

SISI AND SONIA

© Nic Penrake

August 2009

Available through amazon.co.uk & amazon.com

CHAPTER

1

Adrift in the waters of post-trauma, my daughters' tendril-like hands sometimes touching me, their voices lapping in my ears, all I can really see in this leisure centre's recreational area is that beautiful, lissom young Thai girl clinging to the side of the pool like a flower, trembling, broken by heavy rain. The blood red of her swimming costume seems to have been branded on my brain. Even though it wasn't my fault that I knocked half her tooth out – it was a stupid accident – I feel pregnant with a sense of responsibility, pained that she's gone already. I also got hurt. Everyone's said I should go to the hospital to have some stitches put in the small gash above my left eyebrow. But I've also been asked to wait for the police just in case the accident was in part my fault. So, for the last twenty minutes, I've been sitting here on this plastic coloured chair amid excited kids and vending machines and smells of chlorine and take out food, gradually beginning to feel like a bag in Lost Property.

"Dad, you're bleeding again!" my daughters are telling me, more alarmed than I am.

The plaster I was given has finally been breached. I look between my feet to see small drops of crimson rain down in slow motion. I take a tissue from my jacket pocket and press it to the trilling wound.

Michaela, 9, and Mia, 6, five minutes ago dancing in circles around me, their arms arcing, their bodies shaking with laughter as they collided with each other in that happy, lazy and gentle way young girls do, now plonk themselves down beside me—clamouring for information about blood and cuts.

"You need to go to hospital, Dad!"

"No, I'll be fine."

The girls sit beside me. Mia hugs me round the waist—only to get a whiff of vomit from the bag between my feet and recoil suddenly – "Ugh, disgusting!"

"What... where?" Michaela asks, forensically interested.

"I think it's coming from the bag," I tell her.

"*Disgusting*," Mia repeats, waving her hands at the stink. "Is that when you were sick by the pool?"

I wish she wouldn't shout for everyone else to hear – I've attracted enough disgusted looks from strangers already this morning.

"I think so, yeah. It's mostly on the towel, which is in the bag."

Mia backs away from the bag as though the vomity towel might jump out at her. She's funny, so dramatic always. "Don't worry, I'll put it in the wash as soon as we get home."

"When *are we* going home?" Mia asks with renewed emphasis.

"Soon."

"Why were you sick?" Michaela asks in that dreamy way she has that suggests she processes all information in terms of other images, usually from movies and computer games.

"That man said you were pissed. What does 'pissed' mean, Dad?" Mia asks, ever the little perceptive one.

"Pissed means drunk. I wasn't drunk, I had a concussion, and sometimes a concussion can make you look as if you're drunk."

"What's a concussion?"

"When you bang your head and you're knocked out, or you're nearly knocked out. And sometimes that makes you feel sick..."

The truth is, I did wake with a fairly bad hangover that morning, but I'm not about to admit that to two young girls with flapping tongues—it's hard enough to get their mother to give me the benefit of the doubt when the shit hits the fan and the girls are involved.

I'm about to enlighten them further on the subject of head injuries, when my mobile starts vibrating against my thigh and I motion to the girls *hold that thought*. The caller ID tells me it's my brother and I feel immediately grateful for the timing of his call.

"Myles!" I say with the kind of unimpeachable spiritedness the British can muster so naturally in the midst of a crisis.

"Tony, are you alright?" His instant and deeply felt concern strikes me as eerily prescient, it's as if he'd had a premonition days ago that I might be in some kind of danger.

"Er, no actually, my head's killing me, I—"

"Christ, were you hurt?"

"Yeah, I—yeah I was... how did you know?"

"It' s been all over the news."

"The news?" Suddenly my heart starts galloping all over again. I look about me half expecting to see a gaggle of journalists with cameras arguing with security at the entrance of the leisure centre. But no one' s there, just this steady on/off stream of scruffy looking parents and hyper kids bouncing in and out on their way to changing rooms, reception or pool gallery.

"Yeah, are you OK?"

"No, I' m not, I—I think I got a c-concussion, uh..." I just stammered, I never stammer, this is a little worrying, but I plough on. "—There' s a girl with her tooth knocked out— "

"Concussion?"

"Yeah, cut my head open, smashed my knee... It' s not too bad, but there' s another kid also hurt—he' s been wheeled off to hospital—and I think the people here think it' s all my fault, I don' t know, I' m waiting for the police to get here."

"Shit, why would they think it' s *your* fault?"

"Myles, how did you know I' d been hurt anyway? I didn' t call you, did I? I feel a bit dazed..."

"I just told you, it' s on the news."

"Really?"

"Yes."

His slightly reproachful tone makes me prickle with confusion. My head' s beginning to throb with a fresh surge of anxiety, exhausted adrenals are squirting what little they have left—and, now I realise, I' m shaking. I remove the tissue I' ve been pressing to my cut—a sopping wad of bright red that' s made me a little Japanese flag. Another little red bomb explodes on the floor. I press the tissue back, even though it' s probably lost its absorbency.

"But it wasn' t that big a deal. I mean, I don' t think anyone got seriously hurt—"

"Well, Tony, over 30 people are dead and they expect a lot more. I' d say that' s a pretty big deal."

"Myles, what' re you talking about? No one died."

"Tone, you' ve got a TV at your dental practice, don' t you?"

"Yeah, but I' m not there— "

"Well, a radio or something?"

"Myles, what's up?"

"Find a TV, turn it on. There've been 3 or 4 simultaneous terrorist attacks on the tube and on a bus. Maybe you should be in hospital if you can't remember what happened to you."

"Myles, there were no bombs. I'm at a swimming pool."

Hanging up, I now have an explanation as to why the police are taking so long: they've got more important things to be doing. It's probably a fair guess they'll never materialise.

"*Daaad*, when're we going home?" Mia moans again.

I reach for her hand.

"Right now, sweetheart," and so we just walked out of there. And in spite of all the earlier uproar and panic no one seemed to take the blindest bit of notice.

Most life-changing accidents that befall us fill our mouths with spiky 'ifs, like fish bones we can't spit out quick enough—*If only I hadn't gone on that day, if only I'd stayed at home, if only I hadn't looked into her eyes...* For most of you reading this, July 7 2005 brings back one memory—the London bombings. And for me, yes of course it's that, too. But even as I soaked up the repeated video playback of victims' talking of what they'd experienced, shots of the mutilated bus and street debris—all of it a thickening collage of fear and speculation that overlapped itself into slowly-gestating panic—I was still caught up in the experience of some other random collision of energies that had happened to me around the same time, in the same city.

It's an odd feeling to be involved in a public accident at the same time as a bigger public outrage, somewhere else in the same city. I was secretly excited by the coincidence, inclined to believe it might even 'mean' something, I could have believed I'd tapped into a major vibration of gathering randomness, that the events were trying to tell me something about my own destiny. Yes, I sound overblown perhaps, but those were the emotions that day. And although I was transported from my own immediate preoccupations to a broader canvas of concern, I felt undeserving of a sympathetic ear. And so I withdrew. Ironically, it would be in part the post 7/7 swell of compassion that would sweep me, months later, into my own nightmare of savage violence and loss. But I'm running ahead of myself. I should return to the pool—which gave birth to this story.

I'd been startled awake that morning by a vibration against my thigh. I was lying on my back in my dentist chair like a space traveller. I'd meant to get out of the chair and crash on the sofa in reception, but I'd been too wazzed to make it that far. I'd opened my eyes half expecting to see that I'd fallen asleep on the dodgy drill head. It was my phone, of course. The single buzz told me it was a text message. I lay there a moment longer, gazing at the crowd of happy-go-lucky cartoon characters on the poster pinned to the ceiling above my head and imagined pinning something obscene up there in its place. And just for a second or two I felt bereft of any childish mischief in my life.

A little letter icon and my wife's name, SYLVIA, soon wiped the grin off my face.

I'd argued with her the night before. Over money. I'd not only given her less of it in the last three months, I'd failed to offer up an explanation which could be accounted for in terms of the family's well-being. If I was really going through such a lean period at the practice, perhaps *she* should check my books. If I didn't want a joint account, fine, but she needed a regular monthly allowance—either that, or *I* could start doing the bulk buys at supermarkets.

"So what is this money going on?" she demanded.

I could have asked her the same thing about the money I'd given her. Surely switching to organic hadn't cost *that* much.

"I don't know what you mean? Bills, I imagine. It's not like I'm out boozing every night. Or even every weekend..."

"So what then? – because it's definitely less than you were giving me." She'd planted herself in the middle of the doorway like a reindeer blocking the road, defiant, even a little haughty, daring me to test her with evasive tactics. All the warmth had gone from her Franco Mauritian eyes. Her lips, normally full and sensuous, had shrunk to angry, cherubic knots of ruthless repudiation. With her rich, curly dark hair now like an angry mane, her long, dark eyebrows stood ready like little curled swords drawn from their sheaths. I wasn't going to be allowed to wriggle out of this one—she'd been saving it up.

I threw out some figures, but she chewed them up and spat them out—they simply didn't account for the shortfall. She didn't like being taken for granted, she said, as if for the record. Sylvia wasn't one to carp on about money, even when times had been hard; only when she felt the kids' future might be at stake would she transform herself into some kind of paragon of steely virtue—she was doing it then and I was dangling on the pin of her

stare until I insisted lamely, then more heatedly, when I saw she wasn't about to soften, that I'd already given her some extra cash that month.

"When?" she scoffed.

I stammered, not remembering clearly.

"You see – you don't even remember. The money you think you gave me was months ago – for fixing the car."

"No, it was after that..." I began, honestly amused by this 'false memory' syndrome we both seemed to be suffering from more and more, recently—but of course she assumed I was being supercilious. Which was fair enough, I suppose—but, again, her reaction once again underlined the fact that we were so seldom on the same page.

An ordinary enough squabble, perhaps, familiar to any couple, except, coming through this one, like the scent of a third person in the room, was Sylvia's unspoken fear – a fear that she's always carried around with her like a wound I've never been able to heal – that I was spending my money on another woman. Ironically, although I wished I were, I wasn't in fact seeing anyone else. As the accusation in her eyes bore into me, my blood began to fizz with this heady cocktail of latent guilt and bristling indifference. It's true, both of us had been tired, dehydrated, fractious from drinks we'd had earlier that evening with our separate friends – we were as volatile as sticks of sweating dynamite – but for the first time in a long time I didn't care too much about the consequences.

I grabbed my jacket and rushed out of the house into cool, summer night air, a kind of teenage kick to my stride, as I headed off just anywhere. Not even half way to the next street, I slowed down and seriously considered rushing back to the house to pack a suitcase. Thing is, I wasn't twenty-three anymore, I wasn't even thirty-three. I was forty-three in all but a few weeks, and I was a dad. I could just picture Sylvia rousing the girls as I was heading down the stairs with a case, getting them up to come see their wonderful daddy walking out on them, a picture to remember for all eternity... OK, so I'd walk round the block, walk it down, I told myself. But then I surprised myself by hopping on a bus, the bus I take to get to work. I hopped off near the practice in North West Ealing and strolled into an off-licence a few minutes before closing. I hadn't done this for some time and I had a sort of warm alcohol feeling that a bottle of comforting Cabernet would do me some good and, by turns, perhaps even Sylvia.

With the alarm deactivated, a couple of lights on, I poured myself a glass and propped my feet up on the sofa before the widescreen TV. But after 20 minutes of flicking from

channel to channel, and already queasy from the ejaculate of the reality shows, I settled on the news until I was threatened with trivial stories and golf highlights, whereupon I aimed the remote.

Silence. The faint smell of damp in the air. Sylvia had remarked on it years ago and only now was I really noticing it. Didn't help that I'd gone for a traditional toothpaste ingredient as the theme for my waiting room—the dark minty green of the leather sofa and armchair, the pale creamy mint for the wallpaper, the green tint to the landscape photograph had all lost their refreshing look in less than six months and reminded me of the girls' tropical fish tank when it got covered in algae. I didn't even much like the taste of mint, if I was honest.

I turned my head and glanced at my grey filing cabinet—I'd been uncomfortably aware of its presence as I watched the TV.

