

LEARN TO BE STILL

Jessica, could you get me Bob Ascots on the phone please?”

”Of course Henry, I’m right on it.”

Henry had never quite figured why his parents would give him a name that made him cringe every time he heard it. Strangely though, it didn’t seem to sound so bad when it came out of the mouth of a beautiful woman.

”Your wife’s on line one Henry! Who’s been a bad boy?”

”Not today Jessica, I’m too busy for sarcasm.”

”Hi honey, did I forget something again?”

”No Henry you didn’t forget anything, I’ve just realized how long it’s been since I called you at work to tell you how much I love you.”

Henry’s eyes filled up and with a deep cough; he strained to pull himself together.

”I’ll try to get off early and maybe we can have a nice bottle of wine together and snuggle up on the couch in front of the fire, like we use to, when Rebecca’s in bed.”

”Sorry Henry, I didn’t hear you, Becky was asking me something.” “I’ll tell you later honey, Bob’s on line two.”

Bob Ascot had been a close personal friend of Henry’s since kindergarten after Bob beat off Tom Grey the school bully.

“No school is complete without a bully”, Bob told Henry, as Henry dried his eyes.

“Thanks, what’s your name?”

“Just call me Flash, like Flash Gordon, you know, the superhero, explained Bob.”

Henry wasn’t allowed to watch such things, but he had heard of him.

“Hi Bob, I got your message about Scarlet, is she ok? What the hell happened?”

“It was an accident; you know how she’s always bumping into doors and falling off ladders. I think she must’ve done something real bad when she was younger and God’s got it in for her.”

“I don’t think so Bob.”

“Only joking, you could never understand my humor Henry. Look I know we said we would have you over tonight for dinner, but could you take a rain check?”

“Sure buddy, I’ll call you next week.”

“Henry it’s Natasha again on line one.”

“Ok, put her through Jessica.”

“Hi honey.”

“Hi Daddy.”

“Hi baby is everything ok?”

In the background Henry could hear Natasha slamming the kitchen cabinets, which was never a good sign.

“Is Mommy ok sweetheart?”

“I think she’s mad; daddy can we play tonight?”

“Sure baby, I’ll be home early, could you ask Mommy to come to the phone sweetheart?”

“Ok Daddy, I love you.”

“I love you too baby.”

Natasha had a kind and gentle heart, and very few things seemed to bother her, her passion was human nature and she held a master's degree in psychology; although she could not understand, or tolerate, wife abuse. She was stunningly beautiful and yet her Italian eyes could tear you apart, if you harmed a single hair of her family or friends.

“Hi honey, what did I do?” asked Henry.

“It’s not you, it’s that superhero chicken shit, so called friend of yours.”

Henry had never heard Natasha swear in the fifteen years of their marriage, so it came as quiet a shock to hear it for the first time. “Honey, is Jessica in the room?” Henry asked, wondering what might come next.

“Of course not, I sometimes wonder if you know me at all Henry.”

“Ok, ok, calm down, and tell me what’s going on.”

“I just got off the phone with Scarlet, but before I tell you, you have to promise not to say a word to that dirtbag friend of yours.”

Henry, more out of habit than with any intent, crossed his fingers and said, "I promise, now what's going on?"

Natasha held the phone with her left shoulder and chin as she thumbed through the phone book with a rage that could turn a charging elephant.

"Mr. dirt bag, (A name that now seemed to have stuck in Natasha's vocabulary when referring to Henry's friend Bob.) has beaten up poor Scarlet for the last time if I have anything to do with it. Could you get Jessica to look up the battered wives society, or whatever it might be called? That bastard won't get away with this again."

Henry, although shocked at Natasha's rage and language, had already gathered what had happened. Two weeks earlier Henry had bailed Bob out of jail at three in the afternoon, for beating up a prostitute. Later that day, after a few drinks, Bob told Henry the whole gruesome truth about his outbursts of anger and how he always regretted it afterwards. Bob explained that he was seeing a psychiatrist and he was figuring things out. Henry told him to never mention a word of this to Natasha, as he was sure that she wouldn't be quite as understanding, especially as he was taking his anger out on her best friend.

"Henry, are you listening to me, he won't get away with this."

Natasha's anger suddenly turned into tears as she broke down and began to tremble.

"Oh Henry how could he? What makes a person so cruel?"

"Honey please don't worry, I'll be home soon, we'll talk about it then, I really must go now."

Jessica stood in Henry's doorway eagerly waiting to find out what was going on.

"Is everything ok you look pale?" Jessica asked softly.

Henry looked up his body still tingling from the adrenalin rush. "Yes Jessica everything is just great."

"Coffee?" Jessica asked with a smile.

"That would be wonderful Jessica. I love you! I mean. Thanks."

Henry wasn't quite sure why he said I love you. Maybe it was because he was still thinking of Natasha, but whatever the reason, those simple words seemed to bring a silence you could cut with a knife. Henry's mind scrambled to make some excuse for his words and for no apparent reason his eyes wandered across Jessica's shapely body like a flash of lightning, returning to her wide opened pupils, waiting for his arrival. Henry's eyes seemed to stop like a magnet and in a moment, that felt like an hour, their eyes locked together. Then as fast as it had happened, as Jessica dropped her long eyelashes,

she shyly bowed her head and softly said, “ I think I better get that coffee now.”

“Yes; coffee; right; that; that would be nice.” Henry said with a stutter.

Henry was a faithful husband and a good father. He had known Jessica since kindergarten and had given her a job to help her out after he found out she was nursing her mother, who was dying of brain cancer. Jessica was a sweet and beautiful girl, whose only mistake in life was to be born to a drunken father on the wrong side of town. Henry had heard about her many exploits and wondered how it would have been if she had just been born into a different set of circumstances. Natasha wasn't happy from day one, as she was the first girl he had ever kissed, but then again so did every other boy in the school, so she didn't take it too seriously.

“What the hell was that?” thought Henry.

He got up and hurried to the kitchen door and walked up behind Jessica.

“Jessica please let me explain”

He paused for a moment as Jessica turned around, their eyes locked once again. His left hand reached out onto Jessica's waist and in the same moment Jessica slipped her hand behind his neck and gently pulled him towards her lips. Henry felt a passion so strong that without stopping to think he pulled Jessica closer.

“Not here!” Jessica whispered in his ear.

Henry swept her into his arms and carried her to the couch in his office. Half an hour later as they lay in each other’s arms, Henry couldn’t think of anything he could say to break the long silence.

“I didn’t know you were having problems with your boyfriend” Henry blurted.

“I’m not! Are you having problems with Natasha?” Jessica replied.

“No absolutely not”, said Henry.

“Then what would make you think that I’m having problems with my boyfriend?”

“I just thought if you would do this you must be going through something.”

Jessica pulled back and looked at Henry in amazement.

“I did it for the same reason as you Henry and it won’t happen again, believe me.”

“I’m sorry Jessica don’t be angry, you’re obviously better at this than me, this is my first time.”

“You son of a bitch, what do you take me for.” Jessica said as she pushed Henry back, picked up her clothes and stormed into her office to get dressed, slamming the door in Henry’s face as he tried to follow.

“Jessica, let me explain.”

“No need Henry, just go home; I’m sure your darling wife will be waiting.”

Next chapter

“Hi honey I’m home.”

Henry ran upstairs before Natasha had chance to meet him.

“Where are you going Henry? Becky’s been waiting.”

“Well you won’t believe what happened. As I was leaving the office I slipped on a pile of dog do-do and landed in it on my back. I’m just going to take a quick shower and rinse these cloths, everything stinks.”

“Henry are you ok?”

“Yes honey, just a little scratch on my back. I’ll be fine. I’ll be right down.”

Henry’s mind was racing and he was acting like someone who had just committed a murder. He filled the bath with water and put in all his clothes like they were covered in blood. His mind traced over his every move from the moment he left the office trying to think of every little detail, for something he may have overlooked.

“What the hell were you thinking” Henry thought to himself. “Are you insane.”

Henry had never even noticed what Jessica’s perfume smelt like before, but now it seemed to fill the whole bathroom. Natasha thought that too much perfume was tacky and once told Henry that Jessica needs to go a

little lighter on the cent; so he was sure she would know instantly it was hers. Henry picked up Natasha's Chanel No5 and tried to pour a little into the bath.

"Who the hell designed these bottles?" Henry muttered. He placed the bottle on its side on the edge of the bath to drip a little more as he frantically washed his clothes.

"Henry darling, do you have the car keys? I need to pop to the store to pick up some sugar."

"NO!" Henry leapt to the bathroom door and opened it slightly.

"No honey, you can't use the car, it stinks and I have to have it valeted before we use it again."

"You didn't sit on the seat with that on your back did you?" asked Natasha.

"Well it kind of seeped through the cloth I put down. It was a real mess."

"Ok you can pick up the sugar tomorrow on your way home. I'll write you a note."

Henry lifted his clothes into the sink and stepped into the bath.

As he closed the shower curtain it finally hit him that this could change his life forever. He thought how he had always wanted to be the perfect role model for his children. An example to the young men in his local church. But most of all he wanted to be a husband that any wife would be proud of. He looked down at the bottle

of Chanel No5 that he had bought Natasha for their 15th anniversary and recalled how she wore it that same night and how perfect she looked that evening as he gazed into her beautiful Italian brown eyes, across the dinner table. And now the bottle was empty. Why?; because of one stupid mistake. Henry gripped the shower curtain, dropped his head onto his hand and broke down in tears. "What have I done? Oh my God what have I done?"

"Henry is everything ok?"

"Yes honey, I'll be right down."

"Daddy hurry up, I have to go to bed soon and you said we could play tonight"

"We will baby, we will"

Henry stepped out of the shower and stood in front of the mirror. As he stared into his own eyes he realized he didn't know the man that was looking back at him. He thought about all the things he had wanted to do in life and how he never seemed to get around to living any of his dreams.

"What am I afraid of", he thought. "What the hell is this life about anyway? I get up every day. I kiss my wife goodbye and go to work. I come home, kiss my wife hello, tuck in my daughter, go to bed and slip into a coma for 7 hours till I awake, to do it all over again. Something's gotta change. Hell I already feel like a new man." He thought. "It's like I've released something in me

that's been waiting. Waiting to live the life I was born to live. Not this excuse for a life I've been living for others. My life; my choices, do the things I want to do. Not the things I've been told I have to do. Hell this could just be the best thing that could ever have happened."

"Henry; you want to pass those clothes out so I can put them in the wash. And you really should be coming down any day soon. Scarlet is picking me up. She wants to take me for a coffee to talk about Mr. Dirt bag and figure out what she's going to do."

Henry opened the door to give Natasha his clothes.

"What have you been doing with my perfume, it smells like you used the whole bottle."

"Sorry honey, I had a bit of an accident. I was trying to get rid of the smell off my clothes and I spilled it."

"Henry you didn't?"

"You never used it anyway."

Natasha looked into Henry's eyes and felt a feeling deep inside that she had never felt before. It wasn't the perfume, something just didn't feel right. Call it intuition or maybe it was that look in his eyes. All she knew was, something was very wrong and she didn't feel good about it.

"Mummy there's somebody at the door."

"Ok baby it's Scarlet, let her in, I'll be right down".

Henry couldn't get his mind off what had happened while he played with Rebecca.

"What's the matter daddy you're not playing very good."

"I know baby, I'm sorry, daddy's a little tired. Come on; let's get you into bed now, I promise I'll make up for it tomorrow night."

"Promise? Rebecca said as she shook her finger in the air.

"I promise, now let's go young lady, I'll chase you up the stairs, run."

Henry put Rebecca into bed and tucked her in. Rebecca looked up at him and said in the softest voice. "Daddy, are you mad at me?"

"Honey why would you say such a thing?"

"It's just that you look so sad Daddy."

"No baby, it's not you, I just had a very bad day that's all. Now go to sleep, and remember, no matter what happens, you'll always be daddy's girl."

"Why; what's going to happen daddy?"

"Nothing baby, now close those pretty eyes and go to sleep."

