

A young woman contemplated me from my front doorstep. She was a mess. Her clothes looked tired and worn and so did she. First impressions matter and Miranda and I were away to a bad start. She wasn't selling cheap electricity or broadband. She didn't have the ID or the dress for it, and she had a child with her. There was a momentary awkwardness as we contemplated each other. I wasn't going to make it easy for her and hoped she would get the message and go.

'You don't know me,' she said.

Well she wasn't wrong there. Why she should imagine that I might know her, or care, was beyond me. She was the sort of brattish young person I prefer not to know.

'No, I don't believe so.' *Please go. I have book to read, breakfast to eat, a radio programme to ignore and a game of computer cards to play.*

I let the silence linger. Surely she couldn't take much more of this. She must get the message soon and drift back out of my life.

'Umm, I need to speak to you.'

Across the road old Mrs Pettigrew was putting out her recycling bin. How could one old couple create so much rubbish?

'Umm sir?'

A car raced past. Damn these young fools and their agitation and noise.

This could take my whole morning. So I told her I had things to do and began to shut the door. She stepped into the doorway and blocked it with her shoulder. A felt an irrational surge of anger, but it merely left me drained and weary.

Oh the hell with her. I'd let her try to sell whatever she was selling. Probably wanting to send more cancer kids to Disneyland or some such nonsense. Letting her blather on about her tiny life and concerns would be less trouble than getting her to go. I turned my back on her and went back to my radio and toast. She and her child came too.

I hated having people inside. It made me notice the stains on the walls and the rotten patch in the carpet. I feel comfortable at home inside my shell but I know what other people see. I suppose that is why I don't generally have anyone in. And now I was made uncomfortable by a scruffy young saleswoman with an even more scruffy child in tow.

I watched in the mirror as she looked uncertainly around for somewhere to put herself. Eventually she sat down shyly on the edge of my most inhospitable looking chair. I began to enjoy myself. I wondered if I could get her to leave before she began her spiel.

'I met Matthew in Nepal,' she began.

My world stopped turning. A slight haze formed. I blinked for a few moments until it cleared. I was not going to be required to send sick kids on holiday. I was going to be required to relive the past and that would be much worse.

'I have done what was needed for Matthew,' I said, 'and I have no further interest in him, or his friends.' I added this last part with emphasis and was delighted to see that it struck home. Miranda stiffened and stood up.

'I'm sorry, I shouldn't have come. I thought you might be interested in ...' She didn't know what I might be interested in and I couldn't help her.

She was heading for the door. I almost let her go, but the devil, or perhaps some kinder spirit made me call after her, 'Write your number on the pad by door.'

She looked back uncertainly. The child bumped into her and hung on her legs. She looked about for the pad, not wanting to linger, but wanting to get something out of having come to disturb me.

As she wrote, slowly and awkwardly - Did I expect anything else - that same malign spirit prompted me further into disaster. I suppose I already knew. In fact it was obvious, but I hadn't yet accepted it. But I called, 'Have you any money?'

She said, 'No,' and started towards the door.

I had won the battle and the war. I was rid of her. I had nothing left to lose. I would not be humiliated by a young beggar but I could humiliate her. I learned that her name was Miranda

Holding, gave her a cheque for a thousand dollars, ignored the tears and protestations and the gratitude and thankfully shut the door.

It should have ended there, and it nearly did. I took her piece of paper tore it off the pad and put it in the rubbish basket. I sat back down in the chair I bought from the op shop for \$15 and finished my toast and game of cards, then I turned off the radio and went for a walk.

Our local shops are a hotch potch of uselessness. Once we had a hardware shop, a bank and post office and two supermarkets. Now we have several real estate agents some takeaway shops, coffee bars and one remaining supermarket that puts more effort into giving away children's kitsch than in supplying food. Outside one of the coffeebars I saw what I took to be Miranda. There was no need to speak to her again. We had finished any business we might have had, but I went to her and nudged her shoulder a little harder than was necessary to get her attention. I think I wanted to startle her. I succeeded in startling someone. A horrified young Asian woman jerked away from me and hurried off followed by my apologies. I walked on through streets lined with cars and the dross of modern living. I told myself I didn't care. And I told myself that the past was done with. But that didn't explain the need to accost strange women in the street. Nor did it explain the need I felt to get home to take the piece of Miranda's writing out of the waste basket. I took my time. I stopped to admire Kevin's early flowers. They looked like a boring row of nondescript plants to me, but apparently they are something special to a gardener. Personally I prefer dandelions to roses because the former just grow and are reliable. I left a note under the windscreen of a car on the footpath expressing the hope that the owner would be transported by aliens to a planet where people don't need to walk on paths. Notices of that sort seem not to work but I live in hope.

When I got home I rewrote Miranda's number into my address book and threw away the piece of paper. Then I got it out of the waste bin for a second time and put it back beside the pad where she had written it.

Miranda hugged Chloe close and pressed her lips to the little girl's neck. Chloe giggled contentedly. Hiding her face from Chloe Miranda wiped away a rogue tear. She said, 'We have each other and a thousand dollars. Who needs more?'

With the innocence of her four years Chloe hugged Miranda closer. It had not gone well. That was obvious even to a young child, but she trusted Miranda as every child must trust their protector. A voice from the kitchen called. 'Did you get rid of her?'

Miranda anxiously picked Chloe up and swung her around and around to distract her from the question.

'Mum! She is not going anywhere, I told you that. But it wouldn't have worked anyway. He is a scruffy old curmudgeon and he is not having my favourite little girl.' This last was said directly to Chloe who giggled obligingly.

'Well you know she can't stay here,' added her mother. 'You'll have to find someone to take her. As long as she is in the house you will just seem like another sluttish single mother and I won't have it. We have neighbours and our reputation to think of.'

'Mum, the neighbours are half wits and bores they can mind their own business.' Miranda longed to add that the family reputation depended on reliably being the same as this themselves. But she knew her situation to be too precarious. She must hold her tongue, especially in front of Chloe. She added, 'I'll sort something out soon. Chloe is a very special girl and everyone loves her. All will be well.' Miranda said all this with as much forced happiness as possible. She would not allow her mother to make Chloe feel unwanted. Chloe had had enough of that already in her short life.

'I'll go back to see the housing people tomorrow. They said I must follow up all possibilities and now I have. We will find somewhere nice to live. I have some money now.'

'Twenty dollars is not some money,' her mother said.

Miranda said nothing of the thousand dollars. In truth it was both a fortune and a pittance. It was the first real money she had had for years, but for bringing up a child with no support from anyone else it was not very helpful.

Her mother had not finished. 'You may not like the people around here who go out to work and have honest jobs and look after themselves, but some of us respect that and don't need to go around the world spending other people's money and getting illegitimate children. If you know so much about coping with life perhaps you could show us your successes young lady' Miranda could no longer hold back the tears. It had been a long disappointing day and the sight of Chloe's eyes beginning to fill was just too much.

I couldn't shake off the feeling of discomfit. The Miranda episode and the strange woman at the shops who wasn't Miranda had intruded too deeply into my world. I had handled both perfectly well. I had sent a silly young woman off with an overly generous gift for whatever it was she thought she needed and I had accidentally disturbed another silly young woman for no reason. For that I had apologised and now I must forget the whole business. I opened the drawer of the ancient sideboard. It stuck as it always does, but by rocking it up and down and pulling at the same time I got it far enough out to be able to rummage in the bottom. Somewhere there I still kept some bits of Matthew's life. A few letters asking for money and the last note that I did not expect to look at again. And a photograph. I got that out now. I felt a small pang, but only a very small one. Time heals. I was healed. Once I had looked at this picture with hope, then resentment, and finally with great shame. Recently I just saw an attractive, exasperating young man full of joy and innocence but without any depth at all. Such is the evolution of human emotion. The last conversation I had had with this picture had been several years ago and was full of remorse and self loathing. Now I was back to recriminations and resentment. 'Well, Mat, what have you done now? Why would a young female friend of yours turn up here for no reason, unannounced and scruffy and with a child? I think we can both guess. Will you never leave me alone? I thought death might finally silence you but no, no, now this,' and I hurled the picture down on the floor and left it there for five minutes. An old man's pathetic defiance to a son he never understood but always loved. And when I was calm again I put the picture back in the draw and ate eggs and beans on toast for tea. I won three successive games of '*Loan Baron*' that evening. The last even though the 10 of hearts was trapped above the 9 of hearts. Tomorrow, perhaps, I would ring Matthew's woman. There must be some way to get her out of my life permanently and cheaply.

'See you later, Mum, I'm off to convince the housing people I am a worthy recipient of the tax payers largess.'

'Just see that you don't bring that child back here without having a house and some income to go to,' her mother said.

'Oh Mum, it doesn't work like that. I have to convince them I am who I say I am, and that there is no other support and anyway the best I can hope for is some temporary money and a waiting list for somewhere to go.'

The interview was the trial that Miranda feared. It was explained to her kindly but firmly that there were many frauds perpetrated over the domestic benefit. Children born overseas pose a particular difficulty. Also there were some doubts about the authenticity of Miranda's passport and identification. Miranda schooled her face to meek acquiescence as she agreed that of course all precautions must be taken. She must not show her anxiety. Her throat dried out while her palms became moist and sweaty. Her heart was now beating hard enough to feel. In any other circumstances Miranda would have thought the woman talking to her was just a pleasant person doing a difficult job. Now she looked on her as an inhuman monster.

'Foreign Affairs have suggested that Miranda Holding died whilst in Nepal,' she was saying. Miranda forced a smile. 'The reports of my death are much exaggerated.'

Her nemesis didn't even try to pretend that she thought that was a joke.

‘You were with a group of young people who became an embarrassment to the authorities. There were a number of irregularities and at least two have overstayed their travel permits and may be in difficult circumstances, dead or perhaps merely involved in some criminal activities.

At that the eyes came up from the documentation she was reading and studied Miranda.

Oh my god, how alarming was this. The authorities were tracking the rest of the group. Who had done what and who had returned. How long would it take for there to be a direct accusation? Not very long apparently.

You realise that identity fraud is a very serious crime Ms Holding?’

Miranda was becoming desperate. ‘There is nothing sinister about me and my child. May I speak to you off the record, woman to woman?’

‘I’m afraid not, Miranda. My job is quite clear. I must identify the applicant and obtain an accurate assessment of their personal circumstances. I have no personal discretion. Let’s deal with facts. Are you Miranda Holding, a New Zealand citizen and is your application a true and accurate picture of your present situation?’

‘I am Miranda Holding and Chloe is my child and the child of Matthew Lane, now deceased. I am not running drugs or impersonating anyone or in any way a threat to national peace and security. Please believe me and act accordingly.’ Miranda was so tense now that words were difficult to form. She knew very well that she was talking to a professional interviewer who would be looking for subtle indications of lies. The last time she had had a heart beat like this.... well never mind what made her heart beat like this. It wasn’t the same anyway.

Miranda thought that perhaps she had received a slight smile but it seemed unlikely and it may just have been a disbelieving smirk. The other woman may be pleasant natured but she remained mostly a po-faced bureaucrat.

‘You will hear from us.’ And after a significant pause, she added, ‘Miranda.’

Miranda loved the enthusiasm for life from her young friend. Chloe was interested in the drains, the flowers and even the weeds and grass. Progress home was woefully slow but full of adventure and discovery. They stopped to gaze in awe at dogs and other children. At toys in shops and trees and bushes. It took an hour to get past the play park. The exotica of Asia had been exciting but much more normal to Chloe. New Zealand held many new thrills.

At home Miranda said, ‘Mum, however much you resent it I must get immigration to accept that I am Miranda Holding and that my daughter is Chloe. If I don’t succeed you will have me living with you forever.’

‘Oh no I won’t. Whatever the government says about you and that brat you can find your own house, man, and money. I didn’t rely on my parents to house me and I managed to have legitimate children and a husband to contribute to their upbringing.’ She had the grace to blush and look uncomfortable at mentioning her husband as a useful breadwinner. For a moment Miranda saw the same weary struggling young mother in her own mother that she was now experiencing for herself. If only her mother could get over the vicissitudes and disappointments of her earlier life and be more helpful now.

Chloe came into the room holding the much loved rag doll that she had carried across a quarter of the globe. Miranda willed her mother to silence, but there was no stopping her. ‘Those rags don’t look clean to me. Give them here. I’ll throw it away.’

As Chloe’s face began to dissolve into tears Miranda stepped quickly between them. Even her mother would not dare to take on the wrath of Chloe and Miranda combined just to get rid of a dirty doll. It was another power struggle to make the two of them regret that they were staying. Picking Chloe up quickly she carried her from the room saying ‘Granny is just joking, she loves Heenee too.’

Behind she heard her mother’s parting shot. ‘I am not any one’s Granny and especially not hers.’

Graham came knocking on my door. He thinks I am a social project. After Matthew's funeral he came back to the house and then continued to visit at least once a week. I have not been able to get rid of him. He has a hide a rhinoceros would consider excessive. He thinks of himself as a hearty helpful friend. I have other opinions, but he was in Asia with Matthew, so today he just might be helpful.

'Did Matthew have a girlfriend called Miranda?' I can see he is startled. I expected as much. I usually refuse to talk about Matthew. In fact I have been driven to distraction by him wanting me to talk of Matthew. Matthew is dead. I have now accepted that, yet I know that Matthew would be alive today if he didn't have me as a father. A weird and nonsensical paradox but one that has its own truth. I killed Matthew and I pay for it every day.

I repeated, 'Did Matthew have someone called Miranda?'

Graham regained his composure. 'No I don't think so. There were several women about - he searched his brain for names he had heard years before: Marianne, Tensee, Hala, Amanda and a few others but he really wasn't much of a man for the women and I don't remember a Miranda.'

I could see the cogs in his brain whirring. He was wondering how to get me to talk more about Matthew. What he didn't understand is that I am done with Matthew. I don't care any more.

Matthew is best forgotten. And so is his woman, except that she came knocking on my door.

Graham has his starting point. He is not going to give up easily. 'Who is Miranda? Has someone written to you?' he asked.

Now I had a dilemma. Do I keep him talking hoping to get an insight into Miranda or do I shut him down as usual. 'It's just that a friend of a friend said that Miranda had met Matthew on his travels. No big deal. It's probably just someone who happened to be there.'

Graham tried gamely to get me back on the subject of Matthew, but I managed to get him to drink a cup of weak cool coffee and that was enough to get him to go home.

