jodie was probably right, but that didn’t make the feelings any less real. A squeeze of my hand was Jodie’s cue for me to continue: “Maybe, I don’t know. But this time, it was different; as you can see. I just had this anger inside me. I’d never *ever* felt like that and ... well I’m not exactly proud of what I did, but...”

Jodie nodded, or at least I thought she had nodded: “Maybe it was like a release?”

“That’s certainly how it felt. And I think I know the reason why it happened.”

“And it is?”

I breathed in sharply and looked Jodie in the eye (strictly speaking it was both of them) and prepared to be ever so brave: “You.”

“Me?!”

I nodded; a definite nod: “I hope you won’t take it the wrong way. It’s just that I’ve always felt that whatever my issues have been - or still are - that I’ve never been able

to deal with them on my own. I can't explain it, but you seem to be making me feel sort of stronger."

"Strong enough to kick a hole in a cupboard!" Jodie laughed, then her face instantly changed: "Seriously, I'm taking it as a compliment that maybe I've made some sort of difference, although I'll be honest, I wasn't quite prepared for *this*."

Jodie flicked her head back in the direction of the cupboard. When I caught her gaze again, the words just kept coming: "My problem has always been that if anything good has come into my life, I'd fight and fight until it went away. Or I'd push it away until everything got back to 'normal', because when things go wrong, at least I know that things are back just as they should be. But I *do* feel different Jodie; and it *has* to be because of you. I'm not very good at putting things into words and I'm going to end up saying something really stupid, but I really like you Jodie. Just the person who you are ... shit, sorry, I'm making such an arse of myself."

Jodie's hand swept the hair from my forehead. She gently kissed the exposed skin and whispered: "Go on."

"I know all this has been really sudden, but you've been willing to trust me and open up to me and I've done the same. I honestly can't explain but whatever it is, you seem to have given me the will to fight, rather than just being crapped on all the time."

"Ahhh, that's lovely!" Jodie continued stroking my hair and the next kiss was on my cheek, much firmer than before.

"I'm just sick of expecting or even making things go wrong Jodie. I don't want this to go wrong."

"This?"

“Us.”

“Us?!”

“Yeah. *Us.*”

At this point, Jodie touched my lips with her finger - my signal to shut up. She shuffled nearer, so her face was almost touching mine. Her eyes were so close, they seemed out of focus, but when her lips met mine, pretty much everything went blurred!

It was the most passionate kiss that we had shared and left (even) me in no doubt about just how Jodie felt.

“I’ll let you into a little secret Matt. I’ve felt so strange; so different. Yeah, it’s like you get me and even though some of the things we’ve been talked about are really difficult, it’s been almost easy talk to you. Do you know what I mean?”

I did, so I nodded.

It was as if Jodie was thinking exactly the same things as me during the time when we’d been apart; and much as I was struggling to believe she could be attracted to me, her actions certainly suggested otherwise.

“You okay?” Jodie sensed I was in a bit of a world of my own.

“Fine. Better than fine,” I smiled.

“I think the best thing to do is not to think too much about what’s happened, or happening. Let’s just keep spending time together and see how things go. What do you think?”

“Sounds perfect. I think we’ve both been surprised by how quickly things have developed and yes, I want to spend time with you, but at the same time, I don’t always want us to talk about the heavy stuff. It’s important ... it’s

kind of what brought us together in a way, but I'd like to do other things as well. Maybe we could go out for a meal?"

"Matthew Green, are you asking me out on a date?!"

"Er, yes ... yes, I suppose I am!"

"You want to take me out for something to eat? With my history?!"

"Oh shit. I never thought."

"It's fine!" Jodie laughed. I blushed. "Sorry," she continued, "that was a bit unfair. I'm still not a massive eater, but I'm so much better than I used to be. Where were you thinking of going?"

"I hadn't really thought. Somewhere where I could order you bean on toast perhaps?!"

"Ha. Touché; you're a funny guy. I know it's maybe not overly adventurous, but I really love salad. Maybe we could go to an Italian where they do salads as well as pizza and stuff?"

"Yeah. Whatever you fancy!"

"So, when's our first official date gonna be then?!"

"How about tomorrow?"

Jodie grinned: "You don't waste much time, do you?! Tomorrow's absolutely fine. You can pick me up at seven!"

That was me told. Now all I had to do was find some-where to take her, somewhere that served salads. And sort out something to wear. And make sure that I had enough money. How much did salads cost anyway?

Jodie had resumed her cross-legged position on the bed. She looked relaxed and I suppose I was semi-relaxed. I felt incredibly happy that Jodie was with me - that she

clearly *wanted* to be with me - happy that the “hole in door” chat had gone well, but also nervous about our upcoming night out. I had asked Jodie out for a meal as if it was sort of thing I did regularly. It wasn’t. In fact, apart from a few pretty unromantic trips to the local *Wimpy* before I’d come away to university, this was actually the very first time I’d offered to take a young lady to a dining establishment.

“Anyway, how were things at home?”

“Pretty good. Jess came round and the four of us had a bit of Sunday lunch and a chat. Yeah, it was nice...” Jodie hesitated. “I told them about you!”

“Really?!” Facial temperature on the rise. “What did you say?”

“Oh, nothing much, just that I’d met this really nice guy, we’d talked quite a bit ... and I really liked him!”

Sitting with an inane grin across my glowing red cheeks wasn’t my most attractive look, but I thought I should enter into the spirit of the conversation, even if the outcome was a likely deepening of my facial colour to an intense shade of purple: “I told my Mum about you too.”

“Did you?!” Jodie looked surprised, but in a good way.

“I didn’t say too much, because my Mum would have started interrogating me, but yeah, I did tell her. There was one thing though...”

Jodie innocently bit her bottom lip, raised her eyebrows, but didn’t speak.

“I ... I didn’t know ... I wasn’t sure whether to say you ... er...”

“What? That I was your girlfriend?” Jodie’s face lit up as she laughed.

“Sort of, yeah.”

She leant forward and rested her hands on my thighs. Our eyes met and Jodie grinned a genuinely mischievous grin: “What do *you* think?!”

“I ... shit I’m rubbish at this. Yes, yes, I want us to be more than *just* friends, but what I want and what I think...”

“Matt, you are funny sometimes. Here, maybe this will answer your question.” She left one hand resting on my leg, but cupped the other round the back of my neck. As she pulled me gently towards her, I could sense I was losing my balance, but instead of pushing me back, Jodie simply fell with me and I somehow ended up lying on top of her. If I’d have tried to engineer something like that, we would have ended up in some awkward tangle of arms and legs, but everything seemed so natural, although I was a nervous wreck inside.

“Close your eyes,” Jodie whispered. Now wasn’t the time to disobey orders. Her hand was still round my neck and I could sense her drawing me closer. Her other hand touched my waist. She fumbled with my long-sleeved t-shirt and pushed it untidily upwards, so that her hand was pressed against the bare skin at the bottom of my back. Jodie wouldn’t have been able to feel the latest wave of butterflies in my chest, but she couldn’t fail to notice a more obvious physical sign of how I was feeling.

I screwed up my eyes, rather than simply closing them. Jodie sensed that I was embarrassed, but simply held me tighter.

The kiss we shared made me feel like I was almost floating, and when her tongue flicked into my mouth and touched my own tongue, the reaction right through my body was quite unlike anything I'd ever experienced. My senses, my emotions were simply out of control.

After thirty seconds, a minute, I've no idea how long, we rolled onto our sides. Jodie moved her head away, just far enough for us to be able to look at each other: "That's your answer!"

If there was a word to describe inner calm contrasted with total excitement, now would have been the ideal time to include it, but let's just say I felt fantastic. It was a moment that I didn't want to end, nor did I want it to continue. We had discovered so much about each other in such a brief time, but I - actually we both - recognised that we were really only starting to properly get to know each other. There were a lot of gaps that needed to be filled in before the emotional side of our burgeoning relationship developed into the physical, and that was fine by me, because Jodie was beautiful ... and deep down I was petrified.

I simply held Jodie close. Nothing more was said. Nothing more needed to be said.

10-11/10/1983

The main task that evening was to find somewhere suitable for our first public engagement. After getting absolutely no help from any of the lads along the corridor, it was actually Kerry who recommended what was apparently a cosy and relatively reasonably priced Italian restaurant that was actually only about a ten-minute walk from the campus.

I'd probably passed the restaurant (unimaginatively called Luigi's) dozens of times, but never consciously noticed it. I didn't push Kerry on her definitions of "reasonably", or "relatively", but as my wallet was sadly devoid of notes of any denomination, I decided to stroll down to the nearest cash machine to withdraw enough to cover the cost. The restaurant and the bank were on the same street, albeit a couple of hundred yards apart, so I could have a quick glance at the menu in the window before getting an adequate amount of money. I could also pop in and reserve a table - it was the done thing apparently.

It was a clear evening, and much colder as a result. I hardly ever wore a coat or a jacket, so I was pretty chilly too. What was going to be a stroll turned into a much faster-paced walk along the main road, past the bank and onto Luigi's. I peered through the window. It looked pretty busy, but when I went inside to book the table for two, at seven thirty, name Green. The bloke I spoke to gave me a neatly folded menu for me to take away and peruse at my leisure.

I had spent no more than a couple of minutes inside the restaurant, but as I headed back towards the bank, there was now something else that I knew was going to bother

me, although this was likely to be more of a personal irritation.

A quick glance at the menu, which I had to hold up towards one of the street lights to read, revealed that the salad dishes were described as “insalata”. Now whilst I fully accepted that the latter was the Italian word for the former, my experience of Italian restaurants (which was limited to those recently-mentioned couple of minutes) made me believe that if I ordered a meal in my barely noticeable regional twang, everything would be then repeated back in a ridiculously over-exaggerated Italian accent.

Worse still, “Luigi” was likely to have actually been born within a ten-mile radius of the restaurant, was probably called Dave, and was no more Italian than I was - and I wasn’t.

I retired to bed relatively early; not for any special reason, but I hoped that an early night might be rewarded with at least a semi-decent kip; and the eight hours of restful slumber that duly followed were very welcome indeed.

I was up, showered, dressed and ready to face the day (Tuesday) even before Hilda arrived with her mop, bucket and solitary incisor.

What she lacked in teeth, Hilda more than made up for in female intuition: “Blimey Matthew, you’re not often up and about this early. You haven’t found yourself a young lady, have you?”

How the bloody hell could she know?

Maybe - and this was nothing more than educated guesswork - perhaps there was some sort of correlation between teeth (or rather the lack of them) and perception or

insight. Was it really possible that the ability to be intuitive was inversely proportional to the number of remaining teeth?

“Er, actually yes, Hilda. How did you...”

I didn't finish the question; not exactly a novelty in female company.

“You just have a sort of glow Matthew. Do I know her?”

“Don't think so. She's called Jodie and she's staying just over there...” The nod to my right wasn't overly helpful, but Hilda didn't probe any deeper.

“Well I'm really pleased for you, pet,” and with that she disappeared along the corridor.

Lectures came and went, as did lunch, although I didn't eat much. I just felt slightly queasy, understandable nerves.

After I'd finished my studying for the day, I strolled along the murky path back to my room. It was something past five and I wasn't exactly stretched for time to get ready. A quarter of an hour was usually more than adequate, but I was determined to make a good impression, so for one time only, I was prepared to relax my rules and allow myself the luxury of a whole twenty minutes.

Those twenty minutes excluded ironing time ... mainly because making a decent job of the blue and grey checked shirt and jeans would have used up the full allowance. I was slow, but I got there in the end; and sometimes there weren't even any creases.

A shower, roughly towel-dried hair, no chance at all of a shave (Jodie was lovely, but there was a line that I wasn't prepared to cross for any girl), on with the clothes et voilà!

Well, I didn't think I looked *too* bad.

Wasting time when you're ready too early for a (hopefully) special night was not one of my skills, I cleaned my teeth and checked my hair. I'd been nervous on and off for most of the day, but after a flutter-free hour or so, the butterflies returned with a vengeance as I checked hair and teeth for the umpteenth, but final time.

I wanted to run over to collect Jodie, but that would have belied my cool image - the one that only existed in my dreams - so I covered the short distance between Halls at a more military pace. Through the front door, up the stairs (two at a time, so whilst my weight caused step number four to creak angrily, number nine remained silent), along the corridor, slowly, to preserve that image, before knocking on the door.

Jodie emerged. God she looked gorgeous.

I was never much of an expert when it came to fashion, but Jodie's jeans were definitely tight, actually the same word would have sufficed for her black jumper too. Black ankle boots, perfect hair and make-up, she was stunning; and Jodie couldn't fail to notice the inane expression on my face ... like a four-year old who's just been told he's got a pound to blow on chocolate.

"Wow!" was the best I could manage.

Jodie grinned: "You look pretty good yourself!"

Well it was just something I'd thrown on.

"You ready?"

Jodie nodded and beckoned me inside. She picked up a jacket that was draped over the chair next to her desk, turned, placed her free arm round my neck and kissed me, really hard: "I'm ready now!"

I blushed; the cool pretence being destroyed in that instant. I exited into the corridor; Jodie followed and locked the door behind her. We walked hand in hand through the campus and out onto the main street. In the faint distance, I heard the sound of a train. The main line was probably the best part of a mile away, but the roads were quiet and presumably the sound was being carried on the gentle, but crisp breeze.

When I was very young, I often stayed with my grandparents - my Mum's parents - whose home was situated quite close to a railway line. Most nights, I would listen to the hum of the freight trains as they made their nightly trundle past my bedroom window. The curious thing was that the sound would normally be considered as some kind of disturbance or irritation, but to me, the noise of train on track was always a source of comfort, something I always associated with happy times.

The restaurant was fairly busy. Not packed, but there seemed a nice atmosphere or buzz about the place. We received a friendly welcome from what appeared to be one of the waiters - the notepad sticking out of his apron and pen behind his ear gave it away. I confirmed that we had booked and we were duly escorted over to a small table, at the end of a row of other tables set up for dining couples at the far side of the room. The tablecloths were of the disposable variety, but comprised the red, white and green colours of the Italian flag, adorned with a small candle flickering away happily in the centre.

Jodie slung her jacket over the back of her chair. She had taken the seat next to the back wall, which meant she could look out across pretty much the whole of the restaurant. I couldn't, but I was more than happy with the view!

We were handed menus and asked what we wanted to drink. We decided to sample the house white wine, a bit of a gamble on my part, because I was hardly a connoisseur.

Within moments, a different waiter brought along a wine-filled glass container which, to the untrained eye, looked like a cross between a large flask from a chemistry lab and some sort of urine specimen bottle. Right at that moment, the reality of the taste could only be better than the prospect.