Next Chapter

Natasha and Scarlet pulled up outside the coffee shop.

“Would you mind if we went for something a little stronger Natasha? I really could do with a stiff drink. I’m sure you will too when you hear the whole story.”

“Sure”, said Natasha; “you know I’m not a big drinker, but if it helps you I’m ok with it. But if you don’t mind I’d rather go somewhere where nobody knows us.”

They drove across town, to a small motel bar where Scarlet had once stayed after running away for 3 days.

“Let’s sit over there Natasha, it’s quiet.”

“You’ve been here before?”

“Yes, I stayed here the last time I left Bob.”

“Ok, maybe you should start right from the beginning.”

Scarlet sobbed as she told the whole heartbreaking story of her life as an abused and battered wife.

“Please tell me that Henry didn’t know about this, asked Natasha.

“I don’t want to cause problems between you and Henry Natasha.” “I’ll take that as a yes. I’m wondering if I even know who he is anymore. You were right; I think I do need that drink after all.”

Natasha thought for a moment.

“Scarlet I think it’s time that all these dirty secrets were laid out on the table. It’s the only way I see of putting a stop to it and getting everyone the help they obviously

need. Tomorrow night is the Rotary club's annual party. We'll leave it to the end of the evening and choose an appropriate moment when we are all feeling a little light hearted. I'll bring it up, but you have to be strong Scarlet.”

”You don't know what he's like when you're not around Natasha.”

“Don't worry if it ends on a bad note you can come home with us until things cool down.”

As they drove home Natasha could feel her blood boil, but she knew she couldn't act as if she knew anything until after the party, which wasn't going to be easy. Henry was already in bed and looking like he was sleeping. Natasha quietly got ready and slipped very slowly into bed hoping that Henry wouldn't wake up. Henry didn't move a muscle and was very relieved that Natasha didn't try to wake him.

New Chapter

“Daddy, daddy wake up there’s someone at the door.”

Henry woke startled and looked at the clock.

“Goodness it’s 8 o’clock already, I can’t believe I slept so later”

Henry climbed out of bed and through on his robe.

“What’s going on Henry?” Natasha asked.

“It’s ok; it’s just someone at the door honey.”

Henry ran down the stairs and opened the door.

“Who is it Henry.”

“It’s only Bob.”

Natasha hurried to the top of the stairs.

“Is Scarlet ok?”

“Yes honey I forgot we had arranged to go golfing today. Step inside for a moment Bob, I’ll be right back.”

Natasha stood for a moment at the top of the stairs and could hardly hold herself from opening both barrels on him right there and then.

“Hey Natasha you’re looking more beautiful than ever. Henry sure is lucky to wake up next to you every day.”

“You have a beautiful wife too, or maybe you just haven’t taken the time to notice lately.”

“Yeh; I guess you’re right, she’s a little wrinkled around the edges these day but she does have her good days”.

Natasha knew this was not the time or the place to confront him, so she turned and walked away.

“Ok Bob lets hit the course.” Henry said as he walked down the stairs.

“Is she on her period Henry? I just tried to pay her a compliment and she almost bit my head off.”

“Henry, be sure you’re back in time for the party tonight.” Natasha shouted.

“Ok honey, I’m dropping the car to be cleaned. They should drop it off for you here around 12:00, can you pick me up behind the golf course at 1:00 honey.”

It was a beautiful morning for golf. Henry noticed the smell of the freshly cut grass for the first time, which was strange as he had played here many times before.

“Ok Henry lets really open up on this first drive and set the standard for the game.”

Henry stepped up and slowly placed his golf ball on its tee in the ground. He looked down at the first hole like he was Tiger Woods, playing for the World Series. His swing, timing and style all seemed to fall into place and as his driver contacted the ball, he knew this was going to be the drive of his life.

“Holy mother of all drives Henry! That has to be the best drive I’ve ever seen.”

Henry now knew that something had definitely changed, but he wasn’t sure yet what it was. It couldn’t be love, he wasn’t even sure if he liked Jessica, so love really was

out of the question. It was more a sense of freedom. He still loved Natasha with all his heart and was sure his life would be over without her.

“So why do I feel so good, so free, so released”, Henry thought.

Then it hit him. He didn't have the perfect life anymore. His judgments had gone. How could he judge others, if he himself could do such a thing? He suddenly recognized how hard it had been to maintain the perfect image, to live by standards set by others. Standards that he had always considered reasonable, now seemed simply ridiculous.

“These things sometimes just happen to good people, and now to the world I'm a monster, the lowest of low and I don't care what they think,” thought Henry.

“Henry, are you ok buddy? You've been miles away all day. If you drop this one in the hole, you'll finish at 7 under par mate. You've never shot better than 6 over. What the hell are you taking, and where can I get some?”

“Sorry Bob I got a lot on my mind at the moment.”

“Not from where I'm standing buddy.”

Henry dropped an 8-foot putt like it was two inches.

Casually picked his ball out of the hole and asked. “What time will you and Scarlet be there tonight Bob?”

“Are you for real?” said Bob. “You just finished the game of your life 7 under with an 8ft putt, and you ask what time will I be there. Am I missing something?”

“I don’t have time to discuss it now Bob, but maybe later tonight. I’ll see you there around 7:30, Natasha’s picking me up and we’re running late. I gotta dash.”

New Chapter

“Daddy, the car is nice and clean now.”

“I see that baby.”

Henry kissed Natasha on the cheek and said. “Hi honey”!

Natasha lifted her eyebrows and asked. “What was that?”

You haven’t kissed me on the cheek since the first time we met at Bob’s birthday party.”

“Honey why are you evaluating everything I do? I’m not one of your screwed up patients.”

“My patients are not screwed up Henry. They are people who recognize they need help and frankly you could learn a thing or two from their example.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean!”

“Henry can you lower your voice, Rebecca is getting upset. We’ll talk about this later.”

“Mummy, are we getting a divorce?”

“No baby we are not getting a divorce. Mummy and daddy are just discussing daddy’s well being.”

Natasha turned towards Henry, who could see in her welled-up eyes that he may have carved the first scare on the heart of an otherwise perfect relationship.

“I’m so sorry honey.” Henry said softly.

Natasha turned her face away and looked ahead at the sun peeking through perfect white cotton candy clouds against a deep blue sky.

“How perfect”, she thought. And yet only yesterday this beauty; although still there, was hidden behind a wall of grey. What a strange thing to think in a moment like this”, thought Natasha.

“Scarlet can you kick it up a notch; we’re going to be later.”

“I’ll be right down Bob, go wait in the car, I’ll be out by the time you open the garage door and turn the car engine on.”

“You had better be Scarlet or I swear I’ll leave without you.”

Bob opened the garage door and started the car.

“Where the hell is she?”

“I’m here Bob; see that saved us some time.”

“Babe don’t try and be funny, it’s not your thing.”

“I wasn’t trying to be funny, I was just saying it saved us some time” Scarlet said sheepishly.

Bob drove the car out and jumped out to close the garage. As he reached up to grab the door, Scarlet leaned out of her window and asked. “Did you remember to bring your checkbook for the charity auction?”

Bob turned his head and shouted, “Yes I remembered. I’m not you.”

With his head still looking towards Scarlet he pulled down on the door.

“Holy mother of pain! Scarlet quickly help me, I think I’ve broken my god damned back. Come on stupid, can’t you see I’m in pain here.”

Scarlet tilted her head back and whispered. "Thank you God." Then in no real hurry went to helped Bob into the car.

"Are you going to be ok to go Bob?"

"I've got to go. So many people are relying on me to be there. Who's going to do the introductions, if I'm not there? No, I'll be fine but you better drive."

"Henry, Natasha, over here! Sorry I can't get up but I did my back in closing the garage door."

Natasha smiled at Scarlet and said. "Henry why don't you sit down and keep Bob company while Scarlet and I go to the bar and get you some drinks."

"You girls hurry back now; you don't want to miss my introductions." Bob said.

"Scarlet, you didn't mention our little conversation to Bob did you?"

"Natasha I thought you knew me better than that."

"Sorry, just wanted to make sure, Henry's been acting real strange and I thought he might have known something.

"Hi girls; so nice to see you all made up. Can I buy you a drink?"

"Jessica how are you? Looks like you started early."

"Earlier than you think Natasha. Earlier than you think."

“Maybe you should go get a coffee Jessica, the night is still very young.”

“Oh look Scarlet your darling husband is starting his speech; looks like you’ve been overworking his back sweetie.”

Natasha jumped forward, “Jessica that’s enough... you ought to be ashamed of yourself showing up to a charity event drunk.”

“Ashamed of myself, and what makes you so high and mighty Natasha. I used to think I wanted a life just like yours, but now I see it was all an illusion. Your life is no better than mine. At least I know the truth about my life. What about you Natasha?”

“What’s she talking about Natasha” Scarlett asked with a frown.

Natasha looked across the room at Henry who's terrified eyes told her the rest of the story.

“Oh my god” she thought; “it’s true! Scarlet I have to leave now but don’t worry, Bob can’t do you much harm for a while with his bad back, I really have to go, I’m sorry.”

As Natasha crossed the room towards the door Henry pushed his way through the crowd. “Natasha wait, please let me explain.”

“Don’t say a word Henry, not a word, just drive me to my mothers to pick up Rebecca, pack your things and leave. Tonight!”

The long drive to Natasha’s mothers was the quietest Henry had ever been. He knew there was little if anything he could say. He still wasn’t sure how much Jessica had told her, but he was sure it was enough to change the rest of his life. He ran every possible beginning to his first words through his head but realized it wasn’t his turn to speak. Henry turned his head just enough to see Natasha’s face from the corner of this eye. A single tear ran down her face as she thought of Rebecca’s words earlier that day and wondered how she was going to tell her little girl that mummy and daddy are getting divorced. How could she save her from the pain that she never did anything to deserve?

She recalled counseling a young couple with their 7-year-old daughter and the look on the little girl's face when she tugged on Natasha’s dress, looked up at her with her sad blue eyes and asked her. “Are you the lady that’s going to fix my mommy and daddy? I think it was all my fault, I said I was sorry; but mummy’s still very mad at me and I miss my daddy so much.”

How could he do this to Rebecca? Who was this man she thought she knew.

Henry pulled into Natasha's mother's driveway.

"Stay here" Natasha said sternly as she got out of the car to get Rebecca.

Henry stared at the steering wheel for what seemed like an hour without a single thought in his head. The silence was broken when the car door opening and a strong gust of wind filled the car.

"Hi daddy, I'm so happy you came to get me early, I was frightened by the thunder and whitening. Are you feeling better now?"

"Better?"

"Yes mummy told grandma you were sick and had to leave early." "Oh yes I'm feeling a little better baby."

"It's very scary tonight daddy."

"Yes baby it is, but I'll take good care of you now, don't worry."

Natasha jumped into the car as she shook the rain of her hair.

"Be careful Henry this is a terrible storm."

A sudden flash of light lit up everything like it was daylight and a loud crash shook the car. Natasha and Rebecca screamed. Rebecca grabbed Henry around his neck from the back seat and Natasha gripped on to his arm. "It's ok girls; I told you I won't let anything happen to you." Then like another flash of lightning it hit him. This could be the last time Natasha ever turned to him when she needed

someone to hold on to. Who would they hold on to in the next storm? Who would take his place? He wouldn't get to teach Rebecca how to ride her bike. He wouldn't get to read her bedtime stories and kiss her goodnight. He wouldn't be the father of her brother or sister or get to watch them grow together as he and Natasha had often talked about.

Why didn't I think of this before I made that stupid mistake? Why didn't God intervene; he thought? I've been a good Christian and the one time when I need Him he's not there to guide me. God why did this have to happen, when everything was so perfect?

Damn you satan, dam you like I have been dammed for falling into your twisted trap, he thought.

