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Gliding Through Big Fluffy Clouds



1

Today, wherever you are.

Hi, I really should introduce myself. I'm Nick Middleton, medium height, starting to get a bit heavy around the waist, brown hair going grey, and a moustache to match. Sliding into my mid-fifties and feeling pretty medium in all ways. Mid height and build, middle of the road, middle aged and Middleton.

I've had a career in the technical side of computers to control machinery. You know the stuff that automatically makes and assembles all those things you buy for next to nothing. Boring, nerdy stuff, but it's seen me OK and it kills the 'And what do you do?' conversation at parties.

Things have changed a lot in my life lately and that's what this is all about. Hope you enjoy the read, well most of it, because some of it is not happy. But that's life as I know it.

Sorry Anna's calling to me and I've got to go

2

47 year ago

It is like gliding through big fluffy clouds on a midsummer's day. A day out, in the countryside, away from routine. Big rounded white forms bubble up and tower into the blue sky, forming cliffs, valleys, undulating hills for you to glide round and through. Sometimes you can only see the blue sky above, other times Surrey is spread out below like a map. The fields, the villages, roads and railway lines reduced to miniature. Clear as day.

Then suddenly you are in cloud, become embedded in a featureless glowing white sphere. You have no idea where you are, of your direction or even if you are upside down and sideways. No ground, no sky, just glowing white. A shielded, inner, directionless place.

Then as suddenly you are out into the real world again, the land spread below, the blue heavens above. And in your mind's heart you want it to carry on, like those days in the country all those years ago with Aunt Clara. Running on the Downs, through waist high grass, in between bushes and stands of small trees. Carefree.

But now, as then, you know it will end. You will be called in for tea and bed. You push it from your mind and run on harder, faster, but you are only gliding in happiness and at

the end of the day you know you will come to earth with a bump.

3

April, last year, London

April in London. Easter has gone. Another family Easter, though it felt cold, disconnected. But then a lot of my life felt that way. I'd walked round the block once more. I was fast forming the opinion that she was going to be another disappointment, like so many things in my life. I looked over the road to the small park. Or was it a memorial garden. I didn't know or particularly care. A couple of unkempt, old men sat on a bench sipping from lager cans in paper bags.

Though it was late morning the mist still hung over London. The sun had yet to build the strength to burn it away. Yet it created a different world. A blurry, iridescent, light blue covered everything. Buses, cars, taxis, even people suddenly appeared when they were too close to you, paraded passed and then melted quickly away.

I pressed the bell again. Nothing. I pulled out my mobile and called the number in the advert for tantric therapy, the small ad euphemism for a sex worker that stops at a hand job. I expected no answer. Another time waster. Her ad had

attracted me because of Barcelona and now I was doubting it meant anything.

It rang twice.

“Hi”

“Hi, is that Kapucina?” That was the name in her advert on Craigslist.

“Yes.”

“It’s me, Nick, your twelve o’clock.” I’m annoyed but trying not to say it and in doing so emphasise it by a hundred percent.

“Oh I’m so sorry, I was held up. I’m only seconds away.” That accent again. Too indistinct for me to get, not London, Birmingham, not English, but not odd. Just indistinct.

“How long? I’ve been waiting twenty minutes already.”

“Just round the corner.” She sounded unconcerned. Moments passed in silence but I could still hear the traffic through the phone.

“What are you wearing?”

“A dark fleece, jeans,” I answered.

“I can see you. Look to your right.”

I looked towards the park and on the opposite pavement was a female figure, waving at me, with a mobile to her ear.

She wore tight, low waist denim jeans, a scoop neck t-shirt under a light brown leather jacket and shin high leather boots. And an orange silk scarf, crossed around her neck. But none of that mattered. Wind light, waist length blonde hair streamed out behind her. She was slender and walked with a strut. She walked right off the pavement, still waving at me. A black cab screeched to a halt, the cabbie, rightfully leaning out of his open driver's door window, tried to explain the rules of survival to her, but she just smiled and waved at him too. A smile that resolved anything and the cabbie drove on giving her a wave back.

"You can see me? Yes?" I heard through my phone.

"Oh yes."

In that crystal blue, misty, surreal moment my life was to change. Completely.

Kapucina.

4

July, 47 years ago, Aunt Clara's

I have a deep cut memory that's always been with me. It happened when I was young. It was unexpected, literally came out of the blue, violent and gory. It was like nothing before in my limited experience. It has never left me, rarely a week would go by without it returning to me. Sometimes it would float in alongside something I was thinking about, other times it bubble up through the surface of the present, and sometimes it would hit like a wake up screaming nightmare. And there was a streak that some of it was my fault. If only I hadn't ...

I'm nine. My older sister, Karen, is eleven. Or twelve, I can't be certain or bothered to work it out. But we are with Aunt Clara. Normally we were kept away from her. Except when mum and our new dad couldn't find anybody else who would have us when they wanted to 'be alone'. And that had happened within the second week of the school summer holidays, so we were packed away for a few days.

Not that I cared. Aunt Clara was always happy to see us, gave us great food and sweets, and more than that, lived in a country cottage on the North Downs. You could see for miles, she said on a clear day all the way to France, but back then I didn't know what that was.

She had a friend, Ingrid, from a town called Sweden, and she was a bad woman according to my mum. Apparently all people from Sweden were bad. She certainly had a strange way of saying things. When we stayed with Clara we rarely saw her. She stayed in her room upstairs. What baffled me for a long time was that her room and Aunt Clara's room were the same room.

On our stay last year I had come down, very late at night. It was a warm, humid, thundery night and I just couldn't sleep. As I walked on to the terrace, Ingrid was obviously concerned about Clara's wellbeing as she was closely examining what was between her legs. Aunt Clara obviously wasn't happy as she was gasping and groaning. It took a long time for me to understand why they reacted so badly. I had 'bad boy' nightmares for at least a year as I really didn't know what I'd done wrong.

Still I digress. What I want to record was what happened on the stay a year after that 'incident'. Clara was very pleased to see us and did everything to entertain us and make us feel welcome. I liked it. Such attention, good food like baked beans, just heaven really.

And the Downs. Aunt Clara's cottage was at the end of a track and below it was a dry valley cutting back deeply into the North Downs. It was filled with open grass land with patches of scrub and stunted hawthorn trees.

They were carefree, happy days where my imagination painted the world around me. Karen and I explored the Nile, Amazon, and Himalayas in that valley, never more than five minutes from lemonade and shortcake.

Then on that July day it changed. Reality crashed in from the sky..

5

January, last year, Barcelona

Ah, the beginning. When do things begin?

Does everything have a start? Or do some things slowly evolve out of what is there, crystallize and then we notice them? Notice them only when they have become startlingly obvious? This one is difficult to pinpoint for me, as like most things it had many sources and each one started a small stream that merged with others. A bit like a great river that starts from tens, hundreds of small springs. Streams combine and eventually you have a Thames, a Danube or even an Amazon, something that has a totally different character to any of the bubbling little springs that are its origin.

And one of those sources for me was certainly Barcelona.

For over twenty years I had worked for Dean Fisher Ltd. They made production line machinery for a broad range of manufacturing companies. They had originally been in Smethwick, part of Birmingham but as their products became more sophisticated, eventually being indistinguishable from computers, they left their roots and moved to the Thames Valley, the UK's answer to Silicon Valley in California, ending up on a business park just to the East of Reading, with a West London Sales office. I joined them as a programmer to help support their first range of programmable machines. Well it wasn't really a Dean Fisher machine. In the late 1970's Dean Fisher had been bought out by Neumann-Schwartz, a German company and all design and manufacturing of the machinery was done in Frankfurt. They kept the Dean Fisher name for the UK just in case we Brits still remembered the war.

I was already a programmer of some repute, even if I do say it myself, and this job was ideal for me. Nobody else in the UK operation knew a thing about computers so I was left to get on with my own agenda. That mainly consisted of outsmarting my German colleagues who were the real developers of the new range of machines, the mighty 3000 range. I enjoyed making their 'child' do things they never envisaged and in doing so we won many orders in the UK. I still remember that great day when the head of development in Frankfurt asked me to go and demonstrate an impressive little trick I had developed that seemed to be just what Adam Opel needed in their production line. Wow a trip to

Germany. And wow, it was just what Opel wanted and they ordered ten on the spot. My counterpart in the Frankfurt office, Helmut, never spoke to me again.

My success got me more money, some sort of a promotion and eventually I was appointed Technical Sales Support Manager for the UK. The 'Manager' bit baffled me as I had no staff, so basically I managed myself, usually badly. Hence how I came to be on this trip to Barcelona.

Westin Samuel-Smith, Sales Director for the UK and a list of other non-Germanic European Countries, was leading us forth in a proposal to a major manufacturer based in Barcelona. On the surface our new, about to be launched product, the 9500 range or the 'nine five hundred' as Westin insisted it be called, was a shoe in for their requirements. We'd, well Westin, had courted them for some months and finally they seemed to be ready to make a decision. We were the favourites according to Westin, his Eton trained voice calling all lesser educated mortals to follow him. We techies could only loose this deal he assured us.

So late in January we flew down to Barcelona to give the prospect some much needed 'face time' and expose to him all the still secret features of the 9500. In addition to me, the appointed Sales Executive for the deal, Todd Sherman came along. Westin always did this. A Sales Executive was appointed for each prospect to do the dull, boring stuff, entertain the ugly and smelly and, most of all, to take the blame if we lost. Wins were always Westin's.

I liked Todd. He was an unassuming chap, just shy of six feet but almost painfully thin which did not go well with Westin's nickname for him, 'Tank'. Todd's dark hair had retreated from his temples some time ago and he was now also going grey. We shared the same lack of being impressed by Westin and that often led to long, sarcastic, 'put the world to rights' conversations that usually left us both in stitches. We flew into Barcelona on Monday even though our first chance to meet the prospect was Wednesday, and even then it was in the evening. Westin said it was all about being on the ground, familiarising ourselves with the local environment. Like a military operation he assured us, even though Westin's closest contact with the military was playing with plastic soldiers when he was young.

I had always hated wasted time away from home. Ginny and I had worked well together. We'd married over twenty years ago, her second, my first, and been great since. That's not to say we have not had words, or strops, or whatever you want to call them, because we have, but always resolved them quickly. We brought up Ginny's daughter from her first marriage, Samantha, and our daughter, Natasha to be confident, intelligent ladies, now both at or graduated from University. Two added days on a business trip away had pissed me off to say the least. But that was getting less so now.

Westin always added days onto a trip. Usually it was a day before or after. And the extra days were always for two reasons. One was Westin's wife was planning some sort of

event that he did not want to be present at and / or two, was to exercise Westin's libido. Well that's a polite way to say it. He'd start by trying to impress some poor, unfortunate, ever younger lady, in the hotel bar then if she gave him the FO he would go to a dodgy massage parlour, brothel, whatever and pay to get his end away. It rankled with me.

But then came Barcelona. It changed my view.

6

January, last year, Barcelona

We had landed in the middle of the afternoon and taken a mad taxi ride to our hotel in the centre of Barcelona.

"Meet in the bar at six," commanded Westin after we checked in. We were all on different floors. I was the last stop for the lift, sixth floor. Westin was fourth, Todd a lowly second. I'd showered, changed and was in the bar just after six, hoping that Westin would brief us on the prospect and the plan of attack. False hope for the former, but spot on for the latter.

"Have a few bebies here and see what occurs," he started after taking a deep swig from a bucket sized glass of gin and tonic. "Then if it's dull we'll go out and see what's on offer, have a bite and back here for night caps."

“Great,” I replied in a flat tone.

Todd sounded more enthusiastic but his eyes were screaming ‘OH NO!’ However Westin held Todd’s remuneration and even employment in his hand so Todd did what was necessary to pay the mortgage, car loan, loan for the new kitchen, loan for the holiday apartment, all of which his wife had insisted they needed.

The third round of drinks that Westin had ordered from the waitress were coming to an end and Westin’s one and only attempt at finding solace for the evening had fallen flat. She was an attractive lady in a crisp, dark blue business suit and sat alone in the settee set next to us. Westin walked over and invited her to join us, but she replied with a cool ‘no thanks’ without even giving us a look, then was immediately joined by five male colleagues. The next stage was obvious to me. We’d leave the hotel, walk the streets until Westin found a bar that might offer the type of entertainment he sought, then get drunk and return without Westin, either before or after having something like a meal.

Westin stood up.

“Right lads, let’s find some action!”

I’d had enough.

“I’m not feeling too good. Must be those prawns on the plane. I’ll give it a miss tonight.” Todd looked mortified.

“Got a promise have we?” Westin answered quick as a shot.

“Not that I know of, and with my stomach feeling this way I don’t think I’d do too well.” It was an unconvincing sounding answer.

“Well Todd, it’s just you and me to uphold the honour of Dean Fisher and England!” And with that they left, Westin giving me a big wink.

At first I went back to my room and looked through my presentation slides, starting to plan something for Wednesday evening. Something sharp, interesting and short, as I would be in the worst place for a presenter – stopping people finishing for the day. I managed a first cut of a twenty minute run which I thought was about right but no doubt Westin would change it before Wednesday. I put the TV on flipped through the various channels, eventually settling for BBC World because I could understand it. I may have dozed a little due to the early start needed to get to Heathrow and suddenly it was ten o’clock and I needed to eat.

The bar did snacks so that’s where I ended up. When I had come in it had been nearly deserted and I had taken a stool on the corner near to one end of the bar. I sipped my lager waiting for the club sandwich, and as I did the bar filled up. The woman who earlier had brushed off Westin came in with her entourage and formed a circle in the middle of the bar. A few other groups drifted in, some taking the settee sets, others blocking more of the bar. The waitress arrived with

my club sandwich, fries and a pickle, the same snack I could and have eaten in any international hotel anywhere in the world, but it was savoury and comforting. I was tackling the second quarter when a woman walked in through the double doors from the lobby. She had dark hair, pulled back from her forehead by a band, the rest hanging down well below her shoulders. She was well tanned, or maybe had lightly coloured skin, high cheekbones, and an olive shaped face with a small chin. Her dress was like a throwback to the 1970's, a highly patterned, dark kaftan. Although confident in her step, she stopped just to one side of the door and looked around. Then she saw what she wanted and walked on. The Kaftan was well cut and flowed with her, keeping it just off the heeled sandals while a side slit gave a glimpse of thigh as she walked. She was attractive and drew glances from around the bar.

And she walked up to me.

With a hand on the stool next to me, she smiled and said something I didn't understand.

"Sorry."

"You speak English, yes? Is this chair taken?"

"er no not at all, please take it."

"Thank you," she said and slipped onto the high seat, her foot finding the cross bar high on the stool and split in the

side of the kaftan giving me a pleasant exposure of tanned thigh. The bartender was already waiting.

“Senora?”

She ordered, and a large, mixed fruit juice arrived in what would have passed as a flower vase anywhere else. She drew heavily on the two straws then looked at me and smiled. I realised I was staring and felt uncomfortable. Her hand reached out and covered mine.

“Sorry, were you hoping for somebody else?”

“er no not at all. I’m alone,” I blabbered, looking away as I started to stare again, this time at her carefully made up eyes that had an intricate pattern of eyeliner running from the outer side of each eye.

“Please continue your meal,” she said directly engaging my eyes then looking down at my plate and my hand which still held a half-eaten quarter of club.

I took another bite and followed through with a couple of thin fries, dipped in ketchup for good measure.

“It’s not good for a man of your age,” she said looking sideways at me between sucks on the straws. Now close up I thought she was stunningly attractive in a very sensual way.

“I know, just felt like indulging myself tonight.”

“Do you like indulging yourself?”

Something broke the glass and alarm bells started. My mind's voice started to nag me. 'You've travelled a lot. Been in many bars in many countries. How many times has the most attractive woman in the place made a beeline for you then, within five minutes, asked if you like indulging yourself? How many times? Is that none, nada, zilch? Except when she had a financial motive. Any minute now she's going to give you the menu and price list. 100, 150, 200 or whatever euros. If it looks too good to be true, then it probably is'.

Probably, now there's a word that leaves the door ajar.

"Now and again," I replied and took another large bite. She waited until I had finished the mouthful and then held out her hand.

"I'm Zoraida."

I went to take the offered hand, then realised mine was covered in grease from the fries.

"Just a moment," I said, picking up the napkin and wiping my fingers.

"That's better." I took her hand. "I'm Nick, Nick Middleton." Dumb wad, it should have been 'Middleton, Nick Middleton rendered in a deep, manly tone'. Must be the alcohol.

"And what is Nick Middleton doing in Barcelona on his own?"

"Business meeting, later in the week. What about you?"

“I’ve spent the weekend with a couple giving them tantric love making training. I thought I’d stay one more day and go and see the Gaudi buildings again. I find them inspiring, erotic. I’ll go back to Mallorca tomorrow. I have a tantric retreat there just outside Palma.”

Tantric, lovemaking, couple, Mallorca, retreat. Which part of that should I latch onto and follow. Obviously it should be Mallorca.

“A couple? Is that normal? I mean usual?”

“Yes but not always. I help a lot of men to understand their orgasm, and women too. But couples I enjoy most. It is so intimate, so rewarding to be one with an intimate partnership and to teach them how to satisfy each other more. I feel it is a great privilege to be invited into such a space.”

My club sandwich suddenly looked and tasted like cardboard. I pushed it away, screwed up the napkin and dropped it on top of the plate.

“er what do you do?”

“I’m a tantrika, a tantric goddess you may say. I take people on their journey to discover their inner sexuality. It liberates them, let’s them be who they really are, and enjoy their sexual being.”

I heard myself say nothing for far too long. She took another draw on the straws.

“I usually start with an erotic massage, from head to toe, body to body before arousing them.” In a way she made it sound like making sausages, a normal part of everyday life. But the sound of her voice was like acoustic sex. I hoped the subdued lighting was hiding my warming face.

“I’m a great fan of massage,” I said when she paused. “We went to the Maldives and a spa visit was included. Since then we’ve had a masseuse visit us at home at least once a month. It’s great for relaxing us.” The Maldives had been paid for out of last year’s bonus. Two weeks of desert island bliss. The only disappointment was the relaxation and exotic surroundings did not rekindle Ginny’s passion. Not one little bit. And maybe that was why my views were changing.

“It is indeed good for relaxing. What sort of massage, Swedish?”

“Yes, and Linda, that’s the name of the masseuse we use, usually finishes with a little Indian head massage. Just takes all the stress away. We usually just stay in and get an early night afterwards.”

She looked at me, eye to eye for what seemed like a long time. I felt she was weighing me up, trying to make a decision about me. I smiled back limply.

“Well Nick Middleton, I would bet I can give you a massage that will make you so much more relaxed.”

The ‘only 100, 150, 200 euros’ flashed into my mind again. She drew on the straws again, her cheeks hollowing with the suction. Her glass emptied and she turned to look at me and her hand found mine on the edge of the bar, covering it again.

“What you are thinking is wrong. This will be my gift. My present to you to start you on your journey to a liberated life.”

“er”

“Don’t be shy or afraid. Once you give yourself into my hands you will drift into bliss. Come now, you can shower in my room.”

‘Don’t you dare move you dumb wad!’ It was that inner voice again.

I slipped off my stool and stood beside her, offering my hand to help her to the floor. She took it, collected her small clutch bag and led me across the bar. Were those looks of envy or were they the ‘what a mug’ variety? A memory came into my mind of a hotel restaurant in the Wirral. I was eating alone in corner table. A few tables in the middle of the room where raised up about a step, and generally more brightly lit. A young woman, slender, with a low cut, strappy dress was dining with a portly, florid man. The waiters fawned and

hovered all evening. As they left the head waiter thanked him profusely and wished him a good night. The diner weaved his way to the exit followed by his glamorous companion. As she passed the head waiter he said in a low but carrying voice, "See you same time tomorrow Charlene."

We went to Zoraida's room on the fourth floor. Well room was not quite right. All fourth floor rooms were suites and spacious ones. She guided me through a lounge, a bedroom and into the en suite.

"Please shower, and use the toilet. You must be able to totally relax."

I did as I was told. When I came out of the shower my clothes had gone from the chair in the corner of the bathroom. 'You fool! How old are you? Travelled the world! Credit card gone, luckily your passport is still in your room. The room opened by the keys in your jacket pocket. Dumb ass!'

