



A BENT PENNY

Autobiography of Lifelong Loser And Sexual Misfit

Introduction

What you are about to read is true. It is not for the faint-hearted, because this is an autobiography of a woman who reached an emotional crossroads in her life far from home but took the opportunity to review what had brought her to that uncertain point.

It is an uncompromising and revealing look at a life torn apart by her desire for love and affection, thrown into contrast by the cruelty and callousness of people she depended on. As such it contains the light of hope but it has also dives into a darkness most of us could never contemplate.

'A Bent Penny' certainly sums it up.

Penny Lee -- not her real name, but that should properly remain secret -- was approaching 40 when she wrote this from her small home in Spain. She circulated it to a small number of friends of which I was honoured to be included. I never met Penny in real life but she struck me as a warm-hearted and engaging person in our email exchanges. She ran a blog, long since lost, which reflected her ability as a writer and provided entertainment and humour to a good number of people. I initially got to know Penny through some of her stories and because I like good writing I quickly appreciated she had a considerable talent for conveying ideas and telling stories. I am happy to say that this ability shines through her recounting of own life, despite all its troubles and agonies.

It is foolish to classify people by labels but it would be fair to say Penny was sexually adventurous and definitely bisexual. As her life progressed her preference for women came through more but behind it all she had a predilection for young girls. It was an attraction that gave her a lot of pleasure but took her on a life path fraught with anxiety and even risk.

This life story stands as a memorial to a woman who deserved far more than she ever got from life. I would ask you to read it without prejudice but equally I would ask you to read it because here was a writer who could write very well, and that is no small ability. She deserves to be remembered for all the good things she was and did.

Our lives would have been enriched if we could have seen more of her talent.

A Bent Penny

Penny Lee: lifelong loser and sexual misfit. That's me.

I'm writing this not for fame or fortune, or because I think I'm the cat's whiskers, or even because I think I have such an uplifting or interesting tale to tell that people might actually enjoy reading it. I can't even promise a happy ending, though that would be nice, wouldn't it?

The truth is, I'm writing this for me. You wouldn't be harsh in thinking, if you succeed in finishing this catalogue of disasters, why I've managed to survive thus far; why hasn't justice been served and seen the dreadful bitch off the planet? But muddle through I have, stumbling from cock-up to catastrophe and losing the plot a few times. And now I'm struggling to get it right at long last.

So bear with me, please - this is my confession. I want to come clean, grow up and move on.

Penny Lee
Catalunya, Spain

With special thanks to Audrey, Howard, Janet and Ingo, without whom this tale might well have ended much sooner.

A Bent Penny
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Preface

It has taken 38 or so years for this tale to approach a happy conclusion. Or a hopeful new beginning, as it should more realistically be seen.

As I set out to write this account of my time on Earth so far, it soon became shamefully clear to me that almost every aspect of my shallow life has been dominated by sex. Whether I wanted it to be or not. That makes it a sordid tale: a desperate chronology of weakness, bad judgement and failure of which I'm definitely not proud.

I was a bad kid, a desperate teenager and in adulthood, I deteriorated into a hollow vessel, devoid of scruples and driven by physical desire, until I sickened even myself. But rather than deny it, or cover it up, I want to put the crap behind me now. Own up to my past, get it out in the open, expose it for the baggage it is and then dispose of it. It is ancient history and I promise I'm no longer Bad, Bent Penny. Still occasionally naughty perhaps, still learning, but older and wiser and determined not to screw up any more.

You may wonder why I should want to publish this and expose myself to inevitable condemnation. Some of the things I've done certainly justify that and probably more besides. I just hope that people might be inclined to see my failings in context, and then perhaps give me the second chance I crave.

I'm starting over - I now have a nice home, in a great climate; a small circle of really true chums; and a modest yet growing business with the prospect of financial independence. I would have liked to add to that list that I've even found someone with who I'd be happy to share my life, but that prize has still eluded me. It nearly happened this year. But didn't. Yet again. So forget I said that. Maybe it's my just desserts.

These words represent what I hope will be my final look at my past. I really don't need it any longer.

I want to live the present. To find my soul and rejoin the human race.

Please let me back.

1967-1980. Kowloon - A Flawed Paradise

1. Early Days

I tried to find the family home a few years ago, when I was still a trolley dolly. I had a long stopover during a cabin crew assessment trip and took the Island line from Hong Kong International Airport to Kowloon, with the intention of spending an hour driving round in a cab, to see how much I might remember. God knows why - bloody stupid idea as it turned out.

The young cab driver couldn't find it.

We passed waypoints from my early childhood and each time the view from the taxi overlaid some hazy vision from my early childhood, a little ghostly shiver of recognition would supplement the chill of the air-conditioning: the school in Jordan Road, tricky junctions to cycle across, the row of shops where I would fritter my pocket money on twists of sweets. There were the same playing fields and surprising clumps of woodland, and the neat rows of houses and gardens that I remembered peddling past each day. But of the spacious colonial-style villa in which I spent my childhood, there was no trace. We explored every little twist and alley West of Nathan Road but nothing rang a bell. The cabbie was getting fractious, perhaps wondering if the stupid cow in the back was some timewaster and he kept reminding me how much the fare was mounting up.

Back at the MTR station, I waited for my return train with a sense that I had been cheated once again. Part of my life had been erased permanently, buried under the foundations of some high-rise development.

All I had left of those years was a file of my Father's papers and some extremely unreliable and sketchy memories. Plus an indelible clutch of very strong ones, which I preferred not to recall.

Until now. Twenty-five years after I left that house for good, I want to confront the demons and get on with the rest of my life.

This is proving to be the most difficult thing I've ever tried to write.

Even now, having finally taken the agonising decision to click the button and publish this drivel, I'm very unsure. Beneath the thinly-veiled persona that I maintain online to hide my true identity, I remain a desperately private and I admit, still fragile and insecure, person. Marshalling memories suppressed for a quarter of a century and presenting them in words was supposed to be my very own shock therapy.

The shock part is working. I wish I could be sure this is the right thing to do.

Oh dear - this is sounding like the self-indulgent crap I had feared it would be. But I've started, and if it bores people to death and they don't read on, well does it matter?

This is about me, after all. Me, facing up to my past life and saying goodbye and good bloody riddance.

Where was I? Oh yes - Kowloon. Part of Hong Kong. Late 1967, and still a stalwart outpost of Empire despite the sporadic riots that were unsettling the ruling classes. A straight-laced and successful expatriate businessman in his late thirties makes his Chinese PA pregnant. She is a local girl, bright, pretty but not worldly-wise and not much over half his age, and a hasty civil wedding is arranged, respective families disapproving and not invited to participate. No-one is pleased by the arrangement and forgiveness is never offered or accepted by any party.

However, the British financier keeps his job and most of his reputation and his new wife reconciles herself to estrangement from her family and she easily assumes the role of lady of leisure, destined for a shallow life of worthy ladies' circles, business receptions and chain-smoking afternoons lounging in drawing rooms, clattering the mah-jong pieces. The mismatched couple move into a modest yet expensive villa in its own grounds just off Kadoorie Avenue and the following summer their unwanted ugly duckling is born. These days, some people might know her as Penny, although to be pedantic, that's not the name written on her birth certificate.

I can't summon that last little bit of courage to reveal the whole truth and I must concede that almost all the names in this autobiography here have been changed, mine included. Partly to avoid embarrassing those unfortunate enough to have crossed paths with me. But mainly just in case a skeleton strays from its cupboard.

Anyway, the girl had a content, if perhaps solitary childhood. She attended the local Junior School, where with the innocence of childhood it was barely noticed that she wasn't the same as most of her Chinese classmates, yet neither was she a true guilo (Hong Kong Cantonese for a round eye, or Westerner). It was a good school, lessons in English, values from a fading Empire (British, not Chinese). Neither parent seemed to want to get close to her, perhaps for she was the reason for their enforced marriage. And so she spent much of her time at home in the company of the Lam family.

In the arcane time warp that was HK, it was commonplace for a home like ours to host two families - the Master's in the main quarters and the servants tucked away at the back. In the annex to the villa lived the Lams - Audrey was our amah (part nanny, part cook, part housekeeper), her husband, Jin, was caretaker, gardener, handyman and sometimes referred to by older colonial visitors as the houseboy, although he was well into his forties and looked even older. Their two teenage sons were the nearest I had to older brothers.

I have only the vaguest memories of my early childhood: a few out of focus yet happy images in which the sun was always shining and there is an indistinct soundtrack of laughter to accompany the fireworks and ponies and dancing of butterflies over the back lawn.

It is when I get past the fragmented recollections of birthday cake candles, my first bicycle, and playing netball in a cramped playground, that it gets more difficult. That would put me at about eight-years-old.

I curse my lousy memory. A few occasions remain starkly vivid -I can almost feel them, cold and clammy against my skin. But for the most part, I've had to write this part by stringing together odd feelings and flashbacks, with only a few factual cues to supply context and sequence.

You read about false memory syndrome, when people become convinced they remember something that never took place. Well I wish. The starker episodes I'm dredging up from the back of my mind, where they were safely buried for so long, are certainly real enough to me.

My Father was dreadfully old-fashioned in so many ways. I can hardly recall him in anything other than a sharp suit or perhaps 'planters' in the summer, with his sober tie tightly knotted and sleeves rolled down despite the heat and humidity. I always called him 'Sir', and I rarely dared enter a room with him there, unless I had been invited. And his fiery temper hinted at his Scottish ancestry, as I found to my cost the first time he slapped my legs. I'm sure he wasn't consciously cruel, merely traditional in his thinking, and I'm positive that neither was I particularly naughty, but throughout my later years in the villa, when I was at in the later years at Junior School, it seemed as if I was regularly summoned to his study for a sound spanking across his knee.

For reasons unclear to me, he became yet more intolerant as I grew older. The slightest infraction of his strict code infuriated him and by the time I approaching my graduation to secondary school, he

was using his belt on me two or three times a month.

Even at that early age, I could see him becoming more and more uptight. He would work longer hours and be impossibly moody when he did come home. It was wisest to avoid him much of the time. My Mother usually did.

She made no comment, at least in my hearing, but then again she always seemed to be a stranger in the house. She had her own vacuous life and I frequently had the impression that for her I was merely an irritating distraction. She wasn't especially offhand, but nor was she ever memorably affectionate and I often rarely saw her during the day.

Mother would drift into my life for a while when Audrey Lam was serving my supper, finding time perhaps to talk about my day at school and to amaze me with her elegant looks and beautiful clothes. Floral prints, fancy hats, white gloves. She had always embraced Western things and insisted on using her chosen name, Beatrice. She existed in the shallow afternoon world of the pampered Hong Kong housewife.

When I wasn't at school, I always tried to find new ways to insinuate myself into that world, hanging around as she got ready to go out, happy to listen to her inane chatter about things that meant nothing to me, if it meant I could be with her. I so wanted to be a part of my Mother's world.

Don't think I wasn't happy. I never wanted for anything. We had some marvellous holidays, when my parents relaxed and we gelled as a family. They made an impressive team when they were minded - I would peep in at their parties and long to be old enough to join in the fun - all those big, confident grown-ups, beautifully dressed and coiffured, braying loudly into the night as their host and hostess played the room so effortlessly.

Most of the time though, Audrey Lam was my surrogate mother, always patiently indulging my presence in the kitchen, provided of course, I made myself useful.

I never questioned the absence of other, real, relatives in my life. A serious omission, as it turned out, when I had great need of them.

Family was a subject not to be raised at any cost - an unspoken taboo. I just accepted that for some reason, to which I need not be privy, that I had no Gran, or uncle or cousins. And what you don't have, you don't miss. As far as I can work out, putting together the few tiny hints and clues I've filed away over the years, my Father had had no contact or communication with his own parents or family since he announced his intention to marry my Mother. What actually comprised his family, or where they lived, I have not the faintest idea. I suppose they must have known of my existence, for I was the cause of all the trouble in the first place, but I don't believe anyone has ever tried to track me down for an emotional family reunion. Which is fine by me: I've never tried to find them either. If I have living relatives somewhere, there is little chance we'll ever meet.

On my Mother's side, I know just a little more, courtesy of Audrey's indiscreet tongue. Mother was an only child, and before she met my Father, lived with her parents, commuting daily through the madness of Hong Kong's teeming streets to the merchant bank where she worked in my Father's outer office. The scandal of her falling pregnant with me caused them to disown her, and although she did stay in touch with them, they never came to our house. As for more distant relatives, I think both my parents found it easier to deny their existence entirely rather than perpetuate old animosities, so I've always assumed, whether strictly accurately or not, that I have none.

It was mutually convenient for the family to consist of just the three of us. I used to worry greatly about the dreadful prospect of having a younger brother or sister, which would have meant I would have competition for my parents' attention, such as it was. I had no idea that for their own reasons,

they would have hated that idea even more than me.

But it was my innocent desire to emulate my distant, yet utterly fascinating parents that prompted a sea change in my Father's disciplinary regime. Even now, it does seem so unfair, really.

It would have been a few months after my ninth birthday, as my parents had thrown a party to celebrate Mid-Autumn. I used to like that time - there were always little cakes with secret messages inside. That's it: mooncakes. Each year I hoped I would like the taste and texture and each year I was again disappointed! Nancy Lu's parents brought some one year and they had something quite disgusting inside them; but Audrey's cakes had rice-paper messages and I would collect them up and ask Mother to explain them (as they were meaningless hieroglyphics to me). She would always faithfully read out to me some profound or mystic saying and then I would take them to my Father, who always made up extremely silly versions like 'My dragon has a puncture' or 'You will meet a tall, dark elephant' and I would giggle and scurry off to find some more. I was actually allowed to stay up late to see the lanterns and the big moon.

On that occasion, or more specifically the next morning, my Mother and Father slept in late and I got up first and wandered down to the drawing room, where Audrey had yet to clear away the debris of the evening's festivities. I suspect my parents' parties involved more booze than food, compared to more traditional Chinese celebrations. There were several half-finished glasses scattered about and I innocently picked one up and swirled in my nightie around the room with it in my hand, pretending to be my Mother, joking and gossiping with my elegant guests. I retrieved from an ashtray a part-smoked cigarette, unlit of course, waving it about whilst I slugged the flat, tepid wine. I'm sure I didn't particularly like it, but I was having such fun. Hosting my very own party with my own imaginary guests. So I emptied another glass. And another.

Until I looked up to see my Father watching me.

My goodness, he was apoplectic. He looked unusually unkempt and thick-headed and I rather think that it had been a serious mistake for me to have turned on the big reel-to-reel tape recorder, for the loud music had woken him from his alcohol-fugged lie-in.

The drink had been swift to take effect on me. I just swayed and giggled stupidly as his face darkened.

I can recall quite clearly the familiar sweet smell of his leather chair as I bent over it, minus my nightie, clutching the studded back to stop the room spinning, and getting increasingly nervous as I waited and waited for him to come back into his study. He'd been searching for something special. In the garden.

How that bamboo cane stung! A traditional six strokes on to my little bare arse. Followed by a second six when I was too slow to say I was sorry. By the last, I was shaking all over and my eyes stung from the tears. As the initial shock of the caning sunk passed, I was left with the agonising, burning throb and a rising nausea. Disgusted with me, Father stormed off and back to his bedroom.

But above all else that morning I can vividly remember Jin Lam, passing by the open window of the study as I knelt there, naked and shivering and sobbing in a puddle of my own reeking vomit, 'reflecting' how bad I had been, exactly as my livid Father had instructed me.

Jin stopped and just stood there, watching me, and there was a cold, knowing smile playing across his lips as he looked me up and down. It spooks me to this day.

I've no idea how many times such harsh punishments were repeated: having proved effective, the cane was taken into regular use. Quite a few I think, for later my Father later deemed it a good idea

for me to parade my shame, and after a caning or thrashing with his belt, he would frequently forbid me to dress for an hour or two, so that my throbbing red bottom would signal to the world (or at least anyone in the house) that I had received my just rewards for my dreadful behaviour. And no matter how much I would lie awake at night, frantically planning the events of the next day or week to avoid risking his wrath, he would always find something at fault and summon me to his study.

It was as if punishing me released some of the pent-up anger and frustration he brought home from the bank.

He must have been very stressed there.

2. Bad Girl

I would have been ten when there took place one of the events that I find so hard to describe dispassionately here.

My Mother's family had always felt disgraced by the circumstances of her marriage, and she was effectively estranged from them. Father would most certainly not have been a welcomed guest in their cramped little apartment in Chai Wan. I only went there once, I think, as a toddler, but I have no way of being sure. Anyway, I worked out later that my maternal Grandfather was dying and my Mother had gone back to make peace before he passed away. So she was away for a few days.

During her absence, my Father had arranged for some of his friends or business associates to come over for an evening of cards or the like, and I was told to stay in my room. Years of living in Hong Kong had seen him succumb to the Chinese addiction to gambling - this weakness would resurface later to influence my life even more dramatically.

They were making a fair old din and obviously the scotch was flowing freely and as I couldn't sleep, I foolishly decided to get up and wander along the corridor to spy on them. After all, what did men do when they got together for a party? My Father wasn't normally given to laughing out loud and yet I could distinctly hear his Scottish roar and just had to see the unusual phenomenon for myself.

I would have got away with it if it hadn't been for one of the guests, who had chosen that precise moment to return from the downstairs bathroom. He found me, pressed against the wall behind a column in the lobby. It amused him greatly to prise me out of hiding and usher me into the drawing room. 'We have an unexpected guest,' he laughed and pushed me into the centre of the thick blue smoke. From around the green baize tablecloth, half a dozen pairs of eyes zoomed in on me, all chuckling at the scrawny little kid in the short white nightdress, blinking sleepily and pushing strands of her uncontrollable black bob-cut off her forehead.

All the men were highly amused, except one. Father.

I wanted the parquet floor to give way and swallow me up. My heart stopped beating. I prayed he would keep calm, send me to bed and deal with me in the morning. I was quite pragmatic: if he beat me then, I would have deserved it. All my own stupid fault.

But he had a different plan. He was too incensed at my disobedience, my embarrassing him in front of his friends, disturbing his night with his chums. Ignoring his guests, he stormed across the room, shouting drunken abuse at me. 'Who is being an embarrassment now?' I remember thinking, insolently. Perhaps he could read my mind: he was out of control. The cloud of whisky breath surrounded me and I was taken by surprise when he quite literally tore my thin nightie from collar to hem and ripped it from me. I was still in shock when he picked me up and (I think) threw me bodily across the room, into one of the big sofas by the fireplace. Next, I could hear a metallic clanking and for an appalling moment, thought he was going to strike me with the ornamental brass poker.

Thank Christ he didn't or perhaps I would not be writing this now, but he did set about me with something indescribably painful - an antique tooled leather fly whisk which was also kept in the brass shellcase by the fire, and in a frenzy that just went on and on, thrashed my naked legs and back and bottom as I writhed about, screaming my apologies and begging him to stop.

And as suddenly as it began, it was over. He was sitting back at the table, holding his cards, making a quip to break the stunned silence. There was some nervous laughter, the chinking of bottle against glass, a whiff of freshly-lit cigar.

I lay, curled in a ball, pressing myself into the settee. I dared not do anything else to attract attention. My skin was bubbling with pain. From head to toe. I bit so hard into my forearm that my teeth broke the skin, but I had to cry silently. I squeezed my eyes shut, pushing my head against a cushion, and then pulling it hard down over my head, to shut out the sound of the men's card game. I was too scared to think. All I wanted to do was to slink away, unnoticed, to the safety of my room. As the agony gradually subsided, I steeled myself to do it.

"Get over here, girl!" slurred my Father, when he noticed my moving. Years of conditioning had me on my feet instantly and despite the toe-curling shame of being naked in front of these grinning men, I raced to him.

He held an empty whisky bottle towards me.

"As you decided to invite yourself, you little bitch, make yourself bloody useful and get another of these from the pantry."

I did, as fast as I could, anxious to curry favour.

"Go round the table and top up the glasses," he ordered. And I did, burning with embarrassment as I squeezed my little body between the large men, stretching to pour a shaky measure into each glass.

Then a hand slipped up between my thighs.

I froze. What was I to do? I daren't disobey my Father. I chose to ignore it, to hurry around to the next man. I recognized the man who had stroked me - he was a frequent visitor to the house. He didn't even look at me.

After I had poured the drinks, my Father told me to stand in the corner - he would call me when I was needed.

It was terrible. Standing self-consciously as the men drank and played. One or two would shoot me the occasional glance and mutter something: the man who had touched me and the big, sweaty foreigner at the head of the table. From the way the others deferred to him, I presumed he was someone important. There were always important strangers visiting my Father, I had no idea who they were, except that as many of our neighbours were consular or diplomatic staff, many were from countries other than England.

When the game paused for a comfort break, and the big sweaty man came over to me, I was extra nervous. My Father would not want me to be ungracious. He stood, his great bulk blocking out the room, looking me up and down with a sickly smirk. I pressed my hand harder over my exposed crotch in embarrassment.

When the game resumed and the cards were being dealt, the fat man beckoned to me.

"Here, girl. Come bring me luck."

I glanced at my Father. His blank expression I took to be tacit permission and I scampered to the top of the table and stood a coy distance from the man. Nobody else seemed to pay much attention when he reached out and pulled me by the wrist until I was standing right against his huge thigh. Nobody saw when his hand slipped from under the baize and settled on my raw bottom, nor when he stroked my buttocks. Or when his fingers pushed my buttocks apart. I was petrified. Nobody had ever touched me in any way like this. I had no idea what to do, although I had a sense that what he was doing was not very polite. His fat fingers forced my thighs apart and whilst he played his cards, he stroked the softness at the top of my thighs. I looked at my Father. What should I do? I needed to know, but he was too busy studying his cards and exchanging banter with the other men.

I jumped when his fingers reached my private parts. I turned to face fat man. He laid down his cards and muttered 'Fold' and the rest of the table concentrated on their game. I looked right into his piggy eyes. He stared straight back and as his lips curled into the hint of a smile, his fingers aped the action, curving up below the green cloth, pushing my labia apart. My mouth fell open, but I couldn't make a sound. I shot another look at my Father, but nothing would take his attention from the cards. The man smirked deliberately and I could feel his fingers slowly squirming across my vulva. This was surely not right, was it? He licked his lips and I gasped in surprise as the tip of his finger pushed firmly at my vagina. No. This wasn't at all right. My Father was still engrossed. I looked pleadingly at fat man, and when he observed my growing discomfort, his face formed into a horrid, cold, mocking smirk. My lower lip began to tremble and there was a flash of heat across my face as the tears welled in my eyes.

Fat man pulled his hand away and chuckled silently. He tapped my bottom playfully and gave me a gentle shove.

"Alistair," he called to my Father. "I'm afraid she didn't bring me luck after all. Perhaps she should go to bed now?"

My Father nodded and glared his dismissal at me. Never had I been so keen to close my bedroom door behind me.

Then the tears really flowed. I was hurt, deeply shamed and thoroughly confused. Why had that man done that bad thing to me? I felt dirty.

But to this day, the memory that haunts me most is recalling how later, as I sobbed myself to sleep, I had the most overwhelming sense of guilt. Not for what had happened under the table, but how I felt about it. For just a few moments, when the man had his hand up between my legs, I had experienced a really weird and rather nice tingling in the pit of my stomach. An entirely new, bewildering feeling, which I momentarily enjoyed. Even then, I am ashamed to admit, I understood that I got a little kick out of being at the mercy of this predator, and being powerless to stop him invading my body. Now that had to be bad, didn't it?

I banished my dirty thoughts and resumed my childhood.

Puberty beckoned.

For the most part, I wasn't conscious of growing up. Although I had an awareness of my own body that seemed to creep up on me. It would surprise me, looking in the mirror, to see that in certain light, there was just the suggestion of a shadow under my nipples. I would twist and turn, contorting to produce the angle that best allowed me to fancy I had proper boobs. Even at that young age, I laughed at my conceit, and concluded that my ridiculously thin layer of chest padding was best kept to myself.

So it was all the more mortifying when one afternoon (I must have been just ten at the time), after my Father had determined my bum needed half a dozen strokes from his belt to remind me not to leave my room untidy, and I was forbidden to get dressed until bedtime, that I found myself in the hall as the front doorbell chimed. Audrey was not around and my Mother called down the stairs for me to answer it. She wouldn't have realised I was naked, as Father insisted.

The bell rang again and she yelled again crossly, and I knew my Father was upstairs and I really didn't want to upset him any more. I pulled the door open and peered around. It was one of the couriers from my Father's work. With a large carton.

The driver, a young Chinese in a peaked cap, kept asking to bring the box inside. He had to deliver

it to Mr Lee's house and he couldn't leave it on the step: it contained important papers, apparently, for the urgent attention of my Father. I had no choice but to pull the door open and let him in. He was so shocked to see me naked, he almost dropped the parcel. I stood aside awkwardly, and my hands and arms tried unsuccessfully to cover my crotch and chest. And I really couldn't turn away, or else he would see the redness on my buttocks, and know how bad I'd been.

He put the package on the hall table and as he left, he studied me slowly with an insolent smirk.

I fail to see why, but he insisted I write my name on his clipboard - I think it was just a rouse to make me lift my hands.

"Nice tits, Miss," he whispered and shot out of the door, giggling to himself.

I could have died.

The incident served to make me even more self-aware. I found it oddly intriguing that grown men took an interest in my childish body, even if I was far from comfortable with that knowledge. It was not that long before I came to learn how that interest could be manifest in a much more tangible fashion.

I had grown up with Gordon and Timothy Lam, although neither sets of parents actively encouraged us to spend time together. The subtleties of relations between upstairs and downstairs meant nothing to us, as kids, and so inevitably we did see a lot of each other, and I was in awe of them both, with their fascinating teenage awareness of everything that was cool and fashionable. Even if they were silly boys. Gordon would have been about fifteen, his brother two years younger, when it happened.

A warm, dry December day in 1978, I would calculate, which put me at ten-and-a-half-years-old. It must have been the beginning of the school holidays for we were all home, but my parents were out. A water fight in the garden, and for once, I have a good recall of that day. Jin had left the sprinkler running. As I came into the garden from a cycle ride round the neighbourhood, the boys ambushed me and turned the hose on me. It was all playful, although my shorts and vest were soaked and I chased after them.

It was just the usual rough and tumble that we had done ever since I can remember, until the point when Gordon ended up straddling me on the grass, tickling me. His fingers strayed and he put his hand inside my loose vest, over my breast. We froze, as if realising this was more than just larking about. I giggled, not knowing what to do. Gordon lifted my vest and I lay still, excited, as he put his hands on my chest. Timothy watched, amazed. Was this what older boys and girls did? I was excited and privately pleased that a teenage boy was doing this to me.

This was all so new. Until then, my world had revolved around school and games and ponies and my bike and my friends around Kowloon: boys had never featured, except as crass objects to be avoided both socially and in the classroom.

With a quick check that nobody was watching, Gordon whispered conspiratorially that we should all go to the 'toolshed', which had always been our refuge from the grown-ups. It was in fact a large room under the villa, where Jin kept his gardening equipment and had his workshop. Bubbling with anticipation, we crept inside.

Timothy was happy to stand and watch. I stood still, waiting for Gordon to take the lead - he would know what to do. He pulled up my wet vest again and stroked my flat little chest. My heart was pounding. Emboldened by my acquiescence, Gordon's fingers moved down to my shorts. I said and did nothing - what was he going to do? There was an electric hush in the room; I could almost hear my own breathing. My soaked shorts slipped to the floor. Gordon crouched in front of me, smiling

confidently, checking my reaction as he reached under the elastic of my knickers.

That funny, warm, tingly feeling came back - the one I had briefly felt when the fat man felt me up at the card table that night. Only this was much nicer. Gordon's fingers were so tentative, I could almost feel them trembling. Now I thought I knew what a man did to a woman when they were in love, how he touched between her legs. I felt very grown up. And aroused, though I hardly realised what that entailed. I moved my legs wider apart to make it easier for him to feel me and it felt even better.

Then, just as Gordon was gaining in confidence, and his finger was pressing between my expectant labia, Timothy blurted that Jin was coming and we all panicked. I rushed to pull on my wet clothes and we made it out of the cellar and round the corner before the boy's Father reached the door. A close call, but I felt horribly cheated.

Unsurprisingly, the brothers were quite keen to do it again. And so was I.

Two days later, we were back in the toolshed. Although the spontaneity was missing, the air of guilty excitement was if anything thicker than before. The brothers must have been working out their strategy, as there was a blanket laid out in the furthest corner, and a bottle of Coke. We chatted and joked and then came the pregnant pause when we knew what must happen next. This time it was different. Gordon took my hand and pressed it to the crotch of his shorts. Of course I was aware of the basics of male anatomy but hitherto it had never been of any interest whatsoever. But now, I was desperate to learn.

I was astounded when I touched his cock. It was larger than I would have imagined - surely boys weren't all like that? He showed me how to hold it between my finger and thumb and I was terrified of hurting him when I began to move my hand up and down along it, like he told me. His face certainly looked as if he was in pain.

Gordon asked me to take off my dress. I can remember feeling strangely disappointed, as if I had wanted to feel his hands undressing me. I ripped it over my head. I could hardly take my eyes off his penis, which had grown even stiffer and harder when I had rubbed it. He pulled down my pants and it was good. He was going to touch me. Even Timothy was involved now - he had moved closer and had pushed his shorts down and had his own small yet rigid cock firmly grasped in his fist. I knew this had to be naughty - because it was so much fun.

Much more confidently than the first time, Gordon ran his cool hands all over my bottom and my thighs, then began to explore between my legs. He suggested I lay on the blanket and I stared up at him, trusting but motionless with excitement, whilst he pushed my legs wide apart and parted my cunny with his fingertips.

He knelt between my knees and I watched, fascinated, at the way he massaged the shaft of his penis with his other hand. When he lay down on top of me, I was worried briefly, but all he did was press his cock into the crack of my pussy and move his body up and down over me. It was thrilling, having this handsome teenager tower over me, to feel the warmth of his body on mine, especially the aching tease of his dick pushing down hard into my slit as he slid over me.

He groaned and looked away sheepishly and suddenly I became aware of wetness on the skin of my tummy. What had happened? Gordon must have seen my look of panic as he laughed and explained that he had cum, whatever that meant. Timothy laughed too and so did I, not wishing to reveal my ignorance. But I was still mightily puzzled by the patch of sticky stuff smeared all over me, from my belly button to my groin, just beginning to cool on my skin and feel odd. Then Timothy croaked that he was going to cum too, and before I realised what was happening, he spurted his load. Right over my chest! I had a grandstand view: he was holding the end of his thing only inches from my

face, for goodness' sake. Now it all became clearer. The snippets of information I had learned about rabbits in science class; incredulous playground gossip; overheard dirty talk from older kids. So that was how boys did it. And that was their stuff that made babies. Amazing!

I was still perplexed by one aspect. What on earth was going to happen to my own body when I grew up? I mean, I understood the mechanics, but I could see no feasible way that something as big as that thing jutting out in front of Gordon would ever fit inside me. Not there. Absolutely not. I must have missed some vital piece of information, and prayed my ignorance wouldn't be shown up.

There I lay, naked and spreadlegged, flanked by two boys who had just cum on me. Wow. I was grown up now. Some of the girls in my class had talked about kissing and I hadn't been that impressed. But this was the real deal with boys, I thought, smugly. We shared the bottle of Coke. I was Timothy's turn to feel between my legs, but I squeaked when he tried to put his finger inside me and his elder brother rebuked him, telling forcefully that Miss Penny wasn't old enough to do that.

Now that annoyed me. OK so I was ten (eleven in a few months' time, actually), but we were 'doing sex' weren't we? Or my interpretation of it, anyway. I almost felt like storming off to my room, but that would have been childish and I was grown up now. And besides, Gordon's willy, which had gone all soft, was sticking out straight again, and I wanted to see if he would do that 'cum' thing again if I rubbed it.

He did. And so, eventually did Timothy, although it made my fingers ache because it took a long time. My front was slick and shiny and the aroma of four deposits of semen was quite strong. Not unpleasant - a fresh smell that reminded me of seaside holidays. I was delighted with myself.

And the boys seemed really pleased with me. I hadn't shown myself up.

All through that Christmas break, we somehow managed to arrange a few minutes of privacy in the toolshed, usually with both the brothers, and I was becoming quite adept at wanking, as the boys called it. But there was then an occasion when only Gordon was around, and I learned a bittersweet lesson. It was dreamy to begin with. There must have been a party going on upstairs (Burns Night, perhaps), as I was in my best frock, and I was over the moon when I slipped away unnoticed and met him in the garden. The fifteen-year-old closed the toolshed door behind us and immediately began to unbutton it. Oh yes - feeling his hands on me as he stripped me; just the two of us. That's what I wanted. I had my very own secret boyfriend! He paused when he discovered I was wearing silk vest and pants, and I can remember his flicker of approval when I, yes I, asked him to take it all off me.

Then as soon as I was buck naked, apart from my customary ankle socks, he pulled me against him (I could detect the firm bulge in his trousers) and put his arms around my back. It was so fabulous, I really did close my eyes and when I opened them, his face was over mine and his lips touched mine and I held my head stiff as he gave me my first real kiss.

To be kissed by a gorgeous teenager!

My dreams were being realised. Since the first time in the shed, I'd discovered the pleasures of masturbation, never before having recognised the significance what sometimes happened naturally on the odd occasion I had spent longer than strictly necessary washing between my legs in the shower. It all made sense now and I knew what felt good. I was at it all the time, in the bathroom, in my bed, and I found that imagining being with Gordon made it feel even better. If this was what happened when you grew up, I wanted the time to fly past.

But this was the real thing, here and now. Proper kissing. He persisted, encouraging me gently until

I realised that my lips shouldn't be stiff. I relaxed and our mouths moved together. I loved the way he held me tight and when he adjusted his stance, with one leg slightly in advance of the other, I unconsciously pressed my crotch against it and as we embraced, there was the most wonderful simmering heat between my legs that flared and ebbed each time I moved myself over his thigh.

His tongue slithering between my lips was another surprise in this incredible fortnight of discovery. Our lips were as one; I pushed my naked body hard against him and bore down on his leg. As his tongue filled my mouth, and his warm, soft hands roamed all over my body, it was as if he had total control over me.

And I was happy as Larry. Gosh - I was doing exactly what big girls did!

Then he moved away and had me lie down and as we resumed that wonderful kissing, his finger was stroking my cunny and it felt strange. I was wet. That sometimes happened in bed and had worried me before. Although this time, I had a feeling it was OK. And so was his finger, rubbing between my nether lips and his tongue was in my mouth and I wanted it to go on for ever.

Except that it started to hurt. For as long as I could, I endured the discomfort. Some how the mixture of pain and overwhelming satisfaction was too irresistible to miss. I squeezed my thighs hard, to make him pause and provide temporary respite, but I soon wanted more - it was so thrilling, giving myself over to him, and feeling so deliciously helpless as his hand produced those strong twin sensations in my tummy. But finally, frustratingly, the constant chafing proved just unbearable and I needed him to stop. Finding his fly and unzipping his trousers seemed a clever way of achieving this. It was the first time I had initiated anything like that and Gordon looked at me with excited surprise. This must have suggested the idea to him, for he hugged me and then lifted me gently to my knees. What next, I wondered.

It had never occurred to me that a man might want to put his thing in someone's mouth. Why? I wasn't too sure about it, but Gordon was older and knew what he was doing and so far, I'd enjoyed everything he'd shown me. So I did it, when he asked me.

I had no idea what to expect and having a mouthful of hot, tangy flesh was quite a shock, but once I'd covered it with saliva and my tongue had go the measure of it, it wasn't bad at all. In fact I found it quite delightful. What better way could I have to show Gordon how much I liked him? He was bound to be even more keen to spend time with me.

And he was very happy with me. Between us, we worked out what he liked best, when I should squeeze him against the roof of my mouth, and when I should stop sucking and hold his cock in my hand and lick the big shiny end till it gleamed with my spit. I would strain to look up at him and judge how well I was doing by the size of his smile. There was a slightly sweet taste, and then I was suddenly struck by uncertainty. Was that his stuff in my mouth? There didn't seem much, though - just enough to taste and it was a nice contrast against the raw flavour of his willy. Any minute he would squirt and then what should I do? Should I take his penis out and let it cum on my front, like he usually did? What if he did it when it was still in my mouth? Was that OK? Should I spit it out? That wouldn't be a very polite thing to do, surely. Suddenly I lost confidence. So much for being grown up. I could feel Gordon straining and he grunted, like he did just before he did it. I hoped he would do the right thing, whatever that was, and I wouldn't get it wrong and spoil it.

It almost choked me. I had managed to deal with the constant stream of saliva as my mouth over-watered but there was this warm, thick sensation completely filling my throat and try as I might, I couldn't get my throat muscles to contract. In a blind panic, I choked, convinced I was about to stop breathing. I pushed him away and flung my head to one side, coughing. I distinctly recall a glob of creamy stuff flying out of my mouth and hitting the wall. My mouth was coated in it, sticking to my tongue and I sucked hard to sluice the stuff and force it down, like you did at with the mouthwash at

the dentist after you've spat most of it out.

And I felt so ashamed.

What would Gordon think? I so wanted to be grown up, to make him want to be with me, and I had been such an idiot. Such a little girl. I began to cry.

And looking back to that moment, it makes sense, but then it all went terribly wrong. Gordon must have thought he'd gone too far with such a young girl, for he immediately dressed and stood up, burbling stupid apologies that only made it worse, for it was me who should have been sorry. He offered me a hankie, but by then I was so angry with myself, I childishly shoved it away, which of course convinced him I was upset with him and...

We never did it again. Any of it. Both boys distanced themselves, finding excuses not to be around. As for me, I had no way to explain myself, nor was I mature enough to understand why the relationship had suddenly changed. My guilt fought with my disappointment, and I was sad that something had gone so terribly wrong.

I had inexplicably lost two great friends. More than that - my surrogate brothers. I simply couldn't figure out how I had ruined our relationship.

But unknown to me then, there was one other factor that had driven the Lam boys away. I had absolutely no inkling at the time about what else had happened: a sinister twist of fate that was to change my life dramatically. The boys' Father later took great delight in telling me the details. He knew precisely what I had done with Gordon and had had words with his sons the very next day: warned them off going near me again.

And so it was that dire warning, not my inept fellatio, which had actually caused their very sudden change in attitude. Not that it made any difference in the end.

3. Jin

Jin had always intimidated me: even when I was very small, I was always happier if Audrey was in the room at the same time. That awful time when my Father had beaten me for drinking the stale wine, and Jin had leered at me through the window was impossible to forget. It was as if I could sense some malevolence in the grizzly old Chinese.

Which as it turned out, was precisely justified, for Jin stole the rest of my childhood.

On the third or fourth occasion he was abusing me, he recounted with glee how he too had been in the toolshed that very evening that I had fellated Gordon. He had been around the corner, deeper inside the cellar, where apparently he sometimes sloped in the evenings, 'reading' (which I understood to mean skiving or having a nap). When he heard the door open and woke up, he had simply remained still and quiet. Watching from the darkness. Watching me with his son, observing our kissing, with a grandstand view of the dirty little slut taking Gordon in her mouth.

Knowing that he had been there made my stomach churn. Even more shame, on top of what he himself was by then doing to me. I truly wanted to die.

Jin was meticulous in his abuse. Careful to balance the physical with the psychological.

He had waited a while to make his first move. I'd gone back to school, and there was a noticeable buzz in class - the anticipation of the final two terms, before most of us moved up to the Diocesan Girls' School. I always enjoyed being at school and by absorbing myself in my schoolwork, I had even managed to put the incidents with the Lam boys behind me. Plenty of time to learn about all that grown-up stuff when I was older, I decided. School was better: predictable, secure and a more appropriate way for a young girl to keep herself amused and busy. Besides, I could always let my imagination wander in the quiet of my bedroom, if the mood took me.

Good old school - I knew where I stood there. Unlike home, which had a ghastly surprise waiting for me that afternoon.

I was putting my bike away in the cubby-hole next to the toolshed. Jin materialised behind me and made me jump with surprise. I made a nervous giggle to show he hadn't really spooked me. He replied with a thin-lipped smile and asked me to follow him. In Cantonese, I'm sure it was. That was unusual -my Father always expected the staff to address us in English. Funny - I can't remember a single word of Cantonese these days. So I now remember Jin's words in English, which is inexplicable -perhaps a shrink might explain it but that is never going to happen. I'm going to sort myself out without resorting to that.

Slinging my satchel over my shoulder, I went with him into the toolshed; a brief tingle running through me as I glanced at the corner where the boys and I had spread the old blanket.

Jin saw me look and his lip curled in a wry smile.

"I think your Father would be very cross to learn what you have been doing just there," he stated, indicating the bare patch of floor.

All at once I was on the verge of being sick. My mind was racing, searching for a way to react to this damning statement - I could pretend not to understand what he was talking about, or else I could deny it, or, maybe, try to tough it out? Jin did work for my Father, after all - he was being downright impudent - how dare he say that? One look at the cold expression on the man's face scuppered all those options: he was going to make some big issue of this. I shivered.

He must have loved my reaction, for he simply watched me, saying nothing. My ears were burning, as were my cheeks, and the strength had left my legs.

Jin was of course entirely correct. My Father would indeed kill me if he found out about his dirty little daughter. The thrashing I usually got for a few scattered clothes and toys would be as nothing, compared to what he would do if he found out about me and the boys. In the innocent logic of a ten-year-old-girl, equally bad as the prospect of being beaten senseless was the certainty that I would have blown my chances of joining the Pony Club in the New Territories. I had recently been going along each week with a friend from school and I had every hope of being allowed to join in my own right, provided I brought home yet another excellent school report: Mother had virtually promised it. The bottom was falling out of my world.

Oh God. Not only that - what if my friends found out too? None of the other girls had gone any further than kissing - I had more or less been 'doing sex'. School would be unbearable once everyone knew. Word would get out to my new school. I couldn't face that.

My mind was whirling: why wouldn't he say something? Tell me the worst. Are you going to tell my parents?

Eventually, he showed his uneven, yellowing teeth. He nodded as he spoke.

"Yes, Mr Alistair will not be pleased. Nor will the Mistress. To learn what their filthy daughter has been doing in here."

To hear him talk about me like that, so disrespectfully, merely added to my feeling of despair. I had really lost everything now. He narrowed his eyes until they seemed shut.

"I think Mr Alistair will beat you very, very hard, Miss Penny."

He didn't have to tell me. My mind's eye had already formed that picture and my stomach had turned watery. Life from now on would be a living Hell.

If I gave him a sorrowful, pleading look, it was entirely genuine. And exactly what he wanted to see: his cue to go on.

There was a subtle change in his expression. A look of thoughtfulness. My heart stuttered.

"Of course, your parents don't have to know," he began. He had my utmost undivided attention. Was he going to be kind? Oh please, Jin.

"You must decide: are you a girl who can be trusted?" he said, mysteriously. Open-mouthed, I listened to his words. Then he was gone and I fell back against the wall, shattered.

The next day, as he walked past me in the garden, he murmured, again in Cantonese, I think. "Are you a girl who can be trusted, Miss Penny? Or a bad girl? You tell me on Sunday, after Church."

I hardly slept the rest of the week.

That weekend he did put me out of my misery as promised. And plunged me into a new, private nightmare.

He didn't just hurt me - he delighted in humiliating me as well, and his glee was written all over his leathery face. On that Sunday afternoon, as my parents took their afternoon siesta, I kept my appointment with Jin. He had a proposal, which I had no choice but to accept. In return for his keeping quiet about my disgusting behaviour, I had to make a solemn promise to give him an hour

of my time each week. In the toolshed. To do his bidding and keep my mouth shut.

He relaxed triumphantly - he had trapped me and I was at his mercy. We had given each other our word and in Hong Kong, that is an immensely powerful commitment, no matter what your age or circumstances. He stroked my cheek and growled out of the corner of his mouth that now he really would show me what happens to dirty little girls.

I was naturally very nervous when he bolted the door and let down the blinds. He led me around to his den at the far end of the cellar. Without a word, and all the time staring me coldly in the eye, he unfastened my Sunday dress and pulled it over my head, then stripped off the rest of my clothes.

I had to let him. I had given my word.

The touch of his big, rough, adult hands on my body made me shiver and cringe, but that merely encouraged him. He felt me all over, his breath rasping in my ear. It was unpleasant, but I consoled myself that I had brought this on myself, through my dirtiness. It was probably no more than I deserved.

But I had no idea that the pawing was just the prelude. Only when I was placed down on all fours on the floor, and I felt a cold wetness between my buttocks as he rubbed in some form of lubricant, did I begin to have a notion of what was to follow. Even then I didn't believe it was happening - the playground chatter had never mentioned anything like this. I squealed when his finger entered my bottom and cried out loud when he forced his penis in afterwards, squatting behind me and pushing with his whole weight until he had overcome the resistance of my sphincter. He became very cross when I kept falling forward and I had to grip the legs of his workbench to hold my body still as he bore down on me.

And that scene was repeated, week in, week out. It was part of my routine: Sunday School in the morning, gripping the bench and being sodomised by Jin on the floor of the toolshed in the afternoon.

I could never look him in the eye, either during those sessions or at other times about the house. For his part, if no-one was looking, he could never pass the opportunity to put his hand up my skirt and squeeze my crotch, to remind me that he was in charge.

For the rest of my week, I became adept at blanking it out, and it only became real as I came home after Sunday School.

Afterwards, once I had washed myself, and aside from the lingering ache in my backside, I used to continue the rest of my Sunday, outwardly as if nothing had happened.

So began the first of my double lives.

Autumn 1979. Onward to a new school. It was in its own grounds and really quite close to home, but still a huge surprise when I got there.

It was what can genuinely be described a 'culture shock'. From the voluble familiarity of the compact and cosy Junior School to this seemingly vast, anonymous township of learning, with me at the very bottom of the food chain. So much to absorb - rules, routines, unfamiliar subjects, an entirely new pecking order.

For me, it was as if I no longer had any solid objects to cling on to, once going to school had ceased to be a reassuring routine. I felt very alone. From being a daily moment of happiness, leaving the villa for school became another challenge to be faced each morning. I had lost my remaining place of stability, for by now, home was not the sanctuary it should be to a small girl; it was instead just

somewhere I occasionally encountered my parents (and had to fight for their attention). And the place where each week I would let myself be degraded even further.