Henry's mind scrambled to find something to blame other than himself. He believed he was a strong Christian and wondered how he of all people could fall at the first temptation thrown at him. All he could do now was to ask God and Natasha to forgive him and pray that somehow it would all turn out for the better. Henry finally realized there was nobody to blame and nothing he could hide behind but his own weakness. He dropped his head in shame and whispered under his breath.

"God forgive me. I've not only sinned against you, but against my family who loved me as you do, please, please forgive me and I'll make this right."

Henry turned to Natasha and said;

“I’m so sorry honey.”

Natasha let go of Henry’s arm and his moment ended as suddenly as it began.

“Mummy why is it so quiet? Is something wrong?”

“No baby we’re just tired. Henry slow down, I can’t see a thing. Do your wipers not go any faster?”

“I’ve never seen rain this heavy; I can’t see the road in front of me.”

“Henry slow down or stop the car and let me drive.”

Henry turned to Natasha and said. “Will you just let me drive?”

Rebecca screamed. “Daddy look out!”

It was the last thing Henry heard before he slowly opened his eyes to the feeling of the rain on his face. He could see the car a few yards away lying on its roof. Rebecca’s motionless body was half inside the back window and half outside. Natasha was crouched down next to her with her head in her hands screaming, “My babies dead, oh my God help us, not this, please not this. Somebody help us.”

Henry gently brushed Rebecca’s hair off her face so he could see her eyes. “She’s ok Natasha, she’s hurt don’t touch her, but she’s going to be ok.”

Rebecca looked up at Henry without moving and said. “Daddy, why can’t I move Daddy;” and slowly closed her eyes.

A hand touched Henry on the shoulder as he saw the flashing of a red light on Rebecca’s face.

“Come with me and let the ambulance medic get in to your daughter. She will be ok now. You and your wife need to come with me. My names Nathan I’ll take you to the hospital, you won’t be able to go in the ambulance. We better go they’re moving her right now.

As if trapped in some bizarre nightmare, Natasha and Henry sat in the waiting room trembling as doctors rushed back and forward. “Henry why won’t anyone tell us what’s happening; I want to see my baby now”!

Nathan put his hand on Natasha’s shoulder. “I’ll go find out what’s happening, I’m sure you’ll be able to see her soon, please stay here I’ll be right back.” “Are you a doctor?” Natasha asked.

“No I’m a priest, but I’m sure everything is going to be ok.”

“Thank you, you’ve been very kind.”

“Henry where is he? He’s been gone too long, there’s something wrong I know it, there is something very wrong.”

“Natasha you heard him, he said everything is going to be ok.”

Natasha could see the priest walking towards her as if in slow motion. He held out his hands to his sides his palms wide open. Natasha put her hands over her mouth as she looked into the priest's' eyes for any sign of an emotion. Nathan put his hands on Natasha's shoulders and smiled, “I told you everything was going to be ok. She's having some final checks and you'll be able to take her home with you tonight. They're just getting her ready to leave right now. A good friend of mine is with her and held her hand the whole time, so you've no need to worry any more.”

Natasha threw her arms around Henry's neck and put her head on his shoulder. Henry held her tight and gently stroked her back. Natasha sobbed as she whispered in Henry's ear. “If God can do this, he can show us where we went wrong and how to fix this terrible mess Henry.”

The doors at the end of the hospital corridor suddenly burst open and Rebecca ran towards them. Natasha ran to meet her and swept her into her arms. “Baby you're ok I was so worried about you, are you sure you're feeling ok?”

“I was very frightened mummy, but an angel was with me the whole time and he told me everything was going to be ok and I know angels can’t lie, so I wasn’t scared anymore.”

“That would be Simon, my friend I told you about”, Nathan said with a smile.

“We should go now, you all need some rest. I’ll take you home.

Natasha had never been even remotely interested in another man since the day she got married. Maybe she was always too busy to notice all the attention she got from other men, or maybe it was because she thought that men were all pigs and shallow. But Nathan was somehow different to any man she had ever met before. When he touched her shoulder he gave her a sense of peace she had never felt before, like he really cared. She knew this was a time when her emotions were mixed and wasn’t about to make any rash decisions about her feelings. But she also knew she was strangely attracted to a man she had only known for just over an hour.

Henry took Rebecca to bed and tucked her in as he had done so many times before, but this time was different. Rebecca never asked him any questions like she always did, which was even more surprising after what had just happened. She simply closed her eyes and fell fast

asleep. Henry kissed her on her forehead and whispered. "I will never let you down again baby, as God is my witness, I will never let you down again."

Natasha awoke to the sound of birds outside her bedroom window. The sun broke through the blinds and cast its pattern across Henry's face. Natasha stroked his cheek with the back of her hand as she remembered the first morning they woke up on their honeymoon. She recalled how they walked along the beach that day and talked and talked about their future together with the sound of the waves crashing on the shore and the gentle spray against her face, carried by the wind. "Henry, why can't we stay here forever? I never want to forget this moment. And if the sound of the waves grow dim, we'll come back to this exact spot and the smell of the air and the sea spray against our faces will bring us back to this moment, again and again."

Where was the man that had once swept her off her feet and carried her into the ocean and made love to her, as the water washed against their bodies? Where was the eternal romantic that wrote her love poems and shared with her his hopes and dreams?

Henry's eyes slowly opened. "Good morning honey. Is Rebecca still sleeping? I better go check on her she never sleeps this late."

"Don't worry, she's fine it's only 6:30."

Natasha looked at Henry and asked "What happened to us Henry, when did we forget."

"Forget what honey?"

"Us"

"Life has a way of doing that when you're trying to build a future."

"What good is the future if you lose the very thing we're building it for? This is not what life was supposed to be. If the future even closely resembles what we're living now, I don't want it."

Henry remembered looking in the mirror and how he felt when he thought how his life was about to change. He knew it had nothing to do with freedom, sex or even love. It was because he felt released from the agony of living a lie. Always trying to be something for everyone else; like a second rate actor playing the role of an honest pillar in his community trying to figure out how he would portray the part of a loving husband and father.

"Can you ever forgive me honey?" Henry asked as he brushed his finger across Natasha's chin.

"I don't know Henry, but I know that things are about to change forever and I'm very scared."

“I’m sorry Natasha; I don’t know what to say or do right now. All I can tell you is that whatever it takes I’ll do it to make things like they used to be. I promise.”

“It may never be the same again Henry, but maybe that’s not such a bad thing.”

Natasha gently put her hand on Henry's chest and lifted Henry’s hand onto her breast. Henry’s breathing began to get stronger and Natasha could feel his heart beat faster.

“Natasha, it may be a little soon.”

“I know Henry; it was just something I needed to be sure of.”

Rebecca burst open the bedroom door and ran as fast as she could leaping onto the bed.

“Mummy; there’s a man in my room! Henry jumped up and ran to Rebecca’s room.

“I think she was having a bad dream honey there’s nobody there.”

“But there was mummy, I promise.”

“I know baby don’t worry. It must have been the shock of what happened last night. It’s ok now, don’t worry let me hold you.”

Henry lifted his hand and said abruptly. “Honey be quiet for a minute I think I heard something.”

The room was suddenly so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Rebecca shuffled up close against Natasha.

Natasha placed her hand on the side of Rebecca's head and pulled her close to her chest. A loud noise filled the room and Rebecca screamed throwing her arms tightly around Natasha's waist.

"It's ok Rebecca, it's just the phone - it's only the phone baby."

Henry lent toward them and picked up the phone next to the bed.

"Hello? ... No we're all fine, thanks for calling... Sure,... I think so; just let me check with Natasha." Henry covered the phone with his hand.

"Honey it's the priest that took us to the hospital last night. He was wondering if it was ok for him to come over just to check on us; something about it being his job."

"Sure what time?" Natasha asked as she stepped out of bed and pulled on her robe.

"In about an hour", Henry said lifting his eyebrows.

"Ok, I'll get Rebecca ready if you can make us some breakfast."

"Yea that works fine Nathan, we'll, see you then I guess."

Henry placed the phone back on the receiver, put his hands on his waist, looked up and said. "You know I can't remember much about last night at all. The one thing I do remember - he said with a smile on his face bending towards Rebecca, - is seeing my baby running down that

corridor towards me. Come here you little tinker. Let's go clean those teeth and wash that petty face."

Rebecca giggled as Henry lifted her up in the air and rubbed her tummy on the top of his head.

After breakfast Natasha sat down in front of the bedroom mirror behind Rebecca to brush her long hair and thought how close she came to losing her little girl. It was like a second chance to do all the things she would have missed before life slipped away without her even noticing that her little girl was all grown up.

She wondered what life would have been like if Rebecca had died. Would there even be a life worth living tormented by the knowledge that she may have somehow been to blame for her own daughter's' death. She couldn't bare to even think about the pain she would be feeling right now. "Maybe there was a reason for all this after all", she thought.

"Mummy why are you crying?" Rebecca asked.

"They're happy tears baby."

"Happy tears?"

"Yes baby, sometimes in life an angel whispers in your ear; "everything is going to be ok."

And you feel so happy, that it makes us cry."

"Did an angel really just whisper in your ear mummy?"

“Yes baby, everything is going to be ok.”

“Natasha; I think that’s Nathan at the door;” Henry shouted from the bathroom. “Could you let him in while I finish up in here?”

Natasha looked in the mirror next to the front door and touched her hair as if to make some final adjustments before opening the door. “Hello father” - Natasha paused, - “I’m so sorry I didn’t catch your second name.”

“Oh just call me Nathan, I can’t stand formalities. We’re all equal in Gods eyes.”

Natasha hadn’t noticed that Nathan had a strong Irish accent in all the confusion the night before, but she thought it added a touch of charm to an already unusually handsome tall dark priest.

“Can I get you a drink of something?”

“That’s very kind but I just had a gallon of tea with an old lady I visited. Well it looks like you all survived your ordeal.”

“Yes, thank you again for your help and kindness.”

“Oh that’s ok; it’s kind of my job.”

“Kind of” Natasha enquired.

“Yes I follow the ambulances to accidents, just in case I’m needed. I’ve been doing it for some time now,

between that and my work at the hospice, I barely have time to party these days.”

“Party?” Natasha said with a surprised look on her face. “I’m joking, I know it’s hard to believe but we priests can split your sides with laughter given half a chance. The trouble is, everyone seems to think we spend our lives handing out pennants and punishments to sinners. In my last church I installed one of those ticket number machines they have now instead of line-ups. I put a sign over it that read. *If you’ve sinned please call back, the ticket machine ran out of numbers.* I don’t think anyone got the joke. One woman came up to me after about three weeks and asks me when I was going to refill it.”

Natasha burst into laughter just as Henry walked down the stairs. “Did I miss something?” Henry asked.

“Yes I was just telling your wife about a poor old lady who died an hour ago; your wife has a very strange sense of humor.”

Natasha laughed so hard she could hardly control herself. Nathan leaned over and said, see, “I told you we could split your sides given half a chance.”

Henry looked confused as to why Natasha would laugh at such a thing but the look on his face only made Natasha laugh even more.

“I’m sorry Henry” – Nathan explained – “I really just told your wife a funny story. I’ll share it with you another time

when the moment's right. Now where's that beautiful little lady I saw last night.”

Nathan had already noticed that Rebecca was hiding behind the wall at the top of the stairs. He could hear her giggling as Natasha laughed, but she was still too shy to come down.

“Rebecca baby why don't you come down and say hello to our visitor.” Henry said.

Natasha was still trying to get her breath back, she hadn't laughed so much for such a long time and it felt good.

“Father - I mean Nathan, please come in and sit down for a while. Rebecca's a little shy, I'm sure she'll join us when she's ready.”

“I'll go get her honey; you two go on in and we'll join you in a few minutes” Henry said as he walked back up the stairs.

“So Nathan, tell me about your work at the hospice.”

“Not much to tell really, people die just about every day, they need someone to share their fears with, which most people are afraid to talk about with them, and I'm there to listen. It amazes me every day how just listening to someone can help them deal better with what most people would agree is the hardest thing we'll ever have to deal with, especially when you know it may only be a matter of days, even hours away.