I slapped a pile of papers on the reception desk. I drew up the chair and began raking through the accounts, and all the other bumf you have to file. I wasn't sure what I was looking for—presumably, some kind of proof that we were in fact going through a lean period. But now that I was here, alone, not having to worry about losing face, I had to admit that I possibly hadn't given her as much money in the last three or four months because I was apprehensive about what I'd be left with if what was happening led to divorce—I didn't want to be living in squalor when it happened. *I'm turning into a squirrel.* Trying to convince myself that I'll put my few hoardings back on the table again if we could but somehow bridge the gap between us.

If only I'd got a pre-nup.

Sometimes it appalled me that I thought this way, but I'd once been badly fucked over by an alcoholic partner in the early years of setting up my practice—a Lebanese Jew who had so played me for my liberal sympathies, my fear of appearing to be in any way anti-Semitic—and I'd never quite regained my trust in human beings, even the women I'd loved. Still, a two-thousand-a-month allowance wasn't exactly mean for a woman who was now a full-time mature student. Would I ever see any of the money she earned from selling a painting, assuming she ever sold one? We might be divorced by then. *God, all she has to do is fuck my brains out and I'd be easy about money—well, easier.* If only it were that simple. Well it might be, on one level. But her urges aren't made that way, I know that. And I'm drunk. She probably senses I think like this sometimes and tells herself she'll be damned if she's going to stoop to being my whore. "I'm a whore," I told her only a few nights ago, in a

moment of self-disgust, words I already regretted as I uttered them. "I'm a whore because I'm not even in love with my job."

"So change it."

I'd laughed. "And who's going to pay the mortgage if I do that?"

"So let's downsize – but don't give me your self-pity."

Even though I knew she'd already demolished me, I laughed louder.

"Only the week before you'd been asking me to look for a new house! So which is it?!"

But I knew the answer to that: she wanted answers not questions. Sort myself out, then she might listen and plan something together.

"What would do it for you?" I'd say, one of those nights when we'd have gotten into bed frisky enough to do something, but twenty minutes later find ourselves just lying there, side by side, gazing at the inky ceiling, strangely disembodied from our impulses.

I'd hear a gently scoffing laugh and she'd ask, Why did I only ever bring this subject up when we were in bed, when she was already tired?

"You don't seem that tired."

She'd sigh and I'd pursue the subject regardless.

"How about with other couples?"

She'd laugh derisively, denying me the irony in my question. I could have reminded her there was a time when she might at least have had fun with the idea, but this was my problem, wasn't it—*living in the past*.

"Toys?"

"I have enough of those going up my bum by accident, when we sit down to watch tele..."

She didn't like anal sex. If I liked anal sex, why didn't I go to a gay bar?

"I'm not gay."

"You might be. You've got a strong feminine side. You might be better off with them—you'd certainly get more sex than with a woman."

I could never be entirely sure whether she was being purely facetious—there was always this edge of suspicion to her tone. And yet her suspicion wasn't about my sexuality per se—her way of normalising her loss of libido was to mock my own. By making me feel desperate she was hoping to undermine my chances with other women, or—presumably—men.

"Why does it always have to be something that ends in an orgasm for you?"

"Well I always try for us both – you know that."

"No, I mean, why can't you just enjoy tenderness?"

"I can."

She thought about this. "Not really," she said finally.

Five minutes later, exasperated by our inability to find a meeting of minds, I'd said in an almost off-hand way that I supposed this sort of thing happens to most couples – only a lucky few manage to interest each other sexually beyond the seven-year itch.

"So – you just want to give up?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's best."

"Why can't you think of a different way of approaching me? Like, why does it always have to be in bed?"

"Like, when else do we have time for each other? You're always so busy with your studying, or the kids, for us to even think of doing it at any other time!"

"You could watch less TV and then we wouldn't get into bed so late, when I'm already tired."

So I'd gone on a diet of less TV. I'd got a lot of reading done, but still gained no insight into our chilled sexual relations. Ironically, the reading had inspired me to go on a course for amalgam-free dentistry, which in turn took me farther away from Sylvia. By the time I'd completed the course, she was addicted to E-Bay. Missing my treats of CSI and 24 no longer became a meaningful sacrifice. Her E-Bay habit and bingeing on comfort food became the permanent cuckoos in the nest of love. I drank to take the edge off my sexual frustration and, if she'd abstained that same night, my winy breath would be duly noted in bed as a reason, specious or otherwise, why she never really felt like it anymore. Eighteen months of this and we'd become fully dysfunctional. For the past six months we'd taken care not to touch each other in bed without prior intimation that it was sought after. I'd found the cold turkey horrendously painful. Also demeaning. My attempts at rekindling interest became increasingly self-conscious and carried the whiff of desperation. If only I could have been happy cutting my balls off, maybe that sadness I saw in her eyes from time to time would lift.

So there I was in a pool of electric light at the receptionist's desk, on my third glass, wavering between an optimistic outlook and a downright pessimistic one. I saw myself admitting to her that I'd gone down to the practice and checked over the accounts and, well yeah, perhaps I could afford to give her a bit more money after all. With the wine in my

veins, I could picture her breaking into that cheeky, all-forgiving smile I saw so rarely these days. I could see her coming to give me a hug – her sweet little boy who’d finally worked up enough courage to dig out his awkward make-up-and-be-friends speech. ‘Would 250 quid help?’ I’d say, taking out the wad of notes I’d have drawn from the ATM on the way home. She could buy some new boots with that. Would she still be smiling as I offered her the money? Or would the gesture be taken as ‘patronising’? What if I came back and her mood had hardened with time? And we had to continue with the argument to its bitter conclusion… whatever that might be.

I poured a fourth glass hoping to gain clarity as to which scene was the more realistic outcome. I took the reconciliation scene further. And, strangely, it was this scene that unsettled me more than the other one. I could picture myself recoiling from her as she hooked her hands round my neck and told me she was worried about me, I was over-working, it was time we took a holiday. I could see her jumping onto the kneel-chair at my desk and booting up the computer and logging on to lastminute.com before I could sound a tentative note of caution. I could imagine my panic; I saw myself incapable of reminding her of the conflict that had dogged our last holiday together. To have pointed out that we were now even more remote from one another than we were then might have ended it all that very night—and I wasn’t ready for that just yet.

The fact is, you can’t bear the thought of not waking up with the kids every day.

I knocked back the glass and took measure of my settling inertia. On balance, it was probably best just to give her some space.

Coming up for midnight, I was even admitting to the possibility she was right about everything—that I was to blame, I’d been blind to her little hints encouraging me to woo her afresh. If intelligence was defined as the ability to adapt—in this case to a very infrequent sex life, that’s to say 3 times in the last six months—I was a very dumb male. I should have done what she did in her early twenties: gone travelling around the world: waking with scorpions tickling your toes, rats the size of cats scratching at your door; spontaneous sex on E on a Thai beach; living in huts with crocodiles swimming beneath you; being nearly busted for drugs planted on your friend by a dirty Asian cop; having sex with a silent Massai whose penis resembled the spears he carried; waking in the Serengeti Desert to see the silhouettes of lions through your tent covers… I’d still not heard half the stories. These days they tended to pop out in the company of friends over an evening meal. She’d be telling them her story, not quite including me in her narrative, a guilty but tenderly outreaching look in

her eye as she read the left-out expression on my face. She's never said in words that I should have got all of that Wander Lust out of my system long before having kids, but I know she feels it. And she never used to make me *feel* it, until recently. *As if there was anything I could do about it now.*

Or could I?

The bottle empty, I'd gone to the pharmacy cupboard and carelessly tipped out a bunch of sedatives into my open palm. I gazed at them, wondering drunkenly whether I wasn't vaguely suicidal. Then I put all of them back but one and went to lie in the chair. Where I must have nodded off.

'Give me a call please,' read Sylvia's text message.

I'll go for a pee first, thanks.

I washed my hands and splashed some water over my face.

"Hi, it's me."

"And where did *you* go?" There was the hint of laughter and irony in her voice, as though she were fully prepared to find an account of how I'd ended up at a brothel totally hilarious. I hadn't expected that. And was instantly reminded of why I still loved her: for her tremendous capacity to forgive and move on.

"I'm at the practice, um..." I drew breath, rubbing my muzzy head. "I thought I should, um-y' know-check over the accounts... uh- "

"You spent the whole night doing that?" as if my income had nothing to do with what we'd been arguing about.

"No, I-I watched a bit of TV...um-You OK?"

"Yes," as if to a stupid question. "I hope you haven't forgotten."

"Forgotten what?"

"You're taking the girls to the pool today."

"I thought it was Thursday - aren't they meant to be in school?"

This is where men fall down so badly-it's not so much we forget about the arrangements for the rest of the week following a bust up, we can't even imagine *any* kind of future arrangements. Women, on the other hand, can always stay focused on their children's appointments, regardless of their spouse's behaviour.

"No, don't you remember? They have an audition for a TV commercial at 2 this afternoon. You said you'd take them swimming in the morning, because they have the day off and so do you. Why do I -

can't you –"

"It's OK, I-I can do it. Um –"

She sighed down the phone—to blow away any germ of a lame proviso.

"What's wrong with your voice anyway?"

I coughed, trying to clear it.

"I suppose you were out drinking again last night and that's why you can't remember."

"OK, yes, I admit, I did have a few glasses of wine—doing one's VAT is very dull. I had a few to help me get through it."

"I thought your accountant did your VAT."

She was right. What a pathetic lie.

"Well, it's not very bright, is it, checking your accounts when you're drunk? Your maths isn't so good anyway, is it."

I inhaled, exhaled—a very useful practice in stopping yourself from getting further mired in a woman's pique. I expected her to continue, but she'd fallen silent, either lying in wait or on the verge of hanging up in disgust. In the past year I'd grown to read these silences of hers less as pockets of silence as I used to think of them, rather, as soundless ping pong balls that we knocked back to each other in a bid for one long, final pause.

"So are you coming?"

Yes, I was coming. I reminded her I had to be back at the practice around lunchtime to let in the engineer, who was due to come and fix the drill bit that had been playing up.

"Fine. I don't need you for the whole day," she replied pointedly, as if she might run on to point out how useless I was generally at family matters.

It occurred to me that I might still be over the limit and unsafe to drive, but I didn't dare air the possibility. Perhaps a black coffee would make all the difference.

I hung up. *Fuck. We're fresh out.*

I found Sylvia in the kitchen, wiping surfaces down, reasserting her high standards on her environment. Her shoulder-length Afro-Western-Asian hair was tied back in a simple band. The sleeves of her tight-fitting cardigan were hitched up revealing her elegant forearms and accentuating the beauty of her tapered fingers (which she'd inherited from the Hindi line in

her family). Her movements were measured, absorbed in the choreography of her routine. She barely glanced at me as I appeared—I could have returned from the postbox at the end of the road—so I was immediately mindful of how I should approach her.

“Hey,” I said simply.

“You OK?” she inquired with provisional warmth.

I nodded and gave a tentatively hopeful smile. As our eyes met, she paused half way through folding a tea towel and raised her chin a fraction. I detected a hint of forgiveness about the slight but telling smile on her lips and read from the glint of irony in her eyes that she assumed I knew she was sorry for her harsh attack the night before but also had enough sense to see to it that I made up for my meanness of late. I stood there, hovering by the door, suddenly overcome with a desire to kiss her, passionately, but before I could move an inch the girls and their choruses of “Hi Dad, where’ ve you *been*?! Are you taking us, Dad?!!” were pouring into the room.

“Aren’ t you going to shave?” Sylvia asked over the hubbub.

“I don’ t think there’ s time, is there?”

She clucked her tongue, despairing of the lack of care I took over my appearance these days.

“Can’ t you change that awful old fleece top at least? It’ s pathetic.”