On the positive side, preparation for secondary school had at least meant that I had some more time alone with my Mother, as she bustled around ticking off items on the endless list of uniform and kit. My Father even found time in his diary to attend the introductory parents' evening shortly after the beginning of term. Highly unusual, although he spent most of the time discussing business with other parents.

But I was now completely adrift. I couldn't seem to catch my breath, to master the school layout and synchronise with the timetable. I was always rushing or late. I forgot to bring the right books. I slept badly, fell asleep in class.

As each Wednesday afternoon approached, I could barely concentrate. I knew what was waiting for me at home. For Jin had moved the day of our session from Sunday, shortly after I began at my new school: he had quickly worked out that it gave him more time alone with me. With Father at work and Mother out at her regular bridge club, we would have the entire house to ourselves. So no longer did he have me in the toolshed. He had graduated from that, and upped the stakes. In the summer holidays, a few weeks after my eleventh birthday, he raped me for the first time.

August had been steamy and hot. The start of the monsoon.

During the holidays, I had been trying my damndest to avoid being at home, at least when Mother or Father were both away. I'd managed to persuade them to let me spend much of my time at the riding school and almost every day when I was not there polishing ponies, I would arrange to pedal around the neighbourhood to stay and play with one of my school friends. I was still hankering after membership of the Pony Club, but that had not yet been followed up: on my birthday, I was very disappointed, having convinced myself that it would be my present. I had received a great final report from my old school too, so I felt rather cheated. To ensure some more of the holiday was covered, I even pestered my parents to enrol me in a week's Bible class, guaranteeing another week away from the house and Jin's leering intimidation. I even won a book token for something, I've just remembered.

But despite all my plotting, one evening I found myself in my room and entirely alone in the house, with the shutters closed and a raging storm outside, whilst my parents attended a reception at Stonecutter's Island. That entailed an overnight stay.

He was so brazen. Cocksure.

Audrey had fed me and retired to her quarters. I killed some time phoning friends and watching TV but eventually turned in. The oppressive onslaught of monsoon tended to make you want to shut yourself in, make yourself snug. I was taken by surprise.

He waited until my bedroom light went out.

I leaped bolt upright the instant the door opened. He strode in, grinning, and sat on the end of my bed.

"Miss Penny. I am displeased with you. You have not been honouring your obligation."

I was petrified. I clawed the sheet up to my chest.

"I have been expecting you to visit me downstairs, but every day I find you have gone out. This was not what you promised. Once a week, you agreed. You gave your word."

Whatever I was about to reply just emerged as an incoherent babble. Jin raised his hand.

"You are eleven years old now. Not a baby. You are answerable for your own actions."

He shifted up the bed.

"And you owe me for my discretion. It is only fair, is it not, that I should be rewarded for my continuing silence?"

Again, I was unable to find words, intimidated by the squat, broad man who had invaded my bedroom and who was only a couple of feet from me.

I don't know why he chose the guest room - perhaps it was easier to remove any traces before my parents' return. But I had no choice. He held out his hand and I took it and he led me along the darkened landing and into the large, empty room. The bed was big, with a voluminous white mosquito net tied back to the wall. He lit the two bedside lamps. The tapping of rain swept back and forth across the shutters.

Like the well-trained little slut I had become, I needed no instructions. I climbed up on to the bed, facing the pillows,

pushed my pyjama bottoms to my knees and crouched down like normal, my face pressed to the cool, musty sheets, my naked backside jutting upwards, ready and available for his use. I closed my watery eyes and waited for the cold ointment to signal the start of the latest ordeal.

But when after a full minute the mattress still had not shaken with his climbing on behind me, I looked up.

He was chuckling silently, his hand pressed across his face to stifle the laughing. He shook his head as I turned.

"Oh not like that, Miss Penny: you're a big girl now. It's time you learned some new tricks." And with that, he stepped to the bed and gave me a shove so that I fell on to my side, and deftly, he sprung beside me and rolled me on to my back, straddling my legs. And then he unbuttoned the blouse of my pyjamas.

I can remember feeling no surprise, no shock, nor really any sadness. This was inevitable, wasn't it? It was what happened to bad, dirty girls. I was silent, numb.

Complicit.

He pulled off the lower half of my pyjamas and straight away began to stroke me with his rough, clammy hands. I just looked up at the ceiling, focussing on the patterns in the mouldings of the cornice, aware of his touch but trying not to acknowledge it.

He took his time, preparing my vagina, crouched low between my legs, he applied some of the usual ointment to his fingers and worked it so very slowly all around my cunny, then deeper, to grease the little flap of skin at the top of the crease and only when he had teased and rubbed and tickled and tapped was he ready to move down, to probe my most private place.

I don't think I made any conscious reaction - I didn't want him to know how I was feeling, and although my heart was racing and my lungs were paralysed when he jerked my bottom up on to his thighs and he knelt towards me, I wasn't going to cry, or shout out or beg him to stop.

My earlier fears about how such a great big thing would fit up inside me were not realised. I gasped

as the bell end of his cock forced an entry, but there was no tearing sensation or the like; I think after all that sport and cycling and pony riding, my hymen was no longer fully intact, for it seemed like no time at all before her was thumping his whole cock hard up into me, and the initial discomfort had faded, replaced by a persistent ache as his cock rasped against over-stretched flesh. The pain came later.

There was no way that I could face him. I could probably still draw quite accurately the intricate swirls and notches of that coving now, such was the intensity with which I studied it. Patterns burned into my memory.

He was grunting: sharp piggy sounds from the back of his throat, one each time his weight ground me down into the mattress and I felt my belly filled to bursting. Then he shuffled up even closer and with each stroke, there was a painful tightness that seemed to come from my inner labia and which seared up to the top of my head. But still I refused to cry or react.

Jin's breathing was now audible, almost a sigh, that seemed to take place on every third lunge. I began to count. One, two, sigh. How much longer?

Not long. I felt him go stiff, then he threw his head forward and made a really repulsive noise, a cross between a cry of pain and a yell of triumph, and inside me there was a new feeling, a slight warmth, and I knew he had ejaculated.

My misery was total when he climbed off, and wiped the tip of his cock across my cheek.

This then became the new ritual, for Wednesday afternoons. And if I dared to linger longer than necessary after Games, to postpone my walk home, he would get worked up and impatient and grab my arm when I arrived back, and push me up the stairs.

Then he would be unnecessarily rough when he had me. I dreaded having to explain the finger-shaped bruises on my arms.

I would imagine that Audrey would have been the one to notice the tell-tale evidence in my knickers after that first time, and must have mentioned it to my Mother, for the next afternoon, when I came back from school, there was a pack of sanitary towels on my bed, accompanied by a note in my Mother's breezy handwriting: 'Darling - so sorry you seem to have the monthly curse so early - use these. If you have any questions, ask Audrey'.

So typically Mother! She couldn't have coped with the truth even if I had found the courage to tell her.

Was this to be my life? Confused and frightened, yet unable to confide even in my parents? When a good week was when I was only buggered or raped by the houseboy, not given a good hiding with a belt by my Father as well, just for being me?

For the greater part of that year it was.

I lived inside myself. Nobody else would have understood, so I said nothing to anyone. Outwardly, I just tried to blend in and be inconspicuous - at school and with my pals, and I was content just to follow the crowd; at home I avoided my parents as much as I could, so as not to get in the way or annoy them, or give my Father any cause to punish me, a strategy that worked most of the time. And each week, in the guest bedroom, Jin gave me what I had earned for myself, reminding me just how useless and dirty I was.

It took a terrible event to end this miserable existence of mine. Having said that, if only it would have brought my Mother back, I would gladly have endured any amount of pain and humiliation for

as long as it took. I never did have the chance to get to know her.

I am ashamed to say, I don't know the exact date. It was 1980, some time between western New Year and Chinese New Year, because I remember my parents had gone out to a Ball for to celebrate the first one but the wonderful firework display at Victoria Harbour to mark the second (one of my annual treats) hadn't yet taken place.

There was a police Landrover in the drive when I came home from school, its khaki-clad driver leaning on the front wing, smoking and kicking his heels. It gave me a bad feeling.

I went into the house through the veranda as usual. My Father was sitting very straight and upright at the head of the dining table. He was unusually pale. A very tall European policeman stood beside him, peaked cap tucked under his arm, and the two of them looked up. My Father waved me to enter.

There was no attempt to wrap it up or soften the news. Father could be very economical with his words.

"Your Mother has died in a traffic accident," he said flatly, his eyes in my direction but not really looking at me. I noticed the policeman turn to my Father as if to say something.

I kept looking at my Father, as if expecting him to tell me he was only kidding and we would all fall about laughing at the practical joke. It was ridiculous - I'd only seen her this morning: she had called out a goodbye as I rushed downstairs, late as usual.

But he had nothing else to say. He looked down at a sheaf of papers. I frowned, staring up at the giant police inspector, but he merely tightened his lips and turned away in embarrassment. I took a step towards my Father: I suppose I'd wanted to hold him, but he shot me a look so icy and malevolent that I instantly staggered backwards, exactly as if he had physically punched me. I picked up my satchel and decided I wasn't required. I returned to the veranda and sat quietly on a bench, until the sun sank behind the hills and Audrey found me and put me to bed.

Mother had been knocked down by a lorry in the early afternoon, at one of central Kowloon's busiest and most notorious crossroads. No discussion of blame took place - I supposed it was just another accident and Fate had decided that one of that week's several dozen road deaths in Hong Kong should happen to be her's.

I really can't remember much about the funeral, either. There was an imposing church with stained glass windows, which I presume was St Andrews, and I was wearing a dark dress that made me feel hot. There was a small coffin on a plinth and a lot of flowers and lots of grown-up faces and expensive hats. I recognised quite a few of the women - my Mother's friends in the various guilds and societies and clubs to which she belonged. Many people touched me on the shoulder or arm and said well-meaning words. I stood as close to my Father as possible. One of the company's cars took me home and many people milled around talking in a low murmur over their glasses of chilled wine. I think her body went for cremation, because there was no graveside service or anything like that. I'm ashamed I know so little.

How I wanted to give my Father a hug. He was so subdued. Always he seemed such a tall man, but that day he appeared to me smaller, deflated. I watched him across the drawing room, nodding and talking quietly with a succession of well-wishers.

I had to do it. This bit I can remember fairly clearly, even if the rest of that day is hazy. I hid behind a large woman, who was waiting with her husband for a chance to offer condolences. As she stepped closer to where my Father was sitting, I slipped past and laid my hand over his, on the arm

of the chair. I squeezed his hand and smiled at him.

And he smiled back. For a few moments, his eyes sparkled at me. Then he remembered his manners and turned to the couple who were talking to him. He patted my bottom affectionately as I sidled away to my room.

Staring out of my bedroom window, the sounds of the traffic and the guests wafting in alternating waves from below, I felt calm. I grieved for my Mother of course. I naturally felt guilty, for I had so much I wanted to say to her, to be her friend as well as her daughter and make her happy through being a success. Now I wouldn't have that chance to make her love me. But even such thoughts are just selfish, aren't they? Me, me, me - as always, thinking of me.

Now she was gone, it would be my responsibility to take care of my Father. I knew he would need me.

I stayed home from school the next day, and wanted just to sit in the corner of the kitchen with Audrey for company. She was preparing vegetables for supper and I asked to help chop, for something to do.

"That's plenty, Miss Penny," she fussed, as I grabbed another handful of peppers to put under the knife. "Is only you this evening."

"My Father's not eating?"

She paused and gave me her puzzled look.

"Of course not, Mr Lee is gone to London. Long way."

I nodded slowly, as if to say, 'Silly me - I forgot', and decided he must have been too busy or in a rush to tell me himself.

Jin wasted no time in taking advantage of my being alone in the house. In retrospect, I think he probably knew full well what my Father was planning to do - perhaps Father had discussed his intentions - I don't know. Unlike me, for I was still numb and had no idea what was about to happen. My tormentor was determined to make the most of his remaining opportunities to abuse his silent little plaything.

I sensed him before I was properly awake and actually saw him. So that when my sleepy eyes sharpened focus and I saw his creased face watching me from the other end of my bed, I was not completely surprised. But I was very annoyed. In fact, I was extremely angry, and I shouted at him and told him to go away and leave me alone. When he just laughed in my face, I swung wildly and scratched his cheek with my flailing nails.

He snatched my wrists in his sandpapery palm and held my arms above my head, whilst I thrashed about, calling him names and asking him how he dared to even think of touching me when I was still mourning my Mother. He swapped hands, swabbing the thin trail of blood from his face on the back of his hand. He looked at and swore in base Cantonese. There - I can remember that, but not what he actually said. It's like witnessing my own nightmares with subtitles added. I knew I had gone too far to provoke him. He would be back, and I was for it.

It was only a matter of time. Not that long at all, as it happened.

I was up, dressed and breakfasted and sitting on my own in the drawing room. As a family, we were not big on photographs, but what we had were stuck in a big volume in the top drawer of the huge lacquered dresser. I was turning the pages carefully, slowly coming to the conclusion that I hardly

knew my Mother at all. We should have been close friends; confided in each other. I wondered if you had to be much older for that to happen: the mum and daughter thing. Now I would never find out.

Jin's shadow darkened the French window. His face was darker still, and he was carrying a coil of rope.

"You disrespected your elder, Miss Penny," he stated. "You cut my face."

I pushed back into the sofa: he was already standing over me.

"You must learn due respect."

His fingers raked a handful of my hair and the pain was sudden and excruciating when he hauled me to my feet.

I stumbled awkwardly beside him, trying not to trip over his feet yet keep my hair slack. Out of the house. Back to the toolshed. I tried just the once to make a break for it but he had a strong grip and I received a solid punch in the lower stomach for my disobedience.

He pocketed the key. I was bent double, massaging my stinging scalp, my eyes already watery. He pushed me across the floor and round into the inner arm of the 'L' shaped room, where he had his small work area and a comfortable chair and that horrid bench. His murky little hideaway. The rope swung in his hand and I didn't like the look of it.

His triumphant sneer bore down on me. My back was pressed against the vice attached to his workbench. He tossed the rope on the scarred and pitted counter. And his hands went for the top button of my blouse.

I was stripped in silence. There was no point in resisting - I didn't want him to hit me again, and besides, it was true: I had been disrespectful to him, so I probably justified some punishment. He was rough - showing me just how much he didn't care what I was feeling. I cried without sound, helplessly allowing him to wrench the sleeves from my wrists and the jeans from my ankles. He stood up and gloated at my nakedness. Then he picked up the coil again.

He wanted to explain, to begin my torment. He held a length of the rope across my face.

"I have told my wife that you have gone to stay with a friend, to get over the loss of your Mother. We have plenty of time for you to understand the meaning of respect."

Spinning me round, he wrapped the end of the rope around my wrists and tied it off. I was absolutely terrified. Jin saw my face and loved every minute - he had total power over me. When he gagged me, I wet myself. I can recall the shame of feeling it running down my legs.

I think it was the single most terrifying experience of my life. He kept me tied in the toolshed for a day and a night, doing every kind of unpleasant thing he could think of. He wanted to hurt me and succeeded repeatedly. He used his tools. My tears and terror simply fuelled his desire to abuse me further. This was meant to be a full and frank account of my life, but there is no way that I can make myself to write any more about that. I hope you'll understand.

When finally he had satisfied himself, and I was released and allowed to run back indoors, I barricaded myself in the bathroom and hid there (goodness knows how long) until I heard a taxi pull up outside.

When I heard my Father come through the door, I ran and hugged him so tightly, he had to prise me

off. Never had I been so glad to see him. Now he was home, Jin wouldn't find it so easy to intimidate and abuse me. I might even think about a way to tell my Father what had been going on, for at last, the repercussions of even the worst of his rages would be nothing in comparison to another session like that in Jin's workshop (every inch of my body seemed to ache, I had obvious marks all over me and I think I was still bleeding sporadically). But first things first; I was just so pleased to see him.

Yet I never did take that chance to tell my Father. Nor did I later. In fact until I wrote this, I've barely mentioned Jin to anyone, ever. Father's news was much more important. Over supper, he had something to tell me, which left my head reeling from a maelstrom of conflicting emotions.

We were to pack to leave Hong Kong. For good - moving to London, where my Father was now going to work. And not in a few months or weeks either: I needed to start sorting out what I would be taking almost immediately, for the crates would be arriving in the morning!

I hated the upheaval. Just as I was still coming to terms with not having my Mother around, and discovering how I missed her in so many little ways, I had to rush around, sorting out my possessions and frantically attempting to say a proper goodbye to all my friends. I never did have the chance to say goodbye to the ponies.

Father was quiet and serious, and I avoided him, just in case he turned on me. The sole consolation was that Jin was being kept busy, preparing the house for our departure and he never again had the opportunity to rape or abuse me.

Leaving dear Audrey was the single most awful aspect. She had been more or less my surrogate Mother and in recent weeks, she had been my comforter and anchor. Only many years later have I been able to appreciate quite how much I owed her, for she alone made my life bearable at that time and never once did she seem to expect anything from me in return. I wish I could have thanked her in later life, but I had no way of contacting her. If only she knew that I think of her almost every day.

It was a very tearful and emotional departure.

1980 - 1985. Downhill In London

4. False Start

We took a cab from Heathrow Airport.

In the back of the black taxi, My Father let me hold his hand and he kept squeezing it and pointing out landmarks. He made the cabbie take a detour through the centre of town, so that he could show me all the sights. That was the beginning of a long line of firsts. To me everything looked so grey and cold, as if London were painted from a palette that had run out of the primary colours.

The little house in Mill Hill, a suburb in the North of the city, lifted my spirits. It was a typical Thirties semi-detached, white-painted with a bow front and leaded windows, garage at the side and unruly roses around the front lawn. Extreme suburbia. The strips of grass between road and pavement, and leafy trees, were not unlike our little piece of Kowloon, which was comforting.

It was a furnished let and so were able to move in directly, and the crates arrived a week later as my Father had paid a small fortune to have them air freighted. The larger items - a few selected items of furniture and the like, turned up a month later, after I had gone to school. But once my small bedroom filled up with the familiar detritus of my childhood, it felt much more like Home. Smaller, cosier, colder yes, but Father was there, so it was definitely Home. With no Jin. But before I felt settled, I had very steep 'learning curve' to negotiate: my Father expected me to run the house. To cook and be housekeeper and manage the laundry. Quite a tall order for a hitherto spoilt and clumsy twelve-year-old.

Right up until the moment we boarded the aircraft in Hong Kong, I'd been expecting it all to be another one of my bad dreams and I'd wake up in my little bedroom sanctuary and hear the sounds of Kowloon and it would be just another day. And now I was actually in England, where everything was so strange and new and frightening. Reality shook me by the throat. It really had not occurred to me that there would be no Audrey in our new home, to take care of all the practical stuff and keep us fed. And that I would be doing it.

I had a fortnight before starting at my new school, and my goodness, I really needed that time. There was so much to learn.

Shopping in an English supermarket, overwhelmed by walls of mysterious things with strange names and brands, which one then used in various unknown ways for cleaning and cooking. Paying for them with currency that had no meaningful worth. Even carrying the wretched things home in those flimsy bags. Searching my brain for things Audrey had muttered over the years, like how long to boil an egg, even what bits of vegetables to cook and what to throw away. It all kept me fully occupied from dawn to well into the night, teaching myself how to work the domestic appliances and clearing up after my culinary disasters before my Father discovered the mess. Why when I had followed the printed instructions to the letter, or read and re-read the recipe half a dozen times, did what emerged from the pan never closely resemble the picture on the packet? I persevered. No way was my Father going to be disappointed. Or angered.

No way was he going to be given a new range of reasons to punish me with his belt or length of cane.

Incredibly and much to my surprise, he was actually very good-natured about my random cooking, and dutifully ate whatever I presented him when he came back from his new work at his bank's head office in the City. He even enthused occasionally. Yet very tactfully, he suggested that once I

started school, he would instead have his main meal in the staff restaurant, and that decision rescued us both from the unappetising prospect of depending entirely on my cooking, even in the holidays.

The strangeness continued.

My Father was just so different when we came to England, which was a blessing and a relief. He appeared content with his position at work and was only occasionally grumpy when he came home in the evening.

He was surprisingly protective of me, taking an interest in my going out to the shops and listening to my accounts of people I had met. He was even determinedly practical about the house, which was a side of him I had never before seen. Best of all, he rarely even raised his voice at me and after a fortnight, I was warily amazed that he hadn't even slapped me since we left Hong Kong.

I liked helping him to set up house. The massive upheaval took my mind off my Mother, or rather her absence.

In private moments, of course I missed her and I was still puzzled and angry that one moment she was still the calm, loving, stable bedrock of our family, the next she was under a shroud and I could no longer talk to her, or slip behind her and peek out at the world from behind her steady shoulder.

To this day, I'm still not sure precisely why we moved from Kowloon. In the light of subsequent events, it wasn't for the best.

Perhaps my Father couldn't face the memory. He would have had to drive past the place where she had been knocked down each time he left the house, so maybe that was it: he wanted to escape the daily reminder. Although later I found some hints that his finances were not as sound as they should have been - had that anything to do with it? If I were a gambler (which certainly I am not - that is one vice to which I'll never, ever, fall victim), I'd bet that the real reason we moved lay somewhere in my Father's business dealings. But I never did learn the truth.

Whatever prompted the move made no difference, for we had done it and there was no going back and so I found myself in a very strange land, with no roots, or friends, or real understanding of the culture. The Hong Kong I left had more in common with the England of twenty years earlier. I was truly an innocent abroad.

Except of course that I was far from innocent. Jin had seen to that.

And although I had escaped him, it transpired that I was still fated to be a natural victim, albeit in a different context.

My Father decided that I would be better off going to a pukka girls' boarding school. It was half way through the academic year and so the choice of school was limited, but off I was duly despatched, with a traditional trunk full of the prescribed uniform and games kit (including, to my secret delight, my very first entirely unnecessary yet much-coveted brassieres). Father drove me there and I was extremely nervous with anticipation as we pulled up at the huge, sprawling Edwardian pile buried deep in an Oxfordshire woodland. I was going to join the First Form. Having spent many Kowloon evenings devouring musty old volumes of Enid Blytons and WE Johns and the like, I really hoped that being at boarding school might turn out to be great fun, once I had settled in. I was so naïve.

Unsurprisingly I was so sad and lonely once he had dropped me off and driven away but I was swiftly swept up in the relentless routine of school life.

It was there that I began to confide my thoughts to a small diary -one of those five-year ones with a

clasp and flimsy padlock.

Each evening, after I had closed my books and had a few precious minutes of privacy within the curtained cubicle provided for personal study, I would extract it from its secret hiding place behind the radiator and hunch over the desk to scratch a few lines. It was a habit I maintained, on and off, until my mid-teens, until I saw no more point in keeping a lasting record of my tedious little life.

That diary was one of the very few legacies of my childhood that I bothered to retain as an adult. When I finished writing what you are currently reading, and had saved the draft on my computer, I spent a cleansing few moments, reducing each and every page of that scruffy little booklet to tiny fragments and then I made a special trip downstairs to the communal wheelie bin outside my apartment block, where I scattered inside the shower of paper like ashes from an urn. I sat up until midnight, watching from the balcony of my flat until I had witnessed the municipal binmen take away those unwanted memories. That old diary had no place in my new life.

Too much unpleasantness lay behind the tiny childish scrawl I began at boarding school.

It didn't take them long. A clique of mainly Third and Fourth-form girls.

I suppose I invited attention: I was different, withdrawn, nervous and gullible. I had arrived late into the Year, after friendships and alliances had already formed. The easy-going blandness that had been my response to moving up to my first secondary school back in HK failed to protect me this time. I was singled out. I fell for their pranks constantly, and although I tried to accept being the fall guy with good grace, I'm afraid the niggling and teasing and laughing soon wore me down and once they'd seen how easy it was to make me cry, it only encouraged them to pick on me more.

It wasn't relentless - hardly 'Tom Brown's Schooldays', but it took its toll. 'Chink', 'Half-Caste', 'Suzie Wong' were not the nicknames I would willingly have chosen for myself. Before puberty brought out my Father's gangly genes to the fore, I was more obviously my Mother's daughter, that is to say my oriental lineage was much more prominent than in early adulthood. I was the only Asian in the Lower School: an obvious target.

My belongings constantly went walkies; I had to remake my bed each night to remove the apple pies and rescue my soft toys from the window ledge of the dormitory. In narrow corridors, I frequently had to press myself tight into the wall, or else face an anonymous barrage of pinches and punches when the clique crowded past. And I had more than my fair share of enforced cold showers, with a couple of 'bogwashes' for good measure. That's what I deserved for being different.

Yet although I was emotionally fragile after all I had been through in the previous year, I was determined not to let the stupid cows beat me. Perhaps if I stuck it out, they'd leave me alone, I reasoned.

That made me treasure the friendship of the small group of my fellow outcasts: the nerds and the oddballs. It was unfortunately, a weakness the 'in-crowd' exploited so effectively.

Very quickly I gained a best friend. Rather conveniently, she had the bed next to mine in the dorm. Gill was impossibly chirpy and it really annoyed the clique that they couldn't wear her down either. I think this was actually due to her natural unworldliness rather than any great moral strength: she was a twelve-year-old genius and eccentric and I wonder if she actually even realised half that time that she was being bullied. She was extremely clever, a gifted musician, and looked the part too: round wire-framed specs, frizzy hair, cute freckles. Her chest had begun sprouting, whereas mine was stubbornly flat, yet if she noticed it at all it was just to complain how inconvenient it was, having this unaccustomed encumbrance to contend with when she played her violin. She preferred Brahms to Duran Duran. We enjoyed each other's company hugely and when the oppressive school

timetable allowed us a free hour, we would invariably spend it together.

Ours was an entirely innocent friendship. If there was any biological attraction, it passed us by unacknowledged. It simply felt good to be together. In retrospect, as far as I can recollect, I did feel physically good when I was close to her, and yes, we hugged as friends do, held hands sometime, but we didn't regard each other in any more meaningful way.

The gang of bitches clearly didn't see it that way. It riled them so see us cheerful in each other's company and so began a whispering campaign. I had to ask an older girl what a 'dyke' was, and the answer made me laugh before it made me cross. I knew all too well what men did to women but the notion of women doing it to women was ludicrous. How could anyone call us that? It was a disgusting thing to say about us!

Yet stupidly, not long afterwards, we played straight into their hands.

One evening, I had phoned home and my Father was less than sympathetic, listening to the litany of wrongdoings that had been perpetrated against me. I really only needed to talk to him, to get the words out: I knew I would have to handle the aggravation by myself but I still needed to tell him about it. The call went badly wrong - he went off on one of his pompous lectures and so I had a little tantrum and then he lost any remaining patience and hung up. To the fragile little thing such as I then was, that was one rejection too much. Back in the dorm, I hid under my sheets and cried for what seemed like hours. It must have woken poor Gill, and kept her awake, for after a while, she slipped into my bed and put her arm around me and held me to her. Considering how scatty she normally was, I can now see quite how wonderfully genuine and compassionate that gesture had been for her. She said nothing, just squeezed me and rubbed the back of my hand until at last I stopped sobbing and we both drifted off to sleep.

Trouble came the next morning. The House Prefect, doing the morning wake-up. And there we two were, huddled together in my narrow iron-framed bed. Not good form in a girls' boarding school. The Prefect made a scene, the rest of the dorm looking on, scandalised and delighted with the early morning entertainment.

Remarkably, we were spared being reported to the Staff. Both of us pleaded tearfully, and the Prefect, who had other duties to perform, couldn't be bothered to waste any more time on us. But the damage had been done. Gossip like that takes only a few nano-seconds to reach even the farthest corners of a small school, on the way gaining impetus and losing accuracy. And of course our tormentors lapped up each sordid detail of the much embellished incident.

Why they decided we needed their particular punishment I don't know. The psychology of the bully is beyond me. The clique passed judgement and sentence in *absentia*.

It was the following weekend when they pounced.

Saturday afternoon, after Hockey. I think the rest of our Year had been tipped or warned off, for one moment everyone was chattering and showering and dressing in 'personal kit', ready to enjoy a few hour's relaxation, the next the changing rooms were deserted. Expect for me, Gill and a sneering group of about ten taller, older and altogether unfriendly girls. I knew most of their names, not that that mattered.

"Oh look, what have we here?" said one.

"It's the little queers from The First Form," sneered another.

"The dirty little perverts who snuggle up at night with their tongues down each other's throats."

"Or other places," sniggered the first girl.

"So they can feel each other up and do disgusting things to each other."

"Fuckin' disgrace!"

"Shouldn't be allowed."

"This is a good school. We don't want filthy queers here."

By now the girls had reached us. Gill was packing her games kit into a drawstring bag and one of them snatched it from her and hurled it across the changing room. Another pushed her roughly in the shoulder and dear, sweet Gill just looked bewildered, blinking through her specs.

Two of them circled round behind me and I decided to run for it, much too late of course. Hands gripped my shoulders.

"Not so fast, Suzie Fuckin' Wong. You can't come to our country and bring your filthy foreign ways into our school. Dirty little bitch."

I can remember trying to say something and then falling hard on to the damp tiles as something hard was swung against the back of my head. Then a mass of arms and legs surrounded me and feet connected with my curled-up body and strong hands were tugging at my limbs and even my clothes. Heavy knees held down my legs and someone was sitting on my stomach. There was a ripping sound as my precious cheesecloth blouse lost an arm.

Across the changing room, Gill was much more vocal, screaming angrily in her croaky, precise accent, but I could tell she was undergoing the same treatment.

I felt the cold, hard wetness of the floor against my backside and was horrified to realise that these girls had stripped me naked.

"Is it true Chinks have sideways fannies?" one girl guffawed and as the others roared with laughter, my legs were pulled apart so that they could check for themselves. Someone had an arm around my throat and had my head in a lock against her body, forcing me to watch myself being prodded and poked.

Then without a signal, both groups of girls hauled Gill and I to our feet and we were propelled to the centre of the room, arms and necks still firmly grasped from behind. Gill had stopped complaining. Her face was red and her glasses had been knocked off or removed and she was visibly scared. The bullies pushed us together.

"Go on then, dyke. Kiss your girlfriend!"

Someone had a handful of my hair and was twisting it. I cried out.

"We said kiss her, chink!"

And so I did, to stop the pain. A peck on the cheek wasn't enough to satisfy them. Full, on the lips, tasting the saltiness of poor Gill's tears.

"Jesus! That's disgusting."

"Fuckin' makes me feel sick."

I must have been punched in the kidneys, for there was a great stabbing pain in the small of my back and my knees gave way.

As the aching fug cleared, I knew they had gone, leaving just Gill, sobbing, sitting on one of the wooden benches a few feet away. I staggered to my feet and made my way to sit beside her. She shuffled a foot away, to distance herself: I don't think consciously, but something had definitely changed. Through her association with me, she had undergone this ordeal. I so wanted to hug her and comfort her, but now wasn't the best time.

They had emptied the changing room entirely. We scoured the whole gym block, but it they had done a thorough job - not even an abandoned towel to be seen. Our hockey kit and clothes we found when we eventually got back to the dorm. After we had scampered naked, right through the school: across the Quad, past the Library, into the Junior Wing and up half a dozen flights of stairs. Past just about everybody in the entire school, it seemed. All of them shrieking with laughter and pointing fingers and whistling and yelling names.

I was mortified; Gill completely traumatised. We hid in the dorm until lights out, and were awarded several official punishments for our absence from supper. Chapel the next morning was torture, every face seeming to smirk knowingly at us.

Our notoriety soon passed. These things don't last - there is always another bit of excitement or school gossip to take their place, but neither Gill nor I could ever forget. We decided it would be better if we spent less time together and sadly, our friendship dissolved quite rapidly.

I alone now became the focus for the bullies and there was some consolation that at least dear, scatterbrained Gill would be left alone. I put up with it for another month, before I could take no more of having my locker trashed and my possessions thrown out of the window and my arms and legs pinched and punched in every queue for the refectory or chapel. I had tried so very hard to brave it out, but the pressure was relentless and when my schoolwork suffered, I just couldn't cope any longer. In common with prisons and military recruit training, it is part of boarding school culture that you don't 'grass' on your peers, and even though I perhaps ought to have explained to the teaching staff that my late work and missing books were due to my being picked upon, I was terrified that I wouldn't be believed and I would then suffer even more. The trouble with my chosen course of action, or rather inaction, was that inevitably I began earning extra punishments for a host of trivial things, and these, on top of the oppressively tight timetable, and the need to allow time always to recover my missing possessions, finally pushed me over the edge.

One night, I slipped out of the dorm and crept down to my secret sanctuary - the chaplain's room behind the chapel. I remember quite vividly lying in a ball on the scratchy blue carpet, crying in total desperation until my throat was raw.

My Father wasn't best pleased to pull me out of that school after less than two terms.

But even he couldn't deny my obvious distress. In fact he surprised and delighted me when he accepted my pleading almost without objection and actually stuck up for me rather firmly when we met in the Headmistress's office, taking her to task for letting such bullying take place. Much to my relief, we all three readily agreed that my leaving without delay would be in everyone's best interest. He even successfully demanded the return of part of my fees.

I dreaded going back home, in case my Father's supportive attitude had been only temporary and that as soon as we were back, he'd remember his belt, but he hardly mentioned the episode ever again and if anything was remarkably careful to ensure I had my own space at home. His new laissez-faire attitude made it so much easier. That it was actually born of apathy passed me by - I had not yet noticed how he had begun to lose his zest for life. Of course, I now know that had

already begun the steady process of decline that eventually finished him off, but how could I have recognised the signs then? He had rescued me from the bullies and I now owed him a debt of gratitude.

He arranged for me to attend the local secondary school in Mill Hill and I was excited, if apprehensive. This time it was a traditional grammar school. Third time lucky?

It was. This time there was no bullying and I coped fine with the new surroundings and yet another set of classmates. It was an entirely normal and unremarkable period, apart from the additional duties I had at home, fulfilling the role of industrious, if inept, little housewife.

That Christmas, our first in England, I tried to hard to show Father how much appreciated his understanding and support. For weeks, I had secretly studied cook books at school and wrote up an entire plan to provide proper, traditional English food over the holiday: ingredients, shopping list, cooking instructions with split-second timing. My Father humoured me and issued me a little extra housekeeping, and though my cooking has never been anything more than barely adequate, I suspect that my first attempt at the full works - roast turkey and steamed pud (as separate courses I must point out!) - was possibly my lifetime best. Sad to think I peaked at only thirteen! Just the two of us, sharing the dinner, with crackers and some little presents afterwards, and he even helped with the washing up. Yes, I'd go so far as to say that Christmas was never bettered.

Joining the Girl Guides was also a masterstroke. I threw myself into it, eagerly trying to fill my sleeve with badges. Yet again I must have found comfort in wearing a uniform and I'm sure this foible led directly to my choice of career. It was also yet another factor in shaping my tortured sexuality.

It wasn't long before I had developed a crush on this fabulous girl. We'd been away on Camp, somewhere in Wiltshire, so it must have been 1981 - a few weeks after my fourteenth birthday, though emotionally I was still much, much younger. She was so perfect in every way. Sixteen, with a great figure, Celia was everything I longed to be, and knew I couldn't. Blue-eyed, blonde, with a crisp, rounded accent. She didn't endure the agonies of recurring spots on her chin. Her skirt and blouse fitted as if they had been tailored and she even marched with an effortless grace. I think all the juniors admired her, but I fell hopelessly in love with her.

Each week I would arrive early at the hall in which the Guides met, in the hope of exchanging a few words and a laugh with her. I plotted to ensure that I could be alongside her in activities, sitting as close as I could to her or best of all, being her partner. Her company was so easy and if my constant presence and doe-eyes annoyed her, she never let it show. I thought I had been so clever when I engineered her invitation to spend a Saturday afternoon with her: the first of several.

Celia's home was nearly as impressive as she, and I was chuffed to bits that her Mother took to me instantly. Despite the differences in our age, school and background, our friendship grew, possibly because I was happy to do whatever she wanted and agreed with everything she said. I became a regular visitor. I adopted her tastes, aped her mannerisms, aspired to her wardrobe, although my efforts to emulate the New Romantic look from what I could find in my wardrobe fell far short of Celia's cool standards.

And I felt so comfortable with her. Sprawling on her bed on a Saturday afternoon, listening to Radio 1 or her latest cassettes and enthusing over her latest clothes was as close to Heaven as I could hope for.

I loved watching her change and float around the room to show off her latest trendy new things. She couldn't have known how my throat tightened and my lungs ached each time she stripped to her bra and pants. I would study her as subtly as I could, inwardly dismayed at the way her full, firm

teenage body filled her underwear in a way my awkward, skinny bits and pieces never would. I was acutely aware of my own feelings; even had a good idea why I had that warm buzz inside my tummy. I had yet to be conditioned by received thinking and social pressure and it simply didn't cross my mind that perhaps I shouldn't feel that way about another girl. How I longed to touch her and feel those delicious curves for myself. What I failed to appreciate, even by the age of fourteen, was that my feelings just might not be reciprocated.

So when I thought the opportunity had finally presented itself, and naturally I grabbed at it, the awful truth was even more devastating, for the possibility that my love would not be accepted or even appreciated was not something I had considered.

All I had done was take hold of her hand, as we huddled closely, sharing one of Celia's magazines. She froze and examined her hand in my palm, then saw my pathetic expression, no doubt fixed in some adoring gaze, and she leapt away, flapping her wrist as if to shake an unpleasant substance from her fingers.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, Pen? Oh my God, that's disgusting! Jesus, I don't believe this!"

She made a meal of it, so loudly that her Mother came tearing up the stairs, full of concern at the racket. As she opened Celia's bedroom door, I dashed past, red-faced and about to howl.

How could I have been so stupid? I hated myself all over again, cursing my ignorance through the tears all the way home. Rejection is one of the hardest humiliations. I couldn't bear to see Celia again. I don't think my Father realised for many weeks that I had stopped going to Guides and then he passed no comment.

That came as a great relief, as I was dreading having to explain why yet again I had run away from something unpleasant. What would he think of me?

But by then, my Father had more than enough problems of his own.

5. Changing Fortunes

I was surprised to find him at home. He was sitting in the living room, in the dark. I pushed open the door and in the light from the hallway, I could see his head was in his hands. I quickly made to leave him alone.

But my Father waved me to join him, indicating I should sit beside him on the settee. Something had to be up. He never did that before. I couldn't see his face properly, but his voice was cracking.

"I'm so sorry, Penny."

Another first. I prepared myself for something serious, searching my brain for anything that I might have done to cause it. It had been a long time since he had hit me.

"We have to move again," he said quietly. "My firm has let me go and we can't afford to live here any longer."

So that was it. I didn't really understand, although I was already ticking off mentally the things I'd miss. But we'd done it before, we'd moved and set up a new home together, so it surely wasn't that bad.

I was inwardly devastated at having yet again to change school, but Father was more important: it was my job to look after him.

It was such an unusual situation, sitting there like that. I put my arms around his neck and hugged him. And he hugged me back. Properly. I buried my face against his collar, filling my nostrils with the familiar scent of his aftershave. I didn't want it to stop. I was just sad that it had taken something which had upset him in order to give me the opportunity to hold him.

There was a difficult period lasting a few weeks, when the house seemed different each time I got home from school. Furniture would be missing from a room. One Sunday, my Father's beautiful car was driven away by its new owner. I said tearful goodbyes to my mates, handed back my schoolbooks. A man arrived with a big white van and my Father helped him load up what we were taking. I squeezed between them on the bench seat and we headed South.

It wasn't that far, really, but in those few miles, the sky receded as the buildings grew taller and the trees became scarcer and I noticed the litter on the streets.

When we pulled into the estate, I didn't realise we had arrived. It was dreadful – two vast quadrangles of dark red flats, piled on top of each other, with external balconies, gaudy doors and draughty stairwells at the end of each block. In the centre of each square was an area of dirty concrete, unencumbered by any greenery, just some abandoned washing line poles and the derelict remains of a children's playground. The estate was ringed by cramped streets packed with all manner of vehicles in varying states of decay. We parked the van and picked our way through abandoned fridges and heaped rubbish and with a sense of disbelief, I followed my Father up to our new home on the second of four landings. The flat smelt sour.

Two bedrooms, my Father's facing outwards, mine adjacent to the landing, a cramped and damp bathroom next to it, a dark living room and a small kitchen-diner. Dusty and stained carpet, peeling and missing wallpaper. A world apart from the spacious elegance of Kowloon or even the tired suburban orderliness of Mill Hill.

My disappointment was ameliorated by my improved relationship with my Father, who became

more human each time life knocked him back. If the price I had to pay for that was living in this dump, well so be it.

I busied myself as the apprentice housewife again, unpacking and cleaning and late in the evening, he went out for fish and chips and we ate them together at the little kitchen table, just like a proper family. We tried to cheer each other up ("this flat isn't too bad - we can make it nice, can't we?") and Father told me about the new job he had recently started in a warehouse behind St Pancras station, laughing about how mundane were his duties and unimaginative his managers. He had never discussed work before. Since that momentous evening in our old house in Mill Hill, when he announced the impending move, he hadn't commented that I had been calling him 'Dad' rather than 'Sir'. Or perhaps he hadn't noticed.

At least neither of us had to spend all day in our new home, forced to reflect on our changed fortune: I had my new school to attend and he left for work early each morning, often staying out with his new friends and colleagues until quite late. It was no problem – I kept his supper warm for him and snoozed on the settee so that I could serve it up whenever. I felt a bit sorry that my Father's new work didn't have its own canteen (like the bank had), for it meant he now needed my dubious cookery to keep him sustained.

School was a bit of shock too. A typical inner-London redbrick rabbit warren, named after an enlightened turn-of-the-century philanthropist and which had only recently ceased to be a boys-only establishment. Its heritage showed. There were well-equipped workshops for training South Camden's future mechanics and plumbers, but there was none of the heady academic aspirations of the County Grammar I had left. That said, I fitted in more easily than at any of the other schools. Half my new class were immigrants or the sons and daughters of immigrants. Crossing the playground at break, you could hear half a dozen different languages. And the teaching staff were in the main encouraging and competent, though clearly exhausted much of the time. Oh well, even if the surroundings were a bit daunting, I could handle it. School is just like me, I thought, looks aren't that important!

It did take a while though, before I felt reasonably comfortable walking around the neighbourhood. During the day it wasn't too bad, especially when I began to recognise other kids from school and could exchange a wave, but after dark it was unnerving, even if only popping down to the 'open all hours' to fetch my Father some smokes or a fresh bottle. My age was never questioned by the hard-working Sikhs who ran it - they soon marked me down as a good customer.

The random noises were the most unsettling aspect of living on the estate. At any time of day or night. Not like the general rumble in our nice part of Kowloon, or the soothing hum of traffic from the motorway in Mill Hill. This place could assault your eardrums at any time with anything from a drunken fight to a baby's scream. Car alarms, random shouting - it took a long while before I had an unbroken night's kip.

But you can't dwell on these things and I soon enough began to feel settled. I made new friends and enjoyed being in the top set for all my subjects at school. Quite a novelty, and I took care not to be too smug about it. It was quite OK for a whole year. Parts of it were great.

Dad even took me away for a week's holiday: a coach to Great Yarmouth and a caravan on the cliffs. It was amazing. We had a fabulous time, indulging in all the British seaside traditions – bags of greasy doughnuts, walking slowly around the model village and girly screams on the big dipper. And that was just Father - I yelled a bit as well! Bouncing along on a fleabitten donkey on the beach was not quite in the same league as posing on a lovingly-groomed pony in the New Territories, but I still enjoyed it.

One memorable evening, we went on a long walk right out of town, over the sand dunes. We

paused and could see nothing but sand and sea and sky; not a soul around apart from the two of us. My Father lit up and for the only time I can remember, told me about something from his own childhood: a seaside holiday somewhere unpronounceable in Scotland. Staring out to sea and talking so quietly I had to lean close to listen, he confided to being an only child, and I could sense his pain when he mentioned his own parents, about whom I knew nothing and from whom I had been denied contact. He told me a few anecdotes and I caught myself beaming at him. I willed him to tell me more. But the second he trod his stub end into the sand, the door closed, almost as if he was extinguishing the flame of his own memory.

The next day, I braved a less than subtle question about his past, hoping to persuade him to resume his reminiscence and tell me of the family beyond. The moment had passed, though: he changed the subject automatically and I knew he would never speak about it to me again.

Back in Camden, my friends couldn't understand why I kept going on about it: spending your fifteenth birthday on holiday with your Dad was hardly the hippest thing to do.

I just couldn't explain how it was the best birthday present I'd ever had.

I wasn't exactly ecstatic to be living in a run-down inner city estate, but as I began my Fifth Form - exam year - life was bearable. Schoolwork was interesting and I was consistently near the top of my class in all my GCE subjects. I had a good circle of acquaintances through school, and was included in a loose gaggle of girls that swept up most of the waifs and strays who failed to qualify for membership of the 'cool' gangs. We were a rare assortment of teenagers, almost all of us born outside the UK, or at best, second generation English. We had our own slang and a truly awful accent that seemed to afflict us all when we were together - a hybrid North London twang with double negatives and a West Indies via Karachi disregard for correct verb endings. "N'aht ah mean, innit?" In unguarded moments, I to this day catch myself thinking in it, even if I've successfully managed to regain my own neutral accent and received pronunciation. With a hint of a lisp.

Unlike the other gangs, my group's principal topic of conversation was not usually boys. Several of the other girls were instinctively discouraged from such distracting thoughts by their cultural and family backgrounds - husbands would be chosen for them in good time - and quite bluntly, one or two others of us were just too damned 'minging' to have stood much of a chance of attracting any half-decent Sixth Former, even if we'd wanted to. Just as well then that I wasn't in the least bit interested in that particular subject.

But that's not to say my teenage hormones weren't every bit as active as those of my classmates.

It took a long while to bounce back from Celia's rejection. I hated myself for being so stupid, for misreading the signs. When I finally restored my self-confidence, I was determined not to repeat my mistake. And as an added imperative, I was desperate for any reason to stay out of that miserable flat as much as possible.

For my Father seemed to be in freefall decline. His despair seemed to permeate the very walls of the place. And he was often an unpleasant companion, even if he was my Dad, snapping and moody. There were times when I began to be afraid of him again.