I remember in particular a young boy only 7 years old at the time. I had been visiting him for about 10 days and reading him the story of the little prince. I came to the end of the book and he asked me why there was an empty landscape after the last page. Then he asked me to read the author's comment to him as he nuzzled his head onto my chest and held my hand. It read –

“For me, this is the loveliest and saddest landscape in the world. It’s the same landscape as the one on the preceding page, but I’ve drawn it one more time in order to be sure you see it clearly. It’s here that the little prince appeared on Earth, then disappeared. Look at the landscape carefully to be sure of recognizing it, if you should travel to Africa someday and if you happen to pass by here, I beg you not to hurry past. Wait a little, just under the stars! Then if a child comes to you, if he laughs, if he has golden hair, if he doesn’t answer your questions, you’ll know who he is. If this should happen, be kind! Don’t let me go on being so sad: Send word immediately that he’s come back.”

When I finished reading, I looked down and he had passed away.”

Natasha reached for a tissue as tears ran down her face. Henry brought Rebecca in from the hallway. He tilted his head sideways and dropped his eyebrows.

“You appear to be having quite an effect on my wife Nathan, one minute she’s laughing, like I’ve never seen her laugh, and next she’s crying, like I’ve never seen her cry.”

Rebecca walked quickly over to Natasha’s side and held her hand, which seemed to make her cry even more.

“Did an angel whisper in your ear mummy?” Rebecca asked.

“No baby not this time; this nice man just told me a very sad story that deeply touched my heart.

“I know” – Henry said to Nathan – “you’ll tell it to me later when the moment's right.”

Henry sat down on an armchair across from Nathan and folded his arms. “Nathan why don’t you tell us another funny story I could do with a good laugh myself.”

Natasha could see that Henry was feeling more than a little jealous, which she was enjoying immensely. “Henry! There is no need to be rude to our guest” She said sternly.

“Rebecca, why don’t you go play while mummy and daddy talk to father Nathan.”

Nathan smiled as he had never been called father Nathan before. “Are you and daddy going to have

another *arguamment* about daddy's well being?
Rebecca asked.

"No baby we're just going to have a nice chat with our visitor. Rebecca smiled, looked at Nathan and said "Thank you for making my mummy laugh, I've never seen her laugh like that, it was very funny."

Then she skipped across the living room and ran upstairs.

Nathan sat forward on the couch and asked. "Is there anything you would like to talk about? I'm sensing that you two are not in the best place right now."

Henry unfolded his arms and placed them on the arms of his chair. "Go ahead Natasha; you know you want to get it off your chest. Why don't you tell father Nathan that your husband's a fake who's sleeping with his secretary, while he's preaching to the church youth about abstaining from sex before marriage."

"Henry! - I'm sorry Nathan, I don't know what's got into him" Natasha said apologetically.

"Well I think I got a very succinct but clear picture of what's happening now. Would you like to talk about it Natasha?" - Nathan asked as he placed his arm across the back of the couch and turned towards Natasha as if he already knew what was coming next. - "Why don't you tell us how you're really feeling right now?"

“How I’m really feeling? To be perfectly frank, until you came to the door I thought I would never laugh again or cry for anyone other than myself, and my own pitiful wasted life. I’ve tried to figure it out in my head and ask myself a thousand times what I’m going to do. And if it wasn’t for the accident I think I know exactly what I would have done with your sorry ass you son of a bitch”

Natasha said as she looked across the room at Henry.

“And now you sit there Henry, and have the audacity to be jealous of the man that has shown us nothing but kindness and compassion. A man you’re not worthy to sit in the same room as. Yes I’m angry. I have no idea what to do with all this anger or where it will lead me. But I am sure of one thing. Whatever I do right now will be for Rebecca. It will be your actions and your words that make up my mind what I’m going to do about you. And believe me Henry, after this, it’s not looking very good. I’m sorry Nathan maybe you didn’t need to hear all that.”

“I think I did” Nathan replied placing his hand on Natasha’s back as he passed her another tissue.

Nathan paused for a moment then clasped his hands in front of him.

“Look, you may think that what I’m about to ask is a bit too soon after everything that’s happened in your lives recently. But I have traveled a long way and seen a lot of things and I truly believe that what I’m about to offer you

would be exactly what you need or I wouldn't even suggest it.

I'm leaving tomorrow on a two-week mission to Somalia and we have three open spots in our mission group. I would like to offer them to you. I know it's a little sudden but all I ask is that you talk it over when I leave and I will call you later tonight to see what you've decided. Please don't let fear be your guide in making your decision. I've been many times before and I can assure you, I will not let any harm come to any of you or ask you to do anything against your own free will. You'll be staying in a secure and beautiful mansion set in its own grounds surrounded by a 20 foot wall. There will be another couple in the group your own age that have a 7 year old son who will be great company for Rebecca. There's clean running water and the food is excellent. I will be visiting the mission areas with some of the others in the group during our two-week stay and you'll be under no obligation to join us. Look at it like a short holiday on me. Well it's up to you now; I'll call you later. I do hope you decide to come, if you do, I promise you this; it's a journey that I'm sure will change you forever."

Henry closed the door behind Nathan and turned to Natasha who was already halfway up the stairs.

“Natasha, can you believe he even asked us to drop everything and just take off with him to a war zone.”

“Everything Henry – what everything are you talking about? Our marriage is falling apart, your best friend is a wife beater and last night we almost killed our daughter. Is that the same everything you’re talking about Henry?”

“This is crazy Natasha, you’re not seriously considering this”

“No less crazy than anything else that’s happened to us in the last 72 hours and if there’s a remote chance that it could save our marriage, don’t you think it’s worth a try? Because believe me Henry, I don’t think the ‘everything’ you’re talking about will be much if we don’t.”

Henry stood in the hallway and looked around at the home that he and Natasha had built. He looked at the furniture and ornaments and remembered how they picked each and every piece out together. He thought of how trivial the argument they had only last week now seemed, about that darn flat screen TV, now mounted on the wall and the one that followed about that stupid antique vase that he firmly believed Natasha had overbid for at an auction she dragged him to, just to make a point, that he never got.

“What is the use of all this damned stuff now? Is this what I’ve wasted my life in pursuit of? Surely there has to be

more in life than collecting stuff. Meaningless inanimate objects, bought to try and satisfy that empty yearning or to add some meaning to this stupid distorted journey we call life, till insanity picks us up and drops us in some God forsaken country and leaves us for dead. What was the use in collecting all this stupid crap at all?"

Henry picked up the vase and through it at the TV smashing them both to pieces with a loud crash. Natasha ran downstairs. "Henry, have you lost your mind?"

"No honey. I think I just found it. You're right; I think we need to go."

That evening seemed very different as Henry tucked Rebecca's blankets in. He felt a sense of peace in all this madness he had never felt before.

"I like Mr. Nathan daddy, he made mummy laugh", Rebecca said as she closed her eyes and fell fast asleep. Henry lent over and kissed her on her forehead. "I like Mr. Nathan too baby. I just hope I still like him in two weeks from now." Henry said as he turned out the light.

New Chapter

Nathan had arranged to pick up Henry, Natasha and Rebecca around 1:00pm as the flight was scheduled to leave at 3:00pm.

“Natasha I’m just going to call the office and let them know we won’t be back for a couple of weeks.”

Henry was surprised but very relieved when a total stranger answered the phone.

“Hello, is Jessica there?”

“No, she didn’t show up today, I’m filling in for her temporarily, can I leave her a message?”

“Yes, this is Henry her boss, can you just let everyone know that I will be unavailable for about two weeks and to cancel all my appointments.”

“No problem sir, I’ll let everyone know right away.”

Nathan arrived right on time. “Well, are you ready for the ride of your lives.” Nathan asked with a reassuring smile. They drove to an old army airfield and could see as they approached that the plain was not quite what they expected.

“Is that a 1956 C-130 Hercules transporter?” Henry ask Nathan with a frown, glancing nervously at Natasha.

“Sure is Henry, you definitely won’t find this trip listed at your local travel agency.” Nathan replied; “Although we have missionaries leaving from here just about every

day. Scheduled flights can't always get us to where we need to get too when we need to get there."

Natasha was now feeling a little more nervous than she was the night before, now that the reality of her decision was finally starting to sink in. Nathan stopped the car only 50 yards away from the plain they would be making their long journey in.

As they stepped out of the car they were met by a small group of people already waiting on the airfield, "Mummy, daddy, that's my angel." Rebecca grinned as she pointed to a tall blond haired man in the group.

"That's Simon who I was telling you about." Nathan said with a grin.

"Let me introduce you to the rest of the group."

Nathan bent over and smiled at Rebecca. "I'm sure you in particular young lady are keen to meet your new friends for the next two weeks. Why don't you go say hi to your new buddy?"

No sooner had he finished his sentence, Rebecca ran over to the little boy wearing a Red socks baseball cap and thrust out her hand. "Hi my name's Rebecca, what's yours?"

"Hi Rebecca my names Peter; do you like the Red socks?"

"I wear mainly blue socks cause that's my favorite color."

“No silly, the baseball team.” Peter said as he smiled at Rebecca.

“Oh! I’ve never watched baseball but maybe we can watch it together. I’m sure I’ll like the Red socks if you do.
- Why don’t you have any hair on your eyebrows? Are you completely bald? I’ve never seen anyone that’s got no hair at all.” Rebecca asked.

Natasha quickly jumped forward. “I’m so sorry! Rebecca I’m sure you’ll have lots of time to chat with Peter later.”

Peter looked up at Natasha and said. “It’s ok, people are always too afraid to ask me usually.” Then turned to Rebecca and answered. “I’ve been very sick, but they told me my hair will grow back soon now they have stopped the treatment; you want to see my baseball cards?”

Nathan turned to Natasha smiled and said. “If only we could all be like children when it comes to meeting new people.”

Henry's attention was focused on a short red headed man standing beside Peter's mother.

“Have I met you?” Henry asked as he reached out his hand. The man stepped forward and shrugged his shoulders forward insecurely.

“I’m not sure if we have, but I’m pleased to meet you anyway. I’m Tom Grey; sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

Natasha grinned from ear to ear and could hardly contain herself from laughing out loud.

“So you’re the big school bully that Henry had to be saved from?” Natasha said with a smile and a note of sarcasm in her voice.

Tom looked at Natasha with a slightly confused look on his face for a moment, then punched his fist into the palm of his other hand. “Henry. I remember you. You’re the kid that stuck your foot out and tripped me up and I pushed you against the wall. I don’t know about school bully. You hung around with the real school bully, if I remember rightly. What was his name, yeh Bob that’s it Bob Ascot; that was it. He was a piece of work, that guy terrorized all of us, except you of course. We use to call you his bitch. No offense but you know how it is, kids talk and all that. Oh and by the way, I never got to apologize for pushing you. I found out later it Bob who tripped me. He told me himself after he beat me to a pulp. Anyway, how are you keeping?”

Natasha looked shocked, but couldn’t help being amused by the irony of it all, especially the part about Henry being Bob’s bitch.

Henry didn’t know quite what to say, and yet the total blank look on his face said more than words ever could. For Natasha it was priceless. Mr. Dirtbag had finally been exposed and Henry was feeling and looking like the total

fool he had made of himself for all those years. So many things now dropped into place. He knew why none of the other kids ever played with him, after that day and it wasn't because they thought he was a coward. He finally understood why he never made friends. One innocent push against a school wall and his own fear at that moment had cost him almost a lifetime of loneliness. Nathan broke his thoughts with a hearty slap on his back and said. "Well maybe not all kids are good at first introductions. Let's meet the rest of the gang. This is Simon Schultz, my long time friend and colleague. Ashley Grey, Peter's mother and Toms loving wife. Rachael Polanski and last but by no means least Oliver McPherson and with a name like that, parcel to a spot of whisky I'm guessing?" Oliver was 5 foot 11 inches standing upright, but no one would have put him taller than 5 foot 4. It was hard to get a good look at his face as his head was so low that he looked through his eyebrows as he mumbled simply "hi" as he was introduced to anyone, then quickly turned his head to the side. "I don't touch the stuff. Never have and never will." Oliver mumbled then turned away.