She came in. The kaftan was gone. A lace corset covered her body, and there was a tiny thong I think.

"I've laid your clothes out on the bed so they don't crease." And beyond her in the bedroom I could see them. She stepped closer and took the towel that was hanging unused in my hands from me.

"I'll dry you." And she did. Everywhere.

Leading me by the hand she walked on the balls of her feet, an exaggerated step at a time, into the lounge. It was transformed from the luxurious but bland hotel room into a magical space. The cushions from the settee were now on the floor where the coffee table had been. They were covered by two Indian patterned throws with red hotel towels marking out where I was to lie. Scented candles burned in small glass bowls everywhere and a fan of josh sticks smouldered on the displaced coffee table. As we approached she turned, took both of my hands in hers and reversed me to the edge of the cushions.

“Sit back and relax as much as you can,” she purred and I lowered myself onto the towels, knees raised and arms outstretched behind me.

Using her foot she inched my legs further apart and then knelt in the enlarged space.

“Zorda,” I said before she could speak, but she hushed me with a finger on my lips.

“My name is Zoraida, it’s Arabic for ‘enchanted woman’. My mother was from Morocco and my father French.”

Enchanting woman, yes, what an accurate name. She placed her hands on my shoulders and sat back on her ankles.

“Nick Middleton you are concerned, a little sad and unsure what is going to happen, yes?” I wondered on her meaning

of sad then thought whatever it was, it was probably right. I nodded.

“Does my dress please you?”

I looked again across the soft lace corset. It had a little red bow tied just under her breasts, the ends of the cord hanging down daring me to pull them.

“Devine,” I whispered.

“Thank you. Now let me ease your apprehension by telling you what is going to happen. You will lie face down and I will massage your back and legs with warm oil.” She looked to my right at a bowl of steaming water in which a plastic bottle of oil was immersed. “That will relax you then I will ask you turn over and I’ll massage your chest to remove all the stiffness. Then I will arouse you, spinning up your sexual energy and channel it through your other chakras to heal and strengthen your body and mind. I’ll do this multiple times, arousing you, then letting you calm, then arousing you, until ...” Her voice trailed off as she looked down at my todger. I looked too and was dismayed to see it was sharing my apprehension.

“I’ve mixed this essential oil for you. It is mainly bergamot with a few added high notes.” She held the dish forward for me to smell. Although any man smelling of it would have emptied a rugby team’s dressing room, here, with the combination of the josh sticks, scented candles and an

enchanted woman kneeling before me it made perfect, if heady sense.

“It’s nice.”

“Thank you, now lie flat on your front, breathe deeply and relax.”

I lay back and turned over as Zoraida added the oil that had been warming in the water to the essential oil in a bowl.

“Breathe,” she gently encouraged, her hand flat on my back. “Deeply, you will relax.” She was right and within five or six deep inhales my apprehension has declined. Keeping one hand palm down on my back she drizzled the oil along my spine and then sat across my buttocks, spread the oil with long, slow passes of her hand and began a back massage unlike any Linda had ever done to me. It was gentle, repeated but unexpectedly effective. My legs, thighs and buttocks were treated in the same style and I drifted away into a trance like state. A gentle tickle on my balls brought me back and she whispered “turn over” next to my ear.

I did so without a thought for my lack of covering and opened my eyes. The warm, cosiness of the room seemed to have intensified. Zoraida knelt to my right, next to my knee. She was arranging her oil and tissues then stood upright adjusting her corset by tugging the lower edge down.

“We don’t need this do we?” she asked, while pulling the string of her thong down and passed her hips. It fell to the

floor and she stepped away from it then sat across me low on my abdomen, tantalisingly close but not in a sexual position.

“Relax, trust me, enjoy being pleased,” she smiled. The oil was drizzled on my chest and a light massage followed. My eyes closed and I drifted again. She spread the warm oil and her hands glided across my skin. I sensed her face very close to me and she whispered something but her head moved past mine so her words came in then faded from my hearing. She repeated it several times before I heard it all.

“Undress me, please.”

I opened my eyes and she was sat upright, offering the end of the string that held the corset closed. I pulled and the bow fell open. She eased the garment off her shoulders and her hair tumbled down over both breasts.

“There,” she smiled, “now we are equal.”

She moved to kneel between my legs and took my now less apprehensive todger in her hands. A liberal pour of oil followed and she began to stroke it with a gentle pull. Within moments I was fully erect and she continued, closing one hand around my shaft and sliding it upwards. As soon as one hand was just losing contact the other hand grasped and the movement was repeated over and over. My excitement grew and although Ginny and I had once again failed to have our once usual weekend event, meaning it was well over a week since I last had sex, I felt in control. For a while.

Zoraida's pace slowed and she moved to my left and began to massage my upper arm and shoulder.

"Breathe deeply."

I did and softened. My eyes closed and soon after she returned to kneeling between my thighs and her attention moved back to my todger again, this time progressively involving my balls as well. Once stiffened she reversed the two handed massage this time grasping at the head and pushing down the shaft. Her grip was firmer and my excitement rose rapidly. Soon I was at, then passed the level before. Again her pace slowed and she moved to my right side taking my right arm and placing my hand, palm first, between her breasts. After pouring oil just below her neck she guided my hand upwards into the down flow of oil. My hand now glided across her skin under her guidance and was taken down between her breasts then up over the left one, down again and up over the right. All of the time she locked my eyes with a smile that radiated from every part of her face. The effect of this 'break' on me was minimal. Zoraida knelt up and still controlling my hand took it down to her left thigh then up across her pussy down the other thigh and back again finally stopping on her pussy. She started pushing her body against the heel of my hand. Still the smile covered her face.

She returned to kneel between my thighs and as soon as she restarted contact with my erection I knew what would happen. Still sliding her hand along the shaft she angled it towards me and I burst. It was the deepest orgasm I could ever remember. She continued to stroke it as it softened then moved onto all fours above me. In a single movement she lay on me, cradling the back of my head in her hands and squeezing me to her oiled breasts.

“Thank you,” I said with more emotion than I ever felt capable of before. I was almost in tears for reasons I could not understand. She kissed my forehead in response. Moments passed and neither of us moved or spoke. Then I had to ask.

“Why me, why this?”

“Because my Nick Middleton, you were sitting there with a big sign above your head saying ‘Help me!’. Help me because I’m drowning in frustration, in insincerity, lack of trust or belief. And I knew I could help you free yourself from that, liberate yourself, enjoy your sexuality and let you bring pleasure to women, for you have shown me you that gift but deny it. My Nick Middleton this is my spirit’s gift to your soul.” Another big and lasting kiss to my forehead. Then she rose away. I drifted and felt a warm cover settle over me and all went chocolate dark.

7

January, last year, Barcelona

A silk soft hand was stroking my temples, and another cupped my hand. I was coming back down from a high glide in a velvet night sky, being coaxed to land and return to day. It was a soft if muzzy landing. My eyes opened.

Zoraida was smiling. "It's early in the morning for you, but I think you have things to do. It's five-thirty so you should be able to get to whatever it is that brought you to Barcelona."

The kaftan was back on, her hair a mayhem of black curls and all of it above me. Reality seeped in slowly.

"Five-thirty?"

"Yes I didn't know when you needed to be awake."

"Not yet."

"Oh, but you fell so deeply asleep last night I couldn't wake you to get back to your room."

Reality was now flooding in. The scent of the oil was still strong, the ceiling above Zoraida's face was not mine. I was in the wrong place.

"I'm sorry. Have I imposed?"

“I don’t know what is impose, but you did impress. However I think you need to go. For your business not because of me.”

I moved the thin sheet off me and realised I was naked, in front of woman I didn’t know, but somehow knew very deeply.

“Shower. I’ll get your clothes.”

I looked at her, starting to wrap the sheet around me.

“Did we?”

“What?”

“Have sex?”

She laughed, not giggled.

“No, not in the way you mean. We consorted, deeply.” She paused. “And I loved every moment of it, I hope you did too?”

I was unable to answer so went for the shower.

Emerging from the en suite with a towel wrapped around my waist, Zoraida was waiting for me, holding my underpants in her hands.

“I think these go on first. She pulled the towel off me and offered the undergarment to me. As I stepped in to them a

hand stroked my todger and her face looked up at mine with a grin.

“It was happier last night,” she purred and I was in total disarray. My arms collapsed by my side. She stepped forward and took me in her arms. Whispering close to my right ear she said, “My Nick Middleton you have taken half a step in the right direction. All I ask is you don’t stop or turn back.” The embrace became a hug. I hugged back.

“Now dress and go. Remember from now on you must walk in the right direction or my gift to you is wasted.”

I was dressed and she opened the door for me. I stepped into the corridor just before six. It was deserted. Suddenly I couldn’t leave Zoraida, not just walk away, so leant back in to kiss her. At first she withdrew, saying ‘go, it’s best,’ but then offered her cheek. I gave it a kiss and she put her hands in a prayer position, palms together, fingers pointed upwards then bowed her head and said, ‘namaste’. I turned away, hearing her door shut at the same time as the swing doors in the corridor burst open and Westin was standing there. All six foot something of him, looking as rough as I’ve ever seen him, still dressed, like me in yesterday’s clothes.

“You sly old fox. I just knew when you said that you weren’t coming out you were on a promise. You have come up in my estimation. And a woman in a suite, what a pull.”

He bear hugged me, lifting me clear off the floor.

“See you at breakfast at nine. This is going to be a great trip, something tells me!”

With that he unlocked his room door, directly opposite Zoraida’s magical shrine.

8

January, last year, Barcelona

The morning and afternoon that followed were hell. Westin had told Todd about seeing me leaving a room opposite his as he was returning from a night on the tiles. For some reason the fact he was just getting back at six o’clock was not the issue. I was the issue. Todd didn’t join in but he did smirk a lot at my discomfort. I thought of responding but everything I could think of would just make it worse. ‘It was just relaxation therapy.’ ‘An old friend’. Whatever, it would be grist to Westin’s mill so I chose to remain silent and concentrate on work.

Well almost. On returning to my room earlier, flushed with embarrassment of meeting Westin I had checked through my clothes. My keys were there, as was my untouched wallet and credit cards, plus one item. In my jacket pocket was Zoraida’s contact card, including her telephone number, email and website. So I Googled the email and found a

number of adverts offering her tantric goddess services or stays at her retreat, then looked at the website. It was well produced with a flash intro, expensive in my estimation, had some sensual descriptions of what she could do for you, none of which I could doubt at all, and a price page that made my eyes water.

A two hour session with her, which was the minimum booking, was 400 euros. A weekend where she visited you for tantric training was 3,000 euros plus her expenses. Not a problem until I looked at her availability page which said that she was taking bookings for September or later – otherwise she was fully booked. Good work if you can get it as they say. Despite that shock I still looked at evening flights to Mallorca and early morning returns and wondered if my credit card bill could ever be kept from Ginny.

The day passed in a strange half world for me. When left alone I reran my time with Zoraida, but the immediate world was Westin and the presentation next day. Westin was to do a welcome, this is 'Dean Fisher' and introduce the 9500 range, sorry 'Nine Five Hundred' range, then it was up to me to wow the techies, then Todd would come up the rear, as it were, with prices and delivery dates, both of which were dire.

We selected slides, reviewed the message, and then rehearsed, critiquing each other's part very blatantly. By the middle of the afternoon we were in individual preparation, polishing our bit, our way. While doing that less immediate

thoughts took over. I had a Hotmail account as well as my company email. I signed on to see the usual trot of spam, then clicked 'New', typed Zoraida's email address from her card and started a mail.

'Hi, it's Nick, from last night (Monday). I just wanted to thank you for the most incredible experience of my life. I still don't know what I did to deserve it, but it was so special to me, Nick xxx'

I clicked send it was gone. Back to the slides of the 9500 not daring to think I even warranted a reply. Within a minute the Hotmail tab blinked. One new message. I clicked.

'Massa Bank offers you a 5 percent loan'.

I deleted it and went back to my slides.

The Hotmail tab blinked again, this time offering me leather shoes at the price of chips. I deleted that too and went back to my slides.

The message I was to deliver in my presentation was quite simple. The 9500 would do everything they wanted now, and into the future. The only problems were delivery dates; it wasn't even in production yet, and price. The US equivalent, available off the shelf was a good 20 percent cheaper, but nowhere near as versatile. That's where I needed to aim my tech position, majoring on the ability to meet as yet unknown future needs and lace in a little 'old technology' to belittle

our unnamed rivals. It should work I thought. The Hotmail tab was flashing. I clicked.

“Hello Nick Monday Middleton, I wish you would decide what I should call you?? You are so welcome for last night. I enjoyed it immensely. I don’t think you know it but you have a special touch as far as ladies are concerned. I think you missed the pleasure you gave me, but hopefully you will concentrate more on the next opportunity, even if it is not with me.

I don’t know if we will ever be able to share such a special time again. I would like to. I have, or I hope I have, started you on your journey from the swamp to real life. Leave the mediocre life you have and breathe in real, vital air until you glide through the skies! Nick Monday Middleton promise to me you will never look back. Bliss is yours for the taking.

I hope to pleasure you again, Z xxx’

I hadn’t really expected a reply. Was she just encouraging me to recoup her loss leader? Did I really have a special touch? Or was this just a way to loosen the purse strings for a 400 euro session. Then again she sounded uncomfortably like Westin, encouraging me to drop the safe, checked, secure stance and fly a kite now and again. Glide through the skies, not held back by cares and convention.

“Stuff the facts, sell the f’in stuff,” as Westin often told me.

Back to the slides.

9

April, last year, London

Kapucina rose up and pecked me on each cheek.

“It’s Nick, yes?”

“Yes, and how do I say Kapucina?” It was the name from her advert but I felt certain I was missing a trick.

“As you said it.” Her hand brushed my chin. “Come on.”

Her scent was of fresh flowers.

She took a bunch of keys from her open shoulder bag, selected a Yale and opened the door to the block. She turned and smiled again and I followed her in. Inside smelled of a strange mix of damp and new, cheap carpet. I followed her up two flights of stairs while she chatted happily that it was like a spring morning in her native Holland. At last I realised the accent. Dutch. I knew it well from colleagues at work but just had not expected it here. We arrived at a landing and she turned left into a dull, narrow, unlit corridor with cream painted doors opposite each other every 3 or 4 metres. She stopped outside the last pair and used another key to open the right hand door.

“Come in!”

I stepped passed her and she followed in, closing the door.

“My God! What does she think! It’s freezing.” Kapucina went immediately to the radiators under the three windows opposite the door and turned them up. That done she opened a cupboard to the left of the door, extracted a fan heater and turned it on full.

“Sorry, she doesn’t understand why I want the room, so doesn’t heat it enough. Please come this way.” She took my hand and walked me further into the room. It was a Victorian building and the rooms had high ceilings. It had been altered many times in the past. What was once a single room, now was a studio flat with a main area that was ‘L’ shaped, the door we had entered by being at the end of the short leg of the ‘L’. To the right of the door was a kitchenette, and on the left side, further from door was a table with three small chairs. In the angle of the ‘L’ there was a settee and a chair and in the long leg of the ‘L’ there was a mattress covered in a throw. A few Thai prints and sculptures added an exotic feel. Kapucina was tugging at my jacket.

“Please, let me take this.” I put down my bag and slipped the fleece off.

“Take off your shoes and relax.”

Easier said than done, but I tried. I have to say I was thinking of leaving and the only thing that stopped me walking to the door and telling her to stuff it was her smile. It was a whole

face smile, as genuine as I have ever seen. Well that and the blonde hair.

She took off her jacket and unwound the scarf.

“Please relax on the bed,” she said pointing to the mattress. I sat, still not certain I wanted to stay. Kapucina then started a ‘dance’ as she tried to take her boot off while standing on one leg.

This wasn’t my first attempt at finding an erotic ‘therapy’ session. I’d had a fawning Ukrainian lady that all but wore an advert saying marry me so I could get a British passport, a Romanian that watched a muted TV throughout, a little Thai lady who I walked out on as I doubted her age, and another that I never even said more than hello to as the minders smoking and coughing in the next room spelled trafficked. I know what I’m doing is on the edge but Zoraida had shown me it doesn’t have to be one sided or dripping in exploitation. But maybe that’s only true at 400 an hour.

After a struggle one boot was off but the second was not giving in so easily and finally she fell over. Unhurt, she looked towards me and giggled. A smiling giggle.

“Let me help,” I volunteered and crossed to her prone figure. I took the heel of the boot and easily removed it.

“Thank you, thank you.”

I put the boot next to the other. Was I enchanted, bewitched? Or about to be mugged?

“Please you must relax. Undress while I change. And breathe, deeply.” She walked behind a three section bamboo screen to the left of the door by the table. Her T shirt was thrown over the top of the screen and I went back to the mattress and removed my clothes, lay back, face up propping myself up on my elbows.

Kapucina appeared from behind screen wearing what I first thought was a short dress, drawn in around her slender waist by a rope belt. With bare feet and bare legs she crossed to the mattress and knelt on the very edge. She looked late twenties, early thirties with a good, slightly tanned skin tone, and the figure I’d seen earlier as she crossed the road now looked even better. Most of all was her smile. And the curtains of blonde hair.

She tipped her head to one side and said, “I’m sorry I upset you by being late. It’s me! I’m always late. My friends say I run on Kapu time”

“Kapu time?”

“Kapu, short for Kapucina.”

“You mentioned Holland earlier, is that a Dutch name?”

“No!” she giggled so desirably. “It’s a nickname! And very embarrassing for me. But it is mine.”

“How did you get it?”

An embarrassed giggle and she turned her face away. A curtain of fine, very blonde hair poured off her shoulder.

“Tell me please, I’m intrigued now.”

Another refusal with a giggle and her face hidden in hair.

“Please.”

At first she shook her head to decline, then said, “OK provided you don’t laugh. Not one snigger, OK?” She wagged her finger at me.

“Not one!”

“OK! When I was sixteen a whole group of us from school went to Amsterdam, to see the sights. We went into a cafe. I was trying to be very sophisticated, mainly to impress a boy I fancied. The cafe had hundreds of coffees prepared in different ways. The others studied the card looking for something to try. I ignored it and when the waiter asked I said ‘I’ll have a kapucina’ in a very off hand, casual way. He looked puzzled and said ‘What?’ I really went for it and said, ‘Don’t you know what a kapucina is? You work in cafe!’ He basically said ‘Sorry dumbbo, I know what a cappuccino is but if you want to show me a kapucina then follow me!’ Well of course everybody laughed and by the next day it was my name.”

I tried hard to suppress a grin just making it into a smile.

“You’re laughing!” She gave me a playful smack on the thigh. “I hated it at first but then grew used to it. I think it’s nice now, except when rotten people ask how I got it and then laugh!” Another playful smack.

“Ow, but thank you for sharing.”

She smiled again. A whole face, happy smile.

“You’re crazy,” I said.

“A lot of people say that. My head’s not wired right. My husband..” She stopped.

The dress was not a dress, more like a collarless shirt, with very short sleeves and a run of buttons down to below the waist, all of which were undone. The orange rope tied around her waist then made the rest of it look like the skirt part of a dress. It was made from a loose weave cotton, like cheesecloth and was slightly see through. She had no bra and very dark nipples.

“Enough talk, lie face down.”

I did as I was told and she picked up a plastic bottle of oil, sat by my side and began to spread the oil on my back.

10

January, last year, Barcelona

On the Wednesday we rehearsed again. The slides for Westin's introduction and Todd's Terms and Conditions plus close where all loaded onto my laptop alongside my technical presentation. When I first saw Todd's slide set I thought Westin was setting him up. From the way Todd delivered it in rehearsal I think he did too, but we got no hint from Westin as to how he was going to abuse Todd.

Off we went at four p.m., started the meeting at five as the Spaniards returned from siesta. A Spanish colleague had once told me that siesta was for your mistress and night time for your wife. I found it hard to think any of the four seated before me could manage one of those, let alone both. All were rather over weight. The main man was Jorge and he stamped his authority on the meeting from the start, stressing he could only spend an hour with us. The others could stay longer if they wished but it was plain that anything covered after he left would be irrelevant.

