

Dean Court – Backpackers in London
A Novel

VOL 2

Masters Arts (Research)

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One

Estimated Arrival Time

It was early in the morning when Louise arrived at Dean Court and rang the doorbell. She peered through the glass door as a woman strode up the passage and flung open the front door.

"Hi, are you Gill, the manageress?" Louise asked.

"Yes."

"Oh good. I spoke to you from the airport about half an hour ago."

"Yep."

"About a room."

"Aha."

"And, now I'm here."

"Hmm."

"Hoping to check in," Louise finished, unsure of what to do next.

"That was quick," Gill frowned at her.

"What was quick?"

"You getting here from the airport so soon. It usually takes an hour, sometimes more."

"Oh that was easy," Louise said proudly, "I got a cab,"

"A cab!" the manageress looked startled. "How much did that cost?"

"Umm," Louise hesitated, "thirty pounds."

"Thirty pounds! You paid thirty pounds to get here by cab when the tube costs less than

five?"

"Well yes," Louise glanced down at her feet, "I wasn't sure how to find the tube."

"You weren't sure how to find the tube? I told you how to find it. Besides, even if you couldn't remember what I said, you must have seen the signs when you got out of the terminal."

"There were signs?"

"Yeah, big signs that point to the Piccadilly Line. The tube takes you to the Queensway, and then it's a couple of minutes walk to get here. I can't believe you didn't see the signs." Gill shook her head, clearly annoyed that her instructions hadn't been followed. Louise wondered whether to apologise for the taxi.

"Err, I would have got ..."

"You'll have to wait," the manageress said curtly, "I'm cooking the breakfast." She took off down the passage, leaving Louise to struggle inside. One step into the hallway and her backpack wedged itself in the door. She was now caught off balance and doubled over painfully as the backpack slid out of the door and pushed onto her back. "Put your backpack by the office door over there and then come downstairs. I'll check you in when I've finished all the breakfast," Gill said, before she disappeared through a doorway down the hall. Louise wondered; the manageress a frumpy woman wearing a dirty white t-shirt with a long floral skirt and an old style pageboy haircut, who was she to be so rude?

Louise looked around. A dingy carpet covered the floors and staircase; leaf patterned paper covered the walls and a fake chandelier dangled from the ceiling. A musty smell filled her nostrils and it was hard to imagine this same house would have belonged to

aristocrats in its heyday.

Louise straightened upright to release the backpack straps. They slid off her shoulders and halfway down her arms and she wiggled around to loosen the straps from her body. She hated backpacks; they were heavy, made her stoop and were impossible to get off. Why was it that she had so much difficulty with these things?

If it had been up to her she'd never have bought the thing. Her friend Mark had dug it up for her, a relic from his backpacking days. Inside the pockets were old Eurail tickets and empty sweet packets.

"You've got to have a backpack if you're backpacking," he said.

"It looks heavy," she replied.

"It's not heavy, the purpose of it is to make it lighter for you. That's why they call them backpacks so the weight is distributed evenly. Imagine if you were carrying around that stupid black bag you want. You're arms will get all stiff and sore because all the dead weight is sitting there." He demonstrated how to undo the straps with a series of clicks and yanks so that the pack rolled smoothly off his back and onto the floor.

"You see how easy this is?" he smiled triumphantly.

She nodded and tried to look enthusiastic as he continued his lecture.

"What you should do is put all the things you want to take into one pile and then halve it. Most people pack stuff they don't need. Like this, what do you need this for?" He was holding up a small, stuffed koala.

"It's for good luck. My sister gave it to me."

"What about these?" He reached over and grabbed a pair of bunny-eared socks.

"Melissa said it was a going away present."

"Surely, this is excessive," he scooped up three books.

"They're in case I get bored."

"You can buy books over there you know," he looked exasperated. "You'll be sorry. Believe me, when you get off the plane and have to start lugging all that around, you'll wish you'd listened to me."

She ignored him and kept packing most of the clothes from her wardrobe and quite a few pairs of shoes. Mark had to sit on the backpack so she could zip it up. He kept insisting she was overloading and the zips were going to break. He went on and on until she told him to shut up, then he refused to help her carry the pack to the car. Once they were at the airport he looked miserable.

"It's okay Mark, your backpack is in safe hands," she said, trying to console him.

"As soon as you get to London, I want it back."

"Huh?"

"I'm thinking of going to the States."

"Do you know how hard it will be to get this thing back to you? How am I meant to do that?"

"Mail it."

"But that will cost me a fortune."

He'd shrugged and waved goodbye.

As she wiggled, jumped and eventually squirmed free of the restraints she regretted ever having borrowed it. The backpack slid to the floor with a thud. She gave it a kick and her foot hit a lump that had been sticking into her back since she'd got through

Customs. Louise saw a payphone at the bottom of the stairway and felt like calling him. He'd be in bed fast asleep. He'd answer the phone and she'd yell "wanker", then the phone would go dead and he'd be left wide-awake and furious. She picked up the phone and dialled the number but it didn't work because it only took English coins. The phone call would have to wait.

She walked down the hallway, following the direction taken by Gill. She opened a glass door covered in a stencil of flowers and stepped into a small passageway with three wooden doors. The one on her left had a toilet, the one in front enclosed a small washbasin and the third one a dark, narrow staircase from which drifted the sound of people chatting. She hoped the stairs were safe as she made her way down to the bottom where more rooms led off from a passageway. She could hear the clinking of cutlery and plates and the voices were louder now. She hesitated outside the door before pushing it slightly. It swung open and she stepped into a room where people sat around eating breakfast. Everybody stared at her.

She felt her cheeks burning and mumbled, "hi." She realised she was standing in a communal lounge room with tables and chairs, an old green couch shoved to the side of the room, a television mounted on wall brackets and a mantelpiece with letters addressed to people at Dean Court. Through the lounge room was the kitchen where Gill was frying sausages and toasting bread beneath the grill. The kitchen back door led to a stairwell going up to the street, and through the barred, lounge room window people sitting inside the hostel could see who came up and down the back stairs.

She felt awkward standing in the middle of the room and moved over to the couch. A guy, sitting slightly away from the group, was eating breakfast and reading the paper. He was of medium build with short brown hair and dressed in work clothes. He glanced up from his paper, from time to time, to direct a look of contempt at a man sitting opposite. The object of his contempt looked hung over. He was pale and wearing a rumpled overcoat that doubled as a blanket. He kept flicking his black hair off his face as he sat with propped elbows and tucked into his breakfast of sausages. Surprisingly, considering the state of him, he had on a pair of shiny black shoes. Sitting next to him was a woman in a conservative suit; the type worn to an office, her hair was pulled back in a bun. She was eating toast and was so absorbed in the morning breakfast show that she didn't notice the jam slide off her bread and land on her sleeve. She was following an investigative report on human experimentation and nodding with enthusiasm. At the table closest to Louise, two blonde men were scanning a magazine called *TNT* and writing down telephone numbers.

The television was giving the weather forecast. There was going to be a top of seven degrees with rain and possible snow the following day. An advertisement came on about a man who'd eaten too much pudding at Christmas, he grimaced at the camera as the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas", was reworked into a humorous verse. It was a funny ad, much better than anything she'd seen on Australian television. It struck her that everyone at the hostel would have celebrated Christmas in London, while she'd celebrated at home with her family. She suddenly felt sad, realising how far she was from anyone who cared about her.

With the conclusion of the news broadcast, people finished their breakfast and headed out of the lounge room. The man in the uniform stood up and took his plate to the kitchen where he rinsed it before scaling the outside stairwell and on to the street. The two blonde men followed, leaving their plates on the table, poking one another chanting 'unch, unch,' as they went up the stairs. Eventually the only people left were Louise, the hung-over man and Gill washing the dishes. The sound of plates and cutlery tipping into the sink faded as she drifted off to sleep.

She was standing in her bedroom waiting to board the flight for England. Hundreds of planes were flying above her head, shaking the bedroom walls as they took off and disappeared into the clouds. The absence of planes coming in to land worried her; why were none of them coming home? Suddenly her friends surrounded her, "You'll have a great time," they all said, "you're so lucky."

"I don't want to go," she pleaded. "What's the point? Here take my ticket."

She shoved the red and white ticket emblazoned with the image of the flying kangaroo into the hands of her friends but they pushed it back. She was crying now, the tears running down her cheeks in great big blobs. She saw the cabin crew walk past and one of them turned to her and said, "You can follow me now."

"I don't want to go."

"I said you can follow me now," the voice was insistent and the stewardess grabbed her arm dragging Louise alongside her.

She tried to pull away but the voice in her ear and the tugging was beginning to hurt her arm.

"Huh?" she said.

"You can follow me now."

Louise awoke with a start and looked around, Gill was hovering over her, glaring. She felt hot and uncomfortable and Louise could feel that her cheeks were moist. Gill told her to come up to the first floor landing and when she got there was directed to remain beside the backpack. Gill produced a set of keys out of her pocket and opened the door with an office sign on it. The room was poky and contained two single beds and a desk. "It's 11 pounds for one night," she said holding open a receipt book.

"Can I stay longer?"

"You said on the phone it was for a night."

"I know I did, but I was wondering whether I could stay longer."

"Hmm," the woman hesitated, "you'll probably be all right to stay a while. This time of year is a bit slow." She reached over to a book on the desk running her finger down the page. "I'll put you down for the week and if you want to stay longer you will have to let me know by Monday. Payment is in advance of 49 pounds."

"You want money now?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

Louise had everything in a money belt. It was another piece from Mark's travelling gear and he'd lectured her for ages not to lose it.

Louise handed Gill a fifty-pound note.

"You don't want to carry all your valuables around. I can put your passport and tickets in our safe. It's such a hassle if you lose them and it takes ages for replacements. Why don't you go and open up a credit account to put your money away."

"Thanks but I don't actually have much money. I have to send most of it back to

Australia. You see my parents lent me the money to get through Customs but they...."

Louise trailed off.

"Whatever. Now, you can have a bed in room one," Gill handed over two keys. "This one is for the front door and the other one will get you into the room." She pushed past Louise. "This is room one," she said pointing to the room next to the office, then snatched the keys back and opened the door. Squashed into the small space of the room were five beds. The room was gloomy despite the big window opposite the door.

"Why is it so dark?"

"Because it's on ground level."

Louise noticed the iron bars across the window and the heavy curtains full of dust. Just looking at them made her sneeze.

"It's hard to tell where you are in this hostel but the kitchen and lounge room downstairs are actually below the level of the street. I guess you didn't see the stairs by the kitchen but you can use them to go outside if you don't want to come in the front door."

"Actually I did see the stairs and...."

"There are six levels including downstairs and ground floor. You can put some of your stuff in there," Gill pointed to a wardrobe with a door hanging off. "There's no curfew here. You can come and go when you want but make sure you keep your front door key with you. You can use the kitchen but if you put stuff in the fridge, mark your name on it; people have a habit of pinching food. There's tea and coffee available all day downstairs and you can smoke in the lounge room. There's no smoking in the bedrooms and we change the sheets weekly. Like I said, be careful where you put your stuff or it will get pinched. Last week one of the guys had his shoes stolen."

"His shoes?" Louise asked. "Is someone from the hostel that desperate?"

"I don't think so. We chased a guy out of the place last week. He snuck in because someone didn't wait for the front door to close properly." She leant toward Louise, "It annoys me that people leave the front door open."

Louise nodded.

"And another thing. Don't ever answer the front door if the doorbell rings. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, sure," Louise nodded again.

"I hate it when people open the door to strangers. Elaine and me are the only people who can let people in. Brian is very specific about who he wants staying here."

"Brian?"

"Brian owns this place and he doesn't want any English or Indian people staying here. It's not a permanent boarding hostel you know."

"Oh," Louise wondered why anyone would want to stay permanently.

"If you answer the door to them then they'll try and get in and it's impossible to get them out again."

"Okay."

"This bed is vacant," the manageress said dismissively and turned to go.

Louise wandered over to the wardrobe, every shelf was full and all the coat hangers were being used. She was wondering where she could put her shoes when another woman walked in. Louise had seen her downstairs whispering to a girl and handing into a plate of baked beans.

"Gosh, Gill's put you in here with us?"

"Seems so," Louise replied dejectedly.

"I'm Rachel."

"Hi Rachel."

"Where you from?"

"Melbourne."

"Melbourne. There's always lots of people here from Melbourne."

"Really? I didn't think there'd be that many Australians here."

"London hostels are full of Australians. Have you been to London before?"

"No. This is my first time."

"I love London," Rachel said.

Louise felt Rachel watching her as she unzipped her backpack and started laying the clothes out on the bed. Most of the clothes were wrinkled and needed ironing.

"I bet you like black."

"Black what?"

"Black clothes. Do you wear anything else?"

"No. I like black."

"Sure," Rachel shrugged, "I like black as well."

Rachel was dressed in a black jumper and black cotton pants; the jumper had hairs and dandruff on it and small chunks of skin were peeling off her face. Louise shuddered and hoped that living in London didn't give everyone a pale and unhealthy complexion.

"What part of Australia are you from?"

"Perth."

"Perth is a great place," Louise said enthusiastically, "I wouldn't mind living there myself. It's so clean and warm. Everyone is brown and healthy. I was there a couple of

years ago and I thought how beautiful people in Perth are..." she paused, noticing Rachel was staring glumly at the floor. "Of course, not everyone looks like that."

"You got relatives here?" Rachel said changing the subject.

"No."

"Friends?"

"No."

"Did you come over to work or travel?"

"Both."

"How did you hear of this place?"

"I found it in my guide book when I was sitting at the airport."

"Which guide book?"

"*Let's Go Europe.*"

"Show me what it says," Rachel clapped her hands enthusiastically.

Louise pulled the book out of her bag and turned to the page on London Hostels. She wondered why Rachel would have any interest in reading about the place she was staying in but she handed over the book anyway.

"Do you know how they review these places?" Rachel looked at her expectantly.

"It explains in the introduction that Harvard University students review hostels during their summer break."

"Yeah," Rachel looked deflated. She returned to the book and read the review aloud.

"Clean and full of friendly Australians and New Zealanders," she snorted.

"Is it true?"

"It's true that it's full of Australians and New Zealanders but I wouldn't say it was all that clean. Have you seen the bathrooms?"

"Not yet."

"It also says it's well priced."

"Is it?"

"Not really considering how many people are crammed into a room, hey," Rachel giggled, and Louise found herself smiling at her.

Rachel tossed the travel guide back to Louise, it landed on the bed by the wall. Louise reached over to grab the book and noticed several travel magazines for Africa lying on the bed cover. The brochures were covered with pictures of bronzed travellers beaming from the back of an open four-wheel drive. There they were again gazing contentedly at the camera and holding tin cups around a campfire, setting up tents, while in another photo they were pointing to a herd of elephants. Next to these photographs were diary entries about the fabulous game reserves in Africa and a list of prices that looked incredibly expensive. She didn't have enough money to last more than a couple of weeks in London let alone an African adventure.

"Are all hostels like this then?" she said, forcing herself back into the moment. Rachel was hastily shoving a bottle into a chest of drawers.

"Well the New Kent next door is just the same but that's because Brian owns it too."

"He must make a lot of money out of these places."

"Never spends any money on them though. Gill gets nervous when he comes over but I reckon he's just a miser."

"All landlords are misers."

"Hmm, you're not wrong there, hey," Rachel giggled. "Anyway, Gill puts all the boring people in the New Kent, she reckons it's more run down than here."

"She's not very friendly for a manageress."

"Gill? She's fine," Rachel said defensively. "Anyway, she's waiting for her boyfriend to come back from Newcastle so she's a bit preoccupied."

"I'll say," Louise muttered.

"How long you staying?"

"I don't know, probably a week."

Louise unpacked her books and placed them on the small shelf behind the bed.

"A week isn't long."

"How long do other people stay?"

"Depends. A lot of backpackers spend the winter in London working to save money so they can spend summer in Europe. Or there are short termers who stay here a couple of nights till they join up with their Contiki or Top Deck Travel Tours. I've been here the longest, nearly two years off and on; and then the next longest would be Paul. It's up to you how long you want to stay, hey."

Rachel pulled an overnight bag out from under her bed and stuffed some clothes inside.

"Actually, there is something the guide book forgot to mention. Lots of South Africans stay here too."

"South Africans." Louise paused. "I've never met a South African."

"Gill's South African."

"Oh," Louise was reluctant to meet any more of them if they were anything like Gill.

Rachel pointed to the bed squeezed between the wardrobe and the wall, "Melanie sleeps on that bed and she's a South African too."

The bed had a brown and white blanket spread over the top, not the standard quilt

covering on all the other beds. Rachel flopped onto it and stretched out.

"This bed is too lumpy."

"They all look a bit lumpy to me," Louise said, "and narrow," worried about rolling off and on to the floor in the night. Or if she didn't fall on the floor she was likely to find herself snuggling up to the person in the next bed.

"Who else sleeps in here?"

"Karen's got the bed by the door, she's from Queensland but she won't be here that much longer, she's saving for Africa. Melanie's here of course," she patted the bed underneath her, "but the one next to you doesn't have anyone in it yet. There was a girl who used to sleep there but she's gone back to Oz. Actually, Melanie has a friend coming over soon so she'll probably get that bed. I've got the bed under the window. It takes ages to get the room and the bed you want. So if you like it here, don't go away or you won't get it back. I reckon room one is the best room in the hostel."

Louise wondered how much worse the other rooms were if this was the best.

"How long did you say you've been here?"

"A couple of years off and on."

"So you've lost your bed before?"

"Yep. That's why I don't want to lose this one."

"Can't you ask Gill to keep the bed for you. I mean if you've stayed here for a couple of years surely they owe you some loyalty."

"Nah, it doesn't work like that, the place gets too busy in summer to hold a room or bed for one person."

"Then lots of people come through here?"

"Loads, people always move on but there's always someone else to take their place."

Louise wondered how long it would be before she could move on. She'd need to get a job first and save some money.

"Which airport did you land at?" Rachel asked.

"Heathrow."

"It's a big airport isn't it?"

"I guess so."

"Did you have any trouble getting through Customs?"

Louise remembered being nervous. The queue for Customs was long, with travellers streaming in from all entrances. She wondered how many more planes landed at 5.30 am. Gradually, she shuffled forward, pushing the backpack along with her foot, sweating by the time she got to a processing booth.

"Hi," the man in the booth said.

"Hullo," she replied.

"First time in England?" he said flicking through her passport.

"Yes."

"Where are you planning on staying?"

She gave him the last known address she had of her friend hoping he wasn't going to call the number. He looked at the address she'd provided and nodded handing it back.

"Got enough money to last your time here?" He studied her face.

"Sure," she said.

"What have you got?"

"I've got \$500 in cash and \$1,000 on a credit card." This was the moment she'd been dreading. Was he going to ask for proof of the money and the credit card?

"Are you aware of the conditions of your working visa?"

"Pretty much."

"You get two years in the country in which you can work in three month blocks. Each time you leave the country you will get the time spent outside of England added on to your visa."

"Uh huh," she nodded.

"If you over extend your visa you will be deported."

She nodded again and he stamped her passport. "Your visa expires two years from now, on the 27th of December 1994."

He handed her back the passport, "You're from Melbourne?"

"Yes.

"What's been happening on *Neighbours*?"

"Huh."

"It's filmed in Melbourne, right?"

"Yeah."

"The episodes we get are a couple of months behind you guys." He leaned towards her confidentially, "So tell me. Do Scott and Charlene come back from Queensland?"

"Did you have any trouble?"

"What?"

"Heathrow. Did you have any trouble?"

Louise blinked and shook her head.

"Not really. I've got a work permit. I was expecting to show the money I'd brought with me. A friend told me that they would check, but no-one bothered."

"Usually they do, you must have been special."

"I doubt it, all Customs wanted to know was what happened on *Neighbours*."

Rachel groaned, "Neighbours, they're obsessed with that over here, hey."

"God knows why, I hate the show."

"I hate it too."

"I especially dislike Kylie Minogue."

"You wouldn't believe how popular she is, you won't be able to get away from her, she's always in the charts and on posters all over London."

"Why so popular?"

"Don't know, but the sad thing is they think we all live like the characters in *Neighbours*. It's the first thing people ask, about whether you've been to Ramsay Street."

"But it doesn't exist."

"I know, but it doesn't make any difference."

Louise finished unpacking then found herself having to repack most of her clothes. Why were so many people squeezed into one room?

"I came over when it was winter too," Rachel said. "I was so cold the first year I was here. It was the coldest winter they'd had in 15 years. Every time I went outside it was freezing. It snowed all the time and there was always this cold wind that blew right through me. It was impossible to get warm; I thought I'd never last. There were terrible storms as well. One of them was so bad that it blew down trees in Hyde Park."

"What about this winter?"

"It's not cold. At least I don't think it is but it will probably feel cold to you. I've got used to it. You acclimatise, hey."

"I hope so."

"This is nothing, believe me, but you need a coat, that jacket isn't going to keep you warm. Go down to Oxford Street while the sales are on, you'll find something there."

"Where's that?"

Rachel wandered over to her bedside drawer and rummaged around. Louise heard the clinking of bottles before Rachel pulled out a small book with A to Z written on it. She opened out a compact map of the underground. "You can catch a tube at the Queensway. There are two stations but the one you want is the Central Line - that's this red line here," she traced it with her finger to Oxford Street, "the other one is the Circle Line - the yellow one."

"There are two stations in the one street?" Louise exclaimed.

Rachel produced a notepad and wrote down directions. "They're both different lines so they have two stations," she said ripping the page out of her book then handing it to Louise. "Anyway, you should buy an A to Z straight away. It's a book full of street maps, otherwise you'll get lost. It's so easy to be lost in London."

Suddenly, Louise felt exhausted. It was hours since she'd last slept and it was getting difficult to concentrate on what Rachel was saying. In fact, after the stress of the last few weeks she couldn't believe she'd made it to London at all. The 23 hours on the plane had been spent worrying about where she'd stay and what she'd do and now here she was, sitting in a dingy hostel room with a girl from Perth giving her directions to Oxford Street.

"The sales will be on for a couple of days but the best stuff goes really quickly."

"Sure," Louise smiled weakly but felt like crying.

"I have to go to work now, " Rachel said, moving towards the door. "London can be a lonely place you know, but once you get used to it you'll find it's the best city in the world."

Two

Delays Expected

Rachel walked along the Queensway to the Central Line tube but changed her mind, retracing her steps to Bayswater Road. She preferred catching the bus to South Kensington and looking at the shops. The bus stop was on the corner and she pulled the Walkman from her bag, adjusting the earphones while trying to find a tape.

"Damn," she forgot to pack any.

Rachel switched the button on the Walkman from tape to radio but static exploded in her ear. The switch had broken, she remembered rolling on it the other night. There was no time to go back to Dean Court and retrieve the tapes. It was 11.15 and the job started at 12.00. Rachel stopped walking; what if she'd also forgotten to pack the Night Nurse? The bus was coming and she had to run, pulling things out of the bag, finding the bottle nestled in the corner. The bus had pulled alongside her and the driver looked dubiously at her bag. The conductor was sitting at the back of the bus absorbed with a book and she checked he wasn't watching before pulling the bottle out and taking a sip. The thick, syrupy cough mixture enveloped her with a warm and tingling feeling and she patted the bottle of Night Nurse affectionately before placing it carefully back in the bag.

Her day had started off badly. The agency had phoned earlier that morning, while she was still groggy. It must have been 7.30, way too early for Rachel to think of an excuse to miss work.