Miranda stayed rudely and obtrusively on my mind. I resisted but, sooner or later I would be seduced by the number on the piece of paper and have to ring it. There was a mystery here that I could not ignore. But the cost of not ignoring it might be enormous if that messy young creature had some hold on me or Matthew. However the decision made itself. I could not forget the small girl clinging to her mother's legs. Nor could I forget the way Miranda had retreated beaten when I was rude to her and yet had stopped to leave a number and accepted money when I had offered. I wanted to be ashamed of her and I tried very hard to dismiss her as unworthy. But instead I merely saw a young woman doing what she could and I reluctantly accepted that she was probably just trying to do what was best for her child. But mostly there was the mystery of who she was and why she had materialised on my doorstep when I had things to do and lunch to eat.

I walked back to the local shops. There was something there called *Kid's Palace*. Of course I had never been inside but now I went to look. If I was to talk to Miranda I did not want a child hanging off of us asking what we were talking about. *Kid's Palace* met my requirements. There were places where children of that child's age could play unsupervised by their parents and seats off to one side where adults talked. I would not need to have an almost certainly ill disciplined child loose in my home.

Miranda emptied her mother's clothes from the washing machine and put in her own and Chloe's. Her mother's clothes would be hung out in impeccable neat rows, some on hooks, some pegged and some draped over the line just as mother did it. Miranda knew she would get no thanks and only surly comments for doing it like that but the alternative was carping criticism of how she didn't care about anyone but herself and that she should be gone by the end of the week. Fine. She would go in the next five minutes if she had anywhere to go. Her phone was ringing which was strange as she hadn't anyone back in New Zealand to ring her. And anyway her hands were full and wet. She would catch up with it soon. Once her own wash was nearly done and her mother's flapping happily on the line she checked her phone. She didn't recognise the number. Then she thought that the most



likely people to ring would be the government departments she had contacted and she didn't want to be casual about them so she returned the call.

I felt both let down and relieved. She hadn't answered the phone. I had rung in good faith to find out what she really wanted and she didn't bother to answer. That was done. I had no further need for concern. I had given her far too much money for her own good. It had probably been spent in the pub or some fancy restaurant by now. The child had almost certainly not seen any of it. Any obligation I might imagine I had was over and done with. I went back to my computer to check for emails. There were none. I had not bothered with a smart phone since I left work. No one needed to contact me and certainly not urgently. In the kitchen I peeled some potatoes. A few peas and carrots and a slice of cheese made a quick nutritious meal.

My phone rang. I simply said 'Hello.' Any one calling would know me and have my number. There was a pause then a voice asked, 'Who is this.'

*Of for goodness sake. If you ring a wrong number, just apologise and go.* 'Harry Lane, here. Who is this?' And then I remembered and understood. Modern phones record an incoming but otherwise unidentified number.

'Oh Mr Lane. I was washing. Very sorry I couldn't pick up, but I wasn't expecting you to ring back. It's Miranda here' It was her. She had returned my call.

'You left a number for me. Of course you should have expected me to ring,' I said, attempting to discompose her. The best defence is attack.

She had to fill the gap while she waited to hear what I wanted. 'Thank you again for the money. It will help so much when I set up home for Chloe.'

The child was called Chloe. If this really had anything to do with Mat I would need to remember that.

I came to the point. 'There is a place in town called *Kid's Palace*, I wonder if we could meet there. I would like to hear more about Matthew when he was overseas.' *Keep the child and the circumstances of her mother out of this. I might escape having to bother myself with that situation yet.* Only then did it occur to me to wonder where she was. For all I knew she might be back in Asia by now.

But apparently not. We made the arrangements and I hung up. I doubted that I would go. I would ring up just before the appointed time and say I had to go out of town. Then we could forget each other and the whole foolish episode would be over. With that comforting thought I settled down with my book.

Miranda gazed down at the phone still clutched in her hand as if it could tell her more by itself. 'It seems that we are to be taken out, Chloe,' she said too quietly for the child to hear. 'First I am treated like rubbish blown in off the street. Then I am invited to leave a number, then I am given a large gift of money, then I am ignored for a while, and now, the crowning mystery, I am summoned to *Kid's Palace*. I begin to understand why Matthew was the mess he was.'

Behind her a happy giggling started. 'Mummy you are talking to yourself.'

Miranda gathered her wits together and pasted a happy smile on her face. 'Well now I am going to talk to you instead, because that is much more fun.' And together they made a sari for Heenee out of an old dish cloth.

I assured myself that she would not come. She was not the sort of person to be able to keep an appointment that had been made two days before. I would sit in in *Kid's Palace* by myself, perhaps sipping a fruit drink and looking at my watch so that anyone near me would see that I had been stood up by a careless family member and then I would leave with as much dignity as an elderly man can leave a children's play area. It would be embarrassing and a little pathetic but I would have done my duty. I had made an appointment with an old friend of Matthew's who was no more reliable than Matthew had been and I need think no more of the three of them.

Miranda was waiting outside for me. The child seemed to have an obsessive interest in the cracks in the footpath. As I approached I could see her hopping from one to another and counting loudly. And then perversely from over twenty years earlier, unbidden and unwanted, from a time before drugs and teenage angst and night time visits from police, a little boy looked up smiling and happy and announced that he had jumped over three cracks all at once. And I think I may have sobbed out loud, for Miranda turned abruptly, startled, and saw me, but I had something in my eye and turned towards the building saying that I would be with her in a moment.

I had chosen well. The place was cheap, suitable for the child but quiet enough for adults to chat. After I had reassured Miranda that I did not expect her to pay she reluctantly took the child inside and agreed to a fruit drink but refused a sticky bun for herself and the child. I bought them a muesli bar. But long before we were settled and eating the child had gone and was climbing on a rubber castle oblivious to us both.

I pride myself both on my ability to penetrate to the heart of a matter or, when needs must, to prevaricate and conceal my intentions. So here I was making futile small talk in a children's play area with troublesome people who were nothing but bother. I wished I had prepared some sort of brief for myself. I wanted to hear a little of Matthew and his time in Asia but at the same time I would resist any personal disclosures, as I had from Graham. I wanted to know why Miranda had come to my door, but then I already knew and didn't want to be obligated. I knew she was biding her time until she could assess my attitude to Matthew. Then she would spin a heart rending story appropriate to my feelings which would end up with an explanation of why I should get her established in life. I had no doubt that I was dealing with a fraudster and would not offer questions or information that would assist her. But most of all I was honest enough with myself to realise that I was sitting here now in this ridiculous situation because she had brought contact with the past to a lonely old man who was vulnerable and weak. I could not let her see that weakness or I would never get rid of her.

Miranda talked of the weather, the traffic, the wonders of settling back into New Zealand after years in Asia. She even risked talking of the expense of having a young child back in the Western World after years of the lower costs of Asia. What she would not yet do, was to say that Chloe was Matthew's daughter and therefore Harry Lane's granddaughter. With any normal person she would have explained the situation, but with Mr Lane she felt the derision. She felt the defensiveness. The superiority of the man who handed out money readily but with the covert message that it was a magnanimous gesture to rogues who were beneath his contempt. Eventually the time would be right and the obvious would be stated but first the sparring for position went on.

The stupid woman seemed to think we were having the friendly chat of old acquaintances. I waited for her to make her claim but it did not come. I learned about the heat of India and the cold of the mountains. I heard about the cost of clothing children but there was no suggestion I might like to chip in. I heard about how many languages a much travelled child can learn. All no doubt fascinating to a fool. Then it occurred to me that this was the outcome I wanted. We had met. We had talked. I had come out unscathed. Perhaps we could even meet again in the distant future and talk properly of Matthew and the time he was away from me. I had won. I had wanted this and it was over. I began to prepare a farewell speech wishing her well for the future and promising to get in touch in a year or so. I began to collect my things together, enjoying a feeling of well-being. I had faced the past and it meant nothing to me. Who was I kidding? I doubt I fooled Miranda, and certainly not myself. Suddenly the same malign spirit that had asked for Miranda's phone number took hold of me.

'Did you seek me out because you believe there is a possibility that Chloe is my grand-daughter?' I asked.

She was good. She didn't gush. She didn't protest. She made it seem so simple and obvious. She didn't show the relief that she must have felt that the hurdle was safely over without having to broach the subject herself.

‘Yes, of course,’ she said. ‘Chloe is Matthew’s daughter.’

How easy it would be for a woman with an illegitimate child to return from overseas, learn that Matthew had died, and approach a lonely old man claiming contact from the past. I have seen a lot of fraud in my working life and there was something not right about this. No contact had been made previously. Matthew had not mentioned it, but then that was not significant, Matthew didn’t mention anything worth knowing. And there was a wary aspect to Miranda that was neither shyness nor embarrassment. Despite her modest ways, or perhaps because of them, I could see that she was on the make.

To buy time for myself I commented rather than asked, ‘And you were Matthew’s faithful lover.’ There was a falter. Perhaps she was not faithful. Perhaps she was embarrassed discussing this with an older man. But it sowed another question in my mind. Even if this young woman was Matthew’s lover, which she was long way from proving, for Graham and I had never heard of her until recently, did it follow that the child was my grand-daughter?

‘And what do you want me to make of this information?’ I asked.

She remained calm and persuasive. ‘Whatever you want Mr Lane. I thought you should know she exists.’ Here she paused and clearly queried herself about whether the time was right. She decided it was. ‘I have no income at present and no family able or inclined to help. I wanted to wait until I was settled before I sought you but circumstances were such...,’ she shrugged and trailed off. ‘The money you gave me is a big help but I can see you are not rich or a family man. For the present I can stay with a friend so I just want you to know that you are Chloe’s granddad.’

I understood that not being a family man meant not wanting to subsidise Matthew’s irresponsible behaviour. I started to say, ‘Why should I believe you?’ but at that moment Chloe fell from the climbing frame. I started to get up but Miranda just laughed. ‘She’ll be ok. I try not to panic.’ A child only slightly older than Chloe helped her up. Chloe turned towards us and was rewarded by a wave from her mother. She climbed back onto the frame.

‘Have you applied for a benefit to help look after your child?’ I asked.

‘There is a problem. They have a certificate from Nepal saying that I am dead and that makes it difficult to get assistance.’

My legal antennae twitched. Miranda was legally dead. I became intrigued and very suspicious. Up until now I suspected she was merely naive and simply looking for a handout, not a true fraudster. But here was something more sinister. I queried how that could happen and she became vaguer and vaguer the more I delved. I offered to use my contacts to help with her application. She was enthusiastic until I attempted to write down her address and specific details. Then she became evasive again.

‘It’s only temporary with some people I know. They want me out. I don’t want to bother them.’

I wrote down what details she would give me. It didn’t amount to much. Eventually in frustration and some resignation I decided she could fight her own battles and starve if that is what she wanted. The child returned to us, ate the remains of her snack and we gathered our possessions and left. In the street I was eager to leave them. It was done. I started to wish them well for the future in the most unfamiliar way I could manage.

And then I saw Graham. Graham who had been in Nepal and India with Matthew and presumably Miranda. Had I had time to think I would perhaps have delayed the meeting, but Graham had come out of a shop across the road and was walking away. I took Chloe’s hand and put my other hand on Miranda’s back to guide them quickly over the road. I have a powerful voice honed by years of public meetings and courtrooms and fortunately Graham paused to look in a window. I called him to wait.

I hurried the pair of them up to Graham. He turned to me and gave a welcoming smile. He was rather more used to being avoided by me than by being accosted in the street. Chloe was running at my side giggling, enjoying my new found vigour. I heard Miranda exclaim something and stop. I said, ‘Graham, I have someone here you may know, Miranda was in Asia with you and Mat.’ His eyes travelled past me to Miranda and I saw expectation fade to bewilderment. I looked back at Miranda and saw what I expected. She had a look that said she would rather be anywhere in the



world than on a footpath facing Graham. But she is a resourceful woman. It took her only seconds to recover herself.

‘Hello, Graham, I remember you from a party in Mumbai and you were with us at the funny little village where the guide was drunk and fell off of a donkey.’

Graham was clearly perplexed. ‘But you were....’ he began.

Miranda had no intention of letting me hear what she had been and hurried on. ‘You didn’t meet Chloe, my daughter. She was born in Nepal and has only just come home.’ Miranda crouched down and told Chloe to say hello to Graham which she did in her usual cheery way. It worked. Graham was diverted. There were to be no more disclosures in front of me about what these two knew of each other. And so with the formalities dealt with Miranda and Chloe prepared to depart.

I think that from what I have said so far you will have formed an opinion that I am a silly old fool who would have taken to any reasonably plausible person who had come into my life at this point and allowed them to take advantage of me. And you would of course be right. Miranda and Chloe had no real claim on me even if the unlikely story they had told was true. But you would err if you thought I was a complete victim. I knew what was happening to me and like a spectator in a drama I had contentedly suspended disbelief and could recover myself at any time I chose. But life is capricious and irrational. At that point my fate was sealed and although it sounds emotional and shallow it was one of the most telling and significant moments I had experienced. Chloe turned her face up to me obviously expecting to be kissed and said ‘Bye bye, man.’ And so I had no choice. There is perhaps no offering so difficult to resist, even when acceptance means submission and surrender, as an offered hand or cheek. And so I kissed her and told I would see her soon.’ And amidst the smiles and friendliness I felt a rage. A pure and magnificent anger that I had been outsmarted and humiliated in front of Graham and the child’s mother by a four year old.

As I walked away Graham fell into step beside me. I willed him not to speak.

‘She was not called Miranda when she was in India,’ he said. ‘I remember her quite well because dressed up for a party and the only one in the room not drunk and drugged out of her mind, she caught my eye. She is, Annette or Annabelle or something. Harry, you will be careful, won’t you? Matthew had already gone north through Nepal by the time she arrived. I doubt she even met him. And what’s with the ‘bye bye man,’ bit? She’s trained that child to assist in a con job.’

Knowing very well that he was completely right and I was a lamb to slaughter, led on by a child, I responded loudly with anger. ‘Graham, I am an old dog who has learned a few tricks of my own. I know the difference between evidence and hearsay. Miranda is a fraud. She admits she only came to me when the money situation was so bad she needed to. She admits she is in trouble with the authorities about her passport. She will not tell me where or with whom she lives. And she died a death of mortification when she saw you and knew she couldn’t escape speaking to you. So let me be a grown up person who can think of things for myself.’

I have said that Graham has a solid hide. He merely gave me a rueful grin. ‘I’m glad you’ve grown up Harry, it’s taken a while and I’m still not sure that this is not a pretty young face that has lead you astray. Well two pretty young faces actually.’

I reluctantly climbed down from my condescending position. It never works with Graham anyway. ‘I grant you that Chloe is a bit of a looker, but is Miranda pretty? She looks like a tomboy who has been dragged through a hedge to me.’