He succumbed to depression. The last of his confidence and optimism had deserted him and the constant drudge of his work, and the seediness of our surroundings, seemed to push him into a perpetual circle of bad temper and melancholy. I don't think I appreciated quite how bad he was feeling, poor man. And I was certainly not as supportive as I should have been. But I was a selfish teenager now, wasn't I? Didn't he realise I had pressures too?

We found an acceptable compromise: steering clear of each other and sharing sullen mealtimes but

little else.

It was therefore fairly understandable that when something good came along, I grabbed it and treasured and nurtured it.

And 'it' came in the form of a divine First-former who lived in the next block of flats. We'd shadowed each other to and from school for a couple of weeks before we fell to chatting. We had much in common: we hated where we lived, had difficult parents, and were less than impressed with many aspects of our school. Maz was always funny. She had a lovely accent, part nasal London, part sensual Mediterranean, from her Greek family, although she herself had been born and raised in the neighbourhood. Once it became clear we were destined to become close mates, I took time to study her as she prattled and joked and larked about, and I simply loved what I saw.

I was old enough to understand my own feelings. Why my spirits would lift when I saw her; why I had that tightness in my windpipe whenever our bodies were close. I had felt much the same with Celia, but this time I was determined to remain in control of my emotions.

There couldn't be another incident. I would have to be so damned careful.

As for Maz, well I never did quite work out how much she simply followed my lead, or whether she had genuine feelings for me too. The issue bothered me. I spent countless hours in my crummy bedroom, agonising over it. I tried to imagine myself three years younger, at her age, and wondered whether had the opportunity arisen, I could have been emotionally attracted to an older girl, but always the spectre of Kowloon destroyed my train of thought and I knew I couldn't imagine how a 'normal' girl could feel. At twelve, I wasn't given any opportunity to learn about relationships through innocent experimentation.

What was undeniable was my own infatuation with her, which was becoming more painful by the day. Maz became the unknowing focus of my existence, constantly in my thoughts. She represented the only human to whom I had any capacity to offer my love. The urge to hug and hold her became near-impossible to suppress.

I daydreamed about her, imagining the two of us in warm, exotic places, her beautiful dark eyes sparkling with shared pleasure. At night, I comforted myself to sleep, shoving a spare pillow down beside me and clutching it to me, stroking the soft cotton and trying to imagine the feel of her olive skin against my hands. And when I had whispered and planted soft kisses on my imaginary Maz's lips, I would lift the hem of my nightie and push the pillow between my legs and roll about the bed, squeezing my thighs hard around my hand and riding the ripples of warmth.

I knew exactly what I was doing. And I wanted the real thing.

We spent all our free time in each other's company, usually away from the wind-blasted flats and the embarrassment of our respective families. That said, I did enjoy Maz's place - her Mum was friendly and funny and there were always loads of delicious snacks and treats to try, but more often, I would rather have Maz all to myself. We had a special place: she took me there and we claimed it for ourselves - a long-abandoned hut on the edge of a disused railway marshalling yard. We had to climb through two fences to get there. We knew others used it - sometimes the unpleasant traces of a tramp's overnight stay or a fresh pile of dog ends would indicate someone else had been there, but most of the time, it was our private sanctuary, where she could tell me all I needed to know about the Pop Charts and I could lead her astray by sharing the occasional Consulate menthol ciggy, filched from my Father's packet. It gave me a wonderful excuse to sit close, and enjoy the buzz from feeling her leg close against mine, or the touch of her fingers as we passed the illicit weed back and forth.

I simply had to do something about it. I was finding hard to concentrate on my schoolwork, willing the time to pass until I could seek her out in the melee of the playground and walk back home with her, hearing about her day and gazing at her lovely, animated face.

My Father's unpredictable mood swings were usually too daunting for me to risk bringing Maz back to our place and there were too many noisy siblings crammed into her own flat, for us ever to have found time alone.

But for once, the Gods smiled on me, for my Father announced he was going to a reunion dinner somewhere in Town and would be late back. That was if he made it back at all, I thought unkindly, since he had taken to getting truly smashed of late. As the one who put out the trash, I knew just how much booze he was putting away these days.

Maz was very excited at the prospect of a sleepover - I'm sure it was much more of a novelty in those days, especially in the community where we lived.

I have to admit, it was a meticulously planned seduction. I had no moral qualms about plotting to take the twelve-year-old to my bed. In the many hours I had lain awake before the day, I had rehearsed and refined the gameplay and when the evening came (a Friday, I recall), I was as nervous as a West End stage manager on Opening Night.

We just larked about for the evening until I feigned tiredness to entice her into my room. I had laid out my old Guide sleeping bag on a mattress of blankets on the floor, but once we had changed for bed, Maz didn't hesitate to take up my offer to snuggle down beside me on my narrow divan.

The whole thing took less than half a minute. One moment we were chattering, the next our faces were close together and silent, then I leaned to her and kissed her lips, watching her eyes close and holding her so very softly until they reopened with a sparkle of excitement. She smiled so happily, and it seemed so natural and right, easing her back on to the pillow and peppering her lovely face with my kisses.

That night I couldn't bear to close my eyes. To risk wasting any of those precious moments. Maz slept in my arms. Her hair was against my chin, smelling faintly of the menthol cigarette we had shared out of the bedroom window, after I had thrilled her by raising her top and kissing and licking her flat little breasts and shocked her when my tongue probed her mouth for the first time. Her small, hard body was pressed into my stomach, separated from my own by just the thinness of her oversized t-shirt.

I was wanton, naked, having tugged off my nightie agonisingly slowly, so as not to disturb her. In my crotch, I was aflame. I clenched my upper thighs and willed my inner muscles to be calm, to suppress the delicious throbbing within. I merely succeeded in making the back of Maz's shirt warmly wet. Even my scrawny little tits tingled when she shifted in her sleep and her back brushed the eager, sensitive nipples that were straining towards her. I cursed my own inhibitions, for I ached to reach around her and lay my hand between her legs. My bravery had found its limit.

I lay my face against her shoulder, my lips to the intimate warmth at the nape of her neck and eventually dozed, still wearing a stupid, contented grin.

After that first wonderful night, there was no subsequent embarrassment. No sheepish looks or avoiding each other. We continued as secret young lovers. Maz was as keen and willing as me. In our railway yard den, we could be together, alone and snatched minutes in each other's arms made anything and everything fine again.

Which of course meant that life was about to kick me in the teeth again.

She came around to my flat as soon as her parents had announced their plan to move. We both cried. Her folks intended to set up their own restaurant in Aylesbury or Milton Keynes or somewhere like that, miles away. Before she left, I am pleased to say we had one glorious day together, playing truant and cuddling naked in my bed, and discovering at last and with mounting excitement the joys of full-on petting and mutual masturbation. It was exhilarating, made better by the guilt of being absent from school and I lost track of the times we aroused each other to elated, almost disbelieving climax. One of those unforgettable moments, sadly never repeated.

How empty I felt after she had gone. I had nothing to look forward to, over and above my boring routine of school and housework. Evenings spent sitting quietly in the corner of the living room, toying with my homework and watching whatever channel my Father had on, waiting to bring him his tea or find a fresh pack of fags. I had entirely lost direction and was very sorry for myself.

And so when my Father lost his job again, he slid down to an unprecedented level of depression, and I followed him. That was the last permanent job he had.

He now had excess time on his hands, to drink and let his anger fester. So that by the time I slipped into the flat after a day at school or, more likely, an evening hanging around the estate to prolong my return, he was ready to lash out at me. Better me than anyone else, I supposed, but it did seem unfair. At least his blows tended to be verbal at that time, although he had resorted to giving me a sudden slap if I really pissed him off.

We polarised into our separate, uncomfortable existences.

Father became secretive. Not exactly paranoid, but I suffered badly from his unpredictable mood swings. One day I thought he was out and went to his room to collect the laundry. As I opened the door, I heard him rush to the other side and he swore terribly, slamming it shut in my face. I had a very uneasy feeling that he was not alone in there, although I didn't dwell on my supposition, in case I discovered something I would have preferred not to.

Reliant on benefits now, he increasingly resented giving me money for shopping and I had to hide my cash, after some notes went missing from my housekeeping pot. Another oddity was the mail. Normally the few items of post we had were left on the sideboard until one of us got around to dealing with them, but for weeks, there had been nothing there. I hoped that it meant he was getting our bills paid directly by the Social.

One bitterly cold day in February 1983, there was a van being loaded under the flats when I returned from school, and I was puzzled that the large teak dresser in the back looked just like ours. That's because it was. My father had sold it: one of the few remaining links with our lovely home in Kowloon.

For all his faults, I still wanted the best for him, and if he found some casual work, I would try to enthuse and ensure he had a clean, ironed shirt and a decent packed lunch to take with him. It hurt me to see how he much he had lost faith in himself. I missed seeing him neat and tidy in his suit and tie; when he went without shaving it seemed to emphasise his decline, but it would have taken a much braver girl than me to have mentioned anything. And I always did seem to have a fading bruise somewhere or other, just in case I thought otherwise.

The unthinkable happened a week before the end of the Spring Term, when I was already preoccupied with the prospect of spending the Easter holiday with my head buried in revision books.

6. Alone

A normal Thursday afternoon, my head still full of geography from the last lesson of the day, and as I put the key in the lock, I was switching from schoolgirl to housewife modes, wondering what I would cook for our supper.

It wasn't all that unusual for my Father not to be there, although since he had still not found a proper new job, he usually tended to be slumped in an armchair, watching TV, when I got home. So I made our meal as usual and plated his up to warm up under the grill later. By ten, I was a little miffed at the likelihood that I would have to throw away and waste his meal, and by midnight, I had waited up long enough and went to bed.

There were no signs that he had come home by the next morning -no pair of shoes kicked into the corner of the hall or smell of stale cigarette smoke lingering in the living room. I tapped gently on his door and confirmed his bed had not been slept in.

I tried to forget about it at school, but when I came home that evening to find it precisely as I had left it, my first feelings of unease set in. OK, so he wasn't the most attentive of parents, but despite his deepening depression and his over-indulgence with alcohol, he was still a cultured, highly intelligent and well-mannered man and it was so unexpected that he should impolitely have left no note, or sent a message or something, to let me know what was going on. By Sunday night, after I had waited in all weekend, feeding on my own anxiety, I was very worried indeed.

But what could I do? I knew so little about him really. And who would be able to help anyway? So I did nothing; pretended everything was normal.

Throughout the following week, lessons were a blur; I sat in class and worked mechanically, and hid in the lavs at lunchtime. The housekeeping fund was too low to pay for lunches that week, for he hadn't left me any of his dole money. Each evening I would hurry home and fling open the door, hoping to see my Father dozing in his chair by the television.

By the next weekend, I knew I had to do something. I didn't know what, but as a start, I finally dared to go through his room. I felt so guilty, afraid he would walk in at any moment and catch me and thrash me senseless. His wardrobe was almost empty. It smelt of him, of stale smoke and old shoes. Likewise his drawers. And I remembered to look upwards and his old but expensive suitcases weren't where he kept them. I stripped his bed as usual and replaced the sheets: at least the room would be nice for him when he did return. His washbag had gone. But there was still no note anywhere.

After I had made the bed, I opened a towel over the quilt and emptied the remaining contents of his drawers on to it. Under the bed were a pair of battered cardboard shoe boxes. There were some box files stacked in the corner. I picked my way through the lot.

It was like an archaeological dig, with small clues and layers of history that revealed a frustratingly incomplete account of my Father's change in fortunes. I think he had burned most of the rest of his papers before we left Mill Hill. These were therefore the few things he had wanted to retain, so they had to be special. I made two piles, to sort things out: Pile A - Admin, on which went anything I could find to do with the practicalities of our life -bank statements, my NHS card and birth certificate and big black passport; Pile B - Personal - hand-written envelopes with his name on, a broken watch (heavy and engraved), an empty Zippo lighter and a leather pouch marked 'collar studs'.

The shoe boxes intrigued me. The first contained all that he had decided to keep from Hong Kong.

A handful of black and white photographs, which I hadn't ever seen before, of my Father as a handsome young man, in crisp white shorts against a backdrop of the harbour. Another with him wearing a dress kilt and sporran and dagger down his sock, with lots of beaming young men in sharply-pressed army or navy dress uniforms. And a small, well-thumbed snapshot of my Mother in a stunning embroidered silk blouse, looking so young and happy, smiling broadly at the camera. Despite myself, my eyes watered. There were a few snaps with me in - as a baby in my Mother's proud arms; one which made me giggle, all puppy fat and school blazer, not long after I had started at infant school; a Sunday School group photo; and another that brought back a distant happy memory, sitting astride a pony in the New Territories, that had been taken by Nancy Lu's Dad. There were some embossed invitation cards, an old business card of his with his impressive-sounding job, a Jockey Club race card covered in excited red hieroglyphics, a pack of playing cards from a Macao casino. All manner of bloody cards. Just random mementoes, but he had clearly felt strongly enough about them to bring them to this awful flat. I wondered if he ever looked at them and if so, how he felt, comparing that charmed life then with the one he now had. What had gone so wrong?

It was the other box that was the shocker. I'm not sure that at the time I properly understood what it meant. Now I can make sense of it: in fact the explanation is obvious, but to a fifteen-year-old with a relatively sheltered upbringing, it must have been quite bizarre.

My Father was gay.

The box contained confirmation. An explanation of something that I had never before been able to fathom. Why he had never been able to love me as I had wanted and why he was so distant and secretive. Maybe even why he would beat and humiliate me? There was a clutch of queer porno pictures that repelled me and a paperback book, and some contact cards for rent boys. Pages torn from an old diary, with names and phone numbers. And a bundle of intimate letters that I skimmed until I had seen enough to want to burn them immediately. Several different signatures, different handwriting, and they spanned my whole lifetime. Man's writing, male names. Innuendo and smut. I replaced the lid and put the box back under the bed, so that I didn't have to see it.

I ran to the bathroom and threw up my lunch. I had no experience of male homosexuality and no opinion either, but it was the realisation of my Father's secret life that knocked me for six. That I myself fancied girls rather than boys didn't even seem relevant.

My Father. All that time. Did my Mother know?

That evening, recovered, I diligently worked my way through the remaining paperwork, listing what I needed to do, as acting head of the household, to make things continue as before.

There was no cash. As far as I could tell from the last statement, his bank account was near enough empty. My hopes had been raised when I discovered a jewellery box, my Mother's I supposed - it seemed spookily familiar, but it was empty, save for a stud from an ear-ring. There were depressing letters stuffed at the back of the wardrobe, from banks and other companies, each opened and put back in its envelope. All seemed to mention 'insufficient funds' or to deny 'any further extension to your line of credit'. I arranged them in date order. My stomach churned again – they went back to our time in Mill Hill, no, wait: I recognised our Kowloon address. My Father had had money troubles back then too.

I searched in vain for anything that might have revealed a clue as to where he might have gone. I hoped to find the address of some never-mentioned relative, however distant. Zilch. By the end of the night, I had never felt so alone.

In my heart of hearts, I just knew he wouldn't be coming back.

At that moment, how I resented being denied a proper, extended family. For if I was ever to need support it was now. But I had absolutely no way of knowing if there was anyone, let alone how to contact them. I had my (real) surname of course, and knew that my Father had originally come from somewhere in the north-east of Scotland. No - it wasn't worth even thinking about trying to find anyone, with such inadequate and vague clues. I had only been in Britain three years too, and I was still very unsure how everything worked - who did what in officialdom. Neighbours? My father's associates? I dismissed the notion - Maz's family were the only responsible adults I knew on the estate and they had long since left for somewhere North and I knew only a couple of my Father's friends by sight but not name. He would obviously not have wanted to introduce me to any of his other 'friends'.

I tried to imagine what would happen if I tried to ask for official help, maybe from the police or school or the council. Each time, the scenario resolved into my being 'taken into care' - perhaps moved away out of London, or perhaps made to leave school. Care meant some children's home and I had unpleasant flashbacks to the bullying at boarding school. I couldn't face that: I would lose what home I had. And then what if my Father did eventually come back - where would he stay? No: I had to be here just in case. To maintain a home for us both. Just in case. Anything else was not a viable option. I had no plan, but I had at least made my first big, adult decision.

By Monday morning, I had a new resolve.

I had spent 24 hours feeling inconsolably sorry for myself and now it was time to move on. Quite simply, useless little Penny Lee would just have to make it on her own. Things had to be done, I had practicalities to address.

It felt strange, sitting in lessons, knowing that at the end of the day, all the others would go home to whatever family they had, whereas I would return to an empty flat in that ghastly block, and have a sandwich and do my homework and go to bed, all on my own. Yet nobody must ever find out the truth.

At least the pressure of imminent 'O' Level exams kept me busy. I just put on a breezy shell of normality when I went out the door. No problem. I took the broken watch to a jeweller up the High Road, who sucked his teeth and shook his head, but I could see the gleam in his eye and I refused to be ripped off and came out with enough cash to buy food for a fortnight. This might work, I dared to hope.

Until the housing association sent a final demand for the rent. Three months in arrears: an amount I had no idea how to pay. A small fortune.

I thought of little else for a couple of days. My mind was still occupied as I was walking home, and I didn't think twice about the car that had slowed to a crawl alongside me.

"Need a lift?" leered the greasy arsehole behind the wheel. It wasn't the first time, by any means. Dirty old perverts often did it to girls from our school. I stopped. Looked him straight in the eye and told him very forcefully to fuck off. I rarely swore, so I suspect he could tell just how very cross I was. He sneered and roared away. But though my heart was pounding and I was scared and angry long after he had driven off, a dreadful nagging idea had formed in my mind, and try as I might, it kept returning. Every time I thought about that housing association letter.

The area to the South of our estate was notorious for it. In the maze of narrow streets and arches behind the big railway stations, it was common to see hookers hanging around on the corners of the street. So normally, you didn't really pay much attention.

That awful idea had to be investigated. So I put on my coat and went out to walk the streets, to see

what went on when the dirty old men's cars stopped and a girl approached. It was daunting -those streets were usually to be avoided, with their sleazy shops and groups of intimidating men hanging around. I lurked as inconspicuously as I could, avoiding eye contact with anyone and hurrying from lamppost to lamppost, to stay in the light. I saw cars come and go, and the women in the short denim skirts getting in and out. I listened to the women's catcalls, watched them huddling to share a match and catch a welcome drag between cars. I was quite horrified. The idea I had had was a non-starter: there was no way whatsoever I could do that sort of thing, even though it would mean getting the money I needed. Miserably, I started to walk home. I wasn't quite sure what I had expected to learn when I set out, but I was sure that no matter how desperate I was, I could never join these brassy, savvy women and do what they did.

And besides, what if a man did actually proposition me? What happened then? Where did you go to do it? In fact, what was 'it'? All that time ago in Kowloon, I had just wanked the Lam brothers, but they were only lads. Yes, their father had fucked me and sodomised me for months, so I knew quite a lot about that part of it - is that what men expected to do to a woman in exchange for their money? What about sucking a dick? Ugh! I hated the idea of that. And with strangers? Good God, no!

I was ambling back, head down, feeling so miserable at my own ignorance and angrily ashamed that I had even considered such a terrible thing as selling my body, when I heard the shuffle of feet close by and I looked around, startled. Down an alley, a girl was crouching before a man, who was leaning back against the wall. Quickly, I darted back around the corner, then peered back. I watched her, how she used her mouth on him, then hoisted her skirt, yanked down her tights and swapped places, so that he was screwing her against the wall. It was over very quickly. There was no kissing. Just a brief, hard rut, with a bit of groaning. The man pulled off a condom and tossed it over a wall. He said a couple of words, they laughed and the deed was done. I pressed into the shadows as he sauntered past. The woman wiped between her legs, and pulled up her knickers, deftly lighting a cigarette at the same time, with her other hand. I admired her dexterity.

So that was how to do it. Quick, no emotion - just some mechanical actions until the man finished. I thought long and hard. I suppose I could do that. I didn't want to, but yes, I suppose I could.

The next night I went out again after I had finished my homework. I needed to find out more, in case I had got it all wrong. I found parked cars rocking in unlit corners. I watched another tart giving a blow job in a doorway until I was spotted and the man yelled at me. I noted where it all happened and marked up on my tattered copy of the London A-Z gazetteer. I saw which way the cars came and went. And had a piece of inspiration.

I could not imagine competing with these women. I suspected that they would not appreciate my being there. But if I somehow positioned myself further along the routes taken by the cruising men, might I be noticed?

That was how I decided on my own pitch. I had to try it - the only idea I'd yet come up with. I felt sick.

It was another two evenings before I turned my first trick. Twice I had psyched myself up to do it. Twice I had dressed sexily, or at least what I thought would be sexily, using mainly clothes I had actually outgrown! And twice I had chickened out the first time a kerb crawler had pulled up and I had run home in panic. Panting, angry, fit to scream, I sat in the kitchen and gripped the table, castigating myself under my breath. For motivation, I tried taunting myself, reminding the stupid little girl inside my head that it wasn't as if she were some timid wee virgin - for her being fucked was nothing special. That was all she had ever been good for, wasn't it, the dirty little bitch. I told her she had been a tart once before and the only difference was that this time she was expecting to be paid for letting a man stick his cock inside her. Stop being so precious, you little slag - just get on with it. I heeded my own taunts.

So I went back out. And it wasn't long before the skinny young girl hanging around on the kerb attracted her first customer. Indian. Fat. Impatient.

From my reconnaissance, I more or less knew the form by now, even the correct parlance. When he wound down his window, I blurted out my tariff, like I'd heard the King's Cross toms do it. He looked at me and laughed and replied, "Don't be fucking stupid. Ten for a hand job, kid. I'm in a hurry."

And that's what he got, parked round the corner. He didn't even bother to move from behind the steering wheel. I had had the presence of mind to stuff a handful of tissues in my coat pocket. I tried to keep smiling sweetly and he stroked my hair as I brought him off. There was a moment of panic when I was at a loss what to do with the sticky tissues, but I grabbed the money and ran. But this time it wasn't home: I sat in a shop doorway until I had stopped shaking. I looked at my own reflection in the shop door and could hardly believe that the girl I saw had just done that.

And then I went back out.

This one fucked me properly on an itchy blanket in the back of his estate car. Or rather, expected me to fuck him. I'd not done anything like that with Jin - he had always made me lie there whilst he ground away inside me. Whereas this man wanted me to do the moving. I improvised. He kept on asking me how old I was. "Seventeen", I replied. He didn't believe me, but that didn't prevent him describing in detail how I should take off my pants and straddle him, bent low, with my head brushing against the roof lining. I handed him a condom (another trauma, buying the packet a few days earlier in a local chemist). He wanted me to rub my pussy up and down him until he was hard and then I awkwardly grasped his thing and lowered myself down on to it. I was barely wet and it hurt. I didn't remember it being like that when I was a kid, but Jin had used a jelly. Cold comfort.

As his mouth streamed obscenities that were making me quite scared, I arched and flexed my back, repeating any twitch and squeeze that earned a moan of approval. His hands were up under my blouse, pushing my little bra aside and kneading my scrawny tits. His fingers dug in when he came and I yelped. I remember trying to look on the bright side - that so long as I was on top, I could control the action, get my body used to it at my own pace, not let it get too deep inside me. When he handed over his twenty pounds, he smirked.

"Don't undersell yourself, darling - usually costs me at least thirty!"

I felt stupid, but wasn't going to show it.

"OK, it'll cost you forty next time," I retorted, surprising myself with such brass.

But that's what he paid the following week. And up front too. I'd learned to demand cash in advance the hard way, the time I pulled up my pants and watched helplessly as the bastard who had just had me in the back of his van put his foot down and took off without paying. Even though I had by then done it a half a dozen or more times, I was not yet a hardened professional and I sobbed all the way home, so angry at my stupidity.

But as I worked my little patch, I also took my first step into marketing. The traditional schooling I had received in Kowloon paid dividends: I could handle a needle and cotton, and with a bit of ingenuity, I converted an old dress that I must have had when I was twelve or thirteen. By unpicking the seams at the hip, letting out as much as I could, then re-sewing, I fashioned a peculiar yet effective outfit, that showed off my long legs and made the most of my small bum. Underneath it, I squeezed into my smallest, tightest pants – comfort wasn't a luxury I could afford. And my own innovation: a small pot of Vaseline inside my coat, for applying a surreptitious smear between my legs at the critical moment. That just left the bust. I've never been blessed with much in that

department, and at fifteen I was still pretty flat. I could hardly resort to stuffing tissues into my brassiere – that really would have impressed a pick-up, if he fancied a fumble of my tits. I was rather proud of the solution. I took an old, soft lawn handkerchief of my Father's and created a lining inside my largest bra, tacking it carefully so that it remained concealed, and then I made a pair of thin pads from cotton wool, that fitted snugly in the two ‘pockets’. Result – a gain of almost two inches, if I held my shoulders back. With a touch of the eye shadow and lipstick I'd pinched from an open duffel bag in the school changing rooms, I reckoned I could easily pass for eighteen, certainly under the orange tint of the streetlamps. Even if I was only imagining that my ruse worked, I still found no shortage of clients.

I managed to keep it up for eight of the next ten nights. One or two a night. Admittedly, sometimes it took few hours for someone to stop and pick me up, which had me yawning constantly through the next morning's lessons.

I survived. Not just that – I was a damned successful trainee whore.

I made over four hundred and fifty quid. Enough to pay off the backlog of rent. I learned how to insist on my price and not be beaten down, and to turn away if a punter didn't give off the right vibes. The sums spoke for themselves. If I kept on doing it once or twice a week, I could scrape through to the end of term, with luck. So what if I felt dirty and used? Big fucking deal. I could always take a bath. And as for feeling used? Get real, Penny: you've been a slut since the age of ten. What was new?

In retrospect I was of course so very lucky. Christ knows what could have happened if I had been picked up by a dodgy punter, or some perv who got off on hurting girls.

That said, each time I went out, I was shaking with nerves. My head was a whirl of conflicting emotions. Shame mostly, even more than worrying about my personal safety. But how else was I going to keep up the pretence of a stable home life? And stay at school and finish my exams? Or eat?

Little Miss Organised, I was. I wrote it all down. Went through the heaps of paper in the sideboard over and over, making a calendar of things to pay - rent, electricity, gas. I didn't know what to expect, but I understood that 'Final notice' and red ink were serious. I didn't know how to pay them at first - I had some money now but I didn't have a bank account. I had found a cheque book of my Father's, but he hadn't used it for months, so I didn't dare use it in case it went wrong, even though I could make a passable representation of his signature - after all, I'd been doing it for ages on school reports and forms.

Converting the little roll of notes into postal orders at the Post Office seemed to circumvent that problem. There! I was sorted. I could send money to these people whom we owed. I was independent. This plan was going to work.

What a weird image I have of myself then, which I suppose must be accurate. Still fifteen, huddled over the kitchen table, cramming for my exams each evening, then closing my books, donning my homemade slag kit and creeping out to roam the streets until I'd got some dosh tucked inside my sock.

When I was arrested, I thought my world had imploded.

Having my collar felt eventually was inevitable, of course. I had so little idea of what I was doing, and wasn't exactly subtle with it, hitching my skirt up a few inches and walking slowly up and down the street, looking for business. The bobby who pulled up behind me was nice enough. I was so dumb that I didn't think to keep an eye out and I was picked up by two uniformed cops in a panda

car. There was no point in protesting - it was obvious what I was doing. I was ordered to get in the back of the car and was taken to the local nick. All very professional; businesslike.

During that short ride, I began to cry. I could foresee the chain of events that would follow. Random thoughts, all of them bad. I would be put on trial and everyone would find out. School would find out. All the teachers and classmates. Knowing that I let men fuck me for money. Taunts in the corridor and boys constantly expecting me to be an easy lay. Friends turning their backs. Murmuring behind my back. And I'd have a criminal record and never be able to get a job. People would know that I was living on my own and I'd be taken into council care and sent to a home. Probably have to change schools after all. And have to put up with social workers prying into my business. A big fine. I couldn't pay that. This was it. Stupid, useless Penny screws up again.

I was put in a dingy interview room with a desk and two hard plastic chairs. They let me stew for about an hour. Over and over, I worked out excuses and strategies, but it always came down to one thing - my attempt at going it alone was over. I had fucked up big time and was about to see my life fall apart. The truth would out.

Another policeman came in and filled in a form. Big man, shirtsleeves and stale cigarette smoke. I was expecting a lecture, some outraged rant about what a terrible thing I had been caught doing. He was older than the chirpy pair in the car, unsmiling with an aura of bad temper. He looked me over and I felt a little shiver, sitting there in my tiny skirt with my parka pulled tight around me. What did he see? A pathetic little half-caste tart? A frightened teenage girl - victim of circumstance? A vulnerable candidate for exploitation, who would give him a quickie just to be released? I was so far out of my depth. I would be whatever he wanted me to be, go along with it.

I stepped down the steps of the police station, reeling. It was so matter-of-fact. Maybe in the early hours of the morning, the policeman had just wanted to get it done. He could have been as exhausted as me. But whatever, he hadn't thrown a wobbly when I gave him my date of birth - I'm sure he didn't realise I was underage. He just wrote everything down and made me sign. I'd received a formal Caution under the Street Offences Act 1959. A 'prostitute's caution'. The bored cop had told me that was all there was to it. No charge, no magistrate's court appearance. But if I was caught twice more, I'd be fined.

That was not going to happen. I'd no idea what the implications of this caution were, but I was determined not to get caught again. I still needed the money, though: I had to get streetwise.

Which became painfully apparent shortly afterwards.

It was my penultimate GCE exam - Maths I think. I had a two day gap before the final one and so far, touch wood, I thought they'd gone OK. I'd stayed off the streets for two weeks since being busted and my housekeeping tin was almost empty. Cautiously, I ventured out that evening.

With not a little relief, I spotted a familiar car. I'd given the driver a blow job three times already and he used to give me an extra fiver in exchange for my knickers. Liked me to spit his cum into them and then he's stuff them in his suit pocket. Weird man, but business was business. He was a salesman, I think - the back of his car was always too full of boxes and so we had to drive round until we found somewhere quiet, and I'd do the necessary next to the car. I finished and shoved his money into my sock. He offered to drive me back but I knew where I was, and reckoned I could get home in ten minutes.

He'd no sooner driven off, when two big men in leather jackets appeared beside me. My arms were pinned against me and they not so much dragged as lifted me up and carried me. Round a corner. To a big black car with tinted windows. Just like in the movies. I began to yell and my head snapped back with the force of the smack to the side of my face.

I was bundled in the back and the men climbed in either side. The inside of the car was thick with fag smoke - the driver stubbed it out and pulled away. Long black curly hair. Dreadlocks maybe. My face was throbbing and I was trembling. The grip on my arms relaxed. I hardly dared look at my captors.

"What the fuck you up to, cunt?" grunted the one on the right. Late twenties, skinhead. I was too scared to speak.

A hand clasped my thigh and slid my skirt up. Instinctively, I grabbed it and the man on my left snatched my wrist and bent it up painfully.

The first man spoke again.

"Wha's your name then?"

"P-Penny," I replied weakly. With my wrist gripped painfully hard, the one to my left had free access to my crotch.

"The little bitch ain't wearing any panties!" he chortled with surprise. "Fuckin' little slag."

The skinhead leaned close. His breath was sickly sweet with booze. I wondered if I was going to be killed.

"Well, Penny," he said deliberately, "This is our manor. And we don't like fuckin' whores dirtyin' it up without our say so. And you didn't ask us did ya?"

"I, I'm sorry. I won't do it again..."

"Too fuckin' right darlin'. Now tell me, whose bitch are you?"

"I don't understand," I replied, genuinely having no idea what he meant.

I leapt off the seat. The other man was actually pinching one of my labia.

"Ere, Pete, she ain't got no hair down there neither," he sniggered. "How old are you, darlin'?"

I swung round. This was no time to tough it out.

"Fifteen. Please stop that!"

His face curled into a cruel smile. He was younger, his face pocked with acne scars. "Oh, very posh. Please stop that" he mimicked. My tried to wriggle away, but his finger rasped up into me. I squeaked.

The older one reached out and snapped my chin round so that I was looking at him. There was a sharp sting where my cheek was swelling.

"I asked you who runs you, girl," he growled.

I began to comprehend.

"No-one. I don't do this much. I just need a bit of money," I blurted.

The men exchanged grins. Skinhead's lips pursed and wriggled as he considered my response. He checked his watch, looked me very coldly in the eye and spoke deliberately.

"You are one lucky little slag, Penny. If I didn't have to be somewhere, I'd have to give you a proper slap."

His face was hard and terrifying, illuminated by the regular glare of the passing street lamps. I had no idea where we were or where we were going. I needed to wee.

He tapped the driver's shoulder and the car drew to a halt.

Skinhead moved very close. He put his hand on my left breast and squeezed it hard. His lips were right against my ear.

"Do yourself a favour. Get out of it while you still can, or else you'll end up working for a nice man like me. Understand?"

I nodded emphatically.

"And if I ever see you on our patch again, my associate here will slice your cute little face to shreds. OK?"

Suddenly I was lying on the cold pavement and my grazed knee was bleeding and I watched the tail lights disappearing down the road. My crotch felt warm then wet. A dark stain was snaking across the paving slab to the gutter. I had wet myself. Just like in the toolshed with Jin.

It was a measure of my new priorities that my first reaction was not shock, or fear - I checked that the pair of tenners was still in my sock. And then I crumpled into a snivelling ball on the dirty pavement.

I was somewhere to the East of the City and using the beacon of the Post Office Tower to guide me, I limped home, constantly fighting the tears, staring wildly at cars passing by. The damp cloth of my skirt clung to my thighs and disgusted me. Finding home took an hour and a half.

How I found the strength to sit that last exam I don't know. I ran all the way to school and ran straight back afterwards. Everyone kept asking about my black eye. I pretended I'd opened a cupboard door on it. All the others gathered afterwards, to sit in the sunshine and drink smuggled bottles of cider down by the Regents Canal, celebrating the end of the exams. I was home by then, with the door locked and bolted and chained.

I longed to have Maz there with me, but she was long gone. I wanted my Father. I missed my Mother.

There was one more compulsory school day left, which I attended, but I hardly left the flat for two weeks. I missed the rent payment. Goodness knows how, but I caught a summer cold and rarely left my bed. Until the ache in my belly forced me. My stock of stale white bread and sardines was exhausted and there was nothing edible left in the kitchen.

I saw the postcards in the newsagent's window and placed my own advertisement. Selling off the furniture from my Father's bedroom kept me fed until July, but I spent all day every day inside the flat, still nervously starting with every bang and crash on the outside landing. I spent my sixteenth birthday alone, although I allowed myself a cream eclair from the 'open all hours' as a treat to myself. I don't think I actually enjoyed eating it - the symbolism was far more important.

That cake marked a minor turning point, though. I caught a glimpse of my face in the hall mirror: a glob of cream on the end of my nose and for the first time since, well I couldn't remember, I laughed. Then I thought, 'for Christ's sake, snap out of it'. And so I did. Fuck those bastards. I wasn't scared any more.

Not so much, anyway.

Just two more years of this, was all I had to manage. If I could bear it. I simply had to stay on at school, get 'A' levels, to have a chance of a life afterwards. Sure, I could have tried to find a job instead, but that was not an appealing prospect. What sort of a job could I get at that age - unqualified and inexperienced? Nothing that would pay the rent and bills. Not here in London. Aged sixteen and useless. True enough, I had actually just found some conventional casual work, thanks again to the postcard adverts, but I'd also been to the Job Centre, and seen from the few vacancies on offer that my prospects were pretty hopeless. There weren't many proper jobs that didn't want qualifications and experience and most specified over 18. I didn't even think about seeing if I could claim state benefit - I wouldn't have known where to begin and I feared the questions I might be asked.

No. I needed to finish my schooling, whatever it cost. That was my goal and my GCE results reinforced the decision.

For over half the holidays I had been waiting for results day, with an increasing feeling of gloom. The results would be posted in the window of the school gym but it was mid-afternoon before I forced myself to trek over to see them. A lad from my class was coming out of the gate. He was happy. He called me 'swot' and laughed. I found my name, half way down the list. I had passed all nine, seven with grade 1 or 2. Almost the best results in the Year. Even a grade 2 for the exam I had sat after being roughed up by the men in the car. I was chuffed to bits. I had to get those A levels now.

I remember sitting out on the outside balcony very late that hot August night, enjoying the cool breeze and still on a high from my results. I was wearing some nasty, sticky nylon overall dress, for I'd found some work as a shift washer-up in a big hotel along the Euston Road and was now spending weekday evenings and weekend mornings bent over a stinking sink in a stifling hot basement, up to my arms in hot, greasy water. It was a lovely clear night and I watched the navigation lights of the big jets, sweeping in from the North and turning over the City in their approach to Heathrow. And I saw my way out. Only three weeks past sixteen, but at that moment I knew precisely where my destiny lay. On one of those planes. I was going to be an air stewardess.

That vision spurred me on. Hardly a day would pass when on the way home from Sixth Form, or out on the street, I would gaze up and imagine myself in one those birds, smiling and serving cocktails to grateful businessmen, wearing a tailored uniform, my scraggy hair expensively coiffured, elegantly parading up and down the aisle and dispensing smiling, professional courtesy to my appreciative passengers.

I searched the careers library for details, and was delighted to learn that applicants were accepted with 'A' levels, minimum age 18. That would be me. Just two years on.

It became a fantasy. Some evenings (it embarrasses me to remember this), I would dig out my old Guide uniform and prance around the empty flat in it, practising my elegant walk - toes in line, just a cheeky little wiggle in the hips. I spent some of my precious funds on some lippy and mascara and taught myself how to use it to put on a few years. Once I shoplifted some powder or something from Boots, but spent so long worrying about being caught, I never tried it again. I think it was because makeup was so expensive, I became used to being sparing with it, for I honestly can't recall falling into the teenage trap of piling it on thick. Just enough to make my funny eyes look vaguely sexy, and to even up my lop-sided lips. I let my hair grow, which was just as well, as my clumsy attacks with the kitchen scissors every month had given me a bit of a street-urchin appearance and did nothing to hide my horrid ears.

Now all I had to do was get qualified, and get older. That I would still have to be interviewed and

pass selection never entered my mind.

When I was idling about in the public library, killing time to avoid having to go home, I happened upon a poster from the Salvation Army, which mentioned their Missing Persons Service. I can remember stepping back and feeling very excited. Could they find my Father? It wouldn't be like going to the Police, with whom I really couldn't afford any further contact. The next day I took a small bag of papers and splashed out on taking the bus South of the river, to register. Returning later, deflated, I was at least more settled, better informed and sure I had done the right thing. I had made the effort, which was the right thing. The busy but kindly lady who had taken all the details had been frank to the point of almost convincing me he might never be traced. But she had said 'never lose hope' and I promised that I wouldn't. I was especially grateful for the way she tactfully avoided asking any questions about my own situation, once she noticed me clamping up.

For a long time, I had a reason for checking the mat for post each morning, but nothing ever came.

The hotel job was awful, but it gave me some income. Cash in hand. Enough to eat and buy a few bits of school uniform second hand from the school shop, when the previous blouse had become just too tight round my bust, or the elbow of the jumper was too thin to darn any more. But I could only manage a shift on Saturday and Sunday mornings once term started.

Working there was OK really, because tucked away off the main kitchen, I didn't have to talk much to people, or ever have to explain myself. Mountains of pots would be dumped on a trolley behind me and all I had to do was work steadily through them, singing along to the tinny transistor perched on a shelf above the sink. Best of all, I got to have a huge free meal twice a week.

School was very different, which suited me. You turned up, sat in the lessons, did the work and went home; although I used to hang around as long as I could, on the pretext of using the library, just to postpone having to traipse back to the empty flat. I don't think there was any compulsory sport or gym - I can't remember playing any more hockey there. Quite a lot of my classmates had left at sixteen, but the ones who stayed on for Sixth Form were in the main my type of mates; the ones who were mature enough to want to improve themselves. There were some voluntary after-school activities that I would have loved to join, but these inevitably involved some expense - buying badminton racquets or paying for theatre trips. There was a new computer club which really interested me, but unless you could demonstrate your bona fides in the form of your own BBC Micro or Commodore 64, you weren't considered for its exclusive membership. One of those would have cost a couple of month's rent. Or a week on my back.

No matter how I tried, my secret tin of money always seemed empty. I walked everywhere. I never bought any pretty clothes or went out to the pictures with the others, which earned me an undeserved reputation for being a party-pooper. I would sit in the flat each evening with just a single bulb lit in whichever room I happened to be. My luxury was having the TV on for company, from the moment I got in until I went to bed. I became astute at living on a shoestring, going via the market on my way home to pick up anything being sold off. I could spot a 'reduced' price label from outside a supermarket! But when a big bill arrived, it was hopeless. And I steeled myself for what had to be done. Yet again.

Despite the police. And the scary bastards in the leather jackets.

Sometimes it would be days before I could summon up the guts.

And then I'd put on whatever clothes still looked half presentable, and spread a thin layer of makeup across my face and sneak out of the block as the streetlights were coming on. There were bad weeks, when I could stand out in all weathers for hours and go home cold and despairing and empty-handed.

As time wore on, so neighbours began to comment that they hadn't seen my Father for a while. I always had a prepared reason. Fooling school wasn't too difficult - it was not one of those nice middle-class places where parents were expected to demonstrate an active interest, and a scribbled sick note was barely glanced at.

My saviour was called Howard.

I remember him very fondly, despite the circumstances of our relationship. He won't know it but he made everything possible for me. Often I've wondered about trying to track him down and thanking him, but I suspect he might not appreciate being reminded of his role in my little life, so best let sleeping dogs lie, as they say.

His was the first circumcised prick I had ever encountered and he found my undisguised surprise quite funny. After doing it in the back of his car, I was happy to sit and chat for a while rather than scurrying off immediately with my gains. He was so shy, but he told me all about his family and his work and I got to like him. He was refreshingly open and talked to me easily, notwithstanding our commercial arrangement. For my part, I tried to give him a good time, playfully affectionate as he performed.

I imagine he was in his early thirties, although his receding hairline and serious demeanour made him seem older to me. He was genuinely surprised when I confessed that was really only sixteen, and I could tell that seemed to appeal to him.

He was a jeweller, or more precisely had quite recently taken over the family business in Hatton Garden, upon his Father's death: he himself had worked there since graduating. He clearly found the responsibility stressful and claimed he was shy and found it impossible to meet girls, because of that and the pressures of running the firm. That all seemed most plausible - not like the 'my wife doesn't understand me' self-justifying bullshit from some other punters.

He was the first adult I had ever been able to chat with. As an equal.

Howard began to see me twice a week, and it was a bonus knowing he was coming, so I didn't have to hang around in public too long. On several occasions, he was so distracted or exhausted when we met that we simply sat in his car, watching the Regent's Canal, and I listened to him reel off his frustrations and anxieties. Eventually I felt so comfortable with him that I reciprocated and he was the only person with whom I shared the secret of my solitary existence. It quite spoiled the mood and my best efforts to maintain the erection that I had been encouraging for the previous five minutes were wasted. The lovely man listened to my tale, his deep frown growing even deeper and then he turned to face me properly and his eyes were wet and he gave me a massive hug! He insisted we drive up to a Hampstead pub and sat grinning over his pint, watching me devour the first plate of steak and chips I'd ever eaten. When he dropped me back in Camden, and pressed a hundred pounds into my hand, I was utterly stuck for words.

"Same time next week," he beamed, happier than he'd even been when grunting his way to a climax on the back seat of his nice car.

He was early the following week and delighted to see me.

"I'd like to take you to my place," he announced, adding thoughtfully when he saw my hesitation, "if that's all right with you, Penny."

I wouldn't have risked it with any other punter, but Howard was almost a friend and so I agreed. We headed West, towards Wembley. I remember recognising the tops of the stadium towers over the rooftops. It looked a lot like where we had lived in Mill Hill when I first came to England - so

much greener and more open than the squalid estate where I lived. And the house was amazing.

Howard fussed around me, explaining that his Mother, with whom he lived, spent every Wednesday evening with her sister out in Hertfordshire. She had left him plates of food in the huge refrigerator, which he split with me. The place was big and spotless, with heavy furniture and thick chintz furnishings - a real palace. He opened a bottle of chilled wine and I took the tiniest of sips, not being used to alcohol and unsure of what it would do to me. He was so much more relaxed in the safety of his own home. And more confident. Quite unexpectedly, he jumped up from the table, led me up the thick carpet to his room and stripped me naked. It was fine. In fact I liked it. When we had sex, I experienced my first full orgasm and was completely thrown. I lay there, flushed and panting and hugely embarrassed. That wasn't supposed to happen.

As a marketing ploy, it worked wonders! Howard was delighted for the both of us. He lay next to me, smiling, tracing his fingers over my tiny tits and gazing with real fondness.

On the way back to Camden, I could see his mind ticking over.

I had no hesitation but to agree to his proposal. It was a godsend. And so for the next nine months, right through to the end of my first year in Sixth Form, I spent Wednesday night in his bed. All night. He would drop me off near school on his way into the City. I no longer needed to offer myself on the street two or three times a week - Howard was more than happy to pay me a hundred for my company, which with the hotel job gave me enough to live on and have a few pounds left over with which to buy some badly-needed new clothes. I even saved enough the first month to replace my broken television with a working one from the second-hand electrical stall on Camden Market.

I actually looked forward to my Wednesday nights. Howard was always so polite and considerate and when he became emboldened enough to ask me to dress up, I was fine with it: I liked to see him happy. When he saw me in my school uniform the first morning after I had stayed, his eyes popped and the following week he had me wear it to the house and got a real kick out of helping me out of it before he screwed me.

The strangeness of waking up in a big, soft bed, with a warm body beside me, was a constant surprise, but once I had blinked and kick-started my brain, I would look around Howard's large, expensively-furnished bedroom and relax. I would snuggle back under the cover and spend a couple of precious, private moments, simply enjoying the luxury of it all.

It seemed to amuse Howard greatly. Every week or two, I would become part of another of his hidden fantasies, and although I invariably readily agreed to whatever he wanted, my face must always have betrayed my continuing innocence, even puzzlement as to why a particular game or prop would give him pleasure.