"Rachel," Amanda's crisp English accent had barked at her over the phone, "we've got a

Mrs Howl in South Kensington. We need you to do an overnight for us."

"Oh, um, hi Amanda. Look I can't really do it today, I've got something else on."

"But Rachel you do such a good job and we really need someone good. She's a special case. Very wealthy you know. I'm sure you will get a really good tip."

"But..."

"And she's meant to be a very nice old lady and in such a wonderful location. Just think Rachel, you can pop out and do some shopping when you finish your shift tomorrow morning."

"Well..."

"And of course she'll have you back again. It's always nice to have a permanent client isn't it?"

"Yes but..."

"I'll just give you the address Rachel. Do you have a pen?"

"No."

"It's 44 Bromley Road, South Ken. Remember to send your time sheet through after you've finished. Cheers then Rachel."

That phone call was the reason Rachel was sitting on the bus rather than lying in bed taking a nap. She grabbed a cigarette from her coat pocket and lit up, it still amazed her that people could smoke on buses. In Perth, hardly anyone smoked, let alone did it on public transport. That was just another reason, Rachel decided, why London was better than Perth.

She was late getting to South Kensington because of the traffic. Rachel located Bromley

Avenue in her A to Z and followed the directions on the map. Luckily the house was close to the High Street. She paused before approaching the front door, the house was enormous. Surely, whoever lived there could have professional nursing staff around the clock rather than someone from a carers' agency? Perhaps Amanda had been right, if Rachel did a good job then the client might hire her permanently. Rachel rubbed her hands together at the thought of the money in a long-term residential placement and raised her arm to ring the doorbell.

Louise was tired but couldn't sleep yet, it was too early in the morning and she wanted to ring her family. She headed back out through the glass front door, up to the Queensway and looked in shop windows; Wimpy Bar, Boots Pharmacy, Tie Rack, The Sock Shop, and W.H. Smith. A huge construction site called Whitley's was at the end of the Queensway and the noise of jackhammers and steel saws accompanied her until she found a phone booth and shut out the noise. Louise searched the list of numbers displayed above the phone searching for the international operator.

The phone booth was full of advertisements for hostesses and prostitutes. There were business cards pasted all over the booth, stuck into the crevices of the door and covering most of the glass. Some of the cards were professionally printed with drawings of voluptuous women. Other cards were hastily scrawled notes, with names, measurements, phone numbers and itemised services provided by individual girls. The amount of cards stuck in the phone booth made Bayswater, Paddington and Notting Hill look like it was full of prostitutes. Louise picked up the phone and dialled a number.

"Hullo," the voice of a bored female responded.

"I want to make a reverse charge call to Australia. "

"What's the number?"

Louise gave the operator the number and checked her watch. It would be around 7am in Melbourne.

She shifted the money belt around her waist wishing now that her parents hadn't lent her the money to get through Customs. She'd applied for a Visa Card but a week before her trip a letter arrived from the bank. Inside the envelope was a rejection letter. The letter informed her she was an unsuitable candidate for a credit card. How would they know?

"It's based on your employment," Mark had explained.

"What do you mean?"

"If you worked in an office you would have got one. They assess you against your earnings and employment situation. You work as a casual in a bar so that's why they think you're too much of a risk."

"But I don't have any debts."

"You don't have any savings either. See it from their point of view. You've got no capital, no investments and no employment security. Why would they give you a card?"

"Because all I'm asking for is a credit limit of \$500. It's hardly anything. Anyway, you're the one that said I should apply."

Mark shrugged. "You'll just have to find the cash somewhere else."

In the end, her parents lent her the cash to get through Customs. It had been a waste of

time though. If she'd known the British were obsessed with *Neighbours* she would have taped two months worth of episodes and sold the copies. Instead Louise spent the next 15 minutes reassuring her parents that she had found a nice place to stay and would find a Commonwealth Bank and return the money.

Louise got off the phone and continued to explore the streets of Bayswater. Many of the houses were triple and double storied, bars covering the basement rooms and black gates fencing off private courtyards. The housing contrasted sharply to the weatherboard houses of the Australian suburbs. London had a familiarity to it though and Louise wondered whether it was all the Enid Blyton and Narnia books she'd read as a child or whether there was a spiritual connection to the place of her ancestors.

The streets were narrow and the sky a constant grey. The trees had lost their leaves and stood tall and barren in the gloomy light. The air was still and the back streets were quiet. Despite walking around for more than an hour she felt cold and clutched her leather jacket, folding her arms close. Walking around the streets reinforced her feelings of loneliness and whether there was any point being in London. What had she been trying to prove?

The old woman stood on the doorstep and glared at Rachel. She was in her late 80s, clean and nicely dressed, the only sign of dependency was a walking stick.

"Yes?"

"I'm Rachel. I was sent by the agency. They said you needed someone for an overnight."

"Humph," the woman snorted. "Why do they send me someone so fat?"

"Excuse me?" Rachel recoiled.

"You better not eat all my food."

"I won't eat your food."

"Looks like a night without food would do you some good."

Rachel thought that the worst thing about old people was they said whatever came into their mind.

"Come in then, there's no point keeping me waiting like this. You're late enough already."

Rachel took a hesitant step into the hallway and then another fighting down the urge to flee.

"Come on, get a move on."

The entrance hall was dark. "Perhaps I could turn some lights on for you," Rachel offered.

"Leave them off. I don't want you going around and wasting the electricity?"

"How about I open the curtains then?"

"No. My eyes will hurt."

"Okay."

Mrs Howl stopped at the staircase. "I've got rules in this house," she scowled before raising her walking stick, banging it to emphasise each point, "you can use the kitchen, bathroom and bedroom but don't go snooping into any other rooms," *bang*. "I always have my lunch at 12, but since you were late I'll have a sandwich at 4 and then supper at 8," *bang*. "Your room is down the stairs, at the end of the hallway," *bang, bang*. "Be quiet and be clean and once you've found your room, I need a cup of tea. The kitchen is

downstairs," *bang, bang, bang.*

Rachel was dismissed with a final thump of the walking stick and the old woman hobbled off to a room next to the front door. Rachel was stunned; she'd never worked for a tyrant before, her clients were always too senile. Mrs Howl might be old and have trouble walking but there was no doubt she was capable of looking after herself. Perhaps there was still time to ring the agency and reject the job. On the other hand, Rachel would lose out on 80 pounds and considering the extra money paid for an overnight stint it was best to stay, after all, how bad could it be?

Rachel stood on the stairway and felt the wood beneath her sag and creak. The next step sagged and creaked too, as did the next, continuing a mournful tune all the way down. At the bottom of the stairs was the bedroom. She put her bag down on the floor and turned the heavy door handle, twisting it around and giving the door a shove. It wouldn't open. She tried the door handle again by turning it the other way but it remained closed, even with the full force of her weight against the door it wouldn't budge. The only thing left to do was make the cup of tea before telling Mrs Howl about the locked bedroom door.

She figured the kitchen would be at the end of the hallway and felt around for a light switch hoping there were no spiders dangling in the dark. When the light came on it revealed an enormous lounge room. There were cloths covering the furniture, a cabinet full of exquisite crockery locked behind glass doors and polished stainless steel cutlery sitting alongside. Rachel lifted the cloth cover off a large piece of furniture and unveiled

a beautiful mahogany couch made from leather and wood crafted into a magnificent frame. She uncovered more pieces of furniture, all expensive and beautifully designed. The room looked like it belonged on display in a museum rather than buried under cloths in a dark lounge room.

Perhaps, Rachel reasoned, Mrs Howl lived in the dark so that nobody would know there was anything valuable in the house. If that was true then Mrs Howl had chosen a sad and lonely way to live. Rachel heard the thumping of the walking stick coming from upstairs. The old lady was growing impatient for her tea. Rachel found another light switch further down the hallway which lit up a kitchen with an expensive oven, refrigerator, dishwasher and stainless steel appliances.

The thumping from upstairs increased in pace, making Rachel speed up the search for teabags. She couldn't find any on the benches and tried the cupboards that surrounded the room and wondered why an old woman, living on her own, needed so much storage space. She circulated the kitchen again hoping to find an unlocked cupboard but none of them would budge.

Rachel psyched herself up for standing in front of the old lady without the cup of tea and was just leaving the kitchen when they caught her eye, two teabags, next to an electric jug, alongside two cups on a tea towel. The teabags were the Savings brand and she used them both.

"Your tea is coming," Rachel yelled out, hoping Mrs Howl would hear her and stop thumping the floor. She took the plug out, switching the jug off before it had boiled

properly. Rachel only ever made lukewarm tea, old people often spilt their hot drinks because their hands shook or poor eyesight made them miss the contact point between the cup and their mouths. Rachel always got the blame for it, as though the failure of their bodies were somehow her fault. The water from the jug had white bits floating around and she opened the lid to check the scaling inside. It was stuck all over the rim and bottom of the jug and made her wonder whether it stuck like that to your insides.

Rachel opened the fridge to get some milk but it was empty. The thumping from upstairs was incessant. She left the teabags in the cup unsure of what to do about the milk and slowly made her way up the stairs, careful not to spill the tea.

"What took you so long?" Mrs Howl demanded.

Rachel paused inside the bedroom door and looked around at the room. There were paintings decorating the walls, wardrobes with ornate door handles and fur rugs sprawled across the floor. There were velvet drapes covering an enormous window and a chandelier hanging from the roof.

"What are you looking at?" Mrs Howl snapped.

Rachel hurried over to the bedside table to put the tea down, nearly falling over a lump in the carpet.

The old woman eyed her suspiciously, "I bet you were looking in my cupboards to take all my food."

"No. I couldn't open any of your cupboards."

"Humph."

"I was looking for some milk but I noticed you didn't have any so I made you a black tea."

"I keep the milk in my fridge," Mrs Howl pointed to a small fridge by the side of the bed.

"You can get the milk out of there."

Rachel opened the fridge door and took out the milk noticing several boxes of tea on the fridge top and an electric jug. Why had the old lady sent her downstairs to make the tea?

"Not so much," Mrs Howl shrieked.

"What? I've only put in a drop."

"Wasting all my milk. What do you think this is, a cafe?"

"No."

"Humph. Pah, this tea tastes disgusting, it's all cold" she spat over Rachel. "Why did you use two tea bags? Do you know how much tea costs? This tea is too strong now. Take the bags back downstairs and make me another one. And make it a hotter one this time. I don't want an iced tea, I want a hot cup of tea."

"Perhaps you could put some more milk in it to make it less strong," Rachel suggested.

"More milk. What do you mean more milk? You've used two tea bags, that's why it's strong. It's got nothing to do with the milk."

Rachel picked the cup up and stood in the room awkwardly.

"Well?"

"Actually," Rachel said, "I need to know how to get into the bedroom downstairs. It's locked."

"What do you mean it's locked?"

"I tried the door handle but it wouldn't budge."

"Do you think I'd tell you to use the room downstairs but lock it up so you can't get in?"

"It does seem kind of odd, but I tried a couple of times to get the door open but it's definitely locked."

“Try it again. You’re not pushing hard enough. Put your weight against the door, that would open anything,” the woman sniggered.

The cup wobbled and tea spilt on her sleeve as Rachel put the cup down and tried the bedroom door again. It wouldn’t budge and she kicked it out of frustration and heard the wood splinter. Picking up the cup, not daring to look at the damage, Rachel hurried back into the kitchen to remake the tea. Mrs Howl couldn't complain now that it wasn't hot or that there was more than one Savings tea bag in the cup. Rachel stood outside the woman's room and heard a loud snore. She peered through the keyhole and saw Mrs Howl dozing on an antique chair. Rachel snuck into the room and left the tea on top of a wooden cabinet beside the chair.

She crept back down to the bedroom door and stifled a shriek, it had a big hole in it, splintered wood resting precariously half in and half out of the hole. How could the door break with one little kick? Rachel mulled over the various scenarios once the old woman discovered the damage and began to panic. She’d be sued for reckless behaviour or vandalism, the agency would dock her wages and strike her from their books. Broke, with a criminal record, she’d be forced to return to Perth, *in handcuffs!* No. That couldn’t be right, a broken door wasn’t a serious crime. Besides, she’d been frustrated and anyway the damage could be hidden with a bit of glue from the supermarket and the pieces stuck together, the old lady probably wouldn’t notice. Mrs Howl might never turn on the light, given her paranoia with using electricity, and never notice the door. Besides, even if she did notice the glued door it wouldn’t necessarily occur to her it was Rachel’s fault. There were no witnesses and Rachel could argue the door was already

broken, after all, the old lady had lived in the dark so long, who knew what other secrets were concealed within the house?

The panic attack passed but the thumping from upstairs began. Rachel reluctantly returned to Mrs Howl's bedroom, avoiding the old woman's gaze.

"You've been up to something while I had a nap," she spat.

"No," Rachel replied startled.

"Yes you have. You look suspicious."

"Um," Rachel shifted on her feet uncomfortably and decided to own up to the damaged door. "I didn't do it maliciously," she stammered. "It was an accident."

"An accident! How could you call it an accident?"

"I thought the wood was stronger than that. I didn't expect it to come away so easily."

"What do you mean so easily? It's antique. Of course it's delicate."

"Antique?"

"It's over two hundred years old."

"The house is that old?"

"Not the house. The dresser."

"The dresser?"

"You've left the tea on it and it's stained the wood," Mrs Howl looked furious.

"Stained?" said Rachel.

"Look what you've done to my cabinet," Mrs Howl hissed and lifted up the cup. Rachel saw a water stain on the wood.

"Why didn't you use a saucer?"

"I couldn't find one."

"They're in the kitchen cupboards."

"The locked ones?"

"Locked? What's the matter with you? Why would I lock everything? Now you've not only ruined my sideboard but the tea is cold."

The woman lifted the walking stick that had been propped against the side of the chair.

"You need," *bang*, "to make me" *bang*, "another cup" *bang*, "of tea," *bang, bang*.

"This time," *bang*, "do it properly," *bang, bang*. "But before you do," *bang*,

"I want the night bowl emptied," *bang, bang, bang!*

"The what?"

"The night bowl. Underneath the bed."

Rachel gazed stupidly at the woman.

"Underneath the bed," Mrs Howl spluttered.

Rachel crouched down and realised that the lump she'd nearly tripped over earlier was a potty. It was full and her hands began to shake, she picked up the night bowl and it tipped, sloshing its cold and rancid contents on her sleeve.

Rachel felt sick and put the potty down when she reached the bedroom door. She was desperately in need of a cigarette and Night Nurse, although a couple of chocolate bars and a Wimpy Bean Burger would have cheered her up too. The cold piss was soaking into her skin, but without a change of clothes, Rachel would have to spend the rest of the shift with tea and piss on her arm. The situation definitely justified a sip of the Night Nurse, before switching on the electric jug and lighting a cigarette. She'd taken her first puff, the smoke drifting down the hallway, then worried Mrs Howl would smell it.

Rachel nipped out the doorway leading from the kitchen into the back yard, the cigarette tasted wonderful and she smoked it down to the butt.

Gurgling noises were coming from the jug when she got back. Rachel took the lid off and peered inside, the element was black, having boiled itself dry and would never make tea again. Rachel had broken a door, left a stain on an antique cabinet and ruined a jug in less than an hour and there was still 22 hours to go.

Louise woke up disorientated, cold and groggy. She wanted to get underneath the covers and go back to sleep but the blankets looked different. Louise felt miserable, of course the bed was different, this was Dean Court, and a long way from home.

She got up to go to the bathroom in the small hallway, the one near the narrow staircase. Snippets of conversation drifted up the stairs and she decided to investigate. The lounge room was empty but then someone mumbled hello. The voice came from the couch where the hung-over man was staring at her with beady eyes. He was using his black coat as a pillow and still wearing the shiny black shoes. He was pale and sweaty and reeked of alcohol.

"Hi," she said.

"Who are you?" his voice croaked.

"Louise."

"Have I met you before?"

"I don't think so."

"When did you get here?"

"This morning."

"Oh." He rubbed his eyes and flicked his hair away from his face. "This morning. What morning?" He staggered to his feet; "I need a cigarette."

He unrolled his coat and reached into a pocket pulling out a squashed sandwich, "I don't remember buying that," he mumbled and threw it across the room. It landed against the wall, slid to the floor and left a slug trail of yellow. He tried another pocket and pulled out a small packet of cigarettes.

"You want one," he offered.

"No thanks."

"You don't smoke?" he looked disappointed.

"Yeah, I smoke but I don't want one at the moment."

"Okay" he shrugged and lit a cigarette, swaying on his feet before collapsing back onto the couch.

"Did I tell you my name already?" he said, scratching his head.

"No."

"Steve."

"Steve?"

"Yeah, what is it?"

"Nothing, I was just repeating your name back."

"Why?"

"Someone told me that the best way to remember a name is to repeat it back once you've heard it."

"Oh," he nodded. "So what's your name?" Steve clasped his hand to his forehead.

"Hang on you told me didn't you? I'll try to remember."

He took a long drawl on his cigarette. "Nope," he shrugged, "it's gone,"

Louise sighed, "how come you're sleeping on the couch?"

"It's comfortable," he said, blowing smoke rings across the room. "Do you want a drink?"

"No."

"You don't drink?" he wrinkled his nose in disgust.

"Yeah, I drink but I don't feel like one. I had a lot to drink the night I left Australia."

"When was that?"

"Two days ago, including the day I spent on the plane."

"What?" he said, "you had a drink two days ago which means you can't have one now?"

Did you have a cigarette two days ago as well?"

"Hang on," Louise replied. Steve was twisting her words around. "I meant that I don't feel like a drink at the moment because I had a lot to drink the other day and I still feel seedy. It doesn't mean that I'm on a quota."

"Ahh, defensive," Steve smirked, "did I hit a sore point?"

"I'm not being defensive, I'm just explaining why I don't want a drink."

"Did I say that it had to be an alcoholic drink?"

"That's what you meant wasn't it?"

"Not necessarily, I asked you if you wanted a drink. I didn't say what kind of drink."

"I assumed that a drink was alcohol."

"Why would you assume that?"

"No reason," she muttered.

"What about a coffee?"

"Where?"

"The pub."

"You want to go to the pub for a coffee?"

"Sure, why not. Then I can get a drink and you can have a coffee and we'll both be happy."

"So you did mean an alcoholic drink."

"I didn't say at any stage that I wouldn't have an alcoholic drink. I was making an observation that you assumed I was referring to alcohol when I could have meant a coffee."

"But you didn't."

"You don't know that."

Louise felt they were going round in circles.

"Which pub?"

"The Black Swan on the Queensway. It's a dump but it's just down the street."

"All right then," she said, tired of arguing.

"Hang on. I've got to go upstairs. I'll be back in a minute."

He staggered out of the lounge room and she could hear his slow ascent up the stairs, groaning when reaching the ground floor landing. After ten minutes she looked around the room and spied the *TNT* magazine. *TNT* was short for 'The News and Travel', not the express courier service that bore the same name. It was a magazine for Australasian travellers and was full of news about Australia and New Zealand. There was an enormous section on jobs and accommodation and she scoured through both. There was a lot of secretarial work available paying up to eight pounds an hour. Otherwise there was bar work or cafes but the money wasn't as much, three to four pounds. She searched through the ads for accommodation. Most of them were for hostels, similarly

priced to Dean Court. Another section had ads for shared accommodation in suburbs with names like Ealing, Golders Green, Shepherds Bush and Acton. She flicked back to the front section of the magazine and read the news and entertainment pages. Over an hour passed and Steve did not return. Louise glanced at her watch, it was 3.30 and the sky was getting dark.

There was a knock on the bedroom door. Louise didn't want to answer it in case it was Steve. What excuse could she give him for cancelling the pub? Jet lag? She opened the door but no one was there. Relieved she went back to bed and started reading. There was another knock, was someone playing tricks on her? She pulled the door open quickly, hoping to catch the phantom knocker but was too slow, they were gone.

No one bothered to say hello when Louise went into the lounge room, nor was there any sign of Steve. Everyone, including Gill, was glued to the television, watching 'Neighbours'. At the bottom of the stairwell she bumped into the two blonde guys who'd been looking at the *TNT* during breakfast.

"Afternoon," said the tall one.

"Hullo," she replied.

"Hi," said the good-looking one.

"Afternoon," she smiled.

"I'm Wayne," said the tall one.

"I'm Chris," said the good-looking one.

"I'm Louise."

"You're from Melbourne aren't you Louise?" Wayne asked.

"How did you know?" she said.

"Can tell from your clothes."

"How do my clothes tell you that?"

"Melbourne people dress differently," said Wayne.

"In what way?"

"They always wear black," Chris answered.

"Not everyone in Melbourne wears black," Louise replied.

"You met Steve?" said Wayne.

"Yeah."

"He's from Melbourne and always wears black."

"What about Rachel? She's from Perth and she wears black."

"Doesn't count," said Chris.

"Why?"

"Cause she's fat," said Wayne. "Fat people wear black."

"I'm not fat."

"No. You wear black cause you're from Melbourne."

"So you have to be fat or from Melbourne to wear black?" said Louise.

"A lot of people in London wear black too," said Chris.

"And they're not fat," added Wayne.

"So there goes your theory," said Louise.

"Not really," said Chris, "London is similar to Melbourne and that's why people over here wear black."

"Where are you two from?"

"Sydney," they said.

"So you never wear black?"

"Sometimes," said Wayne.

"Only for special occasions," added Chris.

"What do you wear then?"

"Colours," said Chris. "People from Sydney wear colours."

"Don't you think that's a generalisation?" said Louise.

"Uunch, unch," Wayne's fist flew out and pretended to make contact with her face.

"Uunch, unch" said Chris as his fist pretended to punch her stomach.

"See you later," said Wayne.

"Much later," added Chris.

The guys went into the lounge room

"Sweet," said Wayne.

"Real sweet," added Chris.

Rachel desperately needed to make a cup of tea but there were no utensils. She hoped something would appear and yanked at the cupboard doors, swearing in frustration. As a last resort she turned on the hot water and let it run till it was hot - not boiling but maybe just enough to convince the old lady it came from the jug. Tea that was brewed in tap water was a bit murky but it was better than nothing. Rachel kept the water running for five minutes until it was hot and steaming.

She hesitated outside the bedroom. What if the old lady suspected the tea was made from the hot tap? Rachel didn't know what else to do, other than go to Tesco's and buy another jug. But that would take 20 or 30 minutes and the woman would be suspicious,

indeed she was already suspicious, if Rachel took that long. There was nothing for it but to put on a brave face and act stupid. Mrs Howl was propped up in bed watching Neighbours and gave Rachel a dismissive wave. "If I have a nap I don't want you to wake me up until it's 5.00. Then I'll have that sandwich, cheese is fine," she returned her attention to the television.

Rachel placed the tea carefully on the bedside table and scurried back down to the broken bedroom door, grabbing the purse from her bag. Quietly she opened the kitchen door and sped through the garden and into a laneway, marched down to Tesco's and searched the supermarket for an electric jug. She grabbed 2-minute noodles and a Mars Bar, bread, cheese and butter because the old woman had nothing in the cupboards and Rachel didn't have the energy to worry about it. There were no jugs and it started raining when she left the supermarket, the drizzle became a downpour and without an umbrella or a raincoat her clothes became soaked. By the time she reached the kitchen door, her shoes were making horrible squelching noises. She turned the doorknob to get inside but it didn't budge, the door was locked.