Westin thanked them for seeing us and started into his pitch. He covered it quickly, too quickly and I could see some of the audience whose English was not as good as Jorge's were struggling. But I guess that was also irrelevant. He covered the history of Dean Fisher Ltd, back to the days of the British Empire. What Jorge made of Birmingham being the machine

shop of the Empire I didn't dare consider, but he was soon through his bit and asked for any questions before we launched into the 'Technical meat' as he called it.

Jorge waited a second or two, taking a deep breath and leaning back in his chair.

"Westin, what can you tell us about the sale of Dean Fisher?"

"To Neumann Shwartz?" he replied innocently.

"No, TMZ of the US."

I was surprised. I knew there had been mutterings of reorganization, redundancy and all manner of other corporate stuff, but being sold to the Yanks had not passed my ears. Westin looked equally flustered for a moment then recovered and said, "Just another rumour with no substance. Now Nick will tell you all about our new range, the Nine Five Hundred. Nick!"

I went through my spiel, deliberately slowly as I considered this was really for the benefit of Jorge's colleagues. The problem with going slow is that you lose the emphasis and commitment in your voice and, in English sound a little bored. Any jests to try to brighten things up are also a 'no-no' as they will be misunderstood in most cases. I was reminded of some meeting of heads of state, where one of the American delegation was being asked if a particular issue could be a problem to the President. To indicate it was best for it not be brought to President's attention he used the

phrase 'out of sight, out of mind' which was translated for the others as 'The President is blind and stupid.' Stick to plain, if boring English was always my rule, but it all combined to make a very flat presentation.

The other problem of talking slowly is that it gives time for your mind to wander, and mine was doing a lot of that towards the end. It was wandering over Zoraida's torso and just about making it back in time for the next sentence.

"Nick," intervened Westin, "we need to be mindful of Jorge's time constraints. Cut to the interfacing now please."

My mind added the numerous occurrences of the 'F' word that would normally have been in that sentence from Westin.

"Sure." I flipped over two slides and covered the wonders of the 9500 interfacing package. It was good I have to say, enabling input from component delivery to be fed in to the first station, and output to packaging and logistics from the last station. They were wowed by it. I asked for questions. They asked one each, obviously trying to impress their boss, but I handled them all easily.

I introduced Todd who ploughed through the T&C's, payment plan, acceptance as production ready, and the fact they didn't have a hope in hell of getting a 9500 line until fourth quarter. Jorge sucked air through his teeth at the last point.

“Todd, that’s fine, let me say a few words,” put in Westin. Todd took a step back, realising this was the time for him to fade into the wall.

“Jorge, we have to tell you all that stuff and we have to tell every customer the same thing. Company policy. But I have influence. First the price. If you buy a minimum of three lines of nine stations in one order I can cut that by 25 percent. Interested?”

“Of course but what’s the point if it will be next year before they are making me any money?”

Westin tapped the side of his nose. I hoped that wasn’t like the round OK sign in Portugal.

“Again production schedules can be reworked. I promise you delivery in June, July latest. You can install and test in your summer closedown.”

Good old Westin, sold himself and not the product, but Jorge was very interested and warm handshakes were shared all round as the meeting broke up. On the way back to the hotel in the taxi Westin asked, “Did I or did I not do well?”

“Incredibly well Westin,” Todd and I replied as one.

11

February, last year, London

When I got back from the Barcelona trip it was late Thursday evening. Ginny was still up and had left some snacks out for me in case the airline food had not been enough. On the flight I had resolved to mention nothing about my encounter with Zoraida. In fact by the time we landed I couldn't understand why I had thought it necessary to even consider that. How could I tell my wife I let myself be picked up in bar and given a hand job by some sex crazed woman from Mallorca? If I told her she probably think I'd lost it completely and started to make things up. To be honest it was only Zoraida's card that stopped me from wondering if I had dreamt it all. It wasn't lying to Ginny, it was just not acquainting her with something she didn't need to know about. And I doubted if Westin would ever mention anything given his own indiscretions.

I decided to indulge in a few snack things and took a plate into the lounge and sat in my armchair. Ginny was watching TV with her feet up on the sofa.

"Oh terrible news while you were way!" she said in tone that made me expect a terminal diagnosis if not death. A sausage roll stopped on its way from plate to mouth and waited for further instructions.

“Linda! Linda called.” Yes I thought, Linda the masseuse since the Maldives.

“She called to say her husband’s move had come through and they’ll be gone to Chester in a week’s time, well this next Monday. So that’s it, we’ve had the last massage from her.”

“That was sudden,” was all I could reply before the sausage roll arrived at its destination.

“Well you know it was either move or redundancy don’t you, so when the offer came he took it like a shot.”

“Can’t blame him really in these times.”

“But what am I going to do now without the relaxation she gave me every month? I’ll be a stress ball in no time.”

“uhmm,” was all I managed over a small square of cheese sandwich.

“You’ll have to find another masseuse.”

“OK darling.”

Another job to do. I decided I wouldn’t share one other thing with Ginny: the rumour of Dean Fisher being sold, and how that could put me in the same position as Linda’s husband.

12

April, last year, London

“Turn over please.” Kapucina told me, tapping me on the shoulder in case I was really asleep. As always I did as I was told. The Dutch accented English made a lot of things she said sound like an order, but the smile she gave me as I settled on my back said it was far from a command. She repositioned her oil and settled between my legs on the mattress, then, making sure she had eye contact with me, slipped the shirt off one shoulder then the other, letting it fall around her waist. I only then noticed the orange rope had gone.

“Will you tell me how old you are Nick?”

“er sure, 54 last October.”

“I’m forty this year, but it’s OK, I like older men.”

Almost casually she took me in her hands and poured oil on my todger. As she looked down to see what she was doing I took the opportunity to look at her breasts. Not large, but not small either and perky, with large, very dark brown nipples. Without looking at me she said, “You like my breasts?” and gave each one a brush with her hand leaving a smear of oil on the nipple.

“Very much.”

“That’s good.” She started to stroke me.

After many minutes I thought, ‘What’s wrong with me?’ There was no response at all. Just a limp, slightly extended, not very impressive todger. She continued unconcerned, but when still nothing happened she shifted to sit astride my right thigh. The heat of her body against my skin was fantastically erotic, but still had no reaction where it mattered.

“You like a firmer hand?”

“Yes please.”

Some minutes later the firmer hand had produced the same lack of reaction. I was starting to panic inside. What a time to flunk it! She was so desirable, doing everything an erotic ‘hand job’ provider could and here I was, limp and if anything shrinking. Kapucina sighed, sounding very resigned.

“Let’s try this,” she said standing up. The shirt fell to the mattress and she stepped out of it while balancing precariously on the springy base. She was now nude, from head to toe.

“Relax,” she said taking my arm and placing it well away from my body with the palm of my hand turned upwards. She sat back on her ankles, my arm held under her between her thighs and then she reconnected with my todger. She was very warm. And wet. And I could not resist but to stroke her. Cautiously as first, in a way that could be just moving

my fingers to be more comfortable. I watched her intently but there was no reaction. A more determined stroke still produced no good or bad reaction.

“You know that most men can’t find the clitoris,” she said finally engaging my stare. Her face was soft and smiling. “Can you Nick?”

As actions speak louder than words I tried and was surprised at my accuracy. My finger gently slid between her lips and up towards the small clipped patch of blonde hair.

“You can Nick!” she said, her voice rising in pitch as she spoke. “Gently please.”

Suddenly I was stiffening, and then very stiff.

“You grow such a lot!” She widened her legs and pressed down on my hand, then started to rock back and forth slightly. Her hand quickened and squeezed me harder. I let go, closing my eyes and moaning. When I looked back at her she had thrown her head back and clamped her legs onto my arm. Kapucina had had an orgasm. I was so delighted. It felt incredible. Her head came back level and she slumped forward across my chest. We remained that way for several minutes.

Finally she turned her head and looked at me. “Not many men can do that for me with just a finger,” she said softly.

“I’m so glad I could,” I replied and relaxed back. With a

satisfied grin.

13

February, last year, London

There was a strange atmosphere in the office, kind of like fragile, with people having hushed conversations, rumours spreading quickly and a general feeling of impending doom. Charles Bradshaw, now MD of Dean Fisher was rumoured to be flying to Frankfurt at least twice a week.

That was the same Charles Bradshaw, then Head of Development that had greeted me on my first day at Dean Fisher all those years ago. After a chat in his office he had taken me to the open plan area and marched in front of me to one of the enclosures of four desks. He had been confused to find all four well and truly occupied.

“Where’s that computer thing been put?” he had demanded and one brave soul pointed across to another enclosure. “The installer couldn’t get it in here,” said the brave soul as quietly as possible.

Bradshaw grunted and we had back tracked down the walkway and turned into another enclosure. It also had four desks, three of which were clear and I could see the

promised Prime mini computer sitting against the back partition. At the forth desk sat a woman with dark brown, curly hair worn at shoulder length. She had a thin face and was smiling at us. On the desk opposite her was a terminal to access the mini computer.

“Hello Mr Bradshaw,” she said happily.

“This is, er, Ginny,” Bradshaw stuttered by way of introduction. “There’s the computer thing, but you will know far more about that than me. Ginny meet Nick Middleton.” I held out my hand and Ginny stood to shake it. “I’ll leave you to get on then,” said Bradshaw, who promptly disappeared back to the safety of his office. I was to learn that expeditions from his office were rare events for Bradshaw who preferred not to mix with the unwashed.

Ginny was pleasant enough and seemed well settled into Dean Fisher. She had taken me on a tour so I knew where the various units were, where the coffee machine and loos were and introduced me to a few people as we went.

“It’s moved round a little since last week,” she said by way of explanation of her being uncertain where some people were. “I had to look round to find my desk this morning!”

I had found out later that the computer install had just been exploited by others to get away from Ginny, but by then I had married her and we had a child.

14

25 years ago, London

Over the next few weeks after starting my new job I got to know a lot about Ginny's life. She was married and now three months pregnant. However all was not well and she had caught her husband playing away as they say. It had happened before and she told me the pregnancy was the result of the last attempt to make up. But he was at it again and Ginny was getting serious about divorce.

Although I was only getting one side of the story he did seem like a slime ball. After the last make up it was less than week before he was caught again in a local restaurant with the same woman. Working late had been the excuse but one of Ginny's friends saw him and told tales. I was quite surprised to find the bearer of bad news had been a man.

About a month after I started Ginny came in one morning particularly upset. They had rowed big time and he'd walked out the night before and not been in touch since. How could anybody walk out on a woman carrying their child? I couldn't believe it. Although Ginny was obviously not drinking alcohol I suggested we have an orange juice in the local pub after work, just to give her a chance to vent. And vent she did. I tried not to take sides but step by step I lined up in Ginny's camp against a man I'd never meet. At the end of the session

together, after a few pints I told her straight. 'File for divorce, you're better off without him.'

A week later Ginny didn't turn up for work. I thought she had gone for a scan or check up or whatever they needed to do in her condition. She was back at her desk the next day. I hadn't even said 'morning' when she blurted out "I've done it! I've filed for divorce!"

I felt pleased and responsible at the same time.

"Well done," I said. "It may be painful but it is for the best."

"I know Nick, but I thought about what you said in the pub last week and realised you were so right. Thank you!" With that she walked up to me, held my face in her hands and planted a big kiss on my lips. "Thank you," she said again then walked back to her desk and started work.

That day she was the happiest I had ever seen her. Problems were not a problem, phone calls were answered politely and even people she did not really like were greeted with a smile. At five thirty she whispered across our desks, "Fancy going to the pub?" We did and had a great time. The divorce was not mentioned after the first toast to the departure of whatever he was called and most of the time we chatted about holidays, my bachelor life and what could happen in the future. I was really happy that night when I got back to my flat. I had found a woman I could relate to.

That she was married and pregnant, and neither was anything to do with me, did not seem an issue.

15

February, last year, London

The situation at work grew rapidly worse. The rumours came round more frequently and were ever darker in content. Being wound up, closed down, everybody out on the street were now commonplace. To give more credence to the stories the sales leads dried up as if someone had pulled the plug out of a basin. Todd and I shared an office in the Sales and Marketing Department. We had little to do and either gossiped or surfed the web for jobs, of which there were none. Or indulged in anything that took our fancy.

One good thing was that it gave me time to tackle what was apparently my number one priority. When Ginny had told me Linda was no more I had casually accepted the task of finding a replacement massage therapist. After a few days it was apparent this was not a casual task. Progress reports were demanded. So I tried to use my spare time at work to sort things out. I tried the local papers but most of the ads were for things that neither Ginny or even Zoraida would have approved of.

I moved online and looked at the likes of Gumtree, Vivastreet, Hallo London and Craigslist. It was a complex situation. Some were blatantly sexual services, others so demur I thought I'd be massaged with my socks on. We tried two ladies, Ginny had insisted on a lady, and neither experience was good. So with another quiet day at the office I was surfing for a masseuse when Todd walked in behind me.

"Still looking for a tart to toss you off?" he said glibly.

"I can find one of those easily, but I doubt if Ginny will be happy. All we want is a good therapeutic masseuse and we'll be happy."

"Sure, but while you're lying there don't you wish she'd just give the old todger a nudge?" He looked at me and winked, then sat at his desk.

"OK Todd, has that ever happened to you?" I challenged.

"You bet! 1995. We went to Caribbean. All inclusive, spa resort. Doris loved it. Massage she said, we have to have a massage. So we booked. She was first and I came along after her. She comes out all wossie, and I go in. There's a lovely islander, young and very sweet. She did my back and legs right to the top, if you see what I mean, then turned me over and asked if I wanted a special for 30 dollars."

"Did you say yes?"

“No, I asked for the extra special for 60!” I knew he didn’t but we cracked up. I went back to the ads. Thinking about it Todd was right, there was always that thought when the thighs were being worked on.

After a number of false dawns including a Ukrainian, a healthy living freak and a spiritual healer / masseuse, we found Elina, a young Polish lady with an easy style who did a good massage. She mixed Swedish with a style called Lomi Lomi, originally from the Hawaiian Islands. It consists of head to toe continuous strokes and as such rules out the continual towel origami that Linda practiced. On her first visit she had used a small hand towel just to cover the vital bits. On her second the towel was removed for the Lomi Lomi strokes and never returned. Ginny was delighted with her and my quest was over and successful. Elina’s top to toe passes however were not always as accurate as she would have liked, or maybe they were. In my dreams!

16

47 years ago, Aunt Clara’s

Then on that July day it changed.

Most days we were there gliders swooped down or flying high above us. I remember a year or two before that Karen had

said, 'How do they stay in the air, I can't hear an engine?' I'd felt very grown up and had answered, 'They're gliders. They use thermals to fly.' I'd read it but had no idea what thermals were. They could have been a jet pack they tied to the plane for all I knew.

"So they just glide through the sky?"

"Yes," I replied, "and the fluffy clouds."

I had felt superior, for a few minutes at least. Many times after that we both raced around the valley, arms outstretched pretending to be gliders.

On this particular day however it was different.

"Look at that!" shrieked Karen, pointing at the sky.

17

25 years ago, London

It was a Friday night and I'd been out with the lads. Quite a sedate night by our standards but a few pints had certainly lightened my mood. As I unlocked my flat door the phone was ringing and I just got there in time to answer it.

It was Ginny and she was hysterical, sobbing, even crying out in pain. I gathered that Neil, her then husband, had come round in a foul temper and hit her. I called a taxi and got to her house as quickly as I could. I didn't need to knock; the glass in the front door was shattered and lying all over the step and hall. I called out "Ginny!" but only heard sobbing in return. I found her in the lounge, curled up in foetal position on the sofa. She was clutching her stomach. The left side of her face was swollen and bruising was already showing. Her lip had ballooned and was bleeding. I just about controlled my panic.

It was obvious she needed treatment, but when she told me the bastard had punched her twice in the stomach I knew she needed medical care urgently.

There was no time to find a taxi so I grabbed her handbag, found her car keys, got her into the back seat and drove. On the way there in the taxi I'd seen a sign to an A&E so we were there in minutes. I rushed in to find what looked like a field hospital in a war zone. Pushing my way to counter all but caused a fight and the receptionist just looked at me blankly and said 'take a ticket'. I gasped in air and shouted, "There's an injured pregnant woman in my car! I need help! Now!"

The word pregnant did the trick. The receptionist stopped taking a drunk's particulars and shouted at two porters who just appeared to be chatting to each other while trundling a gurney along. They sprang into action and together we got Ginny out of the car and into the building. Triage was by

passed and a female doctor came into the curtained cubicle before the porters had finished transferring Ginny to the bed. She was still clutching her stomach and moaning loudly.

The doctor immediately examined the facial injury.

“She’s pregnant and been punched in the stomach,” I said firmly and immediately the doctor transferred her attention.

“Clear this place! I need space,” she snarled and the porters and I slipped out through the curtain. Ginny screamed and I was tempted to go back in but one porter pulled me back.

“Leave it mate, the Doc knows best.” He held my arm until I relaxed. “Anyway you need to move your car, it’s in the ambulance bay. Make sure you do or you’ll get a towed away as well, the wardens work all night.”

I parked the car in a proper space, paid a mortgage for six hours parking and went back in. I took Ginny’s handbag with me. The doctor was outside the cubicle talking briskly to a nurse. I waited until they finished and the nurse hurried off.

“How is she?”

“We’re still checking. I’ll do a scan to see how bad the damage is.” She made it sound like Ginny was a car that had been in a crash.

“This is her bag,” I said offering the oversize, overfilled bag. The doctor took it and put into the cubicle.

“How did this happen?” she asked with an accusing tone.

“I’m not sure. I think her husband beat her up.”

She tipped her head in a questioning gesture.

“You need to give all the details, her name, address, all you know at the desk,” she said and walked passed me giving me a deadly stare.

I went back to reception and eventually got a chance to fill out the details as much as knew them, then sat on a plastic bench while the walking wounded came in, some with Police escorts.

Around one thirty in the morning two men, dressed the same as the porters earlier, came up to me.

“Are you the bloke with the injured pregnant woman?”

“Yes.”

“Come with us please,” said the taller one, taking my arm and lifting me to my feet. They were both well built with short cut hair.

“Is she OK?” I asked as the three of us walked quickly passed reception and down a corridor. The one in front of me opened a door and said, “In ‘ere mate.” I went passed him and into the room. They both followed me in.

The tall one spoke to the other. "What do we think about cunts that hit pregnant women, Jim?"

"We don't like them, Jim."

"specially when they get pissed up before doing it, eh Jim?"

"specially, Jim!"

I was tired and obviously slow witted. I didn't even see the first punch coming but it hit me square on the face. I went over, but before I could move one picked me up and the other punch-bagged my stomach. When he let go I crumpled and the boots came in, kidneys and head. I was just going out when they pushed something in my hand.

"There's your ticket mate, you need to see a doctor."

I didn't hear them leave. I came to in a dark room and struggled to my feet. Groping blindly I found a door handle and opened it, falling into the brightly lit corridor. Very unsteady I stumbled my way back to reception, collapsed onto the desk dribbling blood over the counter and passed out again.

18

25 years ago, London

I got home late the next day. Stitches in my face and scalp, painkillers for bruised kidneys and stomach. I was still passing blood. Talking was difficult and I dribbled more than I drank. Still I was told I would be OK in time. Just before I left, the doctor from A&E found me and told me, strictly off the record that Ginny's baby should be alright. She was being kept in for a few days for observation and treatment of cuts and bruises. From the details I'd been able to give them and an address book in her handbag they had contacted her mother. As I was not related they couldn't give me any more information.

The following day I had two separate visits from the Police. The first was to get me to admit to beating up Ginny and the second to take a statement about how I came to look like the losing boxer in a bare knuckle fight. Both went badly, but fortunately when Ginny was able to see the Police she exonerated me. Later she told me the policeman had replied, "That's a shame for him." When she had asked what he meant he just told her that she'd find out.

I went to see Ginny in hospital two days after but when I got to the ward she had been discharged and gone to her mother's. And no they couldn't give me the address.

It was a further two days before Ginny phoned me and another week before we met. Luckily by then I was on the mend and could make light of my undeserved beating. Even so she was mortified that I had suffered when all I was doing was helping her. She easily got a restraining order banning her husband from being anywhere near her, visiting her house or place of work. And the divorce went through like clockwork.

And it was two weeks after me being attacked that we slept together for the first time although we were both too sore to do anything more than cuddle.