Graham was silent for a moment. Perhaps he was remembering a party in India and the sober girl across the room. Then he said, ‘You might be getting a bit old to assess twenty-five year olds,’ Harry.

I agreed with him, but then I said, ‘You are wrong about Chloe being involved in a confidence trick, Graham. Unless Chloe is a four year old Laurence Olivier she treats everyone the same way. No, I think the farewell was all her own idea. And even if it wasn’t it has me so under its spell that I am lost and you cannot get me back again.’

Graham laughed. ‘Out smarted by a four year old who knows how to handle you.’

But the moment was passing. I was feeling tired and deflated and so I said, ‘Try to remember who Miranda really is, I want to find out about the real her.’

He asked if I had her phone number. I fiddled with the silly little keys on my phone and then with nearly invisible numbers and at last I was able to tell him. Then I invented some urgent business in a side street and I was rid of him.

Miranda blinked away the steam as she put the lid on the pot. 'Spaghetti and cheese, tonight', she said.

'Will that man take us back to that place again? It was fun..' Chloe asked, temporarily diverted from thoughts of food.

'Well, he might be a little bit angry with us,' Miranda replied. She tensed, anticipating the next question.

'Why? He seems nice.'

Miranda grinned to herself. How could she tell a little child that she had done everything right to inveigle her way into an old man's heart until he had no option but to acquiesce?

She compromised by saying, 'He has another friend now who might think that we shouldn't be taken out. He might think that I have been a bit wrong in some of the things that I have said. I haven't really, but it might make him a bit grumpy and we might not see him again.'

Chloe thought about this for a moment. But it was too puzzling. Her new friend had taken her out and kissed her goodbye. Enough. 'I hope he takes us out again and buys me the castle and the dragon,' she said. She had heard stories of old friends and relatives who buy things. It sounded good.

Miranda feared there might be disillusionment ahead.

Miranda's mother poked angrily at her dinner. 'Spaghetti again. I always cook proper vegetables. No wonder that child looks so peaky. She never has a proper meal.'

Miranda battled with herself hoping she could let this pass her by, but lost. 'Mum, she is Chloe, not that child and she is the healthiest kid around. I cooked vegetables last night and you said it lacked substance. Please be a little patient. I'll move out as soon as I can.'

'Well all I'm saying is that when I cook it's healthy and filling and I never had to dump an illegitimate child on to my parents.'

Miranda watched Chloe busy eating. Miranda's mother's comments seemed to be losing their capacity to hurt but Miranda wondered if the ready acceptance of Mr Lane had anything to do with a substitute for her mother's carping criticism. Promises of clothes and presents were much more attractive than life at home.

'You are such a good dishes drier,' Miranda said, giving Chloe a squeeze.

'Mum! You have wet hands.'

They tussled briefly with Miranda threatening to soak Chloe completely and Chloe giggling helplessly and telling her to stop while longing for more.

Through the open door from the living room her mother called, 'Stop that silly noise and don't break anything.'

Melissa's phone rang. It would probably be Mr Lane. Offending him now and with the same excuse as once before was not a good idea. Melissa hastily dried her hands and grabbed for her phone.

'Who? Oh Graham. Graham Larch. Oh god yes, thanks for calling. Yes, I was so surprised to see you today.' With brain racing she tried to compose herself. She needed to find out what had been said to Harry. What did Graham know and what was the damage and how could she repair it?

But she was not to get the chance. 'I'd like to see you again Melissa. It's been a while. May I come to see you? Or you can come here if you like. Or back to *Kid's Palace*? Harry said that Chloe enjoyed it there.

No, not here and it would be awkward at Graham's house with Chloe unemployed and listening. And there was no guarantee that Graham would pay at *Kid's Palace*'

'Can we meet at the park? I'll take some bread and Chloe can feed the ducks,' she said.

She struggled to hear Graham's agreement as Chloe said, 'We have to take lots of bread because of the big greedy black one.'

'Yes, dear we will,' but Miranda hardly knew what she said. This would not be easy. Miranda had really not counted on having to deal with someone who knew her. She was not a natural deceiver, she truly believed that honesty was the best policy but now she had made her metaphorical bed and she was having difficulty lying in it. Then she chuckled at the pun. But she had to finish the dishes. Her mother wanted a cup of tea.

The sun held a lot of warmth for a spring day. Chloe ran ahead impatient to get to the ducks. Her bag of bread flapping beside her. Miranda laughed. 'You watch. No matter how often I tell her to take it slowly, the first duck will get the equivalent of two loaves of bread chucked at its head. Wise duck it's running for cover.'

Graham watched fascinated. When he had last seen Miranda in India they were on opposite sides of a smoky room listening to ethereal Asian music while loud Western music thumped from down the hall. How he had wanted to be this close to her then. He'd been introduced, gabbled nonsense at the nicest girl in the room and then watched her drift away with two other men. And now he had her to himself she was a mother of a child claimed to be old Harry's granddaughter and, according to Harry Lane, involved in some sort of passport fraud and with immigration onto her.

'Should we get Chloe away from the water?' he asked.

Miranda shook her head. 'It's shallow and she's not silly. She won't fall in. And if she does she'll get out.'

That didn't fit with Graham's view of minding a four year old. But then he didn't know anything about it and Miranda seemed quietly competent.

He mentally rehearsed ways of asking her who she was and where she had been for several years but she fore-stalled him.

'Do you work Graham?'

He replied, 'It must seem to you that I don't but I work mostly from home. I program computers. My triumphs are Pickwick Pizzas and Doughlicious Donuts. How embarrassing is that? When you order them on-line with your app you use my software. I made a bit of money on those. But in case you think all I do is sell fried sugar I also wrote the apps for Secular Suicide Support and Vegetarian Advice Centre. It's a sad reality that the crappy products bring in the big money.' He realised he was babbling and this was not getting him any closer to the truth about Melissa. But it warmed him see that she was impressed.

'I wish you could show me how you do that sort of thing,' she said.

'Nothing easier, but it's not much of a spectator sport. Typing hieroglyphics into a computer until it is accepting what the customer says and spitting out something useful. It all comes down to data in and data out and trying to make it look nice and be easy to use'

There was a pause. Graham took a breath and plunged in.

'Who are you really Miranda?'

'You know who I am. We were introduced but you didn't say anything to me. We met again at Chunmou. But you didn't have much to say for yourself there either. But I remember you quite well.'

'I have Mr Darcy's problem that I am ill qualified to recommend myself to strangers.'

'Should I ask, as Elizabeth Bennett did in *Pride and Prejudice*, why a man of sense and education who has lived in the world is ill qualified to recommend himself to strangers?'

Graham laughed. 'Computer programmers are notorious for being anti-social geeks. I'm doing better now.'

The sun shone, children laughing. Graham was chatting to a pretty woman he admired. He was torn about whether he should persist with what was really just an interrogation. But he had told Harry that they were meeting and he would feel rather foolish if all he had to report was that Chloe liked to feed ducks.

How old is Chloe?"

There was no escape. 'Four and a half.'

'You didn't have a child with you when I met you.'

'I left her in Nepal. There was a wonderful community there caring for children. I went back to her about the time you went home. I wouldn't do it now. It's a different lifestyle here and Chloe is older, but then Chloe was used to the Nepalese as de facto parents. She loved it.' *Stick as close as possible to the truth. The fewer lies the better.*

'Miranda, be kind to Harry Lane. He has had a lot of heartbreak in his life. His wife died of cancer, Matthew is dead in unhappy circumstances and he is distressed about his daughter.'

Miranda glanced up sharply at the mention of a daughter. Where was she? But Graham was already going on.

'Although he says he doesn't care about you and Chloe, he is really quite obsessed. He blames himself for Matthew's death and you are a piece of Matthew - still alive. Also he is not the idle old fool he acts. He is not a man to double cross. Take care.'

Across the park, a voice shouted. 'No, black duck, that is for white duck, put it down.' Miranda and Graham exchanged a grin.

'Chloe is his granddaughter, Graham. If that makes him happier then that's fine with me.'

'And you are his daughter-in-law?'

Miranda turned away to watch her daughter. After a pause she said, 'We didn't marry, but yes, I suppose so.'

Graham couldn't bear to go on. He wanted so much to enjoy a morning at the park with a fun loving child and an attractive woman. He did not say what was next on his mind, that as far as he could remember the woman who now called herself Miranda had only just arrived from New Zealand when he first met her at a time when the girl, Chloe, claiming to be Harry Lane's granddaughter, would already have been about a year old.

They played and laughed. They threw a pine cone to Chloe to catch. By carefully positioning her arms side by side and then throwing the pine cone gently onto them she achieved many successes for which she took the credit and was proclaimed an excellent sports girl. They had races across the grass and at last they went to a scruffy little café to have a drink and sandwich. Miranda resisted Graham's pressing offers to drive her home. The bus was so much easier and more comfortable and would save Graham the drive back. A little hurt, Graham saw them off at the bus stop.

Graham dropped in on the way home. He was a different person to the one he had been a day or two before. Instead of a solemn disquisition on how life is good and we must accept our reverses and move on, I now got an animated ramble on the joys of a morning in the park. I waited without much hope to find out what he had discovered and was not surprised to learn that it was not very much. Apart from the fact that Chloe enjoys parks and feeding ducks and that Miranda although somewhat furtive is really quite a nice person, he seemed to have learned nothing. He couldn't remember and hadn't found out, what her name actually was if it was not Miranda, and although he seemed to think it unlikely that Chloe could have been born in that part of the world with Matthew as a father, it also seemed to be quite likely that he had that wrong and she could and he might. As a private investigator, Graham left much to be desired. As a besotted, fickle young man he seemed to have all the necessary requirements. I had to listen to a great deal of pointless chatter before I could get him to go. I remain undecided about whether Graham in high spirits is better or worse than his usual downbeat self.

There was nothing more to be done. I had given the woman money. I had entertained her and her brat and she had delivered her spiel about who she thought the child was. She was clearly lying and the matter was no longer my concern. Graham however was not as resolute, and there he was at my door again. Talking to Graham about it was much like talking to Miranda. We beat around the bush. We talked of locations and times. We talked of the age of the child and we got no nearer to learning who she was and why she was haunting us. And always I had a picture in my mind of two urchins in

rag. I asked, 'What did she wear at the park, Graham?' He shrugged in his vague way and said, 'that sort of kaftan thing she was wearing when I met her with you.'

'And the child was in those baggy blue shorts?' I asked. Graham nodded.

'They really don't have anything do they?' I said. Graham shrugged again.

I hate poverty, or even lack of wealth. It seems so pointless. Such a diminution of life to be constantly struggling for the next dollar. I had no confidence that Miranda would be able to save and manage money, but I was convinced she would not fail to dress the child in a respectable manner if she felt she could. I waited for Graham to go. It was none of Graham's business what I chose to do for them, and for that matter it was not my business what they wore, but I would not tolerate two young females, one of whom just might be my granddaughter going about like tramps.

Miranda paused in the vacuuming but Chloe was already heading for the phone so she finished up behind the sofa. Chloe was quite capable of keeping a bewildered caller talking while Miranda did a final sweep or two and turned the cleaner off.

As silence settled Miranda heard Chloe say. 'Oh yes I want some blue jeans like Lizzy and a pink top.' There was a silence for a moment, then she said. 'Can I have the big castle with the princess and and the dragon and the knight? Mummy says it costs too much.' Miranda suppressed a gasp of horror. They had no friends near here and if Chloe was begging clothes and gifts from one of her mother's acquaintances she would never hear the last of it.

Miranda hurried over to her. 'Who are you talking to sweetie?'

Chloe looked up angelically as only a four year old negotiating presents can look. 'The man at *Kid's Palace*,' she said. Oh good grief, whatever now. How had Chloe got the idea he would buy her clothes and a castle and what was he ringing for anyway?

'Well lets see what he wants shall we,' she smiled at Chloe thinking there was to be more disappointment and difficulty in her short life.

'Hello, is that Mr Lake? Miranda here.'

A brusque query came down the phone. 'What are you wearing?'

Miranda was torn between hilarity and outrage. When she had mastered her feelings sufficiently she said, 'My usual, why do you ask?'

'Have you anything else?'

'Not very much, but I am sorry if Chloe misunderstood and thought you would buy her things. You have been very kind, thank you. We don't mean to be an imposition.'

'That is exactly what you mean to be. You can't bring up a child with no income and no clothes.

You came to me to see if I could help. I don't know why I feel I should, but if no one else is going to clothe you and buy some toys for your child then I think it must be me.'

And so to Miranda's astonishment she was ordered to make herself available for a shopping trip in four days time, and in the mean time to think of what she would need.

Miranda put the phone down and felt a weird desire to scream and scream, partly with relief, but partly with frustration and outrage. What a strange, strange person. But Chloe was there looking expectant so she said. 'We mustn't get too hopeful but perhaps Mr Lake will get us some things we need.'

'I'm going to get the castle,' said Chloe confidently.

Miranda hadn't the heart to disagree. Somehow she would have to find a way to get that damn castle and try not to incur her mother's wrath and requests to know where the money had come from.

Miranda and Chloe dumped the groceries on the kitchen bench. Miranda hated subterfuge but she was very grateful that her mother did not know that she still had most of a thousand dollars in her bank account. She hoped she could pay her mother back one day but now the money was much more valuable as insurance for the future.

'I'll put the serviettes in the dining room,' Chloe said. She carried them in to the next room. She had learned not to speak to Mrs Morgan and so ignoring her she pulled a chair up to the sideboard and



climbed onto it so she could reach. If Miranda had been in the room to see it she would have stood by Chloe or held her to prevent disaster. Mrs Morgan just watched in silent rage at the presumptuous child who had taken over her house. There was a clatter and crash as an ornament dropped and shattered. Chloe looked down in dismay. She knew enough of her welcome in this house to realise that this was a disaster. Behind her Mrs Morgan, worn down by years of work and poverty, an idle husband, a daughter she didn't understand and now a child she couldn't control, reacted. She was not a violent woman and she would not willingly hurt even the precocious Chloe, but in the mindless moment between disaster and regaining self control she spoke and acted. 'Oh you stupid, stupid bastard little brat,' she yelled, at the same time her hand shot out. It should have just been a glancing blow or a complete miss, but at that moment a distracted and distraught Chloe fell backwards. The hand threw her forwards and she crashed off of the chair, against the sideboard and fell to the floor amongst other falling decorations and onto the shards of china. Mrs Morgan, who had spent her life avoiding any confrontation more aggressive than nagging, retreated. She ran out of the room as Miranda rushed in.