Rachel lifted one eyebrow and said "He's joking buddy, think you need to relax a little." Then lifted her backpack; through it over her shoulder and added. "Well guess we

all know everything we need to know about each other; let's get this show on the road."

Ashley who never could deal with confrontation smiled nervously and said. "Ok Nathan, lead the way, and it was very nice to meet you all."

Nathan looked at Simon and said with a grin. "I think this is going to be one of our best groups yet. Follow me everyone, you're all in for quite a pleasant surprise."

The inside of the plane was indeed a surprise and somewhat of a relief for Natasha. As they walked through the entrance it was like walking into someone's living room. "Nice huh?" Nathan said as he led the way. "The plane was restored by a local millionaire who donated it to us in his will. It has 6 private rooms each with their own bathroom-on-suite, a dining room, full kitchen and even a playroom for the kids."

Natasha's face lit up and Rebecca and Peter leapt onto the large couch.

"You are certainly full of surprises Nathan." Natasha said with a smile.

"Enjoy it while you can, it's going to be a long trip. Let me show you to your rooms. We'll be serving dinner in the dining room as soon as we take off to go over details of the trip and to spend some time getting to know each other a little better."

The plane had been split into two levels with a spiral stairway leading to the upper level. Nathan led Henry, Natasha, Tom and Ashley up the stairs. At the top was another small lounge area leading to a side galley and three rooms. Nathan pushed open the door to the first room. It was like walking into a room in a five star hotel. "Wow, I only brought my jeans and casual wear. Now I wish I'd brought an evening gown." Natasha said as she opened the closet door.

"Honey take a look at this bathroom, it's hard to believe you're on an airplane. This guy really liked to travel in style." Henry said as he walked back into the bedroom wandering over to the next door and asked. "What's through this door?"

"That used to be a snooker room, but I'm sure Rebecca and Peter are going to like what we did with it. Go ahead Rebecca, you can open it" Nathan said.

Rebecca opened the door and gasped with delight.

"Mummy, daddy come and see."

The room was filled with toys and children's books. "Look mummy it even has a popcorn maker" said Rebecca.

"And wow! a gumball machine." Peter added with a smile from ear to ear.

Nathan pointed to the door on the other side of the playroom and said. "And that door Peter, leads to your

room, so you and Rebecca can play together while mummy and daddy get ready for dinner.”

“Are you ok Ashley” Natasha asked as she put her arm around her shoulder.

Ashley wiped a tear from her face. “Yes. It’s that teddy bear, the one with the missing eye. I remember it belonged to an 8 year old little girl who was in the hospital with Peter. It’s little Sara’s, isn’t it Nathan?”

“I’m so sorry; most of these toys were donated by the parents of the children from the hospice. I’ll take it out if it upsets you.” Nathan said.

“No it’s ok, it’s a funny coincidence really that it should be here. Sara asked me to look after him and I told her I would find him his other eye. I have it in my purse still, but by the time I got back to visit her, she was gone.

They never told me what had happened to her. I guess I was afraid to ask and choose to believe that she was ok.”

Nathan picked up the teddy bear and handed it to Ashley.

“Then maybe she wants you to sew the eye back in. I’m sure it would make Sara very happy if you did.”

Peter pulled on Ashley’s arm and asked. “Mummy can I have some money for a gumball.”

Nathan knelt down in front of Peter and said. “You know Peter, that gumball machine is a very special machine. If you look closely you’ll see there’s a coin already in the

slot that was put there by an angel. And it doesn't matter how many times you turn it, it will always reappear."

"Really" Peter said with a smile."

"But your mummy always has to say the magic word."

"What word." Peter asked.

"Yes." Nathan replied as he looked up at Ashley and winked.

"Now if you all want to quickly put your things away and find a seat. We'll be talking off very soon; we'll all meet in the dining room in about an hour.

Everyone was already seated for dinner by the time Henry and Natasha came down. "I'm sorry" Natasha said and pulled out a chair for Rebecca.

Nathan stood up and pulled out a chair for Natasha.

"Why thank you Nathan; gentlemen are rare these days but always welcome."

"Was that a shot at me" Henry said as he took his seat on the other side of Rebecca. "Henry" Natasha said sternly.

"I was recognizing someone's good manners openly. If I wanted to take a shot at you, as you put it, I'll do it in private. But if the shoe fits Henry, feel free to wear it."

Simon raised his hand and asked. "Can I get everyone's attention please" in his strong German accent. "We are on our way to a country still in the midst of a civil war. We will be landing at a military airfield on the final part of our

journey. We will be taken by bus to the place we will be staying for the next 2 weeks which is located in the mountains several miles from Mogadishu the country's capital. It is important that you listen to me very carefully for your own safety. You must never talk to anyone without asking Nathan or myself if it safe to do so. You must never discuss your religious beliefs with anyone other than the group here. I understand you are all passionate about your chosen religion and feel that you want to save the souls of the people you will be meeting. But believe me, by the time this trip is over, you may be questioning everything you yourself believe. My suggestion is that you pray that God will be with you, and leave your religion on this plane as you exit it.

The county's core religion is Sunni Muslim. In 1960 the constitution forbade proselytizing of any religion but Islam, a law which is still in effect. However, a small, extremely low-profile Christian community does exist and evil has its finger in every corner of this tormented society, as you may witness first hand.

We did not ask you to come on this trip to convert those you may believe to be lost. You are here to lift and encourage those you meet. To bring hope, even when all you may see is hopelessness. We have a diverse group

on this trip, of mixed religious backgrounds. Nathan and I are non religious and as such, will not judge anyone of you for your views or opinions. We have learned to trust in Gods wisdom alone, which has never failed us.”

“Thank you Simon” Nathan said as he stood up and inserted a disk into a DVD and switched on a large flat screen TV mounted on the wall behind him at the head of the dinner table. “What you are about to see is a video made on our last trip to Somalia. You may find some of this very disturbing; but it will help you all to prepare for what may be ahead.”

Natasha stood up and said to Rebecca and Peter. “You children run upstairs and play for a while and we will call you when this is over.” Nathan gestured with his hand for them to sit down again and said. “Natasha I think it’s important that they see this. This is their journey also.” Natasha hesitated for a moment and slowly sat down.

The video opened with the sound of a large crowd of women holding out their hands as if they were begging for the food on the table in front of them. A mother held up her child so thin you could see its tiny bones through its wrinkled skin, so hungry it no longer had the strength to cry.

“Take my child, please take my baby with you;” she pleaded as tears ran down her face.

Others pushed her back as they scrambled to get to the front. And as her desperate cries faded she pulled her hungry child close to her empty blossom and sobbed deeply. The crowd pressed in closer, many pointing to a long stone building close by. A man led them over to the building and through the doorway.

The room was filled with dead bodies piled high as if they had all been running over one another towards the back of the building as they were mowed down in cold blood. The blood of those who had perished still flowed out the door. A voice from behind the camera asked “What happened here?”

The man replied “The evil ones came and told all the men and boys over 3 to go and wait in this building. They followed them in and as their wives and mothers screamed for mercy outside, they shot them all, then disappeared into the forest only half an hour ago. I’m a priest so they spared me in the hope that God would somehow forgive them for this atrocity. I can’t even bring myself to say ‘may God have mercy on their souls’.”

The room was suddenly silenced by the muffled cry of a young child buried under the pile of bodies. The man cried out to the women outside.

“Help in here, a child is still alive.”

Mothers poured through the door pulling the bodies aside as they frantically searched in the hope that they may find their own child alive, some collapsing to their knees as they found their own husband or child’s dead body. In the midst of the carnage a woman pulled her 5 year old son from under his own father’s body, still holding tight to his hand. She tugged on his arm to let go of his father’s hand as she kissed his cheek to reassure him. “Papa, Papa” the little boy cried as his mother carried him over the bodies towards the door. The room was now filled with mourning wives and mothers, some lying across their dead husbands bodies some holding their children’s lifeless bodies tightly in their arms pleading with God to breath life back into them.

The video cut to a close-up of the frail child the desperate mother had held in the air earlier, and as the camera slowly zoomed out, you could see Nathan cuddle the child in his arms as he kissed it on the forehead. The child looked up at him and smiled as Nathan whispered; “everything is going to be ok now little one” and the video ended.

Rebecca turned to Natasha whose face was still wet with tears and said. "That was very sad mommy. Those bad men did a very bad thing."

"Yes baby they did a very bad thing." Natasha replied, paused for a moment then turned to Nathan and said. "Was it really necessary for the children to see that?"

Nathan placed his hand on Rebecca's head and said. "Mother Teresa once said that it is impossible to understand the poor without living like the poor. Rebecca was born into the world to fulfill a purpose as part of some grand design that we all marvel at as we make our way through its tangled webs. She was born into fortunate circumstances and has only seen the distorted facade presented to her by commercial giants already preparing her to buy their products, so they can grow richer and more powerful. Peter was born into the same circumstances but at the age of 5 he developed his first tumor. His circle of friends became other sick children he met at the hospital. He learned by the age of 7 not to get too close to people as he struggled to understand why so many of his friends had to die and leave him. Over the years I have watched his desperation turn to hope and his pain to laughter. What you have just watched is very real. The little boy buried under those bodies lying silent for half an hour terrified to move, may never get to

experience most of the luxuries Rebecca and Peter have taken for granted, all their lives. But he has seen the face of evil as it stood before him and took his father's life. How much harder would it be for him to watch us complain about having to step out of our comfort zone just once, to see how he lives every day? Yes I do think Rebecca and Peter and every child that grew up in our society needs to see this, if only to help them realize how lucky they really are.”

Oliver clapped his hands slowly three times and said. “That was a very nice speech Nathan. But who are you to say all children born into ‘our world’ are so lucky. What do you know about the unspeakable horrors imposed on children born into this so called fortunate world? He may have seen the face of evil; but he didn’t have to look into its eyes every night, before he went to sleep.”

Rachel lifted one eyebrow and said. “Wow; I think you opened a can of worms there. You know Oliver, you remind me of my father. I use to wonder why he was always so distant from my sister and I as we were growing up. We were very frightened of him and would hide in our closet when he came home drunk. It wasn’t until after he put a gun to his head in front of his whole family and said. “It’s you or me.” Then pulled the trigger, that we were told why he was the way he was. Turned

out he couldn't get over his terrible past. He let it torture him every day of his life, until it finally took it. Just couldn't let it go I guess. I often wonder if someone had just told me what he had been through and that he didn't know any different, maybe I could have help him, or then again maybe its like mother Teresa said 'It's impossible to understand the poor without living like the poor'."

Oliver lowered his head, looked at Rachel through his eyebrows and said. "I don't drink; I told you that already. I don't drink."

Rachel raised her eyebrow again and said. "Ok Nathan; don't you have a daffy duck cartoon you can play now to help lighten the atmosphere in here a little. I think we now all understand that where we are going to is a very dangerous place and that we don't have to go far from home to meet scary people."

Ashley opened a napkin; tucked it down the front of Peter's shirt and said. "Look Peter it's, spaghetti your favorite; now be careful you don't get any on your pants. Well everyone, bon-appetit."

Natasha glanced towards Nathan who was still standing at the head of the table in a deep conversation with Simon. She was a strong willed woman that seldom let anyone tell her what was good for her child. As she

looked at Nathan she wondered why she seemed to submit to everything he had asked her to do. She had never trusted a single word that came out of a mans mouth before and often joked about it with her friends by asking. "How do you know a man's lying?" Then answered, "His lips are moving."

But Nathan wasn't like any man she had ever met. He never seemed to ask or even hesitate, and gave her a sense of security she had never felt before; even when he asked her to take her only child into a war zone, she felt certain he would protect them against any danger. Nathan turned around as if he sensed that someone was staring at him and seemed to smile at Natasha without moving a single muscle on his face. Natasha looked directly at him with a confused questioning look in her eyes, which suddenly melted into a sense of submission and embarrassment as she dropped her head slightly and quickly turned away. Natasha felt a warm glow in her cheeks that she had never felt before. Ashley tapped her leg with her foot under that table and flashed her eyebrows as if to say; I know what you mean.