Rachel cursed the old woman and raised her foot to kick the door but stopped, remembering what happened to the last door. She'd have to go around the street and get in the front way, hoping the old lady would be sympathetic. Rachel squelched down the laneway thinking how all the houses looked the same from the back. It had taken longer to walk down the laneway to Tesco's than it had coming back, which meant she'd misjudged the return journey by at least several houses. Rachel had been trying to get into the wrong house, she was certain of that now because Mrs Howl's backyard was

overgrown while the other one had been recently mown. It took five more attempts of rattling at door handles and cursing before she got inside Mrs Howl's kitchen.

Rachel put the Tesco bag down on the kitchen bench and took off her shoes and socks. Looking around for a heater but the radiator was cold. There were no heaters in the hallway or the loungeroom. She started to shiver and changed her clothes in the hallway, hoping Mrs Howl didn't choose that moment to wonder about her dinner and come searching.

Finally out of the wet clothes, Rachel went to make the cheese sandwiches using her middle finger to spread the butter because the knives were locked away. There were no plates so she stuffed the sandwich inside a cup and took it upstairs. The old woman subjected her to a look of contempt.

"What are you doing?"

"It's your supper."

"In a cup!"

"Yes."

"And you're clothing, why are you wearing those frilly things? Have you been asleep?"

"I got my clothes wet."

The old woman was ready to explode but there was a knock on the door.

"I'll get it," Rachel said and went to the front door. "Yes?"

"Excuse me for disturbing you," the policeman looked startled as he took in Rachel's frilly pyjamas, wet hair and the sandwich sticking out of the teacup. "But we've had calls from several neighbours who've said there's a prowler in the laneway. Have you

heard any strange noises or banging around the house?"

The officer peered over her shoulder as though he was expecting to find something in the hallway.

"N..no..no," Rachel stuttered. "I haven't heard anything or seen anyone and I've been here the whole time."

"You live here?"

"No."

"Oh?"

"I'm from an agency. I look after old people. Mrs Howl owns this house."

"And this is your uniform is it?" The officer was looking perplexed.

"I got wet."

Rachel didn't have to explain any further as Mrs Howl shoved her aside.

"I'll deal with this," Mrs Howl said, "go downstairs and check whether anything has been stolen."

Rachel scuttled off down the hallway and heard the old woman talking about strangers in the area and how she always kept her possessions locked away, even the food in her kitchen, because there were so many thieves around these days you couldn't trust anyone, not even the hired help.

After the officer had gone, promising Mrs Howl that he would return in a few days to check on her, she hobbled down the hallway towards Rachel.

"Didn't I tell you to go downstairs?"

"Yes, of course," Rachel raced down the stairs, stumbling over the potty, tipping it into the bag, left open on the floor when she'd hastily changed into her pyjamas. To avoid

pee going onto her legs she jumped aside, stubbing her toe against the wall.

"Shit," she yelped.

"What is it," Mrs Howl called out anxiously from the top of the stairs.

"There's, err... a big hole in the door."

"What door?"

"The bedroom door, it has a huge hole in it."

"Is that it?"

Rachel pretended to search the lounge room and the kitchen. It was a good thing Mrs Howl couldn't see her face from the top of the stairs.

"The electric jug is missing."

"The electric jug! Are you sure?"

"Yes, it was there before because I made you the tea but now it's gone."

"Who would steal an electric jug?"

"I don't know."

"How strange," said Mrs Howl.

"Very strange," Rachel agreed, trying to sound concerned.

"Someone stole a jug and broke the bedroom door."

"Seems like it," Rachel said.

"The policeman must have disturbed them or they would have taken more."

"Yes, just as well, hey."

"And you're sure you didn't hear anything?" the old woman sounded suspicious again.

"Not a thing."

Mrs Howl took a bunch of keys from around her neck and threw them to Rachel.

"Use these to get into the bedroom and then you can go down the High Street and claim

my insurance for the stolen jug.”

“But my clothes are wet, I’m not going out in my pyjamas. You’ll have to turn the radiators on for my things to dry.

“All right,” Mrs Howl replied subdued.

The idea of a prowler around the neighbourhood had freaked the old lady out. She hobbled off muttering about boarding up the windows and the doors so that nobody could ever get in. Rachel realised that Mrs Howl’s world had become even darker.

Three

Turbulence Ahead

Louise had drifted off to sleep with the book on her lap. It was 8 in the morning. She grabbed a towel from her backpack and was looking forward to a long, hot shower but there was a queue at the bathroom. There was also a queue on the second floor as well as one on the third, fourth and fifth. Louise returned to the first floor and stood in line. Nobody spoke to her though they joked and chatted among themselves. When she finally got into the bathroom the bottom of the shower had several inches of grey water that wasn't draining. She poked her finger into the drain and felt that it was clogged with hair. Empty bottles of shampoo floated around in the water and old bits of soap swirled in between while stray hairs clung to her toes. The water from the shower was tepid but she washed and rinsed her hair before it ran cold. By the time Louise got down to the lounge room, Gill was packing away the dishes.

"Breakfast is finished," Gill said accusingly, "you should have been here earlier."

"I didn't know you served everyone breakfast."

"It's included in the price."

"All I want is a coffee."

"You can get the coffee yourself. There's an urn over there," Gill pointed to the mantelpiece in the lounge room, "and all the coffee and tea is on the shelf."

"Where are the cups kept?" Louise asked.

"If you use a cup you have to wash it. I get sick of lazy people leaving all the dishes to me," Gill scowled.

"I'll wash it."

Gill grabbed a chipped cup from the sink, rinsed it and passed it to Louise who tried not to think about the big, brown stains inside. She grabbed the coffee container but there were no teaspoons. The coffee inside the container was a finely ground powder, the cheapest sort you could buy and similar to the Pablo brand her father drank. She tipped the coffee tin into the cup but half of it landed on the bench top. Luckily Gill was busy mopping the kitchen floor, so Louise cupped her hands together and swept the coffee back into the container. Some dirt and hairs from the bench top got scraped inside as well and she tried picking them out but Gill was watching her. Louise pretended to be shaking the container until Gill turned away.

The urn had just enough hot water to fill the cup and luckily there was some milk left in a jug. She hesitated before taking a sip, the coffee was the colour of dishwater and tasted sour. Louise returned to the kitchen, poured the coffee down the sink and carefully rinsed her cup before placing it on the draining board. Once back in her bedroom, she flicked through the *'Lets Go'* and read the short descriptions on each of the tourist sites in the city before deciding on the Tower of London. The Circle Line in the Queensway would take her all the way to Tower Hill and the directions given in the guide were pretty straightforward but she hesitated, it was grey and cold outside. Perhaps it would be better to buy a warm coat and a decent cup of coffee before trudging around the Tower of London looking at the crown jewels.

Louise shivered as she walked down Inverness Terrace and on to the Queensway. At the station entrance she stood and watched people buy their tickets, placing coins into a

machine and pressing buttons before a ticket spat out of a slot. She studied the fares, a zone fare was two pounds or an all day fare was five pounds. She'd be longer than a couple of hours and decided the day fare would be best. There was shuffling behind her and Louise turned around to see several people glaring impatiently. She hurried and punched in selections and the ticket spat out of the machine. Electronic barriers guarded the entrance to the trains. People put their ticket into the side of the barriers, which opened to allow the passengers through to collect their tickets on the other side. The whole process took a couple of seconds but people were pushing each other in their rush to get through.

Louise approached the barrier and viewed the motionless electronic arms warily. She fed the ticket into the slot and sped through before the arms snapped shut behind her, then followed the crowd past a sign warning that the lifts were out of order and to take the stairs. The stairs were narrow and wound around and down into the bowels of the station, wind roared through the tunnels accompanied by strange creaking noises.

The platform was crowded. The tunnels were like giant wormholes and she understood now why the underground was called the Tube. Advertisements were plastered across the walls of the station featuring Australian personalities endorsing British Telecom. Suddenly there was a roar from within the tunnel followed by a strong gush of wind. The lights of the train appeared and the sound of the screeching of wheels on the electrified rails boomed as it pulled in to stop at the platform. The doors opened and a surge of people spewed from out of the carriages. Louise waited until the doorway was clear and hopped on board.

The carriage was narrow, small and stuffy and the seats were close together. There were more posters on the train, selling holidays, advertising jobs or poetry by the Poets on the Underground. Next to the doors was a map of the extensive underground British rail system. The stations were close together so the train stopped frequently. One of the stations was derelict and closed to the public. The train crept slowly and silently through the gloom, posters peeling of the walls and an eerie light reflected off broken tiles. Louise had read about stations being used as bomb shelters during the Second World War and imagined they would have looked like the one the train was creeping through - dark and cold. She wondered if the station was haunted, relieved to get off when the train reached Oxford Street.

“Mind the gap,” a voice boomed repeatedly over the station loudspeaker.

The crowd pushed their way onto Oxford Street, pulling her along in the chaos. She'd never seen so many people in her life. Everyone was jammed against each other and the crowds spread right down the street.

Louise explored several shops but didn't like any of the coats and walked along Oxford Street until passing an enormous department store she looked up to check the name and people knocked into her without saying sorry. The store dwarfed nearby shops and was called Selfridges. Louise went inside the building with a stream of people and was swept along to the elevators. On the fourth floor she found the coat section where a few were clinging precariously to their hangers. There was a beautiful, white cashmere coat but it was over 200 pounds. She settled for a long, grey coat, scrunched up on its hangar, for 49 pounds and took the coat over to the counter where a snooty saleswoman

snatched her money and didn't say thank you.

Her next mission was to find a cup of coffee and it took a while before she found a café, tucked away in an arcade, which had a spare table. Louise ordered a cappuccino and waited expectantly for a hot, frothy shot of caffeine but was still waiting fifteen minutes later before the coffee finally arrived. The waitress slopped part of the liquid onto the saucer then walked away ignoring the mess. There were no napkins to soak it up so Louise had to drink the cappuccino with the drips splashing off the bottom of the cup. The coffee was watery and weak but she drank it otherwise her caffeine headache wasn't going to go away. She'd just finished the cappuccino when there was a tap on her shoulder and Steve was standing behind her.

Gill sat in the loungeroom watching 'Neighbours', her break almost over. Not that she could relax considering how many times the phone rang or there was a knock on the front door. She hated the job, always having to hang around. Sure, there was some compensation for working at Dean Court, free rent and plenty of food plus the bonus of watching 'Neighbours' every day. At first the Australian accents had been tricky to understand but it was easy now. Gill wished she was Australian and lived in Ramsay Street.

Gill lit her last cigarette, wondering whether there was enough time to dash to the shop for more. She set foot on the stairway by the kitchen when the doorbell rang. The person ringing the doorbell was either Pakistani or Indian. Brian really needed to hang a sign on the door stating that Dean Court was for backpackers only.

"Hello," the man said, "I'm after a room for a few weeks."

"Sorry, no rooms," she said and shut the door.

The man remained peering at her through the glass door and rang the doorbell again.

"Why not?"

"Because this is backpacker accommodation and we only do short-term."

"But a few weeks is short-term."

"Yes, but we only book week by week."

"I can book for a week."

"I'm afraid not."

"You just said you offer short-term accommodation."

"Yes we do, but not at the moment."

"Why not?"

"Because we're full."

"Pardon me," he insisted, "but when I rang earlier you said there was accommodation available."

"Huh?" Gill was flustered

"I rang earlier and made a booking for a couple of weeks and you gave me the directions from Heathrow to the Queensway and then to Inverness Terrace."

"I did not."

"You did, otherwise I wouldn't have bothered dragging myself all the way here with my very heavy backpack."

"You're a backpacker?"

"Of course."

"But you're carrying a suitcase."

"So."

"A backpack isn't a suitcase."

"What's the difference between a backpack and a suitcase? They both carry things."

"Well you can put a backpack on your back but you have to hold a suitcase."

"You can hold a backpack too."

"Look," Gill said irritably, "I've never met a Pakistani backpacker."

"You don't think people from Pakistan travel?"

"Well I'm sure they must travel but I've never seen any backpacking in London with a suitcase before."

"Because you haven't seen one doesn't mean there aren't any."

Gill was stuck, "Can you come back later?"

"Where am I meant to go?"

"Well, we don't have a bed ready and I'll need to check where to put you."

She shut the door in his face and turned away. This was a case for Brian. She went downstairs, desperately in need of a cigarette. But what if someone really had told him that he could stay? Who could he have spoken to anyway? She was the only person who answered the phone, beside Eileen of course, but Eileen would have told her about the booking. Gill searched through the ashtrays checking if there was a cigarette left that hadn't been smoked to the butt. She was out of luck and went back upstairs to check in her room. The guy was still out there, sitting on his suitcase with his back against the door. Luckily he hadn't seen her. She fumbled with the keys and unlocked the office, sneaking inside and dialled Brian's number but it rang itself out and the answer phone didn't come on. She edged her way out of the room and took a peek at the front door. The guy was staring inside, his hands clasped against the glass looking straight at her.

She ducked back into the office. Damn! She was going to have to wait it out.

"We never went for that drink," Steve said pulling out a chair and sitting down opposite Louise.

"That's because you never came back after you went upstairs. I thought you forgot."

"Actually I did forget, but we can go for a drink now."

"Where?"

"Here."

"But they don't serve alcohol here and the coffee's really awful."

"Why do you always think I want alcohol? I can drink other things you know."

"Because you just said that we never went for a drink and we established yesterday that a drink for you meant an alcoholic one."

"Are you always this irritating?"

"I'm not irritating. I'm just reminding you of our conversation about alcohol." Louise folded her arms and silently fumed. Who was this guy and why was he so annoying?

"Look. I'm on my lunch break and I don't want to spend it worrying about what I do and don't drink." He called the waitress over and asked for an espresso. "Really strong," he added.

"Where did you appear from anyway? Have you been shopping?" Louise asked.

"I don't shop. I work upstairs."

"You work? Doing what?"

"Thanks a lot for your confidence," he said, giving her a dirty look. "I'm a programmer. What about you?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"Hospitality, mainly cocktail bars."

Steve smirked.

"I'm looking around for other work," she bristled, "It's not like hospitality is my career choice."

"Not surprised," he lit a cigarette. "Do you want one, or are you still on a restricted diet."

"I've got my own," she said, pulling a packet of Dunhill Red out of her pocket.

"Anyway, I don't smoke Marlboro."

He ordered another coffee and took a drag of his cigarette, blowing smoke in her direction. "Can you type?"

"Yeah," she said, blowing smoke back at him, "I learnt how to touch type at school. Why?"

"You look like you would type."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Secretarial work," he shrugged. "There's a heap around."

"Hang on a minute, you didn't tell me what you meant about me looking like I could type."

"Some girls are suited to working as secretaries in an office and you look like one of them."

"You don't think I can do anything else?"

"Sure. You can work in a bar."

"How would you know what I can and can't do?"

"Didn't we just have this conversation a couple of minutes ago?"

"No."

"Yes we did. I asked you what work you were able to do and you said you worked in a bar and were looking for other work so I said try secretarial work and now you're getting all defensive as though I said something insulting."

"You were being insulting. You just implied that I wasn't capable of doing anything else but work in an office and type."

"No I didn't."

"Yes you did."

Steve flicked the hair out of his eyes as his espresso arrived. "I need to sober up," he said gulping at the coffee. "I slept at work last night, couldn't make it back to Dean Court, too drunk." He eyed her warily, "You've got hang-ups."

"What?" she screeched.

"Hang-ups about working in bars."

"That's not a hang-up."

"You get defensive when I mention it."

"No I don't."

"Look at your reaction now."

"That's because you're annoying."

Steve smirked, "Have a look at *TNT* or one of the free magazines outside the tube stations. You should find something."

Louise decided she'd had enough of Steve for the day, besides she wanted to find the Commonwealth Bank and return her parent's money.

"I've got to get going," she said.

"Yeah, like you've got so much to do."

"What?"

"I said like you'd have so much to do."

"What do you mean by that?"

"What's the rush?"

"I've got to find a Commonwealth Bank. Do you know where to find one?"

"Go to Bank."

"Bank?"

"Yeah, Bank."

"Where do I find Bank?"

"The Central Line tube takes you there."

"You've been there before?"

"Sure."

"What's it like?"

"It's a place with lots of buildings."

"No really, what's it like?"

"I don't know," Steve looked irritated, shaking his head to flick his fringe out of his eyes,

"what does any place look like?"

"Well, with a name like Bank, it should be full of banks."

"The name Bank doesn't literally mean lots of banks."

"I know that, but it must have banks to be called Bank."

"Yes then, it has lots of Banks. I didn't notice much at the time."

"Why not?"

"I was drunk."

"You were drunk in Bank?"

"Sure, why not? You can be drunk anywhere in London, you seen the amount of pubs they have over here?"

"Not really."

"They're everywhere."

"So you went to Bank to get a drink."

"No, I was in Bank because I needed a Commonwealth Bank. That's why I know there's one in Bank."

"So what has the pub got to do with it?"

"Nothing, just that I didn't take any time to notice what was in Bank because I had a couple of drinks after I'd been to the Commonwealth."

"There you go again."

"What do you mean?"

"Drinking. Every time you do something it involves drinking."

Steve studied Louise for several minutes, making her feel uncomfortable.

"You remind me of Kate," he said.

"Who's Kate?"

"My ex-girlfriend."

"What happened to her?"

"She ran off with a ski instructor in Canada."

"And that's why I remind you of her?" Louise said, puzzled.

"No, you don't remind me of Kate because of that."

"What do I remind you of then?"

"Kate's a bitch!"

Louise left Steve at the arcade cafe and spent the rest of the day searching for a Commonwealth Bank but only found branches of Barclays or Lloyds and they wouldn't transfer money without an account with them. But she couldn't get an account with them because she didn't have a tax file number, wasn't a citizen or had a job. In the end Louise gave up, trudged back through the crowds and boarded a tube to Bayswater where she mulled over her encounter with Steve. He was the most irritating person she'd met and his parting comment, comparing her to his ex-girlfriend, was particularly low. How had he managed to attract a girl in the first place? He was in bad shape, all sweaty and pale, a heavy smoker and an alcoholic. No wonder his girlfriend ran off with a ski instructor. The post had been delivered and she glanced enviously at letters and small parcels wishing some were addressed to her. Feeling glum she went upstairs to the ground floor landing and was about to go into her room but was shoved to the side of the wall. Gill was standing in front of her, wild eyed, finger to her lips.

"Quiet," Gill whispered, looking up the hallway, "did you see him?"

"Who?" Louise replied nervously.

"The man."

"What man?"

"The Pakistani man."

"Gosh," said Louise, "are you all right?"

"No. I'm not all right, I've been standing here for three hours but he keeps watching for me."

"Who keeps watching?"

"I told you."

"A man?"

"Yes, he's standing outside. Shush, or he'll hear us," Gill said fidgeting. "Brian will know what to do."

"Oh good, is Brian here then?"

"No, and he's not answering his phone."

"That's bad."

"I know. That's why I've been waiting here but I ran out of cigarettes. Have you got one?"

"Sure," Louise said, hoping that a cigarette would calm Gill down. She passed Gill the lighter and watched as she inhaled heavily and wondered whether to warn her.

"Wow," Gill spluttered, "these are strong. What are they?"

"Dunhill Red."

"These are as strong as Camels."

"Camels taste like shit, but you're right, same strength."

Gill muttered something about feeling a burning in her lungs.

"Can I get past?" Louise asked hopefully.

"He'll see you."

Gill tugged at Louise's new coat, prying the buttons loose.

"Why does he want to come inside?"

"It's a hostel."

"But he's not allowed to stay?"

"Brian says we're not supposed to let them in."

Louise managed to pull away from Gill's grasp and took a peek around the corridor at the front door. Gill pulled her back.

"If you tell him this is a hostel for Australians and New Zealanders won't he go away?"

"What are you talking about?" Gill stared at her stupidly, "I can't tell him that."

"Why not?"

"Imagine the trouble this place would be in if people went round saying they couldn't stay here because of where they come from."

"But it's the truth."

"So what!"

"Can you tell him that Brian only lets certain people stay here?"

"No way."

Louise escaped Gill's grip on her coat and walked up to the front door, peering outside.

Gill tried to pull her back but they both ended up grappling in the hallway.

"There's nobody there."

"What!" Gill gasped, turning to face the glass door. "He's gone."

"I can see that."

"But he was there."

"Sure."

"He had an accent."

"Really?"

"You can go now."

"Okay."

Louise turned away.

"Oh, Louise," said Gill.

"Hmm."

"Just one other thing."

"Yep."

"I really like your coat."

Steve needed a rest. He'd been programming solidly for several hours till his eyes hurt. and needed to stretch out his arms and arch his back, letting out a yawn. His fingers and legs were often cramped sitting scrunched up so often. It was difficult to switch off though, especially when he reached the point of communicating, one on one, with the computer in their private language. His friends didn't understand programming, they believed it was a job, whereby a set of coding, with clearly defined syntax and rules was typed into the computer to produce an expected result. Steve felt differently, coding was a meeting of minds, his conscious brain and the unconscious, each trying to outwit the other, testing to see how the computer interpreted the subtle changes in coding, challenging the technology to produce unexpected results. He knew he was a good programmer, a great programmer even, and it would be nice for colleagues to acknowledge his skill.

He stood up from the desk, shaking his feet. The shoes were pinching his toes. They were too small but Steve had been in a rush to buy a new pair. If only his other shoes hadn't been stolen. He would have taken his time at a good shoe shop, looking at the various styles, trying them on while comparing the comfort level with the style factor. He'd been rushed though, having to get to an interview, running late looking for his missing shoes and then grabbing a pair from the nearest shop in the Queensway. Why would anyone steal shoes? They fit into the groove of the foot, matching the form of the owner; to wear someone else's shoes just didn't feel right. Plus, how desperate did you have to be to take them?

He limped over to the café bar and made himself a coffee, pouring in extra creamer. He liked powdered milk and often flicked in a double serve. Creamer made his breath smell and coated the tongue with a yellowy/white thick residue, but it wasn't like he was breathing on anyone.

He stopped himself from mulling over Kate and what she'd done with the ski instructor. She'd told Steve his name, it was one of those typical American ones like Brad or Jed or something equally sickening. Brad/Jed was good-looking too; smiling at the camera, t-shirt off displaying a muscled, tanned and toned body. Steve looked down at his flabby frame. The weight was stacking on, the alcohol and fast food didn't help. He took the coffee back to his desk and took a sip, the coffee was strong, the white powder hadn't dissolved and was floating in chunks on the top.

He studied the floating white lumps and made out a pattern. One lump looked like the number 11, there was a 1 next to it, followed by a 20 and a five. He flicked the hair off his face and rubbed his eyes but the numbers were still floating on top. Steve swished the coffee around, hoping to dissolve the creamer but they didn't go away. He couldn't drink his coffee while the numbers were in it and tipped it down the sink waiting till the last drop of brown liquid made its way to the plughole. Slowly he rinsed his cup, hoping that the numbers had gone. Tentatively he turned the cup around expecting to see them clinging precariously to the edge. But they weren't there, having been caught in the sink, unable to float away. He returned to his desk and started keying in code, leaving the cup turned over so that the numbers couldn't sneak back in.

It was late by the time Steve finished. Now he could claim the cash bonus for having finished two days ahead of schedule. It was 3 in the morning, too late to get a tube to Bayswater. In a couple of hours the trains would be starting again for the morning shift. He could either wait till morning or get the night bus. He wasn't sure how frequently they ran, whether it was every half hour or longer. It would be cold in Oxford Street, too cold to be standing around waiting for the night bus. Besides, there wasn't much point going back to Dean Court, he'd only sleep on the couch anyway. Steve lay down on the floor and curled up under his desk, using the coat as a blanket.