The waiter poured a small amount of wine into my glass, stopped (too quickly for my liking) and looked enquiringly at me. I glanced at him, then across at Jodie, who was already giggling. “Try it!”

“Why?”

“Because that’s what you do. Make sure it tastes okay then he’ll fill up both glasses.”

I peered sheepishly up at the waiter, who didn’t quite manage to stop rolling his eyes in time. “It’ll be fine. Thank you.”

I couldn’t be sure, but with glasses duly filled, I’m sure he mumbled something under his breath as he turned and walked away. I felt such an idiot.

“You don’t come to restaurants very often, do you?!” Jodie was still chuckling as she sampled the wine. “Mmm, that’s nice. Quite dry.” She took another sip.

“Yeah, dry. Just what I was thinking!”

Jodie put a hand across her mouth, spluttered as she swallowed the wine, then laughed out loud.

“Anything you fancy?” I nodded towards the menu that was covering most of Jodie’s side of the table. Jodie’s

smile and raised eyebrows were enough to make me look at the floor as I felt my cheeks starting to glow yet again. “... on the menu!”

“Ahhh,” Jodie sighed melodramatically. “Surprise, surprise, I’ll have the chicken salad.”

I only needed a quick look to confirm what I’d picked earlier, a hot and spicy pizza with pepperoni and chilli, although I should really have had a plan B because the jet-black hair and slightly-olive skinned waiter who was on his way over to our table could only be ... yes, it was bloody Luigi.

He acknowledged Jodie, then me: “Ciao Signora, Signore. Are you ready to order?”

I so wanted to say “hello Dave” back, but after my faux pas with the wine, I thought it best just to be polite: “Hi ... er, yes ... can we have the chicken salad and a pizza ... Inferno please?”

I gave myself a mental pat on the back for using the restaurant’s name for the pizza, thereby avoiding having to say pepperoni, and denying Luigi the chance to repeat the order but roll several extra r’s into “pepperrrroni.”

“Grazie. Any garlic bread or chips?”

He actually said “cheeps”, but I’ve opted to anglicise rather than try to attempt anything vaguely phonetic.

“No thanks.” I smiled and handed back the two menus.

“Are you okay?” Jodie clearly recognised that I wasn’t used to, or particularly comfortable with the surroundings.

“Yeah. I am now!”

“I hope this is okay for you too?”

“It’s lovely Matt. It was so nice of you to ask me out. Feels kid of normal after all the stuff we’ve talked about!”

“Yeah, I know what you mean! But you’re sure you’re fine with ... with *this*?”

Jodie clearly understood that my vacant expression was meant to convey the fact that we were in a restaurant, and about to eat.

“Honestly Matt, I’m totally fine. Here, can I show you something?”

“What?”

“It’s a photo, of me. It was taken after I’d been in hospital. Back then I used to think I looked fantastic, but I looked what I was ... ill. I carry the picture with me in case those feelings ever come back. My mind might be able to hide the inevitable, but the photo can’t.”

She leant to her right and plucked a small photo (with slightly creased edges) from her bag, which was partially hidden under the right side of her jacket: “Here.”

The truth was that I absolutely didn’t want to look at the photograph, but part of me recognised that however much better Jodie was, her past would never be too far away and coming out for a meal was perhaps not an ordeal, but certainly some sort of personal challenge. I held out my hand and took the picture.

If I hadn’t known that the person in the photo was the same person sat in front of me, I would probably have been almost sickened by the image of what was basically the rear view of a skeleton covered in very pale skin. The face was turned away from the camera and I would never have recognised that this person was Jodie; but accepting

that it was, and given how I felt about her, I was almost instantly overcome by a sadness that was almost painful. How could someone do this to themselves?

I returned the picture, but said nothing. I didn't need to, my face said it all.

"I do understand that there isn't a magic cure Matt, but when I see how I looked, I now see someone disgusting, someone I don't ever want to be again. I don't know if I'll always be strong enough, but right now I'm doing well, I'm eating relatively normally and I'm not ... well, you know..."

"I'm proud of you."

Jodie blew a kiss across the table and placed the picture back in the bag: "Right! Serious stuff over. Tell me about your best holiday!"

As well as interrupting, Jodie had a rare talent for seamlessly changing the course of a conversation and the random question threw me for a second.

"My *favourite* holiday? I'm not sure I've ever really stopped and thought about it." A sip of wine was required. "I've never been abroad, and when I was really young, most of our holidays were spent staying with one set of grandparents and visiting relatives. My Mum's family came from Scotland, the south-west. They had a massive family and lived out in the countryside. It was beautiful. My Dad's parents lived quite close to Blackpool and that was brilliant. Whenever we travelled up, my Mum and I would have a competition to see who spotted the Blackpool Tower first. I always won, but when I was seven or eight, I didn't quite realise that Mum *let* me win! Their house looked out over the Odeon cinema. The building seemed

huge. It was only about ten minutes walk to the sea to be honest, as a kid, both places were kind of magical.”

Jodie’s hands were clasped together and resting on the table. “Do you have any particular memories?”

“Loads, but they are pretty random.”

“Random’s fine,” Jodie smiled.

“Er, okay then. I remember that the house in Blackpool had a wooden box next to the television; it was a black and white telly and when you switched off, the picture would sort of fade into a small dot in the centre of the screen. I’d sit glued to the dot, trying to guess the exact moment when it would disappear. Anyway, the box. There were board games, stuff like snakes and ladders and draughts. There was a set of dominoes too, but my favourite game was these huge noughts and crosses made out of plastic, the crosses were white and the noughts were black. There was this big plastic sheet with the nine spaces and basically I’d sit on the floor with my Grandma and we’d play game after game.” I smiled at the flicker of a distant memory: “She didn’t let me win very often!”

“Aww, that’s lovely!” Jodie didn’t say anything else, but as she continued to gaze intently across the table, the small, yet bright candle flame gave her eyes an enchanting shimmer. She clearly wanted me to go on, and seeing as the meals hadn’t arrived - and there was consequently no danger of me spraying crumbs of food in her general direction as I spoke - I allowed myself to drift back in time.

“My other grandparents lived in a village fairly close to Dumfries. It was totally different to Blackpool; no beach or slot machines for a start! But it was exciting in a different kind of way. I just remember their house being

such a happy place. My Nan had a twin sister who lived just up the road. They were inseparable and they were so funny when they got together and most of my memories are just of them laughing and singing. I didn't realise until much later that gin was involved, but they were special times."

"They were your Mum's parents, right?"

I nodded.

"Are they still alive?"

"Yeah, they're in their late seventies now, but still going strong. Mum rings them regularly. I haven't been in touch since I came here; but I really should. Anyway, what about you? Have you ever been abroad?"

"No, but I'd like to. I've never flown before, so I don't know if I'd enjoy that; but I quite fancy the idea of lying in the sun, near a pool and doing nothing for a week."

"I've never flown either, but seeing as I used to get car sick all the time, I'm not really sure I'd be much better in a plane."

An involuntary shudder followed, which Jodie noticed. "What is it?"

"Oh, nothing really. I just remembered that Mum used to give me these tablets to stop me being ill in the car. They were black, they looked horrible and you couldn't dissolve them: I couldn't swallow them whole and if you bit into one, the taste was disgusting. Mum came up with this idea of hiding the tablet inside a sweet, and then casually giving me the sweet to sort of catch me off guard. It was actually a pretty good plan, except she used one of those jelly fruits. I suppose the sweet had to be soft, otherwise she'd not have been able to put the tablet in, but she picked a yellow one! You could see this black shape in

the middle of the bloody sweet and there was no way it was going anywhere near my mouth!”

Jodie giggled and took another drink of wine.

“Here, I’ll top you up.” I held out my hand and Jodie passed over her almost empty glass.

Just as I was mid-pour, a waiter appeared carrying two plates using (rather cleverly) just one arm. Using his right hand, he took the plate from his opposite forearm and positioned it gently in front of Jodie, before placing my pizza neatly between the knives and forks. The cutlery that would have been used for a starter was removed and with a cheery “Buon appetito” he left us to enjoy our food.

It wasn’t until I watched Jodie put some salad onto her fork that I realised I’d just been talking about throwing up in front of someone for whom food and vomiting had so often gone hand in hand. The part of me that didn’t really understand what Jodie had gone through half expected her to somehow struggle with the first, and every subsequent mouthful. There must have been a time when the simple act of chewing and swallowing must have been mental torture: anguish that was only, and temporarily, alleviated by forcible expulsion. Thankfully, I was alone in my ignorance and I took my first bite of a pizza that was not quite a perfect circle, but big enough for some of the base to be hanging over the edge of plate: “You never said what was your best holiday?”

The fork which was on its way towards Jodie’s mouth was returned to the plate. She looked pensive, but then her face brightened: “I don’t know if it was the best, but the first holiday I can remember was a trip to Filey.”

“Filey?”

“It’s near Scarborough.”

“Ahhh. Sorry...”

“I was only young. Five or six maybe. We would spend hours on the beach, paddling in the sea or building sandcastles. The weather was lovely, the sea was freezing, but we’d always have an ice cream during the afternoon. Mum and Dad seemed so happy back then. Maybe they were; or maybe that’s just how things looked through a pair of innocent eyes. Even though things turned out the way they did, it’s still a nice memory.”

With that the fork resumed its journey mouthward...

The evening continued in a natural and light-hearted vein. Neither of us finished our meal. Jodie hadn’t been able to manage a small piece of chicken and a couple of slices of cucumber, whereas my stomach had waved the white flag with one segment of pizza, topped with four and a rough half circles of pepperoni, nudged over to the far side of the plate.

A short while after the plates were collected and an offer of a pudding politely declined, the bill (with total amount craftily hidden) was handed to me. I left enough money to cover the cost and a tip - restaurant etiquette and I were no longer strangers - and amid a mixture of Anglo-Italian thanks and farewells, we made our way outside.

I extended my hand towards Jodie. She took my hand, but placed it round her waist, a process she repeated with my left hand. She moved closer and kissed me softly on the cheek before nuzzling into my shoulder: “That was lovely. Thank you!”

I didn’t reply, but simply stroked Jodie’s hair, pushing a few stray strands behind her ears. I’m not sure exactly what I did, but Jodie let out a sigh. She looked up at me, smiled, then took a deliberate deep breath, the

moisture condensing visibly in the cold air as she exhaled: “Home or pub?!”

“You choose,” I replied rather indecisively.

“Have you got lectures tomorrow morning?”

“Nothing until eleven o’clock... or is it ten? Why?”

“How about we pick up some more wine from the off licence and go back to mine?”

That didn’t exactly answer the lecture question, but I presumed it was just hangover related: “Sounds good to me. You might have to pick the wine though; just not red though.”

“Why not red?”

“I tried it once ... never again. I’ve never been so ill. Seriously, just smelling red wine is enough to make me feel bad!”

“White it is then!”

The off licence was on the opposite side of the road to the restaurant, but the same side as the campus. We nipped straight across the road and, less than five minutes later, I was carrying a bag containing a bottle of something I’d never heard of in one hand and holding Jodie’s hand with the other, both equally tightly.

We barely saw a soul on the stroll back, and all was quiet on campus as well. The brightest light and only real signs of life were emanating from the Union over to our left, but we hurried past my Hall and onto the next building. Jodie unlocked the door and skipped up the stairs so nimbly, I could barely keep up. Strangely, when Jodie’s feet landed on steps four and nine there wasn’t a sound, but both creaked their customary protest as I followed. Jodie

opened her door to let me in: “I’ll just get a couple of glasses; they’re not proper wine glasses mind!”

And they weren’t. They weren’t made of glass for a start, although using plastic tumblers ensured no breakages, even if drunken spillages were still a distinct possibility.

Jodie unscrewed the bottle top and poured wine into each tumbler until they were about three-quarters full. She slid the glasses together and compared the levels of liquid in the glasses. The one on the left was a fraction of an inch higher, or it was according to Jodie, although she did have to crouch down and squint to be one hundred percent sure. It was the glass on the left that Jodie selflessly handed to me. I had a sip. It wasn’t pleasant.

“Is it okay?” Jodie enquired as she placed her glass next to the bed before assuming her that seemingly customary cross-legged position that I knew I couldn’t reproduce, although the combined effects of alcohol and the bracing October air made believe that I could, so I tried.

And I couldn’t.

Jodie laughed - rather too heartily considering it was at my expense - and shook her head to flick away the hair that had flopped across her face. At that moment, she just looked beautiful and it was no surprise when I felt several heavy thumps inside my chest.

“Was that, er, the meal ... was it okay?”

“I really enjoyed Matt. Honestly! I don’t suppose I’ll ever be totally relaxed in a restaurant and there’s a part of me that feels awkward, almost embarrassed or ashamed to eat in public. It’s just nice to feel like I’m not being judged all the time. Do you understand? That someone sort

of sees me for who I am, rather than the person that they want to see; or worse, the person I became.”

Serious conversation and wine didn't strike me as being a great combination. We'd been honest enough to talk without the aid of any tongue-loosening liquid and I really wasn't sure that opening up even partially under the influence was a good idea, but there we were...

“I'm hardly in a position to judge anyone, am I?!” I replied, before bravely taking another sip of the acidic wine. “It's nice to be liked, but you should never change who you are because you think that's what someone else wants or expects. People should want to know you, the *real* you: the person you try so hard to hide ... but the special person I know is in there.”

“Aww, that's so sweet!”

“I mean it. You're beautiful inside as well as....”

“As well as?”

Fucking great: talked my way straight into the conversational equivalent of a cul-de-sac. Jodie obviously knew what I was thinking and somewhat cruelly wasn't going to let the moment go.

“You know what I mean.”

“I'm not sure that I do,” Jodie's eyes could melt away inhibitions almost as swiftly as cheap vino.

“I just meant that, er, that you are lovely inside and out and you don't need to change. Not for anyone.”

Jodie feigned innocent surprise, leant forward and pressed her lips against mine: “The same applies to you too, you know.”

I whispered a thank you as Jodie moved back to rest against the wall, legs now uncrossed.

“It all seems kind of unreal don’t you think?” Jodie continued. “For all that time when I believed I was fat, or useless, when I just hated myself so much, I would never have believed that anyone would ever have wanted to get to know me, or to spend time with me, let alone actually *care* for me. If anyone showed me any interest, I just assumed they were after one thing, and in my heart of hearts I genuinely believed that’s all I was worth. This feels so different, but I know I’ll get scared that this isn’t for real.” She paused momentarily. “And that’s not because of you Matt. It’s me. It’s the way I am; it’s what I do. I’ve spent so long pretending. Pretending to be happy, pretending to be somebody I’m not and then something happens. *You* happen. And I’m just waiting for Jodie to fuck things up, because that’s what she always does.”