19

March, last year, London

When Todd had asked on the Friday what I was doing at the weekend I'd stupidly said we were having a lazy one and our newly found masseuse was coming on Saturday. He was probing me for details when Westin came in and picked up the topic of conversation immediately.

"Lomi bloody Lomi! Poufs stuff that is. What you need is tossie tottie massage, one of those erotic, sensual masseuses in stilettoes from the online ads listings. Get that todger of yours the exercise it needs!" He slapped me on the back and winked.

“You know that’s what you want. All men want it!”

“No sure Ginny would agree to that,” I replied.

“Then don’t tell her, work late one day and fix up a session.”

Abruptly he changed tack.

“I think our mate Jorge is close to a decision, and I think we are in pole position!”

“Really? We could do with some good news given the mood around here,” Todd responded.

“Yes, I spoke to him late yesterday and it was all chummy. So I want you two on the phone to his team and pump them for all the info you can get. I can still throw in a few more sweeteners if that will clinch it.”

“But we’ve only meet them for an hour, hardly a lifelong friendship we can draw on.” I said negatively.

“You’ve got their cards, that’s saying ‘here are my details, call me!’ Ask them if they need any technical details clarifying, or do they need their wife servicing, anything but talk to them!”

Westin left.

We did call them. The conversations were painful with their poor English and our nonexistent Spanish. At the end of three calls we’d learned precisely nothing. What it did do was remind me of Zoraida. I browsed her website for the

first time in ages. There was a new picture gallery of her going through the stages of her tantric ritual for men. I couldn't help but be jealous of the chap in the pictures, especially the one where she sat between his thighs with both hands deployed on his todger. Memories, memories.

Before leaving for home I browsed the online ad listings, made a call and arranged an appointment for five pm Monday with Zena in Bayswater. I wasn't sure why I had, but I had.

20

March, last year, London

Westin called soon after I got into the office. He was working from home for the day he said. From the 'Good morning' onwards I could tell he was deflated. He waffled for a bit then came to the point.

"Fucking Jorge's decided not decide. He's putting back the decision while they review the situation. No real reason I think he's just playing for time."

"Did he give a timescale?"

"Nah."

“What’s next then?” I asked.

“Fuck knows. Jorge’s the only show in town for us at the moment. All these rumours of being up for sale aren’t helping. They’ve been around too long for there to be nothing behind them.”

“I’ve still not heard anything concrete. One rumour seems to counteract the other to me.”

“Well Bradshaw is still clocking up the airmiles to and from Frankfurt. He’s got to say something soon or we’ll just go under.”

“Know anything about TMZ?” I asked, thinking back to Barcelona.

“They’re our biggest competitor worldwide but well behind us in Europe. Other than that nothing special.”

“I used to work with someone who is now one of their techies. If I can find him again maybe I can get an inside edge.”

Westin’s voice perked up. “Try for God’s sake. Take him for a drink, slap up meal, whore of his choice. I’ll sign off the expenses.”

I checked diaries and old notebooks to no avail. His name was Justin, but his contact detail weren’t there. Then it struck me. Facebook. Within a couple of minutes I was sending an email from my Hotmail account.

It was a day or two before a reply came. I was surprised how positive it was and we agreed to meet in a pub in South Kensington that we both remembered, The Onslow Arms.

I recognised Justin the moment he walked in but the same wasn't true the other way. Despite waving in his direction I had to stand up before he noticed me.

"Sorry Nick, missed you there. Bit more grey than I remember!" Thanks Justin. We chatted about old times, old colleagues, families and downed a couple of pints. I raised the subject of a pub meal and he accepted eagerly. Once we'd ordered I thought it was time to pry.

"Justin, do you know anything about TMZ having an interest in my company?"

He was taken aback. I think I could have slapped him and got less of a response. I waited to see how he would answer. The waiter brought the condiments, knives and forks and serviettes as we sat in silence.

"Nick, that's top secret. Need to know only." He placed his hands, palms down, flat on the table. He didn't look at me which I took as a bad sign. Still there was obviously an interest.

"Well so is it with us, but, you know, I thought if we could share a little, chum to chum, we'd both be better placed to benefit from it."

He looked at me with a blank expression for a long time then said, “See what you mean. There has to be winners and casualties on both sides.”

“That’s usually the way, or no deal would be worth it.”

Justin glanced around furtively then leant closer. I instinctively did the same.

“You didn’t get this from me, but..” Another glance in all directions, “but it isn’t just you UK lot, it’s the whole operation, Germany, the works.”

“I knew that,” I lied calmly.

“You close to it then?”

“Well no, or I wouldn’t be here. But only the whole lot makes sense.” It did really, although it hadn’t occurred to me before. Stunned a little by me saying I knew what should have been a closely guarded secret, Justin leaned in again.

“They won’t leave it as it is you know. They’ll merge sales, tech support, production, the lot. Rationalise product lines like they did with the Canadian lot they bought last year. And don’t expect niceties! It’ll be a blood bath.”

While Justin said a lot after that he didn’t tell me much more, or at least I didn’t take it in. We talked about product line alignment and it was obvious to us both there were major overlaps which Justin advised me would be ‘rationalised pretty damn quick.’ By the time we parted without making

any plans to see each other again, but the best of beer friends, I was glad that Westin was footing the bill. I swore I'd get him to sign the expenses off before I told him the 'intel' I'd gained as it didn't make good hearing for any of us.

21

May, last year, London

I had seen Kapu a number of times. Each visit she made more special for me than the last. We found out about each other a lot more than I had ever intended. She knew I was married, the area where we lived, my daughter's names. We got on really well. The sensual part of the sessions intensified as well. She encouraged me to touch her, intimately, very intimately. She gave me guidance on what, where and how to give her pleasure. We smiled a lot, giggled too, and rolled around in the nude, bare as the day we were born. Gliding in that special space.

She too was married. To a musician in an orchestra in London. He was well respected by all accounts. She only ever used his christian name, Karl, but a little Googling fixed him as Karl Vettel and he was lead violin with a worldwide reputation. I'd asked if he knew what she was doing. 'Sort off' was the answer and she went on to say they had an open

marriage and he liked to watch her with other men, a thought I found strange as she didn't say whether she enjoyed that or not. I also knew she had a daughter, born when Kapu was only just a teenager. At first she referred to her as Kapette but later I found she was called Anna and had been brought up by Kapu's mother in Holland.

"Anna was a mistake," she told me while gently massaging my inner thigh. "But a beautiful mistake, she is very pretty." I could see her eyes mist a little.

"When you married Karl, why not have her live with you?"

"Karl didn't want that to happen. He wanted us to be free to indulge ourselves. And we do, decadently!" The mist dissolved and the full smile returned. I thought it best not to return to subject of Anna. "How decadently?"

"We swing, we bring other partners home. He has a very strong sex drive, which is what attracted me to him. I love the physicality of sex."

I wondered many times if I was being slow, ignoring blatant invitations from her, but at other times I felt I was already invading her relationship with Karl. But she encouraged me into more and more recreational foreplay and soon she was honing my oral skills, something which Ginny never even tolerated.

I had no wish to stop seeing her and every wish to do it more often. Every time I phoned to make an appointment she

sounded genuinely excited. When we meet she threw herself on top me, pressing against me, whispering how she was going to make me stiffer than ever. I never felt it was wrong to touch her, even though she was another man's wife. She openly encouraged me and soon I could find that certain spot inside her pussy with total accuracy and send her into a writhing bliss. Maybe Zoraida had been right, I had the touch. Whatever, it did my ego a power of good. I looked at life positively, walked upright. A that time, Kapu was the only bright spot in my life.

What about Ginny?

We still loved each other I thought, even after all the years, or maybe we'd become best friends. The truth was that making love had become an issue. I said when recalling Barcelona in January we hadn't done the deed the previous weekend, well it was a lot longer than that. Not since before Christmas. The same had happened a number of times in our marriage. Sex would become infrequent and then virtually stop. We'd argue, talk, make up and 'try harder'. Each time the 'try harder' lasted a shorter time. I guess I'd given up trying to try harder now and we only had sex when Ginny wanted to, and even then she made it feel like she was indulging me. Other than that I didn't bother and had a wank when on business trips. Now with Kapu it was totally different, even though we didn't have sex she gave me great sexual satisfaction. That I paid for her 'time' didn't factor in my thoughts.

22

25 years ago, London

I left my flat and moved in with Ginny. At first it felt odd, living in a house that another man had bought, living with a woman how heavily pregnant with another man's child. But I was happy, really happy. My mother asked a few questions when I told her my new address and phone number but seemed to accept I was renting a semi rather a flat.

"Actually that's nice," my mum said. "When I come to London I can stay with you."

"Of course!"

I tried hard to work out the best way to tell them about Ginny, but failed to get a good idea. Christmas was coming fast and shortly afterwards was the due date. I chickened out with my parents and told them I was going skiing with friends for Christmas. Ginny's mother had visited several times and I'd made myself scarce but in late November Ginny suggested we stop pretending and I met what was my mother in law to be.

Elise.

Elise hated me from the first moment. Why would any man with any self-respect want a woman bearing another man's

child? To her I was a pouf, or a pervert, or money grabber, or worse, all of three. After two meetings we agreed to differ and Ginny apologised for her mother.

23

24 years ago, London

At the start of the second week in January it was suddenly time. Odd how something that you know is coming can take you by surprise when it happens. I had escaped all the 'father to be' lessons but was still no less nervous and very concerned. She, as we knew it was girl from the scans after the beating up, wasn't mine but she would be ours. Mentally I made her ours, mine as much as Ginny's. Each day I deliberately thought about her until it became fixed that way in my very consciousness.

Our daughter.

Samantha was born on 8th January, thankfully perfectly healthy and a gorgeous baby with some dark black hair from the word go. For some reason I was amazed she didn't have a black eye.

Samantha. Gorgeous. And our daughter.

24

Late April, last year, London

The whole company was called into ten o'clock meetings. Although officially I was in the Technical Department, because I was based in Sales, Westin did my presentation.

He looked happy when he breezed into the room. There were about fifteen of us waiting there. He plugged in a memory stick to the PC on the front desk and in a moment a slide appeared on the screen behind him.

“Good morning. Thank you all for coming. I have some very important news for us all. I have to give you a standard presentation first so please just listen, then we can have a Q&A and later we'll have one to ones.”

The slide said, 'Your Future'. It should have been black edged.

Westin gave the presentation, most of the time reading from a script. TMZ of Dallas, Texas had bought Neumann Schwartz outright and hence now owned Dean Fisher. An interim TMZ management team would arrive tomorrow and begin the process of integration, however in general we were all to carry on doing whatever we doing for the foreseeable future, which for me meant doing nothing. From the Q&A that followed it was obvious that nobody was thrilled about being run by Americans and a lot expected to be out the door very

soon. Westin did his best to say they wouldn't pay good money just to throw all the staff away and asked us all to wait and see. He then handed out a schedule of one on ones. Mine was high on the list, at 11.15 for 10 minutes.

"Sit down Nick, please," said Westin as I entered. He gestured towards the only other chair in the small room.

"Well Nick as we've worked together a lot in the last few years I feel I can be straight with you. I think we all have a great opportunity here. Sure there'll be some slackers and dead wood that will go but that can only be good. We know Europe, we know the market and we know the clients. TMZ have bought us for that knowledge and for the Neumann Schwartz product line, which I don't have to tell you is superior to TMZ's range. So I'd say you should be as happy as Larry today. Just get through the next month or so and we'll be back on the road selling as hard as we can. Any Questions?"

I didn't have any so that was that and Westin prepared for his next person. By Twelve o'clock it was obvious that others were not having such a happy, chatty time with Westin. Two salesmen came out shouting abuse, cleared their stuff and stormed out. A few admins and account clerks came out crying. It was obvious that all was not well, but I took Westin at his word and decided to keep a low profile.

I called Kapu and she answered immediately. Can we get together this afternoon? Yes of course she said. I asked for

an hour of her time. And that's what she would expect in money terms, but we spent three delightful hours together in a world of our own. Inside the fluffy clouds, Blissland.

25

May, last year, London

Monday evening had been Ginny's film club evening for about two years. Well strictly we were both members, but I managed about one visit a quarter, generally working too late to get there or being away out of the country. While the takeover was proceeding in the corporate stratosphere I had little to do so was home by five and agreed to join her.

The club met at the chairman's house, or should I say mansion. It had a huge lounge which he kitted out with comfy chairs in rows and groups, a digital projector and home cinema system. It was all rather good I have to say. Tonight's fare was a short art house on down and outs in Paris, followed by the next in their season of classics, 'The Blue Angel'. If you don't know it's about a very clever man, the professor, who falls for a show girl. She plays him along, takes all his money and ruins him. But he has a good time along the way.

On the way home Ginny said, "How could a bright man like that be so stupid? All for a girl."

I pointed out that it was Marlene Dietrich and said that the way she looked in the film I would.

"Led by their balls more than their brains!" Ginny quipped. I had to wonder about what I was doing.

26

May, last year, London

That Wednesday I took advantage of the slack at work and had a two o'clock appointment with Kapu. When I arrived she put her arms around my neck immediately the door was closed. She was naked under a silk wrap and her body felt even more horny than it did normally, if that was possible.

"Can you stay all afternoon?" she asked.

"With you?"

She stepped back with a stamp and a pout. "And who else would it be with?" Then she burst into a giggle and hugged me and kissed me.

"Yes of course I can."

“Great!” She skipped away towards the mattress.

“Come on then,” she said patting the space next to her. I undressed and joined her. She pushed me on my back and lay on top of me. Just inches above by face, her blonde hair forming a screen each side, making it a shielded space with just the two of us. “It’s time we fucked,” she said then kissed me full on the lips.

“Er yes.”

“Is that as good as it gets! I’ve wanted to for weeks now, but you didn’t seem to take the hint!”

From the pocket of the wrap she took a handful of condoms and scattered them over the mattress.

“All prepared! Now turn over so I can relax you!”

I did, she did and we did.

I’d never experienced sex with a multi orgasmic woman before. She built up, came, screaming as she did, paused, then started again. And again. It’s the biggest boost for the male ego possible. And this time she would not accept the fee for even a one hour sensual massage.

“You’re not a client anymore,” she told me. “I don’t screw clients.”

27

23 years ago, London

Samantha was one and a bit, and bits matter a lot at that age. We had put her down as I had learned to say and curled up together on the sofa watching nothing on the TV. It was freezing outside and I gave Ginny a hug to feel both physical and emotional warmth. I was a happy man and I wanted to share it with the person who was making me so happy. For the moment all was well in my world. I was gliding along without a thought that something may happen, not even in idle moments did I have a thought that things would change. All was well and would stay that way.

We had both been away with work a few times recently and that had made me realise how much I needed her, and how much I loved Samantha as our daughter.

Ginny turned to lie face up, head on my lap.

“I’d like us to have a child,” she said. I was a little surprised.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing, I’m just surprised, that’s all.”

“You’re so good with Samantha, we should have another, and soon.”

“Two conditions,” I said.

“What are they?” Ginny looked very serious.

I looked down at her.

“One, we get married, and two, we start practicing tonight!”

Three months later we married in the Registry Office. Neither of our families was there. Ginny’s mother had never got passed her initial dislike of me and my mother went ape when I told her I was living with a woman who already had child, and now I wanted to marry her. ‘She’s after your money’ was the only explanation I got.

Sod them, sod them all. We were happy.

About six months after our marriage Natasha Middleton checked into the human race. Less than a day old, she had a shock of jet black hair and looked just like her sister. We were so happy.

28

May, last year, London

I could tell Westin was in a bad mood by the way he kicked the door open.

Todd looked over his glasses and said, "Something wrong old chap?" Given the number of redundancies and ended contracts going on it was a brave way of starting a conversation.

"Fuckin' Jorge's pulled the plug. They've cancelled the entire expansion plan. There's no order to win or lose!" spat Westin. With a swinging kick he converted Todd's paper bin into the top right corner of the room. It ended on the floor rolling from side to side with an enormous dent where Westin's foot had made contact.

"We're all fucked!" he snarled and left by slamming the door.

"Oh shit," said Todd.

29

May, last year, London

Two days later it was a very different Westin that swept into the office.

"Look at that Tank!" he said slapping a sheet of paper down on Todd's empty desk. Todd picked it up, adjusted his glasses and read it.

"Well we are in the ten pound seats aren't we!" Todd said.

"Too fucking right!"

“Care to share,” I asked. Todd replied while Westin beamed.

“Our esteemed colleague Westin is invited to TMZ HQ in Dallas, that by the way, is in Texas, for the ‘Strategy for the Twenty Teens’ conference. Five days plus weekend events, business class travel, the lot!”

I crossed to Todd’s desk and checked the paper. It was all true.

“Two weeks time,” said Westin, drawing to his full and considerable height and puffing out his ample chest while holding in his increasingly ample stomach.

“Don’t worry team, I’ll fight for you every step of the way.”

We were both more worried than before Westin came in.

30

47 years ago, Aunt Clara’s

..... On this particular day however it was different.

“Look at that!” shrieked Karen, pointing at the sky.

I looked up to see a glider streak low above the trees, heading south away from the ridge.

“It’s got bits flapping behind it!” she said and as I saw it disappear from view I could see it had indeed got something trailing from one side of the tail.

“Come on!”

We ran to the open part of the valley and looked south. The glider was low and looked even lower to us as it turned through 180 degrees and headed straight back towards us. We went back into the cover of some scrub and brambles watching it get ever closer as it came back getting lower and lower. Initially it was heading for the lower part of the valley which was clear of scrub and relatively flat. As it came closer I could see it had damage to the rear left wing and some fabric was trailing in the slipstream.

“Let’s go and wave to him,” I said and ran from the cover into the open valley. I’m still not certain if Karen ever agreed. Waving my arms in a cross I stood fore-square in the middle of the open valley, the glider streaming towards me. It touched the ground below me for an instant then bounced into the air, its left wing dragging it into an anticlockwise spin.

Suddenly Karen hit me hard from my left, bundling me down to the ground then rolling me over her, her over me as we followed the valley floor south. I vaguely saw the glider pass just above us before the ground came back into view.

31

19 years ago, London

I'm not sure when I was first introduced to him. Ian Steadman. He was taller than me with a more athletic build and thick, jet black hair. He played a lot of tennis, rowed solo, ran marathons and the like. All too soon he was everywhere we went. All of our friends seemed to have known him forever and invited him to BBQs, parties, even days out with the kids. Slowly I formed the opinion that he and Ginny had known each other sometime in the past, but she would never entertain the subject. If I brought it up we quickly ended up talking about something else. If Ian came up in other conversations he was always a 'nice and helpful man'. Nothing more and nothing less.

I assumed there was a Mrs Steadman, or at least a partner somewhere, but never heard of her. He had joined the same film club as we had, again without taking couples membership.

After a while he was just another one of the group. I always wondered.

32

June, last year, London

Westin returned from Dallas as a man on a mission. He was revitalised, Americanised and more unbearable than ever. We were in our office and Westin came in to impress us with his inside knowledge.

“It’s all about services,” he pontificated. “Services, just like the aero engine business. They give those fuckers away provided you’ll sign a ten year maintenance contract, that’s where the money is. Same for us. Services.”

Todd and I tried hard to look impressed.

“So we’re cutting the price per station by seventy percent. Seventy! That will just blow the competition away! But they sign up for ten years of full support. Break / fix, software changes, upgrades, the lot. You boys in Tech Support are in clover,” he added looking at me. Perhaps he was right.

“Tech Services don’t you mean,” put in Todd as sharp as ever. Westin gave him a withering look in reply.

“When does all this start?” I asked.

“In the States in a month’s time. Here in Europe when they’ve finished a reorganisation to merge us into the TMZ operation and reformat us into the Service Delivery Structure, or SDS as you’ll come to know it. They’ve got

some bright boys, and girls, in their Strategic Direction Services you know!”

“Is that called SDS as well,” asked Todd as innocently as a child. Westin ignored him this time.

“So,” he restarted, “next week we’ll have the big reorg. Thames Valley will be closed and moved to the TMZ offices outside Leatherhead. This place will be enlarged and TMZ city office closed, so that’s good for us. Then everything will be service aligned. Sales Services, Manufacturing Services, Production Support Services for you Nick, even back office will be Administration Services.”

Todd couldn’t help himself. “What about Personnel?” Westin looked confused for a moment. “Personnel Services of course, Tank. Get with the program.”