My phone rang. Miranda again. I assumed it would be good news. We had agreed to meet in a few days. She would have nothing to say to me except that some bureaucratic process had been completed. She would tell me that she was to get some money and perhaps some temporary accommodation. I would no longer be an essential part of her support. She would move on, make friends and she and the child would forget me. It was over. I was pleased. Perhaps if she persisted with the granddaughter story she would get in touch at birthdays and Christmas and expect presents. I could cope with that. Nevertheless I felt a pang. After all they weren't all bad and I had set aside a day to shop with them. I would miss that a bit, but nevertheless they were gone and I was free of them. I answered the phone. They were not gone. Far from it.

Miranda sobbed at me. 'Oh, Harry, I can't go on like this, it's horrible. She hit Chloe and Chloe has cuts and is nearly hysterical, she's never been treated like this and it's getting worse and worse. She doesn't want me here and I've nowhere to go. Is there a room at your place. Even a shed. We're used to living rough. We won't be a bother. There must something somewhere. You are all I have.'

I struggled for a moment to unscramble the *shes* and who had done what to whom. 'Who hit Chloe? Is she alright?' I asked.

'My moth..., my flatmate lost her temper with Chloe because she broke a vase. Yes she is just shocked and has some cuts, but I can't stay here and you are the only person I know. Surely someone can do something for me.' The last words were lost amongst the sobs and tears. Miranda had reached the end of her endurance.

This outburst should have filled me with dread. Whoever's side I took, and whatever I chose to believe, I was now a full player. My peace and isolation were gone. I surprised myself with the strength this gave me. Once when adversaries were getting the better of me I had responded with resolute action and a determination to rise to the occasion. I had not felt that sort of inner strength for some time. I would have liked longer to think through my plan and to contemplate its consequences but time for dithering seemed have gone. I had already formulated a proposal that I had not expected to need. From the past I heard a voice proclaim loudly, 'Your Honour this woman needs the protection of the court. If we fail her now, then we fail in our duty.' The voice was mine. Actually, at the time I wasn't much interested in the safety of the woman. I wanted to establish that the band of thugs she was mixed with were a menace, but it worked on both counts. The judge had taken my advice and now I did the same.

'Ring Graham, and tell him to come to get you and take you to 6 Ambrosia Way. He knows it. Tell him to take any blankets and utensils he can spare. I'll replace them for him. If you get there before me, there is a key behind the bright yellow plate at the back door. The place is a mess but it will do for now and we can clean it up I'll go over now with some essentials and we'll take it from there.' Melissa continued in a calmer more subdued way, 'Harry you are a pet.' I shuddered. 'You know I can't pay yet and can't even feed us properly?'

Did she really think that hadn't occurred to me? Still it showed she was still thinking ahead in a difficult situation. 'Your job is to look after and protect Chloe and you are doing that. I am quite able to cope with the budget and life's necessities. Ring Graham and get yourself organised. I'll go over with some food and open up.

I don't use a car. I find life in the city much easier without one. Now I missed it, but only briefly. I took what I could carry and walked over via the takeaway shop.

Graham's spirits rose when he saw who had rung. He had spent the last few days thinking of excuses to call but had not come up with a worthy invitation or the courage to offer it. Now he was receiving the very call he longed to make. He was disappointed that Melissa sounded rather distant and doubtful however. 'Aah Graham, you know how bossy Harry can be?' Graham grunted in agreement. 'Well I've had some trouble over here and have to leave and Harry said you would take some blankets and household utensils and come to get me and take me to 6 Ambrosia Way. Can you do that?'

Graham struggled to absorb this interesting turn of events. Ambrosia Way was not far off and the delight of taking Melissa to it and knowing where she lived had a warm feel to it. 'No problem. Where are you?' he asked.

'I'll meet you at the intersection of Cross and Everly,' Miranda said.

'You'll do no such thing. For goodness sake Miranda, you won't even be there any more. Tell me the address and get as much of your stuff as you can put in a small car.'

'Ok, meet me at 23 Cross Street, Melissa said. And as she said it she knew she was losing her hold on the myth that had sustained her and was putting her faith in two men she hardly knew. She added a little sadly, 'All of my stuff will fit into a small car.'

They arrived barely two minutes after me. What a trio they made. Three emotionally wrung out people, but for different reasons. Chloe cut and a bit battered and ready to tell tales of excitement and quarrels that Miranda was keen to suppress. Miranda drained and weepy but determined to continue to defend her territory against anyone who threatened her or Chloe. And Graham resplendent in metaphorical armour and white charger laying down the law and ready to organise the world and especially us.

I calmed things as much as I could. I made hot drinks and offered food. I commiserated with Chloe's cut and bruises and agreed with her and her mother that it had been an unfortunate accident and no one had meant to push her off a chair. I had Graham bring things in from the car and do his best to make it look like a properly furnished functioning house. We didn't succeed very well. It continued to look like what it was – an abused rental property that was due for quite a lot of care and maintenance. But that was not uppermost in Miranda's mind. Once a degree of calm was established I could enjoy her surprise.

'But this is not a mess. This is wonderful. It's a real house. I can't stay here. Look Chloe. There is a garden with bird bath and flowers. Harry, I can't afford this, now or in the future.' I let her gush. She had a lot of pent up emotion to get rid of. She kept her presence of mind though. She never lost sight of what was happening to her. While I was showing her around and we were out of earshot of Graham and Chloe she said, 'Harry, I appreciate this all the more because you have doubts about my relationship with Matthew, but if this is in any way a ruse to come between me and Chloe, I will take her and run. I have lived on my wits with her for nearly five years and I can do it again if there are any tricks.'

I found this chilling. I told myself that I didn't care if Miranda took off with her brat, but at the same time I knew she was capable of it, and I could not bear to think that it might end like that. On the spur of the moment I offered a pact. I said, 'Miranda, if you will swear that wherever you are you will keep me informed about Chloe, then I will swear to you that whoever you and Chloe may be and whatever is your relationship to me, I will make no effort to separate you and will see that you have enough to keep living together.' It was a generous offer and rather irresponsible, but I

meant it. I knew that if Miranda and Chloe suddenly disappeared from my life I would fret until they were found. The price was worth it. Miranda and I solemnly shook on the deal. Once Miranda was reconciled to living there, I showed her the walls that would need painting and the holes that needed filling and suggested she might like to help to get the house back to good shape. It gave her a sense of mission and removed some of the helplessness that she was feeling. I respected her for that. When there is nothing else left then one must beg, but I could see that she would put that behind her and contribute as much as she could as soon as she could. There were jobs to do. There would be trouble ahead if she had no DIY abilities but that would be a problem for the future. Once we had done enough to get them through the night I talked to Miranda about moving our expedition forward to the next day. I would have to get a minimum of furniture and set up a banking facility for her. She not only needed my house, but money to run it. Again you will be thinking that I am a gullible old fool and again you will be right. But I could see no alternative, and there is pleasure in helping where there is genuine need. Whatever game Miranda was playing it seemed to me that her poverty was genuine. If that was a fraud then I had been an easy mark but I was on my guard.

The next day was one of nightmarish exhaustion and achievement. I do not shop. I do not like shopping. When Joanne, my wife, was alive, she shopped for anything that required thought, and I picked up groceries and anything that could simply be collected. Now there was no Joanne and this shopping had to be chosen and not merely got. If I had to do it again I would know that I could trust Miranda to be frugal and wise and I would give her money and send her on her way. She likes to shop and does it well. But it did not occur to me that I was not needed. I met her early and we went about town comparing prices and needs. I would have bought one of everything I could have thought of and been home by lunchtime. But by lunchtime we had bought nothing. Miranda had compiled a list of astonishing complexity comparing sizes, prices and how much we actually needed to purchase. Every item she assured me she could do without and I could save my money. Nevertheless I insisted. Then I had to put up with an outpouring of thanks for my generosity and regrets that she could not pay for it herself. And so for each item I had to explain that if she didn't buy it now I would have to do another shopping expedition in the future to amend our current failings. I doubt she was silly enough to believe this. She probably knew that many future tenants would have their own furniture and fittings and I would have to go through the bother of getting rid of the excess. But honour was served and we seemed to be on our way to choosing a sensibly priced minimum to give them a comfortable working home. Then I did what I should have done at the outset. Chloe and I were bored and tired. I took Miranda to the bank and opened a joint account with her so that I could monitor the spending and she could do the spending on the household budget and home repairs. I put a large amount of money into it, and again I had to put up with protestations about how things could be done more cheaply. Then, and rather thankfully I took Chloe and we went off to a café for lunch, telling Miranda we would be home by the time she had ordered the household supplies and got back.

Chloe proved to be a rather good lunch date. Although her mother had been reluctant to see her go off with me, Chloe herself accepted me and seemed to be content with anything and everything that happened to her. We ate salad and drank fruit juice. I gently grilled her on where she had lived and what had happened to her in the past. I could find nothing inconsistent in it. At her age she didn't remember much but most of it seemed to be living a poor and primitive life in India. There seemed to be some sort of father figure who had come back to New Zealand with them but he was gone and it seemed that her mother had not made any new friends or kept up with the old ones back in New Zealand. It appeared they had been living in constrained circumstances with an unpleasant older woman. It began to seem possible that I was in the company of my son's daughter, conceived in Nepal over five years previously and brought back to New Zealand under difficult circumstances a few weeks or months earlier. The realisation left me strangely unmoved. I had already committed to this rather bizarre couple and although their origins were fascinating, emotionally it had ceased to weigh on me. Chloe now replete, relaxed and content remembered a more important issue.

‘Will you get me the castle with the princess and the dragon?’ I faltered. I do not approve of plastic junk for children. Nor did I want to indulge her with crass toys that her mother might not approve, but Chloe did not have anything at all as far as I could see and I was gazing down at a beguiling and expectant face that would loosen the purse strings of Scrooge.

We went to the toy shop. I tried every diversion I could think of. When I pointed out that mum might not approve I was assured that she too longed for a castle with a princess. I said that we could wait and mum would be able to get it in future. I was assured that mum was eagerly awaiting its arrival. I pointed out that it might be disappointing and boring but was assured that people who had castles with princesses were in a state of ecstasy for the rest of their lives. And so I gave up. Castles with princesses and dragons and knights were clearly the fashion. There was a wall of them. I suspected they were advertised almost continuously on TV - hence the enthusiasm for one and the knowledge of just how wonderful they are. But there was no way back.

‘Which one do you want?’

Chloe giggled happily. ‘They’re all the same silly.’

‘All the same,’ I said in a loud shocked voice. ‘Don’t let the princesses and knights and dragons hear you say that. Why that one there has a princess who doesn’t even like knights and is really quite fond of dragons. And this one here has a knight who falls off of his horse. And that one there....’

Chloe entered the game. ‘I don’t want that one. That princess wears ugly black undies and the dragon’s fire has gone out’

‘Yes, and that one has a dragon who is boring and curls up in front of the fire with a good book and doesn’t even want to eat princesses.’

There was a snort behind us. ‘Are you leading my daughter astray.’

‘Mummy, Mr Lane is buying me a castle. One which has a pretty princess and a brave knight who doesn’t fall off of his horse.’ Then she added as an afterthought, ‘and a dragon who is not boring.’ Miranda gave me a conspiratorial grin. I did not want to be caught as vulnerable to the wiles of her daughter as this but it was too late now.

I turned back to the stacks of boxes and asked, ‘And which box contains these wonderful and exciting creatures?’

Chloe touched the only box she could reach which happened to be underneath at least a dozen others. ‘That one.’

Miranda climbed on a ladder so that she could lift the top boxes and I pulled out the chosen one. The shop assistant stood back in amused silence.

I was surprised at the low price. The Chinese can stamp these things out very cheaply.

‘Thank you so much, that will mean the world to her,’ said Miranda. ‘She has never had anything like that. I have been up and down the street hoping to find you to ask you if you want me to get the cream bedside table that we saw. It will fit conveniently but it seems a rather idle luxury.’

I was getting tired and had had enough. ‘Just buy it, and get some proper clothes,’ I snapped. Chloe looked up startled. I tried a recovery. ‘Oh dear, I have been consorting with dragons and now I am getting grumpy like them. I need to go home.’ I touched Miranda gently on the arm by way of apology. ‘Buy what you need. I will take Chloe back to your place and have a sit down. I think I might be required to build a castle although I hope you will be home soon enough to save me.’ And I gathered up a box and a girl and we set off.

The vision I had of sitting peaceably sipping tea while we waited for Miranda and as Chloe assembled her castle was a fantasy shared only by me.

It took Chloe seconds to discover she could not get the plastic cover off and then that the box lid was very tight. That was followed by layer after layer of plastic junk that all required adult strength and dexterity. Following that there were instructions to read and difficult connections to be made between plastic blocks. Chloe was completely undismayed. She was in paradise and kept up a constant chatter that fluctuated between her own successes and demands for me to do the hard bits. I have never been so glad to see Graham. I think he was less than pleased to realise that he only had me and Chloe for company and so I had to work hard to dissuade him from leaving again to go to

get Miranda. I prevailed by pointing out that he would probably miss her and she might arrive home any moment. The medieval castle was looking more like a Roman ruin in Chloe's not entirely capable hands but I had my escape opportunity and I very thankfully took it.

Miranda reached home ecstatic and exhausted. Until now she had never spent more than a few dollars at a time in her life, but today she had furnished a house. Yet through it all she didn't quite trust Harry Lane. He could be unpleasant and kind in rapid succession. He could be generous and mean to a fault almost at the same time. He clearly cared for Chloe and almost loved her and yet he could be brusque and thoughtless. Most of all his motives were unclear. He renounced her as family yet he was now housing her and promising that she would have anything she needed. She had prepared a short speech of gratitude and enquiry, but it was not to be. She discovered Graham and Chloe in her house with Harry long gone.

'Oh, Miranda, I'm sorry, I came over to see if I could help, and Harry was here with Chloe and he went home.'

Miranda was frazzled. It had been a big day at the shops and she had worried about Chloe going off without her. She was becoming weary of Graham's constraint around her.

'What are you sorry for?' she snapped.

'Well, I am here, and it is your house and I'm not invited.'

'So you are apologising for looking after my daughter in my absence. You realise that that is unforgivable don't you?'

'I'm sorr.. No I'm not. I don't handle women very well Miranda. I just didn't want to offend you. But I'll go now if you wish.'

'Mummy, don't be angry with Graham, he helped me make up my castle and he found the secret stairs that she can go up to escape the dragon. And he can make dragon noises. He is a really good dragon and scared the princess but she was up in the tower and safe, and now the knight is coming, but you came home and the knight hasn't come yet.'

Miranda, squeezed Graham's arm. 'And I am a horrible, horrible person. Thank you Graham.'