He bought some stunningly wonderful and expensive underwear for me. The works - black lacy stuff, stockings, suspenders, and it felt so wickedly sensual against my skin, I had no issues with wearing it around his house all evening, knowing that when the time came for me to make a show of removing it, he would be rock hard and eager. Keeping it stuffed in the bottom of my schoolbag the next day was great fun and I would sneak a peak during lessons and smile inwardly. I was wary about being spanked. He promised to be gentle and kept his promise, and although I couldn't help being reminded of those dreadful times in my Father's study in Kowloon, I forced myself to play the part Howard required and he obviously liked having a naughty little schoolgirl in the house, for it was a regular occurrence. In fact we did have enormous fun, playacting little vignettes, but always culminating in the same earnest sex.

One of the high points of being with Howard was the weekend trip to Amsterdam. He was so

awkward about asking me, prefacing his request with every kind of opt-out clause, should I wish to decline. Not a chance. All I needed was a new passport.

The following night, I laid my hands on the old one immediately, along with my birth certificate. I knew intimately every document in the flat, having studied each agonisingly carefully in the weeks following my Father's disappearance, first to see if I could find a clue where he might have gone, and then all over again when I tried to work out how to exist in the big, bad adult world on my own. Anything I thought valuable or important, I had removed to a box wedged up high into the top of the airing cupboard, where I hoped any burglar wouldn't bother to look.

Dear Howard was a treasure, helping me with the application process and even meeting me in his lunch hour, to take me to the old Passport Office in Petty France and be with me should I have a problem. I let him pay the fee too.

It was a magical weekend. He attended his jeweller's exhibition or convention on the Friday, immediately after we flew in, leaving me to stare in wonder from the hotel window at the unfamiliar bustle and beauty of the canal and street below. It was such a fantastic experience, walking arm in arm late at night around the cobbled streets, and gawping in amazement at the women in the red-lit windows. I wondered if they could tell if I was one of them too, albeit a skinny little amateur. I felt no career aspirations to graduate to their position.

I was completely happy to do whatever Howard wanted and was not disappointed with his suggestions, taking in the Rijksmuseum and the obligatory canal boat tour, before a long and delicious meal out in some very smart restaurant. What I had feared just didn't happen - no-one paid a second glance, as if there was nothing odd in a funny-looking half-Chinese teenager dining out with a balding Jew twice her age. I like Amsterdam.

It was quite simply the most fabulous few days I had spent for several years, and when he dropped me back in Camden and I closed the door of the flat behind me, even the usual gloomy old surroundings failed to suffocate me, for I had had a fleeting taste of how life might turn out one day, and I couldn't wait.

Each week, we learned something new together in Howard's big, comfy bed, for we were equally inexperienced. But it didn't matter a bit. We needed each other and I think we were equally fond of each other, and we had almost as much fun being clumsy as we did when it went together properly and the sex was textbook good. Most of the time, I don't think we gave a second thought to the commercial basis of our relationship. For me, it was the highlight of the week and coupled with the washing-up job, it saw me through the first of my two years in Sixth Form. Howard even patiently answered many of my questions about practical things and thanks to him, I finally began to understand the basics of banking and officialdom in Britain.

So when one September evening he was unusually po-faced and quiet on the drive to his house, I had a bad feeling.

He could hardly look at me as we ate and no matter how hard I tried to draw it out of him, he was curt and evasive. Yes, I selfishly worried for myself, for without Howard's generosity, I would have to return to the street corner for the rest of my final year at school, but I think I also might unknowingly have been in love with him, such did it hurt me to see him this disturbed. After coffee, he explained. And my comfy arrangement crumbled about me.

"I'm getting engaged," he announced at last, still avoiding my eyes. "So it would be entirely inappropriate for us to do this any more. I'm sorry. This will be the last time."

When he looked up, he saw my tears. I couldn't help it. The dear man leapt off his seat and ran

around the table to hold me. He was just a punter after all, a great one, sure, but my reaction visibly touched him. We were like a pair of naïve lovers in the throes of parting.

“I’m so very sorry, Penny. We’ve had some great times. You’re a lovely kid.”

Proudly, I stifled the tears and smiled professionally.

“No problem. Really.”

Then he reached into his jacket pocket and lifted out a tiny box.

“I was going to give you this in the morning, but it’s probably best to do it now,” he said, at last letting me see the real regret in his eyes. He placed the box in my palm and squeezed my fingers around it.

“That is your parachute. Only to be used in an emergency. You’re a wonderful, sweet and lovely girl, Penny, and life’s dealt you a lousy hand. I just wish I could do more to help you...”

I didn’t let him finish. I hugged him so tight and squeezed his cheek so tightly to mine that he was unable to continue. Later we made love. Properly. Unequivocally love, not sex.

The small velvet box contained a cut diamond. It looked so tiny, like a glass breadcrumb. Folded inside the box was some form that declared its provenance. Just before he pulled into the kerb

102 around the corner from my school, he told me what it would be worth if I ever needed to sell it. My knees were still rubber when I walked into my first class of the day. I had no reason to doubt his word. And no more reason to sell my scrawny young body. My emergency was immediate.

At half term, I hawked it around a dozen jewellers until I was satisfied I was not being ripped off and opened my first bank account, shoving the thick wad of notes across the counter with enormous relief.

I really do think often of that lovely, gentle man and how he was so kind to me. I would have done just about anything for him, but he never asked for anything more than a few hours of harmless sex. He saved me, I’ve no doubt. Had I gone back to touting for trade from passing cars, I’m sure that in good time I would have been beaten up or forced to work for pimps, or possibly much worse - such things are nigh-on inevitable in a dangerous occupation in a dangerous area like mine.

As it was, I now had security. A small insurance fund, from which I could draw a little each week to supplement my wages from washing up. Enough even to go to the pictures with some of the others on a Saturday night, enough to buy a skirt and dress that I didn’t actually need, and to go wild on Christmas Day, eating an extravagant curry in a real restaurant next to Kings Cross station, with a napkin and music in the background and a glass of lager shandy. At last I thought my luck had changed.

At school, I really tried hard.

Not just at the schoolwork, though it was no hardship to be a swot, as staying late in the library postponed the prospect to returning to the flat and meant I could complete much of my homework at a proper desk. I also worked at the friendship thing.

There was a remarkable lad in my Year, Tim, whom I used to watch with curiosity. Some how, he managed to transcend the cliques and rivalries and be mates with everyone. People would seek his company at lunch, find ways to work beside him. He was just so damned nice! A good sportsman,

true, but nothing remarkable in either the looks or academic abilities departments. I studied him, analysed his entirely natural gift for being a great people person. He avoided conflict, never took sides, backed away if someone else was being aggressive, and yet we all respected and liked him. I tried to emulate him.

It was an uphill struggle. Having for so long avoided taking friendship beyond the classroom (I could hardly invite anyone round to the bare flat), I had a fairly justified reputation for being aloof, even cold. I had once overheard a description of myself as 'Iron Knickers', which could hardly have been further from the truth, of course, but better than let the truth be known.

I made an effort to lighten up, which without the constant pressure for money, was a welcome change in outlook.

One weekend, as I dozed and tried to put off the moment when I had to slip on the overalls and trot off to the hotel kitchen, I became aware of what my sleepy mind was daydreaming - I was mentally reviewing each and every one of my classmates, and for each, trying to come up with and store a small comment or topic of conversation, to be slipped in at the appropriate moment, as a prelude to fishing for friendship. A calculated piece of planning, to pursue another of my goals. Naturally reticent, I was working out how to project myself. That I was unconsciously working to overcome my own failing came a shock to me and I realised quite how much I had grown up in the previous year or so: suddenly I was in control, independent, no longer an innocent kid. Serious and lonely, yes, but I was surviving. I didn't yet like myself, but I was prepared to admit to the emergence of a slight, grudging self-respect.

What sort of friend I was, I don't know, but I offered the invitation to just about everyone in Class. Just like Tim, I could work a room, except whereas his was a natural gift, my efforts were selfish and preplanned, albeit sincerely meant. I rediscovered the ability to laugh spontaneously, and although I still declined any suggestions to go out to pubs or clubs, I was happy to go with the flow and join my peers wasting hours hanging around shopping precincts or idly passing the time down by the canal.

At a dreadful school disco before Christmas, I played my part well enough, rewarded by a couple of inexpert snogs in the playground between dances, which did just enough to re-establish my credentials. It was tame, and almost charming, after the seedy groping and furtiveness of my months on the Game. But it was what I should have been doing at seventeen, normal behaviour, and that was more than satisfactory for me.

It is a truism that everyone remembers their favourite teacher. Mine was Mrs Smith. She was a world-weary veteran, fazed by nothing, who faced a daily struggle uphill imparting her enviable knowledge of the English language and its literary heritage upon a sceptical and reluctant assembly of North London teenagers. It was therefore not surprising that when one of her charges showed an interest, she would reciprocate with warmth and candour. I loved her to bits.

I had to tread carefully, for she was always so encouraging to me, and her ready ear was always ready to listen, and I so much wanted to open my heart to her and tell her about my problems. With Howard gone, she was probably the only adult in my life with whom I could have had a no-nonsense conversation, but I had spent too long trying to do everything alone to take the opportunity to share my squalid world with her. That said, she would always seem to find time for me, even when she was clearly ready to head home to a gin and tonic and an evening with a pile of uninspiring marking. She lent me books from home, suggested new authors and fired me up when I was down. I confided to her my aspiration to be a stewardess and she was instantly enthusiastic, reinforcing my own optimistic assumptions and genuinely delighted that one of her pupils at least, had decided upon a proper goal in life.

Mrs Smith gave me the reassurance I needed at that time, and countered the dampener I received from the careers advisor, who looked at me indulgently when I bubbled about my career aspirations.

“You realise that there is huge competition for jobs like that? And you’re very young – they’ll be looking for experience. Why don’t you look at these? A couple of years’ solid office work behind you and then you’ll have a better CV.”

“Oh don’t take any notice of all that, Penny,” Mrs Smith would say, “If you want something badly enough, you’ll get it. You really come alive when you talk about becoming an air hostess – do that at your interview and they’ll have no hesitation in taking you on. I would.”

She didn’t laugh or patronise me either, when I told her I’d written to Lord Marshall, the Chairman of BA. I think my touching naivety must have struck a chord, for just over a week later I received a lovely reply signed by the Director of Customer Service Operations, telling me exactly how I should submit an application and saying how much they looked forward to receiving it. Mrs Smith checked the form for me and wrote a nice letter to accompany it, with her expectations of my performance in my upcoming ‘A’ Levels.

When the invitation to attend a selection day arrived, I sought her out and hugged her at the staff room door, much to the poor dear’s embarrassment.

Thankfully, I had a clear week between my last mind-numbing examination and the great adventure to cross London to get to the training centre. Mrs Smith had left a message for me to see her.

“I don’t make a habit of this, and don’t tell anyone or they’ll think I’ve gone soft,” she said. Then she explained. I almost burst into tears when she took me home.

What a wonderful lady she was. Whilst she prepared tea downstairs, I tried on the elegant dark blue skirt and jacket she had laid out for me on the bed of her spare room. It belonged to her daughter and she had arranged for me to borrow it for my interview. I looked critically at my shabby school clothes, with the frayed collar and shiny skirt and realised that Mrs Smith must have done the same and realised that I probably had nothing suitable of my own, but had spared me the embarrassment of asking. That was such an incredibly nice thing to do. I would have given her more hugs but I didn’t want to make her all flustered again!

She insisted I borrowed a blouse too and I can remember her huge smile when I went down to show her the finished product – her own Eliza Doolittle. After she had fed me, she sat behind her dining table and coached me on interview technique, so gently – coaxing me out of my shell and suggesting things to say without appearing artificial. She forced me to speak up – I have always had a very quiet, rasping voice, with a thankfully neutral accent that has an impish tendency to mimic the pronunciation of people around me, but I rarely spoke outside school and I found it so hard to project my voice the way she insisted. She persevered patiently.

I was fired up, and ready to go. I prayed that I wouldn’t forget everything before the real thing.

And she even ran me home in her own car. I clutched the garment bag and was itching to get inside the flat and try it on again. One other memory sticks from that evening. I remembered my manners and asked her if she would like to come in for a cup of tea (I kept a few bags just in case). For just a second, her eyes let her down and she glanced momentarily over my shoulder at the dirty red brick block and I knew what she was thinking. Then instantly she beamed at me and made her excuse about needing to get back to do some marking, and deep inside I was so hurt and angry and disgusted that I couldn’t repay her kindness. I didn’t blame her at all. Looking back, it was surely a blessing, for had she dared to come to the flat, the rooms now almost entirely bare of furniture, and

seen how I lived, it might have become complicated.

Strange thing is, I can barely recall the interview day itself.

I left the flat ridiculously early, shyly self-conscious in the wonderful blue suit. My school shoes had polished up OK, and thanks to an eternity with the hairbrush, my spiky black mop was under control for once. I had to hang around at Hatton Cross tube station for over an hour to kill time and be doubly sure of catching the shuttle to the complex where the selection panel was convened.

First, there was a slide presentation by some high-up and I can remember looking at the other candidates and my heart sinking. They were all older, graduates probably, with experience and self-assurance and nicely rounded CVs. Next there was a brief interview with a man who went through my application form and he barely made any comment – just kept looking at me and I was sure he was thinking ‘what a stupid little daydreamer’.

Then I think there was some sort of role-play exercise that might have been about helping somebody in the street, who had fallen over – I really can’t recall, except that I felt so awkward in front of the others. By lunchtime, I was sure I had completely flunked it and I was almost ready to quit, although I sat quietly in the loo for a minute and remembered Mrs Smith and how much trouble she had gone for me and I knew I had to last the day. Which then turned out fine! There were some strange written tests that I finished so quickly that I thought I might have misunderstood what to do, so I did them all again just in case, and then there was the panel interview – three or four senior people arranged behind a long desk and little old me primly perched before them, knees and calves together and slightly at an angle, just as Mrs Smith had insisted. Hands in lap (so they can’t see you shaking, dear!), but I remembered to use them sparingly when I needed to emphasise a point, and to remain in eye contact and to smile a lot. And be entirely open. I did disobey her once and attempt a weak joke, but they laughed politely and I got away with it. The serious lady in the middle had my letter to the Chairman in her pile of papers: I recognised the cheap blue notepaper. Oh God – was that a good sign?

I had no idea at all how it had gone.

It was a nerve-shredding week. Thanks to Howard’s legacy, I didn’t feel pressured into making money – I had enough to last for a while and the prospect of being stuck in the hot, smelly hotel kitchen all day was too easily dismissed while the sun shone and I waited for the mail. I don’t think I had given any thought to a Plan B, should I be rejected.

I carefully laundered Mrs Smith’s daughter’s blouse and pressed the creases from the suit and returned it to her at the school staff room. I think she was almost as excited as me, when I told her all about my day.

The letter was just sitting there on the lino. I hadn’t heard the postman; been doing something mind-numbing to fill the time – lining up knickers in the drawer or something, I expect! I didn’t let myself open it. Such a special moment deserved due ceremony. I don’t know why, but I laid the kitchen table and set the envelope opposite my place, and I kept looking at it as I prepared a celebratory fry-up of everything I had left in the cupboard, complemented by a genuine can of Coke that I had been saving for the occasion. At least if it was bad news, I could enjoy a decent meal.

After a single forkful, the self-denial was too great. Controlling my breathing and pressing my hands to the edge of the table to keep them steady, I tore open the flap. Just a single sheet of paper. That was bad news. If I had passed, there should have been a pack of information, shouldn’t there?

At the fiftieth reading, I believed it. I was on my way. Such a pity Dad wasn’t there to share my news.

1985 - 2000. Open Skies

7. A New Direction

Someone said I was the youngest trainee they had had – I don't know if that's true. But rules were indeed very slightly bent to allow me to start my five-week training course near Heathrow a couple of days short of my eighteenth birthday.

At last the Gods smiled on me and it was the luckiest break of my life. My escape chit.

Looking back with more cynical eyes, I do suspect there might have been more than a touch of tokenism involved in my success: a slight touch of the brush in my looks that helped maintain politically correct quotas and my very young age to bring down the averages, but it would be nice to think it was all down to my own performance at the selection panel. Whatever the case, the upshot was that suddenly my life was transformed.

It was a great burden lifted when I abandoned the wretched flat in Camden and found a bed-sit in Hounslow, to the West of London and an easy bus or tube ride to the airport. I had to blow the last of Howard's money on the deposit, but if I was careful with my pay, I could afford to keep it up without having to resort to any nocturnal activities ever again. Lovely Mrs Smith insisted on wasting a precious day of her holiday to drive me across town. That my entire belongings fitted into her small car and that there was nobody to wave me farewell from Camden was not commented upon. This time she accepted my invitation and stayed as I fumbled around the unfamiliar kitchen to make her a cup of instant coffee.

Clutching the landlord's receipt to my chest, I vowed that never again would I have to fuck to survive.

Now I can see just how damned lucky I was. In those days, before computer databases and easy sharing of personal data, I slipped through the net. Perhaps it was because in those days, the airline was still in public ownership - bureaucratic and inefficient, or maybe it was because I had been cautioned as a Minor, but whatever the reason, my criminal record was never discovered by the World's Favourite Airline. I don't know - perhaps a 'Caution' didn't count as a record and so wasn't part of any background checks? I just knew that nothing had prevented my being accepted and was totally relieved. And I know nothing was revealed to BA because when several years later, when in a more senior role, I had a jolly good look through my own personnel file.

I reported for duty. What a change!

A glamorous job (from the outside), a steady income, no ties with the past, and the world to explore. Just five weeks at Cranebank, learning the ropes, and another couple getting the hang of safety procedures and the peculiarities of individual aircraft and there I was, late 1986, nominally unsupervised for the first time and standing self-consciously in the aisle, demonstrating safety drill in earnest to real passengers, as a fully-fledged and be-winged hostess in my unflattering striped two-piece. A star student, someone said. And damned proud of it.

A total geek, truth be told. I was like a sponge, quietly borrowing manuals, technical documents and reading everything I could in the quiet of my little top-floor room in Hounslow.

Everything was so new and exciting. I had perpetual butterflies in my stomach.

Even the house in which I was now living was new and wonderful. There were five rooms and a communal kitchen/diner, and a shared bathroom that was a recurring source of irritation as there

always seemed to be at least two people wanting to use it. It was so strange, having the constant background noise of people in the house, and stepping out of my room and seeing another person was quite spooky for a while. Especially the first night, when I unthinkingly wandered sleepily down the stairs to the bathroom wearing just a tatty old pair of drawers and a friendly smile, just as three of my new housemates were stumbling in from a night out – it made for a most interesting first introduction!

The other occupants changed frequently, but almost all were great housemates. Young people, with their own ambitions and hang-ups and aspirations.

I declined all invitations to socialise with my peers at first, but once sure of myself, I made a massive effort to force myself to sit with the others in the pub, nursing a Coke through the evening and trying hard not to let my sobriety be too obvious: I had entered a work hard, play hard culture. Being a team player meant socialising too, however painful that may be.

One Sunday morning, I got up early, to take a long, luxurious shower, when I thought I could use up all the hot water without upsetting anyone. I closed my eyes and sighed happily and breathed in the steam and then suddenly realised I had just spent ten minutes masturbating! It made me laugh out loud. I had rediscovered normality!

Things had never been better in every aspect of my life. I loved my work and for a brief while, I even harboured a secret ambition to go further - not long after I qualified, BA appointed its first women pilots, but as it turned out, working the cabin was where I belonged. One look at the daunting career path to the flight deck and I reined in my fantasies - I was content enough with my existing lot. It wasn't rocket science, and I liked the orderliness, the blend of routine and thinking on your feet. I was determined to prove myself in my chosen field.

The strategy worked. I was readily accepted by my colleagues, and once I had proved a good team player, I became the quiet but reliable little Penny whom the pilots regarded as a top-level challenge after hours and the older girls mischievously wanted to lead astray, like a gullible little sister.

Which suited me fine. I moved around, from TriStars to the Middle East to the new tranche of A320s across Europe and I loved it. Being part of a team; being appreciated.

The accumulation of leave took me by surprise and it took a gentle hint from my supervisor for me to realise I ought to use it up.

In 1986, I spent my nineteenth birthday on a proper holiday -probably the first time I had been away on vacation since the week in the caravan with my Father, six years earlier. It was one of the happiest fortnights I think I have ever spent, with nothing more troubling to worry about than the hard ground under my sleeping bag and how to find the campsite loos after dark.

It was a bed-sitters' outing: Mick, Van(essa) and me from the house and Van's boyfriend, Charlie, who owned a small car. Mick, a postgraduate student and elder statesman of the house, navigated and Van and I were crammed in the rear seat, surrounded by the camping gear that wouldn't fit in either the boot or roof rack. The plan was seven countries in two weeks, girls in one tent, boys the other, with us all paying an equal share of the ferry and petrol. A grand adventure on the cheap.

The two tent idea lasted one night: it was quicker and cheaper and warmer for us all to squeeze like sardines into the single musty green army surplus tent. But that just added to the fun. Plenty of ribaldry and innuendo, but we had an almost chaste fortnight, Charlie and Van included, and we had little choice but to become huge friends.

With limited funds, we survived on lots of bread and cheese and cheap local plonk, travelling across

France via Rambouillet to Dijon then to Belgium, via Luxembourg, spending the night there with a great view of the castle. The Mosel and Rhine were a must, and I loved our night camping at Koblenz, on the bank, right at the point where the two rivers came together with a castle opposite, talking late into the night as we watched the barges and pleasure boats motor past.

It was my first time in Germany and I really took to the place. I appreciated the orderliness and sense of civic responsibility. We continued down through the Black Forest to Switzerland, which was just too pretty to be true, and killed our meagre budget, and so we returned to Germany quicker than planned, clipping Austria and spending about ten minutes in Lichtenstein, just to tick another box on our itinerary. We couldn't afford to change money all the time, in those ghastly days before the Euro, and the little car made it back into the land of Deutschmarks more thanks to collective willpower than petrol in its tank. We pottered along the autobahnen at our own pace, overtaken by every other vehicle, but we usually earned a tight grin of amusement rather than any overt signs of annoyance from the locals.

There's nothing like spending all day crammed in a little car and all night squeezed into a little tent to make four people quite familiar with each other. It took until we reached Breda, in Holland, two-thirds of the way through the holiday, for Mick to make his move on me. It was a warm evening and we had splashed out to celebrate my birthday with a delicious meal at a Moluccan restaurant (peanut sauce to die for), before trekking back to the campsite. Van had tipped me the wink, meaning that she wanted to spend a little time alone with Charlie in the tent and so I suggested to Mick that we should stop off for a drink in a local bar.

Funny really. I had never before consciously been attracted to a lad - Howard didn't really count, as that was initially business not pleasure. I liked him and over the previous week had formed a very favourable opinion of him, and as we chatted over our small, cold beers, I decided he was the One.

For to me, he was the first. The first man I had ever wanted to have sex with. Out of attraction. Not because I felt obliged, or was frightened or was being paid. Or forced.

I couldn't face doing it in Charlie's car (too many associations), and the sounds from the tent indicated that our holiday companions were still otherwise engaged, so we found a soft spot among the pine needles of a little copse beside the campsite and shagged enthusiastically by moonlight. What impression Mick had of me I don't know, but he was dumbstruck when I guided him up against one of the more sturdy trees and attacked his fly, dropping to my knees and treating him to his first experience of oral sex. That I seemed quite incomprehensibly competent was a heck of a shock, judging by his wide-eyed amazement! I was the quiet, studious stewardess from the top floor, with no known boyfriend. No, I'm sure he didn't see that about to happen! Sadly, to be blunt about it, getting him over-excited more or less spoiled it for me, for he had no sooner fumbled his dick into my eagerly awaiting pussy than it was all over. A few frantic shoves and he couldn't contain himself. At least he had the manners to hug me and apologise in his own way and as I put my arms right around him and pulled him tight and kissed his pretty, earnest face, I didn't really care a bit. Just cuddling and kissing for its own sake was more than enough of a wonderful birthday present.

Back in bedsitland, Mick made the trek up all those stairs several times a week until his doctoral thesis was complete and he disappeared to make his fortune with an international oil company. We got better - learning each other's preferences, losing his inhibitions and simply loving the novelty of being squeezed intimately together with no purpose other than to share the pleasure of it. We must have spent hours, listening to albums and petting until neither of us could wait any longer and one of us would leap on the other, to begin yet another frantic coupling.

The smell of his shampoo and aftershave on the pillow of my little bed stayed a short while longer. It may not have been true love, for when he announced his going, we more or less shrugged and

agreed it had been fun while it lasted, but I do recall him with great fondness and hope life treats him well.

I changed my image too.

For the first time, I took a serious interest in my appearance, like a normal girly. I was neat enough for work, where the young, scrubbed look, whilst unfashionable, was deemed perfectly acceptable by the management. But I was now a 'proper' young woman, who had had a boyfriend of sorts, and quite liked the concept. It was time to look the part if I was to attract a replacement.

There's a single surviving photo of the short crop I adopted, with its heavy fringe and feathered neckline. I was so proud of it. It was only the second visit I'd ever made to a hairdresser, and once we'd got past the 'who's been attacking your hair with a pair of shears, love?' stage, I put my entire trust in the hands of the delicate young man with the long fingers and pitying expression. And emerged a quasi New Romantic, a few years after everyone else! At least my uniform hat sat properly on it, unlike before, when my unruly bob would do anything to resist it. I looked at the confident, alert, young woman staring back at me in the hairdresser's mirror and realised it was me - no stunner, but not unpleasant on the eye and most definitely no longer a geeky teenager.

Sadly it's been downhill all the way since, in the looks department, but I can be satisfied that for a couple of years I probably warranted a second glance.

Housemates came and went. It wasn't the sort of place you'd want as a permanent home.

My great chum was Di, who lived on the ground floor for six months until she got a place in the nurses' home. We spent hours in each other's company, for like me, she was desperately careful with her money and like me, keen to prove herself in her new career, which was psychiatric nursing. Her parents had come from Barbados in the Sixties but had returned recently and so we shared a lack of family in our lives. So we formed our own family and it was like having a new big sister. We even tried sharing clothes, which was a hoot, for her bust was twice the size of mine and her dresses hung on me like a tent. We also shared books, LPs and plenty of dirty jokes. Though we both worked shifts, whenever possible we would cook for each other, and she showed me fifty different ways to use fruit to brighten up my limited cuisine, Caribbean style. Sadly, when she moved out, we saw less and less of each other and when she became serious with her man, it seemed appropriate to move on.

I dabbled too. With men, of course. There was a dishy guy who moved into the room directly beneath mine and I suppose I had an instant crush on him. That pleased me – confirmation of my new-found normal, rounded life as a successful, independent young woman.

Dan. Mid to late twenties, some sort of contract worker in construction. Strong forearms and tight bum to die for.

Like a silly schoolgirl, I would lay in my bed and try to guess the music he was playing from the bass notes thumping up through the floor, and I would picture him below me, imagining him wandering around in a pair of tight shorts, and hoping he might be thinking of me. I would listen for the clunk of his door and time my appearance in the hall to catch him as he returned to his room.

But bugger me, just as I had worked up the courage to ask him out for a drink (since he for some unknown reason failed to ask me), he moved out! Was I cross with myself?!! 'Seize the day' was another lesson learnt the hard way.

The first time I saw a balance in four figures on my bank statement had me scurrying to check my own calculations. I've always kept an incredibly tight record of my money, ever since my Father

left, when it was a case of choosing between paying the rent or affording to buy food.

On the plus side, my exposure to poverty has made me cautious and I never did develop a taste for snacks or chocolate, since I very rarely had any temptation. Now that I'm not that far from forty and gravity and old age are taking it in turns to ravage my body, I'm grateful for the lack of superfluous calories in my life!

My sole weakness at the time was nicotine. From shared Embassy Regals behind the Tech block at school, through menthols pinched one at a time from my Father's many packs, I enjoyed smoking. Even when I was at rock bottom in my teenage whore years, the taste and buzz from a fag cadged from a satisfied client always helped take the edge off my guilt. I absolutely couldn't afford it then, and given the fragile state of my finances and my otherwise ruthless self-discipline, I still find it remarkable that I should have wasted money on a weekly packet of twenty, right through to when I left school. Goes to show how powerful can be an addiction and although I would never use harder drugs myself, I can most surely sympathise with those poor souls who become hooked to them. Cause or effect I don't know, but a slow, deep drag right down to the butt just before going to bed was my drug of choice.

It was a habit frowned upon with cabin crew. Nobody wants to be served by an ashtray. I would possibly have given up, but like so many of my contemporaries, smoking was a way to help pass the time waiting for crew buses in hotel lobbies, or a pleasant accompaniment to a long, cold drink at the end of a hard day. Access to duty free was like having a pusher, nagging you to buy the ruddy things. Even if you weren't flying international, there was still a concessionary allowance at your home airport shop or a friend would get some for you; enough to keep me hooked at least.

Not dreadful, but I had got up to three packets a week in my early twenties, and it would take my Big Early Mid-Life Crisis to see me quit for good. Breath freshener spray and packs of mints weighed down my handbag for years and even now I can't pass my 'going out' checklist without them.

Back to the bank balance. I would have been twenty or just twenty-one when I decided that I could afford to move up in the world. I envied many of the other girls at work, with their tales of posh apartments and exciting London life. Well, that's not strictly accurate. Envy is one of the few unpleasant traits I don't have. When your life hits a low and then gets a little better almost every day, it would be very ungrateful to be envious. Nonetheless I think I was intrigued and curious and I would try to picture myself in their world.

I took one step closer - a small one but in the right direction. Not exactly exotic - a flatshare in Ealing! But on the way.

I missed the bed-sit in some ways. Obviously not the mouldy shower and mysterious piles of dirty plates that appeared regularly in the kitchen without any apparent human intervention, nor the interrupted sleep as five, six or more young people led separate lives to their own timetables and didn't always consider that some of us were on shifts. What I missed was the shared vibrancy of a disparate group of young people starting out in life. We were all skint and optimistic and lived out lives day by day.

Moving into the flat, I felt obliged to act more responsibly - I was growing up a little bit more.

Compared to the housing association flat in Camden and the attic bed-sit, my new place was palatial. All the wallpaper was firmly attached to the wall and the appliances were clean and fully functional. I felt out of place for a long while, a guest in someone else's home. Which in a way, I was, for Carol, who owned the flat, sub-let the second bedroom to me and I was never in any doubt that beyond that room, it was her apartment. About ten years older than me, she had a managerial

job in the centre of Town and so we actually spent little time together during the week, as our working hours were quite different. But a natural relationship soon settled into place, as it does under such circumstances: acquaintance more than friendship. I had no need to stray too much into her territory - I had no record collection to squeeze in beside hers and if she wanted to watch a programme I didn't, it was no hardship for me to see mine on the little old black and white set in my room. When I cooked, I cleared up immediately and if I heard her bring anyone home, I would scuttle into my room to leave them alone, and I think Carol noticed and appreciated my tact. I was therefore especially nervous the first time I invited someone to stay and I took pains to do so when Carol was safely away for the weekend. But before that, I received some bad news.

I had not been there more than a couple of weeks when the doorbell rang early one evening. It was a tall, stooping gentleman in his sixties, who gave me a tight-lipped smile and showed me an identity document with the Salvation Army logo.

Although I instantly believed I knew what he had to tell me, I insisted we wait until I had made us tea before I let him explain. As if delaying the moment might change what I expected him to tell me. Apparently when I had written to inform the Missing Persons Service of my change of address, it had prompted someone to revisit my case file and there was news to give me. He added that my previous address had not been on record, or else I would have been informed much earlier. I felt awful - in my excitement and haste to move into the bed-sit in 1985, I must have overlooked giving them my changed contact details.

Yet another Penny foul-up.

And the news was? Where was my Father? The gentleman gave me a practised look of sympathy. My Father had died two years earlier, in Bristol of all places. Found dead in a boarding house -natural causes. Before I could ask, he apologised and said that there were no recorded personal effects. What little had been found in his room was insufficient to interest the Treasury Solicitor and having been unable to find any next-of-kin, the local council had given him a municipal burial. He had the details on a piece of paper that he had to squeeze into my hand.

I don't remember feeling strong emotions of any kind, and I suppose the nice gentleman must have thought me a callous bitch, taking the news so calmly, carefully asking him to repeat the few additional details he had, so that I could make a note. He passed me an information leaflet and explained about obtaining a copy of a death certificate, so that I could seek legal advice in case my father had left a will somewhere. But I never bothered, certain that if there had been a will, I would have come across it years before. Anyway, even if a will had existed, there would have been no assets left to be disposed of.

Knowing what had happened to him was great relief - a loose thread in my pathetic little life had been trimmed off. Instantly I thought I was a selfish cow, thinking that! But I really was very sad that he had died in that way and genuinely hoped he did not suffer and was finally at peace with himself. He had suffered a single heart attack, I subsequently found out.

But I could not grieve.

I loved him greatly in my own way and I think he sometimes appreciated me, even if he resented what my coming into this world had done to his own life. I have always felt guilt that I was the cause of his slide downhill and that had I not been born, he would have continued his high-flying ways in Hong Kong, and been so much happier. That I had no choice in the matter doesn't diminish that suspicion.

And so one more link with the past had been severed. All I could do was get on with my own life.

I loved my work. Ealing was quite convenient for getting to and from Heathrow, where I continued to be based, and it wasn't much of a problem heading into Town for some fun. In fact, everything was pretty fine and dandy. I was a healthy young woman, attractive enough it seemed, and very, very cautiously, I decided to see if I could hold down a relationship rather than just enjoy the occasional snog or fumble under the sheets. It was too easy in the close community of cabin crew, to earn a reputation that would cling for years, and I had no intention of becoming a bike.

There was a quiet and studious co-pilot called David, whom I had several times caught looking away shyly and I thought, why not?

He turned out to be a lovely young man, mid-twenties, with boyish charm rather than film star looks, and his shyness was just what I wanted, being painfully introverted myself. Never did he try to push me too far. He was always considerate and patient and when we fell to kissing one evening in a hotel bar somewhere in the Arabian Gulf (not at all the 'done thing'), he was content to go at my pace, and when I left him at my door, he accepted my goodnight with disappointed but gallant grace. I rewarded him two nights later – well, you have to keep men on their toes don't you?

That was such a bizarre night, with both of us playing a part - he the self-confident man-of-the-world pilot, I the inexperienced young hostess. Whereas he was actually almost a virgin and I a seasoned whore. He was so sweet: kept checking that I really didn't expect him to wear a condom. He didn't have to know I'd been popping the Pill daily for three years.

But there was something I had never encountered in a man before, even Howard, which was true mutual respect and affection, and despite the desperate awkwardness, our love-making had an innocent sincerity that more than made up for a low score in technical merit. There was no rush; I had no need to pretend. I wanted him and to be his lover.

David was such a sweetie! We were like a pair of soppy kids. Emotionally, that was almost the case, for he had been school swot and never bothered with girls, so he had a bit to learn. I never confessed to him that when I should have been snogging at the school disco, I'd actually been turning tricks in the back of salesmen's cars. I don't think he could have handled that amount of frankness. He had his own image of me and it suited us both to leave it there. The 'need to know' principle and he didn't need to know.

I was twenty-two, he a couple of years older, and we were both so terribly young, which of course doomed the relationship eventually. Had I been less hard-nosed, we might well have fallen into the trap of believing our love could lead to marriage, but I knew it would be a while before I could handle such a major responsibility, however tempting. For David was a wonderfully kind young man, cutely shy and blessed with a great, dry humour that bordered on the sarcastic. In so many ways, he was very much like me. He was a great observer and mimic and wherever we went, he could find something funny or deserving of gentle mockery. He used his humour to defuse a tense situation, although I'm sure at times, his older colleagues were annoyed by it. Again, rather like me.

But unlike me, he had great ambition and justifiable self-confidence too, though not at all ruthless or conniving - he simply knew he was damned good at his job and had the blind faith of a self-assured young man that all in good time he would inevitably be rewarded with success. Although I've not seen him for a decade, I've kept a weather eye on his progress and I'm so pleased that by all accounts he has indeed done well, and is now a successful operations manager with a young family and all the trappings. And if I'm honest, there have been quite a few occasions over the years when I wonder if it could have been me, bearing his two point four children and ironing his shirts on a Sunday evening.

Who knows? If we had met a bit later in our lives, it might have happened.

Although he was on a decent salary, he was always short of cash and so we enjoyed simply being together as much as going out and doing something extravagant. And like me, he had started his career young, as a cadet entry pilot. We finally clicked at some work-related social event. I knew straight away that we were soulmates. I gave him a week to contact me, after which I couldn't wait any longer and contrived to find an excuse to visit the place out of which he worked. I embarrassed him by refusing to leave until he had sworn to meet me for a drink that weekend.

Which he did, and it was so apparent we were a good match. To me, he was a very pretty boy, with dark eyes and long lashes and the cutest bum. An only child, he still had a faint West Country burr to his voice and dutifully visited his doting parents every month. After three months, I was invited to go too, and once the slight embarrassment of where I would be staying had been sorted (the spare room, to spare everyone's blushes), it was a fabulous weekend. I liked his parents so much: utterly unpretentious, they were hugely proud that their son had done well at university and had a glamorous job. Tea and food were forced upon us at frequent intervals and David's father took us to the British Legion for a drink whilst the Sunday roast was prepared. I responded to their genuine warmth and I overheard them telling David how he was lucky to be courting such a polite and well brought-up girl, so I think I was accepted by them.

Our own relationship was sickeningly sweet, as I recall it. A few weeks of seeing each other and for the first time I knew what it was like to be deeply in love; how you hold your breath when you hug and wonder if the other one can sense the adoration you're beaming from your mind to theirs. How you want to hold hands and kiss and don't give a monkey's who sees.

I was on long-haul at the time, so we had no regular pattern of seeing each other, which made it even more wonderful when we did. Most of our friends had paired off and so we often went out with one or two other couples, to cheap Indian restaurants or walks in the country at the weekend. We attended each other's work Christmas parties, and I was privileged to be asked to spend the holiday week with David and his folks. I was in the spare room again, although nothing was said: they knew full well we stayed at each other's flats, but everyone was silently in agreement that we should continue to respect his parents' moral position.

Assisting with Christmas lunch was just like being back in Audrey's kitchen, with me desperately trying to be helpful and probably creating more chaos and confusion than if I just stood and watched, but my efforts were taken in good humour and I can say with confidence that as Christmases go, that one ranks up there with my first one in Mill Hill, when I was twelve and did all the cooking - my cheeks ached from smiling.

At Easter, David and I used our comp. flights to have a few days away. It felt so right, our being together. And being away from home made the sex even better.

We had about eighteen months together in all, and David almost proposed to me after only twelve. I could tell he was a tad edgy and when he had twice attempted to turn the dinner conversation around to matters of 'The Future', I think I had worked out what was coming. For I was working equally hard to change the subject. Quite amusing it might have been to a third party, listening to the conversation dart about like a game of tennis, with me gently trying return his serve, David inventively trying new tactics and spins. Eventually, after we had each realised what was happening, both of us retreated and left the matter unspoken and inconclusive. Poor David. He didn't get to ask me outright until later.

He ambushed me again a few weeks, and on that occasion my post-coital brain was too warm and cosy for mental gymnastics. I hugged him, and promised to give his proposal serious consideration.

The prospect of marriage was a nightmare. I tried every possible way of putting off my reply but in the end, I just had to explain to him that I wasn't ready. His eyes gave away his hurt, though he

nodded and said he understood. I hoped we could just carry on being close friends and lovers, for to my mind, marriage wasn't much more than an unnecessary label. It wouldn't have made me love him any more than I did already, and if instead we decided we simply wanted to live together, I was definitely prepared to give that a try.

Unfortunately, as is often the way with these things, at least in my limited experience, David read more into my attitude than I had intended.

I am sure that I could happily have waited a few years and then been ready to marry him, but he had already formed the wrong impression – that I was against the idea entirely. It was enough to come between us. We kept on seeing each other for quite a while, but the original sparkle had dulled, and we parted as friends. Which of course meant we hardly ever exchanged another word since.

Dazed from the experience, I resolved that I needed to get more life under my belt before I would be ready to have another serious relationship. Just have a good time - make more friends, have a lively yet sensible social life. Maybe have the occasional slow dance and a snog, perhaps, just to keep in practice.

Janet just confused me. Caught me with my hormones down.

I don't know whether it was spontaneous or if she planned it - to catch me on the rebound. I was coming up to twenty-three, and more than I realised, still reeling from the break-up with David. Changing routes seemed like a good idea and I was regularly rostered under her - she was an old-school Cabin Services Director, married, kids at school, crisp accent and British stiff upper lip. She ran her crew with calm, understated confidence that both inspired and intimidated!

Almost from the first time I flew with her, I knew. The twinkly exchange of looks that lasted a millisecond longer than necessary. Unexplained clumsiness when the two of us were crammed in the galley. It was as if we both sensed an unwelcome mutual attraction and if we ignored it, perhaps it would go away.

It didn't. And when she seduced me, I was more than ready and very willing.

8. Experimentation And Weakness

I can't remember where or when - after a while all the Ramadas and Hiltons and Holiday Inns merge into a pastel and beechwood blur. We had most of the day to rest over and whilst the rest of the crew were hitting the shops, Janet and I had independently decided to say behind and make use of a small swimming pool in the hotel basement.

When I got there, she was already completing slow, leisurely lengths and I could hardly not join her, for the bikini under my towelling gown made it pretty obvious why I was there. I muttered a hello and slipped into the water.

She had a fine figure, for an early-thirty-something mother-of-two, and the sleek black one-piece costume showed it off beautifully. So funny it was, the two of us sneaking secret, admiring glances in each other's direction, yet averting our eyes if contact threatened. The pattern for our relationship was soon set. With the directness I came to adore and depend upon, Janet walked over to my lounger, picked up my towel and flicked her eyebrows upwards. I needed no more bidding.

I was a quivering bag of nerves: this was completely outwith my experience and I wanted so much to give myself to her. How she teased me! I stood, damp and ignored, in the middle of her hotel room, watching expectantly as she methodically put away her bits and pieces - her paperback, watch and bag. I didn't notice the mischievous smirk playing across her lips until she wheeled about and fixed me with her piercing green eyes and pushed her costume provocatively down her body.

Suppressing a gasp, I let her take my hand and she pressed herself against me and put her hand behind my neck, guiding my lips up to hers. I almost literally melted in her arms. Everything felt so wonderfully right - the softness of her skin against my face, her subtle perfume. Janet's purposeful fingers releasing the strap of my bikini top.

Most memorable for me, that first time, was the total sense of giving, my absolute trust in this statuesque woman - I willed my body to her, craving her touch and the soft caress of her lips down my tingling skin. I was unprepared for her inventive and masterful tongue, and lay, exhausted and exhilarated, unable to believe that she had taken me to wanton climax yet again. This was somewhere I'd never been before and I felt I was embarking on an exciting journey. With a bewitching guide.

Curiously, we spoke very little when we were together, certainly not a lot of pillow talk. As if we realised it was unnecessary: the pleasure was in our being together and we weren't seeking a more significant relationship.

Janet had her perfect life already - a well-paid IT Director for a husband, who spent half the year in the US; a huge, expensive farmhouse home outside Reading and two lovable young sons at prep school. Her work was her hobby and her escape from stifling domesticity. How I fitted into all that, I'm not sure, but whatever my role, I was more than happy to perform it. For seven years, on and off.

If I was her plaything, so what? I was always more than happy to respond to her sideways invitations to spend the weekend with her. To share the marital bed and play her games. Janet loved to provoke me, to see how far I would go to amuse her. If only she had realised - I would have done just about anything for her. In fact I loved it when she toyed with me and I fully admit that I could quite easily be an out and out submissive to the right woman – being dominated and used suits me just fine. When she half-jokingly suggested raunchy underwear for me, I was delighted to parade around in a basque and stockings as she shrieked with laughter. That only encouraged her, and over the years I think we road tested a sizeable proportion of the Ann Summers catalogue for her

amusement and our mutual stimulation. That aside, just being with her, sharing her sumptuous home when the family was away, was sheer delight: I would sit in her kitchen, watching her adoringly and awaiting instructions to help with the cooking, just as I watched Amah Audrey when I was a little girl back in Hong Kong.

At work, though we only flew together for another year or two (still long-haul), we kept it stiffly professional, almost to the point of being cool with each other. I doubt that any of our colleagues had the slightest inkling of what we got up to in the privacy of our hotel room or during those blissful days off in deepest Berkshire.

Janet remains to this day my oldest and most constant friend and the only person who spans both my old life and the one I am now trying to define. I've deliberately cut off contact with everyone else.

Hers is an undemanding friendship that has seen me through ups and downs and yet never pressed for anything more than intimate companionship when the mood struck us and circumstances permitted. How Janet managed to compartmentalise her life is a wonderful mystery but I love her in a way that I could never love another human being - she has been my anchor and my confidante, my big sister and my mistress, and though I rarely see her these days, now that we live in separate countries, I am comforted to know that should I ever need her no-nonsense directness and her sound practicality, she would unhesitatingly give it. She will be dismissively annoyed to read this, but I want the world to know how much I love her.

Sorry - I had to pause my writing for a moment there, remembering all the wicked things she taught me. Best if I don't elaborate. Suffice to say that after only a few months of our affair, I was in no doubt that I could never experience such total, utter, concentrated satisfaction with a man.

I worked at the sharp end for almost five years, almost all of it on long distance flights to India and other Asian destinations, but in 1991 I transferred to the very different regime of Northern Europe, to the likes of Stockholm, Copenhagen and Berlin. Each had its plusses and minuses - long flights are tiring simply because they are long, but on shorter ones, the work is concentrated and you seem to have less time to do everything: by the time you've got everyone sat and then shoved drinks and food down them, it's just about time to clear up ready for landing. On the whole, I found long-haul more enjoyable, in that you can take a few minutes to chat with the passengers if you so choose, and there is more opportunity to spend a few hours seeing the sights during your rest periods.

As it turned out, moving to the European region was a stroke of luck, for the entire airline business faltered in the wake of the Gulf War and there were quite a number of cabin crew redundancies at the time. Somehow I escaped.

I celebrated my new role by spending some savings. By carefully squirreling away most of my expenses and allowances, and living only on my basic pay, I had built up a tiny nest-egg. That said, I was hardly profligate, of course - this is me we're discussing here -in those days, I just didn't do self-indulgence.