As I stood before the bathroom mirror squinting at pink eyes and an impudent zit on my forehead, I heard Sylvia calling from the kitchen that she’ d packed a towel for me along with my trunks. She expected me to join the girls in the water. I knew it was unwise to protest, so I called to her, Had she seen my goggles? “No! Find them yourself!” But she came into our room anyway, determined to prove how useless and childlike I was – and not hearing her, I bumped into her as I turned round. She laughed and playfully slapped me and told me I was such an idiot, never organised etc. and, as I stood aside, letting her do my job for me, I casually reappraised her behind – still in good shape after two kids, I told myself, as if merely reading the electric meter – vaguely wondering whether a beach holiday for two, (kids at Grandma and Grandpa’ s), mightn’ t give our marriage the kind of shot it was badly in need of. “There,” she said, turning round, making a face as she planted my goggles in my hands.

It felt churlish not to kiss her on the cheek on the way out, but I wanted at all cost to avoid her smelling the alcohol on my breath.

"Don't forget to give Mia her armbands if she goes into the deep end!" she called after us as I herded the kids out the door.

"OK," I said, hardly listening.

Turning to see her wave, I was struck by the depth of her devotion to us as a family unit – my compartmentalising ways of the male seemed suddenly so devious and self-serving by comparison. She called a musical, faintly melancholy "Take care!" after us, which lodged in my throat like a prickly seed of sadness for at least a mile down the road.

The girls were all questions and chat about school and movies, their energy pushing us through the traffic, insisting that life goes on with minimal self-reflection.

"Oh, Dad, haven't you seen it yet!" Mia exclaimed.

"Sorry, I've been a bit busy recently. Is that the one with um– "

"You're always so busy, Dad!" they complained beautifully together.

"I know, I know, always busy," I said with a tired, sympathetic cadence that reminded me of how meaningless the word had sounded when I was their age—that's if it didn't seem even more meaningless now.

I always wish I could share in my kids' pleasure upon arriving at a leisure centre, but the fact is I find the whole experience turbulent and overwhelming, as if I'm being force fed with everything that's generic in the world of advertising. Not having eaten a thing that morning, the warm fog of chlorinated air punctuated by the cacophony of echoing voices made me feel instantly queasy as I entered the pool. I was surprised to see so many other children. Did they also have McDonald TV ad auditions to go to that afternoon? My fragile state of mind wasn't helped when the girls emerged from their changing room to fall about laughing the moment they spotted me waiting for them in my trunks.

"What's so funny?"

"You're nearly as thin as Grandpa!" Mia exclaimed as if she'd never seen me out of trousers before. She was growing up, I realised, little by little being infiltrated by social and sexual self-awareness.

Michaela and Mia trotted off like fairies to the diving area on the balls of their feet. They sat down together on a corner of the pool and dipped their legs in. I'd been close to my brother, but these two were even closer. How would they ever bear to be apart? I watched them natter happily for a minute, legs idly kicking in the water, their life stretched before them, so buoyant. I wasn't even sure I could face going in, so I parked myself on a wooden bench within a few feet of them. Michaela turned her head and smiled and waved the

moment she saw me, and then Mia did the same and I waved and smiled back wishing to encourage them to explore on their own for a while.

Michaela then Mia slipped in and began swimming widths. It must have been three or four months since I'd seen them swim and, gratifyingly, they were beginning to find their strokes at last. It hurt to recall Sylvia's recent criticism that I was 'missing out on my daughters' lives'. My friends would readily observe that as far as they could tell I did a lot more with, and for my girls, than most fathers they knew—and that was some source of comfort, but I think I knew what Sylvia meant. She meant that even when I was with them, I was mentally elsewhere for much of the time. If I wasn't preoccupied over the recent ups and downs at the practice, I was asking myself, Did I really want to spend the next twenty years of my working life as a dentist? Or I'd be with them one minute, then dreaming of adventures with other, younger women the next.

When I looked around the pool at other fathers my age or older, I didn't see myself in them. They seemed happier in their softer, sagging flesh and trunks, their baggy jeans and baggy tracksuits. Why did I never get chatting with any of the parents in the playground whenever I went to pick up the girls? The mothers who would have welcomed a chat. Where had this profound unwillingness to involve myself in like parents come from? I wasn't unfriendly, but I was invariably distant—Sylvia had told me some mothers had said I looked 'unapproachable'—which was quite unlike the person I was with my patients. I suspected it had something to do with a subconscious feeling that being a dad was an emasculating experience. Which was bizarre, really, because I don't identify with anything overtly male or macho. Valuing integrity in others, I suppose I've always felt uncomfortable being identified as Mr. Happily Married Family Man, because I was anything but and suspected I was probably incapable of ever being one.

It had been a mistake to try and line my stomach with a few Pringles from the tin Sylvia had slipped in with our things. My mouth felt icky and my head ached. I pulled out a newspaper I'd rolled in with Michaela's towel and chopped it into readable portions as though settling into a thorough good read. As usual I darted listlessly from one article to the next, often starting in the middle or even the end and reading from random points—like a film editor desperate for a fresh, 'alternative' way of telling a familiar narrative—until finally I found the rhythm of it only added to the swell of my nausea. I stuffed the newspaper away and contemplated the pool with the short, sharp shock of a swim in mind.

Mia was bouncing up and down on the second highest diving board—and off she went, the little daredevil. I cherished the warm feeling I got as I watched her, totally absorbed in her moment. Watching these two is the nearest I get these days to ‘feeling in love’ . When I watch them move, I’ m in that same innocent space as you are when you’ re in love. It’ s not something sexual; it’ s something wondrous and light, buoyant with hope.

Mia’ s head bobbed up and she shook the water out of her face calling to her sister, “It’ s great Michaela, you should try it!”

I saw Michaela trot along in her funny fox-like gait to the same diving board. Her coordination skills as a two-year-old were so poor you couldn’ t believe your ears when you’ d heard she’ d come second behind an athletic black girl in the Summer Sports Day race last year. Now she was running straight to the end of the board and doing a little twirl in the air as she spun off, one hand holding her nose. She came up with her eyes closed tight. Mia was already showering her with fresh alacrity about how great it was. She then pushed up and out of the pool and hurried off to go again—with such great fanfare it had boys twice her age coming along to join her.

The sun came out about then, casting a multitude of dazzling scales of golden yellow on the hypnotic, shimmering grid of blue. The echoing voices sloshed around in my head like memory soup and I was content to drift off into nowhere for a minute and a day. When I next turned to see what the kids were up to, my eyes were dotted with yellow blotches from the sun. And as they slowly began to make out clear outlines again, I saw a flash of red and white costume half way up the ladder of the tallest diving board and I recognised Mia by her sheer Laura Croft energy alone. Three seconds later, I realised something was missing, it was something I’ d forgotten—*You forgot to give her the fucking armbands!* I turned and dove into the bag on the bench beside me—fluorescent orange things her mum had specifically reminded me I should give Mia before she went in... My legs scuttling ahead of me toward the boards, I blew air through one of the chlorinated valves, realising I probably should be calling to her already. I got to the lower board and waved, hoping she’ d see me, but her face was busy watching some boys take their running jump.

I glanced in the direction of the umpire-like chair, some 25 feet away on the other side, from which the attendants survey this end of the pool. It was empty. The guy had left his post to fix a water polo goal stationed in the far corner.

“Mia!” I called out.

Sylvia was right, my voice was lower after drink, more resonant and yet I hadn't found the wind to make it cut through the atmosphere of echoing voices and splashes. On the other hand, I was very conscious of not wanting to betray alarm. I wasn't alarmed. I'd go up there and give her the bands, simple.

I got onto the lower diving board and started up the steps. From the first board there was another flight of metal steps leading to the higher board. It was roughly 25 feet above the water, hardly a dangerous height. And yet, as I neared the top, I felt slightly faint and, for a moment, I lost the point of what I was doing there.

Level with the board I saw Mia wasn't alone. There were two boys—ages twelve or thirteen—up there with her. With their hair plastered flat to their skulls and their hairless wet bodies glistening in the light, they looked like amphibious humans. They were taunting each other, then darting innuendo around Mia who'd just stepped back from the edge and turned to beam at them with cinematic confidence. Even in my befuddled state I could tell the boys' mischievous desire to tease this little girl over the edge was being fuelled and undermined by their adolescent fascination in her beauty and courage. My arrival had introduced a new power dynamic, forcing them to back off or up the stakes.

Before I could say anything, Mia pointed at me and laughed and cried, "Daddy, what are you doing up here?!" as if I'd appeared in a clown's costume.

"Sweetheart, it's a little high, OK?"

"Wanna get high mister?" It was the skinny boy with dark hair, a similar skin colour to my lot, almond eyes, who took the first shot—leering at me with a swagger that boys show only when they know you're on their turf now.

I ignored the remark and walked over to Mia.

"It's really high," she said, gesturing expansively before her as though surveying a new kingdom she never knew existed. "Can you die if you fall?"

"Hey... let's put these on, OK?" I started to slip one of the armbands up her slender little arm.

"You're in our way mate."

I turned and realised it was the fat boy talking. His mouth was lardy and unlovable and the sloping hound-dog eyes gave him a congenitally bored look that you learn to associate with sociopaths.

"Give me a second, OK?"

Crouching, I was seized by a nasty cramp in the arch of my left foot. Mia visibly reacted to my grimace as though I'd pulled a nasty face at her. The boys were muttering obscenities behind my back—

"Guys, can you just give me a minute here, OK?" The tone of a mate, reasonable—but even then I was conscious that they might find the familiarity presumptuous—*like, no was I as cool as them brov.*

"You just 'ad a minute," the fat one said.

"Yeah, go on, this board isn't for dads and little girls, y' know," the skinny one joined in, swinging about on one of the support bars. He spoke like adolescents who push themselves to be hard, the type who's come late to the hard game. He had crooked teeth, a fidgety energy.

"I realise that. I came up to take her down."

"*Take her down, boss,*" the fat guy echoed back with a mock New York accent, vacuously conveyed. He started making rap noises that descended into farts and giggling.

"Well get on with it then!" they nagged more or less in chorus.

I turned back to Mia to put on the second armband. She'd fallen quiet, faintly troubled, the full lower lip hanging in a doubtful pout.

The boys started up their rude and impatient demands again but this time with a difference—one of them, I think the fat one, said that this wasn't the place to touch up little girls. I jerked my head round, my face creasing with disgust.

"Hey, will you just get lost. This is my *daughter*, OK?"

"No you get lost—wanker!" ' the fat one bounced back at me—he looked like a pig chomping his words, as if he'd eat me next. "Get off this fucking board or we'll call a guard."

It was years since I'd encountered this kind of unprovoked aggression in anyone—I'd known how to deal with it better when I was his age.

"You're in our way, mate." It was the skinny boy, now delivering a matter-of-fact explanation as if merely to temper the full-on provocation of his friend.

My butterfingers slipped with the valve again as Mia quietly observed that the fat boy had used the 'f' word.

"Oi!" I heard needling my ear. Then snickers. It was hard to judge how serious they were.

Mia's earlier happiness had evaporated under the savage heat of the older boys' jibes and she'd become completely suggestible to heading back down. But then she spotted Michaela, who was waving up at us from the water, diagonally below. Mia waved back, calling out and I lost my grip on the valve of the armband again.

"Sweetheart, stay still a minute, can you— "

As I put my mouth over the nipple of the valve –

"Blow job, blow job!" the boys sounded off, behind me.

In retrospect, I should have realised my butt was out there like some kind of fresh insult to these two boys itching for their jump.

I heard a quick rumble of feet and the next thing I knew a pair of wet hands had landed on my back, with weight, a body flew over my back, but clipped the side of my head so I lurched sideways. As a reflex I grabbed at Mia—or was I still holding her?—and, for a second, I thought we'd steady ourselves, but then Mia toppled, and as I reached out to grab her... I don't know, perhaps we were already falling. Even as I was falling I somehow had time to feel anger first at the boy who'd pushed us—was he the fat one or the thin one?—then joy as I saw the world entirely through his eyes... but I had no fear of being hurt or of anyone else getting hurt. So that was the shock. Hitting someone. Or *something*, you think to yourself, because when you're falling into water anything you hit that isn't water is a thing to begin with. Mia went over with a squeal—but it sounded like fun, if only just. I knew I'd get a nasty smack from the surface because of my awkward trajectory and flailing shape. But then came the crack of something hard against my head, left hand and my right foot. *Don't say you've hit Mia*. In the first few moments of being under the water, I wasn't concerned with pain, I knew that was coming, I was worried I'd seriously hurt someone else. Except the worry kind of froze as I sank further into the water. My body pretended to be a starfish, waiting for the current to lift it onto a rock. Time stood still. My lungs seemed capable of holding out for minutes on end. Instincts had assumed command, the body knew to relax and let the brain rediscover coordination in its own time. Like a trapped bubble set free the thought came to me that I must somehow move to find Mia before something worse happened.