Graham said, 'Well, now that the princess is safe and Mummy is home I better be on my way home too.'

'Why?'

'Because the princess is safe and Mummy is home, I guess,' Graham said, trying to make a joke of his embarrassment.

'Am I really such an ogre that you can't bear to be in the room with me?' Miranda asked.

'You know very well you are not. It's just that I don't trust myself not to make a fool of myself. And at the risk of sounding like a bad romance novel, I am not worthy of you.'

Miranda's head snapped up, 'The penniless floozy who mooched around the world without friend or family getting comfort where she could and who begged her way home and continues to live as a beggar is too good for the wealthy, kind, handsome, caring individual who holds down a good job is widely liked and respected and who helps pathetic old men and young women. Yep, I guess you're right. You're rubbish. You better go.' Miranda had meant to deliver this as a light hearted tease but by the end it sounded far too bitter and real. She compensated by taking Graham's hand. 'Don't leave me just yet,' she said.

'Is that really how you feel about me Miranda?'

'It has been a big big day. Just shut up and hold me. And don't ever make me ask again.'

Dr Jim Fraser was now a big man. I don't mean in physical dimensions. He remains trim and fit, but he now holds a key advisory and administrative role in Social Services. I had known him as a much younger and more modestly placed man twenty years earlier and I intended to take advantage of that. I made an appointment. Not many people get to see Jim face to face. His is not that sort of job, but I knew he would see me for old times sake.



We shook hands and did the usual pleasantries. I learned that his wife and family continued to flourish. He commiserated me on the mess of my family life. He didn't put it quite like that but the message was plain enough. Then I got down to business.

'I need some information on a friend who is having trouble over a benefit.' He made as if to speak but I forestalled him. 'No quarrelling Jim. I need it and there will be no repercussions for you.' His eyes told me he had given up already.

'Who?'

'Miranda Holding, was one of a group of....'

I lapsed into silence as Jim put up a hand.

He called through to his secretary. 'Anything on Miranda Holding?' We spoke of other things while we waited.

A young man looked in at the door. 'She applied for a benefit. Denied because she gave a false address. There was a check to Nepalese authorities at her last address. The Nepalese sent us a copy of a death certificate for her and her one year old child from several years ago. The case is still under consideration. Do you want the paperwork?'

I nodded. 'A short time later I was given a copy of a Nepalese Death Certificate and a copy of a benefit application. On the address part of the form was scrawled 'No such address'.

The secretary was reluctant to give it to me, but his boss said nothing so he carried on. 'Sorry, that's all we have. If Ms Holding wants a benefit she has to give us a valid address and some reason to believe that the Nepalese have declared her dead for no reason. Or better still, rename herself to a New Zealand citizen who is alive. I looked at the death Certificate. Amongst the usual information of time place and circumstances it bore the inscription 'identified by Amanda Morgan.' 'Who is Amanda Morgan?' I asked.

'Another young nuisance touring in Nepal, we assume,' the secretary said. 'We may have to try to find her but if Ms Holding needs her benefit badly enough she will be back and no doubt explain it all.'

I was used to giving instructions in the and office and expecting them to be obeyed. I said, 'Find me the last know New Zealand address of Holding and Morgan.' Then I thanked Jim for his valuable help and prepared to follow the secretary.

But Jim was on his feet and anxious. 'Shit Harry, if you go stirring these people up they are going to ask where the information came from and how is it not going to come back on me?'

'I am not a fool Jim, I can invent sources. In fact I have many sources including the woman claiming to be Miranda Holding. I know how to protect you, I've done it before.'

The last remark found it mark. We were both remembering a young man with huge potential, and a new wife, house and car just starting life in the Public Service. Jim on the day I first met him had been a frightened and beaten man.

'God, you can't get me out of this. I was a fool. I took the money and people know I did.'

I had replied. 'Only 'Frank McEvery knows and he also knows that you asked permission to transfer funds temporarily into your own account to meet a temporary shortfall that would be made up. He is a very busy man and he has forgotten.'

'But I didn't tell him. He has testified that the accountant asked where it had gone and he immediately suspended me. I have no job and soon I will have a prison record.'

I was an older man with experience teaching the younger man the ways of the world.

I said, 'You are a valuable employee with good education, white, well dressed. The system cannot be bothered with you. You misunderstood the advice you were given, or Frank misunderstood what was asked of him. It was a silly thing to do and a foolish communication breakdown. You are very sorry and there will be nothing like it in future. You sign the document that I shall compose, saying that. I will present it to the court. You admit nothing and we will have you back at work next week with an apology for the inconvenience you have suffered. Convictions are reserved for people of colour and bad body odour and the occasional tycoon with three yachts and twenty-five bedrooms who gets so greedy and out of control that not even expensive lawyers can save him.'

And so it was. Now Jim was an honest law abiding citizen at the top of his profession and carrying a large load of guilt and gratitude.

As I had expected Jim ran a tight ship with good employees. I was handed a printout with two addresses. Miranda Holding of 17 Bay Vista, Taupo and Amanda Morgan 23 Cross Street. I glanced up at the secretary. 'You don't look for people at their last known address?', I asked.

'Not unless we get into a full investigation for criminal reasons. People like that move about a lot. They usually want their benefit and give us correct addresses.'

'Well it appears that the Morgans live not very far from me on the 83 bus route.'

The point was of course lost on my efficient friend. 'They don't put bus routes on foreign death certificates,' he said with a hint of smile.

'No, but I know someone who used to catch an 83 home.' Then I thanked him for his help and hurried off. I realised I had been a fool. I should, long since have asked Graham where he had got Miranda from. I did it now.

'He answered promptly. He is that sort of person. 'Hello? What, Oh, she was at Cross Street over by.... What? Ok, that's alright. Bye.'

'Miranda put her head in the door. Who was that?'

Graham said, 'Only Harry wanting to know....', and then he stopped. He remembered how Miranda had fought to keep that address secret. Perhaps he had done something very foolish.

'Know what?'

'Oh, just how we are getting on.'

'Harry doesn't know that there is a 'we' yet'

'No, I don't mean that. He was just catching up.'

Miranda gave him a puzzled look and returned to stripping wallpaper.

Cross street had a sad feel to it, but 23 was one of the better homes. There were flowers outside, even a respectable tree. The house had seen better days but was basically sound. It did not look quite like a flat for young society drop outs which was what Miranda had implied.

I knocked and rang and after a while a woman probably in her fifties came to the door. I had prepared myself for anything from a large family to a horde of gang members. I smiled warmly.

'Mrs Morgan?' I tried.

'Yes.'

'I'm so pleased I've come to the right place. I have something for Amanda, is she her?'

'No she doesn't live here any more.'

So far so good. I was on the right track and feeling quite proud of myself. But I wanted to be sure.

'Perhaps Miranda is at home?'

I received a puzzled frown. 'I only have the one and Amanda quarrelled with me and moved out.

Good riddance to her.' She attempted to shut the door but I blocked it.

'I need to get in touch with her, do you have her phone number?'

She recited Miranda's phone number at me and asked, 'Don't you need to write it down?'

I replied that I knew the number but thought it was for someone else. I lingered on hoping for more.

'I understand she has a child now, you must be very proud of her.'

'She's an ungrateful slut.'

Silently apologising to all young people I agreed that the younger generation were feckless and cruel and always ungrateful.

I was invited in, refreshed with coffee and biscuits that were really not too bad, and eventually came away an hour later with a good knowledge of Amanda Morgan's upbringing and appearance and the startling information that she is a qualified nurse. I had also gained the less surprising knowledge that her mother claimed she could not possibly have given birth to the urchin that she had brought home with her. A photograph had put the matter of who she was beyond doubt.

I left her with smiles, compliments, profuse thanks for her help, and considerable relief.

You will think now that I had my proof and that I would return to Miranda – I still chose to call her that – and confront her with the truth, reduce her to a sobbing wreck and then take whatever action I deemed appropriate. I had made a career largely out of doing that. Criminals and scallywags and prosecuting attorneys had all fallen prey to me and those tactics, but I had no intention of doing it. In fact I never really gave a thought to doing anything like that. My reasons were obscure even to me but some at least were as follows: The whole business was too interesting not to continue. I respected Miranda too much to want her humbled. I liked Chloe, the girl would grow to have even more fire in her than Miranda. But most of all I did not want to put Miranda in the position of continuing the charade. It might have just been compassion or perhaps it was just my legal training that required me to gather as much information as possible before striking, but really it was my now firm belief that Chloe was not my granddaughter. I fully expected to expose Miranda and forgive her at the same time. Whoever Chloe was, she was now partly mine and I felt perversely that if there was any possibility remaining that she was my granddaughter then at some point Miranda or in this case Amanda might make a run for it. But I reasoned that if there was not doubt that I had no hold on her then there would be nothing to run from. Perverse but true.

The house at Ambrosia Way was a scene of cheerful chaos. Miranda said, ‘A perfect patch. Dead smooth plastering ready for the paint.’

Graham studied it critically. ‘There is a run near the bottom. No don’t try to smooth it now you’ll rough it up again. Let it dry a bit.’

Despite her slightly inferior plastering, Miranda was enjoying herself immensely. ‘There is no need to be hyper critical just because you are good at filling cracks,’ she said.

Graham whispered. ‘Careful, Chloe is just outside.’

Miranda gave him a puzzled look. ‘She’s fine.’ Then as Graham turned bright red, she gave a squeal of laughter. ‘Mind out of the gutter, oaf. I was speaking of paint preparation.’

Seeing that Graham couldn’t meet her eye she took pity on him, gave him a hug and said, ‘Anyway if we are going to leave this to dry now, let’s do the small stuff in the kitchen.’

They used the last of the plaster around windows and the stove. Graham said, ‘I must get back to do some work. I have a site for Crunchy Carrots to write. They want to go live and give me lots of money in a couple of weeks and I need the money because there is young lady that I love and want to impress with flowers and fancy gifts.’

‘Well she better stay away from me,’ said Melissa playfully seeking compliments.

‘She is always near you,’ said Graham as gallantly as he could manage.

At that moment Harry appeared at the back door, led by Chloe. ‘I could hear noise in the back garden, so I came around,’ he said.

Miranda ran forward. ‘You have to see how brilliant I am. Actually Graham is better. The smooth flat bits of wall in the second bedroom are the ones he did and these runny ones over there are mine. But I am improving. What do you think?’

Harry looked at the wall and then at Miranda and Graham. ‘It does seem from this that Graham has mastered filling cracks,’ he said.

Miranda laughed. ‘We’ve already done that one and Graham says we mustn’t advertise his prowess in front of Chloe.’

Graham started for the door. ‘Oh give over you two. Harry, do you want a lift home?’

‘Yes, please, but I just came to tell the two of you, although I wasn’t expecting to find Graham here, that I am going to have a couple of days in Taupo. I have a friend there to catch up on and everything here is going well. Miranda, I’ve taken the liberty of telling the other tenants to take any problems to you. It’s not very likely, but there is a list of tradespeople in my desk at home. The key is on the keyring for this house and I will rely on your concern and competence if anything comes up.’

Miranda was taken aback. The idea of not only having her own house, but being responsible for other ones as well was quite stimulating. She asked, ‘Harry, is it ok if I do some vacuuming at your house while you are away?’

Harry paused at the door, 'I have no objection to you attempting to make me respectable. Go for it. But please remember you are neither servant nor slave. You have a child to mind. You are already repairing this place and I have given you responsibility for things that crop up in the block of apartments while I'm not here. Don't over do it.'

'I'll manage,' Miranda laughed.

I eyed Graham. 'What happened to *please take care, we know nothing about her and she is dishonest?*'

'I think that you answered me by saying you are grown up and understand life and can look after yourself. I will tell you the same thing. Whatever she may or may not have done she is a wonderful person. I well, you know, I think oh, whatever.'

I was enjoying myself. Graham is very easy to tease. 'Does she have any stretch marks, Graham? To my surprise he took that seriously and in reasonably good spirit.

'I'm not going to discuss her sex life with you, but I think that in the circumstances you have a right to know. No, she doesn't seem to.'

I'm not sure what surprised me more. That he answered honestly, or that he knew what stretch marks are.

I confirmed the address for the Holdings with the white pages and occupancy register. I didn't want to ring first. The power of surprise and face to face contact is not to be ignored. Early the next morning I flew off to Taupo to meet the Holdings.

Miranda had been keen to get into Harry's house and give it a once over. There was a schoolgirl who came in once a week and made a token effort, but Miranda wanted to show her gratitude for her house and make things a bit more bearable for Harry and his guests. Hospital life had taught her to get on and get done. She bustled around shifting furniture, cleaning under and around, dusting and vacuuming. Chloe found the process exciting and bustled around after her moving things about as well and recreating some of the mess that Miranda had cleaned.

When things looked better, Miranda looked in the desk for the list of tradespeople. She didn't need it but being manager of a block of flats appealed to her and she thought that as she had been asked to do it, she might as well know what to do in an emergency. She found the list, but then far more interesting she found pictures and letters from Harry's children.

'Look, Chloe, here is a picture of Mr Lane's children. See that man, he was in Nepal with us.' No one had talked to Chloe about Matthew, and Miranda wanted to leave it until she was older and able to understand, so she said no more. Curiosity drove Miranda on. She was ashamed of herself for being nosey but was unable to stop. She pulled out some pictures and papers. One was a certificate. It was a copy of a degree conferring a M.D. on Dr Robyn Lane. 'A doctor, I wonder where she is now.' Chloe was still dusting a chair and ignored her. There were some cards with terse messages giving new locations and contact details. It was a small pile, tidily kept and mostly giving the contact details as *Doctors Without Borders*. 'Well for goodness sake,' Miranda said out loud. 'Dr Robyn Lane is a doctor in war zones.' Chloe looked up from her tidying but there seemed to be no further interesting outbursts coming, so she went back to work. With a feeling of distress, Miranda wondered if Harry's daughter was also dead. Killed perhaps in one of the notorious attacks on hospitals. But the only death notice she found was a formal coroner's report about Matthew.

'Accidental death from drowning at Hetrock Bay.' Miranda shook her head over that. If Matthew was still in the emaciated state that she had last seen him then he would not have stood much chance at the dangerous Hetrock Bay. Sadly she realised that he had remained an irresponsible wretch right up to the last. There were a few very brief messages from Matthew giving a location and a commentary such as, 'Good Crowd, fun,' or 'Too cold, moving on.' There was no other content. No wonder Harry knew nothing of Miranda and Chloe. Sadly she put the items neatly back in the drawer. This was why Harry was weighed down by sad memories. There was not much here to buoy him up.