I took driving lessons. Even though I had no intention of running a car. No - it just seemed to be the sort of life skill I had to have: something else to enhance my independence. If I weren't such a modest person, I'd crow about the first time pass after only eight lessons. That's right - eight! But I won't. Sod it, yes I will - passed first time after only eight tiddly little lessons! See - I'm not a total loser after all. The mechanics of driving seemed to come very naturally. It's the fear of the other wretched people with whom I have to share the road that even now I have trouble handling. And these days, the steering wheel is on the other side. I've still not summoned the courage to attempt Barcelona during the day.

On top of the lessons, the change of job inspired me to move again. More regular hours and an increased feeling of financial security set me thinking and although I had been happy to rent from Carol, I had never quite felt that it was my home – just a place to hang my hat.

The small hand-written advert on an airport noticeboard leapt out at me and before long, I was sharing a rented flat in Earls Court with a couple of stewardesses from another airline. A rival one to be precise, but we couldn't take our employers' antipathy seriously, resulting in a series of weak, long-running jokes about 'dirty tricks' and ghastly pullovers. Not too long after I moved in, my airline replaced our uniforms (thank goodness) and the girls were suitably envious – ha! There was always lively banter between us, although as I represented the more senior and by far, superior organisation, they were inevitably on a hiding to nothing.

As I was now working out of some cramped little prefabricated offices within the Heathrow campus itself, a longer daily commute via the Piccadilly line was easily feasible. With the bright lights of London a few stops closer in the opposite direction.

'Laddish culture' is not a new phenomenon. I think cabin crew and nurses have enjoyed it for years. In my own quiet way, I responded to the example set by Celia and Bex, my far-from-Virgin flatmates. Both were happy-go-lucky socialites in their mid-twenties, from decent schools, and assured of generous support from Mummy and Daddy should their airline pay not quite match their determination to live life to the full. Which of course by the end of each month was precisely the case. They were used to a social calendar far removed from my own, although probably not unlike what might have been expected had I remained and grown up in Hong Kong. But I would only ever experience it second-hand, from their hilarious anecdotes: skiing in the French Alps each winter, long summers in Tuscan villas, country house weekends with friends and family and dazzlingly expensive nights out in the company of chinless traders and brokers called Nigel or Rupert or Giles. Come to think of it, I don't think I've missed out on much.

That we were from such different backgrounds made little difference to our friendship. I was made a welcome member of their circle. No comment was ever made when I would decline to join in the more exotic pastimes and when I was pressured into joining in, they were frequently more than generous, subtly subsidising me when something was obviously beyond my limited means.

And it was of course entirely their fault: without their shockingly low moral standards, I would never have discovered the dubious delights of casual one night stands, drunken girly nights out and the limited use of soft recreational drugs. Nothing heavy - the odd spliff, that's all, I was, and remain, vehemently anti anything stronger. Not my fault - the big girls made me do it. Honest.

It would have been unsociable not to do so, although I was very self-disciplined on the whole, always fearful that booze or narcotics might in some way make me vulnerable, lessen my guard. That constant fear of being the victim again. I hid my reserve successfully, and the 'in crowd' had no problem with my always being the one to volunteer to stay sober enough to get us home safely.

Ever practical, there was another good reason for moderation -each month I would get my own little kick out of seeing the balance of my savings rise a shade. For I had already set out my next goal: to get a place of my own.

That meant no more unnecessary expenditure. Fancy holidays were out. I had no need of a car. I think I became quite adept at playing little Miss Sensible, undercover cheapskate and all-round sober-sides.

I faltered once. A single mad moment. Just the once and never again.

I was in my mid-twenties and as there was no current love interest and Janet had the boys home for

the holidays, I decided to have a holiday on my own, to take a look at the country in which I lived. It was weird - I had been in the UK since the age of twelve but had never really travelled. Yarmouth with my Father, the odd weekend break or training course and the like, a rest day close to a regional airport – but the remainder of Britain was largely a mystery to me. Names on a map. For years, there was London and the rest of the UK and all I knew or cared about was London. I had no desire to get out and about. For when you spend your working life farting about in airports and hotels, holidays tend to lose their appeal, suitcases become objects of hate.

The idea came as a whim and wouldn't go away.

Secretly pleased to feel adventurous for once, I booked two weeks' annual leave, and deciding to make use of my new driver's licence (did I mention that I passed first time after only eight lessons?), hired the smallest and cheapest car I could find, bought an AA Road Atlas and set off with the vaguest of itineraries. It was probably as close to being spontaneous as dull, predictable old me would ever get! It must have been just before the summer proper, as I would have been much too sensible to want to pay high season rates in the cheap hotels and bed and breakfasts on the way - I had by then become too much of a wimp to consider a return to the rough and ready camping of the bedsit years. And single crew were discouraged from taking breaks in the peak season, to give the marrieds a chance to spend time with their offspring. Fair enough I suppose.

Even then, I did have a 'sort-of' plan. I was never going to be completely spontaneous, please. The four points of the compass, half a week South, West, North and East, in that order. Elegant and simple like the mastermind who devised it.

And like an American tourist ticking the 'been there, seen that' list in the guidebook, I "did" Bath then Devon, before heading up into Wales. Snowdonia was especially nice. Parts of it reminded me just a little of the view of the New Territories from Kowloon. I had to make a pilgrimage to visit Portmeirion, to see where Patrick McGoohan had been a free man, not a number, in 'The Prisoner'. Epic. Another embarrassing admission: being susceptible to geeky tendencies - I can hum the theme tune too, if you like. This is another one - I even once found myself feeling ridiculously self-satisfied that as I filled in my log, I realised that I had then flown in every single aircraft belonging to a particular class: I had a full set. Little things do indeed please small minds. That was worrying – next stop joining the beard and thermos brigade taking numbers at the end of the runway?

I had intended to go to Scotland. With vaguely oriental eyes and thick raven hair, I don't look especially 'Braveheart', but my ancestry does occasionally manifest itself. Such as my natural prudence and weakness for shortbread. I suspect I would have ended up doing something silly like trying to look for my Father's family, so it probably just as well that I failed to make it any further North.

Heaven knows what came over me, but I'm not proud of it.

I had reached the Lake District, which was far more beautiful than I had been expecting. The drive from North Wales had been a long one, fraught with roadworks and queues, and I had no inclination to veer off course to explore the ugliness of Manchester or Liverpool. Sorry if I offend anyone, but the hideous accents coming from that part of Britain put me off even thinking about it. That is a strange and illogical prejudice, but I can't help it. It was evening and the views just kept getting better and better as I turned off the motorway and ventured deeper into the hills. Unfortunately, I had not allowed for the dearth of available rooms, and drove around for what seemed like hours, getting hotter under the collar as the sun sunk lower, until I spotted a 'Vacancy' sign not too far beyond Grasmere and with crossed fingers, bumped up the track to a pretty farmhouse. There were tents in an adjacent field and it looked charmingly rural and inviting: a working dairy farm.

With relief, I took the room, and having been so struck with what I had seen so far, booked it for

four nights. That meant missing out on either Scotland or the Eastern side of England, but there would be other holidays. And I took them, eventually.

My hosts were the real thing – proper locals. They worked the farm and I was lucky to have the only room they let in the house itself. They helped me decide where to go and what to see, enthusing over their home region, and it was like having a personal guide. The weather held and I neither crashed the car nor got lost more than half a dozen times a day.

It was on the third night that it all got out of hand. I'm so appalled at what I did, that I almost left this bit out. Skip over the next page or so, I'd suggest - it wasn't big or clever.

The tents in the field next to the house had thinned out and only one was left and I met its occupants when I returned from my day's excursion. They'd been showering in the farmhouse and were about to jog back to the tent, in shorts and towels. I smiled at them and was unable to prevent myself checking them out. Both tall, fit and toned, early twenties, maybe even late teens. Hill walkers I later learned, when the three of us walked to the nearest pub for supper and a drink. Considering what happened afterwards, it is all the more shameful that I don't actually remember their names, or much else about them.

We had a pleasant enough evening, comparing thoughts of the Lakes and swapping anecdotes. They were nice lads - students, I recall. The pub was proper English cosy, with goatskin rugs and brasses and the trimmings, and we stayed as late as the landlord's hospitality extended. I've never been a drinker, but of course, I had let myself get really pissed.

This is becoming predictable, isn't it? Penny goes over the top again.

In my defence, I would point out that I was a grown woman who had gone half a year without a shag. Fair enough, it doesn't really excuse my then insisting that either they both fuck me at once or not at all. It really did seem like a good idea at the time.

The drink made me wanton, and they loved it. Once I had heard my own words and realised what I had said, I was instantly horny as hell, and almost ripped their clothes off, inside the tiny tent. I was in charge, and the boys gamely obeyed my instructions, stripping me and licking me and fondling me. I alternated between them, French kissing, sucking cock, until I was almost screaming for it. I straddled one and gave the second a teasing blow job, insatiable and unstoppable. No sooner had the one beneath me shot his load than I leapt on the second and ground my sopping pussy on to him until he too groaned to a climax.

But that was nowhere near enough for me. They rolled a joint and we sat there together, naked, sweaty and highly pleased with ourselves, and before the last drag was shared, my wicked fingers were already coaxing life back into one of them.

Through uncontrollable giggling and stifled shushing, and with a lot of banging of bums and knotting of limbs inside the tiny tent, I got what I wanted: a really hard fucking, doggy style, followed by my lying spread-legged on the sleeping bags, panting and grinning, whilst the younger lad lay on me and banged me to oblivion. No wonder that little episode has stayed in my memory.

Perhaps it was all that fresh air; the closeness to nature, but I crept back to my room in the house a very, very satisfied young lady. I was too drunk and preoccupied to keep tally of my own orgasms, but I suspect it has yet to be surpassed in a single night. I deserved to feel so bad the following morning. The farmer's wife brought me a tea around nine, as I had failed to make breakfast and when I surfaced and looked out of the window, their tent and car had gone. Just as well I think - facing each other over the breakfast table would have been excruciating.

For the rest of the holiday, across to York, then Norwich and the Suffolk coast, I was demure, chaste and sober. Before that though, my crotch felt like I had spent the night in the next-door field, with the prize bull. I delayed my departure from Cumbria another two nights.

For once, it was an advantage, having no-one special to whom to write a holiday postcard - what on earth could I have written about?!

I think I've always been ready to try anything once. I've done the sex with a stranger thing a couple of times since, but strictly one at a time. Naughty but nice. But never again have I lost control like that.

In fact, the rest of my mid-twenties were quite unremarkable.

I worked, I travelled a little, I had some fun, and was quite content with life. A completely average life for a rather average young woman. With the irregular assignation with Janet to add some spice: lazy weekends with plenty of physical contact.

Probably the sole interesting event that occurred in that period was when I was mugged. It would have been 1993, for I had just returned prematurely from a short secondment in Taiwan with British Asian Airways. More of that in a moment.

As urban robbery goes, it was unremarkable. I was a typical vulnerable woman, walking alone along a typical West London street a few minutes before midnight. I'd had a few glasses of wine and a reasonable curry with some of my pals; wasn't drunk, nor was I thinking about anything in particular beyond a quick cuppa and getting to bed as soon as possible, to avoid having a thick head in the morning.

Two loafing black scrotes, in stereotypical baseball caps and baggy leisurewear, one tall, one short, probably both in their teens, stepped out in front of me, from God knows where. Too late to cross over, no time to turn back. Nothing was said. As the tall one just looked mean, the smaller little shite had my bag from my shoulder before I had focussed on what was actually going down. And without a pause he was tearing off down the road. I would have had no chance of matching his acceleration, even if I'd had the the presence of mind and been wearing trainers rather than my comfy evening sandals.

But in a split second I was mad. In a scarlet fit of insane outrage. Almost certainly livid with myself much more than anything else - the one-time teenage street girl, veteran of Camden's dingiest neighbourhoods, having her bag plucked from her by a pair of little lowlife arseholes. Fuck that, girl.

The tall one was still there, standing in front of me - enjoying a second or two's gloating, before he legged it after his friend. That was a big mistake.

I held curled my fingers, and turned my palm outwards as I took a single pace towards him. The stupid youth had no inkling, concentrating more on his idea of an intimidating smirk or sneer. I wiped the expression off that podgy dark face when the flat of my palm connected with the underside of his huge chin and my full weight just kept it going upwards, snapping his head back. I wished I'd broken the bastard's neck. I'm sure I had meant to.

He actually screamed like a little girl.

I'd like to be able to add that whilst he was reeling from my sudden blow, I kicked him in the crotch so hard that he was never able to grow up to be an irresponsible waster and babyfather (for I'm sure that was to be his destiny), but the truth was that he loped off nursing his neck, half-crying, half

yelling empty threats, and I, having surprised myself as much as him, had no more courage left, and I let him escape as I held on to a garden wall and gulped in huge breaths. There was a light spray of bright blood on the tips of my fingers from what I hoped was the effect of his teeth passing through his lip or tongue. I stared at it and as shock embraced me, I hoped and prayed it had hurt him. Very, very much indeed.

I still do. I'm able to carry a grudge to my grave. Be warned – Penny really isn't nice to know.

I think that I was so especially incensed that someone had taken my things because everything I owned was exclusively due to my own efforts - I had received no inheritance or dowry or trust fund, nor even a damned birthday or Christmas present for ten years for that matter. What I had was doubly precious. That anyone should then try to deprive me of what was undeniably all mine was unthinkable and in the compressed moments of the mugging, I acted upon instinct. Those miserable young thugs should count themselves very fortunate that I had had no access to a lethal weapon, for it scares me to say that I would unhesitatingly have used it.

That said, Michelle Yeoh and Ziyi Zhang and the other balletic actresses from the Orient have nothing to fear from me - I'll never be a martial arts heroine - but my spontaneous reaction did provide some small consolation, whilst I wasted the subsequent hours, replacing my cards and locks and the other contents of my handbag.

So now you know - there is a rotting malice festering away within me, to add to all my other more tangible faults.

Spontaneous violence is actually very un-me. I can only assume it had been the recent exposure to Kung Fu flicks in Taiwan that had temporarily skewed my judgement. My brief secondment had been very disappointing. It was cut short after only a fortnight, and so I didn't spend the full twelve weeks in Taiwan as intended.

It was exciting in the city, and I'm sure I was making all kinds of subconscious associations with my childhood in Kowloon. Rather like those slightly sad Americans who travel to Ireland to drink Guinness and rediscover their 'roots', I had been seeking to explore the Asian half of me. Whether I realised it or not, I had been mucking about with my clothes and makeup and I expect some shrink could have explained that this was my way of trying to identify with the East and make myself fit in and be accepted as a Chinese woman rather than a Westerner. I'm sure the results looked stupid – a pastiche, but thankfully there's only one surviving photo! It was probably a blessing that I had to get back to England before I had the chance to make a total fool of myself.

I had hoped to use the time to explore, maybe taking some leave at the end, even trying to pick up some Mandarin, but for reasons that were never fully explained, no sooner had I carried out the initial training assessments than I was called back to the UK. Inter-company politics? Who knows?

But one mystery was resolved, thanks to my time there.

As a kid, I very occasionally suffered from sudden nausea and headaches, which though unpleasant, was easy enough to handle simply by going to sleep for a few hours. By my early-twenties, perhaps four times a year, I would suffer from such severe air sickness that I would be unable to continue working, and would have to curl up in a corner with an eyeshade whilst my colleagues dashed around, covering my absence and giving me looks that would flit from concern to resentment (if they were busy). Again, provided I could sleep, the nausea and painful headaches would go away on their own.

Unfortunately, the regularity of these attacks slowly increased as I approached thirty and as I so rarely suffered from any ailment or even colds and flu, I was in danger of developing acute

hypochondria because of them. Years of in-depth consultation with crew room women's magazines (much more reliable than any doctor) had diagnosed either a brain tumour or migraine, and so I had been trying various over the counter and herbal remedies for the latter, all with no noticeable success. There seemed no obvious pattern or trigger, nor did cutting out the usual suspects -wine, cheese, coffee - prevent reoccurrence. I had my eyes tested, in case it was strain, but all that did was cost me a small fortune to purchase some weak glasses for close work, and set me on the slippery slope of becoming dependent on the damned things, so that nowadays a pair is stuck to my face most of the time, for deskwork and driving.

I felt bad about it when I had the attacks and couldn't pull my weight in the cabin, but I was also scared to go to the doc, in case something were diagnosed that affected my ability to fly.

I was entirely free of any symptoms in Taiwan and yet within an hour of boarding the flight home, I could sense all the signs - my eyes hurt and couldn't focus, I wanted to retch, my neck was stiff and it felt as if my head were in a vice. Once I had forced down a cocktail of nurofen and paracetamol and slept fitfully for six hours, I was still feeling decidedly shitty but I wasn't bothered. For I reckoned I had found the cause. Taiwan was hot and sticky and although I had never been a slave to confectionery, I did enjoy the daily treat of something small and chocolatey, but there it was just too warm to fancy any sweets. So for sixteen days I had eaten none. And then no sooner had I got on board, in the air conditioned cool, with the prospect of many tedious hours of idleness ahead, than I had a craving to comfort myself with a KitKat, and I had persuaded the steward to dig one out of the shop stock. From the last fabulous mouthful (you know - the one with all the chocolate at the end of the final finger), to the first tightening at the back of my neck took perhaps fifteen minutes. Case proven.

Giving up chocolate was not as bad as stopping smoking. Since then, although I may have risked the occasional After Eight or accepted choc powder on a cappuccino, I have very successfully managed to survive without the lovely stuff. I think that unlike smoking, when the lung cancer takes years to reek revenge, my allergy always had such an immediate and horrid effect that it was a no-brainer that I should leave chocolate well alone. And it has been 99% successful at preventing my old exploding heads.

I have been seeking replacement vices ever since. No doubt my body has other diseases and complaints up its sleeve for old age, but for now, I'm a fairly healthy bitch.

When I sat down to pen this tale, I had a problem with the mid-Nineties. I simply couldn't remember anything I did. Even my flying log fails to provide inspiration. Then the reason hit me - I lived entirely normally and uneventfully for the only time in my life. Perhaps three years of total conventionality, which I suppose in many ways represents the high point of the Penny Lee story.

In 1993, I finally met Lord King, the Chairman, as he did the rounds before his retirement. Thankfully, he didn't mention the letter I'd written to him as a naïve school-leaver eight or so years earlier!

Even digging back into the few other documentary records I have reveals little more evidence. I suppose becoming a homeowner was a pretty big move. It was certainly a bloody big mortgage, and obtained only through considerable exaggeration of my earning potential.

To be strictly accurate, I became half a homeowner. Rach, one of the girls in our circle of chums, was keen to buy somewhere and we had a couple of times bounced around the idea of getting somewhere between us.

We bought the leasehold of the Earls Court flat when Bex and Celia moved out. The landlord was one of those obnoxious types who was out to make his fortune in the Nineties through property

speculation and he needed the capital for his next big-headed scheme. Actually we were all happy with the price, and in particular the avoidance of unnecessary expenditure on those idle parasites, estate agents. Stepping on to the property ladder at that time was probably two or three years earlier than I could really afford to do it, but it seemed such an attractive idea at the time: at the age of (nearly) 27, for the very first time owning the place in which I lived. Well half of it anyway. It crippled me, and I almost reverted to the enforced life of abstention that had led when I first started work, such was my lack of disposable income.

But hey! What a buzz I felt for weeks, each time I got home and looked around the tired little flat and reflected on how far I had come since those black days in Camden. Easily pleased, I am (sad cow).

As the sale went through, I had been busy marketing and to help with the payments, we let the third room to what became a succession of sober Kiwis and drunken Aussies, who turned the small bedroom into a small, permanent outpost of the Southern Hemisphere, each one leaving a further small cultural contribution to the décor and ever more obscure remains in the fridge. Funny how each resident of that room seemed to live up to their national stereotype, but they were all great company in their own way.

In one of those curious ‘isn’t it a small world?’ phenomena, I’ve just realised that Rach worked in the Central London head office of the very same insurance company that has the offices underneath my present place in Spain, and which unknowingly provides my wireless internet connection! (Whoops, there’s an admission.) I think Rach was a PA there, an abbreviation which inevitably earned an alternative meaning when coupled with her insatiable thirst for vodka tonics.

We had little in common but we got on so well. Rach was an Essex girl, always up for a good time, and she had the proverbial heart of gold. And an encyclopaedic knowledge of London clubs and pubs. Like a walking ‘Time Out’, she always seemed to know where we could go for a good time on a meagre budget: where there was free entry for girls, or happy hours, or talent nights with no admission charge. Blonde, with a fabulous bust, she was also very adept at charming doormen. I admired her range of social skills.

She was only a year my junior yet acted like a teenager when she was out and about, which countered my dreary countenance nicely and between us, we did very nicely, thank-you, in the bloke department. Put many a younger bird to shame, we did.

In due course, I picked a new, steady fella - another Mike. Quite a catch, he was - a management consultant with one of the big players, which meant he was often away, but the upside was that we had concentrated bouts of togetherness when our schedules overlapped. It also kept the relationship comfortably casual. We saw each other for almost two years before he took up a fantastic post as a partner in one of their American offices. For a brainy go-getter, he was remarkably human, certainly when beyond the competitive scrutiny of his tiresome work colleagues, who were all so full of their own importance. I’m not the sporty, outdoor type, but he managed to persuade me to tog up in vast yellow waterproofs a few times, to accompany him on some dinghy or yacht or other.

Never let it be said I won’t try something new, even if I never do it again. Which was the case with deep-sea sailing, having spent a final excruciating few days as dogsbody and source of comic relief on board some fancy vessel with Mike and a couple of his pals in the late summer of ’94. I have the dubious distinction of having thrown up in virtually every square mile of the Baltic. I spent hours, tied to the side of the cabin, green and bilious, as we negotiated miles of boring and very bumpy sea all around Denmark and North Germany, although it could have been on the far side of Mars for all I cared. I couldn’t even drink myself stupid to numb the pain, as the stupid boat leapt about so much that the fuel from the engine leaked into the cubbyhole down below where we had stashed the Carlsberg and coated it all in a greasy layer of diesel, that made it undrinkable even to a hardened

lush like me. I am sure sailing does have its merits, but they were lost on me. I'm equally sure that there are simpler ways to achieve the same results, if you just want to spend days on end feeling sick and dirty.

Nice place though, Denmark. Expensive, but nice. Especially nice because the ground doesn't rock beneath your feet, or stink of diesel. I could have kissed the ground when we got there. Actually I would rather have spent the entire week there. On dry land, that is. But love is about give and take, isn't it? There was plenty of that: Mike's sailing gave me chronic seasickness and a lasting aversion to salt water, as for taking, I took handfuls of pills and his mates took the piss. So it must have been love.

For Christmas that year, Mike bought me a bike. At least it didn't make me puke.

Back as a girl in Kowloon, I had been inseparable from my smart little bicycle. It had all the trimmings - a saddle bag, dynamo lighting and streamers coming out of the end of the handlebars. I polished it and oiled the chain and loved it for giving me a bit of independence and the means to visit my pals from school. Now, as a lazy twenty-eight-year-old living in the middle of a vast metropolis, I was slightly less smitten with the concept of cycling, but I was grateful for the gift and tried to make use of it. Call me cynical, but I think it was Mike's subtle hint that my figure was less trim than he would have liked and in need of toning up. Point taken.

It was quite a whizzy machine, with more gears than anyone could ever need, and a saddle that wasn't designed by a woman, if you know what I mean. West London in winter isn't the best place to resume an affinity with pedal power, but to my credit, I was soon zooming about with an insufferable smugness at my new-found green credentials and half-hearted plan to get a little fitter.

The smugness disappeared when smart-ass Mike suggested we take our bikes a little further afield. I gamely tried to keep up, and uncomplainingly accompanied him to all sorts of Sunday destinations - Kew Gardens, Hampton Court, and many, many other locations, all of which could much more easily have been reached by bus or train or Tube. Joking aside, provided the weather is dry and not too windy, I do enjoy cycling and it was mostly fun, even though I usually cursed my stiff muscles on Monday mornings.

Sadly, only a week after Mike had left for the USA, and I was feeling down at his departure (and the reluctant yet sensibly adult decision to end our relationship), some bastard sawed through the security chain and had the bike away. There was some sinister symbolism in the theft, as if I needed any reminder that Mike had left my life.

I didn't want to buy a replacement bike.

The year was saved because Janet had a trick up her sleeve that summer. Her timing was immaculate as I had nothing planned and no current squeeze, so I was more than ready for a spot of gratuitous girly nookie.

She rang out of the blue, to say that the boys were at an adventure camp in Dorset for the week, husband John was in Seattle as usual, and she was sitting in a travel agent's shop in Reading, poised to chuck her credit card at a cheap five-day late-booking holiday and wanted to know if I would like to bring my bucket and spade and join her. Now as you may have gathered, I don't do spontaneity - I'm far too boring, but I said yes before I considered how I was going to get the time off. I'm also basically honest, despite the horrendous wrongdoings I was to commit later in life, and I was troubled for a long while about lying to my employer in order to take the week off at no notice. This sounds so callous, but for once my 'family' was of some use to me, for as far as my boss was concerned, I was travelling to Hong Kong to pay respects to my dying grandmother, whereas in truth I was squeezed on a charter flight with Janet, off to sample the delights of Tenerife.

It was like bunking off school, which doubled the pleasure. And such pleasure. Fabulous weather, a huge bed, and Janet on top form.

She had found us a great room in a new hotel in Los Cristianos, which is slightly less downmarket than its neighbour, Playa de las Americas. Clubbing in the latter was a total scream. We didn't give a toss, glamping it up and putting ourselves about. We put on our gladrags and maxed out on slap in the best trolley dolly tradition, and had a brilliant time, teasing blokes and flirting with girls and generally misbehaving in a way that you can only do when you know you're never going to see the people or the place ever again. Afternoons were for lounging about under the palms by the pool and gently tanning. And all of it was interspersed with some fabulous love-making. Again, I'm not prepared to elaborate any more than to admit that I discovered that a bit of masochism can be fun, with the right partner. Most illuminating.

Janet showed me the ropes and it was the most unexpected pleasure.

More than enough said. Janet would probably murder me for having mentioned it.

I had taken a break from permanent flying duties towards the end of 1995, accepting a secondment to the wacky world of crew training. Apparently although my Taiwanese attachment a couple of years before had been curtailed, the powers that be had been impressed, which was why I had been invited to try my hand at training. I think there was some interest in persuading me to move permanently into the school but I was unsure if I was ready for that and so when I had finished the six months I had agreed to do, I asked to get back to the operational roster. Mike had long gone by then and there seemed less attraction in a regular working week, for there was nothing much to look forward to in the evenings and at weekends.

The timing was right for once, and as a filler, until I could be slotted into a permanent vacancy in the middle of 1996, I was set to work Transatlantics for a change, mostly in and out of Atlanta for the Olympics. I bumped into Celia and Bex occasionally, as their gaudy, lower-class airline flew the occasional clapped-out 747 to the States. Rather like being in an airborne cattle truck I would imagine. Not that I saw anything of the Games other than on television. Overnight accommodation was at a premium of course and so crews found themselves staying on the edge of the city, which made a pleasant change and avoided the hideous traffic problems that clogged the place itself right through the Games. It was my first proper taste of the States and I'm hooked. If Spain doesn't work out, and I can find a way past US Immigration, I might well end up there one day.

I liked Georgia and engineered a couple of extra days off so that I could explore. Lovely people; wonderful waffles for breakfast. Cue my embarrassing Homer Simpson drooling impression! With a diner on almost every street corner, it was impossible not to indulge. Any calories I had burned off during my cycling phase were more than amply replaced. There was a local attraction -Stone Mountain, I believe it is called, where I spent a great day with a couple of girls who had been on the Games flights. You can criticise the Yanks for a lot, but they do rather well at tourist hotspots. Terrific views, a cable car, educational stuff, junk food, a genuine steam train (with those open platforms at the end of each carriage, just like in the Westerns) and a laser and firework show, all in one place - heaven for the time-challenged and unadventurous visitor!

Atlanta would have scored higher in my list of places I could settle in, had it not been for the ludicrous licensing laws, that forced us to drive miles out of the city on a Sunday evening just to quench our thirsts with sadly unremarkable beer. Strange chaps, Americans - they're happy to let all and sundry loose with lethal hardware in their holsters yet horror-struck at the idea that someone might like a little bevy with her Sunday steak.

My companions raved about the downtown shopping, but I took their word for it - for me, shopping is a chore rather than a hobby or pleasure. Genetic Scots aversion to spending perhaps? I did

something more cultural, on a Martin Luther King trail, visiting his family home and the information centre.

When I returned to routine, things had been changing back in London, and a Flat Meeting was called. They wanted to move out, which would mean selling up or buying each other out.

It was always going to happen, so there was no gnashing of teeth, but it was a hassle none of us relished. The catalyst had been Rach's engagement to the dashing Robert, and whatever the inconvenience of it all, I had to share the excitement at the forthcoming wedding. Neither Fee (the current Antipodean resident) nor I could have afforded to buy Rach's stake in the place, so we were stuck. Fee thought for a while and plumped to go back to New Zealand - only a year earlier than she had intended anyway.

I was torn. On the one hand, I just couldn't go back to being a tenant. It meant so much to me, that stupid business of my name on the deeds, or whatever they're called. Tangible evidence that I had made something of myself. On the other, I couldn't make the sums work. Suddenly more than doubling my mortgage repayments would be a killer. I had sleepless nights, tortured by the unpleasant memories of being penniless as a teenager and the lengths to which I had gone just to get by. Obviously I wasn't in anything like that position, I was probably being greedy if anything, but money worries have always seemed the worst for me. I revisited the figures and tried to be optimistic – if I could only rustle up a bit more take-home...

For once in my life, I took an economic gamble.

After years of denying ambition, I applied successfully for a post as a CSD (Cabin Services Director), with the intention of bidding to work primarily on the 'Kangaroo' route to Oz, which BA shared with Qantas, and some other destinations in the Far East. I liked being back in Worldwide: the extra income and allowances were not inconsiderable, and although I didn't relish the responsibility of running a team and doing all the paperwork, it wasn't anything I couldn't do easily. I had always been a 'swot' and had done just about every bit of training or exam there was. I treated it a bit like being in the Guides, and was probably disappointed that the airline didn't issue badges, or else I would have had an armful. I had 'acted up' (worked in a higher grade position) on numerous occasions and worked just about every type of aircraft in current service, in almost every cabin crew position, and had always been popular with the operational management as I was invariably prepared to be on standby or be re-rostered at short notice. Without any pressing domestic commitments, my life was my work and vice-versa, and provided I wasn't asked to break any rest day rules, I was happy to volunteer for anything. Having four weeks' notice of one's roster was convenient, true, but the occasional 'fast ball' change made it a bit more exciting! And just as I had set out to gain when I did my basic training, I still had a sad, encyclopaedic knowledge of almost all the pertinent manuals and regulations and, importantly, the complex rules for expenses and allowances. Several times, I had even been approached by the union, which would have liked to poach me for their LHR (London Heathrow) office, but I had no aspirations to be a workers' champion. No - I'm far too selfish.

Suffice to say I was now formally in a different league, in that awkward yet challenging stratum between the crew and the management.

Before I took up my new post, I agreed to buy Rach out and spent some leave tarring up the flat. Quite nicely, though I say it myself. I moved into the smallest room, and let out the better bedrooms, through an agent (which hurt, but took off some of the pressure). It was tight, but provided there were no periods without tenants, I could just about remain solvent. The long trips away at least kept me busy, though I still fretted.

Homeowner, landlady and successful career woman. Yeah, right. Maybe I didn't cope as well as I

thought. Maybe it was having too much responsibility that made me do it: something so out of the blue and out of character and morally reprehensible, plucked up out of my murkiest subconscious by the fear and uncertainty I thought I was handling so well.

A first indication of the awful person I was to become.

Up to this point, I might have hoped for some sympathy from you, dear reader. I'd had one or two challenges to overcome and in my own unremarkable way, I approached my thirtieth year having made something of myself - the 'best of a bad job' is an apt description, perhaps.

Now I think you'll be appalled.

For me, life was never quite the same afterwards, so I'd better pull no punches. Sorry for the unpleasant detail in the next bit, but this was a key point in my decline and unless I come clean, I'll never be able to rehabilitate myself. If you can work out why I did it, I'd be grateful for the insight.

I was riding the cushions back to HK at the end of '96. To be technical, it was a 'positioning' trip, which meant I was not on duty, but travelling to be based there temporarily for a short while. As the aircraft wasn't full, I didn't have to use a crew seat; instead I was able to enjoy a bit more room in the rear row of the World Traveller cabin.

You need to know at this point that it was not uncommon for unaccompanied minors to travel with us, at the beginning and end of school holidays. They were mainly kids who attended boarding school in Europe, who were going back to stay with their families in Hong Kong, Singapore and other such destinations. A high proportion were Forces brats, but an increasing number of rich HK Chinese also sent their offspring for a Western education. It was well-organised - in the old days, some airlines even used to provide 'Aunties', who escorted the kids across London and put them on the aircraft. We cabin crew herded the little dears into the back rows, where we could keep a closer eye on them.

And that was where I first saw her.

She was absolutely gorgeous and though it may be hackneyed to say so, I was totally smitten. She was of prep school age, ethnic Chinese and stunningly beautiful. I won't claim anything corny like she reminded me of myself, because she didn't. She was simply lovely. I on the other hand, was a gawky, gangly half-breed at that age. She had the window seat, I the aisle, and as I chatted with her, I became steadily enchanted with her high, sing-song voice, delicate mannerisms and innocent enthusiasm for everything. She was perhaps a bit cocky, and clearly spoilt to death by her moneyed folks. When she eventually dozed off, I found myself watching her, studying her tiny little body, her skinny legs curled up beneath her, that flat chest swelling and subsiding, the way her perfect mouth had fallen open, revealing an endearing little gap between her front teeth.

When I fly as a passenger I get easily bored and so I invariably pass the time drifting in and out of light sleep and just letting my mind wander. I was still worrying about my solvency and had issues to address, ideas to bounce around my overstretched little brain.

And wander it did, but I wasn't prepared for the consequences this time: when I shifted in my seat, I discovered that I was, well, aroused, if you get my drift. And all I had done was let my drowsy imagination have free rein. Too much, I suspect. Sometimes my imagination gets carried away. I'm not easily shocked, I can tell you, but though I regarded myself as a open-minded woman-of-the-world, the thoroughly unwholesome daydreams I was having - involving a little girl, for Christ's sake - were profoundly unsettling and once I had sorted myself out in the lavatory, I resolved to behave and forget about the girl for the rest of the flight.

And I would probably have got away with it and my life would have panned out very differently, had it not been for some temporary technical problem with the avionics that made us put down in the Middle East for some immediate maintenance. These things happen once in a while, and it wasn't serious.

To cut the story short, the girl went missing in the airport during the few hours the passengers were allowed to stretch their legs whilst the defect was fixed. The Captain was desperate to get going after the delay and although it was against procedures (and they'd never get away with it these days), I ended up offering to stay so that the flight could continue, the intention being to find her and we would both catch the next scheduled service East. I decamped to the local crew grooming room and changed into uniform.

Predictably, within minutes of my aircraft lifting off the runway to continue its flight, I was presented by a harassed customer service assistant with a small, tearful and eminently cuddlable Chinese girl, still indignantly protesting that she had not heard the many and increasingly impatient tannoys calling her to join the flight.

Ever the consummate professional, I whisked her away in a taxi before she could embarrass the airline any further. The next available flight was not until the following day and so I instructed the cab driver to find us a decent hotel for the night, as dusk was approaching; my corporate plastic would foot the bill. I can't remember why, but everywhere was fully booked and we ended up in a small but adequate place some miles out, and there was only one room left - a double. She had no baggage of course - that had gone on ahead, to be held in quarantine until we caught up with it. I was still miffed at the waste of a day's precious rest day and so when I ushered her into it, the only thought I had was to give her a very stern talking-to.

Lien Hua was a little madam. Comes of being an offspring of the HK super-rich I suppose. I launched into a rant, really venting my pent-up anger on her. She was at first shocked, then stroppy and when she dared to answer back in a hurt, arrogant tone that really got my goat, I wanted to slap her cute little face. You can tell I wasn't used to being with kids. Thankfully I didn't, but I was so damned incensed at her lack of contrition that without thinking, I gripped her arms, spun her round and threw her over the end of the double bed. I was livid. She was wearing a short dress and without hesitation, I shoved the hem up to her waist, revealing the full gorgeousness of her slim, firm bum, encased in tiny pink panties trimmed with lace flowers. I had already gone too far, but it was just so easy to wrench them down to her knees.

The girl was so surprised: it was not until I had landed the second sturdy smack that she yelled out loud.

An indignant stream of invective, that owed more to her indignation than the pain of what were not very hard slaps. It just fuelled my determination and I pushed her down to the mattress and smacked her more. One to each hard little buttock, fascinating to see the skin reddening and the transient white imprint of my fingers.

For a moment I was confused. I couldn't understand it - I was on the veranda of familiar house in Kowloon - I could see the tops of the mountains in the distance. The wailing voice was familiar too - sounded a bit like my own but far away, feeble and child-like. There were faces too. Jin grinning round a door post - licking his lips - it made me shiver - I thought I'd erased him from my memory. I could hear other voices, just the tones, not the words: deep-pitched, laughing, mocking, smutty. My father and his business colleagues I think. My cheeks and ears were burning hot, and so was my backside. I was trying to cover my naked body but something stopped my arms moving. I could feel tears bubbling hotly in the corners of my eyes.

Lien Hua's torrent of contemporary English swear words snapped me out of my reverie. How dare

she say that to me, the little minx? She must have picked them up at school in England. She had to be punished. She had to respect her elders.

My hand made contact, seemingly without any conscious effort on my part. I watched it arc downwards, felt the satisfying sting in my palm, followed immediately by the pleading whine of a chastened little girl. Then curiously, my anger became displaced by a much nicer feeling: like hunger but hugely exciting, right in the pit of my stomach. And all the while, I had the creepy realisation that as I scolded her, my words sounded just like those of my Father, when he disciplined me as a girl.

What the heck was going on in my head?

Lien Hua's tears came about half way through her ordeal, angry howls that soon receded to a subdued and very sexy sobbing, long after I had landed the last slap and held her there, just watching her little pink arse, fighting a disconcerting and powerful urge to stroke and caress it. Like mine had been. Back then in Kowloon... I instantly banished the memories and was back in the hotel room. At least she had stopped protesting her innocence and there was no more answering back. And I was no longer quite so cross. It had been three minutes of utter madness.

Then the awful realisation of what I had just done suddenly hit me. Little Lien Hua was a fare-paying punter, after all, and I had just given her a good hiding! That could so easily cost me my career. Although right at that moment, as she lay over the bed, snivelling, with her dress about her waist and knickers round her knees, showing off that fantastic little bum, half my brain couldn't have cared less. My mind was in a whirl of conflicting, confusing and very disturbing emotions. That I was terrified of my own feelings would be some understatement.

As we girls do, I scurried off to the en-suite bathroom to regroup.

It was a great relief that when I eventually emerged, the small girl was still there. She was sitting cross-legged on the bed, watching the grainy picture on the cable TV. Her eyes were a bit red, but there were no more tears. However, the atmosphere was distinctly frosty and strained and it took time to coax anything from the sulking brat. Thankfully, like any good Chinese, she was ruled by her stomach, and the prospect of my ordering room service earned a grudging, sullen response.

Now I needed to diffuse the situation. We ate in silence, perched on opposite sides of the bed, but she relaxed noticeably with some food inside her and I decided to try an icebreaker. I made some comment which made her titter and pounced on her and tickled her ribs.

"Come on, you: we can't sit here like two jade bookends all night," I chuckled. "If you're going to try to sleep next to my snoring all night, we'd better become close friends pretty quick!"

It worked - she was very ticklish and collapsed into a giggling jelly between my fingers, rolling around on the mattress as I playfully bounced on top of her. If the sound of her squeaky young voice in pain was deliciously erotic, the bubbling of her uncontrollable giggles was almost as much of a turn-on. As was the feel of her skinny young ribs and the way her eyes closed tight with laughter and her coarse black hair danced about her lovely round face. We rolled together across the huge mattress, my fingers just letting her catch her breath before searching out more sensitive places under her arms and down her sides and sending her back into helpless fits of giggles. Then it happened again -another mad moment. We were instantly still and looking into each other's eyes. Something electric passed between us, before we both looked away in our individual embarrassment. I felt a tremendous wave of joy deep within and there was a wonderfully ambiguous twinkle in her eyes, which I interpreted as something between innocent curiosity and guilty pleasure. She had ended up in my arms and neither of us seemed overly keen to move or end the moment until I came to my senses once more.

I lay back on the pillow. This was not happening - it was downright ridiculous. Obscene. Sick. Compulsive.

What if I had misread her expression, was making it up? Then I really could bugger up my career. Big time. Wait - surely I wasn't really contemplating trying it on with an eleven-year-old girl? Logic, sense, decency all deserted me at that point. I felt compelled to continue; I just had to see if she was likely to go along with it.

The room was fairly warm anyway, but I upped the aircon temperature surreptitiously and soon stripped to my underwear, claiming that I ought to hang up my uniform or else it would look terrible in the morning. I was pleased with the way she watched and I carefully positioned myself so that I could watch her reflection in a full-length mirror. To my delight, her eyes kept straying from the TV and checking me out.

We were the best of chums again, the spanking completely forgotten, by Lien Hua at least. Had she been only a year or two younger or older, she might have sulked and that would have been the end of it, but at her glorious stage of life, one lives just for the moment, and grudges don't tend to linger.

I offered to hang up her dress and she readily peeled it over her head. Her white cotton vest rode up with it, giving me a brief foretaste of her trim, young tummy and neat belly button. That was too much for me and once I had closed the wardrobe, I sprang at her, fingers up inside her vest and over her ribs, tickling for sure, but in reality taking full advantage of the opportunity to explore, to take in more of her hot little body. This time I held on to her, wrapping my legs around hers and rolling over the sheet with her, our bodies pressed close, our laughing faces inches apart.

After the frolic, I kept hold of her, and we lay together, still, watching the incomprehensible television, and I lifted the hair from her face and smoothed it over her head and casually stroked her soft shoulders. My arm fell across her chest and we left it there. She seemed quite happy. Ludicrously, shamefully, I was almost creaming myself.

Time for the next test. I could not stop myself.

I announced that I was going to have a bath, as we would soon need to turn in, if we were to be up in good time to get back to the airport.

Once the water was running, I called to her.

"Come and join me, Lien Hua - we can share a bath and do our bit to conserve water!"

To my delight, she was in the bathroom like a shot.

"Pop your knickers in the basin with mine - I'll rinse them out and they'll be dry by morning."

She was unable to hide her curiosity, staring quite blatantly at the trim black triangle between my legs, as I stepped into the bath. I intrigued her, for though I clearly shared her Chinese ancestry, I was at the same time considerably taller than the norm for oriental women. She dropped her pants into soak with mine and laid her vest next to my bra on the tiled floor. Then she paused, and the merest hint of a glow lit her cheeks.

"What's up?" I asked.

She studied the bathmat coyly, then turned to the WC.

"I, er, need to go."

I dismissed her embarrassment. "Well don't mind me - pee away!"

Such directness works with young girls, I have subsequently discovered. They need to be led and are grateful for no-nonsense guidance. She sat and performed without further hesitation. Another tick in the box: she was demonstrably comfortable in my company.

At last I could enjoy the rest of her tiny body. She clambered over the side and I took in her cute little breasts, hardly more than a pair of shallow, pointed cones of puppy fat, with as yet small, pale nipples that rose gently out from each tip. She was embarking on one of those horrid stages of puberty, when the growth outwards outpaces the gain in height, and beneath her trim, firm stomach, there was a slight bulge before you got down to her glorious little pussy. So lovely and neat at that age - utterly unspoilt by pubes, nothing out of place, just two halves of perfect tan flesh standing proud, with the cheeky hint of clitoral hood playing peek-a-boo as she lifted her leg.

I was businesslike, but my wide smiles were genuine enough.

I had hurriedly dunked my hair and had a proper wash whilst she used the lav, and so soaping myself was as much for effect as anything - a flirtatious display, I suppose. She averted her eyes quickly when I looked up from lathering my breasts, but I smiled, willing her to understand that I wanted her to look. In fact I wanted her to touch and kiss and lick, but...

Patience.

I washed and rinsed her hair. There: no problem. Except the distraction of her tiny, wet body just inches from mine.

"Turn around again - I'll wash your back, then you can do me," I suggested.

She knelt up clear of the suds and I immediately slid my soapy hands across her narrow back. It was Heaven! I knelt close behind her and when I tenderly soaped her wonderful little bottom, I whispered with a laugh, "Your bum's still in one piece, but don't you dare be naughty again, or I'll have to spank you again."

She giggled. No grudges there then. I frowned to myself -actually, spanking her would be fun... Stop! One step at a time. Where did that stray thought come from, anyway?

I took the opportunity to move a little closer, and slipped my hands around her waist, then ran them up and washed her tiny breasts. My own nipples were pressed to her shoulders. They were so sensitive; I had to squash them hard against her, to ease the ache. Somewhere in my lower stomach, a minor tremor sent me a note of caution. Easy now, Penny.

Handing her the soap, I said, breezily, "Your turn!" and promptly turned away from her.

The tremor threatened to become an earthquake almost at the first tantalising touch. Her hands were so small, and light and delicate and as they journeyed from my neck and down my spine, I closed my eyes and let every moment run the full course. As soon as she had worked her way down from my neck to my bottom, I stood up, gathering her hands and lifting her up too, and taking hold of the soap.

She watched me, bemused. I lathered my hands and knelt before her, washing her calves and knees, then I soaped up again and tackled her thighs, stopping just short of her crotch. A third time, I put suds on my palms and holding my hand between her legs, I looked at her, eyebrows raised, and a big grin across my chops. Lien Hua nodded and smiled too. My fingers curled over her pubic mound.

Oh the temptation! How I would have loved to linger, fondling, exploring.

But I was good. Functional, efficient, cleansing her nooks and crannies, and up between her cheeks. Shared intimacy, but no more. She laughed, claiming it tickled.

If she was expecting to reciprocate, she was disappointed. I couldn't have survived that, much as it would have been a wheeze. Once I had rinsed her down, I leaned for the towel and draped it over her shoulders. Although I did give her a subtle squeeze through it, a quick hug that did not go unnoticed by her, as she looked up at me with those fabulous almond eyes of hers and smiled. A very mature smile. Almost knowing.