He tossed and turned for ages and then got up again, his brain wasn't tired. He opened a drawer at his desk and grabbed a book. Steve liked to buy lots of books at a time, that way there was always something to read. He'd bought the entire series of Discworld at Waterstones earlier that day and positioned himself comfortably into just the right angle on the swivel chair. He read the first couple of pages, enjoying the style, different from the usual fantasy novels. It was after 4. when he made another coffee using only a small amount of creamer. He settled back in his chair and took a sip of coffee only to find the numbers were staring right back at him.

Louise finally managed to get into her room and found someone leaning over her bed fiddling with the blanket.

"Hi," Louise said.

"Ohh. Gosh I didn't hear you. You gave me a fright."

Louise recognised the stranger as the woman who'd dropped jam onto her sleeve at

breakfast yesterday morning.

"I'm Melanie," she said.

"Hullo Melanie. You're from South Africa aren't you?"

"Yes. How did you know that?"

"Rachel told me."

"And you must be the new girl in our room. I didn't meet you yesterday, by the time I got in here last night you were already asleep and snoring."

"Snoring! Oh no, how embarrassing."

"Just joking. You weren't really snoring."

Louise moved closer to her bed to see why Melanie was fiddling with the blanket.

"I hope you don't mind me doing this on your bed, I forgot someone was sleeping in it now."

"Not at all," Louise replied. "I couldn't understand what you were doing. Is it someone's birthday?"

"No."

"A special occasion."

"No."

"Anything important."

Melanie shrugged, "It's just a gift,"

Louise thought the parcel was big and heavy for something as casual as a gift. She wondered what Melanie bought people for birthdays or Christmas.

"I can't believe how tired I've been," Louise sat down as Melanie continued fussing over the gift. She'd wrapped it carefully, only to rip off all the paper and start again. A pile of discarded wrapping was building up on the floor.

"When I was walking around Oxford Street today my head started spinning."

"Really," Melanie paused and then folded another piece of paper over the gift. "I was tired when I first got here too but it won't take long before you feel better. Actually Louise, it's getting dark in here, could you turn on the light please."

"Sure."

Louise walked over to the door and flicked on the light switch noticing that Melanie had exquisitely shaped hazel-coloured eyes.

"When I've finished with wrapping this I'm going down to the Hare and Hounds. Do you want to come?"

"What's the Hare and Hounds?"

"It's a pub just up the road. It's good. It gets really busy, lots of backpackers. People from here go there for a drink."

"People like Gill and Steve?"

"Gill and Steve?" Melanie looked puzzled, "Maybe. Why? Do you want them to come?"

"No. It's all right, just checking."

"Hmm," Melanie bit a piece of sticky tape and carefully folded a piece of paper into the shape of a heart placing it carefully on the gift and then scrutinising her attempt at origami. "I think I'm done now," she said, standing back, "yes, that's definitely finished." She placed the gift underneath her bed and grabbed a coat from the wardrobe.

"We'd better go or we'll miss out on the half price Snakebites."

"Snakebites?"

"A pint mixed with cider, beer and a dash of blackcurrant."

Louise shuddered, "Sounds revolting. I hate beer."

Melanie laughed, "An Australian who doesn't like beer. I don't think I've met one of

those.”

Louise decided to go to the pub, there was nothing else to do and she didn't want to hang around in case Steve or Gill were prowling about. Louise went to the bathroom to put on some eyeliner and looked in the mirror, her face was pale and puffy.

Melanie was waiting for her outside the front door.

“What time is it?” Louise asked.

“5.30.”

“5.30! Look how dark it is already.”

“It usually gets dark around 4.”

The houses in Inverness Terrace were white and in the light fog had a mysterious beauty about them.

“Are all these houses full of backpackers?”

“No. Not all of them. Some of them are bedsits or flats. Did you know that Queen Victoria would ride down this way to Kensington Palace? That's why they call the main road the Queensway because she always came this way from Buckingham Palace.”

They turned off Inverness Terrace and stepped into Queensway. The street was full of people, getting off buses, walking along or shopping, heading to tube stations or eating dinner.

“What's a Wimpy Bar?” Louise asked as they passed a neon lit shop.

“It's like McDonalds or Hungry Jacks. You can get a nice hot chocolate from there. Actually if you're hungry Louise, there's a place up the road called Fasta Pasta. All the spaghetti you can eat for five pounds.” Melanie said enthusiastically.

They turned off Queensway and before they even got near the Hare and Hounds, Louise

could hear the screeching of Jimmy Barnes, it was the last thing she'd expected to hear in the centre of London.

"Do a lot of Australians come here?"

"Not just Australians," Melanie replied, "all kinds of backpackers really."

Melanie opened the door to the pub and they stepped inside. The pub was large and the bar was in the middle of the room. People were sitting around tables or standing around chatting and nearly everybody was smoking. They pushed past people singing along to Cold Chisel and gulping down pints of reddish-coloured beer.

"I like this spot," Melanie said, sitting at a table with empty glasses and beer dripping onto the floor. "Looks like no-one I know is here yet. I tell you what Louise. I'll get the drinks if you sit here and keep this table."

"Okay. Wait, I'll give you some money."

"No. Don't worry about it. This is your first pub in London. I'll buy you a drink. What do you want?"

"I'll have an orange juice."

"Orange juice. Don't be silly. You have to have something proper to drink."

"Alright. A vodka and orange then."

Melanie went to the bar while Louise looked around at the pub crowd. A lot of people were dressed in jeans and manila shirts from the 70s. She cringed; surely this crowd couldn't be representative of backpackers in London, because it was full of yobbos. Nadine had told her to avoid Australians in London because they were an embarrassment. Louise thought Nadine a snob at the time but now wasn't so sure. Melanie returned with the vodka and a small bottle of orange juice. The juice only half filled the glass and there wasn't any ice but Louise didn't want to seem ungrateful.

"Cheers," Melanie said lifting up her glass.

"To my second night in London," Louise added and they clinked their glasses together.

She'd taken a sip of her vodka when Rachel sat down.

"Hi guys, I was hoping you would be down here," she said.

"You just get back from work?" Melanie asked.

"Yeah. I'm dying for a drink. You wouldn't believe the kind of shift I've had, hey. I've only got an hour left to catch up with everyone on the snakebites," Rachel hurried off to the bar.

"What do you think of London?" said Melanie.

"I don't know really. I haven't seen all that much of it yet but everything looks so grey and gloomy."

"It's winter, Louise."

"I know."

"London is much better in the summer, people are much more relaxed. It doesn't get dark till 10. Just wait and see."

"You obviously like it here then."

"I didn't at first, I thought it was crowded and cold and ugly but I love it now."

"So the place grows on you?"

"Not on everyone. I've met a lot of people who don't last very long. Sometimes you have to come to London a few times before you get used to it. "

Rachel returned balancing several Snakebites but a guy knocked her hand making her spill half of them on the floor.

"I'm sorry," he said and wandered off.

"Great," Rachel cursed. "Just great. But you know after the shift I've had, I guess it had

to happen."

"A bad shift then?" Louise asked.

"Shit," Rachel replied distractedly, wiping snakebite off her sleeve, "You got a tissue or something, my jumper got soaked. That's the second time in a row I've had wet stuff on my jumper."

Louise found a tissue in her pocket and handed it to her. "I haven't used it."

"The shift last night nearly killed me, I was hoping to relax and now I'm wet," the tissue Rachel was using began to break apart, leaving white cotton bits on her jumper. "I can't believe he made me spill my drink and then walks off like that."

Rachel glared around the room trying to find the source of her distress but he'd disappeared into the crowd.

"You're a nurse aren't you?"

"A nurse? No way, I look after geriatrics. You don't have to be a nurse to do what I do. You clean them up, bathe them, and help them with their food. Keep them company. It's not hard. It's a bit sad but the money's better than working in a pub or in a shop."

"I did it for a while," said Melanie. "I didn't like it. Some of those old people are really senile."

"Oh. They're not too bad. Well," Rachel reconsidered her statement, "some of them are, hey. But then I've got this old guy. He lives alone in this huge house but he's really nice. He's got emphysema and had an operation that left a hole in his throat so he could breathe but he still smokes. It's really weird. He puts the cigarette in his mouth and takes a puff and then it comes out of his neck."

"Oh yuck," Louise grimaced.

"Yeah and when he speaks he has to put this thing over his throat and his voice comes

out.”

They all looked at their cigarettes.

“You’d think that he would have given up smoking,” said Melanie.

“He can’t. Once you get to that age I don’t think it matters anymore. It’s a horrible disease and the worst thing is that the cigarettes gave it to him yet he’s still addicted to them. I’d hate to end up like that. In fact I’d hate to end up old and lonely like most of them do. A lot of the time I’m the only person they see all week.”

“Why is that?” Louise asked.

“People don’t care about them, just leave them to rot.”

“It’s sad.”

“I know. What an awful way to finish your life.”

The conversation was sobering them up and Louise was relieved when Rachel said it was time to go to the bar again.

“I want to get my share of snakebites. You want some more Melanie? You coming Louise?”

At the bar Rachel leant over and whispered.

“How old do you think Melanie is?”

“I don’t know, 25 maybe.”

“She’s 28.”

“28! No way.”

“She looks good for 28 doesn’t she?”

“I can’t believe she’s that old.”

“She doesn’t tell anyone her age anymore, hey” Rachel giggled. “I got it out of her one night when we were here. How old are you?”

"23. What about you?"

"I'll be 23 in a couple of weeks."

Melanie had started on her second snakebite when they got back.

"I wish I could drink those, they look so pretty," Louise said.

"Why don't you give it a go?" Rachel asked.

"Nah, I can't stand beer"

"But it's got cider in it as well."

"All right, I'll give it a try," Louise picked up a Snakebite; it was a huge glass, well over a pint filled with amber and red liquid. She took a sip and gagged, the drink was too bitter.

"What do you think," Rachel said eagerly.

"It still tastes too much like beer for me."

"Oh," Rachel looked disappointed.

"It would make my life easier if I liked beer, wine too - can't stand that either. They're both so much cheaper to buy."

"What do you drink?" Melanie asked.

"Spirits; Scotch, Vodka, Gin, Bourbon. Oh and cocktails."

"You've got expensive taste," said Melanie.

"I can't help it, like I said if I could drink beer or wine then I would."

"Me. I'll drink anything," Rachel said, guzzling down her snakebite.

"Me too," said Melanie.

Rachel and Melanie started on another snakebite. By the end of the hour they'd had three each and were looking tipsy.

"Have you thought any more about the experiment?" Rachel said, staring intently into

her glass.

"I've thought about it."

"What experiment?" Louise asked

"They have these experiments at one of the big hospital research centres. You get a thousand pounds if you do it."

"Do what?"

"All sorts of things. I'm going to be a guinea pig," Melanie wrinkled her nose up and down. "Do I look like a guinea pig now?"

Rachel plunged her hand into her drink, "a thousand pounds for a week and all you do is sit around and be monitored every day in case you react to the drugs. It's meant to be fun, lots to eat, other people to hang out with. I'd do it myself but I don't think they'd take me"

"Gosh," Louise said, thinking she wouldn't take Rachel either, "I don't know if I'd volunteer. What about after effects,"

"After effects?"

"How do you know if what they test out on you today isn't going to affect you in the future?"

"Like how?"

"Like kidney damage or heart failure. "

"I don't think I want to be a guinea pig any more," Melanie gasped.

"Aha," Rachel said triumphantly, "I thought I'd lost a pound in my glass," she held out the wet coin and inspected it, "yep, I must have put it in there when I got my change from the bar. What were you saying?" she turned to Louise.

"I was saying that a thousand pounds wasn't worth messing your body up."

"Whose body?" They turned around to see the guy who'd spilt Rachel's drink standing beside them.

"My body," Melanie offered.

"Doesn't seem like there's anything wrong with your body."

"I didn't say there was. I'm thinking of experimenting on it for a thousand pounds."

"I know someone who did that. He thinks it made him impotent." He looked at them one by one and sat down next to Louise, "my name's Daniel."

"Hi Daniel," they said.

"You guys all Australians? That's all I ever meet over here in London, Australians. Me, I'm from the United States, from Washington D.C."

"I'm South African," Melanie said.

"Ouch," Daniel grimaced.

"That's a bit rude," said Louise

"I get that all the time," Melanie shrugged.

"You here to buy me another drink?" Rachel said.

"Hey, did I knock your drink? Sorry."

Rachel waited expectantly for Daniel to go to the bar but he didn't budge.

"You staying around here?" he asked.

"Dean Court in Inverness Terrace," Melanie replied.

"You got a cigarette," he turned to Louise staring at the packet on the table.

"Sure," she pushed her cigarettes towards him.

"You girls up to anything after this? We got a party happening at our hostel"

"Where are you staying?"

"At the Crown."

"Ohh. I've heard about that place, it's got a bad reputation"

"Don't seem too bad to me."

"I heard it's dirty," said Rachel.

"Yeah, real dirty" Daniel said leaning over towards Rachel.

"How dirty?" Melanie giggled.

"All the way dirty," Daniel smiled. "Why don't you girls come back with me and I'll show you how dirty it can be."

"Sure," Rachel and Melanie said together.

Louise didn't like Daniel and wasn't enthused about going back to his hostel either.

"I'll be back," he said and sauntered away from the table to a group of girls by the bar.

"Typical," Louise muttered.

It was over an hour before Daniel reappeared and Melanie and Rachel were drunk.

"You girlies want to get going now?" he said.

"Sure," Melanie replied eagerly. She rose unsteadily and her legs swayed towards the pub door. Daniel grabbed her arm to stop her bumping into tables. She giggled again as he led her outside.

Louise felt cold. She was envious of Rachel and Melanie's gloves and scarves, tightly wrapped around their necks and slightly over their faces. She put her hands inside her coat and followed a short distance behind Daniel and the girls, who had hooked their arms together and were swaying down the street. They turned off past Inverness Terrace and into Westbourne Terrace.

"This place is always getting in trouble for having loud parties," she heard Rachel giggling.

From the outside the Crown was similar to Dean Court but once inside it was more like a hotel. The Crown had a foyer and behind a desk sat a clerk, handing out keys for people coming in or going out. She nodded to Daniel and gave him his key without querying him about the girls.

They passed a lounge room with a billiard table and several people sitting around drinking.

"It's pretty laid-back here. Really cool too," Daniel waved at some people lounging around on the stairwell. "I'll show you my room," he said eagerly.

There were people everywhere; on the staircase, the landing, the hallway, sitting inside rooms with the doors wide open, chatting and drinking while the smell of dope wafted through the air. The Crown was a livelier hostel than Dean Court but there was a seedy atmosphere to it, making Louise feel uncomfortable. Eventually they all stood outside Daniel's bedroom.

"There's no-one here," Daniel said excited.

"Who shares with you?" Melanie asked.

"Two guys and two girls."

"The rooms are co-ed?" Louise was surprised.

"Sure."

"Wow. Imagine sharing our room with guys," Rachel giggled.

"Wouldn't it be great if we could all share a room," Daniel looked straight at Louise. She ignored his comment and stepped into the room, it was bigger than the one the girls shared at Dean Court. There was washing hanging up on a makeshift line and backpacks with their contents spread all over the room. There was an overflowing

ashtray in the corner and glasses and cups scattered everywhere.

"Daniel, don't you ever clean up," Melanie gasped, horrified by the mess.

"Sure. But it's holiday time and no-one's gonna bother. It's a night for fun," Daniel looked expectantly at them. "I'll show you my bed." He lay down on a bottom bunk indicating that the girls should sit beside him.

Rachel prodded the mattress.

"It's nice and hard," she said.

Daniel smirked, "Come on ladies what are you waiting for?"

Melanie sat near Daniel's head while Rachel ended up near his feet.

"Don't take your shoes off," she giggled, "or I'll cop it."

"Nothing wrong with my feet," he said and sat up, looking offended by her comment.

Rachel burped.

"What about you?" Daniel said, "why are you still standing there when we can all get comfortable on the bed?"

"I'm happy standing," Louise replied, unsure of whether to leave or not.

"So what do you girls want to do now?" Daniel said, looking at Rachel and Melanie.

"I feel like dancing," said Melanie.

"Dancing sounds good," Daniel nodded.

"Have you got any music?"

"Music?" Daniel looked perplexed, "Oh, you mean you want some normal dancing?"

"What did you think I meant?" Melanie looked surprised.

"I thought you meant dirty dancing?"

"Like the film," Rachel giggled.

"I want real music," Melanie got up and span around in the room. "Oh, I shouldn't have

done that, I think I'm going to be sick." She clutched her hand over her mouth.

"Hey," Daniel said, "you can't be sick in here." He ushered Melanie out into the hallway where she stood taking deep breaths.

"How about we go back to your hostel and you can show me your room," Daniel said.

"Sure," said Melanie.

"How about another time," said Louise.

Rachel let out an extra loud burp.

"Anyway, it's late and we've got things to do tomorrow," Louise added.

"Like what?"

"Well, Melanie and Rachel have to go to work and I've got to go shopping."

"Ohh..." Daniel looked disappointed.

"Maybe we could sneak him in tonight," Melanie said.

Rachel burped again. "Sorry," she apologised sheepishly, "too many Snakebites."

"We can't sneak him into our hostel, Gill will have a fit," Louise said, thinking of the drama over the Pakistani man. If they started smuggling in Americans it would finish Gill off.

"Come round tomorrow then," Melanie said, "Louise will be there."

"What!" Louise was horrified at the thought of Daniel coming over to the hostel, especially when she'd be alone with him.

"Sounds good," said Daniel, "what time?"

"I'm not sure what time," Louise said stalling. "Um ... I tell you what. How about I come back here and meet you. It will be a lot easier."

"If you don't turn up I'll come looking for you," Daniel waved his finger at Louise.

"I'll be there," she said, eager to get out of the Crown.

“Whatever,” Daniel shrugged, distracted by a woman walking past. “Time to introduce myself” he said, giving Louise a wink before heading off in the same direction as the woman.

Melanie and Rachel staggered back to Inverness Terrace while Louise walked ahead, furious that she had been manipulated into a rendezvous with a sleazy guy. When they got back to their room someone was already asleep. Rachel had mentioned a woman called Karen who shared the room and was going to Africa. Louise collapsed on the bed and saw Rachel take a swig out of the bottle from her drawer.

“What on earth is that stuff you keep drinking?” Louise whispered, not wanting to wake Karen.

“It’s Night Nurse cough medicine. I got a taste for this stuff a couple of years ago when I was sick. I’ve gotten a bit addicted to it.”

“You’re addicted to cough medicine?” Louise said incredulously.

“Sure, why not?” Rachel looked offended.

“Honestly,” Melanie whispered, “he is cute.”

“What?”

“Daniel. He’s cute. It’s a pity I have to work tomorrow. Check him out for us, Louise, it won’t hurt.”

“All right, but I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Ever been with a black guy before?” Melanie studied Louise’s face.

“No.”

“What about you Rachel?”

“No.”

"Is that why you like Daniel?" Louise asked.

"No way," Melanie muttered, and yawned. "Better go to bed now," she said and turned her back on them.

Louise found it difficult to get out of bed the next morning, feeling homesick, lonely and lost. It wasn't long before tears dripped down her face and onto the pillow. She hoped Nadine was having a rotten time on the Greek Island. By the time she got out of bed it was 11 and she had missed breakfast again. No matter, her plan for the day was to go to Kensington Market and check out the famous punk rock haunt. She went to the bathroom to put on makeup and noticed her face was even puffier than the night before, even a layer of foundation didn't help.

Louise turned onto Westbourne Terrace and closer to her rendezvous with Daniel hoping to get rid of him by going to Kensington Market. She would call in at the Crown, say hello, apologise about having another engagement and make a quick exit. That way she'd have kept her promise and Daniel wouldn't come looking for her. When she got to the Crown he was sitting in the lounge room, a girl on either side. They looked at her quizzically when she stood before them.

"Hey," said Daniel, scratching his head.

"Hi."

They continued to stare at one another.

"Do I know you?" he asked.

Louise sighed; he was such a waste of time. "Last night. The pub."

He looked puzzled.

"There were three of us and we came back to your room."

The girls were smirking.

"Hey, yeah," said Daniel, a smile crossing his face. "Australian chicks, right."

"Yep."

"I didn't think any of you guys would turn up today. What's your name again?"

"Louise."

"Louise, yeah right. We're gonna see your room today."

"No, sorry, I've got something else on."

"Like what?"

"I'm going to Kensington Market."

Daniel looked disappointed.

"So I guess I'll leave you to it," she said.

"I'll come. I've heard it's got great stuff," he said without much conviction, "you got a cigarette?"

Louise handed over a cigarette. He lit it with a lighter held by one of the girls then readjusted his beanie before heading out the door, Louise in tow.

"This is an amazing place. I love it here. I'm hoping to stay for six months. Don't know how my money will last though. None of my friends thought I'd get here, they laughed at me when I told them I was coming over. They said I'd never have the money. Should have seen their surprise when I showed them my plane ticket. You like it here Louise? Sure you do," he said. "You been to Washington D.C.?"

"No."

"D.C. sucks man. I never want to go back again. I'm gonna stay here for as long as I can. You know what I used to do in D.C.? He didn't wait for a reply. "Nothing. That's right,

nothing. I was on the dole. Can you believe it?"

Louise could believe it.

They walked through the gates of Kensington Gardens and Daniel stepped closer to her.

"My girlfriend, I mean ex-girlfriend was the worst of all. She said to me that I'd never make it at anything and that I wouldn't last more than three weeks here. There's no way though. I'm gonna stick it out here."

Louise nodded and moved away from him as he droned on and on about his life.

"I love England. I've been here a week now. Do you love England? Have I asked you that already? I miss the States a bit. Anyway what about you?" he said.

"Well I..."

"Hey, you got any food for those ducks?"

The ducks were swimming in a pond that was surrounded by barren trees and a slight mist. The scene reminded her of the television show 'Catweazle' she'd watched when a child. She imagined the main character, an eccentric old wizard, stepping out from behind a tree and casting a spell. Louise wished he had a spell for getting rid of Daniel but that wasn't going to happen, the park was completely deserted.

"Let's walk faster," she said.

They passed Kensington Palace and Louise thought it odd that it was in the middle of the gardens. She'd always imagined the royal family would live far away, removed from ordinary people.

Behind the palace was Kensington High Street; the streets were busy with shoppers and traffic. They nearly walked past Kensington Market but luckily Louise spotted a small sign on the front door. It wasn't anything like an outdoor market with stalls; more a

collection of small shops flogging overpriced clothes and jewellery.

"This place is famous as one of the origins of punk gear," she said. "You wouldn't know it though would you? It looks pretty ordinary now?"

"Yeah," Daniel replied without enthusiasm.

They passed a shop selling postcards and one of Billy Idol, his bottom protruding from his pants, appealed to her. She bought the postcard, thinking of the right friend to send it to. Daniel had wandered off to stare at a shop selling leather thongs and bondage gear.

"Have you ever been into bondage?"

"No," Louise blushed.

"Didn't think so, you seem too innocent to me."

"I'm not that innocent."

"I bet you'd look great with that leather gear on," he said peering intently at her body.

"I don't think so," she moved away.

They walked around a few more shops and found a Doc Marten stall.

"One of my favourite things," said Daniel, pointing at a pair of purple boots, "besides the pub. Hey, that reminds me, I know a great pub down this street."

He set off before waiting for a reply.

"It's a little early for a drink isn't it?" she said wondering why everyone was always keen on the pub.

"It's an English thing," Daniel said.