A lot of what she said struck a chord: “I do understand Jodie, really I do. I know that when I go back to my room, when I can’t see you, or hear you, then stuff’ll start whizzing round my head making me doubt everything that right now feels wonderful.”

“Then don’t go.”

The effect of those few words was like my heart actually exploding. The tingling sensation that my whole body felt when we kissed was magnified ten-fold by just one ridiculously small sentence. I forced myself to try and breathe normally, when all my lungs wanted to do was hyperventilate: “Sorry?!”

“Then don’t go,” repeated Jodie calmly.

Whatever the sensation that I had just experienced I wasn’t entirely sure, but I recognised the feeling that replaced it: panic: “Shit, I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to suggest ... I don’t want you to think...”

“I wasn’t, and I don’t,” Jodie successfully second-guessed what I was trying to say. “I just didn’t want you to spend the night on your own if you were going to stay awake all night thinking. We don’t need to talk. We don’t need to do anything. Just hold each other.”

Jodie clearly sensed I was uncomfortable, but probably not exactly why. The truth was yes, I was beyond nervous at the any prospect of taking a fledgling relationship to a new level, but more than that I felt something for Jodie; and that something was respect. In just a few days, we had gone from strangers to two people with a very strong connection. My feelings were still a bit of a jumbled mess and whilst on a basic level I fancied Jodie like mad, this was about so much more than physical attraction and desire. There were loads of things I could have said, or wanted to say, but I decided to stay silent, and thankfully my mouth obeyed.

It wasn’t particularly late, although I didn’t know the exact time. Jodie and I just looked at each other, I stretched across the bed and placed my glass next to Jodie’s and scrambled rather inelegantly back beside her. We hugged tenderly and I kissed her forehead before I softly suggested to Jodie that she turn away from me.

She moved round so that she was facing the wall, her knees were bent and her bum was sticking out towards me. I copied her position and draped my left hand across her waist: “I’ve had a wonderful evening. I’m not going to stay, but I’d like to cuddle you off to sleep if that’s okay?”

“That would be lovely,” Jodie sighed. I felt her tummy contract at she yawned. I was relaxed, but not especially tired. I didn’t think that Jodie was particularly sleepy either, but after lying still for maybe fifteen or twenty minutes, I could sense a change in Jodie’s

breathing. It had become louder - by virtue of the fact that I could now hear it - and her breaths were deep and rhythmic.

“Night night, Jodie.”

Not a sound. And no change in her breathing. She was fast asleep. I lifted my arm from round her waist and folded the red duvet cover over her to make sure she'd stay warm. I got to my feet, stretched and was about to head for the door when I noticed a notepad on Jodie's desk. I didn't need to search for something to write with because an array of biros and pencils, along with a plastic ruler were poking from the top of a red mug. I picked out a pencil and on the top sheet of paper, I wrote: *<Have a lovely sleep. I've really enjoyed tonight. Thank you for being you xx>*

I left the note on her desk, with the cup placed just over the corner of the paper just in case some implausibly strong gust of wind managed to breach the closed window, walked across the room, switched off the light and gently closed the door behind me.

11-12/10/1983

Sometimes a sleepless night would come as a slight surprise, but surely this wasn't going to be one of them. I did clean my teeth and paid a visit to the toilet, but I didn't bother with any of my other normal nocturnal preparations. I didn't even worry about getting undressed, just plonked my head on the pillow and waited for my brain to engage.

So much had changed in not even a week and there hadn't been anywhere near enough time to reflect on one particular day, before events were superseded (with an "s") by the experience of the next. In the midst of all the to-and-fro of revelation, I appeared to have acquired a girlfriend - way out of my league - who affected me in just about every way possible. It was still Tuesday night and with no nine o'clock lecture, I could allow myself a couple of quality hours' contemplation, but I had clearly underestimated the strength of the wine and its ability to lower eyelids with little or no warning. Within minutes, the school was under attack...

I woke to find that my head had been transformed into a lead weight that was way too heavy to be lifted up off the pillow. The scuffling sounds from the corridor suggested that some of the lads were getting themselves ready for a bit of midweek education, one instructive boat I looked destined to miss. I groaned loudly as I rolled over, rubbed the fingers and thumb of my left hand across two very painful temples and, with admirable concentration and no little effort, managed to sit up.

Having struggled to my feet and shambled pathetically over to the sink. I turned on the cold tap, cupped my hands and doused my face several times. The effect was one of apparently instant refreshment, which

disappeared as soon as the tap was turned back off. I screwed up my eyes and became aware of a sickly, bilious feeling somewhere between my stomach and my throat - although I couldn't work out exactly where.

I glanced over at the foot of the door, half expecting to see a reply to my note, but there was nothing except the faint streak of brightness from the corridor lights. My thoughts turned to Jodie. How had she slept? How did she feel after last night? I shook my head to banish any negative thoughts. There was no logical reason for me to doubt that the special person I saw in Jodie was real and, more relevantly, that she saw some-thing similar in me too. The most pressing concern was to get rid of the throbbing pain in my head: then, and only then, would I be ready to face however much of the day was left.

I didn't quite make it for the eleven o'clock lecture, mainly because it started at ten. The topic was due to be Victorian social history. It was actually quite an interesting subject, or rather it should have been. Sadly, the History department seemed to be inundated with particularly dull lecturers, and Mr Henderson was just one more face in a wholly uninspiring crowd.

Buoyed by a cheese and ham toasted sandwich, served with lettuce, tomato and a nicely charred piece of cellophane which was well and truly stuck to the bread, I was able to tackle the afternoon's festivities with renewed energy. I managed to last through two one-hour talks, along with a half-hour tutorial. Seemingly the powers that be were slightly more impressed with the quality of my work than I was with the standard of some of the lecturers, but it was comforting to know that as far as the course was concerned, I had made a steady start.

As I strolled back across the campus, I wondered whether there would be a piece of paper waiting for me. I turned the key and clumsily opened the door; the simple action being complicated somewhat by the weighty text books I was carrying. There was no note. I flung the books onto the bed, two remained on the duvet, but one bounced off the edge and onto the floor, coming to rest face down on the rug. I bent down and dejectedly spun the book back onto the bed.

The thought of nipping over to see Jodie did cross my mind, but my occasional and immature tendency for petulance surfaced and on the basis that I'd left the last note, then surely it was Jodie's turn? No firm plans had been made for where or when we were going to meet up, and I chose to take out a bout of unjustifiable frustration on the dartboard in the Union. I scraped some coins from the desk and dropped them into my pocket, then picked up my darts, neatly stored in a fake leather wallet, from the sparsely-filled shelf above and made a swift return journey back along the main path across the campus.

For any aficionados, my darts weighed a relatively hefty twenty-nine grams, and every now and again, they landed in the same part of the board that I'd actually been aiming for. I'd only ever played for fun, but on the basis of those other students I'd seen at the oche, maybe I was underestimating my ability. Either that or they were crap. By rights, for someone prone to bouts of anxiety and with a body that occasionally disobeyed even the simplest of instructions, I should have been hopeless at a pastime that demanded such precision, but the game just seemed to come naturally and the confidence, bordering on arrogance, that I acquired just by holding three pointed bits of

tungsten in my hand contrasted starkly with the inescapable need to withdraw.

Dad had let me have a board in the garage, but as soon as he started losing, he beat the hastiest of retreats. I would spend hours practising, prior to unleashing my dubious talent on the regulars of Dad's local, The Fox, shortly after my eighteenth birthday.

Within a couple of weeks, I had been asked to join the pub team, the balance being tipped by a fourteen-dart (501) demolition of the team captain who, far from being irritated at the defeat, was thrilled at the prospect of welcoming a raw youngster into his five-man side. I declined, but only because I knew I was heading off to study and, didn't think it was right to cause any disruption, or ill-feeling.

There were no canny pub league veterans in the Union, and the board was never partially shrouded by smoke drifting from yet another Embassy Regal; but it was sometimes just fun to play the board, rather than an opponent. There were a few people dotted around the room. Some were just chatting, two were playing pool, one was engrossed in a game of Galaxian; a game the alien invaders seemed to be winning, judging by the expletives and casual whack of the control lever.

The table nearest the bar was surrounded by students who looked deep in discussion, but at the opposite end of the bar, neatly tucked away in the corner of the room, the dart-board was free.

My early evening tipple of choice was a pint of cider. A few weeks earlier, it would have been served in a tall straight slender glass bearing the name of the drink that was bubbling away gently inside, but of those branded glasses that had come through Freshers Week unscathed,

the majority were presumably now residing in various rooms around the campus and therefore my pint arrived in a more traditional, but nameless, receptacle with the slight bulge near the top (for enhanced grip when the alcohol started to take hold).

I took a quick sip as I turned away from the bar, and placed the glass on the ledge running across the wall in between the windows. The curtains were closed and the radiator under the ledge was warm, but not red hot, to the touch. Ideal darting conditions! I pulled the darts from the wallet, affixed the plain white flights, assumed my stance at the oche and propelled the first three darts casually towards the board. One, twenty and treble twelve.

It took a few minutes and a couple more swigs of cider before I started to find some sort of range, but sure enough, the pointy end started hitting the board closer and closer to intended targets.

Within a quarter of an hour, I was throwing really well, so it was a bit of a shame for the two lads who chose that moment to show up for what they hoped would be a quiet game. And they could have enjoyed that quiet game, had one of them been able to beat me!

They introduced themselves as Paul and Andy. I half recognised their faces, but hadn't spoken to them before. Not that I said very much to either of them then, as game after game went my way, and the pair could only swap darts for chalk as they took it in turns to play, lose, then keep score.

After about forty minutes, I did the honourable thing and left them to have their fun. My pint was almost empty, and what was left was warm and flat, so I just left the glass on the bar, replaced the victorious darts back in their wallet

and headed towards the exit that was situated just beyond the pool table.

Just as I neared the glass door, I spotted a familiar shape, illuminated by the bright light on the outside wall, walking briskly towards the Union: Jodie. We reached the door simultaneously. I held it open to let her in, but she beckoned me outside.

She looked nervous. Agitated.

“Are you okay? What’s the matter?”

I went to hug her, but unexpectedly, she flinched and I (rather exaggeratedly) pulled back my arm.

“Have you got five minutes?” Jodie actually appeared to be shaking.

“Of course I have. What’s wrong?”

“Can we just go to your room?”

No more words were exchanged until we were in the relative sanctuary of room number nine. My mind was racing trying to work out what Jodie was - or perhaps wasn’t - going to say, and the way she had recoiled when I moved towards her was certainly disconcerting.

“I need to ask you a question.”

My silence was an implication that she should continue.

“What would you say if I told you I made myself ill last night?”

I could feel sudden waves of confusion breaking inside my head. What sort of a question was that? If it was a joke, then it wasn’t very funny, but ... but if she was serious...

I just gave the honest answer: “If you had made yourself ill last night, I’d ... I’d ask you why. I’d ask you if

you were okay. I'd ask if there was anything I could do, or if you wanted to talk, and I'd want to give you a cuddle."

I managed to catch Jodie's gaze. Her eyes were slightly bloodshot and the tear she had just wiped away has left a smear of mascara across the top of her cheek. "I hoped that's what you'd say."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Right," Jodie sniffed and took a deep breath to compose herself. "Will you hold my hand?"

I did.

"I don't know if the words are going to come out right, but please will you just let me talk, even if I'm not making much sense, or if I get upset."

My reply came in the form of a gentle squeeze of her hand, which was trembling ever so softly. Jodie reciprocated, dabbed her eyes with a tissue she'd taken from the pocket of the denim knee-length skirt she was wearing, then looked straight at me.

"I had a massive panic attack during the night. I haven't had one for ages and it absolutely freaked me out."

She paused as if she expected me to speak, but I was under orders...

"I jumped out of bed and just couldn't catch my breath. The more I tried to breathe, the more I couldn't and the more I panicked. It was horrible Matt. I did start to calm down, but then I remembered that when I'd nodded off, you were with me and now you weren't there. I switched the light on and saw your note. I knew you weren't staying, but ... I don't know ... I think I just expected you'd be there and, well, all sorts of feelings started to come back. I got it into my head that you'd gone because you didn't want to be with me, that all the stuff I'd

told you had put you off. I went over to the sink and looked at myself in the mirror. I didn't see my face though Matt. I saw a skull, no skin, no features, just bones, with empty eye sockets that could somehow see deep inside me and find those dark places that I'd tried so hard to hide from. It was like my resolve was broken. Talking to you had been fantastic. I don't care that it had only been a few days. I'm not bothered what anyone else would say, you just seemed to understand, and care. But now you'd gone and the reflection in the mirror was the memory of the person I knew I could be. Perhaps I'd feel better if I was just a pile of bones again. I knew I could do it; I'd done it before. Nobody had to know. Nobody could stop me, so I ... so I put my fingers down my throat and..."

That was the point when Jodie broke down. Her whole body was shaking violently, she began to hyperventilate, tears cascaded down her face, and she pulled her hand free in order to try and shield me from the emotion that was pouring uncontrollably from her.

A good couple of minutes passed. I still hadn't said anything. I just sat next to Jodie and waited until the tears began to subside and her breathing slowed. I offered my hand, which Jodie clasped tighter than I'd expected.

"I thought it would make me feel better, but it didn't. But at least I felt back in control. I know this is totally unfair on you, but maybe this is who I really am. I thought I'd been doing so well, but the less often you fall, the more dramatic it is when it actually happens. The fact that I really like you just makes me feel worse about what happened, but..."

"Please," I interrupted, "just let me say something."

Jodie's body seemed to relax, which I took to mean it was my turn.

“This is a bit of a shock Jodie, but you do want me to be honest, don’t you?”

“Yes. Yes I do.”

“Okay. I don’t completely understand how it feels to make yourself ill and all that stuff, but I *do* get a lot of what you said. I told you what I would say or do if you had been sick; well what I said was true. I do care. I care a lot Jodie. I don’t know if I can help, but that won’t stop me being there if you ever need somebody It’s horrible to see you so upset, but if you think I’m going to judge you, then you’re wrong. I’m sitting here seeing the same person I saw yesterday. You might think things have changed, but not for me they haven’t. That’s as honest I can be Jodie.”

I wasn’t sure if I could tell what Jodie was thinking, but her face looked almost shocked at what she’d heard. Either that or she was scared... or maybe troubled would have been a better word.

“But things *have* changed,” Jodie spoke in a barely audible murmur.

“Changed? Changed how? I don’t understand?” I began to feel uneasy.

“Matt, there’s something I need to tell you.”

No sooner had those few words registered, I shuddered at a sensation that I could only liken to an anchor dropping through my body, and I just knew the next sentence was going to be a verbal punch to the gut. I shut my eyes and waited to be let down gently.

“I’m so sorry Matt, but I think I’m in love with you.”