And so to bed, as they say.

The two of us, our nakedness chastely covered by a single sheet up to our waists, separated by a decorous distance, both awake and staring up at the ceiling in the moonlight.

"Dad will be really cross with me - missing the plane like this," she whispered.

I rolled over and sought out her hand.

"No he won't - the airline has told your parents you were feeling queasy and so just needed to stop off for a rest. He knows you have someone looking after you. And he won't have to pay anything extra. So don't worry a bit. Let him believe what he has been told."

I squeezed her hand and when she turned to me, I slid over as quickly as I could without appearing unnatural, and pulled her against my body, holding her shoulders and pressing her head to my neck. And then, as I stroked her hair, I felt her arm reach out, slowly extending and curling over my ribs. I let my hand slide down her back, gentling her bottom towards me and brought my knees up until I was cradling her body right into mine.

I whispered conspiratorially, deliberately ambiguous, "We can keep a little secret can't we?"

Lien Hua made a chuckling sound. I kissed her forehead.

I spooned her closer. I kissed the end of her dainty nose. Her face was so beautiful - open, soft, with happy cheekbones and an impish mouth.

It was so quiet. My throat was dry. I studied her, checking she was fine. This was it. At last.

"This is actually rather fun, isn't it?"

Our faces were almost touching. In the half-light, her eyes had a mischievous twinkle as they narrowed in a smile of agreement.

I lay my lips over hers, at the same time drawing her right into my chest, and as the kiss formed, my fingers brushed her cheek.

She went so rigid, I thought I'd blown it - spooked her, misread the signs. I lifted my head, searching her face for reassurance. She was breathing more deeply, her arm pressed hard into my side. I tried a wink.

And to my enormous relief, her stiff lips broke into a huge grin, her oversized teeth glinting in the gloom. I hugged her and kissed her again. This time she was much more relaxed, her mouth soft and pliable beneath mine. My hands ranged up and down her tiny body.

Never had I experienced such unadulterated pleasure from a simple kiss. I was surely one sick woman.

I felt I had to be so gentle with her, lest I should in some way break the spell. Cradled against me, Lien Hua was just so petite, so fragile.

"OK?" I murmured, and then I realised she was holding her breath.

"You are allowed to breathe," I joked and kissed her happy giggle.

Having missed out on what I presumed was a 'normal' adolescence, I wonder if the emotions I felt that night were similar? The painful anticipation, the fear that at any moment the bubble would pop. The longing. My insides were in knots. And all for an eleven-year-old girl. Unbelievable then; even more so when I look back on that crazy night.

As she relaxed, and we beamed at each other, she planted her own first kisses on my face - the lightest, softest little pecks imaginable, and yet enchantingly unselconscious. I pushed away the sheet and eased her over on to her back, lightly trailing my fingers over those minuscule breasts, tracing around her nipples. She responded, her stubby fingers running up and down my arm, up to the back of my neck, where they sent a cascade of effervescent goosebumps rippling down my spine.

I could even feel the staccato tap of her heart through the tip of my tongue, which followed my fingers' lead across the softness of her breasts. My lips teased her nipples gently, and my hand idly, casually, wandered beyond, over the cute swelling of her tummy, to caress the baby-smooth insides of her thighs. Instinctively (I presume), she opened her legs, and I sought and found tacit approval in her wide, excited eyes, and my fingers danced lightly over her labia. So small, so accessible. She closed her eyes and I loved her.

She gave herself completely, hardly daring to move, sometimes opening her eyes in wonder, and returning my smile, but mostly lying motionless, save for the rise and fall of her chest as her breathing deepened and the beguiling way her tongue would dart out and moisten her open lips. She had frozen and gasped at the first touch of my mouth over her pubis and I was terrified that I had rushed it, but she melted into the mattress and sighed a contented moan and her fingers played with the hair on the back of my head as I tasted her innocence.

Yet all too soon I had to forego this matchless experience. She winced and I knew she was simply too sensitive for me to continue. I think I brought her to the brink of climax several times, maybe further, but her tender inexperience and oriental inscrutability made it hard to tell. It was a first time for me too.

But when I sat up, and wiped my mouth, she looked like the cat who'd got the cream. A great big, amazed, delighted, stupid grin from ear to ear.

It didn't matter that I was fit to explode, that my crotch was throbbing. I desperately needed her to return the favour, but this was an entirely new situation. I had seduced before, but Maz and I were both just kids then, back in Camden. I had never been before found myself a calculating adult, manipulating an innocent child. My conscience was finally trying to fight back. Had I not already taken too much advantage of her naivety? Just watching her happiness had to be enough recompense, frustrating though it was.

I hugged her until she slept.

Now the story could well have ended there. If only it had. It would have been neat and tidy.

Lien Hua would have been left with a little scandal to confess to her best friend in years to come; I would have come away with the guilt of having fallen for an unexpected and forbidden pleasure, and yet would be chastened and relieved it had been just an aberration.

If we hadn't lost our knickers.

Before going to bed, I had rinsed and hung them over the balcony railing. I hadn't realised quite how strong the early morning breezes were, gusting in from the desert, and when I went to retrieve them at first light, they were gone. No sign at all.

And of course, it goes without saying that the chances of obtaining two pairs of panties, before breakfast, in an Arab city, when you're a lone woman in an airline uniform, are on a par with Concorde ever making a profit. Zilch, in other words.

Lien Hua thought it was hilarious.

Although once we were down in the lobby, under the creepy scrutiny of the leering locals and peering anxiously through the window for our taxi, she was feeling as exposed as I. In fact rather more so, for whereas my uniform skirt was a demure knee-length and I was still acutely aware of my situation, her skimpy dress came half-way up her thighs, and was prone to ride up. In the back of the cab, her hands were thrust so hard in her lap that the knuckles turned white.

And that was the problem. Faced with such accessibility, my weakened self-control failed completely.

We caught the flight and luckily bagged the same rear seat, and as she pretended to doze, my fingers were busy under the tartan rug, this time spending a leisurely half-hour to bring her to an indisputable climax. I knew that, not just due to the condition of my fingers, but because of the unabashed croak of amazed and spontaneous girlish ecstasy that had me scrambling to put my other hand over her mouth before she informed the entire cabin.

She was in fits of giggles, her cute face flushed with delight. My heart was pounding and I almost burst out laughing myself at her shocked little expression as I licked my fingers brazenly, one by one.

Me? I was so uncontrollably horny that I dragged her to the WC and against all my better judgement, stripped us both near-naked and gave her a crash course in how to pleasure another woman with her own hands. She was enthusiastic if rather ham-fisted but it didn't take very long at all, and I can still picture Lien Hua's look of surprise and concern when I hit my own high notes. The sweet kid thought she'd done me a mischief. Such irony - no matter how many times I had been propositioned on flights by leery passengers (and the occasional purser), I never once had the slightest inclination to do it in the air, especially in the lav, and yet there I was, inducted into the 'Mile High Club' by a sweet young Chinese schoolgirl less than half my age!

I stood in Departures, watching the way her dress hugged her lovely slim bottom as she trotted out to the waiting limo, hand in hand with her expensively-dressed parents. They had hardly cast me a second glance when I handed her over.

It had been a breathtaking experience, yet it scared me rigid.

What I had done was totally unacceptable by any standards and I knew it full well. What on Earth possessed me? How had I been so easily overcome by some demons leaping from my past? How could I have lost control so quickly and completely and behaved like that? It terrified me. It had been frightening, confusing, yet I still could not deny, also mind-blowingly exciting. I was so

fuck up. Psychoanalysis would surely determine all sorts of links and pointers arising from my own misfortunes as a small girl - it was obvious, but why should that manifest itself now, and in that way? I was almost thirty, and I thought I was just a normal, average and rather unremarkable woman. Yet had I not just committed a disgusting criminal act with that poor little girl?

Thank goodness she would hardly have been as traumatised as I had been at eleven, when I had been repeatedly abused. Little consolation – I had been responsible for exposing Lien Hua to things best left until adulthood. It was inexcusable. Shaken and with entirely justified self-contempt, I was absolutely certain was that I must never, ever, let anything like that happen again. I even considered seeking psychiatric help - such feelings could hardly be sane could they? But I couldn't face talking to anyone about it. I'd managed my life without help so far and there was only one person who could sort this nonsense out in my mind -Penny Lee.

9. Grown Up and Normal At Last?

The standard Penny solution was therefore prescribed - to find something to keep myself busy and hope the appalling lapse with Lien Hua proved to be a one-off. Much easier than confronting it any further or risking finding any further nastiness inside my head. And fate, kindly, delivered some ideas to keep me occupied: two actually. A budget airline and a smooth-talking bloke called Simon.

The first was exactly what I needed, to keep my mind on the job. BA was bothered by the success of the new cut-price airlines and decided to create its own cheap and cheerful subsidiary, called 'Go'.

I found myself once again a minor player in a big business project, but it couldn't have been more fortuitous. I was identified as a person they needed - an all-rounder who could play a practical role in setting up the nitty-gritty operations. With my precarious finances, the generous offer I was made was a most attractive alternative to working myself to death as a CSD, even with the allowances. And it would be a great chance to get away from the mainstream for a while, away from Heathrow, away from small, vulnerable passengers and where my little brain would have enough stimulation to keep me from straying again.

We were a mixed bag, the little group of BA secondees who took residence in a hotel near Stansted at the beginning of 1997. We did not know what to expect. The jokers amongst us were full of tales of the original Southwest Airlines no-frills operation in the USA in the 1970s, in which the cabin crew allegedly wore white hot pants and hid in the overhead baggage lockers for the amusement of passengers: hardly in keeping with our own employer's slightly stuffy image! My dirty mind had some suggestions that I sensibly kept to myself.

There was much philosophical debate about how much we would be poaching custom from the parent business, but in fact we were simply trying to grab a share of the huge market already identified by the likes of EasyJet and Ryanair. The latter's boss's rude remarks about BA Management 'smoking dope' if it thought it could set up a budget airline were great a motivation to us, if only to prove the Irish motormouth wrong - he the man who personally vetted his business's stationery list to avoid wasting money on highlighter pens! Our Boss, Barbara Cassani, came from the BA's US operations and certainly knew what she wanted. Driven is one word to describe her - I refrain from suggesting others. The UK's national carrier had more than it's fair share of scary high-flying women.

It was an exciting time: I didn't actually join Go - I was there simply to play my part until the no-frills business was up and running in its own right, which at least spared me the dubious pleasure of wearing the uninspiring uniform. Green is not my colour, and as for two shades of green? I think not, darling!

It was great fun, working with mainly new staff and a fleet of 737s, but our hard work was repaid and there was great enthusiasm and pioneering spirit. One of the most interesting aspects for me was the constant tension between the staid, bureaucratic, very 'corporate' style and tradition of the parent airline and the need to pare everything to the bone in the new one, if we were to compete with the bargain basement competition. We had still not quite cracked that issue when I left, not long after the first flights to Rome had begun, but I kept tabs on many of my protégés - it was hard not to get a buzz from watching their subsequent success and seeing them embark on their own careers, irrespective of what happened to the airline itself.

The little BA team did exactly what we were asked and we did build an entire airline from scratch, from writing the documentation to recruiting and training up the staff. I was fulfilled: job done,

selves congratulated and a handy little bonus in the bank, to ease my fears. At least the flat had been fully occupied whilst I had been away and things were beginning to look up.

So it was back to Heathrow in mid-1998 once scheduled flights had begun. Whether Go was just an attempt by BA to spoil the market is a question way over my head. At grass roots level, we simply wanted it to work and I think we did a ruddy good job, as it proved an excellent investment and quite a successful enterprise, which BA shrewdly sold off in 2001.

I never did go back to rostered flying duties. At the ripe old age of thirty, I had finally developed some self-confidence, thanks to my experience at Go. People thought I knew my job and dammit, even I could for once see I wasn't bad at what I did. The option of going back to the chore of organising rest rotas and filling in checklists and massaging the egos of a dozen or more stroppy cabin crew was most unappealing. I could do better. When offered the chance to move permanently to product development, I had no hesitation. A salaried manager I became. From now on, mine would be an ego which had to be massaged.

It became a year of great change, because I ended it by moving in permanently with Simon.

I had vaguely known him for a year or so. He was part of the large, loose circle of friends that buzzed around the flat like midges, with no apparent reason for being associated with any of the current residents. But that was our version of swinging London in the Nineties and we all shared a hectic and varied social life in which shop talk was studiously avoided and commitment was not sought nor expected. None of us was complaining.

It was Rach's birthday, I think, just before she moved out and I became sole owner, although we didn't especially need an excuse to throw a party. Vast quantities of booze, Sainsbury's party food and CDs queued up on the autochanger were all that was required. Penny, living cliché, was always to be found in the kitchen at parties, trying to maintain order and providing a supply of clean glasses and quiche. Simon, the smooth bastard, volunteered himself as my assistant and by the end of the evening, we were huddled in a dim corner flirting like a pair of teenagers.

I correctly guessed that he was more than half a decade older than me, but importantly still the right side of forty, so he didn't seem too ancient. He confessed that he was recently single again, having split from his wife of nine years and his two primary-school-aged sons. He was attractive in an understated way, intelligent yet not too high-brow for little old me, and not pushy. Maybe at just over six feet, a shade too tall, but in good shape and I thought, quite a catch for a grim old bird like me.

To be frank, I hadn't had it for months, and neither had he, and when we met up the following weekend, to have a walk about Town and go for a meal, some telepathic exchange took place and within an hour we had downed a Big Mac, got the bus back to his rented flat in Islington, and were bonking like middle-aged rabbits. It worked - we made a good team, emerging from bed a couple of times that weekend to eat and perform the necessary ablutions, but otherwise we simply stayed beneath the increasingly unsavoury sheets until Sunday evening, confirming our compatibility.

We kept in touch whilst I was at Stansted with Go, and most weekends I stayed with him in London. By the time I moved back to Heathrow and into my new job, we were an established couple.

My new work came under the umbrella of the introduction of the 'oneworld' global alliance of airlines, which was intended to encourage cooperation and hence profitability between its members, through economy of scale and sharing of resources. I tinkered away at in the gloomy underworld of product and standard alignment - and yes, it was just as exciting as it sounds(!) - but later managed to progress to more leading-edge projects, such as the introduction of seat-based entertainment

systems and laptop ports. I especially enjoyed being an early guinea pig for one project, testing beds for the flight to JFK, although sadly accompanied neither by Simon nor Janet.

And on the subject of the latter, the time had come to stop our messing about. It had been great fun, but if Simon was to be The One, there could be no third party, however delicious or harmless.

Janet and I had always enjoyed the most peculiar relationship. In addition to being the firmest of friends, we had met up sporadically for more or less a decade and enjoyed the most amazing sex! She would never have described herself as bisexual and as far as I know, she was an entirely loyal and faithful wife and mother apart from our irregular liaisons. Like me, she viewed the physical side of our friendship as a delightful bonus, separate from the normal bonding of two like-minded souls.

It had never been an issue for us: if circumstances permitted, we would take full advantage, if not, so be it - we just enjoyed each other's company. When I stayed at her home, I was accepted as a family friend; almost an aunt to the boys, who were now both in their mid-teens. I had even joined the family on a couple of holidays in the past. Janet's husband, the workaholic John, was a mate too, although there was never any need for him to know that I sometimes used his side of the bed when he was away. Janet and I could go for months without seeing each other and then pick up as if we had met just the day before. She remains my biggest pal, and the one and only friend whom I have taken pains to ensure has accompanied me into my new life.

She understood perfectly what I was stumbling to tell her - that I was going to devote myself exclusively to the 'new' man in my life, Simon, and made light of my wish for our friendship to become entirely conventional. I've missed the intimacy greatly since then, especially in bad times, but I am delighted that she has stuck by me through all my disasters and lapses and even now always manages to find a space for me in her idyllic life.

Having cleared the decks, I moved in with Simon in the December.

It made sense and the timing was ideal. We'd been getting closer for a long time and I was staying at his place with increasing regularity. Keeping track of which wardrobe held what of my clothes was becoming a nightmare. His studio flat was tiny, which didn't help. Simon's divorce had been finalised and maintenance payments settled and so he knew how poor he was going to be, and a rough calculation on the back of a beer mat was enough for us to agree to pool our assets and find a proper home together.

We both carefully danced around the m-word. He wasn't ready to commit again so soon, and I couldn't see any major advantage in marriage other than perhaps to protect my projected fifty per cent share in the freehold of our new apartment. I winced at with commensurate mortgage repayments but they were really no more than I had been forking out for the Earl's Court flat. The 'profit' I made on the sale of that, formed the deposit on our new place, and I was both relieved and delighted that despite the stress and strain of it all, my brief foray into property speculation had been rather successful after all.

It was a wholly new experience, this living together as a bona-fide couple. It suited me fine. I enjoyed playing the housewife when I wasn't working, not that I was ever going to be mistaken for a domestic goddess.

Simon's work as an advertising and marketing consultant in the City was more regular than mine, so the poor guy couldn't always count on a meal when he got home, but we were content enough, treasuring our weekends and devising a system of codes via notes stuck to the freezer, so that we could keep each other informed of our whereabouts and commitments.

Our choice of a small serviced apartment in South Kensington reflected our implicit decision to live

as a couple, and just a couple. It was most definitely not a family home. In the vaguest of terms as we were getting to know each other, we evolved a shared attitude that neither of us had any interest in expanding to a family. Or rather that was my interpretation. Simon even spared me the dubious pleasure of entertaining his two kids during the fortnightly access he had, instead taking them to stay with his own parents in Gloucestershire.

Perhaps I should have got it all in writing.

Work was doing very well, thanks, and in mid '98 I took charge of my own little team of two. Things looked nicely settled. It was hard to remember being single. Sex on tap was a big plus and our bouts of enforced separation merely increased the attraction of getting home. Neither of us had any notion to stray, nor had I experienced a recurrence of that appalling incident with the little girl.

Monogamy without rings suited us both.

After the novelty wore off, we stayed in more than we went out, and Simon set about educating me in his taste in music, which was stuck in a 70s and 80s time warp. I didn't have much choice -his CD and vinyl collection dominated the living room. I indulged him at first, but be it brainwashing or not, I developed a taste for that era too and am now an enthusiastic fan of classic rock and metal from the days when people played proper instruments and didn't pose around, sticking their fingers up at silly angles in front of a camera and shouting bad poetry over a crap loop of synthesised 'music'. Rap marks the beginning of the end of Western civilisation in my eyes.

When early the next year I was leaned on to take a middle-ranking post back in crew training, Simon was very keen, for it would mean our working and home lives would be almost synchronised. It was a decent promotion, for sure. There had recently been announced a new alliance between my airline and a couple of other big players, which was supposed to give us a more effective share of North American and Australian routes and at least I would be more secure at the training centre if it all went tits up and they started cutting staff again. I said yes, then immediately regretted it.

Simon jolted me on. It would be great having a more stable time together. Having inevitably drifted away from our single friends, he could see us continuing the transformation, becoming stalwarts of the dinner party set. Why not? I was now well past thirty, a junior executive in my own right (wow!) and so conforming a respectable, middle-class lifestyle seemed comfortably appropriate.

Much less easy to accept was the new job itself. It wasn't really me. I stuck with it and tried to look on the bright side - a nine-to-five-ish routine, weekends off, more money again. My income now more or less matched what Simon had left after maintenance payments.

How I wished Mrs Smith could see me now; see how far I'd come.

Not that I couldn't do the actual work. Not at all: having always had that geeky streak, I was quite a good choice to be a training manager, for I could spout off technical jargon and manuals at will and could easily do anything expected of my own staff. I'd been doing a hands-on job for a decade, and could liven up the teaching I did myself with the occasional rehearsed anecdote. But it didn't ever inspire me. It is one thing to attend to customers in the aircraft: a smile and a drink or help with a spillage. I could handle with full confidence a nervous 747-full on a stormy night or the effects of air conditioning failure on sozzled holidaymakers stuck delayed on a hot apron, but the prospect of relentless presentations to trainee cabin crew was never going to fire me to leap out of bed in the morning. And that was before an unwelcome consultancy exercise made the training content 'streamlined', which to my mind took out almost any remaining scope for a bit of fun on the way.

There was a major retraining exercise in progress, with the ongoing conversion from Boeing to

Airbus and so that's where I ended up - just about full-circle to where I had started, only this time I was the one working out class timetables at Cranebank.

One nice bonus was that Simon could drop in if he was passing through Heathrow and we'd lunch together sometimes. I rather liked showing him off to my workmates in the office.

All in all, it worked out fine and Simon and I became fully established as an institution, complete with weekend trips to the supermarket and the DIY warehouse and a cheap package holiday to Cyprus. I'll admit our relationship wasn't always paradise, but it was all so normal and predictable and I loved it for that. When one nervous recruit called me 'Mrs Lee', I kept a straight face, but it had a sort of nice ring about it, pun not intended. Maybe one day, eventually.

Simon was kind and considerate to a fault. His hair developed cute little flecks of grey in it but that was one of the very few indications of the age gap. Otherwise he was just a typical man about to hit the big four-oh, conscious enough of his slackening waistline yet too idle to do anything about it.

To be fair, he had learned a lot from his first marriage and was determined not to let the same tensions come between us. Reliable, steady, tender when I could get him relaxed enough to take me to bed, he was a really nice person to live with.

The Millennium year slipped by, wrapped in consummate conventionality.

It was a charmed life we were leading, with our cosy home just beyond the fringe of the fashionable part of South Ken, a steady joint income that was enough to allow us to take in a West End show on a whim, or a ten days in Ibiza at a push. Simon's Mum finally stopped referring to me as 'that woman' and I could cruise the aisles at Sainsbury's with my eyes shut and still find 99% of the weekly shop. You can't get much more domesticated than that. If only I had mastered cooking, it would have been perfect, but thankfully Simon had an iron stomach and the supermarket a ready supply of prepared meals.

I met his 'ex' at last, and genuinely liked her. Sally was great with the kids. I didn't envy her, just marvelled at how anyone could possibly cope on their own with a pair of boisterous little animals like those. The reason we met was to prepare the way for something I had managed to avoid for the first couple of years: the 'family' holiday. It had all the right ingredients for disaster, from the delicate issue of what the boys should call me, to my total inability to kick a football in any particular direction.

We squeezed into a cramped self-catering apartment in a pleasant little resort on the eastern side of Ibiza island. The lack of air conditioning and relentless heat and noise from the café beneath did little to calm my nerves, and like I'm told kids do, the lads sensed my vulnerability and exploited it to their own advantage. At seven and eight, they weren't bad by any means, but when you are put in the role of proxy mother, yet have little or no natural ability or inclination, it tests your patience to the full when faced with a constant onslaught of disobedience and tantrums. Still, we persevered, and Simon did his best to keep the peace. By Day Three, when we gratefully loosed them in the local water park for the day, an uneasy truce had been recognised by both sides and the rest of the time was for the most part quite enjoyable. I began to acquire, albeit slowly and reluctantly, some of the tricks of the parenting trade.

Bribery works, for a while at least, as does occupying hands and mouths with sweet food and drink. Hand-held 'GameBoys' were essential equipment, although not if you forgot to put spare batteries in your handbag. The beach was great, and beautifully clean, and if all else failed, I could always idle a few hours there as they splashed about and annoyed neighbouring holidaymakers with their ball.

Prolonged wearing of my bikini also brought home the awful realisation that I was going to seed. Leading such a comfy life was just too easy and I had become an undeniable Size 10. Oh yes, that and a speccy too. I had needed glasses for reading and driving for some years, but now increasingly found them still perched on the end of nose at other times. Simon thankfully didn't seem to notice. Even when I secretly replaced them with varifocals, to be worn out of necessity almost all the time.

By the end of the holiday, I was exhausted but it seemed worth it, as we had finally all 'bonded', as Simon had hoped. I think the last evening, when I thrashed the three of them all evening on the pool table gave me the last smidgeon of street cred that the boys were demanding. No-one ever expected me to be a stand-in Mum, but much to my own surprise, I appeared to be an acceptable companion and live-in babysitter.

Though it wasn't a role I especially coveted.

But at least I was prepared for Christmas 2000, when we all stayed with Simon's parents, and I admit to a little satisfaction at his Mother's undisguised surprise at how well the boys and I got on.

Call me paranoid, but I think she had sensed something about me that even I had not realised at the time: that just like my Father, beneath the surface I was actually homosexual. I can recall just the occasional strange remark or look. Did she have some instinctive way of detecting that I was not the woman her son thought I was? Downright odd it was.

Or did she just dislike me anyway?

At least we remained civil to each other. And once Simon and I had dropped off the boys and we were safely back in London, just the two of us, it all seemed right again.

Even when I had a break, and a few days to myself, it was so nice to get home to the familiarity and routine. I was still glad of some time to myself though. I had another super experience, this time courtesy of Air Canada, with whom I had a brief exchange visit in Spring 2001. They were one of BA's closer partners and the ostensible reason for the trip was to compare notes with my counterpart, but I'll admit it was mainly a jolly that gave me a couple of days to enjoy Toronto and him the same excuse later in the year, emptying his wallet in Oxford Street. The hotel I stayed in was incredible - a massive place next to the railway station, with miles of corridors that were straight out of that horror movie, 'The Shining', although at least no-one tried to take down my door with an axe. And the city is fun. I wished I had been able to stay longer. It has a network of underground passages linking the shopping centres, so that its citizens can get about without encountering the winter winds and snow, and a massive tower overlooking the lake, with an observation platform near the top. With a glass panel. In the floor, so that you can see straight down. It is so ridiculous that having flown perhaps a couple of million miles, I can still almost wet myself from vertigo inside a perfectly stable building.

On the subject of tall buildings, the unbelievably terrible events of 11 September 2001 rocked the whole airline business and without wishing to appear tasteless by linking them to my own humdrum existence, they proved to be the catalyst of my own mid-life disaster.

I remember hearing the news and digging out my uniform and heading back to Heathrow to help out. All flights were grounded immediately following the Twin Towers terrorism and it was chaos for days, with poor travellers stranded all over the place. Filling in where I could, dispensing advice and information, it occurred to me that I actually knew the business far better than I realised: and a lot more than many senior people I saw, who were plainly out of their depth when faced with pressure and the need to make instant decisions. Quietly, the idea dawned on me that perhaps I ought to see if I could join the ranks of real management. The big league - the power suits and stiff perm brigade.

That autumn, the air travel market collapsed as the public stopped flying. Yet again, the prospect of staff lay-offs loomed and the work I was doing was even more humdrum than ever. Simon and I had been living together over three years already and I wasn't getting any younger. I had picked up vibes about some big changes brewing in the airline's rather disjointed UK regional operations and had called in some favours to see if there might be an opportunity for me in the new combined structure. I set myself a goal. By my 35th birthday (in 2002), I would be a bona fide member of middle management. I worked out exactly the job I wanted and was going to do whatever it took to make it mine.

As presumably you've managed to read this far, it will be of no great surprise to you that Penny, the ace loser, didn't even get to reach the first hurdle, let alone have the opportunity to fall at it. My remaining luck had long been used up.

When Simon and I celebrated our third anniversary of being together in our own flat, and he said a grumpy goodbye to his thirties, it did look as if we had it made. The prospect of our spending the rest of our lives together seemed both real and rather comforting and for once I had a little confidence in the future.

I can't actually remember the moment it started to fall apart, except that as soon I realised, I reacted with disbelief. Surely not again? I suppose there wasn't an actual moment as such, just a gradual worsening of the situation that escaped me until it was too late to do anything about it. I was devastated. For it seemed that every single time I had been stupid enough to enter into any form of meaningful relationship, life would eventually turn around and smack me in the teeth. And against all the signs, it now it was happening all over again.

Why couldn't I ever get it right?

Three and a half damned years for Heaven's sake. That's plenty long enough to get to know someone, to reconcile yourself to their faults and delight in their strengths. And they yours. To file away as much of their past as you want, to know how far you would be prepared to go to compromise, in order to keep them.

I thought I'd done all that. We had worked out the sticky issue of Simon's family in the early days and it seemed to resolve itself well enough later on, when I became more actively involved with the lads. His wife had always had custody and from the outset, Simon understood my feelings that I should not become involved in his weekend access visits. But even so, as time went on, I mellowed a bit and came to play my part, almost enjoyed it sometimes, like the latter end of the Ibiza holiday. I never tried nor pretended to be anything other than what I am – I never agreed to be a step-mum.

I thought Simon had accepted that, and my attitude towards motherhood in general. As we grew closer, we danced around the subjects of marriage and family and he seemed entirely happy to respect my unambiguous determination never to have children of my own. As for marriage, well, we could just wait and see. Subject noted and left pending. In fact, at the time it went pear-shaped, I was even quietly wondering whether it was about time to lift it back out of that pending tray. How I was misreading the situation!

So why the Hell he should wait nearly all this time before whining drunkenly how much he wanted again to be a father, I wish I knew. There's a Latin phrase I can't quite remember, along the lines of "With drink, the truth". He tried to cover his tracks as soon as he realised what he had said, but it was patently something he cared about most strongly. Straight away, I had a very bad feeling about where this was leading. I must have a nose for bad news.

But it was such a major issue - our entire relationship depended on it, yet the only one on which I was never going to compromise. I simply couldn't.

It would have been thoroughly irresponsible for a person like me ever to be so foolish as to risk bringing a child into the world, wouldn't it? I could never bring myself to allow that to happen, to risk subjecting an innocent to the sort of upbringing I had had. There was no motherly instinct in me. I felt no pangs of maternal pleasure in the presence of babies, nor did I care about passing on anything of myself to another generation - indeed the opposite - I was the last of my family line and I knew the world would be a much better place when the bad blood in my veins ceased to flow. And lurking behind all that, since the business with Lien Hua, I wasn't sure if I even knew everything that went on in my own head - was I possibly a real threat to children?

We rowed about it of course, making up quickly as we usually did, but his true feelings had been exposed and there was left behind an inevitable tension, which niggled and grew day by day. I snapped when he tried a new tack to win me round, suggesting it might be an idea to move out of London, to a proper house. Yeah right. One with space for kid's bedrooms and a bloody nursery. Then we could have the boys over more frequently. Not exactly subtle, but of course he wanted me to have a little trial run at being Mother in my own home. I vetoed the idea, angry and scared. I liked our little London sanctuary. He was persuasive and cunning, I hard-hearted and unwilling to yield my position one millimetre.

At that point, we should have called it a day. Of course we should. But after three and a half years, three and a half bloody good years on the whole, neither of us could bare to face the reality, each hoping by some miracle we could salvage what we had. Big mistake. By remaining together, the needling got worse. His comments had barbed edges. He would make sudden sarcastic remarks at the end of a dinner party, embarrassing our friends, who didn't take long to figure out what was happening.

Then he fucked a temp from his office. To punish me? No idea. He hadn't fucked me for weeks, so maybe he was just horny.

I could be charitable and suggest he was out of practice at deception, but I still can't help thinking he deliberately left enough forensic evidence in the laundry basket for me to have little doubt as to why he had been out so late and why he showered before coming to bed. A few weeks' later, the jungle drums had tapped out their explanation and he admitted it when I asked him outright, in a self-pitying and tearful bearing of his soul. If he had left it there, I could most probably have got over it. But when he did it again, repeatedly as I found out, I had had enough. I'm not the jealous or clingy kind, but surely I had a right to some loyalty after all we'd been through together?

I made Sunday lunch as usual and having served up and begun the meal, I told him that it was over.

Even then it shouldn't have turned nasty. We were two mature people, who had simply fallen out of love over an irreconcilable difference of opinion as to how we wanted our relationship to progress. We should have admitted it, agreed we had been silly to have let it slide even this far, then got on with it and moved on with our separate lives.

Simon clearly didn't feel the same way.

The bottomless reserves of venom that Simon was able to summon up were something I had had no idea even existed. Still, if I can't even read my own character, how can I expect to understand other people? How such hatred and resentment could have welled up so strongly and quickly inside such a lovely chap remains a mystery to me, but from that moment on, he seemed to make it his mission to punish me. It was torture. Persistent, systematic and vicious mental abuse. For weeks, until I finally got it into my stupid head what he was doing, I played right into his hands. I know I'm no angel. I'm not a great romantic lover, nor überhausfrau, nor even a particularly nice person, but I surely didn't deserve quite so much loathing, just for seeking to be excused the role of mother of his children, Mark II.

Simon set out comprehensively to destroy me and with my own unwitting help, totally succeeded.

2001 - 2004. Self Destruction

10. House Of Cards

No account of a tortured soul would be complete without the nervous breakdown. But sorry to disappoint – my crisis was just a long and uninteresting series of rows, disasters and mistakes, and I was acutely and painfully conscious of my mental and emotional situation throughout. I watched my self-esteem crumble and yet I felt powerless to intervene.

It would be too easy to blame Simon for everything, for it was my own fault that I had the vulnerabilities and flaws of character he was so easily able to exploit.

I can even understand how and why he became upset, to a large extent. Reaching his early forties, he reflected on the passage of time and having lost his first family, had decided that he needed to act fast, if he were to have the chance to head another. Not unlike those career women in their thirties, who suddenly hear the ticking of the biological clock and panic each month they fail to fall pregnant. It all gets very desperate and can take over your every thought. Life would have been so much neater and fairer if Simon had met one of those women - they could have fretted together and procreated happily until each fulfilled their dream. Trouble was, he had me, and having been at the receiving end of less than perfect parenting, I was in no doubt that I should never contemplate becoming a parent myself. He had forgotten that, I'm sure.

What puzzles and hurts still is the intensity of his reaction. Instead of cutting his losses and dumping me, he decided to wage a bitter campaign of emotional blackmail. I can only imagine that it was because he still loved me, and at the back of his mind, he harboured a hope that I would capitulate and offer to be the mother of his children and we would live happily ever after. When I didn't, he became increasingly unpleasant, and I was caught out each time. If only I had realised quite how much he wanted to punish me, I would have got away at the start, but I was too stupid and trusting of the man I had loved enough to be my presumed life partner.

The first clues of what he was up to emerged within a few days of our Sunday afternoon bust-up, when our neighbour glared in response to my usual 'Good evening'. Odd, since we had been chums for years. Soon other friends became suddenly busy when I called and it wasn't long before my social diary turned blank.

I never did work out exactly what crumbs of malicious gossip Simon had chucked over the balcony to go mouldy in the street below, although subsequent snide comments from a few gullible acquaintances gave me an inkling. Ironically, I think I had been branded a cheat, who had been preying on the good will and selfless adoration of lovely Simon, poor guy. He must have sobbed to everyone some totally untrue crap about my sleeping around. You could tell he was in marketing and publicity - his campaign was faultless, taking in friends, neighbours, colleagues and even the local shopkeepers, before I twigged what he was up to.

It was hurtful, sure, but I endured it for a while. Until I could persuade him to sit down and work out sensibly how we were going to split up, I had to share a home with him and anyway, I wasn't much up to going out and having a good time. Ever pragmatic, I was trying to work out my exit strategy, quietly checking the property pages of The Standard and trying not to get too downhearted at what I might be able to afford on my own.

When I picked my moment and cornered Simon to talk over the practical aspects of my moving out, he might as well have physically punched me, for his response had me retching in the bathroom long after he had stormed off to bed. He reddened and seemed about to explode. There was such

wild viciousness in his eyes - where had that come from? He had already sorted it out, he growled, and was arranging for a sum to be paid into my account, buying out my share of the flat. Right, I thought - I didn't expect that, but go on. It was better than his usual sullen refusal to discuss anything at all. Innocently, I asked how much? It was about a third of what I had estimated in my own calculations to be the present value of our home. With glee, he explained that the flat was in his name only and I should be 'fucking grateful' he was giving me anything at all. 'Should have read what you were signing, you stupid bitch', he gloated, when I reasoned that I had stumped up almost all the deposit from the sale of my own place, effectively my life savings, and had been contributing half the mortgage payments since we moved in. The more I pleaded, and became distressed, the more it seemed to please him. He wanted to watch me writhe and beg, and to revel in my anguish. What made me most sick was that he was absolutely right - I should have protected myself. In the lovestruck haste to set up home with him, I had been entirely prepared to let him handle all the paperwork and legal stuff.

The next day I had a five minute consultation with a bored solicitor, who sucked his teeth and said that disputes like this usually ran and ran and often ended up with all assets disappearing in legal fees. After explaining all the many ways in which it would be a difficult case to resolve, with Simon so antagonistic, he shrugged and suggested it might be less painful to accept the situation rather than fight: at least I would have something quickly, with which to help me get another home.

Whether that was sound advice, I still don't know, but I accepted it readily enough. I just wanted to get out now, as soon as I could. Simon was scaring me.

But Simon didn't stop there. I had much more to suffer.

I find it hard to forgive him. What he then did was completely unnecessary. He had already won and I was on my way out of his life. He had watched my pain and made me cry enough. Did he really need to continue to be so spiteful, to keep on until I was completely destroyed?

I don't have any conclusive proof, nor can I work out quite how he did it. Indeed, to be utterly fair, it might not have been him at all, but the timing and outcome and absence of any other realistic explanation all point to Simon's orchestration of the sudden and dishonourable end to my career. And I had made it all possible.

I had always been in the habit of sharing the news of my working day with him, usually over supper. It was something we both did, since it helped sometimes to put things in perspective and I found his work rather exotic and interesting. A couple of months before the split, I had told him of some concerns I had regarding the conduct of several colleagues, whom I suspected of defrauding our employer. Simon had advised me to keep my discovery to myself, arguing that an effective management structure would work it out for itself, without my involvement. That made sense at the time, for I was all for keeping life as simple as I could.

If I was at all uncomfortable with my decision it was not through worrying about my own lack of moral fibre - I could live with that - it was more because the perpetrators knew I knew and my continuing silence could be interpreted as tacit approval or even complicity. As it turned out, remaining silent was the worst thing I could have done.

I returned from lunch one afternoon to find a junior from the Human Resources department lounging at my desk. I was stumped and immediately assumed it was my turn for redundancy, which was an occupational hazard faced by most members of the airline's staff. The presence of my line manager and a senior HR bod in the meeting room confirmed my fears and I was mentally braced for impact. My theory didn't explain the thick-set man sitting slightly back from the table, but otherwise, all the pieces of the puzzle fitted. I assumed he was some wretched management consultant whose efficiency report was to blame for my expected departure. So when my manager

asked me why I thought I was called to the meeting, I was resigned to expecting the chop and said so. The looks exchanged on the opposite side of the long desk were not what I was expecting. After a difficult pause, my manager cleared his throat and explained that I was under investigation for financial irregularities.

The silent man was asked to speak and in less than ten minutes, producing one document after another, outlined a serious problem in accounting for certain stocks. I won't describe the details here, but it centred on the Bar Operator training course, so I expect you can fill in the gaps.

This chap was actually an internal auditor of some description and patently good at his job. That goods of considerable value had been 'lost' over a number of months was undeniable: even I could see that. I was nervous, not least in that I had of course known about this for a while, even known who was doing it, but had decided not to report it. I now knew what the interview was about, and calmed down a little, assuming that the whole department would be questioned and this was just my turn. I hoped they would get a move on so that I could get back to work, considerably relieved that I still had a job after all. Jeez, that would have been a disaster on top of the Simon thing.

I relaxed a tad and waited to answer whatever questions they had. I would just maintain it was all news to me and that would be that.

So when the auditor turned to me and stated that I was the prime suspect, I was knocked for six. Me? Impossible - I had almost nothing to do with that training. Recovering, I began to babble, but shut up and listened in horror as my manager read from some notes. It was as if he was presenting a summing up for the prosecution in some TV trial. Goodness knows where the details had come from, but the circumstantial evidence almost had me convinced of my own guilt: I suddenly had motive, means and opportunity. So did others in the department, but so certain of the facts were my inquisitors that I began to panic. I strongly denied any involvement and when I challenged their assumptions, the auditor mistakenly let slip that there had been some form of anonymous yet detailed tip-off, which had then been investigated and which had resulted directly in my being called in to explain myself. As I scrabbled around, frantically trying to reason with my accusers, I listened to my increasing desperation, the hollowness of my protests. I felt faint and sick. Each time I challenged their presumption, I sounded so unconvincing and hysterical. No matter what reasonable (and truthful) account I gave of myself, whatever information they were using could counter it with a plausible, if entirely incorrect, ulterior and dishonest interpretation. My manager looked pained as he opened a folder and emptied an internal mail envelope over the table. A roll of banknotes tumbled out. About a hundred quid, it looked. And it had been found at the back of my desk drawer.

That I could have been innocent, and had been set up, was not a possibility under consideration. I was deemed guilty before I had entered the room.

Struggling to stick to his prepared script in the face of my tearful protests, my manager declared that although the next course of action would ordinarily be to hand over the matter to the police, it had been considered in the best interests of the airline, taking into account my previously exemplary record etc, to terminate my employment instantly, with three months' salary in lieu of notice.

The HR minion escorted me to my desk, and clutching the letter of dismissal, I silently and swiftly gathered my few personal effects and was seen on to the staff shuttle. My colleagues, no doubt tipped off that something was amiss, were nowhere to be seen.

I was seething. Livid with myself for failing to argue my position effectively. Angry with the people who had actually been defrauding the company, fuming at my boss, for his lack of trust and judgement. In fact railing at the world. And I was shaking. For I was also terrified. Someone had framed me. It was like a third-rate movie. That this was actually happening seemed impossible.

Sixteen and a half years with the airline, literally half my lifetime, wiped out in a few minutes.

I hid my indignation and horror behind an impassive mask until I was off company property. I sat for a while at the station, trying without success to raise Simon on my mobile. It took a while before I realised that it wasn't even connecting to the phone company, let alone ringing his number. OK, so I would go home and tell him. Even after all our troubles, he would help me. I would fight back. Get a tribunal hearing, involve the union, even if that meant grassing my colleagues - I owed them nothing anyway. First thing in the morning. Once I could think straight.

But I never did. I was too busy trying to find a roof over my head.

Simon's timing was impeccable. Whether he had prior knowledge that I was to be sacked that day I can't say, but if he had wanted to bring me to my knees so thoroughly, he could not have selected a more effective moment to throw me out. I was still in shock when I wandered home from the Tube, still clutching the ritualistic black bin liner of one who has been told to clear her desk. My key didn't slide into the lock as normal. I wasn't even looking at it, running on autopilot as I just yearned to be safe in my own home, where I could calm down, stop shivering and work out my next move.

I cursed and tried the key again and saw the envelope pinned to the doorframe. 'Ms Penny Lee'.

Inside, a single sheet in Simon's small, neat handwriting. Curt, with bullet points: how very bloody Simon.

- 1. Your belongings have been packed and have been placed next to your car.*
- 2. All locks have been changed.*
- 3. The sum we agreed to buy out your share of the property has been credited to your savings account.*
- 4. If you have any questions, you should address them to my solicitor.*

I stared at the paper, not registering the words. I had no more capacity to be shocked. If a meteorite had landed next to me, I would hardly have raised an eyebrow. In fact I half-expected yet another catastrophe to slap me in the face at any moment: I looked up and down the street for the homicidal maniac who was probably about to attack me and make my day complete. Realising what I was thinking, I even laughed at my own foolishness before I collapsed on the step, paralysed with self-pity.

As soon as my dignity surfaced, I took my crying out of the public gaze, round to the back of the block and into the tiny car park. At least that key still worked.

My Fiesta was half hidden behind a low wall of cardboard packing cases. Ever the master of organisation, Simon must have bought them in advance: they bore the name of a storage company. Ten of them. Each with a detailed list of contents carefully taped to the lid. Everything I owned was stuffed into them - it must have taken him half the day to do it. There was another piece of paper under the windscreens wiper.

'Miss Lee. As you are no longer resident, could you please ensure your car is removed by midnight tonight. Thank you.'

It was from the hall porter.

There was no time for any more self-pity and indecision. I needed somewhere to stay. I spent an hour ringing around and explaining and pleading from the local call box before I found somewhere.

The excuses were many and varied and thanks to Simon's campaign of misinformation, I was obviously persona non grata with most of our friends. Yet I couldn't face decamping to a hotel. That night I needed a friend and with some reluctance I called the only person I knew I could rely upon. Janet.

It was after midnight when I returned to London for the second consignment of boxes - my little car being unable to accommodate them all in a single load. I was all but expecting another smack in the face - the gate being locked against me, thieves having already made off with the rest of my things, but something actually went right that day and although the cardboard was beginning to soften under the light persistent drizzle, I did manage to squeeze everything in and set off back to Berkshire, where the wonderful Janet made me soup and rolls and helped me pile the cases in her garage and put her arm around my shoulder and held me for an eternity.

At this point, of course I should have battled for justice, just as Janet implored me to do; I should have found myself a decent solicitor and reclaimed my job and my home. I know that. But like the weak, stupid creature that I am, I caved in. I ran.

Not that I wallowed in my misfortune. I was shell-shocked and reeling but the stubborn survival imperative that had served me well in all my previous crises again took charge, defying logic and common sense. The next day, I repacked my belongings - a couple of cases to carry clothes and necessities and the rest of my life jammed back into the boxes and consigned to a long-term self-storage unit in Reading. Grateful for but immune to Janet's protestations, I set off in my little car, destination unknown and useless mobile phone switched off.

The only thing I knew for sure was that I no longer gave a flying fuck about reclaiming my old life. I didn't want to fight for it. It wasn't worth the effort.

I don't think I was even aware of what my intentions were. Some new attitudes were materialising as I drove, but seemingly without my active involvement. In my head, I knew I was different now. I'd lain awake much of the night, taking a mental stocktake of good versus bad and a new me was shaping up: independent, cynical, hard-nosed, selfish.

And determinedly lesbian.

Heading south to the coast, I checked into a roadside motel outside Brighton, which is a popular place for the gay community. I needed to prove something to myself.

Goodness knows why I wanted to go clubbing - in the back of my muddled mind, I suspect I was hoping to meet a girl to test out my sudden decision to become a card-carrying dyke. I was not quite 35 and although I'm never going to find work as a model, I think I was still OK-looking: slim-ish with my lumps and bumps in the right places, and I was wearing one of my best frocks for the occasion!