Graham called from the door, 'Miranda, are you still here? What are you doing.?' Miranda guiltily pushed the drawer closed and wiped the front of the desk to make it seem that she was still busily cleaning. She said, 'Graham, where is Harry's daughter?'

'Here and there but mostly in the Far East. Wherever there is a war hospital. She seems to be estranged from Harry. She keeps him informed of her whereabouts and that is all, or so he says.'

'What have you done to un-estrangle them?'

'Nothing. How do I do that? And why do I fear a new disaster descending on me?'

Miranda had an inspiration. 'Harry is very efficient in his own way. I wonder if he kept his address book up to date.' She swung the drop down lid and opened the book at Robyn Lane. 'There we are. There is even an email address. Email her.' Miranda smiled confidently.

'Ah, excuse me bossy boots. I am the socially inept one and this is your idea. But I do keep Harry's computer up to date and know his passwords. You can do it from here.'

'OK, Chloe has been a brilliant helper for hours now but she needs exercise. Start the computer and take her outside and I will email.'

Graham did as he was told muttering about one night's ecstasy and a lifetime of servitude. Miranda told him that she was pleased he understood the terms of the contract.

I asked the taxi driver to take me to a motel as close as possible to Bay Vista and felt I was over the first hurdle when I was dropped off at a pleasant place ten doors away from the Holdings. There is no time like the present so I had a quick drink of water and ate some of the motel biscuits and went visiting. The property was large and immaculate. The Holdings lived in superior conditions to the Morgans. The door was opened by an attractive woman probably in her mid 50s. I suddenly felt confident. This woman had a life to lead that might now have nothing to do with a daughter called Miranda. I still didn't even know for sure that Miranda was dead. I started on my spiel.

'Mrs Holding?'

I received a smile and nod. So far so good.

'My son was in Nepal.'

I got the reaction I was expecting although I didn't feel good about it. Some of the light went out of Mrs Holding's face. 'Oh, did he know Miranda?' Great, I was on my way.

'I understand that she met with an accident.'

'Hardly an accident Mr ...'

'Oh, I am sorry, Mrs Holding, I'm Harry Lane, Matthew's father.' The last of the light left her. She was a sad bereaved mother.

'Oh god, the father of the child, she said.' If she hadn't looked so woebegone I would have felt like leaping into the air shouting *Jackpot*. But at the same time my belief that the two Mirandas, Mrs Holding and Chloe had no real relationship to me died a sudden death. 'You better come in. Please call me Sally. As in Harry meets Sally.' She gave me a doubtful smile so I smiled back.

I withheld any information about the other Miranda and Chloe. I needed to make better sense out of the bits of the jigsaw. And I feared for the consequences now that it seemed very likely that Mrs Holding was Chloe's grandmother. In fact I was beginning to see the folly of stirring this old business up.

It will get too confusing if I continue to call my Miranda anything but Amanda for a while. So Amanda she must be.

I was shown pictures of Miranda including one heartbreaking one of Matthew and Miranda holding a newborn baby. I came closer to accepting that Amanda had my granddaughter, or certainly Miranda's daughter, and Miranda had been Matthew's partner. Miranda even looked a bit like a grown up Chloe. Sicker and more dissolute, but a grown up Chloe nevertheless.

I said, 'I understand that both Miranda and the baby died soon after.'

She looked at me, startled. 'Didn't Matthew tell you what happened?'

I shook my head. 'Matthew was not a communicator, and was ill by the time he got back to New Zealand. I didn't know until a mutual friend arrived home and told me something of what went on. But I am still not clear on the details. Of what did they die and where are the graves?'



The story poured out. It was slightly sanitised so that I would not be too shocked at either Miranda's or Matthew's behaviour but reading between the lines I could see two bewildered, immature young people playing at being grown ups and then parents. Sally Holding had repeatedly begged them to come home. Miranda had repeatedly said that all was well. Through increasing illness, pregnancy, child birth and ultimately the death of both her and the child, Sally tried to get them back. 'In the end I received a visit from the Foreign Office, telling me my Miranda was dead and she had already buried the child in an unmarked grave. They couldn't even find my granddaughter's grave. That is what Miranda had come to in the end.'

This was getting very difficult. I had stumbled into a hornet's nest of future difficulties. I had to think of Amanda and wonder if Sally Holding might not want to take her granddaughter from an unknown woman.

She carried on, 'I had some hope that Miranda's friend Amanda would be able to get her home. She sounded such a sensible young woman.'

This affected me like a physical blow. She was not unknown. The use of her name so soon after learning it for myself had a strange power. Truly names have a spirit of their own. The Holdings knew of Amanda. But then why shouldn't they? Amanda was there. She had identified the body. Miranda sent home messages. Not very good ones apparently, but unlike Matthew, Miranda had kept in reasonable touch. I had judged every young uncaring doped up person by the standards of Matthew.

'What did Amanda do?

'She cared for Miranda and Chloe. That was the baby's name.' I nodded. 'She did what Miranda was unable to do, but it all came to nothing. She couldn't get her back on track. I had hoped she could keep Chloe alive and bring her back. I tried to communicate with her directly but there was so much moving about. I should have gone there but have you any idea how hard it is to deal with young people when they have adopted that kind of lifestyle? Oh of course. I am sorry. You have your own tragedy'

I let her talk herself out and thanked her for her time and asked if she would speak to me again the next day before I went home. She agreed, and so I went to buy food, had a light evening meal, and contemplated the morrow. I could not in all honesty fail to tell her that her granddaughter was alive and well and living a few hundred kilometres away, but also I dared not do so. She was comparatively young and healthy and missing her family. She might very well want her granddaughter back and as things stood now it seemed that Amanda had the status of a kidnapper. It felt like a horrible betrayal of Amanda if I said anything and a betrayal of the Holdings if I didn't. I ate a worried tea and went to bed with a rather foolish motel book.

Dr Lake slid back her chair and called back over her shoulder. 'Hey Anis, come and look at this.' Anis, rested his hands on her shoulders and peered at the screen. He read.

'Hello Robyn, I got your email address from your father's address book. You don't know me of course but I'm Miranda Holding and I recently returned from Nepal with your niece Chloe. I understand that there is some problem between you and your father but he has suffered a lot from your mother's and Matthew's death and your estrangement has made him very sad. Now he is much happier and helping to look after me and Chloe, but I am sure he is missing his family. I wonder if you could find it in your heart to forgive and forget whatever happened between you and get in touch, or perhaps come home for Christmas.' There followed a number of addresses and ways to get in touch.

Anis squeezed Robyn's shoulders. 'Up to you love. I don't really know what the problem is and I've never been to New Zealand. Want to take me home?'

Robyn said, 'Perhaps it's time. But where did a daughter of Matthew's come from? It's the first I've heard of it. If it requires dad to help out then things are pretty desperate.'

Anis said, 'You really don't like him do you?'

Robyn replied, 'Do you know what it is like to grow up with a distant and distracted mother and a father who is usually not there at all, but comes home occasionally to tell you that you are a grave

disappointment? He was never backward about explaining to me that I had chosen the wrong career. I had a the wrong hobbies and interests. I had the wrong friends. When I was younger I tried to adapt to please him, but I learned that every time I changed the bar went up a bit higher. When B grades weren't enough I got A's and then I was told that there was someone in the class doing better. Eventually I learned to despise his standards and values as a way of self preservation. By the time I graduated in medicine I was almost acceptable to him, but then I went off to do work for the poor and was rubbish again. So now I really don't care, the old fool can think what he likes of me. But if you want to see New Zealand it is probably time. And meeting my niece and this rather odd sounding mother may be an interesting experience.'

During the night I rehearsed ways to find out if Sally Holding wanted a child in her house either as a visitor or permanently. Once I thought I had my story ready I went visiting again.

I was given a particularly good cup of coffee and cakes. I was made comfortable and I was shown more memorabilia of Miranda with passing reference to Matthew. It was brought home to me that Sally Holding, whom I had not heard of until recently knew a lot more about the antics of Matthew and his offspring in Nepal than I did. In fact the bitter reality was that I knew nothing of Matthew's or Robyn's so different lives.

When the flow eased off I said, 'Just think that if Amanda had got Chloe home in time, you would now be debating with her which of the two of you should bring up a four year old child.'

'Oh good heavens, I hope not. I made enough of a mess of bringing up my own child when I was much younger. How I wish a sensible young person like Amanda could have got hold of her and looked after her properly.'

That was enough. It was what I wanted to hear. I said, 'Sally, I have not been honest with you, but there is something that I think you should know. I would prefer to leave this to Amanda to tell you but since I am here and she is not I'll tell you. Now this may not be right. There are some things that I don't understand and I may be the victim of a deception so I don't want to raise your hopes unnecessarily, but it appears possible that Amanda Morgan has returned from Nepal, via India and for reasons of her own is impersonating your daughter. She has with her a child called Chloe, who looks not unlike Miranda.'

I expected an outburst of some sort. Perhaps joy, perhaps anger, perhaps both, but nothing happened. Sally sat frozen. Then she said, 'Give me half an hour to pack. I'll drive you.'

I was sufficiently disconcerted to ask stupidly, 'Drive me where?'

She said, 'To meet Amanda and my granddaughter.'

'But they may not be who we think they are.'

'If they are called Amanda and Chloe and have been in Nepal and Chloe is similar to Miranda, then I am quite prepared to take the risk. And if they are not then for a few hours I will have had the joy of expecting them to be those two and I will cope with the disappointment,' And while I struggled to gather my wits she left the room.

About half an hour later I was summoned to the garage and we were off.

I was not used to people being more decisive than I and I felt something had been taken from me, but I was returning to Wellington with a woman who respected Amanda as a caregiver and parent and was prepared to love and presumably support Chloe. I was left to just hope that things would come out all right.

Miranda was on the phone excitedly to Graham. 'Sorry to disturb you and Crunchy Carrots, but they are going to come.' The final word said at twice the volume and an octave higher with lots of feeling.

Graham silently attempted to interpret this rather weird message for a few seconds and gave up. 'Crunchy Carrots is nearly done and can wait for a few minutes and I am pleased that they are coming because you are pleased about it, but who is coming?'

‘Oh sorry, I just read the email and was excited and carried away. Robyn Lane and someone called Anis are coming home to meet Chloe and Robyn’s dad.’

‘Is that a good idea?’

‘Of course it is a good idea. She is an aunt and a daughter. She will meet her niece and be reconciled with her father.’

‘Oh ok, that’s great. Thanks for bringing me up to date. I just have to finish Crunchy Carrots and I’ll come over and bring something to eat.’

‘No need, we are having a risotto and I’ve made enough to have some to spare for purveyors of Crunchy Carrots.’

Graham made a rude noise and hung up.

Sally drove swiftly and safely. We made good time going south but I was worried about how late it would be when we arrived. What would I do with her? She didn’t seem to care. She was a woman of quick and resolute decisions. She had decided to see her granddaughter – she seemed to be in no doubt that that is who we were going to – and so she had prepared and gone. Now we were making rapid progress south. I tried to convince myself that Amanda was a foolish girl who deserved to suddenly be confronted with the grandmother from whom she had taken a granddaughter but I was increasingly uneasy. What if she decided I was an untrustworthy betrayer of confidences and went off with Chloe to return to destitution and vagrancy. I rehearsed ways to discourage Sally from being too abrupt in her approach. ‘Please don’t risk frightening Amanda away,’ I said. ‘She is a runner. Don’t tell her who you are immediately. It will give you a chance to see the two of them together without any pressure.’

Sally shrugged. ‘My unmarried name was Yates. Introduce me as a friend of yours called Sally Yates and I will see what I think of her. If it is not Amanda and Chloe then there is no need to take it any further. If she is who you say she is then she has nothing to fear from me and everything to gain. Just take me to Amanda and I will cope with the rest,’ she said.

I distracted her and myself with other topics.

I am not a good driver. I believe I can be good and conscientious but experience has taught me that no matter how well I set off I retreat into my mind. I prepare speeches or examine briefs in my head and soon become foolish. I sold my last car after I entered a motorway on the off ramp. The combination of horror at watching a wall of cars coming towards me at speed and the realisation that I could do this while believing that I was driving cautiously convinced me that I should leave driving to people who are able to maintain concentration for the job in hand. Now I seldom drive, and never while there is something important distracting me. I have found it particularly hard to think clearly since Matthew’s death. Sally seemed to have no such problems. She drove and conversed. Eventually I relaxed and even may have dozed for a while.

I tried to keep her from coming to my home, but she was quite short with me. I had a spare room, we could make a scratch meal or go out. We were past the age of awkwardness, or so she told me. Well, she might have been past the age of awkwardness, but I really did not want her to see how I lived now that Matthew and Joanne were gone. I led her inside, apologising for my bachelor ways, but Miranda had been there before me. Sally looked about and gave me a rueful smile.

‘I’ve seen a lot worse,’ she said. I accepted that as a compliment and did not disabuse her of the notion that I was a competent house maker. We, or perhaps it was just me, were in no hurry to confront Miranda and so we prepared the second bedroom and got it into quite reasonable condition. We cooked a fairly good meal, enjoyed a sociable evening, and retired for the night. It was a pleasant evening but I feared the revelations of the morning.

The high point of Miranda’s day was often the walk to the shops. To Chloe everything was fresh and new. She climbed on walls, she stopped to talk to strangers and dogs. She peered under cars and hedges. Miranda walked slowly – she had no choice – and enjoyed the fact that Chloe was exhausting herself for very little effort from Miranda. When the shopping was done Graham would take Chloe home with him for a few hours to allow Miranda uninterrupted painting. Redecorating

progress was slow with a four year old, but already the tired house was looking fresher and happier. At the shops Chloe gazed awestruck at the groceries in the supermarket. So unlike the street bazaars that had supplied their meagre rations for so long. 'Vegetables and essentials first,' Miranda said. 'Then a muesli bar to take to Uncle Graham's.' Fortunately Chloe had not yet adapted to the idea that everything in a supermarket was there for her use only. She accepted a modest treat and proudly carried it to Uncle Graham's.

Back home, Miranda got quickly onto the job of painting the second bedroom. Pinks and silvers with some dainty fairy images to set it off when it was done. It was after all to be a young girl's room, but Miranda had no idea how long it would stay that way. How long would it be before Harry's largess ran out, or he decided that Miranda was not to remain part of his arrangements? Miranda hated to be deceitful and she hated to take advantage of a man who was housing and caring for her, but she was siphoning off as much money as she dared into her own account. If she had to run, she would run with as much money as she could decently gather. But until that day it was heaven. She had what would soon be a lovely home. She had money, a mission, and friends to keep her and Chloe safe.

There were voices outside. Because she was holding a wet paint roller, Miranda had no choice but to yell, 'Come in, the door is open.'