For the tiniest fraction of a second, I thought my ears had played a massive -and quite cruel - trick on me, but then I was hit by a indescribable adrenaline rush, the

impact of which was heightened (almost beyond the indescribable if that were possible) by the sheer scale of the jump from emotional nadir to zenith. My face went the colour of a beetroot and the beating of my heart resembled the sound of a punch bag being pummelled by a heavyweight boxer.

“You don’t have to say anything Matt.”

Just as bloody well, because I couldn’t.

“I have never ever felt like this. I’ve never known someone get me like you do and even if I’ve ruined things by saying what I’ve just said, I’d never forgive myself for not being honest about how I feel. I think I realised last night, but the way you’ve just reacted to all the stuff that happened afterwards gave me the strength to tell you. I’m so sorry Matt. Matt? Look at me?”

My head was bowed, and it remained at the same angle as I raised my eye to meet Jodie’s gaze. This was totally alien territory for me. No one outside my immediate family had ever said they loved me, so how was I supposed to feel? Should you follow your heart, or listen to your head? The latter would have been a waste of time because I didn’t feel capable of logical or coherent thought. I lifted my head and brushed my hands through Jodie’s hair, before gently cupping her face.

“I need you to say it one more time Jodie.”

“I love you Matthew Green.” Jodie replied without hesitation.

“And I love you too Jodie Reed.”

Jodie practically fell into my arms. We kissed, and I seemed to be almost floating, so intense was the sense of euphoria.

“How do you feel?” I knew my next words were going to be fairly predictable side of banal, but someone needed to speak to make sure that we weren’t swept away by the raw passion of the moment; a moment that had been totally unexpected, but one that I wanted to savour.

“I don’t know. I mean, I feel fantastic, but...”

“I think I know what you mean. I’m tingling from head to toe!”

“Awww!”

What was weird was that everything then seemed to become a bit of a blur. From Jodie weeping almost hysterically, to her saying that she loved me; to me admitting to feelings I didn’t even know I had ... it had all happened in literally minutes. And as our prolonged cuddle ended, I found that I couldn’t actually remember the exact words that Jodie had said, nor could I imagine the sound of someone saying “I love you.”

From a purely emotional perspective, this was a massive thing for me, but as I basically sort of crumpled onto the bed, I became acutely aware of just how surreal the whole scene was. The reality would come from the touch of Jodie’s hand, or the sound of her voice, so I beckoned her to lie down next to me. We were both lying on our sides, facing each other. I was supporting my head by resting my hand under my chin, with my fingers stretching out and touching the areas between the joint of my upper and lower jaw and my ear. I moved the position of my middle finger slightly, as it was pushing part of my ear across the opening and blocking my hearing.

Jodie assumed a mirror image of my position and it was now a question of who would speak first.

Me. Softly. Even though I wasn't entirely sure what I wanted to say.

“When I look at you, I somehow see beyond the bad stuff you've been through. I see someone special, but someone who tries to maybe sort of hide her real personality. I could be totally wrong ... I usually am ... but I think you're still influenced by everything that happened with your Mum. You said yourself you'd do almost anything to get noticed, or be liked; it's almost like you became used to being the person you thought others wanted to see. Like it was easier to be ill rather than allow your own personality to shine through in case that person was rejected again. And if that was true, you tried so hard and went through so much to try and please people - actually that's not strictly true - you tried so hard to please the one person who outwardly at least, didn't seem to care, and as the real Jodie became hidden deeper and deeper inside, the only person who really got hurt was you. But when I see you, I see that special person: someone I care for far more than I should after such a short time, but someone I respect too, if that's the right word. I couldn't stay all last night because we are still getting to know each other and, well, it wouldn't be fair for there to be any sort of expectation, from either side.”

“Wow! This is really important to you isn't it?” The merest hint of surprise drifted across Jodie's face.

“*You* are Jodie. In a way, I'm still trying to make sense of all of this, but if this all turns out to be as real as it feels right now, then I want to make sure we take time to get to know each other properly. I know that probably sounds silly, given how much we've said already, but do you know what I mean?”

Just when I wanted Jodie to say yes, nod, or give me any sign at all that meant I didn't have to carry on, there was nothing. Shit!

“Look, I think you're gorgeous,” cheeks colouring nicely, “and I ... well, you know, I'd ... shit I'm making such an arse of myself...”

“No, you're not,” Jodie's laugh reduced the tension, but not the red glow. “I know what you're trying to say. Let's just keep getting to know each and what will be will be, right?!”

“Exactly!”

I really needed a second or two to try and compose my thoughts and not blurt out some random sentence, but true to form that was precisely what I did: “No girl has ever said they loved me before.”

The expression of mild shock returned fleetingly, before Jodie smiled reassuringly: “Well no one can ever have got to know you properly then! But I'm glad if I'm the first!”

That implied that she might not have totally believed me, but it was the truth. I had said the words to one person – Beth - but they had a pretty hollow ring when I been dumped just a few days later. I swore then that I wouldn't tell anyone else unless the feelings I had were different, stronger, more real than before, even though that still didn't guarantee I'd not be horribly wrong again. That first rejection made me question my own belief, as I'd been clearly totally misjudged the mutual depth of feeling.

As it had now transpired, repeating words that held so much meaning back to someone was a whole lot easier than saying them in the first place, and I recognised how hard it must have been for Jodie to reveal the true extent of

how she viewed the connection we shared. That said, there was no way I would have responded just for the sake of it. Yes, the words did sort of just spill out of my mouth, but it was so much more than just a reaction to the heat of an emotionally charged moment.

It took another three words to expertly change the direction of the conversation: “Have you eaten?”

“No,” I replied, “I was going to grab a pie over in the Union, but then these two lads came in to play darts and I kind of forgot!”

“Did you win?”

“Lots of times!”

“We can nip back over now if you want. I’ll treat you to that pie!”

“You really know how to spoil a man don’t you?!”

Jodie laughed: “Every expense spared!”

We smiled, but as our eyes remained focused on each other, there was a definite shift of expression. Jodie sat up and rolled me onto my back. Her eyes never left mine and her gaze seemed to drain me of the power to resist, not that I wanted to resist.

She lay on top of me, her legs resting either side of mine. As she pushed down gently, I could feel part of her pelvic bone pressing against me. As Jodie felt my body react, the downward pressure increased: “Open your eyes Matt.”

Resistance was useless.

“I just wanted to tell you one more time: I love you.”

With that our lips met, but this wasn’t a tender kiss. With our mouths locked together, Jodie’s rhythmic

movements intensified beyond stimulating and on towards exhilarating, but the embrace came to an abrupt end as Jodie raised her head, hair flopping untidily over her face. She grinned wickedly at me and simply said: “Pie time!”

We walked, although I almost wanted to skip like a child, over to the Union, hand in hand, boyfriend and girlfriend, and the only remaining problem in another incredible evening was the choice between steak and kidney, mince and potato, or chicken and mushroom.

13/10/1983

Due to the combination of an emotionally draining Wednesday and both of us having upcoming coursework deadlines, we decided to meet up for lunch on the Thursday, but not see each other during the evening.

I was surprising myself at how mature I was being, because I frankly wanted to be with her all the time. I knew only too well that despite everything that had been said, I'd probably be in very real need of some reassurance after an evening apart, but however stupid it sounded, I sensed that I had gained some inner calm simply because Jodie had said she loved me first - not very mature at all then.

The weekend wasn't far away though and we'd already planned to go and watch a film on the Saturday night.

Actually, it was more Jodie's plan; I just did the decent thing and agreed. While we'd been in the Union the previous evening (I went for the mince and potato by the way), Jodie had spotted a poster that had been put up by some science fiction club, advertising a screening of *The Return of the Jedi* at half past seven. I'd seen the film (which had been released earlier in the year) and I loved it - albeit not as much as the original *Star Wars* movie which I'd seen seven times - but the concept of a nerdy club worried me slightly.

"You don't have to go in bloody costume, or something like that do you?"

Jodie winked mischievously and glanced downwards: "Just so long as you bring your lightsabre!!"

I'd lost count of how many times my face had turned crimson, but the richer the colour, the funnier Jodie found it, so I was left with only one option and, in my best

Yoda voice I said: “Pick you up at seven I will. Ready should you be.”

Jodie howled - but not in a Chewbacca way - with laughter: “Ooh, a man of hidden talents. Anything else I should know?!”

For some reason I blushed again.

“Er, no ... well, actually I can do a decent Scooby Doo as well!!”

13-14/10/1983

The canteen had been busy on the Thursday lunchtime, and the fact that Jodie and I were obviously enjoying each other's company wasn't lost on some of the lads from along the corridor who happened to be sitting just a few tables away. I might have struggled to cope with some of the comments I'd received at school, but a bit of girl-related banter and gentle ribbing was no problem at all. Phil had more to say than the others. It was all harmless stuff, but once again, I found myself wondering just how different might things have been had he been in when Jodie knocked at his door?

I'd had a productive Thursday afternoon on the work front (and, indeed, on the cupboard front, as the door had been fixed while I'd been out); and seeing as neither of us had any lectures after lunch on the Friday, we'd decided to go into town, maybe do a bit of shopping (of all things), then head to the nearest hostel where I could recover from the trauma.

Town was a fifteen-minute bus ride away, plus a five-minute walk to the bus stop; and an extra ten bloody minutes waiting for the next number sixty-three to arrive, as one was just disappearing into the distance as we neared the bus stop. The weather was miserable and hadn't threatened to improve all day. In fact, the gloomy skies seemed to be reflected in most of the shoppers we saw, and when it started spitting with rain, we headed for the department store that dominated the high street.

Jodie wanted to buy a new sweatshirt, so we headed to the sports department, which was rather curiously located between the section that sold carpets and the haberdashery department - which I understood to be the

place to go if you liked to haberdash in your spare time. The sweatshirts were hanging from several rails on the side wall (the one adjoining the carpet department). The rails were angled and the garments arranged in such a way that the colour you wanted would invariably be at the back, and therefore too high for most people to reach. Jodie asked me to pass down a couple of grey sweatshirts, and even I needed to stand on tiptoes to grab the second one. She held both up to compare the relative sizes, before disappearing into the fitting room, which was in the corner (still carpet-side) of the little concession.

I suddenly became acutely aware that not only was I standing on my own, my hand was resting on a freestanding rail adorned with any number of tennis skirts.

Embarrassed, I instantly stood up straight in the hope that no one had noticed, but I needn't have worried because my attention (in fact most of the customers' attention) was drawn to what seemed to be a very posh thirty-something, with an empty pushchair and her intensely irritating son, who was showing off his newly-acquired ability to toddle, shrieking with delight in the process. The woman kept disappearing: "William, please stand still for mummy; there's a good boy", but the little brat obviously found the thrill of the chase highly amusing. I was sort of hoping that William would toddle head first into something that was either solid, immovable, or both; that would have been much closer to *my* definition of amusing.

From behind me, I heard the sound of a curtain being pulled back and Jodie emerged from the fitting room, with one sweatshirt back on its hanger and the other resting over her arm. I went over to meet her, and returned the

unwanted garment to its rightful place, as Jodie headed over to the till.

Just then, there was a loud thud. It turned out to be the rarely heard sound of head on haberdashery counter, but it was followed by the unmistakable din of squawking kid. “William!” exclaimed the mother, as she scuttled over to tend to her distraught offspring. “Marvellous!” I chuckled under my breath.

As we left the shop, Jodie grabbed my arm, looked up at me and fluttered her eyelashes: “Do you fancy buying me a coffee?!”

How could I refuse? As we left the store, the grey skies had persisted, but a blanket of menacing cloud certainly wasn’t going to spoil our day.

There was a fair amount of choice for anyone wanting a hot drink and a sit down, and luckily there were none of the anticipated clothing retailer detours before we found somewhere. One coffee, one tea, and one quiet corner.

“Do you mind if I ask you something about yesterday?”

Jodie’s opening gambit caught me slightly on the back foot; and my tea hadn’t cooled anywhere near enough for a delaying sip: “Course you can. Is anything the matter?”

“Not at all. You said some stuff about me and my Mum and because of everything that happened, it wasn’t until later that I stopped to think about what you’d said.”

There was still too much smoke rising from my teacup.

“The weird thing was that the more I tried to get my head round what you’d said, I found it harder to remember

the words that you'd used and I just got myself more and more confused."

"I usually have that effect on people!"

"Can you tell me again?"

I wasn't at all sure I could recreate the mood in which my thoughts had tumbled out quite so openly. For one thing, we might not have been exactly surrounded by other customers, but the coffee shop certainly wasn't empty either, all very different from two people in an enclosed room. I shuffled closer to Jodie and rested my hand on her thigh. She placed her left hand on top of mine and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

"It's all a bit of a blur for me too - in a good way. When you said you had something to say and you weren't sure whether I was going to like it, I honestly thought you were going to tell me you didn't want to see me, or spend any more time with me. This horrible feeling went right through me and in that moment, I realised that if the prospect of losing you made me feel so bad, then ... well, when you said what you said, I knew that I was feeling exactly the same. The stuff about your Mum? It wasn't planned, it just sort of all came out. I can't remember the exact words I used, but when I'd thought about all the things you'd said, it was like you were desperate for your Mum's affection, acceptance even because, well, she's your Mum and you loved her. And all the time she was with your Dad, I guess there was a chance that if you kept looking for the person you thought she wanted you to be, then one day she might feel the same way for you as you did for her. Every bad moment just made you more determined - until the day she left. I wonder if that was the trigger for the release of all the pent-up feelings that you'd kept hidden all that time. All you'd wanted through your

teenage years was a mother that cared for you, that you could talk to, confide in, but when she left, she proved once and for all that she wasn't that person. But by then, the real Jodie was buried under all that resentment. Even if you wouldn't have admitted it, you'd always believed that your Mum really did care about you, but in the end, whether she did or she didn't, she cared about herself more. You needed to find a way to take control of your life, after realising you'd kind of allowed it to be controlled. What you did was pretty extreme, but I reckon it's what you felt you needed to do. Perhaps there was part of you that wanted to punish your Mum, to show her what you could do to yourself and there was nothing she could do to stop you; but in the end you only really damaged yourself. How you've managed to stay strong and come as far as you have, I honestly don't know, but if there's some way that you can learn to love the person that you are inside, then maybe you can really start to look forward instead of back all the time ... I've said too much again, haven't I?"