I'm not really into loud disco-type places, and of course I was feeling sorry for myself, so when my early stamina ran out and I had failed to chat up any of the women I had met, I ended up moping around at the bar of this small gay club and drinking too much. Close by were a group of pretty young men all the worse for wear themselves and I knew they were talking about me. Three times I distinctly heard the prissy little short-arse amongst them make some comment like 'chicks with dicks' and 'shemale'. He was one of those nasty, spiteful little faggots - eye-liner, mobile camp hands and revoltingly full of himself. I'd met his type before once or twice before, as cabin crew.

Now hold on a minute, thinks I. I know it's dark in here and true, I'm not much of a looker, but to paraphrase 'Lola' by The Kinks, 'I know what I am and I'm glad it's a woman'. The little wanker really got up my nose.

Having heard 'Chinese lady-boy' was the last straw. I went to the ladies, whipped off my knickers and in a tipsy moment of outrage, came back to the bar, spun the little fucker around and grabbed his wrist (which as a bonus made him spill his drink down his lousy designer shirt). I'm 5' 8" and had a slight advantage over the squirt. I shoved his hand up the front of my skirt and pressed it over my crotch, adding something along the lines of 'have a good feel, sonny, it'll help you recognise your own face in the dark'.

As put-downs go, it was admittedly crap, but it earned a round of applause as I strutted unsteadily but defiantly out of the club. The incident did nothing for my self-esteem, which had hit an all time low, but it did feel good to let off steam.

Until the night air blasted some of my drunken fug away.

For I think the only time in my life, I very seriously considered ending it all that night. Having lost everything so suddenly, so unfairly, I was left with my own pathetic, stupid self. Jobless, homeless and fucking worthless. I was such a freak that I couldn't even pull a desperate old butch in a lesbian nightclub and had become nothing more than a figure of ridicule. Not worth the effort of living. Oblivious to the gusting breeze sweeping the empty seafront and ripping through my flimsy dress, I leaned on the railings, staring out at the lights of the pier and wondering if I should just walk out along it and not bother to stop at the end. Why not? Janet would miss me but nobody else would.

I only got a few hundred metres before the natural coward within me won that debate. I couldn't even top myself without being swamped by self-doubt. Yet I had been at rock bottom before and clawed my way up. I could do it again, couldn't I? Except I no longer had the energy and I no longer believed in myself: no way could I dig myself out of this hole.

The coward had the answer to that too: she told me to run even further.

Alone in the big, cold bed of the Travel Lodge, face scrubbed clean of smeared makeup, clothes heaped in an angry ball in the corner, I lay still, eyes open in the dark as the plan took shape. I could focus on nothing else. I had gone over the edge.

The prospect was just so unlike me. It had no boring, practical purpose, didn't fit into any grand design. Other than to get away and forget my troubles whilst I got my rocks off. That's right. If I was indeed going to end it after all, why not go down in flames? Have a last fling and not be bothered with any consequences? The more I mulled it over, the greater sense it made. Fuck it; why not? I had sod-all else to lose, nothing to look forward to. Why indeed should I not just disappear and be irresponsible and self-centred for once. Do something entirely for me and only me. Indulge my suppressed fantasies? My mind wandered back to a night in a certain Middle East hotel room, and the indescribable excitement of waking next to a small, warm little girl, and my hand gravitated between my legs and I anticipated future excesses.

The new Penny was made of a very base metal.

11. A Shameful Episode

Arranging it all was remarkably quick. Within three days I was on the aircraft, heading somewhere in South-East Asia. For reasons that will become clearer shortly, I do not intend to be any more specific than that. This part of my tale is especially unpalatable, but I can't miss it out, if I am fully to bear my soul. Here surfaced the very worst of my many weaknesses.

I had first come across the charity and its activities through an article in the airline staff magazine some years before. Employees were encouraged to assist charities overseas where there was potential PR mileage and I remembered a picture of two or three smiling off-duty cabin crew wearing sponsored sweatshirts, surrounded by a mass of cheerful nut-brown children. I phoned to make an instant appointment and made my way straight to the London office, where my earnest persistence and refusal to sit down bounced me up the chain of command in short order and soon I was sat before a very senior executive, explaining myself for the third time that morning. When it became clear that I would not be leaving of my own volition until wheels were visibly in motion and the odd rule bent if not snapped altogether, I was shown a chair in a corner and supplied with coffee as calls were made and faxes exchanged. The fact that I was offering more or less to pay my own way and to work in the back of beyond, well away from the usual backpacker trail in a frankly rather unattractive place, was plainly too good an offer to resist, for dubious documentation mysteriously materialised and a visa and work permit were conjured up with miraculous haste. Thus I left the building at the end of that day, an apparently properly accredited supply teacher of English as a Foreign Language, on my way to assist in the local school of a town I'd never heard of, in a country I'd only once briefly visited and was at the time very pleased to leave. Six months' initial contract, budget air fare provided, local accommodation with the job and the bare minimum of living expenses paid. I was more than happy to settle for that, offering to forego the going rate for wages, even though I would need to subsidise myself heavily from my savings. I treated the bemused cabbie to my first smile for almost a week.

One final day buying a rucksack and some odds and ends, sorting out my paperwork and I was ready. I sold the Fiesta to a backstreet garage for next to nothing, and converted all the cash I had to US dollars as my spending money. Goodbye England and good fucking riddance. Even my British coinage I sought to dispose of, in a brief but emotional call to Janet.

The first blast of warm air when you step out of the cabin is always good for the soul and was never more so as I stepped down into my new adopted land.

It was still a novelty, being a paying customer rather than cabin crew and I laughed at my own momentary confusion when I looked around for the crew bus to take me across the apron. At least I was well-prepared for the painful wait for my rucksack to appear on the old-fashioned roller conveyor, and for two long queues for my paperwork to be examined and re-examined. But finally I escaped into the chaos of the arrivals hall and peered for the little placard bearing the charity's logo and my own name.

My guide and driver and the charity's local liaison rep were one and the same and I was reassured by the eager warmth of his handshake.

"Call me Rick," the tall, admittedly attractive young man beamed, flashing his perfect teeth and taking me by surprise with his well-formed Oxford accent. I later discovered that he had a Chemistry degree from the University there, which explained a lot. Rick kindly spent the evening with me in the lounge of the hotel, briefing me on my new post, and the trials and tribulations of living in his home country. Nothing he could have said would have put me off - the novelty of doing exactly what I wanted to do, not because I had to or needed to, that was more than enough.

After an administrative stop-off at the charity's main office in the capital, a small oasis of calm technology in the heart of the bustling capital, Rick guided his Landcruiser through the shanties of the suburbs and out into the lush greenery of the country. The small town in which I was to serve as an auxiliary teacher was almost three hundred kilometres of hard driving, in the foothills to the West. It took most of the rest of daylight hours to reach it.

The town was a confusion of basic huts, modern apartments, ramshackle sheds and a number of clearly colonial buildings, past their best but still essentially sound beneath the peeling paint and crumbling garden walls. And everywhere, people, milling rather than hurrying, grouped to chat or just watch those on the move.

We followed the remains of a once-grand avenue out of the centre and a short distance along, turned between two towering gateposts. I read the sign. This was the school in which I would be working: the only one in town, with slightly under four hundred registered pupils from about seven to fifteen-years-old, and a permanent staff of six, besides me. My digs were in a small cottage in the grounds to the side of the main school building - a single-storey construction with wonderful, large shutters and bougainvillea flanking the front door. Rick opened everything up and as the musty heat slowly dissipated, I surveyed my latest home with great satisfaction.

London, Simon and the spineless bastards who fired me could have been a million miles away. This was where I wanted to be.

After I had dumped my rucksack and rinsed my face, Rick showed me around, then insisted on driving the few hundred metres back into town, where with enviable efficiency, he loaded me up with provisions and whisked me back to the cottage. As I showered, he was busy on the phone, his clipped English replaced by a rapid and authoritative torrent in the local tongue. I'd tried to learn some basic phrases on the plane and was pleased to understand a few per cent of his words. Mercifully my teaching was primarily to be of English, in English, but I was determined to have a stab at getting by with the language. I have a strange capacity to pick up spoken languages quite quickly and then just as quickly forgetting them once I move on or have no more cause to speak them. I liken that part of my brain to a small sponge inside a cup, able to absorb and retain a very limited amount, and having to be emptied before anything else will fit in. It's not a big cup either - I have a real mental block when it comes to writing in anything other than English.

Rick was informing the head teacher of our arrival and I soon had my first encounter with the serious but kindly Doctor K. Rick insisted on heading back at that point and I didn't envy him the long drive in the dark. Doctor K was charming, and walked me arm in arm across town to his own house, where I was introduced to his family and made guest of honour at supper.

I woke very early the next day, wanting to be fully prepared to create the right impression. Cotton slacks and blouse, face scrubbed and hair neatly tied back: all present and correct. Doctor K greeted me at the entrance and led me to the staff room, introducing me to the polite nods and smiles of my new workmates. I was placed under the protective wing of the senior master, confusingly called Lee, who was to ease me into the job over the rest of the week.

Lee had more or less finished taking me around the school and pointing out everything I needed to know, when we suddenly stepped out into a large courtyard of red earth. That three hundred kids were there was the most amazing surprise. Sitting cross-legged in straight lines, fidget-free and totally silent. Lee clapped his hands and introduced me in English, and I couldn't avoid blushing stupidly when the entire school yelled 'Good Morning, Miss Penny!'

I wanted to yell back at them, laughing. The rows of earnest, innocent faces. I was definitely going to like it here.

The school was full of contradictions. On the surface, there was a happy atmosphere and a lovely old-fashioned level of politeness that drew well upon the twin strands of that nation's heritage: oriental charm and imperial rectitude.

A little further below was controlled chaos: huge classes with insufficient books and teaching aids, a shortage of writing paper, and a very flexible attitude towards attendance. It was explained to me that if a family needed an extra pair of hands in the field or in the family business, school took second place.

And beneath it all were some very strange undercurrents in the staff room, that I could only sense, not comprehend. As in any team, there were bonds and rivalries, but here there was something else that took me much longer to identify - politics. Not petty internal stuff but the real deal. The younger teachers were every bit as dedicated as their seniors, but their motivation was in no small part due to their strong ideology. I'm most certainly no intellectual and I neither understood nor really wished to understand quite what was going on. That said, I knew before I arrived the awful recent history of the country and the lingering turmoil that kept it in a constant state of unease and poverty. What was unavoidably obvious was that to at least a couple of my new colleagues, the presence of a Westerner was a constant source of irritation. It didn't matter that I represented the goodwill of a respected charity, that I had no axe to grind nor brought any political or religious agenda of my own. Nor even that with my half-Asian parentage, I was not exactly a typical representative of either the New or Old worlds. Nope: simple little Miss Lee might have been the President of the USA himself, insomuch as her being there offended their nationalistic pride.

My fate was sealed early on – those same colleagues made sure of that. I did my best to be myself - the empty-headed grinning buffoon, who laughed off such heady matters, but a few words spoken deliberately loudly enough for me to overhear soon left me in no doubt that I was not universally welcome.

Sod it, I thought. Just get on with what you've chosen to do.

Which was two-fold. I genuinely wanted to help these children. To do whatever I could to extend their knowledge and improve their chances for self-improvement. Good, noble stuff, and I had no problem justifying it to myself as the reason for escaping London. I had no ambitions or plans beyond being there - this was a good enough refuge for the time being; maybe in time I would reinvent myself. Or possibly do myself in - properly. Either way, I intended to go down in flames and the jury was out on whether I would eventually choose to play the phoenix.

It is the second reason for my being there that is so appalling. The one I hardly dared admit even to myself. And confessing it here is no easy matter. But whatever I tried, to wrap it up in weasel words, or even try to deny it altogether, my deepest, innermost thoughts could not be ignored.

I was seeking sexual adventure.

There - I admit it. I wanted to do things that were immoral in the West, if not downright illegal. I shall understand if you abandon this autobiography right now, for the next bit makes for extremely uncomfortable reading.

What had emerged from my ongoing mid-life crisis was the dark, self-centred inner me, who had once before surfaced briefly in a hotel bedroom several years before, at the expense of that poor little Chinese girl, Lien Hua. From the depths had risen up this emotional cripple with no future, an unprincipled sexual misfit with a voracious appetite for physical pleasure at any cost.

I had every intention of gorging myself from this cornucopia of temptation.

With nothing left to aim for in my life, and my self-respect in shreds, I was going to pursue the deepest, darkest and most suppressed of my fantasies. And this was the best place I had figured I could do it. How the notion first concocted itself in my evil mind, back in my despair in Brighton, I'm not really sure, and I can't recall that there was much conscious consideration of what I wanted. My basest instincts were in command.

As I took my first class, and looked around at the beautiful smooth-skinned children studying me with curiosity, I felt the faintest of shivers in my guts. If I was to give in to my bad intentions, some of them would end up in my bed.

You read that correctly.

I can't offer any plea in mitigation, nor claim provocation: this was my own doing and though not especially proud of myself, I am prepared to be honest about it now, even if that condemns me to live out my days as a social outcast: that I wouldn't do anything like that again doesn't change the fact that I did it then and I deserve to face the consequences.

The casual way of life just made it that much easier to be tempted. I had a strategy, and the anticipation was delicious. Once I had established a rapport with my classes, it was easy to let slip a casual invitation to drop by the bungalow for a little extra tuition. In fact, a lot of the children did anyway, such was the way of life in that place, and I encouraged them to do so. Irrespective of my sinister motives, it was simply nice to enjoy their company outside of the formality of the classroom. We read, played games, talked and shared food and drink. I loved to learn about their country and culture through their innocent eyes. Most evenings and weekends, there would be two or three youngsters of all ages sprawled on my floor or curled up with a book in a cane chair, and I would sit close and savour the warm proximity of their bodies.

And yes, I did encourage some more than others, and when I was alone with the prettiest girls, the games would turn playful and ticklish and we would laugh and chase and hug. Quite enough to satisfy me, for after the last one had left for home, I could always slip down under the sheet and let my fingers exploit the arousal between my legs.

Yes, I was sick. I can't deny it can I? I had reached rock bottom.

As time went on, I became bolder. I tended to wear little or nothing in the bungalow and my young visitors often followed my lead. I privately enjoyed their shy scrutiny of my adult body.

A few weeks into my stay, I went further, when I found myself alone with one particular girl, whose intelligence, grace and beauty set her aside from her fellow twelve-year-olds. She was a quiet, studious girl, who would hang back until the others left, then light up like a beacon when she had me to herself. She loved to read for me, showing off her expanding vocabulary and honing her English pronunciation, and I would sit close to her, my arm casually resting on her shoulder or idly stroking her hair. She liked that and I could see beyond her looks of happiness at my praise and encouragement, to the confused longing within: she had an unmistakeably massive crush on me.

It was mutual. So slim and lithe was her body beneath the thin dress and where it gaped about her throat, I could glimpse the tiny brown nuts of her nipples. It was unbearable. Her sing-song voice was forming the words, but all I could think of was the tantalising way her hem had ridden up to show off her perfect young thighs. She paused and noticed me looking adoringly at her. I smiled and laid my fingertips against her cheek and kissed her lips, soft and long.

There was no need for words - her moist, excited eyes said it all. We embraced and barely able to suppress our delighted laughter, explored each other's faces and necks with our lips, and stroked and petted and fondled. I stood and unfastened then dropped the thin cotton robe I was wearing. She

took my hand and I led her to my bed.

Yes, I abused my position and did so in a calculating and premeditated way. Guilty as charged. But there was never any coercion or pressure. I was happy to share my time and company with these girls, and it mattered not if nothing happened. But if a girl responded to my subtle encouragement, then yes, I would take every opportunity to be affectionate, and with a tiny number of them, if they were willing, I went further.

My quarters became a little haven of Sapphic misbehaviour. I exaggerate – it was only for a couple of hours a week, as a rule, but that doesn't diminish my guilt.

Rarely, I had the consummate pleasure of a girl staying over. I cannot put into words the total physical and spiritual pleasure of lying with an eager and loving young girl, helping her learn the joy her body can give her, and guiding her through the mechanics of sharing pleasure with another, through her mouth or her hands. Nothing sleazy or predatory. Genuine, honest, even innocent, pleasure shared. But if I disgust you, I am sorry. You would be right to condemn me and I can't justify my actions – my mind wasn't all there.

It was a basic understanding that what took place in the bungalow remained in the bungalow, and there was never anything more than a slight reddening of embarrassed cheeks if I spoke in class with a girl I had kissed the night before - beyond my little home, all relationships were strictly teacher-pupil formality.

My band of young guests saw no reason either to publicise their visits either, for they considered themselves a select and secret elite and did not want to dilute my attention by letting others in on the fun.

By Western standards, I was a degenerate, but I told myself that far from corrupting their moral values, I was merely supplementing their education in a rather unconventional way. In remoter parts of the country, many girls were married off in their early teens, and the cultural attitude to relationships was unlike anything we would recognise in the West. It was little more than a bit of fun.

One of the highlights was an impromptu orgy, that to most people would, I suppose, represent the absolute nadir of my moral decline. There was a trio of regulars: eleven, twelve and fourteen-years old, whom I had systematically seduced over the months and who were frequent volunteers to come to the bungalow for extra tuition or help with coursework. One weekend, perhaps half a year after I arrived, it just happened that just the three of them were with me for the afternoon and it was hot and lazy and we were having a great laugh and some how we all four of us ended up naked. It was the one and only occasion I encouraged girls to make love to each other. For one glorious, hysterical hour, my bed was a writhing mass of hot, moist, giggling girlhood, with me as evil bitch-dyke centre stage, subtly directing the show and in a state of almost perpetual climax. Undeniably shocking I cannot deny, but even now, when I am fully prepared to repent my sins, I would still maintain that nothing we did would have traumatised any of them, for they were fully aware of what we were doing and as determined as me to enjoy themselves.

Within a month of that, I faced retribution for those sins; you may think: justly so.

Bearing in mind that I made no special effort to conceal my overly keen interest in a small number of pupils, it was perhaps surprising that it took that long for me to attract closer scrutiny.

Both subsequent events that took place happened so close together and it is hard not to draw the conclusion that they were linked and being orchestrated by unseen hands.

It mattered nothing that I had given 110% as a teacher, that what I lacked in technical expertise I more than made up for in patience and dedication. That I had seen dozens of kids blossom and had nurtured in them an affinity with my mother tongue. I had even helped out with maths, which stretched my abilities to the limit. That had been a real struggle, trying to dredge up my knowledge of basic mathematics, for Dr K's beaming suggestion that I could also help out in that subject was impossible to decline. Each evening, I had to re-learn old skills in order to bluff my way through them in class the next day!

If my motive for going there was abhorrent, then I would like to think that I made some amends in my teaching. I won't claim to be a natural, but in the classroom and in small groups gathered under the shade of a tree outside, I found such tremendous fulfilment. We had limited books (it looked as if they had received job lots of obsolete teaching materials from the UK and elsewhere), some so old I remembered them from my own school days - ancient 'Janet and John' and for the older pupils, dog-eared editions of 'Robinson Crusoe' and even some wonderful 'Famous Five' compilations. And from the US, those tongue-twisting 'Cat In The Hat' books, which were guaranteed to have the entire class in stitches, me included, by the end of the period. Heaven knows what the children made of some of the tales. I loved to break off and explain, and add little stories of my own, or anecdotes from the nicer side of my own childhood, to try to balance their perception of the West. I encouraged the children to write and especially charming were the one-page compositions of the older and more able ones, in which they would describe their lives and their families and their hopes and dreams for the future. I usually asked them to read them aloud to me and I would look into their innocent eyes, so full of life and energy and it slowly helped me get a grip on reality, and put my own silly troubles in perspective.

Hard to say if I could have settled down there, and perhaps learned to overcome my unsavoury tendencies - in many ways I was very content, spared from the anguish of relationships and leading a simple existence. And very importantly, knowing that I was doing something positive. The question is academic. My card had already been marked.

The two sour-faced politicos in the staff room had the sort of knowing expressions that would make any normal person uneasy. I had a free period to do some marking and one of them came over. That was odd. So when he sneered and announced he was glad I was going, he gained my full attention.

"We've been keeping our eye on you and we know what you've been doing. Bringing your filthy, decadent western ways here, indoctrinating our children and turning their heads with your loose morals and disgusting behaviour..."

I endured a swift and cutting speech of condemnation, which seemed to encompass not just my own shameful performance, but personal responsibility for everything from US imperialism to global warming. There was no point in rising to the bait, but between the invective there was an underlying thread of malice and warning, which could not be ignored. And a very unsubtle hint that I was about to receive a visit from at least one official agency. One that it was unwise to cross in that particular country. I listened in silence, disguising my growing unease, but beneath my passivity, my guts were beginning to churn.

I braved out the remainder of the day, two English lessons and one Maths, which I executed on autopilot. The phone was ringing when I returned to the bungalow that evening.

It was Rick, which was a relief, but after a few pleasantries, he said the charity's Country Director wanted a word. She was a fearsome French woman, whom I had never met, but whose reputation was almost as well known as the organisation's logo. She was curt and didn't mince her words. There had been a complaint made about me, the details of which she was not prepared to discuss on the phone: I was to pack my things and await Rick's collecting me in the morning - I was suspended pending investigation. It didn't do to press the matter. I simply agreed and acknowledged my

instructions. The game was up.

That evening, I lay in the dark, my rucksack packed, pondering what next.

I was scared, now that I was suddenly back in the real world. How had I been so damned stupid? Had I really been so bent on going out with a bang that I had ceased to be a decent, rational, thinking being? Did I really think I could behave like that indefinitely? I had been indiscreet to the point of recklessness and beyond. What was I thinking? One can't live life day by day in the real world, nor pretend one's actions don't have consequences. Even if one thinks there is no future worth waiting for. Even if one's mind was not quite right at the time.

And having laid myself so open by my actions, goodness knows what additional charges might be levelled against me. Fuck, fuck, fuck! Even escaping to what should have been paradise, I had ballsed it up once more.

This was actually much more serious than it first seemed. Paranoia set in. Having been the victim of Simon's comprehensive frame-up, I knew all too well how easy it can be to set up a stupid victim, and I was getting quite hysterical about what had actually been said about me. No smoke without fire again, and I had even supplied the matches. This time I wasn't entirely the innocent victim. The fact that some unknown form of complaint had already reached a government department in the capital suggested that I might well find myself accused of things much more unpleasant or illegal than simply snogging a few willing schoolgirls, though that was of course bad enough. My lack of self-control was more than likely about to be blown up into something much more heinous, as I became a pawn to further the ends of those who resented the charity's presence in the country.

And although I no longer had any life plan, or ties or family, I wasn't yet prepared to sacrifice my freedom and complete my self destruction. The prospect of spending any time in one of the country's notorious jails was both very real and very frightening. A Western woman would have an especially unpleasant time.

That left me in a real dilemma. If I went back to the capital with Rick, I had no idea what was in store for me. I might be put straight on a plane, to save everyone any embarrassment. Or I might just be able to explain myself, promise to be a good girl and get back to school straight away. Or I might be arrested on charges I hadn't yet dared to imagine.

As the first light of the dawn brought the room into focus, I had made my decision. Not a plan, for I was incapable of thinking more than a few hours ahead. Yet again in my wretched life, I was alone and having to clear up my own mess; except this time, I was alone in a remote country, with no friends or contacts, and just the few possessions I could wear or carry.

Just as I had done in Brighton only a few months earlier, I listened to the cowardly voice in my head and I chose to run from the problem, rather than face up to it.

I wrote a note of apology to Dr K and left it in the bungalow. In town, as the market was still being set up, I persuaded the sleepy driver of a battered old Peugeot taxi to deliver me to the country's second city. Further than the capital, it was a day's uncomfortable drive, and cost me almost my entire reserve of US dollars, but by nightfall, I was holed up in a cheap backpacker's hostel close by the port, anonymous and safe for a short while. By then, I was desperate to get out of the country, my mind having spent the exhausting journey conjuring up any number of scenarios, all of which had the common theme that I had become public enemy number one and was about to be set up as an aunt sally.

Fate is a very real concept for me - I'm sure that all I've been able to do with my life is stumble blindly through my various crises and that something else is actually deciding what's really going to

happen. And since I've consistently mismanaged my own contribution to the sorry saga, I've come to rely on fate to take the lead.

On this occasion, it had an almost unbelievable trick up its sleeve.

But thank the Gods, the lucky stars, Heaven, whatever, for it saved me from what I am convinced could have been an extremely unpleasant future in that faraway, beautiful, dangerous land.

He found me in a downtown bar, after I had drunk too much rough Japanese whisky to be able to tell him to fuck off, but before I'd had skinful enough to be a total pushover.

His accent was, and still is, bewitching - mid-German with a North American drawl, which he claims to have picked up when attached to some US government organisation when he was in the Bundeswehr - the German Army. True enough, he has some few framed photos in his current office, portraying a much younger version of himself, complete with crew cut and square jaw, preening in a number of uniforms; so although I'm no expert, I'll take his word that he's not making it all up. And when he gives you that 'steely-eyed warrior' look, you'd better believe it.

What he was doing in that place, I didn't bother asking. I've learned that it is best not to, with Ingo. I let him decide what I need to know, and what I don't, won't hurt me. That whatever he was up to was bound not to have been strictly kosher, goes without saying.

He tried several languages before English prompted my ungracious response and then ordered me a double, to keep me occupied whilst I slurred out the self-pitying tale of woe that had led me thus far. He was a fine judge of intoxication and was ready to catch me when I slid off the bar stool.

That I simply let this stranger lead me firmly to a large car waiting at the kerb and subsequently guide my unsteady frame through the lobby, straight up to his hotel room, didn't matter a toss to me. Nothing did any more. He could do what he wanted -what did I care? Couldn't get much worse could it? I sat queasily on the end of the king-size bed, trying to focus on this athletic-looking German, wondering if all he really wanted really was a cheap fuck, or was I in for something else. Strange, in a city known for its inexpensive, beautiful, young hookers that he should prefer to pick up a thirty-something drunk of indistinct ethnic origin, who had clearly seen better days.

When he hadn't done anything but mess around in the corner for a few minutes, I decided I had better make his job easier, and I clumsily hauled my crumpled dress over my head and started to fumble with the strap of my bra.

"Hey! What are you doing?" he asked, turning round when he heard me muttering a curse at my own drunken, inept fingers. He brought over the strong coffee he had been making and thrust the cup in my face. To preserve my modesty, or more likely to save having to look at my body, he lowered a bath robe around my shoulders. I was propped against a column of pillows and force fed the strong coffee until the pot was empty. He was a skilled interrogator and by the time my eyelids could no longer stay up, despite the fix of caffeine, he had gained a comprehensive snapshot of the pathetic woman now fast asleep in his bed.

I awoke to the knocking of room service, bringing me breakfast, or rather brunch. My head pounded and I couldn't understand how all my belongings were neatly packed and my own luggage was now heaped in the corner of this hotel room. There was no sign of Ingo. In the bathroom, the cool shower revived my throbbing brain. Had he sent his driver all that way to get my things? Damned cheek - what the heck was going on?

He returned as I was towelling myself down, but hardly cast a glance in my direction.

"Come on, Ms Lee, you have work to do."

So that was it - not your typical job interview, but I've been with him ever since.

He explained my new role in the back of the car. Listening, taking notes, passing him papers and bulging envelopes from his briefcase. Even with a head thick with the-night-before's booze, I could handle that.

And what alternative did I have? I'd burned all my bridges. I wasn't destitute, but there was nothing else in my life to look forward to. I had convinced myself that my next move had to be to make a prompt, low-key exit from the country, or else the authorities I had affronted might well offer me long-term hospitality in one of their more infamous penal institutions. It was so damned unfair - I hadn't actually done anything more than thousands of Western men who had visited here as sex tourists! A lot less in fact, for I hadn't forced or harmed any of my young friends, or driven them to prostitution or made them pregnant or given them an STD. I'd looked after them very well and offered them genuine friendship in exchange for a little innocent lovemaking. Morally repugnant I can't deny, but a lot less unpleasant than my own fate at a much younger age.

Notwithstanding any attempt at reducing my guilt, the fact remained: I was here on borrowed time.

So then what? Return to nowhere to live in England? With no job, and a carefully-phrased reference that ensured I wouldn't be hired by any half-decent airline? It was hard to see how much more I could have screwed up.

Fuck it! In for a penny, in for a pound and all that. If I was going to be branded a criminal, I might as well make a decent job of it. And this was as good a chance as I was ever likely to get. I had no ties, no family, no home and no responsibilities. Even to myself now: irresponsible was my new middle name. The only offer on the table was from this charismatic German, with his rapid non-nonsense way of talking and infectious enthusiasm: an irresistible way out of my latest mess. I didn't care if his line of business wasn't absolutely legal: such was my conviction that I was beyond the pale, that deliberately crossing the line of legality was no more than the next inevitable step in my descent into oblivion.

Despite that, I already had absolute faith in him to see me right, whatever 'right' was going to be. And I wasn't about to be proved wrong. As we ploughed through the crowded streets, I caught my own reflection in the window of the car. Beyond the hangover, I was looking at a real hard-nosed bitch.

World - bring it on!

It became clear that his trip to this country was not his first and that the whole enterprise in which he was involved was very neatly organised and run. He was really only here in the role of visiting customer, feted by succession of seedy little men, who hid behind counterfeit sunglasses and who appeared to do the donkey work. I observed, I kept silent. I didn't care that the sleazy men looked down my blouse as they negotiated with Ingo. Gangster's moll? That was quite a career change.

Ingo must have been impressed with my adaptability, or more probably seized upon just the right flaws in my character to reel me in, for he seemed to have no doubt that I would accept his offer, when he made it. In the short time I had known him, I had quickly learned to do a mean impression of the three monkeys, and I could see, hear and speak no evil on demand. Over and above the sketchy allusion to Ingo's activities I have to make in this written account (as much as is necessary to paint the picture, but absolutely no more), I would never relate my knowledge in any official context. I'm not about to become a grass. It never happened and I wasn't there. Honest.

My conscience no longer existed. The world and I owed each other no favours.

When I agreed to continue to work for him back in Europe, it didn't matter in the slightest what my duties would be. Actually, I didn't even bother asking. His was the only door marked 'Exit', so I chose it.

I dutifully followed him back to Germany at his expense, a day behind him and in Tourist rather than Business, but I hardly doubted that he would be there at Frankfurt to collect me, tapping his foot impatiently as I struggled out of Arrivals with my battered rucksack and assorted bags. I snuggled down into the front passenger seat of his huge BMW and considered myself incredibly fortunate that I wasn't instead huddled in the corner of some heaving, filthy women's prison somewhere in South-East Asia.

12. Beyond The Line

Just before I went through to 'Departures' on my way to the Fatherland, I left a brief message on the Charity's answering machine in the capital, thanking them for my time as a volunteer and explaining that they need not fear that I would be around to cause any further embarrassment. I added a personal thanks to Rick and signed off with a grand gesture: they could keep the backlog of money they still owed me.

Another dismal chapter closed. Although I did take away some of the most exciting memories. I might now be riddled with guilt, but I'd be a liar if I didn't admit I had had more than my share of fun there.

As the dark forests and prim villages sped past, I remembered that camping trip fifteen year's earlier, when Germany had seemed such an attractive place. This time it appeared a little less pristine - there was litter and graffiti and instead of construction sites on each corner and I registered derelict buildings and abandoned factories that didn't appear in my holiday memories.

I had given up entirely by then. Given up caring, for I could not have had a lower opinion of myself; given up trying, for my mind was no longer capable of logical thought; and given up wanting, for there was nothing left that I had not already had. It was so much easier to let things happen.

We headed East into the night, and eventually the autobahn gave way to smaller, winding roads and the towns seemed dark and lifeless. Even Ingo's manic one-sided conversation seemed to dry up as he entered home territory.

He wouldn't deny that he is a Schurke - a wide-boy.

If I formed an impression of his many and varied business interests during my eighteen months in his employment there, I kept it to myself and that's the way it will continue to stay. Here included, and even though he has now retired. What you don't know can't harm you, someone once told me. Ingo knew that all along - I have always been so transparent to him, which is why he rarely paid any attention to my being present when he made a deal or barked instructions to the endless string of leather jackets who seemed to work for him. Stumm, Penny. Too right.

As each little branch of his empire became revealed to me, my admiration for him grew. I marvelled at the way he managed to make money, with fingers in so many pies, both sweet and savoury, and across so many borders.

After a night of the deepest sleep in the town's finest (and only) hotel, I was driven to my new home. I don't think I was anticipating anything in particular, and so the faded country house, rising like a small fairytale schloss from the dense blackness of pines, was a pleasant surprise. My apartment on the first floor was a revelation - tacky eighties flock paper and gilded mirrors. I figured it out immediately: the place was quite obviously a working brothel! Ingo watched my reaction as he showed me around, and when I was finally certain where I was and wheeled about to voice my indignation, he creased with laughter, cackling with that loveable rich wheeze of his. I failed to see the funny side, and he put his hand on my shoulder and chortled a characteristically blunt explanation, that soon had me tittering too.

"Oh, poor, dear, Penny. Don't worry, I'm not expecting you to earn your keep here - I don't think you would have enough customers!"

Thanks a bunch, Ingo. You know how to make a girl feel good about herself.

As likely new career choices go, 'Madame' was one of the least likely I could have imagined, but no matter how much I could pretend my role was something less distasteful, that was effectively the post I initially occupied in Ingo's diverse and distinctly dodgy business empire.

Well, not strictly true. The actual operational side of the brothel had a professional manager called Silke - a proper Madame! Silke and I had a strange and often strained relationship. Undoubtedly she resented my being there, and especially my easygoing familiarity with Ingo, and in so many words, she let me know that she thought my position superfluous. She also divined my sexual proclivities within the first few minutes of meeting, which didn't endear me to her either. She was an old school pro, who had spent probably twenty or more years serving local punters before reaching management level and she had the some peculiar notions: a kind of professional pride in her work, I suppose. Still, I was perfectly happy for her to run the place her way, and provided she left me to do my job, we co-existed well enough.

My job? Ingo enjoyed the irony, explaining that he wanted me to do what I once did for the airline - I was to be a kind of 'training manager'. OK. I could live with that - it was the sort of title you could mention in respectable company. As if I actually cared.

I don't think I actually met too many respectable people when I was there.

This sleepy little corner of the former Democratic Republic was a bit of a crossroads for just about any iffy trade between East and West and Ingo was very good at directing a lot of it his own way, as he had been doing for years, from well before the Wall came down.

It is a sad fact that an unending stream of young girls from the likes of Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic are prepared to forsake their own homelands and families for the bright lights of Western Europe, although I doubt that many truly understand in detail, the full reality of what awaits them. It is still true today, but I think as the European Union expands, the source of girls merely shifts further East. A few cynical or realistic ones do have their eyes open and fully expect to have to open their legs too, in pursuit of personal improvement, but the majority just wanted to believe the persuasive advertisements for au pairs or trainee hotel staff or nursery nurses.

Hence the setup in which I became involved. Across Eastern Europe, Ingo's contacts ran recruitment agencies, targeting the young and naïve. There were actually some genuine jobs on offer but these front companies were there to screen the queues of hopeful young girls and select those best suited to disappear and re-emerge under a red light in the West.

And I had the unenviable task of bursting their bubble when they first arrived.

I'm certainly not proud of what I did then. But I plea in mitigation that I was not involved in any of the heavy stuff: the leather jackets took care of that. Whatever threats and coercion were used was something I neither wanted nor needed to know about and I was constantly grateful for my total ignorance of the various languages I would sometimes hear in the dead of night, accompanied by the slamming of doors and the occasional indignant squeal. I simply pretended not to notice a black eye or bruised arm. None of my business. My job usually began with opening the cellar door to be faced with two or perhaps three pale, frightened, bewildered and tearful faces, and finished a few days later when they would be whisked away again in the middle of the night, to end up in Brussels or Düsseldorf or wherever. Very rarely a girl might be kept on to work there in the house itself, but the prettiest would inevitably fetch a premium in a big city.

So to my list of crimes, you can now add sex-trafficker. Feel free to despise me - I can't defend my actions.

But what shames me most is not the illegality of the enterprise, nor the deception, nor the fate of

these girls, nor the fact that I was an integral part of the whole sordid process. It was the intense sexual thrill I experienced each and every time I received a new batch of them. That deep-rooted hang-the-consequences pursuit of the orgasm that had previously drawn me to Asia had resurfaced once again. Little else mattered. I really didn't care any more.

Ingo knew that all along. He found my fault line very quickly indeed.

His perception is uncanny. And yet he under the skin, is not at all the type you would imagine. He can strut and preen with the best when he makes his entrance in a restaurant, yet when he is seated and out of earshot of the waiter, he will joke self-consciously about winning an Oscar for his 'Marlon Brando/Godfather' act. His eyes can bore through you every bit as coldly as the iciest of Russian 'biznessmen' who sprawl in the leather seats of Club Class out of Sheremetyevo, openly leching at you and resentful at being separated from their state of the art cellular phones for the duration of the flight. But with Ingo, it is mostly an act, and in the same way he could lay my soul bare, I in return have been one of the few who have invited to get to know the real Ingo Weber.

Over the years, we've formed an unlikely partnership, albeit a heavily unbalanced one.

My role was not onerous and the steady increase in the balance of my new bank account was more than generous, though I wasn't interested in that. I had about a dozen girls a month to induct. And out of school, I also had my pick of them.

It was run as a slick business, organised with typical Germanic efficiency, from furtive medical examinations by a sleazy alcoholic general practitioner to the split-second timings of comings and goings. Each girl even had a professional-looking file, with a bogus biography and photos, and I expect false identity documentation. Ingo was inordinately pleased when I entered into the corporate spirit and carefully documented a pukka induction programme, complete with bulleted objectives and progress charts! Seriously.

By the time the girls had reached me, they could have had no more doubts as to what was going to happen to them, in principle anyway. And whatever journey they had undertaken, whatever people had spoken to them, it was almost always sufficient to have knocked enough stuffing out of them so that they were demonstrably grateful for the kindness and sensitivity of the funny-looking woman with the English accent. That was my strategy. I was the carrot, the leather jackets the stick.

Divide and rule. I would immediately separate them if there was more than one, and with each, I would put my arm around her shoulder and lead her up to a small but clean and comfortable room, and in whatever snippets of language we could find in common, reassure her that being a 'businessman's hostess' wasn't so bad, and that provided she worked hard, she could make her fortune and return home in triumph. A good hot meal, a glass of wine or two, and fussing over soap and towels and the like was enough to convince her that I at least was one of the good guys.

The girls were much like I had been, when I was fifteen and first walked the streets between Euston and Kings Cross - scared, gullible, homesick and desperate. But unlike me then, they were all over eighteen of course. One of the first things to drill home. Whether fourteen or twenty, now they were eighteen-years-old. Apparently the optimum age in the trafficking business.

And invariably, those at the lower end of that scale needed some additional coaching, to make up for inexperience. Which of course suited me.

Although I had my little 'training programme', and required each girl to complete a set number of objectives before I would confirm to Ingo's people that she was ready to move on, I genuinely tried to impart upon them as well my own experience, hoping that it might stand them in good stead. A sort of grown up version of my little anecdotes and stories with my English classes. I think it made

the process less degrading and impersonal, relating the cold essentials of what the girls needed to know to the many and varied mistakes I could recount from my time on the Game. During my spell in Germany, such moments were possibly the closest I went to acting like a decent human being, and it helped me begin to live with myself again. I felt I almost had a duty to these girls. Sister to sister. I don't recall too many other moral qualms. I rationalised rather brutally that I'd once had to put up with this shit all on my own and learn by my own mistakes: at least these kids were having it easier - they would have a roof over their heads and protection from pimps. I could put it into perspective and manage the remnants of my scruples.

Practical aspects, was what I covered. From personal hygiene to make-up, and how to make themselves seem wantonly available. How to undress sexily and how to turn on a punter. How to undress a man without bursting into a fit of giggles. In the close intimacy of the small, locked room, between the bouts of self-pity and anger, when a girl reconciled herself to the inevitable, I would coax her softly and quietly, and watch her first clumsy efforts to practise the tools of her new trade. What a job - much of the training was hands on! With me in the role of client. It was ingenious of Ingo to set this up, as of course only a woman could really get inside the heads of these girls.

I was often surprised just how naive and unknowing they were, ignorant even of the biology of their own bodies. And I callously played on their dreams and aspirations, letting their imaginations run free: mind games.

To think I was being paid extremely well to do this - I kept having to pinch myself. A licence to grope and take liberties. For an unprincipled bitch like me, it was perfect.

Imagine then, what unparalleled pleasure it was for me, with that evil attitude, to dress in a trouser suit and pretend to be a client. To guide a nervous and embarrassed young girl through the steps of seducing me, flirting, touching then undressing me. Showing her how to handle an over-eager punter, even where to put her fingernails and knuckles in an emergency.

There was little need for me to act, once I was in character. I kept it light-hearted, giggles and all that, but the joys of fondling a succession of young bodies, unnecessarily long sessions of tonsil hockey - fuck, it was heaven on earth!

It was of course essential for me to get to know their bodies intimately, and to make sure they knew a basic range of positions and activities. Clearly, I lacked the physical attributes to complete the task in a completely realistic fashion, but a small dildo has the advantage that it never wants to cum and go flaccid and a big realistic one was plenty good enough for demonstrating my tried and tested techniques for the perfect commercial blow job.

In many respects, I did regard what I was doing as simply a job, imparting wisdom to my young apprentices, but that would have left me rather unfulfilled. With nothing else to aim for, I was motivated by getting my rocks off. Instinctively, you know whether a girl is likely to respond - I'd learned that in Asia. It would have been too easy to abuse the situation, in the same way that the leather jackets did: if they wanted a quick BJ or fuck, they usually didn't hang around and waste time with foreplay. The girls had no choice, if they wanted to avoid a slapping, although Ingo did not encourage such behaviour as it risked damaging the goods.

I easily could have acted the same, I'm sure, but that was not my way. I couldn't force myself on another woman. And anyway, I went to bed with each girl as a matter of course, as part of the 'training'. No; what I needed to ice this cake was the pleasure of making love. For that, there had to be some willingness on the girl's part, be it natural desire or simply curiosity. That was what I looked out for. Much more arousing and satisfying to seek out that chink, the hint that a girl might be minded to seek some consolation in my arms. If I found it, then I generously offered some extra-curricular action.

Some seemed so pathetically grateful for some affection. Half way along a pipeline towards enforced prostitution is a lonely place for a simple young girl from a Silesian farm. Few had ever contemplated kissing a woman let alone being taken to her bed. And for their willing acquiescence, I was the most gentle lover they would ever have, unrushed, patient, understanding, rewarding the shedding of their inhibitions with soft caresses and smiles of reassurance and the opening of their legs with the lightest brush of my lips. Perhaps it is some form of instinct, a latent and natural ability in females that just needs teasing to the surface, for once you've let a girl experience for herself the exquisite pleasure of a lover's mouth at her groin, the baton is passed and she finds little problem in reciprocating thereafter. No threatening accoutrements of male fantasy, no fiendish sex toys, just the undiluted ecstasy of two women sharing the unique joy when their bodies act as one.

In contrast, the 'official' practical instruction that I was being paid to give, was conducted much more clinically.

In the space of a few days, I aimed to open their eyes to almost every sordid deviance I could envision, to prepare them for anything they might encounter wherever they ended up. And provided they accepted my teaching with good grace (most did), it was all a surprisingly easy-going time for everyone. Ingo once commented that he didn't ever expect to hear such laughter, given what was happening behind the closed doors of the house, but I knew that if you don't try to find humour as a whore, there are only two other forms of escape: drugs or suicide, and I wasn't going to let my sweet protégées go down either of those routes whilst they were in my charge.

I had to reminding myself this was really happening. After the near disaster in Asia, I had come up trumps again, morally bankrupt but perfectly happy to trade self-respect for an amazing sex life and steadily swelling bank balance.

If you are feeling disgust at this point, I could not complain - I was indeed truly despicable.

Ingo indulged me. I had enough days off, and he let me have use of a little VW Polo, to explore the German countryside. He took me away for a couple of weekends, to Berlin and Vienna, and although I was fully prepared to share his bed, I found us booked into adjacent rooms on both occasions.

It was a solitary existence though, despite being in a busy working house of ill repute. I tended to keep to my flat and the rooms in the attic where the girls stayed whilst I broke them in. I did form friendships with a couple of the brothel's own girls, risking Madame Silke's frosty disapproval. Both were bright girls, graduates, who saw being a prostitute as a legitimate career option, not least in that their degrees had proved useless in finding more conventional work in this part of Germany. I couldn't fault their reasoning - it was a good way to save for the future, to fund the salon or boutique they dreamed of.

I really enjoyed their company, often sharing a bottle of wine in my apartment and putting the world to rights as the dawn broke. For me, it began to restore my balance, having female friends again who were just that - no sexual connotations. Girly mates.

Lyssa and I bonded instantly. She was an only child too, and had become estranged from her family. She became my guide to normal German life, introducing me to the world beyond the gates of the old house. We shopped and lunched and went on wonderful walks in the densely wooded hills. I was inducted into the tradition of coffee and cake in ancient country *Gasthäuser*, in cosy rooms with walls thick with mounted antlers and engravings. To escape into the light and air of the outside world was our shared indulgence.

Our working hours were usually out of synchronisation, which limited the opportunities to spend time with each other and there is only so much fun to be had watching German TV or reading the

same few English paperbacks. If my body was getting an excess of excitement, my mind was not. I needed an intellectual challenge. Most surprisingly for me, it was provided by the personal computer that came with the flat.

Through that, I added a new string to my bow. And so began my rehabilitation, although I was not yet aware of it.

I saw Ingo almost daily and he responded positively when I indicated an interest in his other businesses (the legitimate ones). I believe he liked spending a little time with me, as I was different: I represented no threat and needed no careful supervision. Once he appreciated that I was sincere, he encouraged me, and began to involve me in some of his dealings, grateful for another pair of trusted eyes to watch what was going on. He was invariably patient and steady and even-tempered and as I became more involved, I wanted to make my own contribution. And that is how, without really looking, I found a niche that suited us both and set me up for the life I now lead.

I had dabbled with computing back in my airline days, recognising how useful it was to master basic applications in order to help me with my projects and training schedules. Although I have no formal education, I must have some aptitude for computer work, for by the time I left the airline, I was quite often the person my colleagues would turn to for help, before resorting to the IT experts from Hatton Cross. Penny the office nerd. Well not quite, I hope. People intimidate me; computers don't. Perhaps that's why I seem go to get on better with computers.