Harry appeared in the doorway. A woman looked over his shoulder. For a moment Miranda thought that she had seen her before but then she remembered her time away. It was very unlikely.

'This is my friend from Taupo, Sally Yates,' Harry said. He stepped aside and Sally came into the room.

'No handshaking,' Miranda said, 'I am a disaster area of dripping paint. I'm trying to get as much done as possible before Graham brings Chloe back.'

Sally said, 'You have had an exciting time, Harry tells me. You toured Asia with a young child before you brought her back here.'

Miranda laughed. 'Too much excitement. Now the bureaucrats are making it hard for me to be a New Zealand citizen again. Thank goodness for Mr Lane who is helping me out. But I should be settled soon, and once Chloe is at pre-school or school, I hope I can get back into nursing and get on with my life.'

Harry was quick to intervene. 'May I show Sally the rest of your house?' He didn't wait for an answer and turned to Sally. 'She has done wonderful things. It was quite run down when Miranda came here, Sally. The stripping, scraping and plastering are all Miranda with some help from Graham. If I had know how efficient she was going to be I'd have encouraged her not to buy anything else until the basics were done, but I thought it would take too long and they needed furniture.'

Miranda called from the next room, 'I've delayed a few deliveries but the rest gets shifted about and covered up. We will have a mansion in no time.'

Harry muttered in an undertone to Sally, 'She's not wrong about that. She is quite the master decorator. She told me she could get the job done and so you see.'

Sally replied in an equally low voice. 'How did she expect to get away with being Miranda who is a nurse, when Miranda is not a nurse.'

Harry gave her a ironic smile. 'I am learning that Miranda does things first and sorts out the resulting chaos as she goes. I fear for Graham's and my sanity if we are exposed to her much longer. She never really had a hope with the Miranda story and perhaps she never really meant to make it stick. But leave it for now. She will hear us muttering to each other.'

At that moment Miranda called. 'I can hear you, or at least I wish I could. I hope you are saying nice things about my handiwork.'

Sally said, 'I'm speculating on how much I can underpay you to paint my house in Taupo, or better still I hope you will bring Chloe to see me some time. It would make a break away before you start work and school and I need some young people to stir me up a bit.'

A hoot of laughter came from the second bedroom. 'If your house is not child proof, Chloe will stir you up a bit.'

I could not be comfortable. Sally was calm. She had met Miranda without any reaction beyond a slight tensing which could have been a reaction to meeting anyone for the first time. But she was seeing a woman whom she had heard of from her daughter and who was now impersonating that dead daughter. It must have taken its toll on her. I tried to stop her whenever the conversation took an awkward turn but Sally was heedless of any risk.

There was clatter and chatter at the door and Chloe and Graham came in. Chloe stopped at the sight of us and gazed up at Sally in her usual unaffected way. This time there was no doubt that Sally was wrong footed. She stood frozen for a moment but eventually recovered to say, 'Hello, you must be Chloe. I'm Mr Lanes's friend, Sally Yates.'

'Hello. I'm Chloe. I live here now with my Mum.'

Sally reached for Chloe. I could see that she longed to pick Chloe up, perhaps hug her. She believed beyond reasonable doubt that she was looking at her granddaughter. The successful and happy progeny of a troubled daughter. I wondered how much she attributed to our Miranda for the happy healthy child she saw before us. But neither of us knew why Chloe was now the other Miranda's daughter. What had happened to deny us both access to our grandchild for three years?

Reluctantly Sally turned her attention to Graham.

'You were in India with Miranda?' Sally asked.

Graham agreed awkwardly. He was very aware that she had not been Miranda when he knew her and I had not yet told him her original name.

Lunch had all that a lunch of grandparents and two other generations should have. Sally and I cooked and prepared. Graham and Miranda continued to make themselves useful with home renovations and Chloe got in everyone's way convinced that she was being a big help. The difference was that only Sally and I knew who we all were and our relationship to each other.

Sally said, 'Taupo is lovely at Christmas time, I wonder if you would all come and have a few days with me?'

Miranda all but panicked. 'Oh, I'm sorry, I would love that and so would Chloe, but we have some friends coming and I need Graham and Harry. I wonder if we could do Taupo some other time?'

Sally and I exchanged a look. Miranda, who had not seemed to have any friends she particularly wanted to meet was now keen to have us all see someone.

Sally acquiesced quickly. 'Some other time then, but please do come.'

Sally was gracious in her departure. She wished everyone well. Complimented Miranda on Chloe, and her DIY abilities. Suggested to Graham that he had found himself a special woman and went home with me. She was not a shy woman but she found it difficult to invite herself back to my house but she needed to and she did. 'Harry, I need to go home to tie up some loose ends, but I want to see Miranda and put her at her ease and get to know Chloe. Perhaps by then we will know why she is an imposter. May I come back for Christmas?'

If Sally was prepared to put up with me and my house, she was welcome back in a few days time which is what she wanted. I saw her off early the next morning.

'Did you know that Harry had a woman friend?' Miranda asked Graham.

'No, I was convinced he had very little contact with anyone outside of his job once his wife died and pretty much no contact at all with anyone after Matthew died. But she seems quite nice and gets on ok with Harry and his rather remote ways. I hope they stay friends. She seems to be all he has apart from us.'

'I have a weird feeling I've seen her somewhere but I haven't been in New Zealand for several years and almost never in Taupo. She seemed fascinated by Chloe.' Graham shrugged. 'Everyone is fascinated by Chloe. She is a bit of a live wire.'

The next few days were busy ones for us all. Miranda put in as much time on the house as she could spare from Chloe. Graham hurried to finish outstanding work before the summer break so that he



could be with Miranda and Chloe. Sally organised herself to return to Wellington and I was busy calling in favours amongst government bureaucrats. I intended that my Christmas gift to Miranda would be unquestioned New Zealand citizenship and any benefits she was entitled to. This proved harder than I expected. New Zealand has very low tolerance for corruption and what I was asking was not strictly proper even if it was harmless and reasonable. I simply wanted Miranda or Amanda to be able to continue life in New Zealand as one or the other according to her choice and with either identity to be the natural mother of Chloe. I was grateful for a lifetime of bullying, coercion, and stretching the truth on legal documents. Eventually, with promises that I would not reveal where they came from I had a pile of papers that would constitute Miranda's Christmas present. Christmas week got off to a shaky start. Monday morning was clear, warm and still. I knew Miranda was frantically painting and hoping to be mostly done by the end of the week. Graham had disappeared back into the solitary shell of the computer programmer so that he too could be free by the end of the week, so I went to Miranda to offer to take Chloe out for the day. Miranda's usual warm greeting was gone. I was the enemy again.

'No I don't think so Harry. Chloe likes to be here with me. I think in the circumstances it's best if she gets used to me and this house. I still have problems with making people understand she is my daughter and I mustn't weaken that,' and then she turned her back on me and continued sanding a door frame.

I felt as if a knife was carving its way through my intestines. What did I do to young people to make them feel like this? How many times had Robyn and Matthew listened to me in contempt and then turned away to live a life that had nothing to do with me? For a moment I considered raging at her. I was housing her, feeding her, I had spent several days humiliating myself in front of important people to give her a secure future and she had turned on me. But anger would achieve nothing. She would merely desert me as Matthew and Robyn had deserted me.

At last I said, 'Miranda, I don't know what I have done to offend you, but it was not intended. Chloe enjoys my company and she will be much better away from all this dust and paint. But your word is law. Perhaps I can get some overalls and do some scraping instead.'

Miranda stood up and faced me. 'Harry, you know perfectly well what you have done. But you and I once made a pact that I would always tell you where Chloe and I are and you promised that you would never attempt to separate us. Do you hold to that absolutely?'

I agreed that of course that was what I had promised and wanted. What I didn't admit was that I had indeed betrayed Miranda. I didn't know how she knew and I realised that she had no way of knowing that I had checked first that Sally would not attempt to take Chloe, but cowardice overtook me. I said nothing and left it to Sally to make things right again.

Miranda scrutinised me for a moment and then apparently was satisfied and relented. 'Ok, take her out and give her a good time, but remember Harry that I will fight for her for ever. If I need to find her and kidnap her, I shall. Never doubt that.'

I tried to calm her and get out with as little angst as possible. 'I never expected anything else, Miranda, but I am an ageing male taking my granddaughter to a play area and park. I don't need a dressing down like this. I assure you I will be more than ready to give her back in a few hours.'

I could see that Miranda understood she had over reacted. She gave me a repentant smile and told me where to get a few essential clothes and some food to keep Chloe going until lunch.

I was unsure of what a modern child expected of a day out with granddad, although with Chloe's unusual background I think perhaps she didn't know either. So I decided to stick with what I knew to be successful. I returned to *Kid's Palace* intending to later continue on to lunch in the park. I chose well. Chloe amused herself for over an hour at *Kid's Palace* and then selected a takeaway lunch that I am sure her mother would not have approved of and then entertained us both and a bevy of ducks at the park. On the whole I was well pleased with my performance as caregiver and we returned to Miranda exhausted and content. It crossed my mind yet again that ageing is a very tiring process. The thought that some people are responsible for several children 24/7 without respite made me feel sick with vicarious stress and exhaustion.

Sally returned to Wellington. I was quite elated to see her. Apart from the pleasant uncritical company she provided for me, she was also contact with the past. She shared my own mistakes and tragedies and I got strength from her presence.

The day she arrived we went to Miranda's home to see her and Chloe and to marvel at the progress on the house.

Miranda and Sally had got on well and I hoped for – but did not expect a warm welcome. Miranda greeted her with, 'Why have you come back?'

Sally was taken aback and obviously hurt. Immediately I repented my failure to warn and protect.

But Sally was her usual calm self and rose to the challenge. 'I would not have had anyone close to go to for Christmas and I thought I would be welcome with you and Harry.' Miranda didn't reply.

Sally said, 'Is there something wrong?'

'You know there is something wrong.'

Sally gave me a desperate look then turned back to Miranda. 'You know who I am don't you?'

Miranda said, 'I have made it quite clear to Harry that I will never give Chloe up. I will find her and get her back if anyone succeeds in getting her off of me. When you were here last time I thought I recognised you. Miranda had a picture of her mother in her baggage. I went back to check it out.'

Sally nodded. 'We handled it badly. We were afraid that you would feel threatened by me if you knew who I was, but I can see we just made it worse. I promise you that I consider you an excellent mother for my granddaughter and an excellent substitute for Miranda. I do not question the suitability of what you have done.'

I felt this was a bit strong since we didn't know what Miranda, or in this case Amanda, had in fact done. But I was very grateful to Sally for sharing the blame of concealing her identity. It had not been her idea, but mine, and if she had had her way she would have come straight to Amanda, declared her acceptance of the idea and all would have been well.

I added, 'I was going to keep it for a surprise but I can tell you that I have solved most and possibly all of your identity problems. As long as there is nothing else unforeseen, you will be able to be either Amanda or Miranda, as you wish. In either case you will be Chloe's guardian.'

Although she was still a little angry with us Miranda was unable to prevent the joy from showing.

The masquerade was over. 'I'm not much of a con artist am I?' she said.

'Actually you did amazingly well. You got yourself and a child across the world on a false passport but really you never had a chance. It is too easy in the modern world to track people's location, family, paper trail, whatever it takes. Identity fraud can be done but it takes a professional with considerable resources and preferably no friend or family ties.'

'I suppose when Graham went to get me it gave it all away? I really couldn't get my mother to understand why secrecy was important'

I said, 'You appear on Miranda's death certification as a witness and I had your last known address when you were preparing to leave the country. So I already had your mother's address before I asked Graham to confirm it. But you weren't keeping secrets before you went away were you? And we still don't know why you started.'

Miranda said, 'I'll take Chloe over to the neighbours. They've been asking for her to come to play and you can ring Graham. I want him to hear this.'

While Graham was on his way over and Miranda was finding someone to look after Chloe we made tea and put out cakes and biscuits. Once we were all settled comfortably Miranda started her story. To save confusion she shall be Amanda during the telling of it.

Amanda began, 'I'm sorry I was deceitful. I thought it was necessary at the time and I wasn't sure when I would be able to stop. It seems now that everyone who matters knows more or less the truth and Harry says he can make it right with the authorities, so it ends here.'

After I finished my nursing training I worked in Wellington for a year, but I wanted to go somewhere else to work and before that I went to India for my OE.'

Miranda smiled at Graham. 'That's where I met Graham and failed to have my wicked way with him.'

'I was shy,' chipped in Graham.

'You can say that again. But I digress. India was fun, but I heard that there was a group of New Zealanders in Nepal and that sounded exciting so I went to join them. But it wasn't exciting. They were a dissolute group who spent their time drinking and worse and seldom got out to do anything or see anything. Three of them were Miranda, Matthew and Chloe. It was obvious that Matthew and Miranda were not really fit to look after Chloe. They were loving and responsible up to a point, but then they would lose focus and she would get hungry and dirty. I tried to get them to realise that they had to take her seriously and would need to take her back to New Zealand for better care and support, but they were ...,' she trailed off.

I said, 'It's ok, don't spare our feelings. We can guess what was happening.'

Amanda gave me a grateful look. 'There was no reasoning with them and although they were quite good parents some of the time, I couldn't leave Chloe with them in the hope she would be fed and cared for. So I took charge of her. Miranda and Matthew just seemed to accept that I was Chloe's nurse. Chloe was about 18 months at the time and small and struggling. I enlisted the help of some Nepalese women who were really good caring surrogates and we soon had Chloe healthy and happy. But then I didn't know what to do next. I wanted to go home and get on with my life, but I had Chloe, and Miranda was still Chloe's mother. So I stayed with Miranda. I know now I should have got in touch with you both.' Amanda glanced across at Sally and myself. 'But I waited to see what would happen. And while I waited I became Chloe's proper mother. Chloe started calling me Mummy, or *aama*. actually - the Nepalese equivalent - and Miranda became more and more distant. I was new to being a mother with a one year old child and I didn't feel very confident so then I started to worry about what would happen if I told any of the grandparents what was happening or if I went to the Consulate. I thought they would take Chloe from me and send her home. I couldn't bear that so I let more time go by. I kept on at Miranda to get herself together and go home. I might have been able to give Chloe back to Miranda if she had returned to health. Not anyone else. But it didn't happen. Miranda became worse and she was told to go to the city to a good hospital, but she didn't care.' Amanda wiped away a furtive tear. 'She really didn't care by that stage. I think she expected to die and was waiting for it. She told me that I was to look after Chloe and gave me most of her possessions to help me do it. I was rather surprised she still had money.'