Jodie lifted my hand off her leg, kissed it and gently replaced it: "Everything you've said makes so much sense Matt." She paused for a few moments, as if trying to untangle some very tightly tied mental knots: "You start by assuming that everything must be your fault, but in the end I'm not sure I gave a second thought about what I was actually doing to myself. I just carried on doing it because, well, I thought I was in some sort of control, but more than that, there were times when I felt *really* good about myself. Physically I know ended up a mess, but my eventual moment of acceptance came with that photograph. That's why I keep the picture in my bag. I accept now that I had an illness - I *have* an illness - but it doesn't have to

dominate my life any longer. I still have issues, and even though my eating is a lot better, I know the old urges can still come back like they did on Tuesday night, and that's really hard to deal with. The longer I go without making myself ill, the worse I feel if I have a bad day. It's like taking one step forward and three or four back, rather than just two. But what I hadn't recognised was that even if being sick *was* four steps back, all that time I'd been well was the equivalent of ten or twenty forward."

The tea was now lukewarm. And finally drinkable.

"And then I met *you*," Jodie continued. "The final piece in my jigsaw!"

"Really?"

"That's how it feels Matt."

"So, no pressure then?!"

Jodie smiled softly. "No pressure! Talking to you and listening to you ... everything seems so natural. We are *so* similar, we just seem to click, to get each other, and all this is something that I've always wanted in my life, but never had."

Jodie was right about those similarities. One thing I had noticed - and that I was definitely guilty of - was revisiting something that had already been discussed. In many ways, it was easier to understand aspects of someone else's personality than it was to recognise (let alone accept) traits in your own, but if I'd been asked to summarise that side of my character, I'd probably have said that I didn't expect good things to happen, so that if they did, perception or otherwise, I had conditioned myself to wait for the fall.

Maybe by repeating certain things that had elicited, or that I had wanted to elicit, some kind of favourable

response, I was simply seeking reassurance that my feelings were not only real, but more importantly reciprocated. Reflecting too long and being affected by past experiences was not the right way to judge the present, but until such time I could exert some element of control over my overactive and unfailingly negative imagination, that need for comfort was always going to remain.

I saw something comparable in Jodie, but for her, the need for reassurance stemmed more from her actions than her thoughts. Even if it wasn't necessarily deliberate, my words and Jodie's actions were fundamentally cries for help, for support, for friendship ... and for love.

It was probably my turn to say something, but that had never stopped Jodie before, and now was no exception: "A few years ago, just before she passed away, one of my grandparents told me always to tell those who you care for how you feel about them, because you just never know what the future holds. So, although I thought I knew how you felt about me - or at least I hoped I knew - I was positive that I had fallen in love with you. Telling you was a risk I suppose, but it was something I had to do."

"I'm glad you did. I'm not sure I'd have been brave enough to say it first."

Actually, I *was* sure. I wouldn't have been brave enough, but our feelings were out in the open, so there was little to be gained by labouring the point.

"What do you want to do tonight? There's a band on at the Union if you want? Or you could come over to mine?"

"To be honest, I fancy a quiet night," Jodie patted the back of my hand that was by now stroking her thigh. "Why don't you come over about eightish?"

With the evening's preparations finalised, we put our cups and saucers back onto the circular brown plastic tray, Jodie picked up her carrier bag and headed to the ladies' toilet, as I went in the opposite direction to pay for the drinks. Five minutes later, we were standing at the bus shelter, anticipating the arrival of the number sixty-three and, certainly in my case, hoping against hope that the ever-darkening clouds weren't going to burst until I'd reached the sanctuary of my room.

14/10/1983

It was only a growl from my obviously agitated stomach that made me realise I'd barely eaten all day. I clearly needed to have something, but at the same time, the anticipation of seeing Jodie again seemed to cancel out the effect of the hunger and, although the rumbling persisted, I just wasn't in the mood for cooking, let alone eating a substantial meal.

In the end, the compromise was a bowl of cereal, which I carried along to what was described as a "lounge", situated beyond the kitchen at the far end of the corridor. Calling the room a lounge gave a false impression of comfort; it was basically a few chairs and a threadbare settee arranged in a semi-circular shape around a television set that had also seen better days.

I didn't venture along this end of the corridor all that often. Even when I'd been living at home, I preferred listening to music in my own room to being sociable and watching telly with Mum and Dad. As it turned out, it didn't matter that I was in an unusually genial mood, because the room was empty. I switched on the telly and pressed the button for BBC1. Bad move. *Crackerjack*.

I watched for all of two minutes before the prospect of host Stu Francis even considering crushing another bloody grape became too much, the TV was turned off and I duly headed back along the corridor from whence I had come, stopping off in the kitchen to eat the cereal and drink the excess milk out of the bowl, before heading to the bathroom.

I had plenty of time to kill before meeting Jodie and, as all seemed quiet, I thought I'd run myself a bath and have a soak, and maybe a bit of a think.

There wasn't any sort of rota for using the bathroom. The six people - including me - who shared the bathroom and (thankfully) separate toilet worked on a "first come, first clean" basis which seemed to work reasonably well.

We were all on different courses, so lecture times varied and there hadn't been too many occasions when there'd been a queue. The toughest task for the early risers was actually to dash back to their respective room without being noticed by Hilda, who was usually on her morning rounds. To that end, I had a distinct advantage with my door being directly opposite the bathroom, so the chances of me being spotted, covered only in a towel, traipsing water along Hilda's freshly-mopped floor were mercifully slim.

With the ever-so-slightly rusty plug (minus chain) safely in place and both taps running, I nipped back to my room and untidily discarded my trainers, socks and other outer clothes onto the floor by the sink. There would be some serious washing required over the weekend. Armed with a clean pair of pants, I returned to the bathroom, nudged across a rather flimsy bolt to lock the door and tested the temperature of the rapidly rising water, before turning off the taps...

Well over half an hour later, complete with wrinkled fingertips, I clambered out of the now tepid bath. Surprisingly I had managed to relax, rather than contemplate, so much so that I almost drifted off. But as the time to go and see Jodie approached and I started to get myself ready, the butterflies returned yet again; and was my breathing just the tiniest bit laboured as the intensity of the fluttery sensation increased?

As I closed the main door to make the brief trip to Jodie's room, the sound of the band warming up drifted across from the Union. Any possible tinge of disappointment - and the likelihood of suffering from a particularly uncomfortable ringing in my ears - was swiftly replaced with the prospect of more time alone with Jodie. I had no real idea what we were going to do, or talk about, but I wasn't really bothered. Just being with her was enough.

Our relationship had accelerated by the motoring equivalent of nought to sixty in six seconds, and when things happened that fast, some quality time together simply had to be necessary, if only to fill in the gaps.

We knew some of the other's most personal secrets, yet I hadn't got a clue what Jodie's favourite colour was, her favourite films, or if she had ever owned a pet: the sort of everyday stuff that any two people who had professed their love for each other should be able to rattle off without thinking. What we had was already amazing, but it was effectively only the rough sketched outline of a drawing on a canvas to which no paint had been applied. I desperately wanted to see what the finished painting would look like, but some things could not be rushed.

I climbed the stairs one by one, just to check everything was as it should be: one, two, three, squeak, five, six, seven, eight, creak, ten, eleven, and twelve. Jodie's door was ajar, but I still knocked to make sure it was okay to go in. I was greeted with an unexpectedly passionate kiss, which Jodie interrupted but immediately resumed after casually kicking the door shut.

With our mouths still locked together, Jodie almost dragged me across the floor and practically flung me onto the bed, where once again she contrived to be lying on top

of me. Jodie's hands ruffled through my hair, she grabbed the back of my head and lifted it off the duvet as the embrace continued. I didn't know how Jodie was feeling - although I could have had an educated guess I suppose - but there was a moment when I could definitely have got carried away, and it was perhaps as well that we were, for the time being at least, fully clothed.

"Missed you!" Jodie grinned after we had eventually separated - or rather she had let me go.

"Moi aussi," I replied, somewhat randomly in French.

"What have you been up to?"

"A bowl of cereal and a bath. Obviously not at the same time. You?"

"Nothing much. Just been lying on the bed and having a bit of a think."

"What about?"

"Us mainly."

"In a good way?"

"Yes Matt," Jodie gave her best disapproving stare. "In a good way!"

I shuffled up towards the pillow and of the bed, sat up, and rested my head on the wall just above the wooden headboard. Jodie lifted my legs slightly and slid underneath, replacing my legs on top of hers after she had wriggled into a comfortable position sitting at right angles to me, with her back against the side wall.

"Jodie?"

"Uh huh."

"What's your favourite colour?"

Jodie giggled, and ran her fingers through her hair: “Pink,” she replied decisively. Yours?”

“Orange!” I grinned. “How about your favourite film?”

“What is this? Twenty questions?!”

“Three. Or maybe four. I just thought it was kind of strange that I could be in love with you without knowing something as simple as your favourite colour, or film, or food. You don’t mind, do you?”

Jodie leant forward and grabbed my hand, before sitting gently back against the wall. “Of course I don’t mind, silly! Pink, *The Wizard of Oz* and seafood ... prawns - but not too many!”

“Orange, *Star Wars* and, er, chocolate!”

“There you go! We practically know each other inside out.”

That wasn’t strictly true, and the fact that my face turned crimson didn’t escape Jodie.

“Matthew Green!” Jodie flashed a grin that was as evil as it was totally beguiling.

The colour simply intensified.

“Are we still going to see the film tomorrow night?” Jodie changed the subject and my facial colour all in one go.

“Wait I cannot,” replied the diminutive Jedi. Actually, it was just me doing my feeble Yoda impression - again. And rather than leaving it there, I gazed into Jodie’s by now rather despairing eyes and in a near perfect Alec Guinness declared: “These aren’t the droids you’re looking for!”

Jodie put her hand over a mouth in a vain attempt to stifle her laughter and an almost convincing look of surprise. “Oh my God Matt! That actually sounded...”

“Like Obi-Wan Kenobi?”

“Yeah, him! And the one before - that was John Major yeah?”

“Get stuffed Jodie!”

As she bent forward, Jodie’s hair flopped over her face, but her shoulders were still very much in motion: “Ahhh,” she sighed as she slowly sat up straight, “that was brilliant, but will you do me one favour?”

“Don’t do the impressions tomorrow?”

“How did you guess?!”

I smiled, shook my head in feigned disappointment. I looked at Jodie, whose grip on my hand strengthened: “I love you Matt.”

I hadn’t expected such a sudden change in mood, but the words were the cue for the thudding sensation in my chest and an intake of breath that I masked pretty well: “What brought that on?”

“I don’t know really. I just get these moments where I feel kind of overwhelmed that anyone could have such strong feelings for me. Whatever we do, whatever we talk about, everything is so natural, and having managed to tell you how I feel that first time, I just want to keep telling you so that you can get rid of those doubts that I know will be flying round your head.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Only to someone who knows you Matt. I just want ... actually I *need* you to know that what I’m feeling is real.” Jodie paused. It was a long pause, and I could have

sworn I felt my heart take an extra couple of beats. She slipped her legs free, sprung onto her knees and knelt gently across my thighs. She just gazed into my eyes. I started to blush again, but this time Jodie made no comment. She lifted herself up and forward, placing her hands on my burning cheeks, her seemingly unblinking eyes having a dramatic effect on my lungs' ability to carry out their intended purpose. Every sense was heightened to a level I had never experienced and in the end, I closed my eyes as Jodie turned my head to the right and moved towards my left ear. "I want to show you how I feel Matt. Would you like to see how good we are together?"

Just that one sentence was more than enough to render me (not for the first time) incapable of speech, but after hearing Jodie's whispered words, the inner part of my ear was immediately caressed by Jodie's tongue, and every darting movement sent tingling sensations shooting round my body and left me shuddering, and almost helpless as my strength simply drained away.

I opened my eyes as Jodie pulled away. We looked at each other, but said nothing. My head was all over the place, but the overwhelming emotion was not one of excitement or anticipation; it was fear. Pure fear. My body had been battered by the most incredible and wonderful feelings, but in the split second they started to subside, a dark cloak of inadequacy fell over me. Jodie was perfect and I was just Matt; plain, inexperienced and shit-scared Matt.

Jodie's eyes no longer seemed to be smouldering, but those two beautifully rich hazel brown circles easily reached deep inside my mind. She could undoubtedly sense my anxiety and she placed her right index finger vertically across my mouth: "Shhh. You don't have to say anything."

I clasped her finger, kissed it and moved it away from my mouth. Now was the time to be honest about my feelings, as honest as I could be, given the fact that I didn't fully understand what my body was telling me. I beckoned her closer with a faintest flicker of my eyebrows and tenderly reciprocated the cupping of face in hands: "Jodie... Jodie, the answer is yes, but I'm so scared right now about letting you down."

I kissed her softly on the lips and smiled. It was supposed to be a convincing smile, but the up escalator that was our relationship seemed to be accelerating out of control, and the point at which I was comfortable with the pace of progress was rapidly disappearing from view.

"You don't have to be scared," Jodie's words were barely audible. "And there's no rush. I wanted you to know just how strong my feelings are, not push you into something you didn't want or weren't ready for. I'm sorry Matt, I've come on too strong. Shit, making you feel like this was the last thing I wanted."

Seeing how quickly Jodie's self-assurance had been replaced with the doubts that had haunted her for so long was awful to see, but sparked an unexpected surge of confidence that was totally out of character, but weirdly liberating at the same time.

The room was brightly illuminated by the lampshaded bulb hanging from the centre of the ceiling. I clambered off the bed and over to the light switch which was just to the right of the door (cleverly counting the steps as I went). I flicked the switch upwards and swung round to retrace the four steps back towards the bed - or at least in the general direction.

My right shin came into contact with the bed, with my foot connecting with the trainers that I'd kicked off

when I'd arrived. I felt my way back onto the bed and my hand touched Jodie (who was evidently now lying down) on the waist. Even with my limited knowledge of the human body, I was able to work out which way Jodie was facing and I shuffled across until I could feel her breath on my face. "Don't say anything Jodie. You haven't made me feel bad at all. I'm so flattered that you want us to be close and the fact that I'm nervous is down to me, not you. The answer to your question is still the same."

With that, I fumbled around until I found Jodie's hand. She interlocked her fingers with mine, and I moved her hand towards me, separating our fingers and placing her hand on my chest, underneath my long-sleeved t-shirt.

I suppose turning off the light acted as a kind of safety net. I wasn't particularly ashamed of how I looked - well most bits of me - and much as I wanted Jodie to know that my feelings towards her were incredibly strong, my nerves were equally difficult to ignore.

My upper body was basically devoid of hair (in contrast to my head, a situation I had been assured would be reversed by the time I reached middle age) and I could sense my whole body quivering ever so slightly as she started to stroke my chest and tummy. Suddenly, an alarmingly expertly, Jodie put her other hand inside my top, which she grasped and pushed upwards along the outside of my chest and up my arms. I tilted my head forward to allow Jodie to completely remove my t-shirt, which she threw casually towards the bottom end of the bed.