I broke the surface to see one of the attendants diving into the pool fully dressed. He swam out to the skinnier boy who was rolling in the water like a dying fish ten yards away from me. His rescuer scooped him up and safety-swam him to the side of the pool. I saw Mia had made it to the other side, a little shocked by the jump, repeatedly wiping water from her

face and coughing to clear her throat of the water she'd swallowed. She hadn't seen me yet. A body was bobbing up against mine and caused me to go under. I swam back up, choking and bumped up against a young woman, her arms and legs. I sputtered an incoherent apology expecting to see a swimmer trying to get round me. But the girl, with long black hair, was treading water, a hand covering her mouth and nose. She had large eyes—South East Asian—she was frightened and she was in pain. I saw blood running through her fingers—and I may have said, "Are you OK?" but my mouth wasn't articulating properly, my teeth had come down on one side of my tongue, and my ears were full of water. The caveman-like utterance seemed to frighten her and she swam away from me as though I'd been about to hit her again.

I swam after her as instinctively as though she'd been my own child. Dazed and shook up, my breaststroke kept deteriorating into a messy doggy paddle. I flopped into a space beside the girl and clung to the side, catching my breath. I still couldn't hear properly, everything was muffled, echoing twice what it had been. The girl had her face turned away from me—whether on purpose, I couldn't tell—her long, dark hair a soaking wet curtain between us. Her dark-skinned, ultra slender body trembled in the water, but she made no sound.

A few yards further along, my daughter was clinging to the side, still coughing. But she saw me now and sent me a little wave to signal she was OK. She looked unhurt. It must have been then I grew aware of something warmer than pool water trickling over my left eye and down my face. I could taste it—it was blood. I dabbed at my forehead but couldn't feel any opening, just wetness.

Turning my head I saw the pool attendant giving mouth-to-mouth to the boy, the skinny one. He'd placed a foam float under his head. The boy was coming round, coughing and jerking about as if a return to consciousness was like being forced back to school...

I turned back to the girl and, my arm shaking, reached to put my hand gently on her shoulder. The pain was beginning to define itself now—in my head and my knee—but a way of avoiding it was first to understand this girl's pain.

She moved a fraction, darting cat-like eyes of suspicion at me.

"Please, I'm a dentist, let me take a look... Maybe I can help."

Hearing 'dentist' I thought I saw something in her eyes relax. I reached out to gently remove her trembling hand from her face, entrusting her shame to me. Blood was streaming from one nostril, but the nose didn't look broken. Angling my head to catch the light I saw

her mouth must have taken a direct hit because her upper second, right, was now but a short stump.

"You' ve broken a tooth, OK, but I can fix that for you. I' m a dentist," I repeated. "Is there anywhere else you' re feeling pain?"

She was gazing at the cut over my eye now; the stream of blood trickling into the corner of my mouth seemed to make us nearly equal and produce a calming effect on her and she made an almost imperceptible shake of her head. The new expression of trust that had entered her large almond eyes reminded me instantly of my own Mia.

"I' m sorry if I landed on you... I was pushed."

"My teeth, it' s bad?"

"Could you get out of the water, please, sir!"

A female attendant—shaggy blonde, all business in her hips and square shoulders—was calling across to me from the other side of the pool, as though telling me off for sexual harassment. I ignored her, pressing on to explain to the girl that I personally could fix her tooth and it wouldn' t cost her anything.

"Sir, if you would please— "

"Yes, OK! Give us a minute! We' re hurt!" I was surprised at the bark in my voice as I turned to fend off the institutional drone of the bustling attendant, then surprised again by the dizziness that followed.

A stocky Thai girl, not half as pretty as my neighbour, appeared next to me, sweet-voiced, calm—

"I' m her friend," she explained. "She get hurt, yeah?"

"Yeah, we both are. Could you help me get your friend out of the pool?"

She was so light we almost tossed her out.

Mia was already standing on the edge, expressing wide eyed amazement and concern at the blood everywhere—on my face, my nose, the girl' s mouth, her hand...

And then there was the male pool attendant calling across to me from the other side:

"Can you get out of the pool now, mate?" Australian accent. "I think that' s enough high board antics for one day, don' t you, sport?"

I turned round to see the boy still on the floor, moaning like a baby, all the puff gone from his gangsta rapper persona. I was tempted to answer back, We were pushed, but the boy' s father—a broad-shouldered athletic guy of about my age and height, a few stone heavier, muscled-up—was standing on the side of the pool, short wet hair pasted to his

Norman looking skull, swearing and gesticulating and darting increasingly murderous glances at me. The attendants were having a time keeping him in order.

"Dad, Dad—are you alright?" It was Michaela, standing on the side, hands clasping opposite elbows, shivering. "Dad, you're bleeding," she observed, so much more calmly than her sister.

"I know, darling, I know, it's OK," though I didn't know that and I certainly didn't feel OK. I couldn't think how I'd cut my head: maybe the girl's tooth, or that ring—a gold ring with a leaf-like design—on her left hand, middle finger, or maybe the boy, he could have had jewellery, even chunky stuff...

"Guys, can you get dressed, I need to look after this girl—she's lost half a tooth."

"Did she swallow it?" Mia asked.

"I don't think so, I think it must be in the pool."

"Oh."

My girls gasped in horror and cast pitying eyes upon the slender young woman sitting motionless beside her friend on the side of the pool with her hand to her mouth.

"Mia, Michaela, let's go... let's go!" and they duly ran off to the changing room without any fuss.

I heard the crackle of a Walkie-Talkie from the far end and saw the female swim attendant arrive with another attendant and some kind of stretcher. *Surely not.*

It was time I made a move. So I put my palms on the tile edge and thrust down. My stomach heaved with the sudden movement. I got my left knee up, but it was the one I'd just bruised, I registered a sharp pain in the area of an old injury, my adrenals surged and I fell into a zone of suspended nausea and fainting. I was no longer a swimmer getting out of the pool, I was a surfer riding a wave, and the wave was curling over me... if I could just thread through it before it swallowed me up... Half out of the pool, I hung there probably only three seconds, a proverbial lifetime, I bent forward—a serious miscalculation, because all of a sudden my stomach heaved up its contents. An ignominious splash landed on the tiles inches from the injured girl. It was so loud and sudden I couldn't believe it had issued from my own mouth. But then it came again. With a gasp and a rasp of my lungs I flopped like a wounded seal on the tiles, bruising my cheek. I could only lie there at the mercy of my spasms. I was too helpless to push the vomit away or even roll away from it. The Thai girls had jumped up with a cry of alarm and disgust and begun moving away from me. My eyes blurred and I lost all sense of where anyone was. I wanted to say I was OK, but I was retching

again. How embarrassing. I could hear a round of kids' "Ughs!" bouncing around the pool... that Australian voice again, this time expressing mild disgust and disbelief as though I were some kind of paedophile drunk who'd dropped into his pool from out of space... Alcohol, hangover, Pringles flavour, concussion—Ugh... *I've had enough*, a voice said in my head, and the voice seemed to be referring not just to this but the shape my life was in at this present moment—and yet, how bloody irrelevant...

I was being hauled roughly to my feet and carried away by two very fit young men, that Australian accent no longer rasping and broad, just matey and chipper, riffing stuff about getting me cleaned up. I felt like a piece of trash I was happy for them to throw away. We torpedoed double doors and arrived in the changing area where the air was thick and muggy with body odour. I was bundled into a cubicle, but let down easy.

The Aussie was gently slapping me about the cheeks and saying, "So are you alright in there, mate? Can you hear me...? What's your name, mate?"

So this is where it begins, the blame, the shame, the legal battles that will take your life to pieces tooth by tooth...

I told him my name and clung to the belief that if I could just make him understand I was a dentist not a drunk and that I would be happy to help the girl and anyone else who'd lost a tooth today, he might give me the benefit of the doubt here.

"The kid pushed us... it was a prank... a leapfrog... He was impatient for his turn..." I blurted out. I badly needed to spit. I was slurring my words and suspected I might have cut my tongue on my own teeth... "I'm sure he didn't mean to hurt anyone," I said, because it offended my sense of decency to hold a grudge or look inside my atavistic self.

"The kid's OK, mate, just got a bit of a concussion like yourself, alright? But y' know, you really should've left it to one of our guys to get your daughter down—"

I looked at the face directly in front of me—the skin younger but having seen a stronger sun, the blond hair burnished, almost turning gold, the blue eyes, used to bigger horizons than anything you get in England—and I felt I was looking at him as a girl might before he fucked her. How weird. I saw he was wearing a badge and that he was GREG. And then I blinked blood again—

"Where're your little girlies? Are they still in the pool?"

As I told him their names, described them, told him they were getting changed, I could see people peeping in through the cubicle door behind his back as if at a lunatic. The muted and shrill pool sounds had a strangely soothing effect on me now and I began to feel as if I

belonged here, the way you quickly start to feel you belong at a hospital when you arrive there on a gurney after a car accident.

I noticed a large blob of blood drip onto the dotted floor between my feet and noticed the landscape down there was dotted with blood.

"Let me get a bandage for that thing on your head there, Anthony, OK?"

At least I was Anthony now, not just 'mate' .

He' d just gone away, I was sitting there with my forearms on my thighs gazing at the blood drops on the floor, trying to count them only to find I couldn' t count past 3, when there came a hefty thump against the cubicle walls. I jumped and looked up to see an angry figure leaning in menacingly, he was spitting words at me, bellowing with such force his words blew any verbal response clean out of my head. It was the boy' s dad, like a pitbull off its chain leash, and all I could think was that his boy had just suffered a brain haemorrhage or something. In the first moment of this barrage it was vaguely reassuring to note that he was now wearing a spanking new navy tracksuit with cream zips and a pressed, white T-shirt underneath, a flashy diver' s watch—because dressed like that he was probably less likely to beat me up. The long, squared-off features suggested a man with a passion for boxing, but his small, bulbous blue eyes and the rapidly blinking eyelids with their rather effeminate eyelashes betrayed panic and disbelief, less an intent to harm me physically. He was a barker, not a hitter, I told myself, as I sat there, taking it, weirdly fascinated by the pink lips of his anus-like mouth that kept puckering with each round of attack as though it could barely handle the volume of the words it was spouting in an increasingly piping, absurdly theatrical voice.

"I' m sorry... I' m sorry," I repeated lamely.

"So you admit it, you pushed him off the board!"

"No, he pushed *us*."

"Bollocks!" His hand slammed the cubicle wall. "That' s not what *he' s* saying. And my son doesn' t lie – not to me he doesn' t!" An odd qualification, I remembered long afterward.

"Your son pushed me!" I roared back and my body trembled as my heart and lungs pumped out the words. I was in no physical shape to withstand a physical retaliation. Perhaps my cut was saving me from a second beating.

"Well that' s not what *I' m* hearing! He went to jump and you barged him sideways!"

"I' m sorry, but it didn' t happen like that. He leapfrogged over me and I lost my

balance– “

“What’ re you doing up there anyway! He says you were being abusive, totally pissed out of your fart!”

“Alright fella! Easy now... Easy...”

My mate, Greg, had returned and was already shielding me from my assailant, backing him up like one of those cocksure Australian documentary filmmakers talking to one of his deadly matey crocs.

“Look at this moron! Half pissed, puking in the pool– “

“Hey hey hey... easy now, my friend,” Greg kept saying.

“Alright alright, I’ m not doing anything, I’ m not touching ’im, I just want a reasonable explanation!”

“I know you’ re upset,” Greg was saying. “Your boy’ s been hurt, but *he’ s* been hurt too, mate, so let’ s just take a breather for a minute, OK?”