There was a choked sound from Sally. 'I kept sending it to get her home.'

Amanda glanced at her. 'She must have spent quite a lot, but I was glad for what was left because I had run out. I had not expected to stay nearly as long as I had and had not expected to have a child to care for.

Eventually some Nepalese took Miranda to a little hospital – more like a medical centre really – not far away. I left Chloe with some local women and went there and Miranda gave me the last of what she owned. She told me to take Chloe home and that she had told the doctor at the centre that Chloe had died and been buried at the camp and that all of her belongings had been sold for drugs. That was her way of clearing it so that I could make off with Chloe and her possessions with no questions asked. I went along with it. Two days later I was called back to the hospital to confirm her identity.' Amanda's voice broke at that point and she stopped. We waited for her to be able to continue. 'She was dead.'

'Where was Matthew all this time,' I asked.

'He sat with her holding her hand almost without a break for the last three weeks of her life.'

'Loving and useless as always,' I said.

Through her sadness and tears, Amanda laughed. 'I'm afraid so, Harry.'

'The doctor – there was only one and I'm not quite sure she was a doctor – was sick of us. She was hopelessly overworked. She had hard working Nepalese patients through every day. They lived a tough life and expected to be patched up and sent on their way. She didn't have patience with lazy drug soaked travellers who used her resources. She actually asked me to confirm the death of the child, as she put it, but not to identify the burial place, if I knew it, because the authorities would insist on the body being exhumed and autopsied. Well as you can imagine, I was happy with that. I was now Miranda Holding with Miranda's passport showing a child on it. I had Miranda's bank account and her possessions. Life was going to be complicated if I became Amanda again. I

reasoned that it would take a while for anyone at the border to know that Miranda had died so I set off as fast as I could for India. I crossed the border without any trouble and that was that. I was Miranda with a child I loved who I would not give up and an identity that seemed to work to get me around the world.'

There was a moment's silence. 'But where have you been?' asked Graham.

'Well there were two problems. One was that I was still afraid that if I went back to New Zealand someone would find me and expect to take Chloe off of me. I wanted more time to establish myself as a mother. The other thing was that I did not have enough money to get back and of course the longer I waited the poorer I got. I knew my own mother was poor and would probably make such a fuss that it wouldn't be worth the worry. So in the end I begged and struggled and eventually got a job in a small medical care centre that didn't ask too many questions about credentials. I worked there about a year and then I fell in with a New Zealander on the fringes of the Diplomatic Corps.' Amanda was clearly stricken for a moment. She looked down in silence and we waited. Then she glanced across at Graham.

'I'm not proud of how I treated him or how he treated me but he was coming home and arranged for me to come too. I left him at Auckland airport and used the last of the money I had getting back to Mum's place.'

She sat back, more relaxed now that the story was told. 'The rest you know.'

Sally said, 'May I welcome you into my family as my daughter? And the mother of my granddaughter?'

I hurriedly interrupted her. 'Before you answer that, Miranda, I have something relevant to what you say. I thought it would wait for Christmas but I think it needs to be dealt with now. I have convinced certain reluctant authorities that probably a mistake was made in Nepal and I have a copy of the original death notification and another one that asserts that Miranda Holding was a witness to the death of Amanda Morgan. I strongly suggest you agree to one or the other and with a bit of help from some friends I can get it accepted as the correct version. Neither acknowledges the death of Chloe and in the event that you choose to be Amanda I can arrange formal adoption. Points to consider are that if you go for Miranda the easy bit will be that you have a delightful child and mother but your previous life will be more difficult. We will have to rearrange to transfer your qualifications and also old friends that you meet in the street may be puzzled. If you are Amanda then the opposite applies. Old friends and qualifications are not a problem but family ties will take some manipulation.

Miranda was truly amazed. 'You have arranged that already?'

'There are still a few bumps, but we can pull it off.'

Miranda said, 'Well in that case, I can reverse Sally's request and ask if it is ok for me to be a Holding?'

The two women got up and gave each other a hug. 'Welcome to the family,' Sally said. 'I loved my first Miranda and would have done anything for her, but after about ten years old, I don't think we ever really made proper contact again. I hope I get a great deal closer to my new Miranda.' I couldn't bear it and hurried from the room pretending to go to the toilet. Soon after, Graham took me home. We left the three females to bond.

The last three days to Christmas continued to be hectic. Graham finally finished what he was doing and rushed to help Miranda make their house respectable. Sally spent most of her time with Miranda and Chloe doing shopping and preparations. She truly seemed to have adopted Miranda and Miranda seemed to be delighted. I pressed on with convincing reluctant bureaucrats that they should accept the various pieces of paper I pushed under their noses and by Christmas eve I had Miranda and Chloe back alive again, Amanda Morgan was dead and nurse Amanda Morgan's credentials had been transferred to nurse Miranda Holding. I was very pleased with myself, but uncomfortable about what Miranda was cooking up for me. She had made it clear that I was to front up to her house on the afternoon before Christmas to receive my surprise. Although I had bought bits and pieces for Miranda and Chloe for Christmas my final flourish was to be that I would offer

the house at a modest price. Graham had all but demanded that I stop housing Miranda, and he would take over. I protested but lost. The world had moved on. Miranda, now wearing clothes that I had paid for looked like every other young woman, virtually naked but nonetheless wearing multiple layers of skin tight stretch fabric from head to foot. She looked spectacular and probably could have chosen from a very wide range of men but she had eyes and desires only for Graham. He was a changed man.

The day before Christmas we gathered up the mince pies that Sally had made and some small presents to get in the mood and went visiting. The Ambrosia Way house is adequate for three people but it is not large. When we arrived there were already guests and we rather filled it up. I was introduced to Anis someone, a slender dark Arabic looking man who made me feel uncomfortable in such a close family gathering. I prefer people and cultures I know and understand. In the corner a woman was helping Chloe organise some new toys. I felt I recognised her but she was hunched over Chloe with her back to me. And then she stood up. I made a fool of myself. I swore loudly although Chloe was in the room. I walked forward, but then unsure of my reception I stepped back and knocked a plate off of the table. At last I gathered myself enough to say, 'Good God, it's Robyn.' At that point Miranda lost patience with us, and being rather more direct about these things than I can ever be, said, 'Oh for goodness sake give each other a hug and stop smashing up my house.' And since neither Robyn nor I would ever have got around to it by ourselves it was the right thing to insist on. For the first ten minutes or so conversation was stilted and difficult but Miranda and Anis wore us down with ridicule.

As we awkwardly discussed where we had been and what had happened to each other without making any real progress. Miranda said. 'Harry, ask her where she grew up. You might find you have something in common.'

Anis, who, up to that point had been watching our performance anxiously suddenly saw the funny side and hooted. 'Robyn love, tell him who your father is. He might know him.' It was childish and a little cruel but it worked. It gave me the courage to take Robyn's hands in mine and say, 'I have missed you so much. And I have been so proud of you.' Robyn burst into tears and threw her arms around me. It was a moment that came thirty years later than it should. But it had come and it was good.

Behind me I heard Miranda say. 'Boy, was that hard work.'

That evening we couldn't get enough of each other. It was a weird group, so different in many ways. Largely unknown to each other but tied by strong bonds. Miranda told and retold aspects of her time overseas and in New Zealand hospitals for the benefit of Robyn and Anis. I recounted aspects of my job and lately the difficulties of making Miranda a valid New Zealander again. Sally gave a heart rending account of attempting to bring up the other Miranda and how much a failure that had made her feel. Of course we all assured her that she had done her best but one does not easily get over the downhill slide of a loved one and their ultimate death. We learned that her husband had left when Miranda was fourteen, unable to take any more of a troubled and troublesome young person and a distracted wife. Now Sally had a family again and it showed every sign of being a united and strong family that she could be proud of. I felt content and complete in a way I never had before until Graham asked about Matthew.

'We've talked about everyone and nearly everything, but I have still never got you to tell me about Matthew's final weeks. I think in present company this can go on no longer. Why did he go swimming in Autumn on a dangerous beach?'

I struggle and made excuses. I tried to distract them. But I was sitting next to Robyn. She had a right to know. I had the beady eyes of Graham and Miranda on me, wanting to know. Strangely I think it was only Anis who suspected the story was too hard to tell. I am a coward in matters of self disclosure. I wriggled and squirmed but I could not escape and in the end the pain of silence was greater than the pain of disclosure.



I began, 'I managed to get Matthew home. I didn't know what he was doing, only that he was ill. I had never heard anything about either of the Mirandas or Chloe and so I could not know that his Miranda had just died. But he emailed and as usual it was the absolute minimum. He said that things were bad and if I sent money he would use it to come back. I didn't believe him. I thought he would use it for drugs or perhaps living expenses or travel until the next time he said he would be coming home. But on that last occasion he bought a ticket and came. I was both pleased and dismayed. I had him back, but what was I to do with him? He sat around the house. He was furtive and uncommunicative as usual. He was probably hiding drugs and was often drunk although by then I didn't dare keep alcohol in the house and he had to hide anything that he had.' My words caught in my throat. I had come to the hard bit. 'But I believed in jobs – in meaningful employment. I thought if he got a job it would give him a sense of pride.' I felt Robyn move beside me. I think she may have guessed where this was heading, or perhaps she remembered uplifting speeches about how valuable it is to have the best, most profitable job one can get. 'I bribed a local timber yard to take Matthew. He was to stack timber. I knew he wouldn't be able to do much but it would be a start. I set it all up. I told them that I would pay them whatever money was owed in wages. It would cost them nothing and he might be able to do a little.' Again the words caught in my throat and I stopped. A voice near me said, 'Don't go on if it is too hard.' I think it must have been Anis or Miranda, but I was past caring. It was too late to stop. The words had a power of their own. 'I still had complete faith in my own judgement. I had faith in productive work too. It was the last time I had that faith but I still had it long enough to destroy Matthew. I told Matthew that he had a job and should be proud. He laughed. I became angry and said he must go. He argued and said he would be unable to cope with it. I told him he just needed a bit of determination and he would succeed. That's what every parent tells their children right?'

'It's certainly what mine told me,' Robyn said, but she squeezed my arm in an effort to make it a tease.

I carried on. It was getting harder but more important to tell. 'Then there came a moment. I saw him change. I can see him now deciding to take action. I thought he had decided that he agreed with me. That he had overcome his doubts about himself. I had won. He would be an upright citizen with a job. Oh what a fool I was'

Robyn put her arm around me completely. Our closeness might have saved Matthew if it had been there from the start, but that was water under the bridge now.

'He went in to the kitchen to cut a lunch.' Suddenly I was sobbing out loud. I longed to be able to stop but it was impossible. How that lunch has haunted me. Why did he cut a lunch? Was it to show me that he could be a reasonable person - or was it a sick joke at my expense. If I could have him back for a minute, that is what I would ask him - why did he cut a lunch? Behind me I heard Chloe ask what was wrong with granddad and Miranda replied that he is very sad because his son died. Chloe came to me and got on my knee. I didn't think she should be there but perhaps she would not understand the rest.

'He went into the kitchen to cut a lunch,' I repeated. And again I had to pause. 'And he went to work. He left me cheery and positive. He had made his decision, I had driven him to it. He went off to work resolute and determined, but he didn't go to work. He walked past the timber yard and carried on all the way to the beach. Probably he deliberately exhausted himself. He was puny and emaciated still. He put the lunch down neatly beside the seawall.' Here I wanted to shout obscenities at Matthew and the ways of the world, but I had Chloe on my knee and I had enough mastery of myself to stay quiet.

'He put the lunch down neatly beside the seawall,' I said again as soon as I could. 'And stripped to his underwear and put his clothes neatly on top.' And strangely at this point I became quite calm. I wiped my face and said to Chloe in case she was upset. 'Isn't granddad silly to cry like that over something that happened a long time ago.'

She smiled uncertainly at me.

'And then he swam straight out to sea until he died.' I waited for them to absorb the moment and my culpability but I didn't want to be interrupted. I added, 'But I had some luck, Oh yes it was not

all bad. His body floated around to Hetrock Bay which has dangerous currents and so the coroner found it easy to decide it was an accidental death by drowning. That was good wasn't it? No suicide and definitely no question of murder. And yet if I had taken him out and held his head under the water I couldn't have done it better.'

Robyn was still holding me, but she is a strong woman toughened by the horrors of war. She knows when to call things bluntly and openly as she sees them. 'Oh for goodness sake, dad, it wasn't you. Matthew was off the rails before I went to university. You and mum did your best, but none of us could make sense of him.'

Graham said, 'In fact Harry you are a bit of a fool. You have been beating yourself up for years and calling yourself a killer. When in fact you kept on trying when others would have given up.'

Matthew was simply one of life's misfits. In his own way he probably tried as hard to get himself sorted out as you did. Sometimes things don't work, even when we all try to do our best.'

I felt absolutely drained and rather foolish. But I also felt a huge relief and happiness.

Miranda jumped up and began to make coffee and put out more food, 'Well thanks for sharing, I'm glad I know what happened and I agree with Robyn and Graham. From what I saw of him in Nepal there seemed to be no way back.'

I doubt that any of them entirely believed what they were saying but I felt much better for it. The day finished well and we were all good friends by the end of it.

My story is at an end. I will bore you only a little with Christmas day. It was a huge success. It would have been hard for it to fail. It was a first Christmas in New Zealand for Chloe and Anis and the first for a long time for Robyn and Miranda and it was the first since a huge weight of doubt and guilt had been lifted from me and Sally. We were all together – that same disparate group from all over the world and yet with so much in common. We filled the house to capacity yet still found space when the neighbours arrived with their two children. We had everything that Christmas needs, but almost nothing of a traditional Christmas. Miranda allowed us only vegetarian food. I grumbled but was ignored and anyway it tasted much better than my usual fare. Anis protested that he had had a Muslim upbringing and Robyn asked what that had to do with anything and he said nothing but he felt he ought to make the point. Robyn said that since there was no point would he be quiet and he agreed never speak again. Graham made us walk around the Yule log and bless it or something but although we obligingly did it, I don't think any of us knew what we were doing – nor did we care – it was that sort of gathering. You might be thinking that this is a love story and that I ended up in Taupo with Sally. But you are wrong, although she comes to see her granddaughter often and is a welcome guest at my home when she does. Miranda, Graham and Chloe go north often to stay with her, but what I did was even more radical - I went back to work. A lawyer with a knowledge of bending Government rules without getting anyone into strife is a valuable person. I only work a few hours a day because I want to spend time with my granddaughter and her adopted parents.

I remain at heart a silly old man who missed too many of life's opportunities, but things are different now and I often think back to the day I had an unexpected visitor and what it has come to mean to me.