"What is?"

"Going to the pub."

"Why is it an English thing?"

"Because it's like having a drink in your lounge room."

"My lounge room is nothing like this."

"Not literally your lounge room but when you find a good pub it's like having all your friends round and having a drink in a lounge room. You know," he said leaning close to her again, "the intimacy."

Daniel ordered a beer but Louise didn't want anything though ended up ordering a coffee because she didn't want to sit there looking at Daniel. Her cup arrived with a big, brown contraption on the top.

"It's where they put the beans," Daniel said, after she sat pondering it for several minutes. He reached over and pulled the top of the lid off, ground coffee dripped slowly into the cup.

"You get used to it," he said, "can I have another cigarette?"

Before she answered he'd reached over and grabbed one from the packet in her pocket. He lit up and blew the smoke right into her face, the smell making her queasy.

"You know back home in the States I would never have imagined going out with a girl like you," Daniel said, staring intently into her eyes.

Louise laughed.

Daniel looked offended and turned away. "I miss my girlfriend," he muttered.

"I thought she was your ex."

"Nah, she's only my ex while I'm over here. She's not literally an ex. Actually, I'm thinking I might cut this holiday short and go home to see her," Daniel gazed gloomily into his beer.

"When would you go?"

"Next week maybe. I don't have much money left and there are no jobs I want. I'll be

better off in D.C. Imagine how happy my girlfriend's going to be when she sees me coming home."

"Imagine."

They sat in silence till Louise finished her coffee.

"I better be going now," she said.

Daniel nodded, "Can you leave me a cigarette before you go?"

"See you round." she said and handed him the whole packet.

"Whatever," he shrugged.

Louise trudged back through Kensington Gardens feeling dizzy. It took a long time to get back to the hostel.

Four

Near Death

She stood on the crowded bus. The heat and the closeness of the crowd make her feel dizzy. Her stop approaches. She pushes her way through the crowds. They don't move so she pushes harder and harder, using her hands to part them from the doorway but every time one leaves another takes their place. Two people are staring at her.

"I think she's stopped breathing," says one.

"She's still breathing, but it's shallow."

"Does she need a doctor?"

"We'll have to wait and see."

Louise misses her stop and in desperation yells, "Everyone move to the back of the bus."

"I've brought you some flowers," Melanie said, placing a glass with daffodils next to her bed.

"Thanks."

"Do you want some soup?" Rachel asked.

"Yeah," Louise replied.

"You haven't eaten for a couple of days. I think you need something to drink as well. I'll get you some lemonade."

Rachel disappeared and Louise went back to sleep. When she woke again Rachel was sitting beside her with a hot cup of soup.

Rachel passed the cup across but Louise took one sniff and nearly threw up. It was a packet soup and the cup had crusty bits stuck to the inside. She lifted the spoon to her

mouth but couldn't go any further.

"I can't eat it Rachel, I'm sorry," she said and handed it back. Rachel looked offended but drank the soup.

"I'll have the lemonade though," Louise croaked and took a sip from a clean glass.

"You really should have some Night Nurse." Rachel said eagerly.

"Okay."

"I'll start you off on 10 mls," Rachel carefully poured the amount into a measuring vial, "you can always have more later."

Louise took a sip and gagged, the thick green syrup tasted of menthol mixed with a bitter tang and she couldn't drink it.

"Maybe you'd like the Day Nurse better," Rachel said, "oh well, no point wasting this," she drank the vial in one gulp, licking her lips before measuring out another 10mls.

The room was empty when Louise woke and a dim light came through the curtains. She got out of the bed and went to the bathroom. How long had she been sick?

"Five days," said Rachel who was standing in the queue waiting for a bath.

"I felt like I was going to die," Louise said.

"I thought you were going to die. Melanie and I were listening to your breathing one night. It was so shallow that I had to put my head near your mouth to check you were still alive."

"Oh," Louise said, a vague memory stirring in her head.

"And there was this one time when Melanie and I were in the room talking to each other and you sat bolt upright in bed, shook your finger at us and told us to get to the back of the bus. Then you dropped straight back onto your bed. It was so funny."

"Yeah Rachel," said Louise, "I bet it was funny."

Her feet felt wobbly but that was to be expected after five days in bed. She went to the lounge room and sat in front of the television. The guy she'd seen that first morning at Dean Court giving Steve dirty looks was seated on the green couch. He glanced at her from behind his paper and nodded.

"How you going?" he asked.

"Fine thanks."

"I'm Paul," he offered.

"Hi Paul."

"You're the sick girl from room 1 right?"

"That's the one," she started coughing.

"When you feel well enough you might want to come for a walk."

"Thanks," she said getting up from the chair and checking the bench in the lounge room for letters. There were several from her family and a couple of telephone messages. One of them was an urgent message to ring Mark about a backpack. She'd forgotten all about it and threw the note in the bin, hoping to avoid any further phone calls.

"Actually Paul, I would like to go for a walk, I need to get some fresh air. Could we go now?"

Paul folded up his paper neatly and placed it on the table. "Okay," he said surprised, "I'll go and grab my coat."

Louise began to cough, the ferocity of it made her sit down. People in the lounge room were looking at her, annoyed that the coughing made it difficult to hear the television. She tried to stop the cough by getting a drink of water but only managed to splutter water all over herself.

"You ready," said Paul standing in front of her in a big blue overcoat.

"Wow," she said, "that looks warm."

"I got it when I was working at home - part of my uniform."

"Huh."

"The coat. I used to work in the police force back home."

"Shouldn't it have a badge on it or something?"

"Nah, you can take the badge off."

Louise coughed again and Paul waited patiently till it stopped.

"You all right now?" he said.

"Yeah."

They left through the kitchen back door and strolled along Inverness Terrace, heading towards Kensington Gardens.

"The police force," Louise said, "That would be pretty dangerous."

"Not really. Well, not where I work anyway. I'm on the South Island, in a small town. I never saw much trouble, just a few drunks and the odd car theft. It can be kind of boring."

"Is that why you're over here?"

"No. I like working in the police, I came over for a break. Besides, I've always wanted to work in England and if I'd left it any later I couldn't have got a visa; you can't work here after you turn 28."

Louise didn't want to stay in England till she was 24 let alone 28. She'd been in London for a week now and had a drink at the pub; an afternoon with a sleazy American guy and five days in bed thinking she was going to die.

"I'm working at Heathrow now, as a security officer."

"What's that like?"

"It's good. I wander around the airport looking for trouble. You know, suspicious luggage, dodgy characters, bomb threats, people too drunk to board planes; keeping an eye on people in general, making sure they get where they're meant to go, whether that's onto a plane or off one. The good thing here though is that when I find any trouble I can pass it on to the English police and go back to the job of scouring the airport. Much easier."

They stood before the lake watching the ducks swimming. Louise thought of the day she'd stood in the same spot with Daniel and wondered whether he'd returned to Washington.

"Gosh it's crowded today," she said, "last time I was here the park was deserted."

"It's Sunday, people always come to the park on the weekend."

There was a lot going on in the park, people rollerblading and riding bikes, ringing bells or shouting for people to move out of the way. Arab women dressed in traditional burka with long gowns, trailed several steps behind the men while their children, laughed and screamed, and ran into people on the footpath narrowly missing the rollerbladers.

"There's a lot of Arabs around," she said.

"The Arabs own Bayswater. Even Harrods is owned by an Arab."

"Oh."

"They came in the 1970s, bought up everything with oil money and set up shops."

They continued walking until Paul pointed out the memorial to Prince Albert. Louise read the inscription that recounted commitment to his subjects, establishing public

libraries and entertainment. Louise remembered a television series shown on the ABC when she was a child, dramatising the reign of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. The television show had portrayed Albert as kind and noble and his efforts to improve the cultural life of his subjects were certainly reflected by his deeds. The memorial stood opposite the Royal Albert Hall, another dedication to the Prince.

They left Kensington Gardens and strolled into Hyde Park. People dressed in jodhpurs and riding jackets, complete with proper equestrian hats, were riding horses around the perimeter of the park.

"What are they doing here?" Louise asked.

"Riding lessons. They hold them on the weekends."

"That's bizarre."

"It gets more bizarre, wait till you see Speakers Corner."

They cut horizontally through the park until they reached a spot where people were standing around listening to solitary figures standing on boxes talking about life, religion, politics or the advantages of a breath diet. One dishevelled man read passages from the bible, looking up every now and then to warn people of the coming apocalypse. Another man was wandering around in a sandwich board, pamphlets pasted all over it, warning of the corruption of multinational corporations. Most people walked between speakers, stopping long enough to catch the substance of the lecture, before laughing and moving on.

"How come no women seem to speak at these things," Louise said, counting eight men standing on boxes.

"Not sure," said Paul, "maybe they're too sensible."

Eventually the park let out to the side of Buckingham Palace where a small crowd had gathered outside the gates, taking pictures of each other posing before the guards.

“The Queen’s at home,” said Paul, pointing to the flag flying at full mast. “That’s only raised when she’s in residence.”

“Oh,” murmured Louise, who had no interest in the current Queen or the rest of the royal family for that matter. They turned away from the gates and Paul suggested walking to Knightsbridge. They passed Downing Street, which looked less impressive and much smaller than it did on television.

They eventually reached High Street in Knightsbridge.

“You’ve got to see Harrods while we’re here,” said Paul.

“It’s expensive though isn’t it?” Louise hesitated, conscious of her casual clothes and worried that the sales people would know she didn’t have money.

“We’re only going in for a look, you don’t have to buy anything.”

“I guess so,” she replied without much conviction.

Harrods was an impressive multi-storied white cream building. Lots of people were streaming inside but few were buying anything. Most people, it seemed, only wanted to look at the place. Harrods was really like any other department store except for the price tags. They looked at perfumes, makeup, clothes, bedding and linen, home appliances and entertainment products, all of them at least three times more expensive than anywhere else. They passed through the food section with hampers full of dried fruits and nuts, cheeses, biscuits and pates. Louise felt hungry looking at all the food and Paul suggested they get something to eat at the small café in the food hall. Louise studied the

menu prices and decided she could wait, ordering a drink instead. The coffee arrived in a silver jug accompanied by a cup and saucer made of white china. She poured out the coffee and settled back to watch the crowds.

"What do you think of Harrods?" said Paul.

"It's amazing how much people will pay when it's got an exclusive name attached to it. I don't think the stuff here is any better than you'd get anywhere else."

"Probably not," Paul agreed, "but they do say you can buy anything you want here, even a Rolls Royce."

"Well there's no chance I'll be doing that."

"Still, it's the exclusiveness of it all that makes it special."

"I guess so," Louise continued to watch people move around the food hall, picking up hampers, shaking their heads when they saw the price.

"Rachel says you've never left Dean Court."

"Yes," Paul replied, looking startled.

"You must really like it there."

"What? Dean Court."

"Yeah."

"I don't stay because I like Dean Court, I stay because I love London."

"But don't you want to travel anywhere else? See other parts of England?"

"No. I've always wanted to live here. Anyway, my visa's nearly up. I have to go home in a couple of months and I'd rather stay in London, make the most of it."

"You know, everyone I meet loves London but I don't know why. It's just a big city."

"Wait till you've been here a while, you'll see what I mean."

"I hope so," Louise felt a wave of homesickness hit her again. It was like pain on the inside. "Don't you miss being at home, seeing everyone, being with familiar people."

"Sometimes but," Paul hesitated and eyed her cautiously, "but I needed to get away from a girl."

"Bad relationship?"

"Sort of. This is as far away from New Zealand as I could get."

"Will she still be there when you go back?"

"No, she's gone."

"That will make it easier."

"Probably," Paul sighed, "but it will be hard to get used to living on the South Island again."

Louise didn't know New Zealand had a South Island.

"What about you. Did you have a reason to come to London?" Paul said.

"I came over to meet a girl. Except the girl isn't here anymore."

"Where's she gone?"

"To the Greek Islands."

"Can't you go there?"

"I don't know what island she's on. She promised she'd write to me and let me know before I left Melbourne but she didn't."

"Too bad," said Paul.

"Yeah, you're not wrong about that."

"If she isn't here anymore why did you still come over?"

"Pride I guess."

"Oh?" Paul looked puzzled. Louise was so disappointed that Nadine had left her alone

in London that she wanted to cry.

"We should get going," she said.

"Sure," Paul replied.

They walked back to Dean Court thinking about the girls who'd left them.

Five

Pictionary

Rachel tucked the bottle of Night Nurse in her drawer and headed downstairs. She felt like company, hoping there would be people in the lounge room. Wayne and Chris came shooting down the stairwell.

"Uunch Unch," Wayne said as his clenched fists pretend to make contact with her face.

"Uunch Unch," Chris repeated as his elbows pretend to make contact with Rachel's neck.

"Still think the story isn't true?" asked Wayne.

"I know for a fact it isn't true," Rachel replied.

"Catch you later," said Wayne.

"Much later," added Chris.

They headed out the front door, waiting till they were out of earshot before Chris muttered, "Too fat."

"Bush pig," added Wayne.

"Where are all the decent chicks?" Chris wondered.

"They don't backpack," said Wayne.

"That's a point," replied Chris.

Rachel was glad to get away from them. Wayne and Chris had arrived at Dean Court two weeks earlier but she'd only met them for the first time the night before. Melanie thought Chris was cute and suggested they play one of the board games stacked on the shelf in the lounge room. Rachel teamed up with Wayne against Chris and Melanie

while Paul offered to keep score.

"So what is Pictionary?" Wayne had said without enthusiasm.

"You pick up one of these cards," Melanie pointed at the stack, "and you have to draw what the card says. Your partner has to guess what it is before the egg timer runs out."

"Sounds a bit boring," Wayne looked sullen.

"It's great fun," Melanie said pulling a chair next to Chris.

Ten minutes into the game, Wayne started to get competitive but Rachel couldn't make out his drawings.

"Is it a cow?"

"A cow?" he looked at her incredulously, "you think that's a cow when it's only got three legs?"

"Those splotches you've drawn on the body look like jersey cows."

"They aren't splotches, they're patterns."

"Hey," said Chris, "you're not allowed to give her hints."

"Is it an ice-cream truck?"

"This is hopeless," Wayne fumed, throwing his pen down.

"Time's out," said Paul, pointing to the egg timer.

"What was it meant to be?" said Rachel.

"It's an aeroplane. How could you mistake an aeroplane for a cow or an ice-cream truck? Can't you see the wings and the tail?"

"Then what are those patterns?"

"It's a flying kangaroo."

"Doesn't look anything like a kangaroo," muttered Rachel.

"Our turn," said Chris.

Melanie guessed his drawing straight away and soon they were 30 points ahead of Wayne and Rachel. Wayne began to lose interest in the game and soon Chris joined him reminiscing about the States.

"We were working in San Diego," said Chris.

"On a construction site," Wayne added.

"Then we spent ten months travelling around the States."

"It was amazing," said Wayne.

"But our visas ran out," said Chris. "So we left the States and travelled around Europe."

"We're stuck in London now because we need money. Then we're going to Asia."

"Did you meet any celebrities when you were in the States?" Rachel asked.

"Nah," said Chris.

"I've met more celebrities when I was working at The Hilton in Sydney," said Wayne.

"Speaking of hotels, I snuck into Elton John's bedroom once," Rachel giggled.

"Sweet," said Wayne. "How did you manage that?"

"He was in Perth for a concert and I found out what hotel he was staying in. There was a fire escape and I climbed it up to his room and went in through the window."

"You got into his room!" Paul was shocked, "that's a really bad lapse of security."

"I got right into his lounge room and I was standing there and about to call out his name when I hear these grunting noises coming from the bedroom."

"Was he with a bloke?" said Wayne looking excited.

"No. It was a woman."

"Are you sure?" said Melanie.

"It was definitely a woman," Rachel nodded.

"But he's gay."

"I know, but he was married for a while so he must be bisexual."

"What happened then?" Wayne urged her on.

"I stood there for ages and wondered whether I should disturb him, you know, right in the act. Then I thought how often do you get into Elton John's hotel room? So I called out his name and asked for an autograph. Next thing he comes storming out of his room and starts abusing me about respecting his privacy and that he was calling the police. He chased me out of his room. He was really angry, hey?" Rachel ended, a puzzled look on her face.

"No way," Chris laughed.

"Can't be true," Wayne shook his head.

"Did you know I went out once with Dolph Lundgren's stand in?" Melanie said, not wanting to be left out of the brush with fame stories.

"What did he look like?" said Wayne.

"He looked like Dolph Lundgren of course except he was really dumb."

"Isn't Dolph Lundgren dumb?"

"Well, that's the funny thing, Chris. Dolph Lundgren has an IQ of 150 or something round that. I read it once and his stand in told me it was true." She picked up another question from the pack of cards. Paul started the egg timer.

"I'll tell you the worst thing I ever heard and it's a true story," said Wayne.

"I love true stories," Rachel giggled.

"There's this guy who works at a hospital for sick kids as a nurse or doctor or something. Anyway, he notices there's this one kid who sits in a wheelchair dribbling and staring into space. Each day he comes in and the kid is still sitting there with the same expression, smiling but nothing else happening in between, except the dribbles.

This guy thinks it strange that the kid doesn't move or talk but just smiles really peacefully. One day he goes up to this kid and looks at the bandages around his head. He's sure that there's something under the bandages because they look like they're moving. He thinks that maybe the kids got lice or something so he slowly undoes the bandages. When he's unwrapped the whole thing he sees that the kid's brain is hanging out and there's all these maggots eating it away. The kid's a vegetable because no-one knew the maggots were eating up his brain."

"Yuck," Melanie grimaced.

"That's a story!" Rachel looked disappointed.

"No it's not, it's true."

"It isn't true, I've read that story in '*The Wasp Factory*.' I'll go upstairs and show you exactly where it's written. Where did you say you heard it?" Rachel insisted.

"A guy in the States reckoned he worked with the guy who saw the kid with maggots in his head. "

"He was lying."

Wayne remained unconvinced, "unch, unch," his hand went close to Rachel's head.

"Come on Wayne, Rachel whose turn is it?" said Melanie.

A loud crash from the street like a garbage bin falling down the stairs made them jump.

They heard footsteps and someone stumbling down the stairs.

"Hey all you bastards," said Steve, swaying into the lounge room. He made straight for their table and leant over it, the smell of alcohol enveloped them.

"Can I play?" he asked.

"No," said Paul.

"Oh, come on," he begged.

"I nearly sat on you the other night," said Wayne.

"That was you was it?"

"I wanted to watch a bit of the tele but you were sleeping on the couch and snoring so much I couldn't hear anything. I had to put your cigarette out too; you'd gone to sleep with it and you stank."

"Why do you always sleep in the lounge room?" Rachel said looking puzzled.

"I can't be bothered climbing the stairs, my bed's on the sixth floor you know."

"You're lazy."

"I was too drunk."

"Why?"

"I got someone sacked."

"You got drunk because you got someone sacked? That's sweet, Steve. You must have felt really awful about it," Melanie said.

"Why?"

"It shows you've got some feelings."

"I didn't say I was upset. In fact, " Steve announced proudly, "I got him sacked."

"You had him sacked deliberately?"

"Yep," Steve grinned.

"Why?"

"I wanted his job"

"That's a rotten thing to do," said Rachel.

"I can't help it," Steve said smugly, "I'm a bastard."

"The timer's run out again," said Paul.

"Sweet," said Wayne.

“Real sweet,” added Chris.

Six

Under Rachel's Bed

Melanie was in the kitchen heating a pie when Louise and Paul returned to Dean Court.

"Are you feeling better Louise?" Melanie said peering intently into her face.

"A bit better now that I've been for a walk."

"Should you be going for a walk on your own when you've been so sick?"

"I went with Paul."

"Oh," Melanie said, suddenly noticing Paul standing in the doorway. She looked at them as though they'd been up to something else and Louise felt embarrassed.

"I hope you feel better soon," Paul said giving Louise a pat on the shoulder, "anyway I'll see you later."

"Thanks," Louise called after him, "I enjoyed myself."

Melanie stared dubiously after Paul, "You know he hardly ever talks to me. I hope I didn't put him off. He probably wanted to spend the rest of the day with you."

"Don't be silly," Louise said. "He's got other things to do."

"Hmm!"

"What have you been up to anyway?"

"Well, you wouldn't believe it Louise but I'm going to book my ticket to New York next week."

"Wow, New York. You're going next week?"

"No, I'm booking it next week. I'm going in July, but I'll have enough money for my flight by next Sunday." Melanie clapped her hands, her enthusiasm so natural and

abundant that Louise was happy for her.

"I'd love to go to New York."

"It's not that expensive, you can get a return flight for 200 pounds. Oh and you need a visa. Actually, that's what I have to sort out really soon, it can take longer if you travel on a South African passport." Melanie looked thoughtful. "Well, I'm sure it will be all right Louise, anyway I've got plenty of time to apply."

Melanie grabbed some plates out of the cupboard. "Hey, guess what I found out?"

"What?"

"You must guess, Louise."

"I don't know."

"Please try."

"All right then, you're pregnant."

"No," Melanie looked horrified.

"The hostel is closing down."

"No."

"I don't know and I hate guessing. What is it?"

"Well Louise I can't really believe it," Melanie giggled, "but Rachel had a boyfriend when she lived in Perth."

"And?"

"Well, can you imagine Rachel with a boyfriend?"

"Not really."

"Can you imagine her having sex?"

"No."

"Neither can I."

"Maybe she looked different then, you know, thinner and healthier."

"Do you really think so?"

"No."

"Anyway, I want to clean under her bed as a birthday present. I thought it would be a nice surprise for her." Melanie's expression suddenly became gloomy, "I'm a bit worried about what I'm going to find under there. She keeps all sorts of things under the bed, I've even seen her put dirty plates with food under there."

"Under where?" said Rachel strolling into the kitchen.

"Oh," Melanie said, "we were talking about the mice in the kitchen and what we might find under there," she pointed to a disused square of the kitchen that was barred by a steel, mesh gate full of disused chairs and milk trays. There was a small couch by the gate and Rachel sat down.

"Yuck," she said, "I don't think this area has ever been cleaned."

"What's it used for anyway?" Louise asked.

"Don't know, but it's always been like this since I've been here. Brian never throws anything out so he's probably saving it for something."

"You know Rachel, now that Karen has gone and Louise is well we should have a tidy up."

"No way. I'm not tidying up this mess."

"Not down here, I mean in our room."

"Karen's gone?" said Louise.

"Yes, she went yesterday."

"Where to?"

"On the African safari, she'd been saving up for ages."

"Gosh, I never even met her," Louise said. "Can we clean the room later?" Rachel said, "I've got to go to work."

The timer on the oven rang and Melanie took out the pie.

"You must have a piece of pie," she said cutting three pieces and putting them on plates.

Rachel took the plate enthusiastically but Louise shook her head. "Go on Louise, I bought it from Nisa, apple pie with blueberry. I've got cream too."

Melanie opened the fridge and fossicked around for several minutes, opening up plastic bags tied up with bundles of food and checking the names on them. "My cream's gone and I can't find my bag, it looks like someone stole it."

"Did it have your name on it?" said Rachel.

"I put my name on everything Rachel. Now I'm going to have to eat my pie without any cream," Melanie looked at the pie on her plate, shoving it despondently with her fork.

"Hey," said Wayne as he came into the kitchen.

"Hi," said Chris, following behind him.

Louise moved out of the doorway and stood on a broom. She clutched it between her feet and swung it back and forth.

"You don't look much bigger than that broom," Wayne observed.

"It's because she doesn't eat much," Melanie said, "she won't even have a piece of pie."