The man continued to protest, but he was gradually being prevailed upon by another male attendant to return to the reception area.

Greg returned with a smirking half smile–

“Wo, is he a mad one!”

I got to my feet, holding on to the sides of the cubicle, fingers buttery with blood.

“No no–not a good idea, m’ man. I don’ t think you should be moving for a minute or two. So take it easy now.”

Just for a second or two I laid my mind against that soft, spongy ‘e’ of the Australian tongue. Then I pulled the band and locker key from off my wrist.

“Can you open it?”

“There’ s plenty of time for that.”

“I want to give the girl my business card. I’ m a dentist. I can help her.”

“She’ s got a knocked tooth, has she?”

I nodded.

“In my wallet, there’ re some cards, business cards. She needs treatment. I can do that, no charge. I need to do this. Please.”

He studied the card briefly.

“If you hang there a minute, I’ ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks.”

He took my key and left–with a squeak of rubber.

I sat up and rested my back against the cubicle wall. I'd give myself another 60 seconds' decompression, then I'd step out of here and go find my girls. And that other girl too.

CHAPTER

2

Pressing to my head the tissue Greg had left me with, I padded out to the lounge area in my wet trunks. My daughters, now dressed, were sitting on dual coloured chairs, talking with Greg, who was squatting before them on his muscular hind legs, his broad back like a ramp toward me. As Michaela saw me coming, she tapped Greg on the shoulder and said something. He rose to his feet,

“Ah, there you go, girls, the walking wounded. Are you gonna be OK, there, mate?”

“Did you get my card?”

“Yep, and here’ s your key,” holding it out to me. “I gave the girl your card and she’ s agreed to wait for ya, if you’ re up to seeing her.”

“Sure. Let me just get some things on. Is the boy OK?”

“I believe he’ s pretty much fine? But er, yeah, checking him out now, sport, as far as I know.”

The girls were still and patiently awaiting a signal. I told them I’ d be back in a minute, I just had to change. Greg said he’ d stay with them until I reappeared.

When I next returned to the lounge area, the girls were gone. I stalled a throb of panic and headed for the reception. Greg and the girls had congregated there with the two Thai girls on a row of seats the other side of the reception desk.

“Is this your dad?” the young blonde receptionist called across to my girls in a cooing tone.

With one hand pressing a fresh tissue to my wound, the other holding our bags, I made my uncertain approach with a bravely ironic smile.

"I've just been hearing—how did happen?" the receptionist said, showering me with sympathy, as though we were old pub regulars.

I'd got as far as 'pushed' when I was rudely interrupted—by that voice again:

"Pushed?! Don't listen to him! My son's on a stretcher because of him!"

As if winged by a bullet I spun round—my brain rattling like a dry nut in its shell.

Walking alongside a couple of paramedics, who were wheeling out the boy on a gurney, was the man in the tracksuit. He paused a safe distance round the reception desk and pointed an accusing finger at me.

"It was you doing the pushing, mate! Completely pissed out of his head, this man!" he announced to everyone.

"I wasn't drunk, I had a concussion—"

"Concussion my arse!" He seemed to be enjoying the scene he was making and rounded it off suddenly with the promise I'd be hearing from his lawyer about the 'damage' I'd done. The gurney with 'damaged' goods had already passed through the doors and now dad marched on to catch up, piping still more indignation into the air as he went.

I turned back to the girl on reception. She'd turned pale just being within a few yards of the verbal onslaught. I made a conscious decision to look her in the eye so she knew the accusations to be false.

"His boy pushed me," I said simply. "And that's a fact," I added, and in that moment heard my faded American accent become suddenly more prominent, (something that tends to happen, I realise, whenever presented with making myself understood to strangers). "I hit my head," I continued. "He doesn't understand, vomiting is a common reaction to concussion," speaking with cool objectivity, and yet keeping my distance from her—I was only too aware that my breath must be awful and might even carry enough of last night's alcohol consumption to support the dad's wild accusations still ringing in everyone's ears.

The receptionist pulled a down-at-the-mouth sort of face, as if 'What can you do?' and asked politely was I sure I didn't need any First Aid or anything?

Greg said he'd take care of that right away even before I could speak.

"No, really, thanks, but could you just get a room for me and, um —"

"Steady on, sport, I don't either of you is in much condition for any of that, y' know what I mean —"

"No, I – " I was blushing, "I need to take a look at this girl' s teeth."

My Australian friend was grinning and blushing to his roots – but enjoying it more than I was. "It' s OK, mate, I' ve already got somewhere for you to do that, if you' d like to follow me..."

Five minutes later I was rolling up my sleeves in a small, windowless and overly air-conditioned office in the bowels of the leisure centre complex. I grabbed the head of the Anglepoise – the only light I had to work with – and swung it round.

"You might like to close your eyes at this point," I told my new patient, seated in an upright chair by a standard office desk.

My girls were sitting next to my patient' s friend on the chairs on the wall behind me, observing like conscientious students. I switched on the light and peered in.

About half of her upper right second was missing, a clean break.

"Don' t you need your dentist chair, Dad?" Mia remarked quietly.

"Yep, that would be easier, sweetie, but I think we' ll manage." Then to my patient, whose name I' d forgotten to ask: "Head up just a little... that' s it."

Too early to say whether the pulp was shot, might even need a pin... Diamond stud inlay on the upper right incisor–don' t see that very often.

"Hm, I' m afraid you have lost quite a large part of that tooth. But not to worry, you won' t lose it entirely, we can build it up. The first thing I need to do is put something on it so you can eat and drink because it must be quite sensitive now." I switched off the light and she opened her eyes, looking up into mine. I always get a quiet kick out of seeing vulnerability and trust pooling in a patient' s eyes. "Hurts, yeah?"

She barely nodded.

"It will do, I' m afraid, until we can cover up the break you' ve got. And the quicker the better. So can you come and see me this afternoon? I' m out in Ealing. I hope that' s not too far for you to travel."

She looked over at her friend and, awkwardly because of the puffy lip, said something in Thai, receiving assurances in return. She then looked at me and said, yes, she could come.

"OK? Good. How about 3.30 this afternoon?"

My patient nodded to the affirmative and asked her friend to do something for her that involved an agency and a restaurant. As they chatted quietly together, I took my first real look at her since I' d been in the pool. She was a beauty, that was clear, even if that beauty was somewhat tarnished and subdued for the moment. The line from her broad cheekbones

to her chin cut in more sharply than I was used to seeing in Thai girls, and gave her an almost Western shape face. The lips were so full that the one swollen by the bang turned her naturally proud expression into one of almost absurdly gross imprudence. Her eyes were dreamy now, but I had a sense that in better circumstances they'd be alive to the charm of the unexpected. The shaggy long hair, streaked with highlights, the low cut designer T-shirt and design-ripped jeans struck me as casually thrown together and effortlessly coordinated. Even her most minimal movements suggested a potent mix of the ingénue and a woman wiser than her years. She was a sexual chameleon, I felt, a sort of female Peter Pan. I'd read intelligence in her face and suspected she had money, possibly a mundane Business major under her belt. Her voice was sweet and musical and it was already gently smoothing out the jagged bumps in my head and body. She stopped talking to her friend and turned to me and said,

"I come your place, yeah?"

"Yeah, um, my surgery... yes. It won't cost you anything," I reminded her.

"OK. Thank you." Her wince I understood as a brave attempt at a smile. She became embarrassed and covered up the front of her mouth with her hand.

"And what's your name?"

"Sisira. You can call me Sisi."

"Sisira." Even on my chewed tongue I liked the feel of her name in my mouth. "OK, well—"

"Dad—" Mia started up.

"Darling, just let me finish here, OK?"

But then I *felt* what she was looking at: a rivulet of blood had escaped the plaster on my forehead and was running down my face.

"Shit."

My blood had splashed on Sisira's dark skin.

She yelped but stayed in her chair—she was smiling as if at a curious denouement to a tribal custom. Our eyes met briefly—and their dark brilliance stopped my next breath. I had to stop myself from licking up the drop from off the nook in her clavicle.

I was finally back at reception, I'd just said goodbye to the Thai girls and I was ready to leave, when an urbane young Asian kid in a new suit and blood red tie swanned by in soft leather shoes and began gesticulating excitably—Was I the gentleman just involved in an accident in the pool?

Before I could even formulate an answer I was caught up wondering if my face had ever shone with this kid's transparent, entirely cosmetic confidence at twenty-five.

"I was involved, yes." I said, instinctively wary of people who prefer gist to meaning.

For some reason my reply caused him to smirk. Pressing his hands together in a regrettably camp gesture of entreaty he asked me if I'd mind sticking around for a while—the police had been called.

"The police?"

"Yeah, it's just routine, yeah? We just want to be sure there was like, y' know—we've got a responsibility to get everyone's details and stuff. Would that be alright?"

I felt I'd just been cast as the 'sensible man' in a comedy sketch.

"No, not really. I need stitches in my head, my kids have to be returned to their mum and I have to get back to my surgery to attend properly to the girl who was hurt. She needs immediate treatment."

"Oh, really, God, I'm sorry. Thing is, 'cause the boy—yeah? Uh, y' know he had had to go off in an ambulance, yeah? So we—like—we feel obliged to, like, y' know, call the police." His way of talking vaguely reminded me of Mia at the age of three-and-a-half.

"I'm sure none of it's your fault, yeah, but the boy did have to go to hospital."

"I'm sorry if he's been hurt, but he pushed me and my daughter off your top diving board. I then seem to have fallen on him. That would suggest his injuries were self inflicted, wouldn't you say?"

He smirked again, as though my more direct form of diction suggested I had a hard-on he might have time for. "I'm sure they won't be long. You can wait in the lounge, there's TV, food and drink... Can I get you a coffee or something... yeah?"

Just for a second I thought he was offering me a decent one from a cafetiere, but no, he simply wished to point me in the direction of the vending machines. Recalling the father's public accusation that I'd been drunk, I pictured myself blowing into a little see-through bag. Perhaps a machine coffee was a good idea after all.

As the young, blood-red tie slithered off to a leafy branch somewhere, I returned to the lounge where the girls dragged me to the wall of slot machines. I threw in some coins and

managed my coffee. I dropped in some more coins to a giant food machine and pulled the slot. Nothing.

“Dad, you have to bang it!” Michaela thumped the machine and the selected flavour of rubbish dropped to the collect drawer. “See!”

I could have done without the ‘See?!’ just then, but I figured she was entitled to express some of her own frustration with my performance that morning.

I took my instant brown water to a tucked away row of chairs and sat down. My hands around the coffee cup, I realised I must have knocked out the girl’s tooth with the ring on my right hand. I sipped the coffee, which was less awful than I’d reckoned, while the kids roamed restlessly, making me vaguely dizzy again with their walking in circles as they munched contentedly on crispy carcinogenic compounds. I sat back, contemplating a trip down to the local A&E, but I dreaded the thought of running into that man again. Besides I had the engineer to get back for...

The girls had run out of games and, tired from their swim, had lain down on the chairs beside me, Mia using her sister’s lap as a pillow. We’d been waiting maybe 30 minutes when my brother called. By the time I hung up, I realised the gathering buzz around the place wasn’t about me, or the accident—everyone was talking about the bombs.

It was time to go home.

A light breeze was tickling the leaves of singular trees as I returned to an unseasonably cool July morning like a criminal walking out of jail in a simple disguise, completely unnoticed. It was weird, though, because I hardly recognised the car park and had to stop and squint at everything.

“Why’re you going like that, making your eyes small?” Mia asked, imitating my squint.

“Can you see the car?”

“It’s there, Dad! Can’t you see?!” Michaela called as if to the dumbest in her class.

And then I couldn’t get the key to turn in the lock. I stood back to take a second look at the car. It seemed to be ours.

“Come on, Dad!”

I tried again, turning the key harder this time and the lock made its familiar whirring noise as a light flashed on and off. I slid myself inside like a package marked 'Fragile' and started up the engine. I reversed very carefully—one accident was enough for one day.