Henry put his hand on Natasha's arm and asked; "Honey can you pass me a stick of celery; are you ok your looking a little flushed?" "Oh I'm fine Henry, don't fuss, I think I just had a little too much wine."

Henry leant forward on his elbows as he looked across the table at Tom; bit into his celery and said. "You know Tom; Bob's not a bad guy when you get to know him really."

Natasha's mouth dropped open. "What"! Natasha blurted at Henry. "You cannot be serious! You just found out he was the school bully and what about poor Scarlet. An innocent woman he tortured for 15 years."

"Well I don't know about innocent. I don't think he beat her up for no reason."

"Are you serious Henry; tell me you're not serious please. How can you even try to defend that dirt bag; and you can't actually believe that anyone deserves that kind of treatment."

"Why the hell did she stay for 15 years then."

"Why did she stay? I'll tell you why. For the first 3 years he had her fooled just like he fooled you; and when he first hit her she left; but just like you she thought maybe he needed her and she cared. God only knows why. But as the abuse continued she slowly lost her own identity and any sense of reality and began to believe the lies he filled her head with. It all felt so normal when it's the only world you know. Even when she did reach out to others; nobody knew what to tell her or had the time to help her. So she stayed with no place to turn. Even her catholic mother only told her the lie she herself had come to

believe; that it would be a terrible sin in Gods eyes if she left him. Now just a shadow of the woman she was; stripped of her dignity and free will; feeling nothing but shame and hopelessness; she learned how to avoid his brutality. Hiding deeper inside herself than any person should ever have to go. Why did she stay Henry? She didn't. Scarlet left a long time ago. But that monster you call a friend continues to pick at her empty shell." Henry dropped his head slightly to hide his shame from the others who all seemed to be staring at him as if waiting to see exactly how far he could get his foot in his own mouth. Tom nervously took a sip of his wine and said. "I'm sure Bob has his good side as I guess even the worst people do. But I don't think I have the time or patients to try and figure out what's eating him. And besides; no matter what's eating him; I for one couldn't sit by and watch him punch out his frustrations on an innocent person. No offense intended Henry, but when you close your eyes to often to bad situations; it's not long before you yourself start to fall into the traps.

Henry held both his hands in the air and said. "Why's everyone looking at me; I'm not the monster here. It's not like I held her down while he beat her."

Nathan looked around the room and placed the palms of his hands down on the table in front of him; smiled and said.

“Can anybody hear that?”

The room became silent as everyone listened intensely. The only sound was the drone of the Hercules engines.

“I don’t hear a thing.” Oliver said as he moved his eyes from side-to-side nervously. Ashley lent towards Nathan and politely asked. “What kind of noise are we listening for?” “I can hear it mommy” Rebecca said quietly. “What can you hear baby.” Natasha asked.

Nathan interrupted Rebecca’s reply and said, “Are any of you familiar with the scripture; *be still and know that I am God.*”

From here on in; may be the time for all of you to start thinking about that simple statement.

Rachael lent back in her chair and said with a smirk. “So much for leave your religion on the plain.”

Nathan grinned and continued. "God has nothing to do with religion Rachael. He prefers to speak to people personally; just as he spoke to Abraham, Moses, Jesus and yes even Buddha and anyone else he chooses to speak too who's really listening. It was groups of people and committees that turned what he said to those special individuals into distorted self-serving religions. And that's what most people choose to follow; too lazy or too busy to seek his voice personally and the real truth. I guess it's because it's easier to join some religion that seems to best serve their selfish needs then rely on their carefully chosen idols to report to them what God is saying for a comfortable fee. Never taking the time to listen for themselves and wonder why they never hear His voice. God doesn't speak to large groups of people led by hypocrites in grandiose buildings built from desperate offerings for selfish prayers or the pleas of those who cover their eyes to the blatant lies they choose to ignore. He speaks quietly to the opened hearts of individuals to share individual pieces of His marvelous puzzle. Thus Joshua walked around his wall, Buddha

Jesus died on the cross each obediently placing their piece of the puzzle on His table. But to all He said one thing. "Learn to be still" and trust that His plan is so much better than the self serving

backstabbing hypocrites and religions that lead you with their empty promises and cleverly discussed lies. And for those who truly seek His truth with all their hearts, He will never fail them. For when the lie is revealed your soul will no longer be held captive.

You see Rachael God knows you were searching for Him passionately. He also knows you stopped looking for him when you found Buddhism. And yet you must have come so close to finding Him. Natasha, Henry, Tom, Ashley and you too Oliver. All got fooled by the same complacent attitude that snares so many that were so close. Like in Scarlet's world, it all becomes so distorted that it's sometimes hard to see what is real anymore.

But we all get a second chance when we are not so blinded by the world we live in. Before we leave this sorry planet God will take each of you to a place where you can hear His voice again; and in the quietest moment whisper in your ear.”

A strong jolt suddenly shook the plane knocking over Henry's wine onto his lap. Rebecca screamed and held on to Natasha. Simon stood up and said. “Stay calm everyone; we are just experiencing some turbulence. This may be a good time to retire for the night. Please have your things ready to leave the plane when you wake

up. We may not have much time to pack once we are on the ground.

Next Chapter

Mummy daddy wake up there are people outside the plain. “Henry pulled open the curtain on the small round window and opened one eye. “Honey we’ve landed.” Henry said as he gently shook Natasha. Natasha lifted her arm over her face stretched and said. “I can’t remember the last time I slept that well. What time is? We must have been sleeping for 10 hours or more.” “I’m not sure honey but we better get moving; they’re unloading the plain.” Henry could see Nathan and Simon outside talking to a tall man in full military uniform. His face and hands were so badly burned that it was impossible to tell if he was black or white. The old military airfield was so pitted with holes and Henry was amazed that they were even able to land there. A deep forest ran down one side of the runway and a steady flow of people appeared sometimes alone and others in groups of ten or more. As they reached the edge of the runway they were met by missionaries who lead them to a plain waiting nearby. Henry could hear a faint rattling sound like gunfire which appeared to be coming from somewhere deep in the forest; and with every rattle more people would appear like frightened lost children. “Are those the

people we've come to help daddy." Rebecca asked. "I'm not sure baby; let's get you ready and we'll go see." Henry replied as he put his arm around her shoulder. Natasha slipped her hand onto Henry's arm and said. "From here on Henry, I think we have to trust God."

Henry struggled down the spiral stairway with two large suitcases. Simon stood in the doorway and said sternly. "You can't take those! Put what you can in your backpacks and hurry; we must leave this area immediately; the bus is waiting." Natasha opened the cases and quickly through some things into two backpacks. The gun fire was getting louder and a sudden explosion shook the plain. "Hurry; we must go now!" Simon ordered as he took Rebecca's hand and ran to the stairs as Natasha and Henry followed close behind. "Stay low when you get on the bus." Simon instructed them as they ran down the stairs. Natasha, Rebecca and Henry crawled down the center of the bus and could see the others with their heads tucked to their knees clutching their backpacks. "Move this bus now!" Nathan shouted to Simon as he jumped into the driver's seat. As they drove away Natasha could see the large Hercules taking off and followed the other plains as the disappeared like ghosts into the clouds.

Nathan stood up at the front of the bus and calmly said. "Ok everyone it's safe to get up now. Sorry about that; just a little change in our plans. Breakfast will now be served at the castle.

Natasha lay on the floor still trembling. She could feel the shockwaves at the ends of every extremity in her tingling body as adrenaline pumped into her veins. "Are you ok Natasha; Nathan asked as he reached out his hand to help her up. Natasha reached up and as she touched his hand a warm soft glow seemed to blush over her whole body. She reached up her other hand and held on the Nathan's arm as he pulled her up. She could feel his strength through his shirt as he pulled her close to his chest and held her tight for a moment.

Henry looked at Natasha with her head on Nathan's chest and knew that if he was going to save his family; he was going to have to do something to make things right quickly. "Are you ok honey." Henry asked. "Why do you always call me honey Henry? I hate it when you call me honey. Always have. I don't know why I feel this is a good time to bring it up; but I guess it's as good a time as any. It's Natasha; I like to be called Natasha." "Ok honey; I mean Natasha. Maybe you should sit down with Rebecca now and catch your breath.

Natasha sat down and looked out the window. What a beautiful place she thought as the bus descended its way down the mountain tracing its way into a seemingly bottomless valley. The road was pitted and every bump was magnified by the buses poor suspension.

Henry looked across the bus at Natasha as she stared out the window. He often wondered if she wished she had married someone more handsome, stronger, brighter or richer. With her stunning beauty she could have had anyone. His insecurities had rounded his broad shoulders and his lack of confidence had long since hidden the handsome man that Natasha was still deeply in love with. Natasha turned and looked at Henry and smiled as if she knew as always exactly what he was thinking.

The valley was covered with a blanket of soft white mist penetrated in the center by a stone majestic Edwardian style tower. "Ladies and gentlemen"; Nathan announced like a European bus tour guide. "If you look out the window to your right you will see the peek of your home for the next 2 weeks. I know it doesn't look like much yet; but when the mist clears you will see on the other side of that hill to your far right that the Chateau Mona Lisa as it is known has a spectacular 250 meter private beach. Its valley location is flanked by a 30 foot high stone wall

which extends across the entire valley. It was built by Jaro Uwanda; a wealthy drug and diamond dealer who some say still walks its long hallways as he awaits judgement for his eternal destiny. The story goes that he was the only son of Marcus Uwanda, sometimes referred to in these parts as the son of darkness. Jaro was born into a life of crime. His daily lessons included weapon training, unarmed combat and psychology so he could recognize when a man was lying to him. He was rarely wrong as he always said that the most important lesson he learned was. If in doubt kill them anyway. At 65 years old he ordered the destruction of a local village as he suspected that one of its inhabitants; and employee; had stolen four diamonds from one of his mines. His men destroyed the village and killed everyone as instructed but brought back a nun which none of them wanted to kill. He promptly had all the men executed then ordered that the nun be killed immediately. The executioner brought the nun before him so he could see for himself that his orders were carried out. As the nun stood before him she smiled and simply said. "I'll see you in heaven Jaro." "In heaven"; he replied. "Do you know who I am? If you guys ever get to hell look me up" he said laughing out loud. "Now can you please send this sister home he ordered? The executioner hesitated; Jaro pulled the gun from his hand put it to her head and pulled back the

hammer. The nun looked Jaro in the eye and said. "God wants you to know he loves you to Jaro and he'll keep knocking on your door until you finally open it." The click of the trigger seemed to fill the room as the nuns lifeless body fell to the ground. "Now get her out of here he coldly ordered."

Soon after, Jaro cut himself off in a room in that very tower you can see. It's said that every night his men could hear knocking on his door. One morning he was found on the floor on the other side of his opened bedroom door. In his hand was a letter and his last will and testament. The letter read simply. "What I have done is forgiven. The greatest struggle I have had is to forgive myself and to open that darn door."

He left his castle to the children of God missionary he founded in memory of Sister Mary Moore.

As the bus dropped through the clouds and turned its final bend Natasha could see a large wooden gate. "Are we there yet mummy?" Rebecca asked with excitement. "yes baby I think we're there."

"Ladies and gentlemen welcome to the Mona Lisa castle" Nathan announced. The bus stopped in front of the two large wooden gates carved with the inscription-

‘These gates may lead to heaven or hell. Let your intentions be thin only judge.’

As they slowly opened they revealed a 200 ft driveway paved with red stone leading to the majestic white palace with 14 tall granite pillars 7 on each side of the 15-foot front doors. Two 10 ft dragons carved in solid red stone stood like giant guards with their wings spread wide open on either side of the white marble stairs leading to the main entrance. The bus stopped at the foot of the marble stairs and Simon stood up at the front of the bus.