Jodie immediately grabbed my hand and laid it to rest on her sweatshirt. She tugged the sweatshirt from under my hand, which was now resting against her bare, thin, but evidently toned stomach. I gently caressed her

skin with my fingertips. It was so soft, so incredibly soft; like touching a delicate piece of porcelain. Jodie let out a barely audible sigh as my hand reached the bottom of her rib cage, but she then sat up rather abruptly and took her hand away from my chest so that she could rather hurriedly take off her sweatshirt, which was also flung across the darkened room.

She put her hand under the top of my arm and made as if to lift me from the bed. I put my weight on my right arm and nervously adopted what I presumed was a mirror image of Jodie's kneeling posture. We embraced and our lips met. I fully intended the kiss to be tender and romantic, but Jodie clearly had other ideas. I allowed my right hand to glide up her gorgeously silky back, until it came into contact with her bra; at which point, I unintentionally flinched. For a split second I didn't think Jodie had noticed, but then she whispered: "You don't have to stop..."

15/10/1983

I woke, momentarily confused, as my left arm was draped across Jodie's curled up body. There was a faint hum of noise from along the corridor, but I was still able to hear the sound of the slow, relaxed breathing coming from Jodie's nose. My arm moved with the rise and fall of Jodie's chest and, as there was just enough light breaking through the partially drawn curtains, I just lay for a few minutes, gazing at the back of Jodie's head, and her ruffled brown hair.

As consciousness returned, memories of the previous evening drifted into - and very quickly filled - my head. Had I not been lying next to Jodie, I wouldn't have believed what had happened. Jodie seemed so assured, and that did help me to relax to a certain extent, but my head and body still had felt like they were hosting a pretty spectacular firework display, the effect of which left me almost numb with excitement.

It's pretty hard to try and create a mental picture of events that had taken place in total darkness, but I didn't need to perceive the physical sensations that I had experienced; their recollection was wonderfully vivid.

Jodie started to stir. As she tried to turn and face me, I became aware that I was perilously close to the edge of the single bed and much as I shuffled slightly to give Jodie the room to manoeuvre, I tried to ensure that more than half of me was still secure on the bed and not dangling in mid-air.

"Hiya!" Jodie smiled.

"Hi!"

"How do you feel?" Jodie placed a warm, almost clammy hand against my cheek.

“Amazing. You?”

“Loved.”

A much better answer than mine.

Jodie kissed me softly on the mouth, before kicking off the duvet and nuzzling into my neck. No other words were exchanged, but for once it didn't matter: I was cuddling all the reassurance I could ever need.

I couldn't begin to understand what I had done to deserve to have Jodie in my life. I was eighteen years old and had known Jodie for what ... well days rather than weeks or months; yet this stunning brunette had bulldozed her way through what I assumed were impenetrable barriers and had discovered someone capable not only of loving, but also of being loved.

I was so used to hating myself, yet Jodie had undoubtedly given me some sort of belief that I was worth something - however hard that was to accept. I'd never talked so openly to anyone. I'd never listened so intently to anyone. I'd never felt so strongly about someone, whether emotionally, physically or any other “-ally”...

And now there we were, having spent the most wonderful night together; and whilst the physical desire was just one component of our developing relationship, I was comfortable that it wasn't the foundation on which everything was based. And that was just how I wanted it.

We lay silently for perhaps twenty minutes, before Jodie raised her head and mouthed: “I love you.”

“Love you too,” I whispered.

Jodie sat up, rather wearily, and for the first time I clearly saw her naked body. I had somehow forgotten that the passion of the previous evening had been conducted in a black void, save the narrowest trace of ineffectual light

from under the door. Jodie was more stunning than I had imagined, and a “wow!” came out of my mouth - without permission I hasten to add. Jodie simply grinned, and flopped on top of me, pressing down on me and clamping her open mouth against mine with an intensity that instantly transported me back to that point of weakness and exhilaration.

The kiss ended essentially when Jodie decided, and she leapt almost acrobatically to her feet, leaving me to lie and watch her almost skip across the room to pluck a fluffy white dressing gown from the peg on the back of the door.

“I’m going to have to go and get ready,” I mumbled almost apologetically.

“I know. Me too.” Jodie instantly seemed to have shrugged off any signs of tiredness and much as I wanted to match her gymnastic dismount from bed to floor, I decided on the slow, but relatively sure option of sitting up and swivelling round until my feet reached the floor.

My clothes were still lying in an untidy pile on the floor. I picked up my jeans and top and gave them both a hard shake in an unsuccessful attempt to remove the creases, before getting dressed. We shared a long, lingering hug, but I was all too aware that as soon as the door closed behind me, the whole episode would take on a magical quality that would make me doubt the reality of what had happened in Jodie’s darkened room.

I swung a mental punch at that part of my brain that was so intent on spoiling the moment. The hug ended in an incredibly tender kiss, but soon and sure enough the door closed behind me, and I walked down the corridor alone.

Outside, I was greeted by a raw, biting wind and I jogged the short distance back to my Hall. As I unlocked

the outer door, I could hear the sound of muffled voices, either a conversation from a nearby room, or a much noisier exchange from the kitchen. There were only two keys on the small circle of metal that passed for a key ring, the dull-silvery one I'd just used and the bronze-coloured (but equally dull) key for the Yale lock to my room.

I turned and pushed the bronze key - at the second attempt - into the lock, twisting my wrist to open the door. I flopped onto my bed, stared up at the ceiling and the faintest smile of disbelief appeared as my head shook gently from side to side. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath through my nose, but any chance of a moment's contemplation and relaxation was lost with a knock at the door.

For some reason, I expected to see Phil's inanely grinning and eminently punchable face, so I was pleasantly surprised to see Hilda, complete with cloth, mop, bucket and missing teeth.

"I gather I won't have much to do in your room this morning, pet?!"

I blushed, and forgot to start counting the incisors and canines, although from memory, incisor should have been singular.

"So long as you're treating her right Matthew."

"Course I am!"

"Well that's fine then, pet. Do you want me to give the room a quick clean?"

A very quick inspection of my humble abode suggested that no dusting or mopping was required: "No thanks Hilda. It's fine."

Hilda sort of reversed back through the open door: "Bye, pet!" Hilda smiled as she dragged the bucket out into

the corridor. The fact that I had only counted three teeth meant that it was only a quick smile, or that another premolar had departed.

Ten, maybe fifteen minutes later and everything was calm. Presumably most, if not all of my neighbours were having a lie in, and Hilda, complete with all her paraphernalia, was either in or beyond the kitchen; whatever the case, she was certainly out of earshot.

Given that it was approaching sensible o'clock in the morning, it really was eerily quiet. Silence had regularly been reflection time, and much as I wanted to push myself to do something constructive, I seemed drawn to the mirror over the sink. I lifted my head so my eyes met my eyes. On the face of it, I should have been beyond happy, but however much my life had been enriched since I'd started to get to know Jodie, there was still a helplessness in the reflected image. The dip in my mood was sudden and dramatic; like a trap door opened simply to let any positive emotion tumble away into a void.

I stared. And I stared. And I clenched my fists as the tears began to appear.

I wanted to lash out. I needed to lash out.

No!

No, I didn't need to. I could do this.

I breathed slowly ... deeply. I closed my eyes, trapping the tears.

I pictured Jodie. Her hair, her face, her body. She was smiling. She was smiling at *me*!

My face was contorted, eyes open again; tears replaced by a few beads of sweat under the hair that covered my forehead. "I am Matthew Green," I hissed at

my reflection. “And I’m not going to let you do this to me. I’m not going to let you fucking do this.”

A deep breath prompted a powerful rush of adrenaline, the result of which was a sense of inner calm, perhaps even strength that definitely took me surprise. Normally once I was in freefall, there was nothing I could do to slow the descent, but Jodie’s love seemed to have equipped me with the mental equivalent of a parachute and a very real reason to fight.

Curiously, with tranquillity came an overwhelming desire to put some very loud music onto my turntable - even if it meant waking other people up. Right at that moment, I genuinely didn’t care. The four songs in question didn’t last particularly long and I would have to flip the record over halfway through, but *All Out Attack* by the punk band Blitz was probably the single most influential seven inches of black vinyl that I’d ever bought. It was pure release music, and the brief ripple of serenity was about to be deliberately blown apart by eight minutes (give or take) of raw, almost brutal guitars and rasping, intimidating vocals.

Never had a record had such a profound effect, even gone as far as to give me some sense of identity, and much as there had been times I would play a particular song just to make me cry and, perhaps self-indulgently, rid myself of pent-up emotion, so there were occasions when sadness drifted into aggression. It wasn’t a massive transition, probably borne of out frustration, and I wasn’t an aggressive person - although there was a certain cupboard door that might disagree - but music (the louder the better) was always my preferred way of letting off steam.

I slipped the record out of its sleeve and onto the turntable. The speed was already set to forty-five

revolutions per minute; I flicked another switch and the record began to spin, and all that was left was to lift across the needle arm and place it gently near the outer edge of the vinyl disc. Actually, that wasn't quite all, because the first chords of *Someone's Gonna Die* weren't quite at full volume; a situation that was quickly remedied.

I shut my eyes and tightly clenched my fists as the power of the guitars rushed through my body. The sensation only lasted a couple of seconds, but brought an explosive end to an incredibly intense and draining few minutes.

Fairly quickly, the bubble in my personal spirit level thankfully reappeared as my mood stabilised. Belatedly, for those in adjoining rooms, I turned down the music, and my focus turned to the unfinished coursework that lay on the desk. I decided to devote a solid two hours to my studies, something I duly (albeit surprisingly) achieved with the only interruption being need for an occasional change of record.

I was in two minds what to do for lunch. A walk to the Union for something hot, but tasteless, or ten seconds along the corridor for a cheese and pickle sandwich; and staying in the building meant I wouldn't get cold, I wouldn't spend any money, and there was also the exciting prospect of seeing whether or not there was a stray packet of crisps in my locker.

Alas the cupboard was bare ... from the crisp perspective, but the sandwich was more enjoyable than I'd expected. I didn't bother with a plate, so I only had to wash up the knife. Both sides of the blunt blade were smeared with cheesy orange and pickly brown, and I nobly decided to clean the knife myself rather than add it to the pile that, according to the rota, was John's responsibility.

By now I had a headache. Not a searing pain, more the sort that you would only feel if you shook your head to see if it hurt ...and it did. But you would still shake it again just to make sure.

And it still hurt.

My tolerance of pain was fairly low, and a mildly throbbing head was more than enough to stop me returning to the half-finished essay. There were still several hours to kill before I was to be reunited with Jodie, Leia, Luke, Chewbacca et al; and I thought a three- or four-mile run might be a decent way of using up a bit of time and maybe clear my head in the process.

Ten minutes later, suitably attired in shorts, sweatshirt and fragrant trainers, I was ready for the off...

15-16/10/1983

The princely sum of twenty-five pence each was enough to secure entry to the clearly makeshift cinema.

Several rows of dimly-lit plastic chairs were flanked by a number of more comfortable looking armchairs of various colours (and varying states of repair) and even a couple of sofas. Refreshed and headache free, I tightened my grip of Jodie's hand in an attempt to encourage her towards one of the sofas.

Jodie sat almost demurely on the right-hand cushion, whilst I plonked myself down to her left. The seats filled quickly (two being rather incongruously occupied by an Imperial Stormtrooper and Darth Vader), and it wasn't long before the last remnants of room lighting were extinguished and the gentle hum of conversation ceased. The screen that had been erected at the front of the room then flickered into life and within moments, we were transported across the cosmos to Tatooine...

The film had been released around the time I was finishing my 'A' level exams and I went to see it as soon as my school commitments were over, but I had absolutely no problem watching the Empire's demise all over again. Jodie was evidently not quite so enthralled, as she snuggled into my chest, dozed off after about half an hour and missed the ultimate redemption of Luke Skywalker's dying father.

As the end credits rolled, Jodie finally stirred. The lights were switched on, and the audience began to file out of the room. Jodie gave me a most apologetic look, fluttered her eyelashes and grinned. I glared sternly at her: "Wide awake you were not. Much have you missed."

Jodie laughed and gave me a massive hug, before springing to her feet, grasping my hand and tugging at my arm to try and haul me away from the sofa. I placed my left hand on the pretty threadbare arm of the sofa and pushed myself into a standing position. As we left the room and made our way back into the bar area of the Union, Jodie glanced up at me: “I’m sorry! I really did try to stay awake. Honestly!”

“It’s fine! Do you fancy a drink while we’re here?”

“Yeah why not!”

“You won’t nod off while I’m at the bar, will you?!”

“Ha bloody ha!!” Jodie cupped my cheeks in her hands and kissed me full on the lips: “Don’t be long!”

“Lager?”

“Please.”

I made my way to the end of a small queue at the bar, whilst Jodie found a couple of empty, black, fake-leather seats fairly close to the pool table. With it being Saturday night, the Union was busy and there were three people working behind what was a now cramped bar. I didn’t have to wait long, ordered the pints of cider and lager and carried them carefully over to where Jodie was sitting. Both glasses had been filled right to the very top, so to save losing any of my precious cider, I stopped and took a quick sip. I didn’t touch the lager (I wasn’t a big fan) and as Jodie had her back to me, I wasn’t overly concerned about any minor spillages.

Having made it safely, I stepped nimbly through a gap between two seats, leant over and placed her glass on the particularly low glass-topped table in front of Jodie. I took another quick sip of cider, before putting down my

glass, and assuming my position next to my gorgeous girlfriend!

Jodie stretched forward, picked up her pint and took a large gulp; some of the frothy head leaving a white moustache on Jodie's top lip, which she quickly wiped away.

There were three spare seats to our left and just as Jodie replaced her glass, a slightly "dumpy" blonde girl tried to shuffle past us. "Are these three seats taken?"

It looked very much like all three were likely to be taken by one oversized backside, but instead of moving my feet out of her way and simply saying the seats were free, I decided it would be a really good idea to bend my fingers to give them an elderly claw-like appearance, pull a bizarre face and do an exaggerated, yet pleasingly- chilling impression of Emperor Palpatine: "The seats are free. Sit down and your journey to the dark side will be complete!"

"Eh?!" The girl looked quizzically at me and shook her head, presumably thinking I'd had a pint or two too many. Jodie seemed transfixed by the enormous arse that was wobbling worryingly close to her face; she did smile, despite being clearly bemused (or unnerved by Jabba the student); but I had amused myself no end!

The conversation drifted onto what we were going to do on Sunday. I wasn't too far behind with my course work, but I *was* behind, and really should have set aside more than that morning's couple of hours to catch up. Jodie said she hadn't got anything planned, but wanted to finish off an essay. That pretty much forced my hand, so we agreed that we'd meet up at lunchtime, spend the afternoon together, go for a walk and probably have a couple of drinks at the Green Dragon, or one of the other nearby pubs in the evening.