"You know I couldn't do that," said Wayne, "I need to eat all the time."

"If you eat too much you get fat," Louise said.

"I'd rather get fat then. I'd like to know what it's like to wobble around." He walked around the kitchen carrying his imaginary weight. Chris joined him. Thump thump thump on the floor.

"Have you ever seen one of those snuff movies?" Wayne whispered to Louise.

"Snuff movies. I didn't think they really existed," Louise replied.

"We saw one you know, in San Diego. We worked with this guy on the construction site and he reckoned he had one. I didn't believe him so he invited a heap of us round to watch it one night. "

"Do you think it was real?"

"Chris didn't think it was real but I reckon it was. I mean, I know it's sick and all that but I couldn't help but be a bit turned on," he added.

Louise stared at him awkwardly until she was rescued by Steve's stumbling entrance into the kitchen.

"Shit," he said.

"Hi ya Stevie," said Wayne.

"Wayne," he nodded.

"Give it here Stevie," said Chris, holding up his hand.

"Chris," said Steve, giving him an unenthusiastic high five.

"Whatcha been up to Stevie?" said Wayne.

"Work," Steve eyed him suspiciously, "why?"

"Working on a Sunday is no good for your health Stevie," said Chris.

"Why?"

"Need a day off to meet the girlies," said Wayne.

"I'm sick of girlies," said Steve. "Besides, I've got women."

"Like who?" said Wayne.

"I've got girls back home who, shall I say, have an interest in me."

Everyone looked dubiously at his flabby, short frame.

"I was fitter then," he said, "I used to be in the rowing team at Ivanhoe Boys School."

He pointed to the wasted muscle. "This flab has only come on since I stopped all the sport."

Nobody replied.

"It's true," he shrieked

"Love is blind," said Louise.

"Yeah and fat too," added Wayne.

"You guys are bastards," he said, skulking up to his room, hoping that Paul wouldn't spot him hiding under the covers.

"He's a wanker," said Wayne when Steve had gone.

"A real wanker," added Chris.

Steve was relieved to get away from Wayne and Chris. Smart arse, good looking pair of pricks. He bet they could probably ski too, in fact he remembered them talking about the time they were in Colorado. What was their story any way? Why did two blokes hang around each other so much? And why were they constantly pretending to punch people with the sound effect of 'unch, unch'. They must have spent too much time in California, believing they were on a movie set. Why did he have to put up with their rubbish? Or anyone's rubbish for that matter. He missed the bedsit and thought the hostel was full of retards. He should never have gone back to Melbourne for that 21st. Anyway, what did going back to Melbourne do for him? His friends said he was fat, his girlfriend had run off with Brad or Jed, whatever the bastard ski instructor's name was, and his parents had moved to Queensland. He couldn't even crash out in his old bedroom anymore but had to spend the three weeks staying with a former neighbour who wanted to watch zombie movies all the time. Considering that Steve had to sleep in

the lounge room he got to see an awful lot of zombie movies. All in all it had been an expensive and disappointing trip.

He probably shouldn't have flown business class but it was better than sitting with all the yobs in economy. Now he was stuck in a hostel with them. He'd have to look around for somewhere else to stay but it was winter. If that wasn't bad enough he had to deal with the numbers as well, they were driving him crazy, intruding into his coffee and dreams. He sighed, the winter blues were taking hold - it was time for a drinking binge and trashy novels.

What was even worse was trying to avoid Paul. Steve regretted the incident two weeks ago that drove Paul over the edge. He replayed the incident over in his head.

"Hey Paul," said Steve, "missing all those sheep yet?"

"Yeah right," Paul replied. He'd just come back from the Nisa supermarket and pulled out a few cans of soup.

"Hi Paul," Melanie said as she walked past.

Paul didn't reply.

"I guess you're not into mutton," Steve chuckled.

Paul turned away.

"Baa," said Steve.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing."

Paul got a can opener to open the soup.

"Baa, Baa," said Steve.

"I heard you that time you fat bastard," said Paul. "I'm sick of your New Zealand jokes you stupid creep." Paul grabbed Steve, veins nearly bursting out of his neck, his face contorted and turning a bright red. He pushed Steve against the wall twisting his arms behind his back.

"What are you doing? This hurts."

"I don't want to hear any more of your pathetic sheep jokes. You got that clear. And if I ever see you in our bedroom room again I'll kill you. You got that. I'll kill you."

"Sure Paul. You'll kill me."

"Get out you piece of shit," he ordered.

Steve couldn't understand why Paul hated sheep jokes. Everyone teased New Zealanders about sheep; it was like teasing Tasmanians about in-breeding. Unfortunately, Paul's animosity confined Steve to a life of sneaking into their room and grabbing a change of clothes and sleeping on the couch. He took his shoes and socks off and put them under the bed, grabbing his sandals. He liked wearing open toed sandals even though people complained about seeing his overgrown toenails. Steve went into the bathroom, feeling like a long, hot shower. He got undressed and turned on the hot tap as high as it would go, hoping at least for lukewarm water, instead a spray of icy cold water shot out. It was just another reason, Steve decided, to leave Dean Court.

Melanie took a deep breath, "I'm ready," she said, dropping down on her knees. "What do you want to do Louise? Clean or pack?"

"Pack," Louise replied.

Melanie pulled the cover away from the bottom of the bed and grabbed a handful of

crinkly, empty biscuit packets. "I'll pass the rubbish out to you."

Soon she was pulling out an assortment of chocolate wrappers and passed them to Louise to throw in a garbage bag. The bag was half full by the time Melanie passed out empty bottles of Night Nurse. They counted ten empty bottles.

"Oh yuck," Melanie said, finding old plates with mouldy food attached.

"What do you think this was?" Louise gasped but Melanie didn't answer because she was holding a pair of dirty knickers.

"It's disgusting," she muttered.

Melanie grabbed the dustpan and swept under the floor. She scooped up a full pan of dirt.

"Is that it?" said Louise.

"Yes, that's it."

Melanie bundled up the bag but couldn't tie the ends together.

"It's too full," she said.

Louise sat on the bag to flatten it. "All those bottles of Night Nurse take up a lot of room," she laughed. They hauled the plastic bag out to the garbage bin and chucked it in.

"I can't believe that all the muck under her bed didn't smell the room out," Louise said amazed.

"I hope Rachel will try and keep it clean," Melanie looked at the dirt on her hands and clothes. "I need a bath."

"So do I."

They returned to the room and grabbed their towels, separating on the landing to find bathrooms on different floors. Louise turned on the tap and waited for the water to heat

up. She was still waiting ten minutes later but the water remained cold. She turned off the taps and returned to the room. Melanie was drying her hair with a towel, looking happy and refreshed.

"Did you have a bath?" Louise said, surprised.

"Of course Louise, didn't you?"

"There was no hot water."

"You don't need hot water, a cold bath is very refreshing."

"A cold bath in the middle of winter? I don't think so," Louise said sorting out the wardrobe space to unpack all of her backpack. "Finally," she said triumphantly, tipping the backpack upside down to check nothing came out.

Suddenly the door opened and Rachel walked into the room.

"Happy birthday Rachel," Melanie and Louise said in unison. Rachel walked over to her bed and lay down. "I'm knackered," she said, "but not too knackered for a drink. Are you still coming?"

"Sure," said Melanie.

"Of course," said Louise.

"We gave you a present."

"Oh," Rachel giggled excitedly, "where is it."

"Under your bed," said Melanie.

"What," Rachel jumped up and peered beneath the bed, her hands shot out and felt the ground. When she turned around to face them her expression was not what they'd been expecting.

"I'd prefer it if you left my stuff alone," Rachel said accusingly, her face turning red.

“We didn’t take anything Rachel, it’s just that it looked a bit untidy and we thought you might appreciate it if you could find your things more easily.”

Rachel sat back down on her bed. “I could find them before,” she was glaring at them now, “I don’t touch your things so I don’t see what makes you think you can touch mine.” Rachel felt humiliated.

“Why don’t we go for that drink?” Melanie suggested.

“Yes,” Louise offered, “I’ll buy you the first round of snakebites Rachel.”

“A snakebite,” Rachel looked attentive, “Hmm, all right but I’m still upset with you.”

Seven

The Experiment

Melanie was nervous. Being nervous made her perspire. The sweat patches underneath her arms spread leaving an odour. She hadn't used enough deodorant and reached into her bag to pull out the spray. It wasn't her usual brand but they'd run out at Boots so this one had to do. She gave the can a squirt under her arm.

"Melanie?" said someone behind her.

Melanie jumped, "yes?"

The nurse looked at her armpits. "What's that bulge under your shirt?"

"Bulge?" Melanie replied. "Oh. Um, just my deodorant."

The nurse nodded before scribbling on her notepad.

"I don't normally walk around with a can of deodorant stuck up my shirt, it's just that you took me by surprise."

"That's okay," the nurse replied. "You'll have to fill out this form. Have you brought enough clothes for the week?"

"Yes."

"Good. Once you've filled it out, come back to reception and we'll get you sorted with a room and everything."

"Thanks," said Melanie. The nurse left her alone in the waiting room. Melanie looked at the form. There were the usual questions, have you ever suffered from diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and high blood pressure? Melanie ticked no. Have you ever had an operation? No. Have you ever been diagnosed with a mental illness? No and so on until she got to the bottom of the form. There was space for two names and contact numbers

in case of an emergency. Melanie wasn't sure whom to write down. There wasn't anybody in London who was next of kin nor did she want any relatives in Durban to know what was happening. As far as anyone at Dean Court knew she was on an extended babysitting job. By the time she returned to the hostel, the experiment would be over and Melanie would be a thousand pounds richer. But this scenario didn't help her current predicament about whom to write down as a contact number. The person who'd known her longest at Dean Court was Rachel. She made up the second contact number and hoped they'd never need to ring Rachel or the bogus one. Feeling much more confident Melanie returned to the reception desk. The nurse took the form.

"Good," she nodded scanning Melanie's answers. She removed another piece of paper from her clipboard. "You'll have to read this and sign it. Just a legal requirement."

Melanie looked at the paper and gasped. The form absolved the hospital of any responsibility in case of her death or injury.

"Hang on a minute," said Melanie, "I thought these experiments were safe."

"They are," the nurse, replied, "it's a precaution. Some people we get for the experiments aren't honest about their health. They'll swear that they've never had any major illnesses or suffer from any conditions and then we find out later that they've lied. This form protects the hospital from any lawsuits that arise because of unscrupulous people. You're not one of them though are you Melanie?"

"No," Melanie said, "I guess not." She felt guilty now about lying on the form about emergency contact numbers but then that wasn't as dangerous as denying a heart condition or a predilection for epilepsy.

"What about when the experiment is over. Am I covered if something goes wrong?"

"Depends."

Melanie felt the sweat dripping down her arms. Did she really need a thousand pounds that much? Even though it would take her ages to save that amount normally, was the stress worth it? She thought about him, back in Durban, if the bastard suffered then the experiment was worth it.

"Give me the form back," Melanie said, and taking a deep breath signed on the dotted line.

"If you wait here a minute I'll process this form and take you down to your room."

Melanie smiled at the nurse and looked around the reception area. Several of the hospital staff were staring at her and shaking their heads. Did they know something?

"Room 101."

"Huh?"

"I've put you in room 101. Grab your things and come with me."

Melanie was marched down the hallway and taken through a maze of connecting corridors.

"How many experiments are going on at the moment?"

"Just your lot."

They stopped outside a room and the nurse opened the door. Inside the room was a bed, a chest of drawers and a small television.

"I thought the room would be more comfortable."

"It's a standard hospital room. You don't have to share with anyone else."

"That's not what I meant. Someone I know said the rooms were really comfortable with all the latest gear."

"Where did your friend do that experiment?"

"Here," Melanie paused, "I think."

"Your friend was exaggerating."

"Perhaps it was another hospital."

"I don't think any other hospitals conduct experiments."

Melanie was subdued, this wasn't turning out as expected.

"There is a staff cafeteria area if you need company," the nurse said helpfully.

"Thanks, I'm just a bit disappointed. I thought the setup would be different. Don't worry, I'll get over it."

"Look, you're probably feeling nervous so why don't you get comfortable and I'll come back with your first set of pills."

"What am I going to be taking?"

"I can't tell you that. How do we know if you are experiencing any side effects if we tell you what we are looking for."

"Side effects," Melanie gulped.

"Yes, some people have side effects. It happens with any new drug. That's why we have to test them on people," she smiled at Melanie and left her alone.

Melanie turned on the TV but was met with static and a screeching noise and quickly switched it off. The only source of entertainment, it seemed, would be the little radio she'd brought with her. Hopefully the week would go quickly and a thousand pounds would be waiting for her. Of course that didn't compensate for a lifetime of side effects and she was beginning to doubt whether taking revenge on her ex-fiancée was worth adding physical disability to her woes.

The nurse came into the room carrying pills and a glass of water.

“You’ve got to take these now before I give you something to eat. This water will help wash it down.”

Melanie screwed up her face, “I didn’t think it would start so soon.”

The nurse was surprised, “there isn’t any point delaying is there? Might as well get it over and done with.”

Melanie looked at the white pills the nurse was holding. They looked harmless enough on the outside, no different from an aspirin really, but what did they contain on the inside? The nurse held out her hand and Melanie noticed how lined they were for someone so young. It must be the detergent they used in the hospital, industrial strength, lots of chemicals, really strong. Premature ageing....lined skin....age spots....liver damage...she grabbed the pills and stuck them in her mouth.

“Here goes,” Melanie said and took a large swig of water. “How funny your shoes look, so old fashioned,” she said as her knees buckled.

Gill was feeling great. Allan had returned from Newcastle, bringing his team. She’d been waiting a whole month to see Allan and wasn’t wasting any time groping and kissing him. Occasionally he would grunt and she would grab him a beer. On Sunday they’d arranged to go to the Church. They had so much fun, drinking as much beer as they wanted, looking at the strippers, the Newcastle boys vomiting and then drinking more beer. It was the highlight of the week.

The boys from Newcastle took over the lounge room, came back drunk from the pub every night, put the stereo up full blast, hogged the television and left a mess all over the lounge room and kitchen. Gill ignored the overflowing ashtrays, dirty plates, mouldy

food, half drunk cups of tea and coffee and copies of *TNT* torn and scattered throughout the hostel. Instead, she sat blissfully wrapped around Allan day after day, racing to the fridge, grabbing a beer, opening it up and presenting it to him within five seconds. For her efforts, Allan generally lit a cigarette, burped and continued watching the football on television. Gill would reposition herself in his lap until the next time he grunted for either a beer or food.

Allan had organised the bunch of Australian and New Zealand jobs steady work on a construction site in Newcastle. It was because of Allan they got to stay for free at Dean Court and annoy everyone else.

"Maybe Gill's never had a boyfriend before," said Louise, although no fan of the South African it was obvious Gill was going to get dumped as soon as she was no longer useful.

"Sure she has," said Rachel. "She told me about some guy she used to go out with in Cape Town. She's in love. Being in love is an excuse for anything."

"Yuck," said Louise, "why would you want to be in love with that?"

"Maybe it's all she can get."

"Then she's better off with nothing."

"Some people prefer anything, no matter how bad, rather than nothing."

Gill was mesmerised by Allan. In the mornings, during breakfast, she served the boys sausages, baked beans and eggs, scrambled eggs, poached eggs and omelettes and made sure they got served first. She kept everyone out of the lounge room until the Newcastle

boys had eaten and settled down to watch the television. While everyone else ate the boys gleefully burped and farted, putting most people off having breakfast altogether.

"Hey whose camera is this?" said one. When no one replied he grabbed it and promptly took a shot of his penis.

"Hey, stop it, that's mine," said Louise, returning from the kitchen after washing her plate.

"Whoops," he smirked.

"You've wasted all my film," she said

"Film's cheap, get another one" he replied.

"Why should I," Louise fumed, "you're the one who's taken all the pictures. What am I going to do with pictures of your dong?"

"That's if you can see it," sniggered Wayne.

The guy shrugged and remained unapologetic, Louise kept on at him but he didn't relent. Eventually she gave up.

"They're arseholes Louise, don't worry about them," Rachel said. If it was difficult for the rest of the hostel to put up with the guys, it was by far the worse for Rachel. They teased her non-stop.

"Here comes the smell," one scoffed.

"Have a bath," shouted another.

Gill laughed along with Allan and the gang feeling guilty. She liked Rachel but liked Allan and the boys more, even though they left their dirty laundry in the kitchen and refused to wash their dishes or nicked people's food from the fridge.

"My pie's been eaten," Rachel moaned to her one night.

"Leave your name on your food," she shrugged.

"It's a bit hard to leave your name on a vegetarian pie in the oven," Rachel replied tersely.

"Put it somewhere else," said Gill.

"Not under your bed," Louise interjected.

Rachel was angry and wanted to ring Brian and tell him that the Newcastle boys were staying for free and eating all the food. But if she told Brian then Gill would get in trouble and Rachel would get kicked out of room one.

"It's not worth it Rachel," said Louise when they returned to their room.

"He doesn't care about her," Rachel sneered, "he's only using her."

She felt something cold on her face and came too with a gasp. Standing directly above her was a figure shrouded in white.

Melanie got onto her knees and clutched at his robes, "Oh god, forgive me," she said, "but I've slept with a black man!"

His hand rested on her forehead.

"It was over a year ago, I found out my fiancé had been sleeping around. I was devastated; we were going to be married the next week. I'd bought my dress, the cake was ordered the honeymoon arranged and then I found out. He told me after his stag night, confessed about the affairs he'd had. I threw a plate at his head and he had to have stitches. It was at the hospital that I met this black guy, an American. He'd been living in Durban for about a year and worked as a pathologist at the hospital. I got drunk with him one night after visiting my ex-fiancé and then one thing led to another. I didn't think of colour, honestly it was a moment of weakness."

"That's okay Melanie, I'm not here to judge, I'm here to take your temperature."

"You're what?" she said studying him properly.

"I'm Doctor George, I'm going to be monitoring you."

"A doctor! But I thought you were...."

"Who?"

"It doesn't matter."

Doctor George looked thoughtful, "is there anything you wanted to tell me about the American guy?"

Melanie felt her face burning, "I thought I was dead."

"Not yet Melanie. You fainted."

"It's not the drugs is it? I remember taking some drugs."

"It's not the drugs. I think you're anxious about the experiment. Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

"Sure, why not," she replied, having confessed everything, there was nothing to lose.

"You can change your mind. It's only early days and the pills won't have had much effect."

"What kind of experiment is it anyway?" Melanie gulped.

"I can't tell you that Melanie, it would be cheating," Doctor George said patting her shoulder reassuringly. "I will be monitoring you over the next week and if you have any problems don't hesitate to let me know. I'll be checking your blood pressure and heart rate every day and putting you on the scales to weigh you."

"Diet pills."

"Pardon?"

"You've got me on diet pills haven't you? That's why you want to weigh me every day

because I'll be on diet pills right?"

"They're not diet pills."

"I know you're not allowed to tell me what you're doing but I promise you that the secret is safe with me," she gave him a reassuring wink. At least she thought it was a reassuring wink but the doctor looked a little confused. He was cute too.

"Anyway Melanie, good luck."

"Good luck? What do you mean good luck? I thought this was straightforward."

He was out of the room before she'd finished her sentence.

Ten minutes later Melanie was bored. She didn't want to sit in the room and take pills, but wanted someone to talk to. Who were the other people that had signed up for the experiment and where were they all? She checked out the corridor, knocking on several doors but no-one answered. Melanie returned to her room and switched on the television but it still screeched -- though considering the funding cuts to the public hospital system she was lucky to even get static. The only thing left for her to do was to write letters. She searched her bag for writing paper and a pen and paused before starting the first letter. What could she say to her ex-fiancé?

Dear Jess,

If you don't hear from me again it is because I have died in a hospital experiment, I hope you rot in hell you miserable bastard.

Nah, too melodramatic she thought and put, you asshole wanker, instead. What was the point of insulting him? He'd only throw the letter in the bin if she ranted and raved at him.

Dear Jess,

I know that we parted on bad terms and I'm writing to you now to tell you how my life has been since I left Durban eleven months ago. My first stop was Israel where I spent six months working on a kibbutz and met some fabulous people. I learnt to scuba dive in the Red Sea and took a therapeutic dip in the Dead Sea. After leaving Israel, I spent three weeks in Egypt, the Pyramids are a bit disappointing, they look just the same as they do on TV. After that I made my way to London and have been here for three months. I'm staying in a hostel called Dean Court and am working as a secretary at Mills Construction. London is a fantastic city, there is always something to do and places to see. I have met so many great people travelling over here that I can go visit just about every country in the world and have somewhere to stay.

I'm sure you've received the gifts I sent but since I didn't explain what they were, you are probably confused. I know we planned to come to London for our honeymoon but since you never got here I thought you might appreciate bits of it. The small rock was from the Tower of London and I got the rust off London Bridge. At the moment I'm working up the courage to steal a piece of Hadrian's Wall but it's difficult to get rubble because most of it is closed off and it look obvious if I start chipping away at it. I'll do my best though. I really liked Bath and just like you read the Roman Springs are still hot, though you aren't allowed to bath in them.

I hope your new relationship has worked out for you; we were together for such a long time that I'm surprised you would want another commitment so soon. I've read lots of books on relationship break-ups and they all say that it takes half the time again of the original relationship to fully recover. I guess that means I've got another five years to go. Anyway, I'll be coming into some money soon so that I can travel around the States and complete the rest of our honeymoon

journey. I'll send you something from New York when I get there.

All the best,

Mel.

She read over the letter and was happy with it. Not too bitter, just enough to constantly remind him that he wasn't in England. It had been his dream to live and work in London while she'd wanted to stay in Durban, get married and have a family. Now she was living his dream while he lived hers. She started another letter to Jess and dated it for the following week, describing her current and future travel plans. By the time she'd finished there were 15 pages on the desk and her hands were numb from clutching the pen. Melanie shook and rubbed her hands to bring feeling back into them and was still rubbing and wriggling her fingers when the nurse came in.

"Something wrong?" the nurse inquired.

"Should there be?"

"Is your hand experiencing pain?"

"It's the pen," Melanie paused, "at least I thought it was the pen. Nurse, am I getting sore hands because of those pills. Is this a side effect?"

"Not at all. I was only asking if you were all right," the nurse said, taking a step back.

Melanie settled down, it was no use jumping to conclusions every time she felt a few aches and creaks. The nurse handed her a tray with dinner on it. Melanie was hungry and tucked into the pasta bake with relish and dessert of baked custard. The nurse returned with a couple more pills and Melanie swallowed them without fuss. If they were diet pills then she could lose half a stone or two and that would make it a

productive week.

The rest of the evening was spent reading magazines and walking around the corridors looking for someone to talk too but all the nurses were busy. By mid morning the following day, Melanie was excruciatingly bored. She'd written to everyone she knew and was constantly hungry. Every meal was wolfed down and the snack bar became a regular stop with chips, chocolates and drinks between meals.

To break up the monotony a nurse or Doctor George would make a brief appearance to her weigh and take her blood pressure.

"Doctor George, Is everything going right?" she asked, watching him scrawl observational notes onto his clipboard catching a glimpse of his writing before he clutched it to his chest. All she saw was 'patient stable' and some ticks. Doctor George's stethoscope hung neatly around his neck and settled in his chest.

"Melanie,"

She didn't answer, distracted by her fantasies of Doctor George and his stethoscope.

"Melanie?"

"Yes doctor."

"Is everything Okay?"