“Ok everyone just a few short details. Do not leave these grounds under any circumstances. It is safe to walk in the gardens and on the beach but never walk around the rocks on either side of the beach. Do not speak to anyone other than the people you arrived with or unless we give you direct permission to do so. If you see a boat approaching the beach return to the house immediately and sound the alarm, you will find red emergency alarm buttons in every room in the house.

Once again you are completely safe while on these premises, but we cannot guarantee your safety if you choose to wander off alone. This is war zone. Please

don't let your surroundings cause you to drop your guard."

"Sounds like home to me" Rachel said as she skipped of the bus onto the marble steps.

Rachael was born into a wealthy family and lived for the first twelve years of her life in South Africa. An eight-foot wall topped with barbed wire sounded her home. Her father was a military sergeant who referred to the local people as damned filthy niggers. Seemed to her that any one of those words could get you killed in that region, which didn't seem to bother him as he often stumbled around in the garden when he was drunk shouting racial slurs over the tall wall. It never seemed to occur to him that it wasn't just his own pitiful life he was putting in danger. Rachael's mother didn't try to stop him any more since the night her nightdress caught fire after a petrol bomb was thrown over the wall. Rachel and her younger sister could only watch in horror as he ripped it off her and shouted. "You missed me nigger" Then yelled at her petrified naked mother- "Go get some damned clothes on women before one of those niggers takes a shine to you." Rachel could never understand why she stayed. One night after she watch him beat her poor mother half to death then slapped her sister to the floor when she tried

to stop him, she knelt by her bed and prayed. “God I know I’m not supposed to ask for bad things, but please God if you can, please send my dad back to hell where he belongs.” Three days later her father killed himself. And as she watched his lifeless body on the living room floor as she held her sister in her arms she whispered. “Thank you God.”

Rachel walked up the marble steps as the group followed close behind and pushed open the two 15ft doors. “Wow this is truly a palace built for a self-proclaimed king. It’s amazing what you can have by feeding of other people’s pain. Hard to believe he built all this from the proceeds of drugs and slave labor. No wonder this guy still walks the halls, I’d find it hard to leave here too.”

Simon handed out a small piece of paper that looked like old parchment with a map drawn on one side and some kind of symbol on the other. “Feel free to wander around the castle freely. This map will help you find your way around if you happen to get lost.

It appears Jared produced it only one year before he vanished without a trace. It was given to all his guests upon their arrival here. The red areas were forbidden rooms. We’ve been handing them out to our visitors ever

since we discovered them inside a large book in the library in an envelope marked simply concierge.

“Keeper of the candles, hum” Tom said as he flipped over the map. “Any idea what this symbol means Simon?” he asked.

“What do you mean keeper of the candles?” Simon enquired.

“Oh; that’s what concierge means” Tom replied; “It’s from the French *Comte Des Cierges*; the keeper of the candles, who use to tend to the needs of visiting nobles to castles in medieval times.

The concierge was also an officer of the King who was charged with executing justice, with the help of his cronies or bailiffs as they were called. So I’m guessing this must be some kind of warning; I just wish I knew what this symbol means though. My specialist field doesn’t include symbols but I have seen it before while studying history.”

Oliver looked down at his map and mumbled; “Metatron.”

”I’m sorry; Tom said; “Did you say something's Oliver I didn’t catch that.”

”Metatron”; Oliver repeated. “It’s a Metatron. It’s supposed to ward off evil spirits. It’s said to have been created from the soul of Metatron the only living being to have ascended to heaven without experiencing death. It’s

said he was taken up by God in the genealogy of Noah. His name was Enoch in the bible before he was given a new name by God which was Metatron. Interestingly his father's name was Jared. There really isn't much written about him considering he was given such favor by God."

"So what does the symbol mean then." Tom said.

"It's supposed to be a diagram of the meaning of life itself. If anyone can figure it out that is."

Natasha gave a low cough from the back of her throat and said "I'm sorry to interrupt the meaning of life but I really must get Rebecca to bed now. Nathan would you mind showing me where the children will be sleeping?"

"Of course Natasha. Simon will show the rest of you to your rooms and we will meet back in the library for supper and some excellent wine from Jarad's vintage cellars. Ashley you can come with us as we've put Peter in the room across from Rebecca so they won't have to wander far to find each other."

New chapters

"Wow! This is quite a wardrobe"; Henry said as he folded the one pair of pants Natasha had managed to pack into the backpack as they ran off the plane and hung them up in the twelve foot walk in wardrobe. "Seems like a lot of

space for one pair of pants, two dresses, six pairs of underwear and two pairs of shoes honey.”

Natasha gasped as she pushed open the ornate double doors leading to the bathroom.

“Take a look at this Henry” Natasha sighed.

“Mummy a swimming pool” Rebecca said with excitement.

“No baby that’s a bath.”

Henry walked up behind Natasha and as they both stared into the bathroom. He said. “Don’t you think there is something very strange about this whole situation honey. I really can’t put my finger on it; but it feels like one of those amazing dreams you have that suddenly turns into a terrible nightmare?”

“Why don’t you go for a walk around the castle and relax Henry. I think you're just feeling a little tense after the long trip and all the excitement. Rebecca’s tired so I’m sure I’ll be down real soon.”

“Your probably right honey; I’ll see you in the library.”

Henry looked at the map as he wandered into the long hallway and said; “It would help if I knew which way was up on this stupid map.”

Natasha was just about to put Rebecca into bed when she heard a light tapping on the room door.

“Natasha are you there?” Ashley said through the closed door.

Natasha opened the door and asked. “Is everything ok?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t mean to worry you but I was just wondering if it would be ok if Rebecca stayed in Peter’s room tonight as I don’t really want to leave him alone on the first night.”

“Of course Ashley! I was thinking the same thing but I didn’t like to ask.”

Rebecca screamed with excitement and ran across the hall to Peter’s room.

“See you in the library Ashley.” Natasha said with a grin as she closed her door and walked down the hall.

Natasha could hear the low rumble of an approaching storm as her curiosity drew her into a room at the bottom of the stairs. As she looked through the small panes of glass in the Victorian windows she could see the air was stirring and the trees were beginning to sway. Her eyes were drawn to the silhouette of a man against the fading sunset. She recognized his stance and stature as she once again felt that warm glow that always seemed to accompany his presence. Like a bronze statue that was fixed to the rocks he stood on; he seemed to possess a stillness that was somehow undisturbed by the wind that now blew fiercely around him.

A flash of lightning suddenly turned the darkness into daylight and in that flashing moment Natasha could see that Nathan was looking directly into her eyes like he was standing two inches away from her. Natasha felt embarrassed that Nathan had once again noticed her staring in his directions and quickly took a step back into the shadows.

"Is everything ok honey?" Henry said as he walked into the dark room. "Why are you standing in the dark: is there something wrong with the lights?" He said as he reached for the switch on the wall. "Oh, they're working; I guess you just got lost; me too; I'm still looking for that darn library; this place is huge. So you coming? I think it's this way," Henry said as he pointed down the hall.

"You know Henry I'm a little tired now. I think I'll just have an early night and read for a while; you go ahead, I'll be fine."

"Well if you're sure I'll go take another shot at finding the others; who knows you may never see me again."

As Henry disappeared around the corner at the end of the hallway Natasha switched off the light and walked over to the window but couldn't see anything through the darkness outside. Natasha turned to leave the room and walked slowly towards the door.

"Were you looking for me?" Nathan said as he stepped out of the shadows near the doorway.

Natasha jumped, thru her hands up to her chest and said with a gasp. "You frightened me; I thought you were."

Nathan interrupted and said; "Outside? It was getting a little windy out there; would you care to join me for a walk around the orchid aviary? It really is something worth seeing. There are over 150 different birds from around the world and about 200 varieties of orchids."

"Wow it sounds beautiful; I would love to join you."

Natasha felt a sense of nervous anticipation and was so overwhelmed by her feelings of guilt that she slowed her pace as if she already knew where this seemingly innocent walk was leading her. Nathan was unusually quiet as they strolled down the long wide hallway extravagantly decorated with crystal chandeliers and gold leaf ornate framed paintings of half naked women whom you could only assume were the many women Jared had in his life. Hung in a long line on both sides of the hallway like his personal trophy gallery for all to admire; each painting seemed to have captured the very souls of the poor wretched woman trapped forever in their extravagant gilded frames.

Natasha felt compelled to speak as she became increasingly more uncomfortable with the long period of silence.

She searched her mind for an appropriate question or comment that would not give any indication as to how she was feeling.

She looked at the half naked paintings and felt that any question regarding them may seem suggestive; and yet a comment about the decor may break the moment with something so trivial.

As they approached the end of the long hallway two paintings hung side by side of a man and a very beautiful woman. They were both dressed in formal elegant evening wear as if they were about to leave together to a high society party.

“Is that Jared?” Natasha asked.

“It is indeed.” Nathan replied “It’s the only picture of him in the whole castle.”

“He must have loved her very much to have his only painting hanging next to her.”

“Well actually it appears that he hated her so much that he personally cut her throat and had her body fed to his pigs.”

Natasha’s shock was apparent and her mouth dropped open as she stopped in her tracks looked at Nathan and said; “Are you serious? Then why did he hang her painting next to his.”

“Jared was a very complex man who knew little of love in his life. He could never understand how someone who loved him so deeply could also betray him.”

“Maybe he had a point Nathan; how can someone betray you and still try to maintain that they truly love you?”

True love to the observer is indeed a complex emotion, but in reality it is a simple and fundamental need in all of us. But a need so powerful that it drives our motives, our deceit and can awaken an evil in all of us that can make what Jared did look like justice. The problem is that we often confuse our needs with or wants and selfish desires. And yet love without desire or wanting to be loved in return is a quality that can only be found in God. When we learn how to master that trick we may come one step closer to what we were created to be. And maybe; just maybe all the love we so passionately pursue can be found when we start to passionately give love without expectations.” Natasha looked at Nathan and thought to herself; “who is this man?”

“Here we are Natasha”; Nathan said as they approached the aviary.

He reached out to open the door at the exact same moment as Natasha and accidentally placed his hand on top of hers. “I’m sorry” Natasha said; “I guess I’m just not used to gentlemen.” Nathan paused for a moment with

his hand still holding Natasha's; looked deep into her eyes and said, "What is it you're afraid of Natasha?" It was like someone had just switched on a movie of the most disturbing moment in Natasha's life in vivid living colors.

It was one of those perfect summer days when it felt so good to be alive. Natasha had just left her best friend's house after a sleepover pajama party to celebrate her 13th birthday. Natasha lived just a short walk away on the other side of the park which she had walked through many times before. A circus had arrived in town and set up a large show tent and everyone was busy preparing their acts for the show. Natasha was excited as she walked through the centre of what seemed like her own personal show. Three clowns were juggling skittles and Natasha stopped to watch. One of the clowns threw a skittle to Natasha and she caught it; not knowing quite what to do with it.

"Throw it back" the clown shouted as they continued to juggle.

"I'm not a very good thrower", Natasha replied.

"Don't worry we've never dropped them ever; go ahead throw."

Natasha closed one eye and threw the skittle in the air into the centre of the three clowns. All three of them

jumped into the air at the same time and collided in mid air and fell down on the ground with a crash rolling over each other then scrambled to their feet as they all brushed themselves off.

“You’re right; you really can’t throw”; the clown said to Natasha with a smile that seemed to reach from ear to ear with his painted on face.

“You wanna see a giant cat”; the clown said as he leant over towards Natasha then moved closer to whisper in her ear.

“It’s a Tiger really but don’t tell anyone I told you. You can keep a secret can’t you?”

“Oh yes”; Natasha said; “I won’t tell anyone, I promise.” The clown reached out his hand and said, “Ok then let's go beautiful.”

Natasha was always told to never go anywhere with strangers, but this was a clown and he did make her laugh.

“I’m sure he would never do me any harm”; she thought then reached out and took him by the hand. The clown led her into the back of the tent.