As I pulled out of the leisure centre parking I suddenly realised I didn't know where we were—or at least, I knew the name of the place but I couldn't recall how we'd got here. I had to pull over and get out the A-Z. Lots of yellow, orange roads and white roads and patches of green to help me, but my mind was only getting lost in them. I tried again, but my mind just tailed off half way. I felt a wave of panic at the possibility I might have some kind of brain damage. *But this is still consistent with a bad concussion*, I told myself. All I had to do was get us home and take a day off work; rest. I turned in my seat.

"Michaela, can you sit up front with me, sweetheart? I need your help..."

Then I discovered that although my brain was incapable of following lines across a page, I could at least explain quite clearly to her how to navigate. When I told them that I thought my memory might be affected by my fall, both girls rallied to the cause of getting us home and took special pride in being able to direct me.

Traffic was thick because of the chaos caused by the terrorist attacks. The girls remained patient, because they saw they had an important job to do, but they were hungry again. When I groaned, knowing they'd soon be urging me to stop off at the nearest McDonald's, Mia reminded me I should let them have their way because they were helping me and if they didn't eat, they'd fall asleep and then we'd never get home because I'd lost my mind.

"My memory," I corrected Mia. I smiled to myself, amused that she could argue her case with such eloquence and moral conviction only two years on from tantrums.

"Yeah, memory," she added.

"Turn right here, Michaela," was saying.

"There aren't any shops round here Mia, you'll have to wait."

"We've got Hula Hoops in the boot," Michaela said, looking up from the A-Z.

"Yeah, in the boot, Dad!" Mia echoed.

I pulled over again and popped the trunk. As they tucked in to their snacks, I switched on the radio news. Requests that Londoners stay in their homes or in their offices went out, and then on and on. The girls grew interested in the reports and my explanations of what had happened, the background to what had happened, the dangers we all live in now.

"Was that man a terrorist?" Mia asked, referring to the man who'd shouted at me in reception.

"No no – just an angry man."

"Is he a Moslem?"

I winced at the muddle they were getting into. And yet how fitting, really, how modern. I did my best to explain. Inevitably the conflict had to be drawn for them as mainstream Hollywood would depict it—in terms of goodies and baddies—which was pretty much how Bush and Blair seemed to see it, I realised. Michaela was just old enough to remember seeing pictures on TV of people falling from the Twin Towers. I suspected she was not old enough yet, to distinguish between spectacle and reality, though—fear was only real insofar as it pertained directly to her. Which was just as well. As for me, I could see myself reacting with a typical Londoner's subdued horror before the images of aftermath TV terror. What did the terrorists hope to gain, if, even after such random carnage, people like me just got back on with things.

Worried that I wasn't going to be able to make it in time for the engineer, I called Andrea, my bright and very dependable Croatian nurse. We asked after each other and loved ones, sighed with relief, groaned at the horror. I said nothing about my own accident—it would have sounded so frivolous, almost disrespectfully self-indulgent. I did tell her, though, that I was stuck in traffic... would she mind nipping down to the surgery to let the engineer in? Yes, she could do that, no problem. Her young voice was compassionate, almost motherly, and even though I'd said nothing about my own accident, I felt soothed by her.

I got back to an empty house around midday. I put on the TV news for the girls who made little sense of the pictures of mutilated wreckage in the absence of real explosions and screaming victims.

I took a long, hot shower. Unlike some, I was still in one piece.

Through a hole in the steamed up mirror I saw the cut was in a bad way and grabbed my phone. Andrea was still at the practice, the engineer was about to leave. I asked her if she'd mind hanging on for another hour, I needed her to do a bit of suture work for me.

Washed, warm and seated comfortably in my own dentist's chair, I felt a light buzz of sexual excitement relating our pool story to Andrea as her pale white fingers worked around the gash in my head, gently pulling together torn skin with black silk. It had been a while since I'd seen her wearing clothes other than her white tunic. The morning's events seemed to have put a girlish sparkle into her warm, Slavic slate grey eyes, leant a vaguely

flirtatious rhythm to her hands, and I thought I detected a mild frisson between us—which, I had to remind myself, I would not be exploring further until she handed in her notice, if at all.

When she was done, I packed the girls back into the car and— “Dad, why do you always drive so fast?” Michaela asked. “Mum says you drive too fast.”

“Does she?”

“Yeah,” they say in chorus.

“She says you’re dangerous and you ruin the car by going too fast,” Michaela said volubly, a note of hilarity creeping into her voice.

“Mum’s safer, but it’s not so much fun,” Mia concluded, with admirable objectivity. Her sister agreed readily.

“I have to drop you off and then I have to go back to the practice, that’s why I have to be quick,” I explained. “I have to fix the girl’s tooth, the girl in the pool, remember?”

There was a pause.

“Do you like her, Dad?”

I glanced in the rear view mirror to see Michaela wearing a slightly embarrassed smirk that made me feel, ever so briefly, like a junior school boy with a hopeless crush.

“Don’t tell Mum about what happened, OK. Let me tell her… later.”

“OK, Dad.”

As I arrived home, I saw Sylvia had also just got in.

“Hello!” she called, not bothering to turn round, lots of shopping to unpack.

“Hey. Did you hear what happened?” I said.

“Hear what?”

“Dad knocked a girl’s tooth out and smashed his head and then he was sick in the pool,” Mia blurted out.

“Mia,” I shot at her. “What did I say?”

She slapped her hand to her mouth and ran off. Michaela following her.

“What’s she talking about?”

“If you haven’t seen it, turn on the TV. We’ve had five bombs – in London. This morning. Many dead –”

“What happened to your head?”

“Oh, nothing, it’s um, I’ll explain later, OK. I’ve gotta go to the practice, I’ll see you later – ” and I rushed back out before she could ask any more questions.

Half way down the road, Sylvia called me, worried that we' d narrowly missed being blown to pieces at the swimming pool. I could hear Mia in the background shouting, "No, Mum, you don' t get it! A bomb in the bus, not in the pool!"

I arrived at the practice around 3.15. Andrea had gone by then. I switched on the TV in reception and sat in the receptionist' s chair to be closest to the phone. I began to worry that the turmoil caused by this bigger event would create irrational fear and confusion in the Thai girl' s head and she' d decide against coming to see me. In any case, she was late. I berated myself for not having taken down her number. Perhaps I' d alarmed her with my first diagnosis. Perhaps I couldn' t be trusted because I was Caucasian and she was now phoning around for a Chinese dentist. I worried she might lose the tooth if she waited too long. And it put another crack in my skull thinking I might never see her again.

After switching off the TV, I began pacing up and down the rickety flooring until the sound of the creaks became too irritating and I had to sit down. I decided to make some calls to friends and family—checking everyone was alright, that no one had a friend or relative who' d been caught up in the bombings. Of course, for every other number I dialled I got the engaged tone because everyone else was doing the same. At every other turn in the conversation I came close to relating my own disaster story for the day. I knew I' d make light of it, though, and to all but my closest friend I could picture myself admitting to having unduly provoked the boy, even though I didn' t believe I had. I think even then I suspected that what had happened was only the beginnings of a story, not the whole of one. What if the boy' s concussion had resulted in brain damage, for instance? What if the father really was about to contact a lawyer? I wondered in a tired sort of way whether the day' s carnage mightn' t bring Sylvia and me closer together. More likely, though, she' d see this as further evidence of a deterioration of my parenting skills. Rather unsettling was the realisation I had no one to talk this through with. Or at least no one whose reaction would clarify and renew my own wobbly trust in my own take on the experience. Maybe it was time for a shrink... Dammit. The Thai girl wasn' t going to show, was she. I could have had another couple of hours with my daughters...

Shortly before six, as I was picking up my keys ready to close up shop, the phone on reception began to ring.

"Anthony Price?"

I didn' t recognise the voice, but for a moment an instinct prompted me to withhold my identity to the late caller.

"Is this Anthony Price's dental practice?"

"Yes. I'm Anthony. How can I help?"

"I think we need to talk, mate, don't you?"

Now I was certain, it was a man whose voice I'd only heard till now in its angered state.

"Um, what about?"

"Well –what happened, obviously. My name's Neil, I'm the father of the boy you landed on in the pool."

"I think I already explained to you what happened at the pool."

"That's right, you did, you did. Um, I'm sorry. I did rather lose it with you. I, um, I was just freaking out. He's my son and... I'm sorry.' There was a pause.

"Apology accepted."

There was another pause. "Do you think we could talk? It doesn't have to be now, I can fit in with you, but I feel – it would just be better if we did. Is that OK?"

It seemed like a reasonable request, but I withheld an immediate answer and then asked after his son.

"Yeah, I think he'll be alright. He didn't have to stay over night or anything. They let him home." The tone had turned strangely familiar, as though he were now informing a member of his family. "So would you be alright if I dropped by your place of business tomorrow around six?"

He said he already had the surgery address from the internet. And then he hung up in the middle of my first line of directions. Which again was odd, given he'd concluded the conversation in an otherwise polite tone of voice. My instincts told me I shouldn't have agreed to see him on my premises. But I was in a strangely fatalistic mood by then.

CHAPTER

3

About a couple hours before my own appointment to see the father of the boy who'd pushed me into the pool, Andrea came into the consultation room with a certain cheeky glint in her eye to tell me that that woman was back again, wondering if she could speak to me.

"Christ, you didn't tell her I was here, did you?"

I knew whom she meant—she meant Georgina P-P for psycho—my stalker. Ever since I'd allowed myself to become her de facto shrink while in the chair, this garrulous fiftysomething divorcee assumed my polite interest in her calamitous life bore the hallmarks of an incipient romantic interest. She'd sent flowers, left gifts, and clogged up our answering machine on several occasions with her barely contained breathy excitement for things she imagined we could do together. And the joke was wearing thin.

"Andrea—"

But Andrea couldn't hold it in anymore and she burst out laughing like teenager.

"I'm sorry, it's not her. I shouldn't do that to you, should I?"

"Thank God for that. What made you pull that one? Is there someone there I need to be worried about?"

"Well," she began, still in a teasing mood, "there is a young girl in reception asking for you. Very pretty. Dark skin..."

"Black, Indian?"

"Maybe Thai."

My back went quite rigid for a moment—fear of my own desire—and I left the room as Andrea was still speaking lest she catch me blushing.

Usually when I step into the reception to greet one of my patients, I find him or her in some state of apprehension. I found Sisira, the girl from the pool, reclining as though the

sofa were made of something unusually buoyant, which, from overnight experience, I can tell you it was not. She was dressed in jeans, sandals and a faded, red cotton shirt, her luxuriously long hair hung loose, over her chest.

"Hello... how are you?" My voice was strangely intimate to my own ears, as though I'd come across her hiding under some stairs, not in my own waiting room.

She sat up suddenly, looking lively, immediately apologising for not having shown up the day before.

"I thought I'd lost you!" I cut across—and the words echoed around in my head with amplified meaning.

"Yes, me too!" She'd meant to come, she said, but the traffic had been so bad because of the bombs and then she'd lost my card and she only just found it—

"That's fine, don't worry, don't worry," I cut across, perching beside her. As she sighed I felt an urge to lean forward to inhale her breath, the expression of relief was so charming. She smiled forgetting the unsightly tooth. "Oh," she went and clapped her hand over her mouth.

"So how are you coping?" I had to stop myself from reaching out and touching her arm; not simply because I was attracted to her but because I saw her as a fellow victim of an accident which still resonated for me with the bombings of the day before.

"Yes, I'm OK. How is your head?"

I'd felt slightly embarrassed to be asked about our little secret in a public place.

"Why don't you come through—we can fit you in now," I said, casting a coded glance at Rebecca, my wily old owl of a receptionist, who enjoyed nothing better than some sexual speculation to get her through the day.

Getting to her feet Sisi was all lightness in her limbs, like a marionette. Following her down the corridor, even in the low light, the craftsmanship to the line of her back, the exquisitely carved groove of her waist, easily visible through her diaphanous red blouse, was so shockingly beautiful I had to pause to catch my breath. Standing a yard or so short of the door, like an actor suddenly fearful of stepping onto the stage, I told myself to get a grip, now, before my nurse started to take notes that she'd later be comparing with the receptionist's. The moment I heard Andrea's voice welcoming Sisira into the chair as if she were just another patient, I regained my composure and strode into the room.