“I don’t want to be the one that tells Martha that,” he said quietly. Matron Martha was the Amazonian guard of personnel and had been since the year dot. It would take a brave man to tell her to offer personnel services.

Westin retook the floor.

“They’ve taken a harsh look at their product line and the Neumann Schwartz one. The 200 series beat their one hands down, so some of the Frankfurt boys will be happy, but Nine Five Hundred is looking pretty lame.”

Westin carried on for about half an hour, but I tuned out. At the moment he pronounced the 9500 dead I felt the axe rise above my neck.

33

June, last year, London

After our first session of sex the relationship with Kapu changed. I used to pay her for a tantric therapy session, albeit that included a lot more contact than her normal sensual session, or at least I hoped it was that way. I used to phone to say can I have an appointment. Now it was she who phoned or sent a text asking if we could meet. The call came about twice a week, which was not a problem as the merger ground through. Well not a problem for my time, but she was very vigorous and I was wasted after a few hours with her. Arms ached, leg muscles were knotted, and as she was great fan of receiving oral pleasure even my tongue ached. Ginny had never been into oral sex, either way, but I was surprised to find that I was rather good at it. Well according to a screaming and breathless Kapu I was!

June brought some decent weather and with it my sister, Karen. She loved coming to London and usually stayed with us for part of the time. Ginny was not keen on her but

tolerated her for my sake. Well Karen followed in Aunt Clara's footsteps and was an open lesbian. But also great fun. Party? Yes please. Drink at the pub, out for a meal? Yes please. Ginny used to lock our bedroom door when she stayed.

It was mid June and Kapu had called so we were spending the afternoon shagging each other senseless in her friend's studio flat. My phone buzzed part way through but with my hands and mouth full I ignored it. An hour later I surfaced, tired but with a grin on my face that a battleship could sail through. I looked at the phone. Eight missed calls, all from Ginny, two text messages, both from Ginny.

In varying degrees of anger and panic she conveyed the message that Karen had arrived to stay unexpectedly, and with a friend that Ginny described in a voice message as an 'axe murderer'. Basically I was to get my arse home NOW and sort this out. I silently formulated a response that went along the lines of 'Sorry dear, have a mouth full of wet pussy and need to finish things off here. Be with you asap.' But luckily that message never got out of my mind and into a phone.

34

June, last year, London

I had to miss out on the by now traditional after-sex shower with Kapu, got dressed and went home quickly. When I got there Ginny tackled me in the hall.

“Upstairs now!”

I briefly toyed with the idea my luck had changed but was soon disabused.

“This is too much! It’s bad enough when she invites herself, but just to turn up and say ‘We’re staying is that OK’ and, and bring some trollope with her is too much. They are not staying and you have to tell them!”

“Hello would have been a nice start,” I said trying to defuse the situation. It failed.

I went downstairs and into the lounge where Karen was doing a little dance all by herself to the music on the radio. A rather well built woman with short, dyed blonde hair, tattoos and walking boots sat in my chair. Ginny crept in behind me.

“Nick! How great to see you!” Karen ran to me, giving me a kiss and a hug. She drew back a little and looked at me. Her finger brushed my moustache. Then she lent close again and sniffed.

“You rampant pair you!” she exclaimed looking over my shoulder at Ginny. ‘He’s only just got here and he’s gone down! Lucky girl,” she added again looking at Ginny.

“Sorry, I don’t follow?”

“Follow! Look I haven’t been a lesbian for all these years not to recognise the scent of hot, wet pussy!”

It was a difficult evening but Karen and her new partner eventually checked into the nearby Travelodge. Ginny was so incensed about Karen and her girlfriend not staying with us the comment about oral sex seemed to go unnoticed, until very late when she did ask what on earth Karen was talking about. I dismissed it by saying it was probably her own moustache she could smell. Exhausted we both fell asleep and the topic was never aired again.

35

July, last year, London

Work was now a time of continual change. New faces flooded in as TMZ managers replaced those we had known and hated for some time. Charles Bradshaw retired and we had a presentation for him. It was a rather formal affair starting at 5pm on a Thursday.

The new American UK manager started the show with thanking Charles for his devoted efforts to Dean Fisher and wishing him a happy and long retirement. Charles then stepped up to the mark and told us we were all embarking on the greatest journey of our life. We should all put our shoulder to the wheel and make TMZ the market leader in Europe. He had one sherry and left hastily to start his long and happy retirement.

I couldn't help feeling that given his deep insight into the situation and that he was jumping ship, then the future for us all was not good.

36

August, last year, London

I hadn't heard from Kapu for 2 days, which was unusual so I called her.

"Hello stranger," she rebuked me after answering.

"Sorry, I'm just so used to you calling me. Are you OK?"

She didn't sound her normally bubbly self.

"Not really. I've had a headache for days. The doctor is arranging some tests."

"Sounds serious, what's the problem?"

“Don’t know. I think it’s just because I’m crazy.”

“Sounds like you need some R&R to me.”

“I’d love it! I’m feeling better today.”

“I can make the studio at 5?”

“No, not the studio. I’ve had a problem with Jessica. She wants me to pay a weekly fee whether I use it or not, and I’m thinking of stopping doing therapies. I told her to stuff it!”

“Oh, can we meet?”

“Of course, come to my house. Karl is away.”

She gave me an address in South Kensington and at five I rang the bell to Flat 3. Kapu said hello on the intercom and buzzed me in. The flat was large, with two bedrooms, one of which was obviously theirs and had an en suite. The room also had a few other refinements, like mirrors each side of the bed and one above it. The pictures on the walls were all of sexual activities, tastefully done but blatant. By the bed was a small casting. I looked at it and Kapu picked up on my interest.

“You recognise it? You should!” she said looking quizzically at me

It was obviously a cast of a shaved pussy.

“It’s mine! Surely you recognise it after you’ve spent so much time with it on your face! It was done for The Great Hall of Vagina, an installation art exhibition.”

I lifted it and kissed it.

“Come and do that to the real thing.”

I couldn’t resist.

Relaxing afterwards I looked again at the art works around the room.

“Did you choose these?”

“A few, but most are Karl’s. He collects erotica.”

I looked at the painting on the wall opposite the end of the bed. It was Kapu astride someone. Her hair had been perfectly captured.

“Is that Karl?” I asked pointing at the picture.

“No it’s a friend of ours,” she replied in a matter of fact tone.

“Oh, OK.”

“I’ve told you we have an open arrangement. Karl has a relationship with a violinist in the orchestra. She’s married but he’s been fucking her for years, well before we married. He has others as well.”

“You are OK with that?”

“Yea, she sleeps here at least once a week.”

“Does he know about me?”

“No, and he didn’t know about the therapy work I did.”

“Did?”

“Yes, I did it to find someone. Now I’ve found them I don’t need to do it anymore.”

I looked at her, straight into her eyes.

“It’s you silly!” she said and rolled on top of me. Pushing her groin down on me she said, “Again, now!”

“I’d love too, but my body’s old and needs longer to recover.”

“You can stay all night.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

“You can, Karl isn’t back until tomorrow night.”

“If you have an open marriage would it matter if he came back and I was here?”

“Yes, because I’ve kept you secret. And I like it that way.”

“You know I can’t stay don’t you?”

“Yes. I’ve never wanted to harm your marriage. You must be with Ginny. But if there is ever a chance to get away I’d love to be with you all night.”

“I think falling out with Jessica has made that harder.”

“It would never have worked there in any case. But I have an alternative. A friend of ours has a flat in Earl’s Court. He’s going to be away for six months and I’ve got the keys to look after it. You can screw me rigid there from next week!”

She kissed me again then told me I should go home.

37

August, last year, London

Home I went. Ginny had delayed our evening meal when I told her I would be late. We ate on our laps while some reality show was on TV. It finished and she cleared our plates away, then topped up our wine and sat down again.

“Are you alright Nick?” asked Ginny, sort of out of the blue.

“I think so. Should the poison have started to take effect by now?”

“Don’t be stupid. I’m serious.”

"I still think I'm OK," I replied, trying to concentrate on the Sudoku.

"Uhhh"

"What makes you ask, dear?"

"Well," and a silence followed.

"Well what?"

"Well, it's ... it's just you haven't asked for sex recently. Well months really. Not like you."

"Would the answer change if I did?"

"No. It's just you haven't asked."

"I guess I've given up."

A frosty silence lasted until we went to bed and hadn't thawed a lot the next morning.

38

August, last year, London

Mid-morning Monday Kapu called my mobile. She told me she had to go for tests on Tuesday and would love to see me that afternoon.

“I need to see you!” she added.

I could get away as work was still very slack.

“OK, your house?”

“No, the place I told you about in Earl’s Court.”

She gave me the address, some idea of where it was and which bell to ring. I got there just after four and she buzzed me in. The halls and stairs smelt a bit musty but the flat was nicely furnished.

The bedroom also had a mirrored wall.

“Nice, must make you feel like home!” I quipped.

“It does!”

“Whose place is it?”

“Remember the painting?”

“The one of you, yes.”

“It’s his, Martin, Karl took the photo it was painted from here in this room. He likes to watch, and take pictures.”

We had a great time, but then we always did. It was total escapism for me. I just slipped into a dream world with the most fantastic, sensual woman I’d ever met, and then when we were satisfied I slipped out of it again and went back to boring old Nick Middleton land. But while I was with her we

just laughed, played and rolled around. And fucked. It was always smiles and happiness. Who wouldn't want that?

I got Kapu to promise to call me when she had had her tests and then prepared to leave. She was still naked when I was at the flat door. She pinned me to the wall, kissing me deeply while her hand cupped my groin.

“Naughty!”

“I am, all the time!”

I opened the door, pecked her on the cheek and left. As I stepped out of the doorway someone almost fell over me.

It was Ian Steadman.

I was half way through ‘sorry’, when he said, “Nick! What are you doing here?”

I paused far too long. “Just checking on a flat of a colleague at work. He’s away for a few months.”

At that moment Kapu did what Kapu often did, hit the CD player very loud. It was obvious to me it was coming from the door I just closed. The supposedly empty flat.

“What about you?”

We walked off down the landing to the stairs.

“Old friend, been in this place for ages.”

Exchanging small talk we got outside the front door. I held back to see which way he went. He turned left towards Earl's Court tube so I said, "I'm going this way, see you Friday in the pub?"

"Sure thing, Nick."

We parted and I calmed down. I called Kapu and she answered with the deafening music still playing.

"Pussy's still purring," she said once she had turned the music down.

"You are impossible. What's above the flat?"

"What? Why do you need to know?"

"As I was leaving I literally bumped into someone I know, and worse, Ginny knows. He was coming down from the floor above."

"There's only one more floor, two flats. Martin says it's an old dear, totally deaf, in one, and a tart has the other. Does a good trade in his estimation."

I thanked her and wished her well for the tests, reminding her she was going to call me after they were finished.

39

September, last year, London

The strange times continued at work. The day after bumping into Ian Steadman it went from strange to stranger. Seemingly randomly people were being called to see the new boss, Jasper Cant. He was Texan through and through and you can guess his nickname. The first time I meet him he joked that Texas had discovered the world in 1857 and had been trying to make it work ever since.

At two pm Todd got a summons. He told me about the call and left. Fifteen minutes later he came back in a black mood.

“They can’t do this!” he screamed.

“What Todd?”

“Cunt just told me I’m finished. He says ‘I know we’ve got to go through all sorts of crap arsed UK stuff, and we will, by the book, but the bottom line is you’re out.’ That’s it redundant. He even had the cheek to say he was being nice by telling me early before they start the procedure.”

“Oh shit!”

Twenty minutes later my phone rang and a distraught Martha was screaming that she had been sacked. She was asking if I would join a union, any union to fight the bastards.

I said I would, because the next time my phone rang it would almost certainly be my turn.

40

September, last year, London

For the next two days I lived on a knife edge dreading calls on my office phone or mobile. Eventually Kapu's call came but she could only tell me about what tests they did. They'd done blood tests and a full MRI scan of her head and back. There were no results yet. I asked if she knew what they were testing for and she just said it was to do with the headaches. I knew she was holding something back.

By Thursday evening the second call still had not arrived and the executions seemed to have stopped. Slightly relieved I'd gone home early and 'enjoyed' an evening in front TV quiz shows, cooking programmes, soaps and reality shows.

Abruptly as the 'Ten o' Clock News' came on Ginny used the remote to kill the TV. I thought I had sensed something in the wind but numbed by the waiting at work I wasn't sure.

"What were you doing in Earl's Court on Monday?"

"Sorry Ginny?"

“You heard, Monday, you were in Earl’s Court weren’t you!”

“Yes I was. Someone at work has a flat there, they’re away and I said I’d stop in now and again to make sure all was OK. That’s all. What’s the problem?”

“Who at work?”

“One of the new Americans. I thought helping him would improve my chances of keeping my job.”

“Him? Are you sure. And not her, with long blonde hair, and tight jeans?”

“What’s this about?” I was shouting.

“You’re supposed to be telling me!” Ginny shouted back.

“Ginny! Tell me what this is about, please,” I said trying to calm myself.

She was silent for a moment then she wrapped her arms round her knees and turned side on to me on the sofa. She spoke to the wall.

“Ian told me he saw you coming out of a flat where a young blonde lives. Who is she?”

“Ian who?”

“Oh nice try. He spoke to you as you were falling out of her door. Ian Steadman. You know bloody well.”

I fell silent. My mind raced through excuses, stories, but nothing seemed to work. Then I thought what proof is there? It isn't Kapu's flat, it's Martin's, so Ian fucking Steadman was wrong. But the description of Kapu was too accurate. He had obviously seen her.

"Well, what are going to tell me!"

"While you're in that mood, nothing!"

I went to bed. Ginny slept in Samantha's room and we didn't talk Friday morning.

41

September, last year, London

Friday at the office managed to top any of the days of the last few weeks for weirdness. It was only now the empty desks hit home. Todd's ex desk said it all for me. I knew his situation, not down to the bank account balance but I knew he really needed that job to keep his head above water. You could say he should have lived within his means, he should have told his wife no but the truth was until two years ago there was no problem. We were making regular sales and the commission made his small basic salary meaningless. As technical support I was paid well whatever, then given

smaller bonuses when we were successful. In good times I'd been envious of the fat cheques that landed in Todd's hands, but the last six months he'd been hurting, badly. Now even that meagre amount was gone. I knew there were no savings, Todd's wife had made sure of that, so he was probably only weeks away from defaulting on the massive mortgage. And Todd was no great shakes as a salesman so another job was doubtful. I then started to think of Westin and what could happen there. But then did I really care?

Mid Friday afternoon the moving men arrived and dropped a pile of boxes by Todd's desk. When I asked who they were for the guys looked at their paper work. After a bit of conferring one said, "Desk 29. Casper Wiener. Guess you'll meet him on Monday." They left.

42

September, last year, London

My mobile rang, it was Kapu.

"Hi, I'm in the office. Any news?"

"Can you go somewhere we can talk?" she asked.

"Yes, hang on."

I walked down the office making small talk to her and she understood immediately replying to my 'What are you doing this weekend?' with 'Sitting on your face.' She always had done that sort of thing but this time it sounded hollow. I made it through the doors to the corridor and felt reasonably safe.

"OK we can talk."

"Nick I need to see you this weekend, before Karl gets back. I know we said never at weekends, but I really need to see you."

"Is it the tests?"

Silence.

"Kapu, please tell me."

Silence.

"Kapu!"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"I'll only tell you when I'm impaled on you."

"What?"

"You heard and you know what I mean, please Nick. This time it's important. Or I wouldn't ask."

I thought about my life at home. I had decided to try and build bridges with Ginny. I hadn't got to the 'Tell all' stage yet but it was close. I also knew if I did 'tell all' I was saying goodbye to Ginny and the girls or Kapu. One or the other would be gone. I decided.

"Is Saturday morning OK, I'll stay 'til Sunday?"

"It's marvellous Nick, thank you so, so much! Come to my apartment, not Earls Court. See you, kiss, kiss, kiss. And I'll fuck you rigid all night!" The line went dead immediately. Again her talking dirty sounded hollow. Something was very wrong.

43

September, last year, London

Friday evening had started badly and got worse. We had sort of worked through catering arrangements but not eaten together. At 8 pm Ginny announced she was staying away for Saturday night I could do what I liked or words to that effect. I shrugged and took a bottle of red to Natasha's room. I thought of calling Kapu to say Saturday was looking very good but just resisted and subsided into a drunken indifference.

I stayed in the room beyond 9 o'clock on Saturday morning. Just after Ginny left with a bag and took the car, I packed a few things and left for the station. As I walked I wasn't sure if I'd ever return, but at the same time was filled with concern at what I was going to find out later.

I called Kapu as I left South Kensington tube station and walked towards her apartment. She sounded so pleased and excited that I'd be with her in a few minutes that my spirits lifted. On an impulse I stopped at a mini market and bought two cans of squirty cream. We'd have fun, I hoped.

44

September, last year, London

Kapu buzzed me in and I went up to flat 3. The door was just ajar and I went in. She was hiding behind the door and as soon as I stepped in she jumped onto my back, covering my eyes with her hands. The blind, two person, but only two legged beastie stumbled around and finally crashed onto a sofa, both of us in raucous giggles. Once horizontal Kapu climbed on top of me. She was in a loose fitting striped night shirt, hair just a waterfall of blonde. She was smiling like I knew only Kapu could smile. I reached up and touched her nose.

“Have I really got you for the whole weekend?” she asked.

I looked doubtful, because I was thinking she possibly had me for far longer.

“Be honest,” she added and waited for my response, a frown spreading across her forehead.

“Yes for the whole weekend. But you must tell me what’s wrong.”

Her expression changed to deep sadness.

“You must.”

“Can’t we just have sex?”

“Yes, but I want to know what’s happening. I care about you, you know.”

Her face changed, suddenly looking serious.

“Why can you stay for the night? Is Ginny away?”

I was taken aback by her insight. With my concern about her tests I had completely blanked my own situation.

“Ginny and I, are, well, having a difficult time.”

“What’s happened?” She sat up on me, tossed her hair aside and locked my eyes.

“Remember when I phoned you at Earls Court.” She nodded. “And I had met someone I knew outside the flat?” She

nodded again. "Well he told Ginny he'd seen me there and she asked me why I was there."

"Oh! What did you say?"

"I said I was checking on a flat for a new American colleague."

"She didn't believe you?"

"No, the 'friend' gave her a very good description of you."

She looked aghast.

"Is this friend tall, with very black hair?"

I nodded.

"And a bit creepy?"

I had never thought of Ian Steadman that way, but now she said it, "Yes."

"I've seen him. The same day. He tried to corner me in on the stairs. Asked if I fancied a bit and how much I charged. I just got away from him and slammed the door. He shouted 'You know you want it!', banged on the door but then left laughing. I didn't realise he went upstairs."

"Why didn't you tell me!"

"How was I to know you knew him?"

Good question. I deflated, then realised she had shied away from the original question.

“Kapu, the tests?”

“I tell you after you’ve screwed me!” she said excitedly and jumped off me. The next I knew I was being dragged to my feet, we toured past the front door to close it, then onto the bedroom, and the bed where she took my clothes off and started to play with my todger. Gentle kisses rained on it and my insistence to know what the tests were about dissolved.

We had great sex for nearly two hours and both cans of squirry cream were deployed all over her body. Finally Kapu made me cum on her breasts. She delighted in it, pushing me on my back then sliding up my chest lubricated by my cum. She planted a big, sloppy kiss on my lips.

Even by Sunday afternoon when I left to go home Kapu had avoided every attempt by me to find out about the tests by resorting to another bout of sexual excess.

45

September, last year, London

The next week was the strangest of my life. Work was just a mad house with old colleague after old colleague being pushed out of the door. There was no home life with Ginny.

We were coming back to the same building but having nothing to say to each other. As Kapu's husband had returned from tour I could only phone her in the day so evenings were bleak.

Unannounced both Natasha and Samantha arrived on Thursday evening. Obviously Ginny had marshalled support. I was told we were having a family meal and duly we all sat around the dining room table at seven thirty. The polite conversation about how life was going and how University was changing didn't last long. To my surprise it was Natasha that made the first attack.

"So does she suck you off?"

"Sorry Natasha?"

"You heard. How could you do this to mum?"