“Is the cat in here?” Natasha asked as he led her further into the tent.

“Just through this door”; he said as he opened it. The clowns grip became tighter and Natasha knew there was something wrong.

“You’re hurting me.” Natasha said as she tried to pull away. The clown pulled Natasha with all his strength and through her across the small dark room into the corner.

“I want to go home now. Please let me go home.”

Natasha said as she started to cry and began to tremble with fear.

The clown closed the door, and locked it slowly turning towards Natasha and said. “Didn’t your mommy ever tell you not to go with strangers? You kids never learn. Now I’m going to teach you why she told you that, but if you ever tell her about this she’s going to be very angry with you and tell you it was all your own fault; but if you promise to never tell anyone about this I’ll let you go.”

Natasha looked up at the clown with tears in her eyes and said, “I promise I’ll never tell anyone; now please let me go home.”

“Ok, but you have to do one more thing before I let you go” the clown said as he walked towards Natasha.

Natasha jumped to her feet and ran to the door turning the handle frantically and shouted “let me out, please let me out.” The clown placed his hand on top of Natasha’s, looked into her eyes and said “What is it you’re afraid of” as he gripped her shoulder with his other hand.

“Natasha, are you ok” Nathan said as he placed his hand on her shoulder. Natasha quickly pulled her hand from under his and stepped back.

“It’s ok Natasha; maybe you should sit down you’re looking a little pale.” Nathan said as he pointed to a small bench in the centre of the aviary.

“I’ll be ok now” Natasha said as she sat down; it’s just that sometimes our memories choose strange times to haunt us.” Then as if to quickly change the subject she continued, “It’s hard to believe that someone can be surrounded by such beauty and live such a wicked life?”

“Jarad did indeed collected some of the most beautiful things from around the world and was also responsible for committing some of the ugliest acts of brutality.”

Nathan replied.

“How could he have still looked upon this beauty through such tormented eyes?” asked Natasha.

“Over the years I’ve come to believe that beauty and brutality can be one of the same depending on how your reality is distorted. I once had a sweet old lady confess to me on her dying bed that the most beautiful thing she had ever seen in her lifetime was a man screaming in agony as he died; as she put it; in the electric chair. I remember smiling she said as his hair began to smoke and I whispered under my breath; you took my little girl from me at 5 years old when you raped her and left her to

die alone and frightened in a cold dark forest. This may be the only joy I ever get to experience for the rest of my life. I thank God that the last thing you got to experience in your sorry life was this excruciating pain.

Maybe Jared started out with a reason to justify what he did to others, but after a while he really couldn't see the difference between all this beauty and the ugliness of his actions. Or maybe he simply thought that there was very little difference at all."

Nathan lent over to smell a flower next to him and said. "A blind man may never get to see the full beauty of this flower but he can sense it from its aroma. Beauty is also a sense Natasha; it's not something you can simply judge with your eyes alone. It resides in the deepest corners of our very being and like darkness and light we are free to wander through one to the other. The key is in finding that light deep within you in the midst of total darkness.

Natasha looked at Nathan with a smile in her eyes and said. "It must be quite a struggle for you being smart, handsome and caring to keep women away from your door?"

"Not really; I always keep my doors open. Just because I'm a priest doesn't mean to say I can't fall in love," Nathan said with his chirpy Irish accent; and winked.

“And have you? Ever been in love that is,” Natasha asked looking Nathan directly in the eyes.

Nathan’s face seemed to change into a different man that Natasha could hardly recognize and yet he didn’t seem to move a muscle.

“I’d rather not talk about it right now Natasha if you don’t mind. Maybe another time.” Nathan said.

“I’m sorry I didn’t mean to pry; I love orchids they are without a doubt my favorite flower Natasha said quickly as she looked around the aviary. “Over 200 varieties you say?”

“Yes they are very beautiful; but you didn’t come in here just to look at the orchids did you? I know how you feel about me Natasha; but I also know you’re not quite sure what to do with that.

Natasha looked deep into Nathan's eyes as they moved slowly closer to hers. She felt his breath against her skin and could feel her heart pounding inside her chest as the adrenalin seemed to explode through every vein in her body. Nathan was now so close she could feel the warmth of his lips close to hers as he whispered so softly like he was breathing each word. “There’s a time and a place for everything Natasha, but believe me, this is not it.”

Henry had always trusted Natasha and never had cause to doubt her for a second. But he never knew as he

fumbled his way through the corridors of this beautiful castle in search of the library that fate would reveal to him something that he wasn't sure he could ever recover from as he stood in the doorway of the aviary.

He wanted to burst into the room and shout out stop! Maybe it was his own guilt or simply the feeling that he no longer deserved her that caused him to quietly close the door and walk away.

Next chapter

Rachel chuckled as she pulled a book from the library shelf. "Jarad owned a bible? That's a laugh. Then again, I've never seen a bible quite like this one. It seems he didn't agree with a lot of it as he tore out most of the pages. A complex and very troubled mind indeed." Simon took the bible from Rachel's hand and said; "Not really. Jarad just did what a lot of people want to do but are more afraid of its contents than they are of its author. Nearing the end of his life Jarad spent many hours in here searching for an answer to the ultimate question. 'Does God exist or is He simply manifested in the minds of a species intelligent enough to be aware of their own mortality; but not quite smart enough to figure out the purpose of their existence.'"

"You and Nathan seem to have a good handle on all this God stuff being priests and all; so can you show me any

actual proof that God exists. And please don't give me that old 'faith' speech. I mean tangible proof that I can see with my own eyes."

"I'm not a priest Rachel, but I do know a few truths about God. When I first met Nathan I was standing next to my father's' hospital bed just before he drew his last final breath. He reached out and took my mother's hand and told her. "They've come for me Beth. I have to go now."

"Who are they?" My mother asked him. They are the light and they're calling me to them. They want the light that's in me to join them. I have to go honey; everything's going to be ok; it's in you too, he said as his hand slipped from my mother's and his eyes slowly closed. Nathan put his hand on my shoulder and said. "Your mother needs you more than ever now."

"Do I know you?" I ask him.

"We met once when you were in hospital in Viet Nam. I work here now. I've been visiting your father for about two weeks and he told me all about you. It didn't take me long to figure out it was you." He told me.

Simon's eyes welled up as he said; "The one thing I could not understand was why my mother never said a word to me as she lay down next to my father; and it took me a long time to accept it even after Nathan explained it to me. It was then that I realized what God was all about, and just like Jared discovered Rachael; there are the

stories you hear and the truth and as I quickly learned; it really does set you free.”

“And what is the truth about God Simon?” Rachel asked.

“Like Nathan said Rachel; it’s hard to find the truth about something you stopped looking for a long time ago, even if it’s put right under your nose. What I will tell you though; is that once you understand the true nature of God, you will never be deceived again. He really is the manifestation of the thing we all spend our lives in search of. Unconditional love never-ending and His actions will never contradict His nature. So if you really want to know what that is you could start by asking Him. All true love starts with a passionate pursuit then we unfold the heart we’ve captured with tenderness and sincerity. Only then does our true love reveal themselves fully to us.”

“Hi guys!” Henry said as he peaked around the door like he wasn’t quite sure if he was in the right place. “My goodness are you ok Henry you look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Ashley said.

“No no I just got a little lost and was wondering if I would ever find my way here.”

“You didn’t see Nathan and Natasha on your ... TO BE TYPED IN

New chapter

“Ashley I’m so sorry to keep you waiting.” Natasha said as she walked down the stairs. “Don’t worry I was just admiring these beautiful Roses. Have you ever seen so many perfect roses in on bunch? Tom use to challenge himself when we first met to find me the perfect rose. Unfortunately those days faded almost as fast as each perfect rose he so diligently picked out for me.”

“I wonder where they came from?”

Rachel pushed between Ashley and Natasha and said; “Excuse me girls, I’ve got somewhere to go”.

“Really?” Ashley enquired “where would that be”.

“I need some air, this place may be big but it still makes me feel claustrophobic in a very strange way.” Rachel replied and continued out the door.

“She’s a strange one don’t you think?” Ashley said.

“I guess if I’d watch my father kill himself and my mother suffer that kind of abuse I’d be a little strange too. I think

she does a great job in holding it together to tell you the truth.”

Ashley put her hand on Peter's head and said “Well let's not waste the whole day tittle-tattling, it's a beautiful day out there and the beach is awaiting our arrival; lead the way Peter.”

“Girls!” Simon shouted. “Remember what I said about returning to the house and sounding the alarm if you see a boat.”

It was a hot dry day with a cool breeze that blew in from the sea; the perfect day for a beach picnic. As Natasha lay on the beach watching Rebecca and Peter playing in the sand, she thought about the night before and about what had happened in the aviary. She knew how she felt and what every nerve in her body was telling her to do. But she also knew there would be a price to pay for following her feelings. A price that wouldn't only affect her; although she wasn't sure if she really cared what happened to her any more. But she did still care about Rebecca's feeling and in a strange way Henry's too.

CONTINUED FROM RETURN FROM BEACH AFTER
TOM GOT TRAPPED IN THE CAVE.

The atmosphere was quiet and almost morbid as everyone stood in the library. Ashley was crying

uncontrollably and Natasha tried to comfort her with a few uncertain words of reassurance. "Don't worry Ashley, Tom's a strong swimmer and I'm sure he'll have made it onto a shelf inside the cave somewhere." Ashley chuckled as if in some kind of hysterical break from her uncontrollable sobbing and said through her chuckle.

"Strong swimmer; are you serious? He only learnt to swim a few years ago. I still can't believe he jumped into that water to save Nathan and Peter. It was so out of character for him. What the hell was he thinking?"

"We would never have made it out without him." Nathan said then continued. "But Natasha may be right. The caves are endless in there. I have never dared go into far myself. I'm told there are literally hundreds of unexplored caverns and the locals told me that many people have had to be rescued after a casual walk up the wrong pathway. But some were never found. I should have mentioned the danger before you went to the beach. I just never thought that you would wonder so far on the first day."

"I saw someone else going in there earlier that looked just like you?" Natasha said.

"Has anyone seen Oliver?" Nathan asked.

“Not since this morning.” Rachel said “He was having some kind of argument with Tom just after breakfast. All I heard was Oliver shouting at Tom something like; ‘Look at the map you fool; don’t you see it, it’s as plain as the nose on your face you idiot.’ Then he stormed off and shouted; ‘Ok don’t listen, you’re like all the rest anyway, you’re too busy searching for pots of treasure at the end of rainbows to see it anyway’. Isn’t he some kind of mad scientist or something? I’m pretty sure about the mad bit.” Rachel said.

Nathan paused, walked over to the drinks cabinet and picked up the map of the mansion and said; “He may not be as mad as he would have us believe Rachel. He was one of a handful of people in the world that became known as specialists in the field of resonant tuning of superconductive microbes. In the old times they were better known as Alchemists. Some say he actually created a means to allow him to be in two places at the same time.

He locked himself away for years and wouldn’t allow anyone into his labs. The government took more than an interest in his research and accused him of working with substances that could threaten national safety. They

raided his lab, seized his equipment and restricted him from working with the substances they found.”

“What were the substances?” Rachel asked.

“Nobody really knows as they were classified as top secret. I’m not sure if they even knew what they were. Oliver knows for sure, but he may not be too willing to share that secret with just anyone. One interesting twist to the story was that whatever they were they performed what can only be described as a miracle on a particular cancer patient I knew. In fact that’s how I first met him. He wanted to use some of the patients in a test he was conducting. He said it would prove that it worked and would save thousands of lives. When the hospital refused he burst into a rage and had to be removed from the building by security. I approached him privately and told him that I would be willing to give his substance to one of the patients I was working with. They were diagnosed as terminal and only had a few weeks at most to live. I figured; what do they have to lose. To my amazement within two weeks they recovered fully with absolutely no side effects. Unfortunately he was arrested shortly after that. They accused him of conspiracy to commit an act of treason against the state and he was convicted to life

without the possibility of parole. The next time I saw him was when I visited him in jail.