"So..." I began breezily, a propos of nothing really, just resetting my brain to 'light and professional' . "...Upper second on the right, if I remember," I said to Andrea.

Now that I was on my comfy stool, skating on rollers from trays and worktops to my patient in the chair, Classic FM playing, by chance, a rousing Waltz by Strauss, I was Anthony Price BDS LDS RCS M.Sc. once again.

I started off by asking if she could describe the pain, if any other teeth were hurting—short, simple questions that tend to reassure my patients. I pulled on my surgical gloves and mask and wheeled in to her bruised but gorgeous mouth and a cloud of erotic perfume, which momentarily robbed me of my next thought. I was glad to see that my patient's lip, though swollen, was healing nicely of its own accord and was not going to scar. I tried to express sympathy and calm with my eyes only to find myself wondering at the absence of reproach in hers—after all, I'd caused this damage, albeit inadvertently. Andrea placed the safety specs over Sisira's eyes—following normal procedure, although her glance at me made me feel she thought that I was already becoming unduly distracted by their beauty. I adjusted the overhead light and fixed my own specs on, more accurately, loupes (which are essentially magnifying glasses supported by fibre optic light) for a bigger picture on the detail of her broken tooth.

As I feared: telltale pink dots on the remaining stump that suggested irreversible trauma to the pulp. We were therefore probably looking at a root canal. As she opened her mouth a little wider, I slipped my mirror round the back to check for other, less obvious fractures to adjacent teeth. Her oral hygiene looked good. She had only three, small white composites, no extractions. "All four wisdom teeth have come through, no obvious sign of impacting, the two lower ones partially erupted," I dictated to Andrea. I gave the broken tooth a little spray. The second she twitched I felt a rippling in my own skin as though I were the earth for her little shock. I gently removed her specs.

"A little painful, yeah?"

Her face told me she was a little afraid of what was to come, but her eyes that told me that she was probably no wimp when it came to pain.

I got the seat upright and we took X-Rays. Then we had to do a few tests to check for the tooth's vitality. The cold test first of all, which involves soaking a cotton wool pellet in ethyl chloride and placing it on the front teeth, first on the unaffected teeth to get a control reading, then on the broken one. As I suspected, she wasn't feeling much of the cold on her broken tooth; the tooth's vitality was poor. Using an electric pulp tester, I also tested the tooth's vitality as against electrical stimuli, ranging from 1-10 in strength. But again, her poor vitality meant she wasn't experiencing much sensation until mark 8, only two notches

below the maximum, whereas a vital tooth would have been tingling away at 3 or 4. "Still, at least the tooth isn't loose," I announced cheerfully.

I could have opted for a temporary sedative dressing and crown in case the trauma eased up over the next 48 hours, but I wasn't optimistic about her chances, so I told Andrea we'd start on the root canal straight away. I took a look at the X-Rays. No sign of fractures to the root, which was good. I gave her a local and asked her to return to the waiting room for a few minutes. I could deal with my next patient while we were waiting for her to turn numb.

"First we're going to do a bit of cleaning and filing, OK?" I explained fifteen minutes later. "And then we put on a temporary crown. Do you understand temporary?"

My patient nodded. I nodded to Andrea and we got to work.

I popped the saliva ejector in her mouth, gently picked up her hand and placed it on the tube, saying that she could be our assistant in the procedure. I made an access hole into the pulp chamber and cleaned it out with a series of graded files. Her root canals were a little narrow, but I took my time and finished roundly pleased with my craftsmanship. I disinfected and measured the canals and put in a temporary filling. Next, the stump. Sharp edges that needed filing. A gentle squeeze on the acrylic gun, a gooey paste that hardens in five minutes to make a temporary crown. File that down... polish... Do the impressions... Make a few notes that would be pertinent for my guy at the lab... And, finally, floss.

Pulling off my gloves I explained to Sisira what would happen next. I could skip the talk about the different kinds of crowns I could offer her because I was going to give her an Empress crown, the top brand, free of charge. She'd need to pay a visit to my ceramicist. No, she didn't have pay, *I* was paying. He was a nice bloke and very expert in his field. He worked out in Beaconsfield, about 30 minutes out of Marylebone. If she had email I could send her a PDF that would show her how to find it from the station. Yes, she had email. Good. She seemed a little nervous about travelling, but I impressed on her she needed to go along or we might have an imperfect colour match to the rest of her teeth. And she didn't want that, did she? By way of further reassurances, I tried to sell her the trip as educational as well as practical: it would be interesting for her to see how many varieties of shades of porcelain she could choose from. She'd find my guy very accommodating... I found myself pausing and smiling, rather as I do with children, except that my pattern of speech struck me as oddly fragmented, as though my 'script' was coming back to me in stops and starts. I

was reminded of Anthony Price as he first started out in dentistry, a little hyper with his overall delivery. When we were done, I offered her my hand before I could stop myself.

Stepping into reception with her I had Rebecca book her in for a fitting in two weeks' time. When my receptionist angled her solicitous smile at Sisira and quoted a price, I was still hovering, ready to fan away the slightly odious smell.

"Becky, um, no, it's alright, there's nothing to pay." For a second I thought to explain why, but it was far too lengthy to go into now.

"Oh... OK." Rebecca turned back to Sisira, now with a little candy in her smile. "So, how's Thursday?" Sisira nodded. "What time would you like?"

"Five thirty, could you?" I leaned over the table to point at the computer and the gap I'd seen in Thursday's diary.

"Right, OK, five thirty, Thursday 21st."

Rebecca was doing her best not to appear overwhelmed by my guardianship of the new patient, who I noticed had mentally drifted off as if bored with waiting for the adults as they wound up their circumlocutory arrangements. She re-emerged languidly from her reverie as I asked her if she could give me her email so I could send her directions to the lab.

Opening the door for her, I was aware of my blood fizzing in my veins as if I'd accidentally jabbed myself with adrenaline. I handed her a fresh card and urged her to call me if she was worried about anything. What did I mean—*anything*? She smiled grotesquely (as you do when half numb) and thanked me.

As she appeared the other side of the window, walking away, I remembered I was due to get a visit later from the father of the boy who'd knocked half her tooth out.

Tom, my gentle-mannered Malaysian hygienist, Andrea and Rebecca left that day at around 5.30 pm. I stayed behind, flipping through an out-of-date Vogue in our waiting room, wondering what kinds of fashion magazines Sisira might look at, pausing only to reflect on the remote possibility I might myself need a dentist later this evening if my visitor exploded again. Around six I heard a car draw up in front. Through the half-drawn blinds, I saw a figure approach the front door. I opened to a solid man, wearing an anxious expression and a crumpled Boss suit, playing nervously with the car keys in his hand.

"Is it OK to leave my car here?" No hello, just straight in, a bit nervous as he turned to point to his old, blue BMW as though she were a dearly loved but troublesome dog.

His eyes didn't quite meet mine, they kind of scanned my face as if measuring it for warning signs that I might be about to find truck with his request.

"Yeah, sure, come in." I hadn't reckoned to respond with such breeziness.

"Cheers." He fired off the fob at the car alarm. I held out my hand and he shook it with a solemn, "Cheers," he said again.

I caught the smell of minted chewing gum just over my shoulder as I returned inside.

"I'm not pulling you away from your patients or anything like that, am I?"

"No no – we're done for today."

I held the door open for him as he entered the reception with a kind of 'am I trespassing?' furtiveness. I could hardly believe this was the same man who'd thrown a fit at the pool. I invited him to take a seat and offered him coffee or tea. He declined with a rush of whispered "No's" and "Cheers" and "Thanks anyway", chewing hard on his gum.

"How about a water?" I asked going to the water cooler. OK, he'd have water.

"There you go." I sat on the same settee, not too close and took a sip of mine.

"So... how's your boy?" I asked. My gut feeling told me I didn't think we'd get on to whether my own daughter had been adversely affected by the fall.

Elbows on his thighs, he looked sheepishly into his cup of water, then up. The summer fruit of his yellow tie and sky blue shirt clashed badly with the shrapnel grey of his suit. He let out a pained sigh and, for a horrible moment, I feared I was going to get that man in the tracksuit again.

"Danny's fine, he's OK, but um..." He drew breath, wrinkled his nose, frowning intensely, looked into his cup again, then at me—I think for the first time noticing the plaster on my head. "I've been a bit disappointed. I, um..." He paused, glanced at me. "It took me a while to get to the bottom of what happened. I didn't know about the leapfrogging – not when I was there. I just thought you'd, uh – y' know – you'd jumped off on top of him. Um..." he looked me straight in the eye, a cold focus. "...you really deserve an apology," he said, in a tone that could just as easily have delivered: *You really deserve a fucking kicking.* "I'm really sorry about my behaviour at the pool—I was totally out of order—I-D' you have a bin for this?" He'd gotten to his feet, taking out his gum.

"Sorry."

"Sure."

I fetched him the wastebasket. He picked out a piece of discarded paper, wrapped his gum in it and chucked it as if it were poison and returned to his seat.

"You really didn't have to come along, it's OK, I – y' know, kids his age, they uh – "

"No no no – I did have to come along, it's not right; I couldn't just leave it. Not if my son is the one at fault. No."

His eyes boggled at me, demanding acknowledgment of his moral standpoint.

"He wasn't skiving, in case you thought that. The school was closed for teacher training."

"Mine neither."

He nodded without comment. "The thing is, I'd been *misinformed*, y' know? Totally misinformed. The first person I spoke to, one of the attendants, she said—she said a man had pushed a boy and a little girl off the diving board." He gestured to me as if to say, Why would she lie? "I get to my son and, when he's able to talk, he says the same. He said he'd been pushed. And then when I saw you throwing up on the side of the pool, I just *assumed*—which was wrong of me, right?—but I *assumed* you were some kind of piss-head fruitcake."

He stared into my face as though I might be about to turn into one. Then double-blinked. His tongue flicked out to wet his lips before he went on.

"Fucked up, man, fucked up." I was getting a Nottingham or Coventry accent softened by maybe 15 years of living in London. "Later in the day, yeah? I went back to the pool to ask if they'd got your contact details. They wouldn't give them out – which is, y' know, fair enough. So, anyway, I got talking to one of the attendants, Greg, and *he says, he saw* my boy push you and your little girl off the board! So I go back home—have it out with my son..." he was shaking a sorry head now— "...finally he admits it was all his fault, he said his mate had put him up to it. So, yeah... apologies on my son's behalf." He gestured expansively with his arms. "I would have brought him along but he's, um— " he paused, tucking in his chin to deal with some indigestion— "he's with his mum tonight and she and I... If you did want to see him— "

"No no—honestly—it's fine. I appreciate your coming along. Uh— " I was finding the man's protracted apology somewhat oppressive and laughed nervously— "to be honest, I wasn't sure what you wanted and uh— "

"No I know, I know, I know—you must've thought, 'Oh, who is this guy, he wants a fight,' but no, I just wanted to clear this up I felt really bad."

"OK, great... Uh, I'm sure your son didn't mean to harm anyone, it was..."

"It was bollocks, mate, it shouldn't have happened. I wasn't raised like that, I don't expect it of my son." He wasn't shouting but his vehemence resonated with my memory of being cornered by him in the cubicle. "He's been behaving kind of strange, though, recently. We don't—it's kind of a... it might even be a medical condition. 'Cause I've um—I've taken him to psychologists, psychiatrists... His school keeps writing us letters... I think they'll kick him out before long." He smacked his lips together and sat back a fraction, briefly fussing with his sleeves. "He's abusive to me, to his mum, kids at school feel threatened by him... I think that's why I was so on edge that morning, y' know."

He dry-sniffed, shuffled his shoes again.

"Thing is, I'm not at home, that's the trouble. Me and his mum, we split, 'bout a year ago, y' know, so..." he inhaled, exhaled, tensing his back. "...Things got ugly, y' know? Very ugly... And, anyway, this—this bloke she's with—they both let him do whatever, y' know? No discipline, none whatsoever, man. But guess what? It's my fault. Not hers, not the new bloke she's with, it's my fault. It's my fault she had an affair." He knocked back his water like a man about to leave. "Sorry, I'm going on, aren't I. You're a dentist not a social worker—"

"It's OK, I—it all sounds pretty... trying."