"Do what Natasha?"

"What? What! I've heard all about you shagging some blonde tart in a bedsit in Earls Court. How could you do that to mum? And me?"

Ginny stayed silent and just played with her food. I hadn't expected a confrontation at the table and was totally unprepared. I felt Natasha was right which didn't help. A little bit guilty again. I had just gone and done it. To tell your daughter that it started because her mother had gone off sex

just did not seem the right thing to say. I stayed silent, hoping the anger would pass I guess. It didn't.

“Well! Have you nothing to say?”

Ginny put her fork into a potato and ate it, deliberately looking away from me.

“How could you?” pursued Natasha.

“Natasha, please ..” I started to say but dried. I had no defence. She hurled her fork at the wall, just missing my face and walked out.

Samantha took my hand and at the same moment took Ginny's. Tears were rolling from her eyes as I realised how I had hurt the people I love most. But even then I was thinking of Kapu and wondering about the tests.

“Mum. Dad? Please try to understand each other. You have a big problem, but I love you both and I want to see you both forever.”

Ginny got up and left the room.

Samantha looked at me, still holding my hand.

“Dad, I want you to know I don't blame you, I just want to keep knowing you. And mum. Can you let me do that?”

I had no idea what to think or say. I squeezed her hand. She stood, kissed me on the forehead and left the room. All I

wanted to do was talk with Kapu but I knew I couldn't. And then the glider surfaced in my mind. I hadn't thought ahead, thought of the consequences, planned the landing when the earth reclaimed me from gliding in the blue sky.

46

September, last year, London

Friday started badly. I had spent the night on the sofa, turning down Samantha's offer of her room if she slept on the sofa. I arrived at work more than the worse for wear and had an immediate command to go and see Jasper Cant.

"Nick! Take a seat. Good of you to come."

"No problem Jasper," I managed in reply. What else was I going to do today in any case?

"Nick, you know we've been taking a hard look at things, making sure we get the right way to move forward don't you?"

"er yes, Jasper"

"Well we've finally made the decision on the product lines."

"Oh yes."

“Yes we sure have. And I wanted you to be one of the first to know. The 9500 range. As you know it’s an equivalent to our ‘Altas’ line.”

I could have protested, defended the 9500 as a much superior product but for some reason I sensed it was futile. Jasper continued.

“We’ve looked at it every which way and there is only one conclusion. The 9500 is wasting our money and is being closed down.”

“Oh OK I can see that makes sense.”

Jasper slid an envelope across the desk to a point just in front of me.

“Open it!” he said as though he’d just given me a winning lottery ticket. I did. It was a redundancy settlement for just over one hundred thousand pounds after tax.

“I know you were sold on the 9500 and I wouldn’t ask you to change that. This is best for you and for TMZ. Hope you’re happy?”

He stood and held out his hand. I was so shocked I shook it and left his office.

An hour later I handed in my security badge, took a box of ‘personal effects’ with me and left my working life. The pub on the corner was my first port of call and after a pint I took out my phone and called Kapu. She answered speaking with

the 'matter of fact' tone that meant she couldn't speak freely.

"Kapu. It's important for me. I need to see you. Desperately!"

"Oh that's nice."

"Kapu did you hear me? Understand me?"

"Yes, of course. Got to go, call you in a minute!"

She ended the call. I think if I had had a gun I'd have put the barrel in my mouth and pulled the trigger. Minutes later my phone rang. It was Kapu.

"Sorry Nick!"

"What?"

"I couldn't talk. What's wrong? You sound terrible."

"I need to see you to tell you."

There was a silence.

"Kapu, I know it difficult, but I need to see you, be with you, now."

"Oh."

"Please Kapu, I really need it."

“The flat in Earls Court, 30 minutes. Got to go, be there. I’ll make it right for you,” she whispered and immediately closed the line.

47

September, last year, London

I made it to the apartment quickly and was not surprised when there was no answer from the door phone. I sat on the steps with my box of possessions next to me a bit like a down and out, which I guess I pretty much was at that moment. Kapu came rushing up and was standing in front of me before I’d even seen her.

“What are you doing there slumped like a drunk!”

I looked up at her, hands on her hips, legs straight and one foot slightly in front of the other, tapping impatiently. But she was smiling, that smile that only Kapu had.

“Sorry, I just didn’t feel like walking around the block until you got here...” I sounded miserable, which I was, and in need of a large dose of sympathy, which I was, but probably didn’t deserve.

“Come on,” she commanded and brushed past me to the door with the key in her hand. I just made it to my feet and to the door before it closed, then followed her at forced march speed up the stairs and into the apartment. The door closed behind me as she tossed her handbag onto the sofa.

She turned and held her arms out.

“Nick, come here. I said I’d make it better and I will.”

I closed the distance to her slowly, almost reluctantly, but when I was in range she grabbed my jacket and heaved me to her. The embrace and kiss were the warmest we had had, and my ‘feeling sorry for myself’ began to soften.

“What is it,” she asked, almost in a whisper.

I took awhile to answer, enjoying the warmth of her next to me and that tantalizing scent that always lingered with me now.

“I’ve been sacked. Made redundant. Not wanted on voyage to the new world.”

“Oh.”

I stayed in her embrace, and if anything snuggled lower. Moments passed.

“Come with me,” she whispered, released me and took my hand, leading me to the bed.

“Don’t resist,” she said as she walked in front of me. “I have to be back in an hour, Karl has friends coming to visit, they are staying the night.”

I knew what that meant but I was so numb it didn’t register. I followed, she undressed me and she did make it better. Much, much better. It was only on the tube going away from Earls Court I realised we hadn’t used a condom.

48

September, last year, London

I got back to the house around nine-thirty. Ginny was there and in a mood.

“You’ve finally decided to turn up!” she said by way of a greeting. I didn’t reply and just shrugged.

“Don’t think for one minute you are staying here!” she continued, her voice taking a harder edge. It took me aback. This was my house as much as hers.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you are not staying here tonight or any other night. Go to your tart. Let her enjoy your snoring.”

I looked back into the hallway and saw two suitcases standing there. She followed my gaze.

“Yes I’ve packed your bags for you. One is suits and work clothes, the other casual stuff.”

“I won’t be needing the work clothes,” I said.

“What?”

“I said I won’t be needing the work clothes.”

“What do you mean!”

“I’ve been made redundant. Finished today.”

“On that is just great! Typical of you, adding money worries to this mess you’ve created!”

I considered pointing out it wasn’t my choice to become redundant, but I doubted it would make any difference.

“OK if that’s the way you want it,” I said, turned, picked up my cases and headed out of the door.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

I looked back, “you told me to go!”

“You drop a bombshell like that and expect to walk out?”

“You told me to go! I’m going.”

“How are the bills going to be paid? What about the mortgage?”

“I don’t know,” I said quietly and continued out of the door. I could still hear her shouts way down the road. I headed for the local pub, bought a pint and then ordered a taxi. When it arrived I headed for a budget hotel, got a room for the weekend and retired to it.

It was Spartan, but clean. I lay on the bed staring at the ceiling and thinking back through the brief time I’d spent with Kapu. She was on top of me again, hair streaming down around my face. I pushed up, deep into her, sending her over the top into an orgasm. Her head flew back, and she locked her legs under mine, forcing us together.

Then the screams started, but they weren’t Kapu’s.

“Get off me you fucking creep!” blared through the walls. It was followed by more screamed words and some loud bangs. I turned over and buried my head in the pillows. A bad punter I suspected.

49

September, last year, London

Monday I phoned Kapu. She sounded down and told me she had woken with a headache.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said.

“It’s OK. How are you?”

I told her about Ginny chucking me out and staying in a crap hotel for the weekend.

“Nick, you should have called me!”

“Thought you’d be busy with Karl’s friends and not able to talk.”

“I’d have found a way to help you!”

“I’m guessing it would have looked odd if you answered the phone in the middle of things.” I was trying to be light but failed. There was no reply.

“How was the party?” I asked trying to restart the conversation.

“Oh sexy fun. Karl took a lot of video, I’ll show you when we meet.”

“Do you really enjoy that?”

“Yes, you know I love sex.”

She sounded genuine. I didn’t respond.

“Nick, you can stay at the flat in Earl’s Court. Can you meet me there at two?”

“Are you sure that’s OK? Doesn’t Karl know about it?”

“No it’s a naughty secret I have, just me and Martin. And you of course.” Her answer raised a question in my mind about her relationship with Martin, but I was too much in need of a roof over my head to follow that train of thought.

“Great, I’ll see you there at two.”

Kapu was typically late and found me sitting between my suitcases on the steps.

“You sure you’re not becoming a hobo?” she teased as we walked up the stairs. Once in the flat she gave me a big kiss and then started to give me a guided tour. Kitchen, pots, pans, plates, cutlery, then bedroom, sheets and blankets, bathroom, heating controls, the lot. She was obviously well acquainted with living there. Finally we sat in the lounge, something we’d never done in our other visits.

“Here, take these,” she said handing me the keys. “I’ve got another set at home.”

“Thanks. Are you sure this is OK?”

“Sure. Martin won’t be back for another two months at least, so that should give you time to get sorted. Any idea of what you’re going to do?”

“Not really. A divorce I guess. Split the money up and see what I have got.” I sounded pretty resigned.

“I can’t believe she’s done all this just because one friend saw you leaving here. She must be mad.”

I was inclined to agree. Why Ian Steadman had told her at all was a mystery, especially as it was odds on he’d been visiting the tart upstairs rather than the deaf old woman, but for Ginny to accept his word so completely just shook me to the core.

“How long can you stay?” I asked.

“Can’t, not today. I have to go with Karl to a recital. We’ll leave at five. I have to fly!”

I spent the evening settling in and exploring my adopted home. Martin had some interesting tastes in music, a small collection of dirty DVDs and nothing in the fridge. I popped out to a small supermarket and got some basics, including a pizza. As I sat and munched the ‘four seasons’, deep in thought about my situation it suddenly came to me that I still didn’t know the results of Kapu’s tests. And I couldn’t call her that evening.

50

September, last year, London

I phoned Kapu just after nine the next day but she was on answer phone. I asked her to call me back. At eleven I called again and repeated the message.

Just after one she finally called. From the background noises I could tell she was walking along a street. "I'm on my way, you'd better get ready for me!"

"How long before you get here?"

"Five minutes! Get undressed, now!" She cut the call.

I walked to the bedroom, undressed and lay on the bed. Within minutes I heard her key in the door. She stood in the doorway to the bedroom. She had very high heels on, a full length, black patent leather coat that was tightly belted around her waist and I could just see the fishnet stockings.

"You lucky boy!" she purred.

"I am?" I replied thinking about losing my marriage and job. She undid the belt and held the coat open. Other than the holdups she was naked. She was right, I was a lucky boy. The coat dropped to the floor, the heels were kicked off and she climbed onto the bed, sitting astride my thighs. From there she moved deliberately along my body until my head was between her thighs. I stroked my hands up her back.

“Eat me!” she commanded and I delighted in obeying her.

It was over an hour until we lay on our sides, her back to me, resting and recovering. I finally got my mind under control.

“Kapu?”

“Uhm.” She moved my hand onto her breast.

“Your tests? You haven’t told me the results.”

She stayed silent.

“Kapu? I need to know.”

She snuggled back into me, wiggling her bottom against my spent todger.

“Please?”

She turned her head to look at me.

“There’s not a lot to tell at the moment,” she said softly.

“What were the results?”

“More tests.”

“When? And Why?”

“Soon, October.”

“Seems a long time to wait.”

“I think it’s because it’s not serious.”

I didn’t respond.

“I need to stay in hospital a few days while they do the tests. That’s probably why it’s taking so long.”

She turned onto her other side, now facing me then rolled on top of me forcing me onto my back.

“Will you come and visit me?”

“Of course,” I answered, moving her hair off my face.

“Good! You have to shag me in the hospital!”

“You’re impossible!” I gave her a gentle smack on her bum.

“More! Harder!”

We rolled and wrestled and much to my surprise had sex again. Very vigorous and satisfying sex. Now totally expended I lay on my back, Kapu’s head on my stomach and her hand stroking my soft todger.

“Did you dress up, well undress for me?”

“Yes and no.”

“Don’t understand?”

“Well after the recital we called home then went round to see a friend. Karl told me to dress like this so I did. I came

straight to see you from the friend's house today. I knew I would when I got dressed, well undressed, last night. So it was for you really. Did you like me that way?"

"Obviously so," I replied, still amazed that I had recovered so quickly.

51

October, last year, London

It was high time I started to look for another job. I had already started but had not enjoyed the experience. Half the time I was looked at as some sort of a fossil, old enough to be the father of the person interviewing me, and the other half I was meet with the 'TMZ keep the best' which I guess meant I was not one of them.

Early October things changed. I had a call from Westin. He had, so he said, decided that working for Uncle Sam was not for him and to take his awesome sales talent elsewhere. He'd signed for a competitor of Neumann Fisher called Advance Systems, also based near Frankfurt and was to relaunch their product line in the UK. As always Westin sounded totally convincing, ahead of the game and in total control. Early in the call he established I was still without

work so naturally assumed that I was open for just about anything.

“I can rubber stamp you in,” he said with that air of authority that public school education brings.

“What’s the job, Westin?” He took a few minutes describing a technical sales support role that was not specific to Advance Systems but had enough meat for me to realise it was my old role, but with a different product line. A product line that I knew nothing about.

“Sounds great Westin, but it won’t be like Dean Fisher, I don’t know these products inside out.”

“Nick, there you go again. Worrying about minor details. How hard can be? It does the same thing, it must work in the same way.”

I couldn’t fault the logic and decided not to explain that those special features I used to produce were generally because I knew the control code inside out, something that had taken years and a younger brain.

“OK Westin, I’m interested, where do we go from here?” For the first time in the call the Westin bluster was muted.

“Well I’m sales, and this job would be under the Technology Division, so basically I can’t hire you. The next step is you attend a session in Frankfurt where they will select the five people to hire. I can get you on the long list, it’s up to you

what happens next. You'll fly through, what do you say Nick?"

For once I didn't need to think. I had nothing and therefore had nothing to lose.

"Westin, that's great, I'll give it a go."

Things moved fast, which was a good sign. The very next day I had an acceptance email with travel details, a hotel booking and a timetable.

I talked to Kapu and told her it was an offer I just couldn't turn down. She was happy for me then a little reservation crept into her voice as she realised the first two days of her hospital stay I would be in Germany.

52

October, last year, Frankfurt

The selection course was bizarre. I'd worked with a number of German companies and they tended to do things their own way - 'At Whatever AG we do it this way' I'd heard time and again, so I expected some very disciplined, procedural selection process, probably conducted in German which would be a disadvantage to me. Still Westin had never

mentioned German as a requirement and I knew he could understand about as much as me, say hello, please and order beers.

The whole thing was run by a Canadian, who you can distinguish from Americans because they have both a volume and a bullshit control. His name was Dave and he seemed a genuine enough guy. We had all arrived on Sunday evening and Monday morning had an eight a.m. start. The first hour was an introduction to Advance Systems. The Director for Western Europe gave the presentation. It was good, his English was impeccable and the only thing that was odd I thought was that Germany was not in their definition of Western Europe. Germany had in fact no fewer than five divisions all on a par to 'Western Europe'. The only other thing I noticed was on the Org chart. The UK Director was a 'TBA' and not Westin.

After that Dave took over, observed by two other people, obviously German to my mind, but they strangely reminded me of 'Nick and Margaret' from The Apprentice. Monday was aptitude tests in the morning and product overview in the afternoon. Just at the end of the day our test marks were delivered and I surprised myself by doing rather well.

Monday evening we were left to our own devices and I texted Kapu to wish her the very best. I really wanted to speak with her but I knew that would have to be in the day time. Very quickly I got a text back saying 'THANKYOU!!!!' all in capitals.

Tuesday morning was a project test and we were split into teams, given a task to complete and had to present our results at three pm. For some reason the other three in my team chose me to present. We did the task just fine then by two o'clock set to the presentation. Ten minutes, and not a second longer we were told, so Hello, three slides and a conclusion. At two fifty five we had ten slides and my fellow team members wanted to add more detail. I gave in and let them.

We were the last team to present. The first had got it right in my opinion. A nice crisp presentation of their solution, well delivered by a Swede with excellent English. Team Two stepped up next and their presenter was English and somehow reminded me of Westin, all noise and no substance. He overran and was brutally chopped off. The Q&A that followed was like watching a machine gun execution. They kept asking questions about things the presenter had not got round to covering. In the end he lost his rag and speaking over the questioner shouted, "If you'd have let finish my presentation I would have covered all of that!" The room fell silent, well except for me pruning our presentation to three slides. I just managed to save it before the silence ended and 'Team Three' were summonsed. My fellow team members had no idea or say in my editing, so my first slide brought surprised looks from them. Luckily the executioners were all focused on me and didn't notice. The second slide had little to do with what I was saying but my words covered why we had selected that solution. The third

slide was one they had added at the very end, but served well to fill the screen while I talked about future directions and enhancements. At nine minutes, fifty five seconds I thanked them for their attention and invited questions. I fully expected 'incoming' as they say in the military. There was silence for a quite a while.

Dave was the first to speak. "Thank you Nick for a very complete presentation. I don't have any questions." That said he looked at the other two who thought for a moment and then said they were fine as well. I sat down with my team and started to wonder if I'd just said ten minutes of total gibberish and they were now calling the ambulance on a phone under the desk. My fellow team members gave me icy stares.

The presentation ordeal over we all moved into a large room where all the furniture had been pushed against the walls. Team building exercises were announced by Dave and I couldn't help but have two thoughts: first I hated them; and second wouldn't they have been better before we played at being a team. All went well until the final one. You stand on chair, side on, cross your arms, close your eyes and fall backwards into the loving arms of six of your colleagues. Dave had obviously played before and had a pile of gym mats in the landing zone, and was always in the catching squad at the head end. One of the ladies present declined to 'be groped by a bunch of pervs', another took the challenge with excessive enthusiasm followed by a rather large man who all but dislocated the catching teams' shoulders and then it was

my turn. I'd done this before and was fine until I saw all of my project team had stepped forward to be in my catching squad. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes and let myself go. It was a hell of a thump and when I opened my eyes I was staring up into Dave's face. The three others from my team were sprawled on the floor either side of me with very satisfied looks on their faces. Within minutes I was getting increasingly sore, especially around my neck. Dave decided we'd built enough teams and gave the details of the evening social event. A formal dinner in a castle to the west of Frankfurt.

It was a really grand place with a stone, galleried dining hall. Large cart wheel candelabras hung above the single long table. It was a very good meal, with a wild boar main course followed by Black Forest Gateau covered in piped cream. My mind wondered back to that delightful session with Kapu. And thankfully there was a lot of wine. I say thankfully as my neck was progressively going into spasm, leaving me with a head that listed to the left. The wine deadened the pain.

Wednesday was one on one interviews and by then my neck was in a fixed position, listing a good twenty degrees to the left. Dieter interviewed me. His hearty handshake did little to help my situation. I started by explaining why my head was tilted.

"I know," said Dieter, "I was there." It was then I realised we were not in America. Had this happened in America I would be in intensive care and they would be bracing for a multi-

million dollar law suit. Dieter smiled for a long time and I tried to indicate it was nothing but my arm refused to move.

“I was also there when you presented.”

“Ah!” That’s right, find an injured man and put him to the sword.

“You have an English expression I think, ‘Thinking on your feet.’ Is that so?”

“Yes it’s commonly used.”

He smiled again.

“You did a lot of thinking on both your feet I think.”

I tried to replay the room but couldn’t place Dieter anywhere. I thought what the hell and asked, “I didn’t see you in the room, where were you?”

He laughed briefly.

“The mirror, beside the screen!”

I began to wonder if I wanted to work with a company that has one way mirrors in its training rooms, but Dieter continued.

“Your team were shocked. But you did the right thing. You made it fit into ten minutes, you covered everything. I was pleased.”

If I had been able to cock my head I would have done, as in 'Dieter, stop having me over.' As I was already permanently cocked I said, "Really?"

"That's a question?" he checked before answering. I nodded and winced.

"Yes really. All the laptops you used were networked so I know what presentation you were going to give. The one you gave was the right one." He laughed again.

"I'm not going to waste either of our time asking why you want to work with Advance Systems. I've seen enough. We'll be in touch Nick Middleton."