What better way to fill in the days and hours between my highly pleasurable day job than to develop my information technology skills: something I could do on my own in the seclusion of my little flat. In English, too.

Ingo was surprised and delighted when I showed him the prototype application I had put together. I was chuffed to bits too. OK, so it was nothing radical or clever, but I had made full use of normal office programs to give him a simple-to-use and very secure set of online data pages, which allowed him to survey his 'high street' empire at a glance. With his interest roused, I developed and extended it, and within a few months, we had running a cheap and cheerful little system, used not just by Ingo himself but all of his management team, all around the globe. He liked to be in control and it allowed him to see enough of what was going on without being swamped by the minutiae.

Not bad for an amateur, though I say it myself. I was especially proud of my blu-tac and paper based security routine, which was so low-tech as not to need a computer at all (apart from when you stuck it on the face of the monitor), yet without it, much of the data content was entirely meaningless to anyone outside our world. Fiendishly simple, it comprised several sheets of card with holes cut out and headings written on it and when placed over certain screens, made sense of the otherwise random and anonymous sets of figures. Ingo laughed so much when he saw it, I thought he might wet himself, but then he launched into a very serious and technical speech, most of which went over my head, but the jist of it was that it reminded him of his army days and he thought it was a far better way of protecting access to his data than any of the fancy electronic gadgetry people had tried to sell him over the years.

I think he might have been over-exaggerating but, shit - it made me feel good to have a little praise. For the first time in a couple of years, I began to like myself again. Just a little at any rate.

Thanks to my being an obvious intellectual lightweight, I didn't even engender any resentment among Ingo's professional business advisors, lawyers and accountants, when I was brought into the inner circle. I did not represent any threat to their roles, and besides, if I so obviously had the ear of the Main Man himself, it would be a brave or foolish sidekick, who would raise any objection. As it transpired, the very opposite occurred and I am now on extremely good terms with the experts who keep Ingo's various enterprises comfortably in the black and immune from any unnecessary

taxation! Much of the work I now do is referred by those guys.

It was a charmed life there in eastern Germany, and lasted for the best part of a year and a half in total. I was busy, sexually satiated, intellectually satisfied and more than happy to entrust my entire freedom and future to this charismatic, dangerous German. Once he had decided that I had more to offer than just breaking in young whores, Ingo was generous with his time and inducted me properly into his business affairs at breakneck speed. I was determined to keep up with him and our unlikely friendship was quickly reinforced by a strong mutual respect.

I still can't believe my luck. And I know I didn't deserve it.

Though I am sure that his true motivation in widening my role was due in the main to our successful personal relationship, I also know that Ingo is too shrewd an operator to delegate anything before he has weighed up the consequences very thoroughly. In my case, he wanted to ensure I was financially secure before he allowed me too much of a free rein. You don't put into a position of trust someone with money problems. He sat me down with his lawyer and in front of me, instructed the man to get me sorted. That meant sorting out the unresolved issues with Simon and investing my assets rather more sensibly than the building society account I had kept on. When I had first told Ingo about how Simon had treated me, and related my suspicion that he had set me up to lose my job, he all but offered to send some 'muscle' to London to resolve the issue (and he really meant it!). Satisfying though it might have been to think of my erstwhile lover with a pair of shattered kneecaps, I was actually more than content to have rather more conventional help to ensure that my chaotic personal finances were finally sorted. Despite the lawyer's efforts, I still did lose almost all of my share of the appreciation on the London property I had bought with Simon, and although I was not exactly pleased, the settlement agreed with his solicitor did mean that I should never again have any reason to contact the bastard. Almost worth losing tens of thousands just for that reassurance: though I'm not sure I could remain a non-violent person for long, if I ever had the misfortune to meet him again.

Ingo looked over my shoulder one day when I was doing my online banking and saw the figures and the next time I checked my account, the balance had inexplicably swelled. To approximately what it would have been had Simon given me my fair share. In fact somewhat in excess of that. As it was unthinkable that scumbag Simon would have had a change of heart, that only left one possible source for all that money. When I thanked Ingo, he pretended to know nothing about it, the darling man.

It makes a lot of difference, knowing that you're financially secure. I'm not rich. I don't aspire to be nor shall I ever be so, but then neither should I ever be destitute. And to a girl who was so poor that she had to sell her body at fifteen in order to pay the rent and buy bread, that security means a great deal. Oh dear, now I'm turning this into a Jeffrey Archer novel. I hope you understand what I mean.

Although I was beholden to Ingo and led a fairly cloistered life in the brothel (can one actually do that?), I was happy. Plenty to do, new things to learn, and in control of myself at last. No long term plans, of course, but that now seemed like an opportunity and a challenge rather than a consequence of my own inertia. I liked Germany and was picking up the vocabulary, albeit with my own distinctive accent, that often raised a smile. When I looked in the mirror, there was still no self-respect, but I now regarded myself with mere disgust rather than outright loathing. Could it get any better?

Of course not: the Penny Lee curse was poised ready to descend. As usual, just as things picked up, everything was about to change again.

Ingo took me to his favourite Balkan restaurant to break the news. He was uncharacteristically subdued, his shoulders a little rounded and his mouth seemed to sag wearily. I was concerned for

him. He was steeling himself to tell me what was up. I was thinking the worst, so to be honest, I wasn't that put out when he told me, although selfishly my own options rolled over in my head as he spoke, as if my life were being determined by some remote-control slot machine.

"I have had enough of all this," he said finally, emptying his glass and refilling it immediately. He meant the other side of his business, where his big money came from, not the various innocent trading activities with which I had now become quite familiar. "I'm tired, and it simply doesn't give me my kicks any longer."

I gave him my fullest attention, for he was my livelihood and this was deadly serious.

"I'm selling up and retiring to Spain," he announced, studying me for a reaction. The alarm in my face must have been plain to see. So he quickly added, "And I would like to invite you to come with me, to help me set up home there. I shall still have plenty of business interests that you can help me with."

Another half bottle of wine later and he explained that he no longer had the stamina to fend off the 'competition' - the ruthless Albanians and Turks and Serbs, who had almost cornered the market. He had already agreed to 'franchise' his operations, retaining a significant financial stake, but handing over the 'management' to some unidentified Balkan villain. He didn't say all that - I filled in the gaps myself, so it is just supposition of course.

He explained as much as he was prepared to tell me, and probably a lot more than I actually required to know.

Of much more importance to me was the invitation to be his 'PA' in Spain. As the evening came to an end, it sounded like a most attractive proposition. Yes, I would be disappointed to lose my supply of lovely young tatty to feed my desires, but when I analysed it all objectively, I knew it was for the best. At least I had now sorted out my sexuality once and for all and being firmly in my mid-thirties, I realised that I ought to be thinking of a more mature, stable relationship rather than superficial physical satisfaction. From feast to famine!

But it didn't take long until I had fully warmed to the idea and began to see how everything could be pulled together to give me a complete new start. To create a totally different new life from scratch, free of my past and my hang-ups. During the course of that evening, I made a journey along my very own Road to Damascus, albeit a secular rather than spiritual trip, in which all at once, the way to reverse my decline became brilliantly clear.

In fact this was the most fantastic opportunity to get my act properly in order - one that I didn't at all deserve and for which I am grateful beyond words.

With a new goal, I was a transformed woman. I even splashed out on some smart new clothes and restocked my dressing table with the latest cosmetics. I was happier than I had been for years, and almost childlike in my excitement. With no more girls passing now through the brothel, and Ingo closing down his operation rapidly, I moved out into a tiny flat above one of Ingo's shops - Lyssa helped me move and set up home. The new regime that took over had its own methods and routes, about which I was glad to remain in complete ignorance. I once saw some of these Balkan types heading off after meeting Ingo, and I was so glad never to meet them myself. Utterly scary. I've broken Ingo's confidence on only one occasion and that was to suggest to Lyssa that it might be wise to move on very soon. Thankfully she took my advice.

It was a novelty, living in a normal place in a normal neighbourhood. I liked it. I could get used to this again, I thought. Meeting neighbours, becoming recognised in local shops. Even the flat felt like a proper home, with its old, heavy furniture and musty soft furnishings. Normality. No guilty

conscience; well conscience under control anyway.

Even no cold turkey from spending every night alone in bed.

I spent most of my time working with Ingo, sorting out the move and trying bravely to keep tabs on the multilingual correspondence that swamped us once he had decided to prepare for leaving Germany. It was hugely exciting, and undeniably great fun, monitoring progress of the construction of his villa, project managing the rationalisation of his businesses and watching him lighten up visibly day by day, as the pressure lifted and the prospect of becoming a semi-retired ex-patriate in the sun slowly became a reality. I hadn't been so completely contented and happy for years, probably since the early days of the Simon era.

From that supper in the Balkan restaurant to stepping off the Lufthansa flight at Barcelona took only ten weeks: a quite remarkable achievement but nothing less than I would expect from Herr Weber. This time, he let me fly with him.

I felt at ease the moment we stepped off the aircraft.

2004 - The Present. Making Peace With Myself

13. Escape to Spain

Spain. Spring 2004: the beginning of my new life.

The completion of Ingo's smart villa was inevitably delayed, but it was a telling comment on how much he had changed that he metaphorically shrugged his shoulders and moved from Germany anyway. I suppose one could argue that he was merely being typically German and refusing to deviate from the published schedule, but I know him better than that. In his own way, he too was determined to reinvent himself on the Costa Daurada. And if that meant keeping his cool and staying in a smart hotel for three months until the building was ready, then that was deemed acceptable. We were both changing.

He had taken a shine to the town of Tortosa, which was a twenty minute drive from the villa, and installed himself there in the pleasant parador hotel in the old castell. He made some passing reference once about someone in his family who had fought there in the Spanish Civil War, but from my hugely limited knowledge of modern history, even I know that is a subject best left dormant, as there are many old wounds to be reopened, especially if one has connections with the wrong side.

I had found a small one-bedroomed apartment to rent, as cheaply as I could, tucked away in a narrow side street beneath castle, so that I made the symbolic trek each morning up the steep streets to meet him. It was small and noisy but I had no doubts that I could be happy in Spain. Everything was that much more chaotic than Germany, and much less impersonal than London. And I knew no-one and no-one knew me. Despite having only a tourist's handful of phrases, I managed to set up home quite quickly and once the frustrating wait for an internet connection had passed, I was up and running and able to look after Ingo's affairs and justify my existence.

But before that, the solitude of living in that tiny apartment had a profound affect on me: that prompted the start of what I so dearly wish will be my eventual rehabilitation.

With no electronic distractions, TV, internet and the like, an almost total ignorance of the local language, and time on my hands, introspection was inevitable. Serious introspection. The sort that ferrets down into the core of your soul and questions your very reason for living. What I found, I genuinely didn't like at all - in fact I was deeply sickened by what I had become in the couple of years since I had run away from England.

In Germany, I had had no issue with working outside the law - it was all too easy to convince myself I had just been doing a job and the really bad stuff was none of my business. Or my doing. Yes, it was all a bit dodgy, sure, but who cared? If I hadn't done it, someone else would have. With a decent income and a roof over my head, and no ambition or responsibilities or confidence in the future, I didn't take that much convincing. The sex had almost been a bonus. Down to that again. Sex. I had become dependent on it. My regular fix. What had I let myself become? A thirty-six year old hedonist? Worse? Some animal, unable to control myself?

When I had gone to Asia, to the school, I had no aspirations beyond satisfying my curiosity. I had unleashed my demons and cast aside all common sense, determined to fulfil my base desires at almost any cost. And as I recalled my feelings at that time, it dawned on me that for a short time at least, when I left England, I had not actually expected my life to continue much beyond that point: I think I regarded suicide as inevitable, yet could not bring myself to make a firm appointment. OK, so it never came to that in the end, thank goodness - Ingo had rescued me in time - but the

implication was there. I had never stopped to consider the consequences of my excesses as they don't matter when you're dead. I wouldn't have been missed, would I?

That brought home to me just how bad my mental state had been. And to a large extent, still was.

I couldn't deny what had happened with those girls, any more than I could pretend I hadn't spent the last phase of my sorry life grooming hapless young women for prostitution. I had been so thoroughly, unforgivably bad.

Shut away in my apartment in the old town, unable to avoid my own company, I tried to make sense of it all. The exciting prospect of starting afresh was there, within reach, but I knew it would not succeed so long as I allowed myself to be ruled by my crotch or didn't even care if I lived or died. For the first time in a long while, I could see the point in acting as if there were a tomorrow. Because there really was a tomorrow worth waiting for. My head had to be sorted out.

I had been so wrapped up in the practical aspects of moving that only now did I pause to consider the person I wanted to be. She had to be one with whom I would be comfortable. Nothing special, of course, but definitely not the freak I had let myself become.

If only I could cure myself. If only I could learn again to be a normal human being, it might still work, this reinvention of myself. What I had been doing was appalling. I was sure that whilst many people probably harbour secret fantasies or fetishes, few rational ones would ever dare act on them. And only sick ones would act if those desires were as socially unacceptable as mine. A weakness for young girls is just not something that can readily be admitted, let alone indulged. There was no getting away from it: I had hit moral rock bottom. In society's eyes, I was a pervert, a dirty old woman.

And however I tried to justify to myself my own behaviour over the previous two years, I came up with the same unpalatable conclusion. No amount of extenuating circumstances could make it better. I didn't need a psychiatrist to analyse my problem - it was downright obvious. The truism beloved of TV drama, that the abused child becomes an abuser, held true in my case and the catastrophic collapse of my career and relationship with Simon had been the catalyst. I had lost control in Asia and the events in Germany had merely fed upon my loss of moral responsibility. Now, here in Spain, I had to address the problem. But could I? Had it gone too far, and I was permanently mentally unbalanced? Would I be strong enough? Or would I cave into the first temptation?

It was a chilling realisation.

I sat alone many evenings, and lay awake long into the night, scared to death at what I had become and even more frightened that I might lapse. By day, each time I caught myself looking a little too long at a pretty girl in the street, I was reminded how much I hated what I had let myself become. My confidence drained away and the more I faced up to my failings, the less I wanted to be with other people. I didn't know if I could trust myself any more and it was better not to risk it.

I drew up a mental checklist of my faults, which outnumbered my positive qualities many times over. I had an agenda, and as the days passed, I worked on my strategy to redress that balance. But for now, only necessity and Ingo could drag me out of my self-imposed imprisonment in the apartment. Even nowadays, when the doubts return, I frequently have to force myself to go out; for hiding in my flat avoids the problem so easily.

Some days, we just went on long drives for the fun of it - one can hover and nag a Spanish builder only so much, and occasionally it pays just to let them get on with it on their own for a while. Ingo justified it by saying the big new Mercedes 4x4 needed running in, but he was just as mindlessly

content to go sight-seeing as was I. You do get a good view from inside those large cars.

Those were some of the simplest and happiest days I have ever spent, in the company of a true friend whom I admire and respect and with whom I could suspend my own self-loathing. It was made all the more enjoyable by having him all to myself.

We have a relationship that is impossible to classify. Though he is easily old enough for me to pass as his daughter, I find him immensely attractive, yet there has never been even the tiniest hint of anything sexual between us. He could have had me if he had wanted at any time. There was never any doubt that he was the employer and benefactor and I the dutiful servant, and yet we readily hug in public like old friends. By day, I find myself naturally walking one pace behind him, but after work my arm can slip easily through his and we keep in step. I am one of the few people to whom he grants carte blanche to speak their mind to him, even when saying something he will not like. I can chastise him and on a good day, even risk poking a little fun. He rarely expects anything of me, beyond honesty and hard work, yet I would readily give him anything I possess.

He is the closest I have to family.

Ingo had several friends resident in Barcelona and the lower part of Catalunya, which I imagine influenced his choosing to settle there rather than the warmer and more popular locations further south. I am pleased he did so, for I did not want to live in a concrete jungle or holiday resort and rub shoulders with hundreds of retired Brits or indeed, other North Europeans for that matter. I like the Tarragona region very much. Yes there are lots of ex-pats like us, but they don't stand out too much and most seem to contribute to the local culture rather than dominate it.

The administrative aspects of gaining resident status were made so much easier thanks to the support of Ingo's local contacts and insistence on retaining good, if pricey, local lawyers. And Catalunya is more welcoming of immigrants than many other parts of Spain. I just rode on his coat-tails and soon enough, we both had our very own identity cards and felt that much more welcome. Spanish bureaucracy still had us idle many hours perched on folding stools in municipal corridors, waiting for our turn to be processed. There are worse inductions. For Ingo, I would imagine being forced to wait several hours in a queue at Tarragona police station was something of a novelty, but he conducted himself impeccably, the dear.

Ingo's 'villa' is actually more of a large, converted farmhouse, set in its own grounds, with all the expected trappings - kidney-shaped pool, sauna, games room and the like. There are some parts of the original building in there somewhere, and I understand it was a planning permission convenience to do it all that way rather than erect a completely new structure. What do I know? Just that it is simply wonderful and I get a teeny buzz from knowing that I contributed to its creation.

With the builders about to hand over and Ingo preparing to quit his temporary home in the hotel in Tortosa, I needed to get myself sorted, including finding some wheels of my own. Now that was fun - shopping for a car!

It is received wisdom in dykey world that we lesbians usually have a special affinity with our means of transport. I am no exception. I'd never had a new car before and selecting one was a game that Ingo and I had enormous fun playing; he constantly trying to persuade me to go for something exotic like a Mercedes coupe, I always having to remind him I was only a lowly part-time PA with a very small budget. We wasted many happy hours in showrooms and on test drives, and I hours more comparing seductive brochures and reviews. The technical jargon doesn't mean much to me at all, but I'm hoping Ingo didn't notice, after the endless debates we had. I felt I had to humour him as he was taking such an interest!

Out of this entertaining exercise was born Samantha: my cute little silver Smart ForFour. Sammy is

a sweet kid and very willing to please. Ingo calls her a roller skate, which hurts her feelings. He has a cruel streak.

So although I had the means of transport, I didn't have much call to go anywhere. In those early months after coming to Spain, my social life was really just a bit part in Ingo's fancy lifestyle.

My self-doubts just grew and grew as I stewed in my apartment. In a few short weeks I had shrunk from hard-bitten cynic to near-recluse, and so I was grateful to tag along when he visited his well-heeled international friends, in their expensive houses and chic city apartments or even fancy gin palaces, moored in one of the many little marinas along the Mediterranean coast. Once upon a time I might have envied them their wealth and even aspired to such a lifestyle, but though it was undeniably pleasant to sample how the other half live, I have increasingly become more than satisfied with my own modest lot.

What these folk made of me, I did sometimes wonder. Ingo introduced me just by name, never intimating that I was his employee. I can recall one or two puzzled looks, as the host or hostess considered the unlikely proposition that Ingo would actually have this quiet, plain half-caste woman as his love interest, but invariably they decided it was just too far-fetched a notion and decided the explanation wasn't worth taxing their valuable brains. I would remain in the background and make occasional chit-chat.

If any of his smart friends wondered about Ingo's love life, his housewarming gift to himself made such a question amusingly redundant.

No more than a week after we had moved him in at last, he disappeared off to Barcelona Airport and returned with not one but two stunningly pretty oriental girls, at least thirty years his junior. Visas and permits all sorted. Their country of origin was rather too well-known to me.

They run his house, cook, do the laundry and make sure the lucky old sod is tucked up safe and sound at night. I was naturally incredibly jealous: of the girls, for slotting into Ingo's life, and of him, for I wouldn't kick either (or preferably both) from my own bed. Whoops - minor lapse there. In truth, we all get along very well indeed.

With the villa completed and my patron installed, it was time for me to strike out on my own.

That meant getting my own place and finding work, practical considerations that were much easier to resolve than the more complex problem I was facing - my increasing panic as the day approached when I would be expected to look after myself completely.

Actually, the accommodation situation proved ridiculously easy. Ingo had already got it all worked out and took great delight in keeping it a complete surprise from me, the old rascal. As ever, his solution was just what I wanted. I've never known anyone quite so adept at second guessing me. He had been investing in Spanish property for years, both commercial and residential, and a small development in which he had a major holding had just been topped out. On the coast, in a nice, small fishing town not that far from Tortosa.

I had no idea what was going on. We drove out there one morning and I presumed he was checking out his investment: as his book-keeper, I was aware of the development company which was involved, but we hadn't ever been here to view their latest project. We parked outside a modest new building in a side road off the main high street, with shops on the ground floor, offices on the next. The builders were sweeping up and peeling the protective paper from the shopfront glazing. Only when we had taken the lift to the top floor, where two apartments had been fitted out, and he had ushered me inside one, did I catch his beaming smile and I began to twig. I loved it. Two bedrooms, one with an en-suite shower, a separate bathroom and a spacious open-plan kitchen/living room,

leading to a small balcony. He saved the best till last – from the balcony, a spiral staircase led up to a small, private roof terrace, and if I stood up straight, and peered over the rooftops, I could see the sea, and the fishing boats, and even the research station out on the spit. If I turn the other way, I see the small mountains that provide a rugged backdrop to the town and make sunset quite spectacular.

I was still marvelling at the views when he explained that he was selling it at a special promotional price. That magically corresponded almost exactly to the balance of my savings account. The deal was done with a Germanic handshake and from me, a hug so tight it almost cracked the old sod's ribs.

I began to move in almost immediately, sleeping on an inflatable lilo until I bought a bed!

And I had a new job too, of sorts.

Ingo's plan all along had been to take it easy in Spain. He wanted to spend no more than a day or two each week, overseeing his remaining active businesses. I never really expected this restless workaholic to stick to his intentions but so far he has more or less managed it. The implication for me was that he would only require my services part-time, usually also a couple of days a week. We had discussed this at length and it was his suggestion that I should set myself up as a business consultant to earn a little more and reduce my dependence on him.

That's really a grand title for the jack of all trades I now am.

But I love it. Protected by the safety net of working a few hours each week for Herr Weber (which just about provides enough for me to subsist), and blatantly exploiting both his vast range of contacts and a few I had myself picked up along the way, I now make a very small additional living, doing odd jobs for all sorts of businesses all around the world.

It took off slowly and only now, a year further on, have I a fairly steady trickle of work with only the odd, rare hiatus. I don't advertise - there is just enough from referrals to keep me occupied, and Ingo can invariably find something if a long gap threatens. I specialise in a niche market. There are millions of companies that exist on paper, for whatever reason. Every now and then, two of them need to interact in a more physical way. That's where I help. I do anything, from acting as a physical representative to arranging a business itinerary, setting up a simple trading system to being a discreet international courier. Lawyers and experts are fine at doing the clever stuff and they charge accordingly, but when it's tedious, low-level and humdrum and needs doing cheaply and if required, very quietly, I'm your woman.

In truth, I'll consider anything these days, and I'm in the address book of several property companies - I help out at exhibitions and have been known to act as a stand-in estate agent. So despite my best intentions, I have retained a dark side to my character. Recently, I've picked up a bit of work with the local British ex-pats, being a sort of fairy godmother to their computers, and I'm even thinking of offering English tutorials. As the supermarket catchphrase says, 'Every little helps'.

In truth, my weekly income after tax is almost certainly a lot less than I would get working in a local shop, but it suits me - I can choose my hours and work mainly from home, in English, and on my own. As long as I have enough coming in to pay my utility bills and fund trips to Lidl and Caprabo, I'll get by. No need to save up for holidays when I live in such a great place and as for putting money away for my old age – I'll worry about that nearer the time, provided I get that far. It's not as if I'll have to worry about leaving a legacy to provide for my dependants.

I'm only just getting used to the idea of having a short-term future.

Despite my new-found domestic stability, I was still a bit of a basket case. I had hoped that once I had set up home, and had enough work to keep me occupied, I would be able to address my insecurity.

On the first evening in my new but almost empty and silent little apartment, I for the first time properly understood where I stood – my new life was tangible at last. I cried myself to sleep, not sure if they were tears of joy or misgiving. There was no going back now, not that I ever wanted to revisit any of my past. I had severed contact with all my old friends and colleagues, and apart from Ingo, I knew almost nobody in Spain.

Solitude has never bothered me too much: I've spent too much time in my own company to let it. In the spirit of my new, optimistic, forward-looking life, I regarded this as a challenge, rather than dwelling on the daunting prospect of being a single woman, seeking to find new friends in a new country, in which I spoke barely a few common phrases. There was of course an added complication.

That pain-in-the-arse 'Outing' nonsense that is faced by all aspiring lesbians and gays.

I am definitely not into all that 'womyn' radical feminism stuff. Doc Martens and dungarees would look daft on me, and although I've kept my hair shorter since coming to Spain (it's cooler that way), I don't think anything in my appearance would suggest my lesbianism. I am decidedly 'femme': I like girly things and feel good if I make at least a small effort with my clothes and make-up. So why should I be concerned about whether anyone knew I had turned 100% queer? What business was it of anyone else anyway? Spain is a country of contrasts - in some respects very liberal and free-thinking, but in a small town, I anticipated more conservative attitudes and so worried if it would be wise to announce myself as a dyke at the same time I was looking to fit into my new community?

It was a difficult call, and probably required much greater strength of character than mine.

So surprise, surprise, Penny's solution was to ignore the issue as long as possible. A typically pathetic fudge. And actually, it hasn't really mattered, most of the time.

As luck would have it, my decision or rather absence of it, went a bit pear-shaped immediately. It wasn't a disaster, being constantly chatted up by all the local males over forty, but I could have done without the hassle. Close to my apartment is a small local bar, and I started to call in most evenings for a glass of rioja and to exchange some pidgin Spanish with a few of my neighbours. It was my concession to being new, my first tentative steps to overcoming my suffocating introversion. I was even a tad proud of myself.

To my relief, the bar staff were friendly (as is just about everyone in this pleasant little town) and by only my fourth visit, we were on first name terms and a glass was poured without my having to ask. My usual formula of sign language, a few stock phrases and a winning smile was enough to strike up the occasional conversation and I've been going there ever since and am now a fully accredited local with squatter's rights on a particular bar stool. A woman on her own, with no rings on her fingers, is almost certain to attract some attention, and even a grim old boot like me seems worth chatting up after a few beers, it seems. Though Spanish men may see themselves as charming Latin lovers, when they persist beyond the fifth or sixth 'no thanks', they get somewhat tiresome. On some occasions, I have considered wearing some black dungarees and a great big 'girl power' badge just to ward the buggers off. This went on for quite a while, and almost put me off going out altogether. Thankfully these days, just about everyone in the bar knows me and I'm just one of the crowd. Or perhaps I'm just too unattractive. Whatever, I'm left alone, and that's fine by me.

Which brings me back to the next social dilemma I faced.

It was one thing sorting out the practical aspects of my new life -work, home etc. And another getting my personality straight. I had had two years of selfish and irresponsible hedonism in Asia and Germany, and followed by months of total abstinence upon coming to Spain. I knew I had to change, but I had no intention of becoming a nun.

I might have reached my late thirties, but I seemed to be as randy as ever! Which meant that yet again, my mixed-up hormones were in charge. With my track record, that of course meant trouble. At the first hurdle, all my resolve and good intentions went for a ball of chalk. I had sworn to myself that the new Penny would act her age, be open and honest and maybe, if luck would have it, she would find a suitable partner. Of appropriate gender. And age. No way would I ever be so depraved as I had been when I hit rock bottom, although I had yet to define my own ground rules in detail. I had some vague aspiration to mould myself on some of the great people I had met in my life, based on an updated version of myself in my early twenties, when I was still lively and keen and self-motivated. Tim – everybody's friend at school; Mrs Smith, my wonderful teacher; Janet, with her dry wit and incredible powers of organisation; even Herr Weber's determination – all these folk would contribute their best characteristics to my new self.

Nice idea, Penny – shame you ballsed it up almost immediately. When temptation crept up on me not that long after I had moved into my new place, I was neither prepared nor resolute enough to handle it, and I reverted to type.

I had come to know a French woman, who had rented a villa in the area, and had decamped there for the summer with her daughter, with her husband joining her for a few weeks in August. Laura was my own age, but a lady of leisure, whose idea of a good day was lounging by her pool. Her fifteen-year-old daughter, Sylvie, was bored stiff with such a sedentary vacation, and seemed to appreciate the times I called in or jollied them into coming out with me, as at least I represented a change from the monotony of doing nothing. I can't deny that I took a potentially unhealthy shine to her, but I honestly had no ulterior motives. Initially.

Everyone was happy with my innocent suggestion that Sylvie should have a day out with me, as I was planning to do some shopping in Tarragona. Driving in larger Spanish towns is so terrifying, it helps to have a co-pilot. I liked having some company, especially such pretty company; Sylvie leapt at the chance to escape the villa and her mother didn't really care what was happening, provided it didn't require her to venture from the sunbed. We had a super day, and got on well - I make a good surrogate 'auntie', though I say it myself. I don't understand teenagers, but I can usually manage to communicate with them, possibly because emotionally I'm still one myself.

At the weekend, I asked if Sylvie would like to come to my place and stay over, so that Laura and Jacques could have an evening together. Genuine altruism, I swear. We did nothing special -went to the market in town, lunched out at Paquita's and went down to the beach in the late afternoon. By then, I was undeniably aware of quite how much I was attracted to this gorgeous teenager and I was already struggling with my emotions. It must have been so obvious, for several times I caught myself watching her too long and she looked away with amused embarrassment. I nearly died when we were getting ready to go out for the evening and she was wandering around the flat naked after her shower. I am convinced the sexy little minx had figured it all out easily and was actually teasing me. Yet I still suppressed the really bad thoughts.

We had a couple of drinks in town and wandered lazily arm-in-arm along the seafront. By then I was in a real fix - being so close to this fabulous young girl and knowing it would be madness to make a pass at her.

But I did anyway. My evil inner self prevailed.

I took her hand and we stopped and I laid my palms upon her cheeks and kissed her lips. Briefly. I

looked right into her eyes and saw the sparkle of excitement beneath her astonishment.

We said nothing; just walked a little further and sat under a palm tree and I held her hand and my fingers stroked her soft, tanned skin. She smiled shyly.

When we got back to my apartment, I had the chance to stop it then and there. But I didn't. I poured us some chilled wine and seduced her on my sofa. Then I led her to my great big bed and kissed and licked her slim, hard body and caressed and fondled and loved her until we were both exhausted.

We made love almost every day until she had to return to Paris with her family.

Yep. I had fallen at the first fence.

I felt hollow when Sylvie had gone. There was a great moral vacuum which taunted me. For all my grand intentions, I had yet again been weak and pathetic and let myself be tempted by a pretty young girl. Quite rightly, I was as miserable as sin and deservedly guilty that once more I had taken advantage of innocent attraction. Sylvie wasn't scarred by my wicked seduction - we keep in irregular touch by email and she's a perky, normal teenager studying for her Bacc and discovering boys, but I still should not have done it. That autumn, as new work was at last just beginning to trickle in, and it was becoming apparent that my little business might actually be viable, I once again had to have a very deep and meaningful conversation with my conscience. I vowed to it that I would never, ever, be so stupid again. No matter what the circumstances, or the yearning in my knickers, I would never again even look at a girl under eighteen. This could not go on, if I were ever to achieve any degree of normality.

This time, I shall not break that promise.

I mean it. I am reformed. I can't deny my past – I even decided that I wouldn't try to hide it - if I have to be honest and candid, then so be it. No point in leaving those skeletons in their cupboards. If I ever were to have a normal, adult relationship again, then my future partner would have to know all about me, warts and all, and then decide if I were worth the effort.

What clinched it for me, my renewed determination to suppress any further weakness and force myself to be a good person (as far as I could), was my growing realisation that I could so easily end up like my late Father. I was well on the way already. The more I thought about it, the stronger the parallels became evident. We were both homosexual, yet had trouble recognising it. We were both weak - he had his gambling and drink problems, I my unacceptable attraction to girls and proven lack of moral strength, and in both cases, our failings had come to dominate and destroy our lives. We had both lost our careers and tried to run away from our problems, to another country, where we both struggled to get restarted. He had died in his forties, poor and I am sure, very lonely, the poor man. That I could follow his lead yet again was the most chilling kick up the backside I could have had. It shook me more than any therapy or counselling or punishment ever could. And I knew that the solution, if I were to avoid my own terminal decline, lay in my hands only.

I believed that I could do it, and I still believe it.

Day to day I was (and still am) quite poor, but I had achieved financial stability and I was earning enough to get by. I had identified my moral issues and I even knew what I needed to do to address them. I have been blessed still with good health, and even have most of my marbles, even if the odd one is chipped. Thinking positively was the order of the day from now on and so I forced myself around a local gymnasium two or three times a week when the place was empty. I even tried to trot a few kilometres each Sunday. Some discipline came back into my life.

What was missing, and what I think was the key to restoring my normality for ever, is the regular

company and support of others. I really had to make the effort to gain some good friends again, who would accept me and my faults, and help me back into the world. A loving partner would be fantastic - icing on the cake -but that would not be easy.

My conclusions now left me with a further dilemma. If I was indeed to avoid ending up a frustrated and friendless old spinster, I needed to start putting myself about a bit. Carefully. What a daunting prospect.

The obvious solution was to pay a visit to Sitges, which is Catalunya's answer to Brighton. Smaller and less in-your-face, but apparently the nearest place for meeting ladies of like mind. I remembered the debacle in Brighton three years earlier, which had precipitated my fleeing England, and had mixed emotions. I find the whole gay and lesbian 'scene' thing really intimidating and wasn't that keen to go there. Even without the burden of being cripplingly shy. I struggled to overcome my entrenched reticence and even made a 'dry run'. OK I'll be honest: I drove all the way up there and all the way back, unable to find the guts to park up and go into any of the bars.

Ironically it was a straight woman who sorted me out.

We had quite literally bumped into each other in the yacht club, where I go occasionally for an upmarket cocktail - she tripped over her own feet and grabbed me for support. Behind the boozy apology was an unmistakeable Australian twang.

I had met my new best pal, my Janet in Spain, although this time there is absolutely no hint of hanky-panky!

Steph is the stereotypical larger-than-life Aussie sheila, who came to Europe to travel years ago and never worked out when to settle down. She had been in Spain a long time and landed in my town a year earlier and hadn't got around to moving on. By profession a commercial photographer, she makes a more realistic living as 'Deputy Front of House Manager' in the flashiest hotel in town. As far as I can make out, that's just a posh job title for the person who mans the reception desk-cum-bar overnight (it is only a small hotel: when it is really quiet I expect she also cooks and cleans the pool in her teabreak).

She's a few years younger than me, and eats men for breakfast. We contrast so well that we make natural friends. That was apparent from the outset and Steph's easy-going extrovertism was just what was needed to counter my own shyness.

Steph thought it would be a hoot to go to Sitges with me.

She wasn't wrong: thanks to her, I had the confidence to go, and although I'm still not entirely comfortable with the concept of gay and lesbian bars and clubs per se, I am now brave enough to return on my own, should I decide.

New Year's Eve 2004, and as I had no better offers, a night out in Sitges seemed preferable to sitting on my own and listening to everyone else in town celebrate. I first noticed Ana earlier in the evening and she had made an immediate impression: not too tall, with a great, athletic figure and strong features. Dreamy brown eyes and easy smile. Very importantly, well into adulthood!

I was like a wretched teenager - I could feel my chest tighten and my mouth go dry when I sneaked another peek at her.

Was it coincidence that I kept spotting her? She was with some friends and I wondered if indeed she was lesbian - perhaps they simply liked the music in the small, discreet club we were in. My 'gaydar' has never been that good. Inevitably, she had seen me watching her - the odd-looking bint

at the bar on her own - and when I risked a smile, she returned it and my heart skipped. I find the courtship ritual painful and actually quite absurd at my age, but I can't deny that my insides sizzled.

It was just before midnight and she got up and came over to me and took my hand, leading me outside, where everyone was gathering to watch fireworks and see in the New Year.

Afterwards, we found enough broken English and Spanish between us to find out about each other and establish that we had plenty in common. We danced, I joined her table, and by the end of the evening, our fingers were entwined. The atmosphere was right, everyone was in great spirits and I hadn't felt this way about anyone for many years. Although we had keyed our numbers into each other's mobiles, as I drove slowly back home in the early hours, I had little expectation that I should ever see her again. It had been a magical evening, but that was all.

14. Still Getting There

I cried when she phoned. Or at least immediately afterwards, when I could be totally sure no-one could see.

A week had gone by and I had written it off as just another fun evening out with Steph. Then Ana called and three hours later, I had caned it up the motorway to Vilanova i la Geltrú, where she lived, and was sitting in a restaurant like a happy puppy, wagging my tail and deliriously happy to be with her again.

It would have been great to have ended this tale on a high. But as will have been all too evident from the catalogue of failures that comprise the life and times of Penny Lee, such niceties are never likely to happen.

Ana's picture still has pride of place on my desk - a wonderful professional head and shoulders shot, taken straight after the spa and makeover day I arranged for her twenty-fifth birthday in May 2005. She looks so excited and lively and her strong tomboy features are subtly softened and I still melt when I look over at her beautiful face. It had been such a perfect day too, in that swanky place just above Barcelona - it set me back a fortnight's income but that mattered not, as we were together and lived the high life for twenty-four hours. Yes, that was as close to perfect as it gets and I am always reminded of that even now, as those big brown eyes sparkle back at me from the photograph.

Alas she is no longer my partner, though I have plenty of great memories of the weekends we spent together. She was my first true love in my new life and though it was never going to be the long-term relationship I had secretly hoped for, I can hardly complain.

The odds were always heavily stacked against us; so much so that it is remarkable we had those seven months together.

She was twelve years my junior, Spanish, and still living at home with her apparently rather conservative and traditional Roman Catholic parents. Her home was 140 km away - not insurmountably far, but enough to keep us apart during the week. Thankfully, her English more than compensated for my awful Spanish and much of the time we didn't seem to need words. Maybe that was part of the problem - if we could have communicated better then perhaps I would not have held out such unrealistic hopes.

To make matters yet more complex, she was not 'Out' either, certainly to her colleagues at the nursery where she worked and more importantly, to her mother and father. She always found a reason why it would be inconvenient for me to visit her at home, but I would never pressure her. I knew how desperately difficult it would be for her when she eventually decided to go public. Behind my patience, I was actually screaming inside, wanting to tell the world about us and imagining a fantasy life with her, possibly even marriage and adoption, if that was what she wanted - Spain having just taken the decision to put same sex couples on the same legal footing as heterosexual ones. Yes, I would even have considered starting a family with her, if it would have meant we could be together. Such irony, given that my abhorrence of motherhood had been the main cause of my falling out with that scumbag, Simon.

Stupid old fool that I am, fantasising like that. Ana of course was young and vibrant and just wanted a good time, and I am sure she could sense my deep-rooted desire for a lasting relationship even if I had not expressed it to her, and it must have scared her. She did let me down fairly gently.

The relationship cooled and died just before my 38th birthday at the end of July 2005.

I've never been a drama queen, and so my instinctive reaction was just to hide from everyone for a couple of weeks until my brain had rationalised and I could put on my brave face again.

Older and wiser I am. I have to say I'm getting bored with learning the hard way. How old must I be before I simply do it properly in the first place?

I'm sure I've many more opportunities to screw up yet to come.

But I can and must be positive.

The Internet has helped me a lot. It is great for me: I don't have to meet people face to face and I can reveal as little or as much as I want, when I want. I've used web technology for a while for work - browser pages over databases if you really must know, but at the end of 2004, when I finally sorted out a robust connection courtesy of some very nice chaps from the office downstairs, I discovered how much fun it can be for social purposes.

Allied to my new-found plaything, I also found a latent talent. That's immodest of me - I would very much like it to be a talent, but that's not for me to judge.

Writing.

An ideal hobby for someone who spends too much time on her own and needs to occupy her over-active brain, such as it is. So ideal in fact, that if I have any ambition at all in my new life, it would be to become a full-time writer. Well, more of a hopeless dream than an ambition, I admit. When I sat down in my second year in Spain, to create the first piece of original writing I had attempted since Sixth Form, I'm sure I had fanciful visions of becoming the Kathy Acker for the Twenty-First Century: a wild child with a chequered past, surprising and delighting a small but dedicated readership with lurid tales distilled from my troubled memory and underutilised imagination.

I'm several years and a gulf of ability away from that. But give a girl a break - I'm still trying. Every now and again, I despatch a piece into the ether and see how it goes down. I'm experimenting, with different styles and themes and even identities as an author, for I would rather be judged on my work than anything about me. There are many places on which to publish via the Web and many great people who are prepared to read and offer advice and comment. I like to read other people's material too, and try to work out what I like and note what techniques are effective. I make my own comments on other's work sometimes and have struck up electronic ties with all sorts of fascinating and clever folk all around the globe.

Knowing that I shall never have to meet any of them makes for easy friendships. Which also suits me nicely.

The results have been erratic, but aspiring authors seem to be a diplomatic crowd, so the criticism tends to be very gentle. I've been polishing my own tact, for the unwritten rule of thumb is never to send anything that you'd hate to receive yourself. It has been encouraging though, receiving compliments and constructive feedback. The only bad news is that the most popular work has been very dubious pornography. My arty, creative stuff and my historical stories have met with little comment; my one excruciating poem, with well-deserved total apathy. I've penned some romantic tales and they have been well-received on the whole - not exactly Barbara Cartland, but there's some promise I think. Yet sadly it is my seedier material that has been surprisingly popular, generating rather more contact with readers than is probably good for me.

I hope it's not the only type of thing I can write successfully. I suppose I was closer to the subject matter than in my other writing and this reflects in the way I write. Committing my darker thoughts to disk, in the form of short stories, has been my way of expunging them. I can't really explain

where some of the ideas come from - some of it is scary, and I'm usually quite glad to see them safely uploaded, where a few like-minded souls might appreciate them. The new Penny really ought not to think of such things.

Perhaps now I've bared my soul in such on such a grand scale in this autobiography, it will be easier.

And so, having revealed myself in all my ignominy, I should perhaps end with a nod to the future. That was after all, what all this has been about - shedding the millstone of my bad past, to make room for the new Penny - socially responsible, considerate of others - the kind of person you could introduce to your grandmother.

It's an anticlimax, but I don't really hope for too much from the future. Just the chance to lead a low-key little life. I have a fantasy of course: I would love to be able to write and publish a proper book. One with real pages and a profile inside the back cover, maybe even using my real name. A thriller perhaps, with a feisty heroine. The complete opposite of this autobiography!

But in the real world, looking around me, at my neat little apartment, and my desk busy with current work, I cannot help but feel that things could hardly be better. If publishing this dull tale of my worthless existence helps me ditch the past then it has been worth it. If exposing my despicable secrets can help me move on, then doubly so. I just have to hope that in doing so, I've not so sickened those people I want to befriend that I end up back where I started.

I've ticked almost all the boxes on my life laundry list this year -now I have such an amazing and undeserved opportunity now to complete the transformation and live simply and decently, in all senses of the word.

Life is good again.

My new life. Please wish me well.

Epilogue

Penny never made it. Despite the hope and the promise in her autobiography that things would get better, she quietly decided to take her own life.

I was in touch with a mutual friend who had earlier visited Penny in Spain (and found Penny to be lively, full of fun and an excellent host) for a vacation and through this older lady I learned of her suicide. Penny, thorough as always, carefully wrote letters to a number of friends and left them with a lawyer. She then, from what I can gather, sold her car and some of her possessions and took an overdose of sleeping tablets. Alone in her own bed and fearing she couldn't go being unloved, Penny slipped from this life one autumn night sometime in 2006.

I have no idea what finally made her move so rapidly from hope to despair. Penny's story, if you have read her autobiography here, tells of a roller-coaster life filled with emotions and fears. It took her from the heights of happiness to the depths of broken dreams. She had shrugged most of it off though clearly there were scars that ran deep.

Of course Penny may have had an illness she couldn't cope with, she may have had echoes from her past that caused her to fear legal intervention, or she may simply have been lonely to a degree few of us might ever want to face. A very good friend of hers (a woman who was straight but understood Penny perfectly) had returned to Australia and that without doubt highlighted Penny's loneliness. I understand Penny had friends, but they were all distant in one way or another; I don't think she had more than rudimentary grasp of Spanish and although Spain has a large number of expatriate Brits for some reason she couldn't relate to them.

I think Penny was always a traveller. She saw the world and even worked as an airline hostess so in a sense no place was ever really home. The life of the wanderer is exciting and intriguing but it comes at a price, and the failure of important relationships finally opened the wounds she must have hoped were healed, or at least could be covered over.

She was an attractive woman: one photo I recall from her blog showed her to be an alluring young woman at art college sometime around 1987 or so. She had the look in her eyes of a person who had a streak of devil-may-care but also the gleam of a person who expected the future to be good. Alas, the few pictures Penny posted of herself were removed after only a short time and I never saved them. All I have is the mental image of a pretty girl in a dark jumper and short hair smiling up at the camera in a black-and-white photo, and I won't forget that in a hurry.

In a way Penny's death still haunts me even seven years later. I am not sure, living as I do in the UK, that I could have gone to her aid even when I suspected that things were about to fall apart. I saw, on her blog, a simple message after the failure of her involvement with a younger woman that made me start. It read: 'So that's it then,' and there was no more. Knowing how happy she had been so recently and fearing the worst, I immediately emailed Penny with an urgent message 'Please don't do anything silly. Talk to me.'

There was no reply. The blog was soon deleted, and before long I got the message from another friend that Penny's time on this planet had come to a premature end.

I am no expert in the human condition and I can only guess what Penny had gone through. I even doubt I could have offered her any advice other than to never give up, and such a well-worn platitude might not have been enough to sustain her. I don't wish to judge her because heaven knows, we all make mistakes and trouble our lives with the misjudgements of others. Whatever Penny did that she regretted I am sure many who knew her would have forgiven her and given her support to make things better. I also believe in the fullness of time she would have found someone

to love and they too, on learning of her life's difficulties, would have more than helped her through whatever darkness still engulfed her.

Above all had Penny remained with us I think her star would have risen as a writer. She wrote stories other than erotica under other names but I have no knowledge of them. I wish I did as I might have, with her other friends, have encouraged her to become an established author and even made a living from self-publishing. Sadly it was a revolution that came a little too late for her.

I miss you Penny Lee, but I hope making your story available to others might preserve some of the memory I have of you. You had a story to tell, and here it is.

Wherever you are, Penny, may the light be with you always.

SG, 2013