I was momentarily distracted, as two girls tottered past and squeezed, slightly awkwardly, in the one and a half seats next to Jabba. I glanced back at Jodie, and grinned inanely.

If Jodie thought I was tempted do another rubbish impression, she'd have been absolutely right, but I was warned off by a whispered, but stern: "Don't you dare!"

A few minutes later and two empty glasses were placed gently on the table.

"Time to go?"

Jodie just nodded. We clambered to our feet, and headed for the exit. I looked over my shoulder for no particular reason, and saw that Jabba had already commandeered our seats, thereby affording her companions the luxury of unrestricted breathing.

It was a lovely clear night, but only the brightest stars were visible due to the intensity of light emanating from the bulbs in the lampposts spaced evenly along the path that led to the Halls. The lack of cloud cover meant that it was fairly chilly, but the morning's biting wind had all but disappeared.

We walked hand in hand, until we reached one of the narrow metal pillars that supported the small area of roof in front of the main door to my Hall.

"Let me walk you home Jodie."

Jodie let go of my hand, stepped in front of me and wrapped her arms round me neck, with such force that I almost stumbled into her. I grabbed her waist, more as a steady reflex than a romantic gesture.

We kissed.

"I'm not going back tonight Matt."

By now I had lost count of the number of times that just a few words from Jodie could release hordes of butterflies throughout my body, and seemingly rob me of my ability to string together anything resembling a sentence. I mumbled something that may or may not have made any sense, but Jodie just drew me closer: “I want you Matt.”

I didn’t even try to speak. We pulled away from each other; I fumbled around in my jeans pocket to find my keys and opened the front door. We scurried along the short stretch of corridor to room number nine, the door to which was hurriedly unlocked. The curtains were still open and those rooms in the adjoining Hall which had lights on provided the barest illumination.

Jodie took off her shoes and sat on the side of the bed, facing the window, as I walked over to close the curtains, cleverly forgetting that I would plunge the room into pretty much total darkness by doing so.

“I’m over here,” came a soft voice from the other side of the room.

I pulled off my trainers and even though I knew there was no furniture between me and the bed, it still took a rather tentative few steps before I felt the bed, and sat down next to Jodie.

No more words were spoken. Our lips touched, igniting the spark that quickly escalated into a raging fire as passion intensified.

The darkness had again removed some (but by no means all) of my nerves and inhibitions, and touching Jodie’s beautiful porcelain skin and exploring her perfect body felt both natural and incredible at the same time.

I became submerged by wave after wave of hormones that I just couldn't repel. Suddenly, almost instinctively, we parted. I felt Jodie's nose brushing against mine and could almost see her hazel eyes blazing through the blackness.

Her hand pressed against my shoulder, gently nudging me onto my back. I could sense that she was moving, but we didn't touch for a few seconds. The separation and silence only served to heighten the sense of anticipation, but that soon transformed into the most amazing realisation that our bodies had joined together for the second time.

17/10/1983

When I woke, Jodie and I were under the covers, facing each other, and the first thing I felt was the gentle rhythmic caress of her breath against my chest.

I moved my hand slowly up and down her silky back, as mental images of the previous night darted through my mind. It was almost a given that I would again struggle to make sense of what had happened. A stunningly beautiful girl had got to know me - got to know me properly - and hadn't laughed at me, or walked away. In fact, she'd listened, she'd cared, and she'd shared her most private thoughts and feelings. The more time we spent together, the more we got to know each other, so our feelings for each other developed and grew, to the magical moment when making love was the only way to display the true depth of our relationship.

Over the previous two nights, all the nerves that had wracked my body and filled my head with self-doubt had been swept away by Jodie's love. She'd wanted to know how good we would be together; I now knew the answer, and hoped ... no, I was *sure* that Jodie would feel the same way.

Jodie murmured and stirred.

"You okay?"

"Uh huh. Just need a wee."

Well I suppose I did ask.

Jodie wriggled free of my arm, clambered rather groggily onto her feet and used her hand to guide her round the edge of the bed towards the door.

"Jodie, you've got no clothes on!"

“Er ... oh yeah! Oh well, it’s the middle of the night. No one will be around!”

I can’t say I shared her confidence, but sure enough, the door opened and I could hear the tacky sound of bare warm feet on lino, before the toilet door was closed behind her. I stretched across to check the time. It was just before three o’clock in the morning. Jodie duly returned, and I became acutely aware that I needed the toilet as well. She slumped back into bed, and I made the short, but slightly self-conscious naked journey across the corridor...

By now we were both pretty much wide awake. Jodie moved over to the far side of the bed and lay on her side, again facing towards me. I used my right hand and bent arm to support my head, although I needed to push my half of the pillow out of the way to get comfortable. I began to stroke her hair with my left hand, sweeping it gently behind her ear: “What are you thinking?”

“Just that past couple of nights have been the best of my life.” Jodie clearly had a monopoly on brilliant replies. “I hope you know just how much I love you?”

“I know.”

Another pause.

It really wasn’t the time for serious conversation, but my mouth clearly had other ideas: “Something kind of strange happened yesterday morning, Jodie. I wasn’t going to say anything, but perhaps you should know.”

“Go on.”

“I almost crashed after I’d got back to my room. I did what I always do, and stared at myself in the mirror, and I could just feel the happiness ebbing away. Just about every time that’s happened before, I’d end up crying, or

lashing out, as the dark thoughts and feelings got the better of me; but yesterday was different.”

“In what way?” Jodie had sat up and it was my turn to have my hair stroked.

“You Jodie. It was you that was different. I saw your face, and something began to flicker inside me. Shit, this sounds so bloody cheesy...”

“It’s fine, Matt. I’m listening.”

“And, well, I suddenly got this surge of energy ... of strength. And it, er, I thought ... it was you, or your love that was telling me to fight. So that’s what I did. I did get kind of emotional afterwards, but I let it all out by playing some loud music. I didn’t give up Jodie. And just this once, it didn’t beat me.”

Jodie didn’t reply. She simply leant forward and kissed me on the lips. Then again. And again. In moments, we were tumbling into the most magical passionate abyss: the love making was almost unexpectedly inevitable, and beautiful beyond any dreams I could have had.

I honestly felt complete.

We woke several hours later still in each other’s arms. What was amazing - in a good way - was that neither of us seemed at all fazed by what we’d shared. Everything between us was completely natural, so much so that when we decided it was time to get up and face the day, Jodie’s attire comprised simply her underwear and one of my sweatshirts, which threatened to engulf her, yet made her look incredibly sexy at the same time.

“Tea?”

“Yeah thanks Matt. That’d be good.”

I rummaged in the bottom of the cupboard, and pulled out a pair of crumpled and creased navy rugby shorts, and grabbed a t-shirt from one of the shelves. It was black, just for the record.

I sauntered along the corridor to the kitchen, to find John, Phil and Tony (one of the lads from the opposite end of our floor) each with a mug of something with steam drifting from the top, and each looking very much the worse for wear.

“Good night then?!”

“Yeah it was. I think!” John’s voice was croaky to say the least.

“Top drawer mate,” replied Tony, surprisingly perkily. Phil just gave me the thumbs up and returned to his drink.

I filled the kettle and fetched a couple of tea bags from my almost food-free food cupboard. The kettle boiled a couple of minutes later, the bubbling sound of the water and the hissing from the plastic spout being the only noise of note, apart from the occasional morning-after groan from Phil.

I heard a door closing, followed by footsteps, almost prancing along the corridor. There were four of us in the room, but only one knew who was approaching.

Jodie beamed as she entered the kitchen. She walked casually across and stood on tip-toes to plant a huge kiss on my lips, probably revealing all of her thighs (and quite possibly a bit more) as her - although strictly speaking *my* - red sweatshirt rode up as we embraced.

She looked at the three open-mouthed faces and grinned as she took the two mugs of tea and disappeared

back along the corridor. I just smiled and smugly shrugged my shoulders and I made to follow her back to my room.

John gave a quiet nod of approval, but the sight of a partially clad girl was enough to break Phil's self-imposed hungover silence: "How the fuck did you pull her?!"

"Seriously?!"

"Yeah. Seriously."

"It was all down to you mate!"

Perhaps I should have waited to see what I presumed would be a look of total confusion on Phil's face, but somebody far more important was waiting for me.

Jodie had left my tea on the bedside cabinet. She was sitting cross-legged on the bed, her back up against the wall, cradling the warm mug in her hands. She was blowing gently to cool down the tea, which was evidently still too hot to drink. I decided to leave my cup on the cabinet, rather than burning my hands unnecessarily, and crawled onto the bed to sit on the pillow, with legs bent and fingers clasped in front of my knees.

"You know what you said last night?" Jodie enquired cryptically. I wasn't sure how to reply. So, I didn't. I smiled in a way that I hoped would make her elaborate; and to my surprise, it worked!

"What you said about getting that sudden strength ... you know, when you were looking in the mirror?"

I nodded, but stayed quiet. I wasn't sure where Jodie was going with this, and thought it best to let her do the talking. In that moment of unease, I leant across to the bedside cabinet to pick up my tea, but recoiled as soon as fingertips came into contact with the mug. Jodie chuckled, and a burning sensation in a couple of fingers quickly replaced my apprehension.

“I’ve felt so different these past few days Matt.” Jodie’s eyes were fixed on mine. “I’m not stupid and I realise there are going to be times when I’ll want to put my fingers down my throat after I’ve eaten; and times when I probably will. I’ll still look in a mirror and I’ll see the fat, worthless slab of meat reflected back at me. I’ll totally fucking hate myself. And I’ll want to cry. And I’ll want to scream. And I guess I’ll remember all the shit that I’ve been through and I’ll still think bad thoughts. All that stuff isn’t just going to go away, however much I want it to. I’ve done a lot of thinking when I’ve been on my own these past few days and what’s different is a sort of inner strength, or resolve, you know, just like you said. One bad thought doesn’t have to lead to another one. And even it does, it’ll pass. If I make myself ill, it won’t make me a bad person. It just means that I start again and try a bit harder next time. It’s not easy for me to accept the person I am, but *you’ve* accepted that person. You’ve accepted me for who I am, without trying to change me. You can somehow see all the crap I try so hard to hide, but instead of running away, or giving up on me, you just ... shit ... what I’m trying to say is that you’re the one, Matt!”

“Sorry?!”

“You’re the one! Simple as that. I don’t know what else I can say. I love you so much.”

What was I supposed to say to that? Although I didn’t fully understand everything that Jodie had experienced, I did seem to understand *her*. I could spend ages letting things whirl round and round in my head in some vain attempt to comprehend how I felt, or perhaps more importantly how Jodie felt, because however hard I tried to convince myself that nobody could ever have such

strong feelings for me, the reality was now impossible to ignore.

“What have you done to me?” It was an honest question.

“Just what you’ve done to me Matt: I fell in love with the real you. The one thing I ... *we* thought would never happen. The one thing we thought *could* never happen because we I guess we believed weren’t worth falling in love with. So, I suppose we’ve proved each other wrong!”

I smiled, as a stray tear began to trickle softly down my face.

“Don’t cry Matt!” Jodie shuffled forward and placed her still untouched tea on the floor. She came and knelt next to me and smeared away the tear with the front of her thumb.

“Sorry Matt, I didn’t want to get all serious. I just feel so incredibly close to you right now. Friday and last night were so special, and I wanted... I *want* you to know exactly how I feel about you; and about the difference that simple chance meeting has had.”

“I’m fine,” I sniffed, slightly (albeit unintentionally) melodramatically. “It’s still a lot to take in, and you’re dead right, I never ever expected anyone to care, and to like me, let alone love me. It’s a brilliant feeling. I just don’t seem capable of controlling my eyes!”

There was nothing more that needed saying. We hugged. It was the same hug that we’d shared plenty of times before, but I felt amazing and, with my hand gently stroking the hair on the on the back of Jodie’s head, I had to squeeze my eyes tight shut to prevent a few more stray tears from escaping.

That cuddle seemed to dissipate the raw emotion, and as we parted, we looked into each other's eyes and simultaneously flashed knowing smiles.

The tea was now lukewarm, and finally drinkable. It was Sunday, so Hilda wasn't at work, and so we were unlikely to be disturbed, but after such an intensely intimate and passionate few hours, we both agreed that we'd get ready and have a stroll over to the Union for a bit of fresh air and a bite to eat.

Jodie recovered her jeans from the floor. They had been lying near the foot of the bed, but had been pushed partly under the bed when the door had been opened. "Do you want your sweatshirt back?!"

"You keep it. It looks better on you anyway!"

Jodie wriggled into her jeans, and pulled down the sweatshirt, before immediately readjusting the baggy top so that it just covered her bum, instead of half her thighs.

"Give me an hour. Do you want me to come back here, or meet you over there," Jodie nodded in the general direction of the Union?

"Come back here. We'll walk over together."

"Alright darling!" Jodie flung her arms around my neck, and we exchanged one more kiss, before she headed back to her room.

A short while later, I was still in a daze as I got myself washed and dressed. If there'd been a cloud ten, hovering fluffily above number nine, I'm sure I would have been on it!

I was so preoccupied that I didn't see Jodie appear outside the window, and peer round the recently opened curtains. The three loud knocks that followed made me jump almost out of my proverbial skin, as I swung round to

be greeted by Jodie, who was bent over, her hands resting against the lower part of her thighs. She was obviously laughing - a lot - although I couldn't actually see most of her face because of the mop of hair that had flopped forward. She ran her fingers through her hair as she straightened up, but as our eyes met, any composure she'd tried to regain was instantly lost.

I moved towards the window, but Jodie skipped out of sight before I reached the curtain (which I was going to yank across whilst assuming my best angry face). I did have the option of leaving her outside in the cold, as the locks to the various main Hall doors in the campus were different, but chose chivalry above temptation!

I grabbed my keys, two crumpled five-pound notes and some loose change from my desk then retrieved my bank card from the drawer. I looked round the room - for no apparent reason - before flicking off the light and dropping the latch so the door would lock behind me. Jodie was standing outside the main door, with her nose pressed flat against the window, each breath briefly steaming up a small patch of glass. As I opened the door, Jodie clasped her hands together and assumed an innocent pose that was more than matched by her wide-eyed look: "I'm sorry!"

"No, you're not!"

"Well, maybe just a little bit! I thought you were going to crap yourself!"

"Nope, but I think a little bit of wee came out!"

"Matt!!" Jodie threw open her arms: "Come here gorgeous!"

A hug and a stroll later, we entered the bar hand in hand, attracting a couple of glances from some vaguely

familiar faces. “Will you get me a drink? I’m just going to give home a quick ring.”

“Lager?”

“Please. Won’t be long.” Jodie blew me a kiss, and ran towards the phone booth.