I left in some sort of confusion. I was on a high because I'd done the right thing, I'd impressed and a new job would mean I could put some stability back in my life. But did I really want to sign up for another few years with Westin?

And what was happening with Kapu?

53

October, last year, Frankfurt

The only part of Advance System organisation of my trip that I could fault was they hadn't booked my return flight to

London until Thursday. At first I thought it was for some sort of social event, but all the others left the training centre for the airport and I went to my hotel. No reason was given, so I guess the Lufthansa flights were full.

In my room I started my laptop and idly looked round the world wide web. On an impulse I looked at Zoriada's site. Once again there were new pictures and a new text about why tantric massage is good for you. 'Releasing your sexuality. Feeling at one with your Tantric goddess.' I thought back and agreed it was good for you, well as I remembered it. I clicked on her availability.

I needed to look twice. This very week she was in Frankfurt. Before I'd even thought it through I emailed her, saying "I'm here too, but just for tonight."

Send

'What have you done!' was my next thought and I reread the email. It could have come from an infatuated twelve year old. She'll laugh was my next thought, laugh at you.

'Ding'

It was an email from her.

'My dear Nick Monday Middleton I hope you are fine as well as being in Frankfurt.

I MUST SEE you. NOW. Where are you?

Z xxx'

I'm shocked and started to think of Kapu and whether I could see Zoraida. Then I knew I could not resist. I emailed back my hotel address and room number and added my mobile phone number just in case. And waited.

And waited.

And waited feeling like a stupid, getting old man.

'Ding'

"Ten minutes, be ready."

Relief gave quickly to memories of early that year and then to excitement. And then to, 'Don't be stupid, she joking with you.'

A knock. I looked through the spy glass and it was indeed Zoraida. I let her in. She immediately held my head and kissed me with such intensity that I couldn't speak. We staggered back, fell over the end of settee and landed fully prone, one on top the other. Finally she released me and moved her head up. She looked deep into my eyes.

"Of all my converts I worried about you the most," she said softly and quickly kissed me again.

"er why?"

“Because you had only one chance left. You had to make it this time!”

Another kiss.

“Have you Nick Monday Middleton? Have you made it? Tell me?”

Lying under her I didn't know what 'made it' meant. “Things have changed a lot,” I said.

She put her finger to her mouth to hush me.

“Not like this. We both have too many disguises on, too many barriers.” She rolled off me, agile like a cat and into a standing position. The long coat came off and she stood in a colourful kaftan, holding out her hand. “Come with me and tell me all.”

I took her hand and she led me to the bed.

“Lie down.” I did. She sat across my thighs and looked sternly at me.

“I said be ready. But look at you! Your sensual chakra wrapped in Levis. Your body encased in clothes. How can your sole breathe?” She took an exceedingly deep breath which pushed her breasts up and out. Her head went back and then snapped forward. Her fingers undid my shirt buttons. I began to wonder what she was wearing under the kaftan, but quickly decided the answer was nothing. She completed the opening of my shirt and laid down onto me,

her arms tucked under my shoulders. It was intimate but not sensual. It was like she was drawing something from my mind. She stayed that way for several moments and then sat back up.

“You took the step Nick Monday Middleton. I know.”

It wasn't a question it was a statement.

“She is lovely, bright and sensual.” Another statement.

“And you worry about her.” A statement.

I collapsed.

“Her name is Kapucina, well Kapu, and she is lovely and bright as you say, and..”

“..And she surprises you, all the time!”

“Yes she does.”

I fell silent. “And she is ill,” said Zoraida, leaning close to my ear. I could feel her breasts, no bra, pressing against my chest.

“Yes I think she is.”

“Then you should go help her get better, not be lying under me in a Frankfurt Hotel!” It was a command.

“I go back tomorrow.”

“You still haven’t got it!” she snapped, “When you find freedom and pleasure you must nurture it, not leave it to find its own way.”

“She has a husband and he will be with her. I can’t be there at the same time.”

“An excuse, but one I will tolerate for now.” Zoraida backed off and sat on her heels. She seemed to be accepting the situation and for the first time I felt I was not going to be frog marched to the airport.

“What’s wrong with your neck?”

I told her and within minutes was naked, face down, with Zoriada sitting on my buttocks as her hands worked magic on my cranky neck muscles. I fell asleep.

I stirred slowly out of a deep slumber. My eyes opened to see Zoriada lying beside me, on her side, looking at me.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled.

“For what? You looked at peace while you slept. I seem to remember you always fall asleep with me.” She touched my nose and smiled at me.

“How is your neck?”

I instinctively rubbed my hand over my shoulder and neck and it felt good.

“Much better. Thank you.”

“You see I’m a mistress of stiffness. I can create it were it isn’t and remove it were it is!”

Having experienced both in the last year I had to agree. She hugged me, very intensely, then rolled me onto my back and lay on top of me.

“Nick Monday Middleton, I would have been delighted to experience your magic touch again tonight. It is why I came to see you. But your soul has given itself to Kapucina. I’m happy for her, she has a valuable thing. Get back to her as soon as you can, and do not let her go!”

Zoraida kissed me, on the mouth for a long time then got off the bed, put on her coat and walked to the door.

“Even now, Nick Monday Middleton, don’t you dare look back! Namaste.”

A little bow, hands held palms together, fingers pointed upwards and she was gone.

I lay on the bed staring up at the hotel ceiling. How many hotel ceiling had I stared at in my business life? Then I wondered if Zoraida had not read my mind would I have consorted with her? Been unfaithful to Kapu? I convinced myself I would not have, but then why had I contacted Zoraida? Did I deserve any of the amazing women that were

now in my life? The questions blurred into a Gordian knot and my brain gave in to sleep.

54

October, last year, London

I returned to the UK and went to see Kapu later that day. The flight was delayed and it was mid afternoon before I got to Earls Court. The first thing I did was text Kapu asking when I could see her. It was early evening before her reply came.

‘Not tonite – more tests x’

I so wanted to phone her and find out more and only just resisted. It was a strange evening and night as I seesawed between worry for Kapu and the feeling of success from my trip to Germany. I held out until 8:30 in the morning before texting her.

This time the answer was immediate.

‘2! Xxxxxxxx’

I took it as positive, well at least I was going to see her. I filled the time with a little food shopping, emails and too many cups of coffee. I got a map for the clinic off the internet and at one p.m. headed off. It was in North London,

well Maida Vale and I found it easily and a bit too early. A local pub provided a glass of red to pass the time. At five to two I presented myself at reception and asked for her by her married name. The receptionist checked and found I was expected. I was escorted to the wing and left to wait for the wing sister to return to her desk.

Sister Thomas was a stern looking, middle aged lady with black hair pulled brutally back into a bun. For all her fearsome appearance she was to turn out to be very understanding.

“Mrs Vettel’s husband is with her. I suggest you wait for a while.” For a moment I wondered if it would seem strange that I didn’t want to meet him as well, but before I could say anything Sister Thomas added, “I really do suggest it will be best. Have a seat over there.” She pointed to some chairs which were away from the desk and to be honest I hadn’t even noticed. “There’s a coffee machine. It’s not too bad as machines go,” she added with a smile. And did she wink? I wasn’t sure, but I took her advice.

A magazine and a coffee later I was suddenly aware of shouting. A man, loud and angry. Sister Thomas hurried away out of sight. A moment later a man stormed passed her desk and disappeared. It was some minutes afterwards that that Sister Thomas came into view and said, “You can see Mrs Vettel now. Room 4.” She held her arm out to indicate the direction I’d find room 4.

55

October, last year, London

I knocked gently and opened the door. Kapu's sobs alerted me immediately I stepped in. I ran across to her bed and tried to pull her arms away from her face but she struggled with me, thrashing out with one hand and catching me in the eye. I bucked back and had to rub my eye.

"Kapu! What is it?"

"Don't you shout as well!"

"Sorry I didn't mean to. I don't understand what's happening. Please help me understand."

She sobbed deeply again and I held her shoulders trying to get her to look at me. Eventually she opened her eyes and looked straight into my eyes.

"What is it?" I asked as gently as my concern would allow.

"Karl has left me .." she said quietly and a little indistinctly.

"What, Karl has left you?" I wasn't certain how she meant 'left'.

"Left! He doesn't want a sick woman. Nobody will screw me!"

There was real anger in her voice.

“Kapu, I don’t understand you. Why has he left you?”

She took some time to get control of herself, wiping away her tears with one hand then the other. I ventured a kiss on her cheek and she immediately hugged me around the neck, very, very tightly, her head nestled against mine. She eventually relaxed her grip and moved back.

“Tell me, please.”

She took a tissue and wiped her eyes.

“I have tumour.” She sobbed again. I held her hand.

“Where?”

“In my brain. That’s why I’m crazy.”

“You’re not crazy,” I tried to soothe her.

“And Karl says nobody will want to screw me now.”

“What! That’s just mad.”

“He doesn’t want a sick person. So he’s left.”

I waited a moment.

“But he’ll come back. Come back and help you get better.”

She shook her head and the tears came again.

“No, no, he means it.” She grabbed me again we stayed in a tight embrace while she sobbed her heart out. Again she relaxed and held me, staring straight into my eyes only centimetres apart.

“Will you stay with me?”

“Of course, all the time and forever.”

The tight embrace was rejoined and only ended when Sister Thomas came in and coughed.

“Mr Clark is on his way to see you,” she said when we let go of each other. And to fulfil her statement a man in a well-tailored suit came in behind her.

“Mrs Vettel,” he said looking at Kapu. Then he looked at me. It took me a moment to realise he meant I was to leave the room.

“I’ll wait outside,” I said putting Kapu’s hand gently down onto the bed.

“I want him to stay!”

“Pardon,” said Mr Clark.

“I said I want him to stay. Say whatever you have to say.”

Mr Clark raised his eye brows, then looked at Sister Thomas.

“Sit down, please Nick,” Kapu instructed and I took a seat away from her bed.

“I was rather expecting your husband to still be here,” said Clark, giving me another withering look.

“I don’t have a husband any longer!”

Clark seemed to ignore Kapu’s outburst, left a moments silence then said what he had to say.

Kapu had a brain tumour and despite all the tests they had done they were still not sure if it was operable. If not, he said in a matter of fact voice, the prognosis was terminal and in short order. They would need to see how it progressed and then decide on the operation. She was to come back in late January. She could now go whenever she was ready. A judge handing down a death sentence to a mass murderer could have been more sympathetic.

56

47 years ago, Aunt Clara’s

Suddenly Karen hit me hard from my left, bundling me down to the ground then rolling me over her, her over me as we followed the valley floor south. . I vaguely saw the glider pass just above us before the ground came back into view.

We were stopped by a bramble patch and finally disengaged, looking back up the valley. The glider hadn't managed to clear the trees and was now flipped upside down and beached on a small stand of stunted trees higher up the valley.

"Come on!" I shrieked and set off towards the strangely deformed glider on top of the trees. Karen followed.

We got there and were able to get under the craft, right to the cockpit. The canopy had fallen away and a body, I think it was a man, was hanging into the trees, the ends of the belt around it dangling above us. A stout branch of a hawthorn tree had smashed through his forehead. The blood was still dripping down to add to the pool in the dirt.

We ran back to find Aunt Clara who sorted it all out. Ingrid never appeared while the police, ambulance and fire crews sorted out the mess. It was nearly eight o'clock before we got tea that night.

Karen asked me, "Why did the glider crash?"

"I guess it ran out of thermals," I replied, again remembering that gliders ran on thermals.

"It must be odd to go up in the sky knowing you are going to crash," said Karen before taking a fork full of chips into her mouth.

"They don't always crash," I protested.

She swallowed the chips. "But they don't have an engine. They have to fall out of the sky some time. No one can glide forever." A good inch of fish finger followed the chips.

"I guess you're right," I replied with a sigh.

Despite my young years I realised then that she was right, you can't glide forever. Earth will reclaim you, maybe gradually, may be unexpectedly quickly, but it will get you. And it may be a smooth landing or gentle bump or it may smash you to pulp. Especially if you don't think about your return to earth, plan for a few eventualities, look out for the signs that the landing is near. Sadly though I thought it, I seem to have failed to act on it.

I have never forgotten that day and the experience often comes back to me, bidden or unbidden.

57

October, last year, London

Kapu dressed and got her things together, packing her clothes into the small wheelie case. I still thought she was exaggerating the argument with Karl until we were outside and hailed a taxi. I started to say their address and she corrected me to Earls Court. Even then I thought it would be

only a few hours to get her thoughts together and she would go home.

We had a light meal, eaten with very little conversation and the occasional tear, then went to bed. I held her and she held me. We'd never done that. Ravished each other's bodies, screwed, yes, but not just held each other.

It was just after six when she woke me. She had woken me by pulling me onto my back, and now was sitting across me. Both of us were naked.

"You had better get used to this!" she growled.

"Uhh?"

"Sex! Every morning. Sex at six! Now I've moved in it's your duty. Not a single day will be missed."

She then started to play with me and her demands were met. It was only then I realised that Karl really had left her just because she was ill.

Over the coming days I brought the subject up several times and Kapu always said the same thing. Karl didn't want a sick wife, and the main reason seemed to be that their friends wouldn't want to have sex with her because she was sick. For my part I was starting to look forward to every six a.m.

58

October, last year, London

Ginny filed for divorce early in October. I told her lawyer I wouldn't contest it and just wanted a reasonable settlement, somewhere near the '50/50' mark. The two girls reacted very differently. Apart from one very angry phone call, Natasha, my daughter, only spoke to Ginny. Samantha however tried much harder and called me every few days just to chat and see how things were. She was generally very calm and even supportive without ever taking sides. So it came as a shock one morning when she called very obviously upset and demanded to meet me. Kapu was going out that day and I did think about trying to put Sam off until later but whatever the problem was she said it just wouldn't wait. I could hear she was almost in tears. I gave her the address of the flat and she said she would be there in about an hour.

I explained the situation to Kapu. In some ways I hoped she would still go out leaving me to meet with Sam but she immediately decided she would stay and be there when Sam arrived. She said she would like to meet her, and maybe help with whatever the problem was. I didn't know how things would pan out.

Samantha arrived and I went down to guide her to the flat. On the way up stairs I explained that Kapu was there.

"I'm glad," she replied. "I'd like to meet her."

I was tense when we entered the flat.

“Kapu!” I called when the door was closed. She came out of the lounge area and stood looking at us.

“Kapu, this is Samantha, my daughter.”

Samantha looked at me for a long time with no expression at all on her face then she turned to Kapu.

“And this is Kapu,” I said relieved the silence was over.

They walked towards each other and shook hands to start with then suddenly Kapu was engulfed in an embrace from Samantha. They broke off.

“I think you make my dad very happy,” Samantha said, still holding Kapu’s upper arms. For the first time ever in my experience Kapu looked surprised. “I try,” she stumbled, “I try!”

“Please say you’re not going away?” said Samantha, very earnestly to Kapu, “I have something to share with Dad that means he will need company afterwards.”

My heart raced, what could she possibly have come to say? That she, like Natasha, never wanted to see me again?

“I will stay,” said Kapu, and pecked Samantha on the cheek. “You two need to be alone, I’ll tidy the bedroom.” She went in and closed the door.

“Come in, sorry it’s a mess, I’m not good at housekeeping.” I led her into the lounge and we sat down.

“Dad, this isn’t easy, but I have to tell you.” My mind is now in the darkest places a mind can go.

“I know you’ve always known I wasn’t your child.” She stopped.

“But I’ve always tried to make you feel that did not matter to me ..” My voice was fragile, cracking up.

“You have, you have!” She took my hand. “You always have, and you will always be ‘my dad’.”

Another silence followed. I just squeezed her hand. “I meet Ian Steadman last week.” She wasn’t looking at me. “Mum has been seeing a lot of him recently.”

I tried to look unconcerned.

“He told me things would be different soon and I could come and visit my home.”

I was puzzled and looked it. Samantha glanced at me and saw my feelings.

“Yes I was confused as well. Then he told me ..”

A sob.

“Then he told me, God!”

Sob

“God I’m so angry!”

“Sam, what is it, please tell me?”

Minutes passed, Samantha sobbed deeply, tears ran down her face, then, “He’s my father!”

She lunged at me and we hugged and hugged. The tears flooded and sobbing deepened and then subsided. I moved her back from me, looking intently at her tear filled eyes. She was going through hell.

“Sam, it’s not a problem, I love Sam my girl, the girl whose nappies I used to change, who fell off her bike and I kissed her knee better.”

“And who I clapped and cheered when she got her degree. I’ve known my Sam all her life. The whats and whys of that happened before that I discarded long ago.”

We hugged again and she cried a little more.

“It makes no difference to me,” I said quietly.

“It does to me, he’s horrible!”

I’m not sure how we separated and began to talk again. It took a long time. Maybe it was Kapu emerging from the bedroom that finally did it.

“I think you two have had a deep moment. I hope I’m not to blame?”

Samantha immediately got to her feet and ran to her.

“No, no, no, not you! You are beautiful.” They hugged again and when Kapu was released she went to make tea, but before it was served Samantha said she had to go and left, promising to call me very soon.

Over tea I explained the situation to Kapu.

“I know what we should do, but I guess it’s not the right thing just now,” she said holding me.

“I don’t know. It doesn’t alter my feelings for Samantha, I still love her as my daughter, it just makes more sense of what was happening when I first meet Ginny. And that was long ago. Let’s shag.”

And we did, for a long time.

59

Late October, last year, London

Even though I tried to keep the divorce discussions on a civilised level I knew deep down it would get nasty. It was just a matter of time.

I went to the 'hole-in-the-wall' and it foretold of the nasty front coming in. No cash in the account and therefore no money for me. I rang the bank having just managed to find minor details like the account number. It was a joint account so both Ginny and I had drawing rights.

"Sorry Mr Middleton, all I can see here is that the entire balance was withdrawn yesterday and we have a request to transfer a number of the direct debits to another account."

"Can you give me the details of that account, please?"

"I'm afraid it's not in your name so I can't."

"My money is being transferred to an account and you can't give me details of it?"

"No. And to be fair it's only the direct debits that are being transferred. The withdrawal was just a normal transaction."

I decided to cut my losses and go to plan 'B'. I had moved a large amount of my redundancy settlement into a deposit account that was only in my name. All I needed to do was open a current account and then transfer some money to it. Easier said than done!

My first attempt at the bank that held the deposit account went wrong when I couldn't provide proof of address for the flat in Earls Court, but I wised up and decided to open an account using my family home address. All I needed was a utility bill and it seemed I was home and dry. I knew there

were lots of those. As Ginny had brought this on me I decided to call in unannounced, well it was still my house as well.

I arrived at my house around seven p.m. It was just dark. I thought about ringing the bell but decided 'Why should I?'. The key didn't fit and a closer examination in the light from a street lamp showed a shiny new lock face. I rang the bell. After a few minutes I rang again, a longer blast. There were noises inside, heavy footsteps approached the door, bolts were thrown back and the door opened.

Ian Steadman stood there.

"Thought you'd show up sooner or later!" he said in not too nicer tone.

"Well I do live here," I replied dryly and stepped forward to go in. He body checked me and I all but slipped off the step.

"Excuse me! This is my house!" I started forward again. Steadman reached out to grab me. I've no idea where I got this from but instead of resisting his hand I grabbed it and pulled. Being a step lower than him his own weight followed through and he went sprawling past me out onto the path.

I was delighted and was about to close the door before he could get back up when Ginny shouted.

“What have you done!” She rushed past me and helped Steadman to his feet. I made sure I was inside the house before they came back towards the door.

“You’ve asked for this!” snarled Steadman and he started towards me, but Ginny pulled him back.

“No!” she screamed, “don’t be like him!”

Steadman hesitated and his anger level seemed to lower a bit. I walked down the hall and into the lounge where I knew the bills and other documents were in a bureau. Steadman and Ginny arrived quickly behind me.

“What the hell do you want?” Steadman said.

I ignored him and searched through the envelopes until I found an electricity bill. They were all on direct debit so I knew it had been paid. I checked the date and it was recent.

“I asked you what the hell you want!” Steadman was shouting now.

“Just a recent bill, that’s all.” I waved the envelope and then put it inside my jacket. “Is Natasha here?”