"Everything is fine. Shouldn't it be?"

"Of course."

"Except, I really don't know how to have any fun."

"Fun?"

"I thought I would meet people here who were doing the experiment but I can't find

them. Can you socialise with your patients?" she said hopefully.

"No."

"What about in the hospital, is there an area where there are people to talk to?"

"There's a café in the hospital."

"I've been to the café, but when I tried to talk to someone they looked at me as though I was strange."

"What did you say?"

"I said I was in here as part of an experiment and that I was sure I was on diet pills."

"Perhaps the person you spoke to didn't realise we have experiments here. They probably thought you were a patient from one of the secure wards."

"Oh," Melanie clasped her hand to her mouth, "I really didn't think of that Drr George.

Is this whole experiment a secret?"

"No, but not everyone who comes to the hospital would know about it."

"Maybe they thought I was crazy, particularly when I said that coffee in the café tasted like cat's piss."

"I've never noticed that."

"It's not my taste buds is it?"

"Your taste buds?"

"The pills. Are they doing something to my taste buds?"

He gave her a noncommittal shrug and disappeared.

Gill was depressed. The Newcastle boys were leaving and she would be parted from Allan for another month. He was standing outside the office waiting impatiently for her to fix up his account. She'd not put his name in the books of course, or the rest of the

Newcastle boys, but couldn't hide from Brian the amount of food they'd eaten for breakfast. She had to charge Allan something so that the boss didn't get suspicious. They had a big argument about it the night before, which had tarnished his stay but Gill had stood her ground and handed him a bill.

"Fifty pounds," he exclaimed.

"Yes, it's a bargain for a week's worth of breakfast and free board for your lot."

"We could've stayed somewhere else much cheaper."

"I doubt it. If I'd charged you the full amount it comes to three hundred and forty three pounds. I think only having to pay fifty pounds is more than reasonable."

"Right!" he snorted and slowly forked out the money. She wrapped her arms around him not wanting to let him go. He struggled to free himself and gave her arm a squeeze.

"I'll come see you off at the station," she offered.

He grunted and turned away. Gill stayed to lock the office door before scurrying downstairs but the lounge room was empty. Allan and his team had gone without saying thank you or goodbye. Gill rushed up onto the street and saw them heading towards the Queensway. Tears dripped onto her jumper. She let them fall down without wiping her face, upset he'd been so rude about the money, especially after having done him a favour. She wallowed in her misery and jumped when someone brushed past and was about to abuse the carelessness of the stranger but froze. The person who'd knocked her was the Pakistani backpacker.

Gill ran down the back stairs of the hostel, slamming the kitchen door shut and stumbled into the lounge room. She peered out the barred window and saw his feet at the top of the stairs.

"Paul," she shrieked.

Paul put down his book, "What is it?"

"Go outside and tell that guy to go away."

"Why?"

"Because he's trying to get in."

"Who's trying to get in?"

"That Pakistani man. I've seen him before when I turned him away. He's following me."

"What difference will it make if I tell him to go away?"

"You're a policeman aren't you?"

"I'm not in the habit of telling people to go away when I'm not in uniform. Besides I don't work in the police over here, I'm having a holiday."

"Whatever, but please, just tell him there aren't any more beds available."

Paul stood up and walked to the door. He looked up the stairs and shouted, "There aren't any more beds available."

He walked back to the couch and resumed reading his book.

"Well."

"Well what?"

"What did he do?"

"He went away."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

"Then go back out again."

"What did you say he looks like?"

"A Pakistani backpacker."

"I couldn't see anyone at the top of the stairs let alone a Pakistani backpacker."

"Then why did you yell out to go away?"

"Because you told me too."

"He was there Paul."

"Sure."

"I seem to be the only person who sees him."

Paul continued to read his book. Her hands were trembling, what with the upset of Allan leaving and then the mysterious backpacker she was beginning to lose her grip. Footsteps were coming slowly down the stairs. Paul glanced up from his book.

"What are you doing now?"

"He's coming down."

Gill cowered behind a chair as the slow, deliberate footsteps came to a stop behind her.

"Paul," she shrieked.

There was no reply, only heavy breathing and the smell of alcohol.

"Paul," she shrieked again. The man was standing behind her, so close his breath reeked.

"Are you trying to hide from me?" he said.

"No," she replied, too scared to turn around.

"You can't get away as easy as that you know."

"I'm not trying to get away. I told you there are no empty beds."

"I don't need a bed, I can sleep on the couch."

There was a loud burp.

"Excuse me," said the voice.

Gill glanced around to see Steve flicking the hair out of his eyes. He was wobbling back

and forth and his legs looked unsteady.

“Steve, what the hell are you doing? Did you see anyone by the stairs before you came in?”

“Sure.”

“Who was it?”

“The Easter Bunny,” he laughed before collapsing on top of her.

Paul headed up to his room. He knew it was Steve coming down the stairs. He could always tell when it was Steve. His shoes set him apart from anyone else. He wore shiny shoes. And it was the shoes that Paul always noticed through the window. It surprised Paul that a man like Steve, who always looked crumpled and sweaty, managed to have such shiny and immaculate shoes.

Paul hated those shoes. He hated the man who wore those shoes. One day he was going to take the shoes and do to them what he'd done to Steve's previous footwear. He planned for the day when those shoes would be helpless, on their own, vulnerable. When that day came Paul was going to take the shoes to the Thames and throw them in. He would watch those shoes sink and imagine it was Steve. He would watch Steve sink into the cloudy, silty river gurgling and thrashing about until he went further down into the depths. He chuckled at the thought of someone stumbling upon a bloated, pickled Australian wearing a pair of shiny black shoes.

By the end of the fourth full day Melanie tasted anything she could get her hands on.

The chocolate tasted liked chocolate, the chips like chips and the coffee like piss. In bed that night she felt bloated and constipated. The constipation gave her stomach pains and she couldn't sleep because of the lack of exercise. Melanie was bored, really bored and thought she'd go mad without anyone to talk too.

"You know," she explained to the nurse at breakfast on the fifth day, "I don't think these diet pills are working. When Dr George weighed me yesterday I'd put on five pounds."

"Diet pills? I'm not sure what you're talking about."

Melanie noticed that the nursing staff looked flustered after they'd spent some time with her. She wondered if it was her accent that they had trouble with or her personality in general.

"These pills I've been taking, I thought they were diet pills or maybe they were meant to neutralise my taste buds. Everything tastes different since I started the experiment but I don't know because nobody is allowed to tell me."

"We don't know what you're given any more than you do."

"Oh my god," Melanie clasped her hands over her mouth. "So that's true is it? I thought all this time that it was something you said, you know, to keep up a front so that you knew what to look for if I became sick. Surely Dr George must know what I've been on."

The realisation that she had been pumped up with unknown chemicals that were most likely unrelated to dieting horrified her. The nurse handed her the pills and without waiting to see if Melanie swallowed them, hastened out of the room.

Melanie studied the pills in her hand. She needed to get them analysed. After all, it was her body that was being drugged and no one knew or was prepared to tell her what she

was swallowing three times a day. Melanie had been gorging herself on food assuming the pills would increase her metabolism and make her lose weight. As if anyone could invent a pill that would make people lose weight!

Melanie rushed to the bathroom and peered at herself in the mirror. She was looking puffy and her face was breaking out in blotches, her stomach bloated enough to look pregnant.

"I can't look like this," she said to her reflection. "Imagine if I went back to South Africa and Jess saw me. He'd never regret us splitting up. Oh no, that won't do at all."

These must be the dreaded side effects everyone had warned her about. She broke into a sweat. They were going to keep feeding her until she became a blob. The only escape was to quit the experiment and get out. The money didn't matter any more; she could earn the same amount by working as a secretary during the day and a pub at night and save a thousand pounds in about ten weeks. That meant she could still go to the States without looking like a piece of puff pastry. But what if she was stuck with a puffy, pale complexion, a bloated body and a life of laxatives. And another thing, it was odd that she hadn't met any other people in the five days. She got a prickling feeling crawling up her spine. Something wasn't right, it had never been right. Where were all the people?

Melanie found her way back to the reception desk. It seemed like ages ago now that she'd filled out those forms and had been oblivious as to her fate. Suddenly Doctor George cornered her.

"Melanie, wait up. I was coming down to weigh you."

"Don't bother," she said "I'm not going to be a guinea pig anymore. You should be

ashamed of yourself, leaving people with permanent disabilities.”

“What are you talking about?” he looked concerned.

“I’m talking about whatever you’ve got in those pills. I’m not taking them anymore. I don’t care about your experiments, try them on some other sucker.”

Doctor George shook his head, “Melanie, I think you’re over-reacting.”

“Over reacting, you’re not the one pumped full of chemicals every day that make you look like a chocolate éclair. Oh no, you’re fine. What about all the other people who were with me? Hah. What has happened to all of them? Yeah, it’s fine for you all right, you just tick things down on that chart and peer up orifices with your stethoscope.”

“My stethoscope! What has that got to do with anything?”

Melanie blushed, she really didn’t want him to know her fantasies about the stethoscope.

“Melanie, do you know what a sugar crystal does?”

“No.”

“Absolutely nothing.”

“So.”

“What I’m saying is that you were taking sugar pills, nothing more. It was a test on placebos. We do them from time to time. You were the only person undertaking the tests.”

“What?”

“It’s more of a psychological test than a physical one. Surely you must have thought the pills were sweet. I thought the taste of them was going to give it away.”

“Not really. I thought my taste buds were damaged. Anyway, I was eating so much chocolate they didn’t taste sweet at all. That doesn’t explain the side effects, I mean look

at me.”

“Melanie, you’ve been putting on weight because you’ve been eating fatty food. You’re bloated because you’re constipated and your skin looks blotchy because you’ve been in the hospital for several days and you’ve been eating too much sugar and starch.”

“Is there anything else?”

“And you really have to get past that hang-up you’ve got about the black guy!”

“I guess I look pretty stupid then.”

“I guess you also missed out on a thousand pounds.”

“You wouldn’t consider giving me 500 would you?”

Dr George laughed, wished her a happy life and walked away. Melanie felt glum. She’d put on weight, abused the medical staff and lost out on the money. At least her ex would never know.

Eight

The Lettuce and Slug

“Well. I guess that’s it,” says Wayne, placing the pencil and paper back down, “Louise and I are still winning.”

Wayne had agreed to play another game of Pictionary as long as he partnered Louise. Chris paired with Melanie and Rachel with Paul.

“Can I play?” Steve asked, limping towards them.

“What’s wrong with your leg?” asked Louise.

“New shoes,” he grimaced, “that’s the second pair of shoes I’ve had to buy in a week. Some bastard keeps nicking them.”

“Who’d want your shoes?” said Louise.

“I don’t know,” he replied tersely, “can I play?”

“You can watch,” Paul said.

Steve drew a chair across to their table and sat down meekly.

“If you don’t guess then we’re not going to play,” Chris was looking at Louise impatiently.

“Sorry,” she replied.

“He’s awful,” Rachel whispered to Louise.

“Who.”

“Him,” Rachel pointed to Steve.

Paul was doing a drawing for Rachel but she was having trouble guessing what it was.

She glanced anxiously at the egg timer.

"It looks like some kind of animal," she said.

"It's a sheep," Steve offered.

"It's got four legs and a small tail, I think."

"It's a New Zealand sheep. There's a lot of them in New Zealand aren't there Paul?"

"Shut up," said Paul, giving Steve a murderous look.

"I mean it's practically full of sheep and hardly any people."

"I said shut up."

"In fact, considering what the women look like I think the sheep are a good option, don't you Paul."

"Why you stupid bastard," Paul stood up, his face flushed.

Steve visibly paled, scuttling off out the kitchen door.

"Arsehole," said Paul.

"It's a horse," Rachel said triumphantly.

Melanie marked the scores, "Wayne and Louise are in the lead and it's our turn Chris."

"What are we going to do after the game?" Louise asked.

"Unch Unch," Wayne pretended to punch her in the face.

"Why don't we go to the Lettuce and Slug?" said Rachel.

"Which one?"

"Lettuce and Slug."

"I don't know that one," said Louise.

"It's in Notting Hill."

“Hey, can I come too?” said Steve returning with a cup of coffee, “when are you going?”

“In about 15 minutes.”

“Give me half an hour,” he said.

Paul looked at him dubiously. “We’ll give you 10 minutes.”

Steve looked glumly at Paul then peered cautiously at his coffee before returning to the kitchen and pouring it down the drain.

Steve didn’t return after 20 minutes and they didn’t want to wait any longer.

“Let’s go then,” said Wayne.

The Lettuce and Slug was crowded, with music booming out onto the street. At least, Louise noted with relief, it wasn’t Cold Chisel. The bar was set on the first floor of the pub with lots of smaller rooms leading off and there was an area for dancing.

“Let’s head upstairs,” Melanie shouted through the boom of the music.

They made their way upstairs but Wayne and Chris didn’t follow.

“Probably busy chatting up some girls,” shrugged Melanie.

“Where do you think the toilet is?” Louise asked.

“I think we passed it on the way in,” Melanie answered.

“I’ll see you in a minute.”

Louise walked through the crowds and finally found the toilet. There was a queue and she stood at the end of the line but after five minutes the queue barely moved. She’d worked in plenty of bars, there had to be a staff toilet nearby. She found one near the bar and crept into the staff room. There were noises coming from one of the toilets but it wasn’t the sound of someone in pain. The couple were oblivious to her own noises

going to the toilet, she'd been bursting and couldn't shut the door. Relieved, Louise headed out but as she neared the door the moaning stopped.

"That was sweet," said one.

"Real sweet," replied the other.

"Find the toilet?" Rachel asked when Louise returned.

"Yeah."

"Where is it?"

"Err."

"You said you found it didn't you?"

"Yes."

"I need to go can you tell me where it is?"

"It's just through the hallway. There's a queue."

"Maybe there's another one."

"No," Louise screeched.

Melanie, Paul and Rachel stared at her, "I mean, I went looking for another toilet but there wasn't one and I had to wait in the queue again so it took twice as long so that by the time I went I was busting. Funny about that isn't it, how long queues are for toilets. It's a shame everyone has to go at the same time." Louise was babbling but the last thing she wanted was for anyone to stumble upon Wayne and Chris, particularly since they'd been keeping the relationship a secret.

"Have you been taking something?" Rachel said, peering intently into Louise's eyes.

"No."

"If you had I wouldn't mind some," said Melanie.

"Honestly I haven't."

"You look kind of flustered," Rachel said.

"I haven't taken anything, all right."

"I still think you look weird," Rachel persisted.

"Did you know that outside of San Francisco, Sydney has the biggest gay population in the world?"

"What?" said Melanie.

"Who cares," Rachel yawned.

"Hey there's Sharon," Melanie waved enthusiastically to a woman in the crowd, "I met her in Israel, we worked on a kibbutz together. You really should go to Israel, you'd love it Louise, and there are so many travellers and lots to do. I want to talk to Sharon, I'll see you in a bit."

Rachel decided to look for a toilet and Paul went to the bar. Louise was beginning to relax when a voice boomed in her ear, "Hey stranger."

She turned around warily, "My god, Daniel. What are you doing here? I thought you'd have gone back to Washington by now. "

He was grinning at her, his beanie sitting lopsided on his head.

"No way. I said I was going to last in London more than two weeks despite what my ex said."

"Your ex? I thought she wasn't an ex, that you'd made that up to get other girls."

"I told you that," Daniel said looking shocked.

"Yeah, that day we were in the pub."

"Man, I must have been feeling depressed or something that day. I usually tell everyone she's my ex but you're right, she's still my girlfriend."

"Still at the Crown?"

"Yeah, for another week. I'm going back to Washington."

"I thought you just said you were staying."

"I miss my girlfriend," he looked at her sheepishly. "Hey you got a cigarette?"

She passed him a Dunhill Red.

"You on your own?" he looked at her expectantly.

"No, Melanie's just over there and Rachel's gone downstairs."

"Melanie and Rachel?" Daniel scratched his head then moved off in the opposite direction.

"Unch, unch," and a fist appeared near her head.

"Hey Wayne," she said pushing his fist away.

"Up for a dance?"

"Nah, I'm sitting here for a while. I still don't feel well."

"Shame," said Wayne.

Wayne gave a little kick and a twirl then sat down next to her. "You know Lou, if a girl wants to be with me she has to take it up the arse. Do you know what I'm saying?"

"Huh?"

"A woman, if she wants to stay with me she has to take it up the arse," Wayne repeated looking into the distance.

"Sure Wayne, up the arse."

"You interested?"

"Not right now thanks."

"Okay. But don't say I never gave you the chance."

"No Wayne, I'll never say that."

Rachel returned from the toilet and Wayne took aim at her, "Unch, Unch," he pretended to make contact with her face before disappearing back onto the dance floor. Rachel rolled her eyes at Louise and then sat down.

"Paul loves you," Rachel confided.

"No way," Louise said.

"You're the only girl he's ever taken out for a walk."

"He was just being friendly," Louise shrugged

"Friendly! It's more than being friendly when you spend the whole day with someone you don't know."

"I couldn't go out with Paul, he's not my type."

"That's what he says."

"What."

"He says he's not your type."

"How would he know?"

"He says you like girls."

"What?"

"I don't understand that Louise, how come you told him but you've never said anything to me."

"What are you talking about?"

"How long have you been gay?"

"I never said I was gay."

"Yes you did. He told me you were a lesbian after that day you went for the long walk. You told him that you came to England because of a girl."

"Yeah. But I didn't mean I was going out with her."

"Then who was she?"

"A friend."

"What kind of friend."

"A platonic friend."

"What's her name?"

"Nadine."

"Where is she now?"

"The Greek Islands."

"So why does Paul think you came over here for a girl?"

"Because I told him that the reason I came over was to meet up with a girl. I didn't say I was seeing her."

"Then how did he get it mixed up?"

"All I said was that she was my best friend. She came over before me, her step dad's English and he offered to give her work in his theatre company. She came over here last year and started working for him and then came back to visit everyone in Melbourne back in February. That was when she said I should come over here and join her. She said we could share a flat together, that her dad would get me a job in his company with her. That's when I bought my ticket, I had it for 10 months before I came over. Then three weeks before I get here she sends a letter. She's changed her plans, won't be in London after all because she's going to the Greek Islands. Can you believe it? Here was my best friend, who'd done everything she could to get me to come over, leaves me at the last minute to run off with some new friends to go to the Greek Islands. I couldn't believe it, after all the planning and waiting for 10 months. I was going to cancel the whole thing but I'd already told everyone I was coming and I couldn't back down. That's how I

ended up at Dean Court and why I didn't have much money, I thought I'd have a flat and a job to come to. That's all I meant when I told Paul I came over because of a girl. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for Nadine."

"Geez," Rachel said, "what a rotten thing for a friend to do."

"Yeah, tell me about it. I haven't heard from her, even though she promised she'd send me some names and addresses of people I could stay with in London. Of course, the list never arrived nor did she ever tell me what Greek Island she was going to. Probably knew I'd kill her if I found her."

"That's how you found Dean Court."

"I had nowhere else to go."

"And your friend. What will you do if you see her again?"

"I don't know. I hope I don't see her again."

"Hmm," Rachel mused on the story before coming to a decision, "you should tell Paul then."

"Tell him the whole story?"

"He doesn't realise you're straight."

"So?"

"I think it would cheer him up."

"I don't need to tell him anything, he can think what he likes," Louise said.

"That's true, if he thinks you're straight he'll be after you."

They sat glumly for a few minutes, Louise remembering her anger at Nadine and the fate that brought her to Dean Court while Rachel wondered why life never turned out the way it was planned.

"You want to come to the cigarette machine? I've run out."

"All right," Rachel replied, as eager as Louise to think about something else. "They did a survey once and found English people are the most depressed in the world."

"Why's that?"

"The weather."

"Not surprised," Louise grumbled. A group of guys were standing around drinking by the machine, offering to buy the girls a drink. "No thanks," Louise said and turned her back on them.

"You don't know what you're missing," one of them said.

"I think I do," Louise replied.

"You sure you're not a lesbian?" Rachel asked.

"Yeah. Why?"

"Just that you don't have much interest in guys."

"I don't have any interest in guys like that," Louise replied as the men remained leering at her.

"That's a point," Rachel admitted glumly.

"What about you, why did you come to London?"

"My dad was born here, I've got patriality. Besides I don't want to go back to Perth. I didn't finish my degree, my dad was disappointed in me."

"Don't you get along with him?"

"He was pretty strict, hey."

"Are you going to stay over here forever so you don't see your dad?"

"I don't know," Rachel shrugged, "I like it here and I don't have a reason to go back. Perth's boring."

"I miss home still," Louise sighed, "I'm not sure how long I want to stay in London. I

figure I'll need to be here around a year to feel like I gave it a go."

"You should do some travel round Europe, you'd love it."

"Where would I go?"

"You should go to Amsterdam, it's great fun over there."

"Amsterdam?"

"It's amazing, you can buy drugs legally and you can check out the prostitutes in the windows there."

"What do you mean in the windows?"

"They sit in shop fronts, you know, advertising themselves. It's amazing. You really should go there."

Louise thought about it. Holland sounded great except she didn't want to go alone.

"Why don't you come with me," she asked Rachel.

"Can't," Rachel replied. "I haven't got the money. Put a notice up at Dean Court. There are always people wanting to go to Amsterdam."

"Sounds great," said Louise, excited by the thought of travelling to Europe with a mysterious companion.

Nine

Amsterdam

"I'll come," Steve offered.

"What?"

"I said I'll come," he handed Louise a screwed up piece of paper. It was the notice she'd put on the board earlier in the week seeking a travelling companion for Amsterdam.

Louise hesitated. Did she really want to get stuck with Steve for five days?

"You been to Amsterdam before?" she said when they climbed aboard the train to Harwich several days later.

"No," he replied, 'but my brother's coming over in a month and it's somewhere he's always wanted to go so I'll check it out before he gets here."

When they got to Harwich they queued up for the boat. They were allocated seats and once on board they headed for the bar. Steve stopped at the Duty Free shop.

"You know it would be cheaper to buy a bottle of Baileys and a bottle of Cointreau and make our own cocktails."

"We'll have orgasms," said Louise.

"You might." Steve replied dubiously.

"No, stupid, I mean the cocktail called an Orgasm, it's got Bailey's and Cointreau."

"Yeah, I know."

They bought the bottles and headed for the bar to get glasses. They found the bar in the ship's disco and searched around for a table but they were all taken.

"I hope you don't mind if we drink here," Steve asked a man seated at a table on his

own and reading a book. He looked up briefly, "Not at all," he replied and kept reading. The disco hadn't started and they got two glasses, filling them up, half with Cointreau and half with Bailey's.

"Pity we don't have any ice, it's much nicer with ice," said Louise.

"Fussy," said Steve.

"I'm not fussy. If we have ice we won't drink them as fast."

"You're not going to get drunk on them anyway. Nobody gets drunk on Bailey's and Cointreau," he snorted.

Louise sipped her drink, enjoying how the thick creamy Bailey's perfectly complemented the orange tang of Cointreau. She'd made lots of these drinks when she worked in the cocktail bar back home; she'd drunk a lot of them too.

"Where do you want to stay when we get to Amsterdam?" she said.

"Anywhere," Steve looked distracted.

"I meant what part?"

"The cheapest."

Steve was onto his second orgasm and Louise gulped hers down as well. When the disco started an hour later they were tipsy. Steve got up to go to the toilet and the man, still reading his book at the table, looked up.

"Your boyfriend sounds drunk," he commented.