I turned and headed for the bar. As I approached, I noticed two lads playing darts; the same two I’d beaten rather comprehensively just a few days earlier. One glanced at me rather uneasily, the other pretended he hadn’t seen me, but his next (very poor) throw suggested he had. I smiled a friendly greeting and took my place at the back of the short queue...

Fifteen minutes later, Jodie returned. My pie was gone, hers was getting cold and I was already halfway through my first pint. Jodie sat down, picked up her drink, and took a long swig.

“What did they say then?”

Jodie quickly chewed and swallowed before replying: “Dad wasn’t in, but Denise has invited us over for tea next Saturday!”

If I’d had any liquid in my mouth, it would have been rather rudely expelled as I took in what Jodie had said, but she placed her free hand on my knee and rubbed it vigorously: “Just kidding!”

Jodie picked up the pie in one hand, and held the plate under her chin with the other. She took a bite and crumbs of pastry fell like golden snowflakes onto the white plate.

That first mouthful was also the last, I had momentarily forgotten that Jodie’s eating habits were different to mine, but in the scheme of things a pie with one tiny piece missing was hardly a major issue, and

certainly not something I was going to bring into the conversation. Jodie took another sip of lager, which she swilled round her mouth, presumably to get rid of the taste of the lukewarm meat and gravy.

She sat back, still holding the pint glass, looked at me, and scrunched up her nose: “The session is now officially underway!”

“Ha! Marvellous!” We clinked our glasses together and gulped down a couple of respective mouthfuls.

“How’s your course been going these past couple of weeks?” Jodie’s question was refreshingly random.

“Not too bad, although I do seem to get distracted pretty easily during lectures these days! I haven’t missed any though ... well, not many. And I’m fairly up-to-date with my work. Not completely though, I have got an essay that I need to get finished, but, yeah, pretty good, I guess. You?”

“I’ve not got anything outstanding, but I know I’m not concentrating as much as I should. I’m sure I’ll soon get back into the swing of things, but I’ve been preoccupied with you ... with us, with everything, and the course and stuff just hasn’t been top of my list of priorities.”

“I know what you mean. I want to spend as much time as I can with you; but I suppose we’re going to have to be sensible during the week, and give each other enough space to do our work.”

“I suppose...” Jodie smiled ruefully. She paused, then a wicked grin spread across her face. “We are bloody great together though aren’t we?!”

I was instantly bombarded with seemingly hundreds of wonderful mental images, which stopped just as quickly,

as I sensed the tell-tale warmth of the blush that was reddening my cheeks. The truth was better than I could ever have imagined - and I could imagine quite a lot! - but what was great was that Jodie could mention something so intimate and meaningful in such an outwardly flippant way. In one sentence, Jodie had simply confirmed the strength of our relationship, and even though that felt great, sadly it didn't lessen the glow from my face.

"Aw bless!" Jodie pressed her free palm against my left cheek, her touch was cold and soothing. I took hold of her hand and placed it on the other cheek, but the effect wasn't quite the same, and it felt like I had one warm and one cool cheek; one red, one deep pink. So, I shuffled forward and stretched over to the table to retrieve my drink, touching both sides of my face with the glass, the bottom of which was still chilled from the remaining half pint or so of draught cider.

"Are you still going running?"

Another change of conversational direction.

"Yeah. Not as often as I'd like: probably two or three times a week."

"How far do you go?"

"It varies. Between three and five miles I suppose, although it depends on how I'm feeling. And the weather. Why?"

"I've been thinking of joining the netball club, but I'm so unfit. I thought if I started doing a bit of jogging or something like that, then I could go along to a couple of practice sessions and see if I was anywhere near good enough."

“Really?!” I was genuinely delighted. “That sounds like a great idea! I’ll tell you what, I’ll let you come running with me, if I can come and watch you play!”

“I might be rubbish, but the running will still do me good. It’s a deal!”

An exaggerated handshake followed.

“How about a cheeky couple of miles first thing tomorrow; you know, just as a taster?”

“That sounds like a really bad idea!”

“Lightweight!”

“Piss off!!”

The sporting theme continued for a few more minutes, until it was time to refill our glasses. I sidled over to the bar and ordered two more pints. I should really have returned the empties, but in fairness, neither of the bar staff was making any effort to clean the glasses, plates (and barely touched pie) from our table, so I didn’t bother either.

The conversation was flowing every bit as well as the alcohol, and I could feel myself getting more relaxed by the minute. Jodie was facing me, sitting with her right leg bent back underneath her left thigh: it looked uncomfortable, but evidently it wasn’t.

I didn’t really notice most of the comings and goings, but the appearance of a familiar face made me nudge Jodie’s arm: “Jodie! Look! It’s that fat lass from last night!” Sure enough, there was a flicker of recognition from Jabba the student as she waddled by, but (unless it was just my imagination), her lingering gaze seemed to be directed at the cold pie on the table rather than at me.

Jodie slapped the back of my hand, and jokingly (or so I hoped) admonished me: “You can’t say that Matt!”

I attempted a sorrowful face, but one look at Jodie and it was clear she was struggling to keep a straight face. It was basically a case of waiting to see who cracked first.

It was me.

Having been unexpectedly reminded of the previous evening’s post-cinematic entertainment, and probably fuelled by alcohol, I had a sudden urge to have a game of Galaxian. By now there weren’t all that many people left in the bar, and no one was playing the machine. With a none-too-subtle flick of my head, I motioned Jodie to come with me. I wasn’t much of an expert in any “space invadery” arcade games, but anything that Luke Skywalker could do...

In went the money. I pressed the one player button and a catchy electronic jingle signalled the start of the festivities. For a while I seemed to be doing quite well. The light blue spaceships were pretty easy to hit, and I even managed a pick off a couple of the purple ones, as they swung across the screen. Then, from the top of the screen, two red and one yellow ship, in a triangular formation, flew down towards me, firing merrily as they approached. The bastards. I had seen other people playing the game and I’d noticed that if you got yourself in the correct position and with the right timing, you could hit the two red ships and blow the yellow one to kingdom come without hardly having to move the joystick at all.

Well it looked easy when they were doing it, but I missed the first red spaceship and as my bolt of laser energy flew harmlessly into the void of outer space, the three invaders swooped towards my defenceless craft and an almighty collision signalled the end of my first life. The

second life disappeared courtesy of a high-pitched zap and loud explosion, but I concentrated really hard with my final ship, and even managed to clear the first screen of invaders. Unfortunately, they were replaced by a second, more aggressive fleet, and although I kept on firing, my demise was as swift as it was inevitable.

“I can’t believe you didn’t hit more ships Matt. You seemed to have loads to aim at!”

Jodie had a point.

She nipped to the toilet, and seemed ever-so-slightly unsteady on her feet as she returned. She giggled as she sat back down: “Are you trying to get me drunk?”

“Me? No! I just want to see you do that entre-whatsit thing from when you did ballet!”

“You mean entrechat!”

“That’s exactly what I mean! Let me know when you’re ready!”

“It’ll take a few more drinks yet. Your round I believe?!”

“They’ve all been my bloody round!!!”

I duly bought a couple of halves to top up our glasses and we returned to our seats. The table had actually been cleared (but not cleaned), and as we carried on chatting, I realised that I was starting to laugh at the least little thing, and with a full evening ahead of us (and the melancholy phase only pint or two away if I’d carried on), I reckoned it would be a good idea to have a couple of hours off the drink, and maybe even grab a quick nap, so that we’d be refreshed for the Green Dragon.

By half past four, we had stumbled back to my room, and within minutes of lying down on the bed, we had both dozed off...

Just over three hours later, we were awake, semi-refreshed, and ready for an evening in the Green Dragon.

It was coat weather for Jodie, but I decided on a change of t-shirt, a warm sweater, and fingers crossed for no rain. We left the campus and were on our way to the pub, when I suddenly stopped: "Shit!"

"What is it Matt?"

"I haven't got any bloody money. There's a cash machine over the road. Hang on. I'll be back in a minute."

Jodie threw me an angry look, then her face relaxed and she winked as I turned and ran over the road, dodging between two parked cars. There was no one waiting at the machine, so I inserted my card, entered my PIN - it was 9301 if you're interested, it doesn't really matter now - and pressed the button for twenty pounds cash.

Thankfully (and it certainly wasn't always the case), the machine wheezed, clanked and actually gave me not only the money, but also my card back.

Jodie was standing patiently on the other side of the road. Her arms were folded, but she gave me a little wave by wiggling the fingers of her hand. I continued gazing over at Jodie as I skipped past the black car parked almost opposite.

Perhaps I heard a loud screaming, screeching sound. Perhaps it was Jodie; perhaps it was a car, a car that I simply never saw. Perhaps it was both.

And then everything went black.

17/10/1983 (7:51 p.m.)

I was trapped, surrounded by blackness: cold, blank, unfeeling and uncaring. Pressing down on my head, crushing my body, overpowering my limbs, draining away my strength.

I thought my eyes were open, but I couldn't see anything. If my ears were working, there were no sounds to hear. My body was immobile. It didn't matter whether or not I tried to move a leg, an arm, a finger even; I couldn't.

My head felt heavy, cloudy - and painful. Yes, that's how I felt ... in pain. Terrible pain.

I wanted to scream, but I couldn't. I was just hurting so much.

Why wouldn't it go away?

Why wouldn't anyone help me?

17/10/1983 (8:04 p.m.)

The swirling shroud pressed ever more heavily on my motionless body, and I had long since lost the will to battle against the downward pressure.

Through the darkness, I thought I could hear the faintest of sounds, but I could have been mistaken.

Thinking was so hard now. I wanted to scream to be set free, but even if I could open my mouth, would any sound come out and anyway, who would hear me?

There was that sound.

And again.

There was definitely a noise; a sort of dull, distant drone. It seemed to be getting louder, but rather than emanating from a discernible point or direction, the muffled, guttural grating appeared to be approaching from all around me.

If anything, as the volume increased, so the blackness began to fade ever so slightly.

That momentary sense of liberation that I had craved suddenly began to sweep over me like the tide rolling across a sandy beach and, summoning my last reserves of energy, I managed to flex one of my hands.

The young girl snatched away her hand and sat bolt upright, almost as if she'd received an electric shock.

The effort had left me drained, although I could feel the fog continuing to slacken its grip as the noise intensified into the readily identifiable roar of a car engine. At the same time, two beams of light appeared, boring holes through my closed eyelids. The sound became unbearable, the glare dazzling...

And then nothing.

Nothing except a relaxation and inner calm that I had never experienced before.

My body was no longer restrained by the invisible bonds, although before I could even open my eyes, let alone contemplate moving, a familiar voice whispered: “Just lie there for a few more seconds, son.”

“Grandad?”

“Try not to talk Matthew. You’re doing really well. Soon be all over.”

“But...”

“Sshhh Matthew. You need to rest.”

The next few seconds seemed to last an age.

Thoughts seemed able to flow slowly round my mind once again; but how I could hear the voice of a man who died nearly six years ago?

“Matthew? Can you hear me son? Open your eyes if you can.”

Through my closed eyelids, I could sense the strong light that awaited me and I scrunched up my face to allow my eyes to open as slowly as possible. Through the fine lines of my eyelashes, I became aware of an instantly familiar scene. A beige Volkswagen Beetle was parked outside no.30 Sycamore Street, engine running and headlights on - incongruously given the glare of the sun overhead.

Instead of lying on a road as I had imagined, or at least assumed, I was sitting on the garden wall, just as I used to when waiting for Grandad and Grandma to visit when I was a boy. It felt like a dream, but it also felt real.

My head was hurting.

Grandad had turned off the lights and engine, stepped out of the car and walked over to the wall. He placed a hand on my shoulder and smiled reassuringly: “Don’t worry Matthew. It’s nearly time.”

“Time for what? My head’s killing Grandad. What’s happening?”

The elderly gentleman didn’t reply, but turned, moved to the car and opened the front seat passenger door.

“Why did you come and say goodbye to me Grandad?”

He paused, before returning to my side: “Because you needed to understand.”

Cryptic comments didn’t really help; I was confused enough already.

“Understand what?”

“You needed to understand that you are never alone. That even if you cannot see people, it doesn’t mean they can’t reach you. That even after you leave this life, the journey can still continue.”

“Am I going to die?”

“It happens to us all, son.”

“But am I going to die *now*?”

Grandad’s silence answered the question...

“I’m so sorry Matthew. You’re so young and you had so much to look forward to, but I think it’s time now.”

I jumped down from the wall and landed at Grandad’s side: “I’m scared Grandad.”

“I know Matthew. I know.”

“But what about Jodie?”

“You want to say goodbye?”

“Can I?”

“Get in the car, son.”

I crouched down and edged into the vacant passenger seat of the stuffy beige Beetle. Actually - and weirdly - it wasn't stuffy anymore! Old yes, beige, well partly, it was rusty too; but definitely not stuffy. Oh well, a small bonus.

“Close the door Matthew and hold my hand.”

I leaned to my left and pulled the door towards me. It closed with a metallic clank. I turned to face Grandad, whose moist eyes betrayed the feelings that his warm smile was trying so hard to mask.

“Close your eyes Matt and it will be Jodie's hand you are holding. Hold it tight Matthew. This is your chance to say farewell.”

I clenched my eyes tight shut and squeezed Grandad's hand as hard as I could. For a couple of seconds my grip held firm and then I sensed the strength ebbing from my body.

“This is it, isn't it, Grandad?”

“It's time to let go Matthew. Time to let go.”

Grandad turned the key in the ignition and the engine grunted into life. He flicked on the headlights and glanced over to me: “Nearly there, son. Always remember the journey never ends. I'll be with you and one day, I hope you'll be able to make sense of all of this.”

I returned Grandad's smile and gently shut my eyes as the car pulled away.

The uniformed man leaning over the body looked up at his colleague. He didn't speak. He didn't need to. He just closed his eyes, and gently shook his bowed head.

Jodie Reed, just eighteen years of age, clasped the hand that had squeezed hers only seconds earlier, kissed it and whispered: “I love you, Matt.” She then slumped forward and wept uncontrollably.

17/10/1998

A dark-haired woman and a young boy neared the school entrance. The woman leant forward and the child wrapped his arms around her neck and kissed her. “Bye Mum!”

“Bye Matthew! See you this afternoon.”

The boy ran through the gates and soon disappeared amongst the crowd of similarly clad children in the school yard.

Jodie Anderson, née Reed, turned away and retrieved a set of keys from her handbag as she walked towards a silver car parked about fifty yards down the road. With the autumn sunshine peeking out from behind a wispy white cloud, Jodie suddenly stopped in the middle of the pavement.

She remained motionless for several seconds, seemingly lost in thought; looked skyward, closed her eyes, and simply smiled...