“No she’s not,” replied Ginny. “I thought you’d got the message she did not want to see you.”

“Whether she does or not she’s still my daughter. I have a right to stay in touch with her,” I said firmly.

Steadman was getting going again. “Your daughter!”

“Yes,” I said as calmly as I could. “I’m not talking about Samantha, though I know your sordid secret there. Natasha, my daughter.”

“He doesn’t know does he!” Steadman said to Ginny. His face was one huge, sordid grin.

“Ian, no!”

“He needs to know, then hopefully he’ll fuck off!”

Steadman took two steps towards me. We met face to face. He grabbed my jacket and I tried to push his arms away.

“You don’t have a daughter, never have, and never will!”

“What the fuck do you mean!”

We shoved back and forth smashing against furniture and walls. Ginny screamed. I was being pushed onto the back of the settee. I pushed back, very hard, and the two of us slammed into the bureau, Steadman getting bent backwards over it. His face spread into a sickly smile.

“Natasha’s mine, just like Samantha.”

I jerked him back and forth again, cracking his head against the wall.

“She isn’t, she’s mine!”

“She’s not!” screamed Ginny.

Suddenly I felt drained. Steadman was laughing, a mocking, hollow bray. I let go of him and turned to Ginny.

“What?”

“You were away a lot.”

“What sort of excuse is that!”

“And we weren’t married then.” Her voice tailed off.

“And that makes it alright does it? It makes a sham of a marriage and family alright!” I paused, blood pumping in my ears. “That night! That night you said we should have a child, you remember?” I demanded.

Ginny nodded.

“Did you know? Did you?”

Silence. Steadman roughed my jacket.

“Not for certain. But it felt the same as with Samantha.” She sounded fragile. I glared at Ginny for many moments but she didn’t look at me, then I knew I had to go. I marched to the door.

“Fuck off pratt!” Steadman shouted after me. I slammed the front door and headed into the night, a pub, an off licence and drunken oblivion.

60

December, last year, London

Ever since the girls had gone off to University I had thought the unseemly early start of Christmas was over the top. This year it was unbearable. I had to get away. Kapu and I had been living together in Martin's apartment since the end of October. I have to say that while I could cage the thoughts of her tumour, my divorce and unemployment, we were having a great time. Some days we just stayed in bed having sex as often as I could, well Kapu never had a problem in another session. The variations of activity, position and finale knew no bounds. We laughed a lot, went out for cheap meals where we groped each other under the table. But Christmas loomed like a bad storm approaching too fast.

I was out getting food in the freezing pre-Christmas cold and it was a spur of the moment decision to go into a travel agent and look at warm holidays, but when I left the shop I had booked a month in Tenerife. It was a four star hotel on the coast just West of el Duque, a nice place I was assured. In a final moment of madness I upgraded to a Jacuzzi suite. Money no object me!

I got back and told Kapu. Her smiling face was worth every penny of whatever it was I'd put on the credit card. She danced around, singing, then did a strip tease and we ended

up on the settee having sex. Yes I started to think, she is crazy. Lovely crazy.

61

December, last year, Tenerife

Tenerife did everything it promised and more. The hotel had a great pool, the suite was fine and Jacuzzi must have needed a service by the time we left. I found it hard to believe Kapu's sex drive could get stronger than I'd been used to, but the warmth, the lack of clothes, and the not having to do anything else proved me wrong. If she ever wore underwear I didn't notice.

We'd sit by the pool taking the sun, then she'd suddenly be kissing me.

"Again, now!"

And we'd go back to the room and have sex of some variety, return to the pool and I'd try to recover before she said, "Again, now!"

Christmas Eve was a mandatory gala dinner. I wasn't looking forward to it when we first arrived, but the hotel seemed to do things well and did a later sitting in their night club which was child free. Kapu had gone to get her hair done late in the

afternoon and I got back to the room expecting her to be there, but the curtains were drawn and room in darkness. But she was there, lying face down on the bed. I ran a finger along her bare backbone. She stirred, very muzzy and looked up at me.

“What’s wrong?”

“Headache. Very bad. Please let me alone, just for a while.”

I kissed her between the shoulders, which normally generated an electric response but this time got only a pleasant groan, so I left a bottle of water next to her and sat on the balcony.

At nine o’ clock she emerged and appeared at the balcony door naked, and beckoning me inside. She was rampant, fully charged, vitally electric. She rode me, taking herself into orgasm, then demanded me on top of her. She pulled my head down to her and shouted “Cum in me, flood me!” repeatedly, and within a moment I did all I could to obey her. She rolled us both over and sat on my stomach. “I need a shower!” she said, kissed me and left for the bathroom. I was wasted and my head lolled to one side. An empty, whole sheet of ibuprofen lay there next to a half empty bottle of water.

Kapu stunned the room, and me, with her dress. It had a front, a back and lacing down both sides that joined the two, was a tight fit and low cut. Holdup stockings and heels that could cause altitude sickness finished the outfit. It was so

obvious she had no underwear on it hurt. There were prettier ladies, younger and prettier ladies, but none could compete with her sensuality. And she sparkled, danced just for me, standing in front of me and all but having sex with me. I've never felt so smug in my life. There were dribbling stares from around the room and more than one man got a smacked face for not paying enough attention to his partner. My stupid grin must have been a sight to see. Maybe she was crazy.

62

January, this year, Tenerife

It was just into the New Year when we started to venture out of the cocoon of the hotel and visit a little local bar. At first it was just for a change, but we soon preferred the outside world and got onto chatting terms with the barman, Leo. He was Dutch and he and Kapu relished the chance to chatter in their own language. One day he said his brother was on the island and would be coming to see him the next day. We made a special effort to go to meet him. Jaap was definitely Leo's brother, in fact they looked more like twins, both tall, on the thin side with fair hair and a skin that tanned well. And both with slightly unkempt moustaches that could have come from the Village People's wardrobe.

Jaap was more of a party man than Leo however and we were soon the wrong side of a few drinks. He was visiting the island as part of the crew of a tall ship, UK registered but with a lot of Dutch crew. She, The Flying Filly, was in Santa Cruz for a few days and Jaap had taken the chance to see his brother.

We had talked about the ship for some time and he was obviously very happy to be part of the crew. Late evening he suddenly said, "Do you want to sail with her? Tomorrow?" I looked at Kapu and her face gave me the answer. 'YES PLEASE!'

As agreed with Jaap we were up with the lark and he drove us TF1 to Santa Cruz and we boarded just after eight. She was a fine sight, a white steel hull, four impressive masts and square rigged sails. The day was to be a cruise around the island to Los Cristianos and we were Jaap's guests for the day. Around thirty other guests were on board and from the look of them they were well heeled. The morning was fine and we meandered along the north coast pulling away from shore and then coming close in. At around 3 p.m. we rounded a point and came in close near Los Gigantes, amazed at the towering, sheer cliffs. The Flying Filly came to and a very pleasant lunch was served with a nice dry white wine. It was surreal, warm sunshine, the gentle rock of the ship and a free lunch. Jaap had obviously done some magic as we had only Dutch waiters and wanted for nothing. The ship swung idly round on its anchor, one way then the other, giving us a view of the massive cliffs and then of another

island, La Gomera. Lunch was winding down when the ship took a distinct swing and stayed there.

Jaap came across and very conspiratorially whispered. “Now you’ll see why she’s called ‘The Flying Filly!’” He beckoned and we followed him onto aft deck. He introduced us to Captain Hestle who took great interest in Kapu’s bikini top, but was gracious and bade us to stay ‘for some real sailing.’

“Get men aloft Mr Bakker, give me some steerage. Then weigh the anchor.”

“Aye Sir!” answered Jaap in a serious and formal tone that we’d never of suspected he had. Orders were barked and five of the crew were up the masts like monkeys. They unfurled the top sails and immediately the ship started to make way.

“Bring her about Mr Bakker, get us away from these cliffs and heading West away from the coast.” Jaap did as he was told and the Captain checked the impressive array of instruments housed in a cabin on the deck. He returned cracking his hands together and smiling broadly.

“Rig her for speed, Mr Bakker, all she can take!” he commanded.

“Aye Sir!”

Jaap handed over the wheel to his second in command and ran down the ship shouting orders. The crew poured out

from below deck, took to the masts and within minutes the full complement of sails were set. Each one dropped with a sound like a roll of thunder, followed by a thump as it filled with the wind. The Flying Filly pushed forward as each new sail added to her power. We were both mesmerised with the hive of activity. The wind had picked up a lot since the morning cruise and was now coming strongly from the stern. And the swell had picked up to match it. Once away from cliffs she really got into her stride, the sharp bow sliced through swell sending towers of spray over her decks. Captain Hestle stood stock still grinning from ear to ear, riding the rolling deck by just flexing his knees. With black boots, white breaches and his captain's jacket, he reminding me of the presenter of the Crystal Dome. This was obviously what he enjoyed from being at sea. The other guests were now clustered round the masts and anything else that looked solid.

Jaap told us to go to the bow where we would get the real sensation of her speed. We did and it was impressive. Curtains of water shot into the air as we cut through the swell. None of the other guests joined us and a few I suspected had started to regret tucking into lunch so much. I've no idea how fast she was sailing, Jaap said later they'd seen over twenty knots. It may as well have been a Formula 1 car. We hit a patch of bigger swell that brought the bow up and then crashing down into the next peak of water. The spray changed from an occasional shower to a fire hose torrent. We were both soaked in seconds then virtually

washed off our feet. I ended up with a sodden Kapu bundled on top of me against the fo'c'sle wall. Water poured off her head into my face, streaming down her blonde hair.

Suddenly we were kissing, deeply and longingly. She shouted into my ear, "Nick lets sail on forever and ever!" And right then I was all for doing that.

"Yes," I spluttered as another deluge of water engulfed us.

"Just you, me and Anna."

63

January, this year, London

By being in Tenerife we missed the snow that fell over South-East England and came back to a dull and cool London. And came back to find Kapu's set of tests were next week. This time they weren't in the private clinic but in a private wing of a hospital. It made it feel that much more serious this time around, especially when the consultant explained that if they found it was operable then they would do it immediately and that's why they needed the facilities of the hospital.

Adding to the confusion I was to start my new job the last week in January. I called them explaining that my long term

partner had to go into hospital and could we put back the start date by a week but they didn't want to play it that way. Kapu had to go in on the Sunday evening to be ready for tests Monday morning so I went with her. It wasn't hard to see she was terrified. Those normally smiling eyes were dull and darted around and she didn't even mention sex, which for her was remarkable.

It was a private room in a set of rooms off a normal ward. I helped her settle in. I watched her undress and put on a hospital gown. She still looked as sexy as hell. Once in bed she stretched her arms and demanded that I cuddle her. Again that wasn't Kapu. She liked to be held yes, but only pre or post sex. I held her very tight and I thought she was trembling, this time not with the ecstasy of orgasm.

She wished me luck for my first day and I left. The apartment felt cold and empty with just me and I downed a bottle of cheap red and turned in.

Thinking back I can't really remember my first day, except that I realised that Westin wasn't there. I enquired a little and found he had not been offered the job, which at first I found odd as he said he would be employing me. But that's Westin. He'd been to an interview and to him that was it, he had the job. As soon as I finished my day's induction I headed straight for the hospital. Kapu was in bed but seemed bright and alive compared with Sunday. I took that as a good sign.

“What did they find?” I asked after she let me go. I was sitting on the edge of her bed and her hand slid up my thigh and began to stroke me.

“We’ll find out together in a few minutes,” she said redoubling her efforts to excite me. She was succeeding well when there was a knock on the door immediately followed by a woman in a white coat coming in. I had to turn away but standing up, which I should have done, was just not an option. Kapu giggled at my predicament.

“Mrs Vettel,” the woman started. I was trying so hard to think of other things but it did no good. I had to stay with my back turned to her.

“Is this your husband?”

“No,” Kapu replied, still with a giggle in her voice, “It’s my partner. Please talk freely.”

“Very well.” The consultant must have thought it odd I had only managed to look at her over my shoulder.

“I have news. We think it is operable, but we will not know for certain until we intervene.” The reality of ‘intervene’ killed my erection. They were going to open up her head, take a look and even then it still may not work.

A lot percentages followed, and risks, and good results, but bottom line was if Kapu did nothing the test showed it would kill her soon. If they opened up her head and found it was

not operable, the same thing but now she would be shaven and scarred, if it worked she would shaven, scarred and alive. I think I said it was a no brainer before I realised just what a dumb thing it was to say. The forms were left on the bed and we were given ten minutes alone. If Kapu said yes it would be Wednesday at four pm.

I recovered from my gaff enough to help talk with her. But it was a short conversation. She wanted to live and would take any odds. It was a yes. The word Kapu always liked to say. As in 'Sex? Yes!'

The consultant returned a little beyond the ten minutes, commented that we had made the right choice and Wednesday at four pm was confirmed.

64

January, this year, London

Tuesday evening came and as on Monday I rushed to see her the moment I finished work. She was between two moods. Bright and sparkling, looking forward one minute then the next wanting to be held and scared of what was to come.

“They need to shave all my hair off!” She held the long blond hair that had curtained my face so many times as she writhed on top me and let it slip through her fingers.

“It’ll grow again,” I said. “Any way then your head will then match your other bits.”

She grinned.

“It’ll be a nasty scar, this side.” She pointed to the right side of her head.

“That’s alright, I can never see your head from where you like me to be.” I was trying to make light of it externally but inside I felt like bursting into tears.

“I’m going to skive off tomorrow and come and see you before four. What time should I come?”

“You are not seeing me bald!”

“Doesn’t worry me! I remember Varoomska in Salome. She didn’t have a hair on her body, anywhere and looked great to me.”

She gave me a playful slap in reply.

“One o’ clock then. No later!”

“One o’ clock it is.”

“Lock the door,” she said quietly.

“What?”

“You heard, lock it.”

I went to the door but there wasn't a lock to lock.

“There's no lock,” I said.

“Well put a chair by it.”

I looked around and moved the small, wooden chair against the door. It was a round knob so there was no point in trying to stop the handle moving.

“Now come here!” she commanded and as I looked she threw back the covers. She was naked and spread her legs as I looked, rubbing herself and smiling at me.

“We can't here!”

“Why not? It's a private room, get on with it.”

Her knees came up and her arms outstretched.

“Come on!”

I pulled my shoes off, slid my trousers down, threw my sweater off and got on the bed. With shirt and socks still on I must have looked like the worst stud ever but she didn't care.

I ate her like I had been starved for years and she arched her back and shuddered. I looked up at her and waited for her to calm down.

“Fuck me,” she said when she was finally able to look at me. So I did and with her legs locked around me I pumped hard and fast until I burst into her. We lay slumped together until I realised we could be discovered at any moment and quickly dressed.

“Thank you,” she whispered as she knelt up on the bed and kissed me.

65

January, this year, London

On the Wednesday I phoned in sick, kicked my heels around the apartment until it was time to set off to the hospital. I got there around 12:30, well early for my appointed 1 o’ clock. There was no one in the nurse station in the main ward so I went straight to Kapu’s room, knocked and open the door. The bed was stripped and the room smelled of polish. It’s all I remember.

66

Fuck knows

Outside the hospital. On the steps. A light rain is spraying on my face. Tears are rolling down my cheeks. And a busker is singing 'No Air'. I am close to, no in a panic attack. I drop to my knees in the middle of the pavement, head in hands. Someone asks if I am alright. 'Are you OK?' they say again, now with a hand on my shoulder.

NO I AM NOT FUCKING OK. KAPU IS DEAD.

67

February, this year, London

It's weeks later and I've started to find the details, work out what happened. Early Wednesday morning Kapu had had a severe headache. The doctor was called but by the time he arrived she was unconscious. An hour later she died. The tumour had killed her only hours before the operation.

They had phoned, but not me. They'd phoned Mr Karl Vettel who didn't even bother to turn up. The fucking shit! I arranged the funeral, a cremation. It seemed right that Kapu should be free with the wind, floating in the air as she had lived her life. About two weeks later the hospital did call me and asked if I could collect her things. I initially said to do whatever with them but the caller told me there was an envelope addressed to me, with my telephone number on it and that I should probably have it.

I collected it

'Nick if you are reading this the worst has happened. I haven't come out of the operation. I want to thank you for knowing me. I enjoyed every minute with you. Every hand job, every sunny day, every kiss on my pussy, Tenerife, and of course, every shag. 😊😊 Please never forget me.

You know I have a daughter, Anna. I was not the best mother she could have had, but we've been close in the last few

years. She knows all about you, I mean ALL. In this envelope are details of savings and possessions I would like you to give to her. Below is her phone number. Please, please go and see her and give her these things.

Your Kapu xxxxxxxxx'

I remembered us being on 'The Flying Filly', Kapu on top of me, both being hosed with water. She had said, "You, me and Anna."

Why, when we had moved in together had I not asked her if she wanted Anna to join us? Why?

Too Late.

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March, this year, Spijkenisse

Somehow my new job had survived my erratic attendance, helped immensely by an understanding lady in HR. In March I took my first scheduled holiday. It was unusually warm for that time of year in northern Europe. I'd called Anna and she had been delighted to hear from me. We arranged to meet. I was going to see her in Spijkenisse. She would meet me at the Metro station. I'd flown to Rotterdam the day

before and stayed in a hotel in the centre. Just on nine o' clock the RET 'D' line train pulled into Spijkenisse Centrum station and I got off, carrying my bag with Kapu's envelope for Anna inside. I left the station and waited outside.

The dense morning mist had thinned a little, but it still swirled around giving occasional glimpses of a blue sky above followed by light grey nothing. Looking around it was a luminescent blue cloud, glowing in every direction. Suddenly visibility improved and I could see a figure walking briskly towards the station. A confident stride, almost a strut. She was slim, quite tall, wore jeans that were skin tight with a thick belt around her waist. A T-shirt was covered by an open, short denim jacket and she had the most beautiful, long, blonde hair that the little bit of breeze flicked up behind her.

"Hi," she said, holding her head to one side. "You must be Nick. I'm Anna." She held out her hand and I put down my bag and shook it gently.

"er, yes I'm Nick. Pleased to meet you Anna." I think I said that because I may well have said Kapu. Whomever Anna's father was he contributed little to her genes. This was Kapu, less 20 years.

We went to a coffee shop nearby and chatted. Well chatted around everything but Kapu. Suddenly she put her hand on top of mine and stopped me mid sentence.

"Did you love her?"

“Yes, I did. But I’m not sure I realised it until I looked back.”

“It started with lust didn’t it?”

I was taken aback and hesitated before trying to reply. Anna smiled, it was like a sunrise bringing light into the dark world I had inhabited since January. Her eyes were sparkling blue, untainted by life.

“I’m unfair, because I know it did. Mother told me a lot about you.”

“Oh dear,” I said delighted to be let off the hook of her sharp question.

“You care, you look after people. And she said she wanted to always look after you.” Her hand gripped mine tighter. And then she giggled. Kapu’s giggle.

“And, what was it she said, er, um, oh yes, you’re great between the legs!” I nearly fell off my chair. Blush flooded up my face. I looked round furtively at the staid looking ladies enjoying a coffee and a cake. Anna was laughing, tossing her head back in a blizzard of blonde.

“Don’t worry,” she struggled in between giggles, “they don’t understand English that well!” I calmed down a little.

“Your mother and you obviously talked freely.”

“Yes, in the last few years. I knew she did hand job massages, she and that man were swingers, he took films of her having other men.”

My panic was returning by the word, until again I realised ‘They don’t understand English that well.’

There was a pause, then Anna tilted her head to one side and said, “But she lied about one thing..”

Her voice trailed off.

“Anna, no, Kapu wouldn’t.”

“Oh she did, she really did.”

“What about,” I said gently, expecting some terrible truth.

“About you,” she replied, looking away from me.

“After what you’ve said she told you about me I don’t think there was room for any lie.”

“Oh she did, she said you were OK looking, and sort of nice.”

I thought it best to stay silent and wait until she was ready to stab me. I deserved it.

She turned to me, leant across the table and looked straight into my eyes. Her eyes. Around the iridescent blue iris she had perfect white eyes, no blemish of age or care.

“She lied! You are gorgeous. I want to have you!”

She kissed me full on the lips.

Kapu! Kapu did you plan this!

The glider was being pulled across the grass, faster and faster, the wings tugging it into the air.

OMG!

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The End