"Yeah, it is."

There was a pause. I sipped my water.

"How did you track me down, as a matter of interest?"

"Oh, that Thai girl you were looking after, she showed me your card. But then I forgot your number and had to look you up on the internet.

"Right."

I made my understanding smile. Neil rustled his classic, black Clarks shoes on the floor. They needed a polish.

"You knew she was Thai?"

"Looked that way, to me. Is she not?" he gave me a strangely startled look, exaggerated.

"Yeah, no, she is."

He rubbed his nose and sniffed, drank his water, no longer interested in this person.

"You married?"

I said I was and braced myself, hoping he wouldn't ask me how it was going – he didn't:

"Is your little girl alright?"

"Yeah, she's fine... Bit of a mad day, all told."

"God, yeah, wasn't it? Fucking terrorists. People from *this* country. I'm not BNP or anything, but fuck. It's gone too far." He jutted his chin forward, as if his next words were stuck in his throat, before adding, "They just don't fucking integrate, do they?" He threw that goggle-eyed stare at me again, and I felt anything less than a clenched fist salute and cry of vengeance would be an inadequate response. I nodded soberly and managed a flickering half smile of accord. His gaze softened finally, and we fell into a trough of bleak, male silence. I thought to speak, but as the silence grew, I felt us both drifting into a stream that was bigger than our own worries about the accident—it seemed swollen by the collective anxiety and anger that had arrived in the wake of the bombings.

"I was going to ask you," he started up afresh, "I've got this dodgy tooth... here." He put a finger in his mouth, pointing toward the back. "I keep meaning to sign up to a new dentist, but I just haven't got round to it since I moved out and now I'm getting this—I dunno—like, sensitivity on my back teeth? Up here," pointing again. "You wouldn't have a minute to look at them, would you?" I sensed he was hoping for a freebie, off the books.

By the time Neil left the surgery around 6.30, I was in a state of complete bemusement at the outcome of our meeting. I was also enveloped in a warm glow of unlikely optimism of a kind that I hadn't felt since I was at school when enemies had occasionally and miraculously become friends overnight. Even after the check-up, seated upright in the chair, he'd chatted away, asking me all sorts of questions about my business from the mundane to the downright prurient. For a man who talked a lot, he also injected his observations with sharp and timely remarks. In spite of his earlier sour note about fractious family life, he struck me as an optimist, a searcher, who was also willing to share the things he came across. I'd expressed spontaneous surprise—then apologised for doing so—when he told me he worked for the government in Immigration; I'd taken him for an entrepreneur. He was pleased by that impression—he wanted to be one, he said. "But, yeah," he groaned, "for now, I'm one of the government's minions," he said with chiselled irony. He told me he hated his

job. In fact he was looking for “the right kind of business opportunity” so he could get out of it—he wasn’t going to be a ‘lifer’ like most of the people he worked alongside. He already had a few things “moving in the right direction” , he said, nothing he’d want to reveal at this early stage, though. He told me “the job” was mad half the time—no consistency in the cases, wide abuse, hundreds of foreign criminals being put out onto the street, some of them mental cases. It was all going to come out sooner or later and he didn’t want to be around when it did. He said the experience was turning him into a racist. He was adamant that he was the last person on earth to be like that—his ex, for instance, she was Chinese, he said, as if that settled it—he’d gone into the Department wanting to help genuine asylum seekers but everything had turned to shit, we were being flooded, the people above him were spinning stories just to hold on to their jobs or climb up the slippery ladder of politics.

I was just beginning to think to myself we might have to break into the practice’s last bottle of Argentinean Viognier, when he segued back to the pool.

“What happened to the girl then, the one who got a knock in the mouth?”

Perhaps he was just shy asking about a pretty girl, but his casual prurience elicited in me a professional response. I described what had happened to Sisira when I fell into the water and what I was doing for her and that it was free of charge.

“That’s bloody good of you. I mean it wasn’t your fault you fell on top of her. Y’ know who you should send the bill to? My ex. That’s where the trouble’s coming from. Maybe I could chip in something – maybe not the whole thing, but – ”

“No no, really, please, don’t worry, it’s fine.” I couldn’t help feeling this was a man in the habit of making ‘offers’ like this to people he knew were unlikely to call them in; had I accepted his offer, I would have wasted days chasing the bill.

“Pretty girl, that one,” he remarked, as though referring to a model of car that was good value for money—I felt he must have been eyeing her in the pool. “I’m sure you’ll do a good job, mate.” The hair on my back bristled at the tone, but he probably means well, I told myself. “And thanks for the check up, much appreciated.” He hoisted up his trousers by the belt. “You’re sure it’s OK to settle up next week when I come for the filling?”

“Check-up’s free,” I said, “but yeah, you’ll need your credit card for the filling.”

“Oh God, is it that deep?”

His look of mock horror made me laugh.

His handshake was more gripping than when he'd stepped inside. He thanked me for being so understanding.

As he headed for the doorway, something in the slight hunch of his right shoulder, a hesitancy in his feet, told me he'd got some other burden he'd want to disclose to me at a later date.

Thursday 21st July I had a text from my brother stating simply: 'Are you OK? We are.' It took me less than five seconds this time to realise he must be referring to another bomb, or series of bombs. The sheer brevity of his message conjured a faintly absurd picture of a future peppered with these kinds of missives between friends and families—a sort of lotto which, when you won, meant you hadn't been blown up today.

I walked in to the reception to find Rebecca and two rather worried looking middle aged ladies already talking about three or four packages that had been found on public transport that had failed to go off. Glancing over Rebecca's shoulder I saw Sisira was due to come in for her fitting at 5.30 and thought *how uncanny* that we should meet again on a day with news of bombs in London.

Later that afternoon I was in the reception when I saw Sisira run across the road heading for the practice. I'd already let Rebecca go, but Andrea was still around; (as much as I wanted to be alone with Sisira, you can't be too careful avoiding possible sexual harassment cases from patients).

Her scent—this time I was catching a stronger note of vanilla and a tree sap deliciously roasted around the edges—induced a brief spell of confusion to my syntax as she floated passed me and into the reception like a butterfly that might fly out the nearest window if I didn't catch her. She spun around as if the absence of a receptionist had disoriented and slightly amused her at the same time.

"After you," I said—and again my stomach was doing somersaults as I filed behind her down the corridor.

The way she got comfy in the chair, you'd have thought I was about to send her up and around on a fairground spaceship. Andrea bibbed her up as I pulled on my gloves.

"We've got your new tooth. Looks very good!" I said, perching on my stool.

I unwrapped the porcelain I'd received a couple days before and skated over to her.

"That's what you chose. Was it an interesting visit?"

She gave me a polite smile—the type of girl who probably didn't care too much for museums as a kid. "Let's take a look..." and, holding up a mirror for her, I compared the porcelain with her front teeth. It was a good match, very good.

"So how've you been?" I asked.

Considering how nervous I'd been earlier, trying to imagine how the hell I was to find a moment to ask her out without Andrea catching on, my outward manner was very relaxed. It wasn't until I began to sense that my banter and questions were affecting her like a breeze alternately refreshing and irritating that my confidence started to congeal. Still, she seemed happy with the porcelain, so I resigned myself for now to focusing on the job in hand. I sedated the area at the front of her mouth and asked her to wait in the front room till she was nicely numb. After she'd vacated the seat I realised this was probably the best time to ask her out—before she was too numb to talk properly—but then Andrea volunteered to go on reception – Rebecca had left already – in case we got any late callers, so I was left to potter about in the surgery, agonising over half-finished versions of how the dialogue might go.

Both women were being ever so quiet. The silly voices on the radio commercials were beginning to grate. So I punched OFF. Then dropped something. It went off with a terrific clatter. Was I waiting till she was so numb that she'd find it easier just to give me an affirmative 'Mm' to my proposal? Would she feel I was taking advantage of her by asking her before the work was completed?

"How's that then?" I asked five minutes later, arriving at the threshold of the reception to find both women gazing out the window like cats. "That numb now?" I asked tugging at my own lip to describe 'numb' for her.

Even with that lopsided, numbed-up mouth her smile was charming—because the eyes that lit it were so alive, so willing to engage.

When she was settled in the chair, I wheeled my stool up to her. The temporary crown came off a treat and everything looked fine. I cleaned with alcohol and flicked off bits off cement. I asked her what kind of music she liked.

"Buddha Bar?"

I hadn't thought she'd pick something I actually had in my small, if half decent dance collection and was delighted to be able to oblige – and asked Andrea to put on the CD.

Now for the drill. Whittling away at the stump till it was a peg. We were ready to fit. First with a temporary paste. You can shade the crown further with the pastes you use to stick it in

with, but as Sisira's teeth were a healthy white, and the match was already good, I didn't need to vary the colours—we could go with neutral. I showed Sisira the final temporary fitting in the mirror and she was happy. I checked her bite while Andrea prepared the luting resin with which I'd cement the crown permanently. As I worked, I began to grow aware that my chest was pressing up against her right hand. With the repeated contact—rolling back and forth on my stool, from worktops to the chair—I was reminded of those first weeks of contact between me and my children, when they were very small, nestling close beside me. I kept expecting her to take her hand away but she didn't, presumably because the warmth of my chest, the rhythm of my contact, had a soothing effect on her mind.

Pushing the crown on, ever so slightly lifting her head up as I did so, gently forcing her neck to arch, exposing her throat, I swooped briefly into the strangest vampire fantasy. Still pushing I reached for the mirror. She was happy and yet the music of her voice seemed to denote a fond farewell, and suddenly I was panicking that I'd let her leave my chair and walk out of here with no promise of seeing me again. Marriage had left me so out of practice at this sort of thing.

"Andrea, do you mind, um—could you tidy those things away and I'll, um—" I gestured feebly in the direction of the reception. Andrea sweetly agreed to my request without her customary, if lovable, smirk.

"Sisira," I called catching up with her in the reception. As she turned I saw she hadn't a clue what I was about to propose. I seized on the openness in her expression, but only managed to say, I thought she'd be fine. "—And if you have any problems, please call."

"OK, thank you. Bye!"

And then she was out the door. *Fuck*. She was leaving. I felt as though I were falling down a lift shaft. I counted to three and dashed for the door. I caught her as she was reaching for the latch on the front door to the street.

"Sisira!"

She turned, unperturbed by the fracture in my voice.

"Sorry, uh—I was just wondering, could we—could we meet for a coffee or something?"

She looked utterly perplexed by my words, as though I'd suddenly switched to Swahili. A younger me would have gabbed on, but I knew I was better served by a beaming smile, however forced.

"A coffee?"

"Yeah, not now, but, um—next week? Say, Wednesday?"

When she said yes it was as if I'd merely asked her to change the time of a six-monthly check up.

"I give you my number?" she asked, as if she had only the vaguest notion as to what use I'd have for it.

We went back into the reception to exchange numbers, discuss a time, my heart like a bass line beating away in the next room as I wished very hard that Andrea would not wander in. Sisira had school in the mornings, she said—and she must go, she said, she'd been very lazy recently. How was 4 in the afternoon? Perfect, I said. Wednesday was my half day. I already had images of us both in a local Starbucks, me with a decaff, because a real coffee would make me tremble with excitement, painfully working my way to asking her out on a proper date. We agreed I'd call the day before to confirm. And then she went.

As I headed home, that old friend Cynic spoke up, reading her yes as no more than an expression of gratitude for the work I'd done gratis on her tooth. I saw us parting on the sidewalk somewhere in her neighbourhood, me mumbling stuff about staying in touch and reminding her to book a check-up in six months' even as I saw myself falling further from her playfully evasive eyes before letting go and heading toward the nearest tube station, smarting with the embarrassment of having let myself run so hard and so far with such an impossible fantasy.

But I didn't care. I just wanted one more 'hit' of being alone with this girl. Because when I was with her, everything that was stale in my life flipped over, exposing itself to healing fresh air. I simply had to find out what it meant.

SISI AND SONIA

Available through [amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk) & [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)