"He's not my boyfriend," Louise replied quickly. She didn't want anyone to think that someone as repulsive as Steve could possibly be her boyfriend. When Steve returned from the toilet she suggested that they have a dance. They moved onto the small dance floor that was slightly raised above the tables and a bevy of wolf whistles accompanied them.

"I've never heard so many people whistle," Steve said, trying to see who was causing all the fuss. "I think it's you Louise," he added with surprise.

Louise ignored him and started to dance. She had a dance move to show him and beckoned for him to move closer. He approached eagerly and she whacked him across the face. Louise laughed but Steve looked annoyed so she whacked him again.

"Why did you do that," he fumed.

"I think it's funny."

"You dance like a private school girl," he said, storming off the dance floor.

Louise danced on her own for several minutes then decided to check out the boat. She passed shops, cafés and the ship cinema. Eventually she found Steve below deck in their seats at the end of a row of people, sitting upright, trying to sleep.

"Where have you been?" he looked at her accusingly.

"I went for a walk."

"How far can you walk in a boat?"

"It was a slow walk."

"I'll say."

"You were the one that stormed off."

"Excuse me can you put that cigarette out, it really bothers me," an American said to Louise. She was reading a book about Holland and looked uncomfortable in her seat.

"I'm sorry," said Louise, "but this is a smoking section."

The woman glared at her so Louise took another drag before stubbing the cigarette out. The woman didn't thank her. Louise felt tired and started to cough. She shouldn't have had the cigarette. The movement of the boat and all the alcohol made her feel nauseous

but she couldn't be bothered going to the toilet. If she was going to be sick she hoped it went over the American.

"Wake up Steve," Louise said shaking him, "everyone's gone."

Steve woke from mid snore, looking around at the deserted boat.

"I can't believe no one woke us up," he said scrambling for his luggage.

Everyone had gone, except for a few cleaners. Louise and Steve stumbled off the boat, both of them feeling the effects of the orgasms the night before. There was a train waiting to take passengers into Amsterdam and Steve and Louise hurried to find a carriage that wasn't crowded. They tumbled inside a carriage full of cigarette smoke and gagged, deciding to look for another spot. All the carriages were full so they returned to the first one and settled down. People were playing cards at tables. Louise collapsed into a chair as the train moved out of the station. Steve stared at her intently.

"You look like shit," he said.

"So do you."

"That's because I always look like shit, but you, you really do look like shit."

"Thanks."

"Do you think that you will look like shit tomorrow?"

"I don't know."

"At least you're not my girlfriend!"

"Shut up."

When they got to Amsterdam they found the cheapest backpacker hostel was in the red light district. The district wasn't far from the station and they went through narrow

backstreets, washing hanging out in the street, but it was too early to check in so they waited in a cafe next door. Louise watched a Dutch woman behind the counter making coffee and slicing bread, admiring the fluency with which she switched between English and Dutch when talking to customers. Cheeses hung around the café and the smell of coffee beans permeated the air.

“Oh, my head?” Steve groaned, putting on a pair of dark sunglasses and slumping in his chair. “I need something to eat, I’m starving.”

He ordered a cheese sandwich and Louise was hungry too. The kind of hungry you get when it’s 24 hours since the last meal. Though the orgasms would have had plenty of calories and added up to a meal. She wondered how many calories were in Bailey’s and shuddered.

“What’s the matter,” Steve asked.

“How many calories do you think are in a bottle of Bailey’s?”

“I don’t know. Lots, why?”

“No reason,” she replied turning away to watch the Dutch woman slice a piece of cheese into little slivers. She thought that the cheese sandwich she ordered had better be the last meal today to make up for all the calories in the alcohol.

The coffee arrived, the milk on the side in a small container.

Louise poured in a generous amount of milk but Steve declined, looking warily at the milk jug.

“What kind of milk do you think this is?” Louise said, taking a sip of the coffee.

“Cow’s milk,” Steve replied.

“I know it’s cow’s milk but it’s much richer than the stuff in London.”

“Full cream cow’s milk,” he crammed half a sandwich in his mouth.

"Do you think I could buy this stuff in London?"

"Probably," said Steve.

"Probably what?"

"You probably can get it in London."

"Do you think I could take some back with me?"

"It's only milk Louise," she was beginning to get on his nerves. He was tired, hot and sweaty. He wanted a shower and a nap. Besides he was annoyed at her for letting him stomp off the dance floor. He'd sat at the table for over an hour thinking she'd come and apologise to him. He'd finally given up and stumbled down to the bowels of the boat but couldn't find where he was meant to be. He went from room to room looking for his seat number but they all looked the same. Finally he found his ticket with the seat allocation stuffed down the back of his jacket.

When it was 10 o'clock, Louise and Steve stepped from inside the cafe and were surprised to find a queue already formed outside the hostel.

"Hey," said Louise, "where did all these people come from?"

"Don't know," Steve shrugged.

They stood in the queue for twenty minutes before reaching the reception desk and presenting their passports.

"Louise," said the man at the check in, "that's a nice name."

"Thanks," she said, a little embarrassed. Steve rolled his eyes.

"You're a 9," he said lingering over the key before handing it to Louise, "and you're 5," he shoved another key at Steve. "Your room is on the second floor," he gave Louise a smile.

Steve was panting by the time they reached their room.

"I'm never going to fit into one of these showers," he gasped as they peered into one on the second floor. Inside their bedroom were a dozen bunks and their two numbers corresponded to the bunk beds by the window.

"This is great," Louise said, "overlooking the canal."

They chucked their stuff down on the beds and checked out the view.

"Let's go for a ride on a canal boat," said Louise.

"The canal is probably just full of dead animals."

"For Christ sake Steve, we're in Amsterdam, try and have some enthusiasm"

"I want a shower first," Steve replied.

"I thought you said you wouldn't fit."

"Then I'll just have to take two." He grabbed his stuff and darted off. Louise decided to have a shower as well. When she'd finished Steve was in the room unpacking.

"Do you want the top or the bottom bunk?"

"I'll take the bottom."

"That's what I thought," he sighed and climbed up to the top bunk, "I hope you don't expect me to get down from here again today."

"Come on, we've got to go and explore."

"Do you mind if I come with you," said a girl with an American accent. She'd been in the room and they hadn't noticed her. She was a redhead with frizzy hair and loads of freckles.

"Umm, sure," Steve shrugged non-committally.

They headed into the red light district. Louise wanted to check out the prostitutes in the

window, wondering whether Rachel had been exaggerating. Sure enough there were girls sitting on chairs behind glass windows and in doorways. Louise saw a beautiful blonde girl sitting on a stool. The girl looked bored as they went past but when she noticed a man walking behind them she became animated, smiled and spread her legs. The man checked in for a visit.

"This reminds me of window shopping in San Francisco," the American girl said, "except for the prostitutes."

They walked past more and more windows and saw fat girls, slim girls, Asian girls, dark girls and finally middle-aged women. Louise was surprised by the variety on offer but Steve was nonplussed. The American girl looked around in awe. A man standing outside a brothel spotted Louise and leering at her said she could make a lot of money. She ignored him but Steve laughed.

"Don't worry," he said, "just give him a glance at you early in the morning after you've been drinking on a cross channel ferry!"

"Shut up Steve," Louise said, blushing.

"This place really reminds me of San Francisco," said the American girl, "it's got the same sort of vibe to it."

They went out of the Red Light District and into the heart of Amsterdam. They walked across bridges, down canals and kept dodging the bicycles that came at them from a different direction.

"It's hard to get used to them using the other side of the road," Louise said.

"Imagine what it must be like to drive," Steve agreed.

"What? These are on the other side of the road?" the American girl looked amazed. "It

looks like the same side to me.”

“That’s because you use the same side,” Steve said impatiently, “in England and Australia we use the opposite side.”

“That’s kind of dumb to me,” the American said.

Eventually, they felt tired from all the walking and stumbled across the Hard Rock Café.

They sat down at a table outside and studied the menu.

“Are we meant to ask for the special menu?” said the American.

“Which one?” Steve asked.

“You know the one with the dope.”

A waitress came over and asked if they were ready to place an order. They glanced at their menus again but there was no mention of drugs.

“I guess you have to ask for the special menu,” Steve said.

“Could we have the special menu?” the American said.

The waitress promptly produced another menu, which contained exotic names like Moroccan Gold and Peruvian Black.

“Are you going to order any of it?” Louise asked.

“I don’t think so,” the American replied.

“So why did you ask for the menu?” said Steve.

“You know, the cafés in San Francisco are like this,” the American replied.

“They have dope menus too do they?” Steve retorted sarcastically.

“No, just the atmosphere is the same.”

Steve and Louise opted for a coffee while the American ordered an iced chocolate, “But hold the cream,” she said to the waitress, “and I’d like skim milk.”

"So what brings you to Amsterdam?" Louise asked.

"I'm on summer break from college and my parents thought it would be a good idea for me to go travel."

"Are you travelling alone?"

"Until I get to France and then I'm meeting up with a friend. What about you guys, what's Australia like?"

"Dangerous," said Steve.

"Huh?" Louise looked at him.

"You know Louise, all those drop bears are a real killer. I left Oz to get away from them?"

"Drop Bears?" the American looked confused.

"They wait up in the trees and then drop down on you when you least expect them. Some people get such a shock that they have heart attacks and drop dead right where the bear landed on them."

"No way," the American said.

"It's true isn't it Louise?"

"I guess so," she mumbled.

Steve continued on about the drop bears and the kangaroos that delivered newspapers in their pouches and koala bears that were endangered because everyone kept squeezing the caramel out of them, until the American was sitting open mouthed. Louise couldn't believe anyone would be so gullible.

When they finished their drinks they made their way back to the hostel. On the outskirts of the red light district they passed a shop selling hash cookies.

"Oh, I must try some of those," Louise said, darting into the shop and buying four cookies.

"Have you tried these before," she offered one to the American girl, "maybe in San Francisco?"

"Oh, no I don't want one of those, you don't know how much hash is in them," she said, screwing up her nose.

"What about you Steve," Louise offered him a biscuit but he also declined.

"I don't like drugs," he frowned.

"But you drink and smoke, those are drugs too."

"They aren't the same," he sniffed.

"You're a hypocrite, but no matter," Louise shrugged and ate them all. By the time they returned to the hostel Louise felt like her feet were tied down with weights. At the check in she had trouble focusing on the clerk.

"Number 5," said Steve and was handed his key.

"Number 9," slurred Louise.

"Number 2," said the American girl.

Louise lay down on the bed when they got to their room.

"I'm going to have a quick lie down," she murmured.

Steve nodded, getting a book out his bag and retreating to the top bunk. The American went to have a shower.

When it was getting close to dinner, Steve tried to wake Louise. She heard him dimly, asking her to come out for dinner. She said she felt too tired, rolled over and returned to sleep.

"I'll come to dinner with you," said the American.

"Sure," he mumbled, cursing Louise and her cookies. Steve trudged off with the American girl and found a cheap café sandwiched between clubs with live sex shows. A dozen men wearing tight black leather gear walked past them and into the club advertising bondage.

"This is so San Francisco," said the American.

On their return to the hostel Steve repeated his bed number to the clerk who'd checked him in that morning.

"Number 5," he said.

"Number 2," the American added.

"Where is number 9?" queried the clerk.

"She had too many cookies," said Steve.

"Ah," sighed the clerk. "It is always the same. They come here, they take the drugs and then they never leave the room again. Yes," he nodded, "it is always the same."

Steve found Louise still sprawled on top of her bed, fully clothed with her Doc Marten boots on. He thought she might rest better if he could get them off.

"Stop, stop raping me," Louise muttered.

Steve continued to untie her boots.

"I said stop raping me," she said loudly.

The people in the room stared at Steve, everyone had returned for the night and 20 people glared at him.

"It's okay," he said, "I'm her friend. She's had a few too many."

Louise tried to kick him but he managed to get her boots off. He picked up her bag that had been lying on the floor where she'd dropped it earlier.

"Hey, stop stealing my stuff," she said.

"I'm not stealing it I'm locking it away," Steve replied.

"You are not, you're trying to steal it."

"I'm sorry," Steve said, apologising to the people in the room. "She's a little delirious from the hash cookies."

"I am not delirious," Louise retorted, "you're just trying to get my things while I can't move from this bed."

"Louise, you don't have anything I want."

The next morning Steve was silent as they explored more of Amsterdam.

"What's the matter with you?" she said.

"What's the matter with me?" he spluttered. "Only that you passed out and I had to go out with that American girl and listen to her go on about San Francisco all night. Then when I get back I see that you're still on your bed with your boots on and all of your stuff on top of you including your money. So I try and make you more comfortable and you accuse me of raping you. Then when I put your bag away so that its safe you say I'm trying to steal it. Do you know how embarrassing it is having everyone in the room staring at you?"

"I'm sorry," Louise muttered, "but you don't need to be so grumpy."

"Grumpy," said Steve his voice rising. "Did I also forget to mention that you slapped me around on the dance floor and when I realised you weren't going to apologise I'd forgotten where our seats were and I wander around the boat trying to find them until

my feet are so sore I collapse into the ship cinema and have to watch, 'My Stepmother's an Alien?' And then I go looking for you in case you've got lost and stumble upon our seats and have just fallen into a nice sleep when you come waltzing in upsetting everyone with your cigarette. Grumpy, I reckon I've got a damned good reason to be grumpy!"

The weather in Amsterdam was hot and they passed houseboats on the canal. People were sitting around eating chips with mayonnaise.

"Wow. Mayonnaise on chips, I love mayonnaise on chips."

Louise thought she was the only person in the world who put mayonnaise on her chips. Everyone would look at her as though she was crazy before they poured gallons of sweet tomato sauce on theirs. She felt vindicated knowing that people in Holland put mayonnaise on their chips.

"Freak," said Steve.

"Wouldn't it be great to live here," Louise said ignoring his comment.

"You wouldn't be living here," Steve snapped, "only people with money would be living on houseboats, people like you would be stuck in the suburbs."

"Let's go look at a suburb then," Louise said.

"Louise, a suburb in Melbourne is the same as a suburb in Amsterdam."

"Nah, it would have to be different. Come on there's nothing else to do."

"I want to go to the van Gogh museum."

"We can do that on the way back."

"But I want to go now."

"What's it matter? Just go later."

Steve reluctantly followed her as they wandered round to the outskirts of the city until they started seeing row after row of grey and drab buildings.

"Louise, I need to go to the toilet," said Steve.

"Well go then."

"I haven't seen one, lets head back."

"There has to be a toilet out here. Just keep walking."

They wandered around in circles trying to find a toilet.

"Louise," Steve said, his mouth contorted into a look of fury, "I've got diarrhoea and if I don't find a toilet soon I'm going to go all over myself."

"Geez Steve, I'm trying to find a toilet. What do you want me to do, snap my fingers or something?"

"No, I want you to know that I'm going to seriously embarrass myself and that it's all your fault."

"My fault? You agreed to come, why didn't say you had diarrhoea?"

"I can't wait any longer Louise," Steve said through gritted teeth, "and if you hadn't of dragged me out here to look at suburbs that look like any other suburb then I would have been in the van Gogh Museum and I wouldn't have to shit in my pants."

"Look a pub."

Steve ran into the pub and reached the toilet just in time. He looked slightly less pained when he reappeared.

"It's all your fault," he said, "you did it on purpose. You knew there wouldn't be a toilet out here."

"What are you talking about? How on earth did I know what your bowels were doing? You're paranoid."

Steve decided he wouldn't talk to her anymore unless she agreed to go to town and into the van Gogh museum.

"You see," he said, once inside the air-conditioned museum, "this is much more civilized."

The museum had hundreds of van Gogh's art works on display.

"Gosh. He was prolific," Louise commented. She wanted to know more about van Gogh. Her knowledge of him extended to a crazy painter cutting off his ear and a song with a chorus of 'Starry Starry Night' by the guy who sang 'American Pie.'

"Do you know much about van Gogh?" she asked Steve.

"Sure," he replied. "He's my favourite artist."

Their relationship was mended somewhat as Steve spoke at length about van Gogh's tragic life. Louise hadn't realised that Steve had other interests besides computers and being a bastard.

The next day they hired a boat and went for a paddle along the canals. They passed a house that had Anne Frank Museum written on it.

"Did you see that?" said Louise.

"What?"

"Anne Frank's house."

They peered at the house as they paddled along. It was strange to think of the young girl hiding in the attic while the war raged around her. The house was so unobtrusive and ordinary and the canal so peaceful and quiet it was hard to believe that anything terrible could happen.

"Louise," Steve said.

"Yeah."

"There's a boat coming up behind us."

"Yeah," she replied, continuing to paddle.

"It's a big boat Louise."

"Hmm."

"A really big boat," Steve squeaked.

"So."

"If you would turn around and look at the boat you'll see what I mean."

She turned around.

"Oh shit," she said.

The boat was a tourist barge and it was bearing down on them quickly. They paddled furiously to get out of the way.

"Do you know if the barge doesn't hit us, then we'll get caught in the wash and be tipped over," Steve growled, "It was a stupid idea to come canoeing".

"You didn't have to come," she snapped back.

"If I drown it's all your fault," he said.

"You're not going to drown."

They paddled to the side of the canal and the boat sailed past them. They could see the faces of tourists, pressed up against the windows, staring at them. "You're lucky I used to be in the rowing team at Ivanhoe Boys," Steve said.

Louise looked at his flabby frame.

"I was a lot fitter then. All this weight has come on since I stopped rowing."

She still looked dubious.

"It's true," he shrieked at her.

They paddled on in silence, the serenity of the canal having been destroyed.

"You've got a big nose," said Steve.

"Why do you say that?"

"It is."

"No-one has ever said that before."

"Maybe they didn't want to hurt your feelings."

"So why are you saying it?"

"Because I'm a bastard!"

Louise tried to ignore him but found herself touching her nose. When she got back to the hostel she looked at it from all sorts of angles. Why did he say things like that, why did he want people to get annoyed at him, why did he have to spoil things? They spent the rest of the evening in silence, going out for a meal where Louise watched Steve eat chips and steak smothered in tomato sauce.

The next day they caught the train to Rotterdam. It was a bland city and as they walked around Louise kept worrying about her nose. Steve wanted to see a film but she said that since it was the only time she was ever going to be in Rotterdam she wanted to see the city. He grumbled all the way, complaining that the place was a dump. She ignored him, too busy trying to catch sight of her nose in shop front windows. They reboarded a train in the afternoon to the port where the ferry was leaving to return to England. They arrived a couple of hours early and decided to wander around the port, checking out the shops. Louise remembered to buy some Dutch milk to take back to London. They continued walking until they stumbled upon a park.

"I guess we should write some postcards," she said.

They had just sat down when it began to rain.

"It will be your fault," said Steve, "if I get hit by lightning."

"Why would it be my fault?"

"Because it was your idea to come to the park."

"I didn't know it was going to rain."

"You should have known."

"Like I should have known about your diarrhoea?"

"Yeah!"

"And the passenger barge in the canal."

"Exactly."

She turned her back on Steve and he disappeared into the trees.

She tracked him down when it got close to boarding time. He was sulking about his wet postcards.

"Come on," she said, "or we'll miss the boat."

He reluctantly got up, flicking his hair out of his eyes. They trudged down to the boat in silence. The return trip was subdued, they didn't bother getting any alcohol and they didn't talk to each other. They sat at the back of the disco and listened to Kylie Minogue blaring out over the sound system. Soon enough the boat hit rough weather but they hadn't booked return seats. Those people without a seat slept in the bar, curled up on chairs or couches or sat on the floor. Louise and Steve lay down on opposite sides of a table. "I feel sick," Steve groaned.

They heard things moving around the deck, chairs began to slide and there was a loud crash of plates. Suddenly there was an ominous rumbling and the sound of something

large hurtling at them at full speed.

"Louise, I think I'm going to die," Steve said as a trolley pelted towards him.

"Ahh," he screamed, "Louise, help."

"Move."

The ship lurched again and the trolley crashed an inch from Steve's head.

"I should sue someone," he said. "How can a trolley get loose like that? You didn't have anything to do with it did you?" he glared.

"Don't be stupid. That trolley could have rolled anywhere, you just happened to be in the way that's all."

He glared at her suspiciously again.

"Try and get some sleep," she suggested.

"Yeah right, and have a trolley kill me in my sleep!"

Who cares? Louise thought and shut her eyes.

When the boat docked at Harwich, Steve and Louise remained silent. They waited in the queue that crawled slowly through Customs. Steve turned blearily to Louise, "I'm going through the English passport checkout, it's not going to take so long."

"Okay," Louise nodded.

"I'll take your bag for you if you want," he offered grudgingly.

Louise passed him her bag. When she finally reached the head of the queue she saw one of the custom officers staring intently at her. She realised that all she was carrying was a plastic bag because Steve had her luggage. She looked pretty silly carrying a plastic bag but no hand luggage. She got her passport stamped and as she started to walk away, the Customs man approached her.

"Excuse me miss can I have a word with you?"

"Sure," she said.

He took her aside.

"What were you doing in Amsterdam?"

"Having a holiday."

"Without a change of clothes?"

"I've got clothes but my friend has an English passport and he wanted to get through the queue quicker and he offered to take my bag so I wouldn't have to carry it."

"Where is your friend now?"

"He should be around here somewhere," Louise desperately scanned the crowd hoping to see Steve but he wasn't there. She worried about the hash cookies, how long did they take to leave the system?

"Where are you working?"

"I'm taking up a full time job at a magazine called *TNT*."

"I know *TNT*," he said, "where are you staying in the U.K.?"

"I'm in a hostel in Bayswater."

"A hostel? What's it called?"

"Dean Court."

He pondered her answer for a while before coming to a response, "Okay, you're free to go."

Steve was waiting for her just outside the door.

"Where have you been?" he said.

"I got stuck in Customs because you had my bag."

"I thought I was doing you a favour."

"I'll carry my bag next time. Anyway, why didn't you come through you could have saved me a lot of trouble."

"I had to get some cigarettes," he smirked.

The English weather was gloomy and the train back to London was cold. When they arrived at Dean Court they went down the backstairs but the door into the kitchen was locked. They went back to the street and stood on the front doorstep. Louise searched through her bags looking for the door key before she remembered leaving it with Rachel.

"Don't you have a key?" she asked Steve.

"I lost it," he shrugged.

They rang the doorbell and waited for ages before Gill came to the door.

"You can't have room one," Gill said glaring at Louise.

"Huh?"

"I said you have to leave room one."

"Why?"

"I can't keep the same room for everyone who goes on holiday," she said.

"It was only for five days," Louise replied tartly, annoyed at losing her bed in such a short time.

"There are lots of other rooms."

"Are there any spare rooms in the New Kent?"

Gill looked surprised, "That's not my responsibility. The manageress is Annie, you'll have to talk to her."

"But we're right next door."

"She keeps her own books, nothing to do with me. Anyway, I didn't say you couldn't

stay here I said that all the beds in room one are gone.”

Steve went inside Dean Court. Louise remained on the doorstep. She remembered standing here before, Gill glaring at her from the doorway. Nothing much had changed, except she wasn't the same timid traveller anymore. She felt confident about living in London now and wanted to experience it like the English did, to live like them in a house or a flat somewhere.

“So are you coming inside or not?” Gill said.

Louise looked at Gill for a long time, making the manageress shift uncomfortably around on her feet.

“Yes,” Louise replied, “I'll come inside for as long as it takes to pack but then I'm off.”

Gill looked surprised, “Where are you going?”

“I'll let you know,” Louise said, pushing Gill aside as she went through the door.