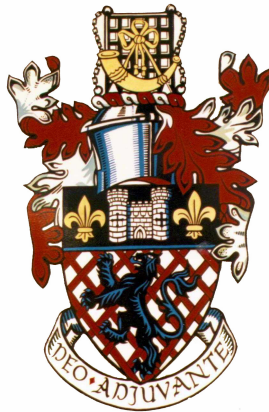


# Wellington Literary Festival



**Short Story Competition  
Winners 2011**

# 1st Place

## SHORTLY BEFORE DAWN

by Ian Butterworth

Two ladies sit in the thinning darkness shortly before dawn. On the flaking plaster behind their sofa hangs a photograph of the man now buried in the soil. The man, dressed immaculately, has the smile of an excited child. His name is Mohamed Khaleel. He is shaking the hand of a thick-set man with a jutting chin. The whole country will recognise the stout man as The Minister. The Minister looks directly into the camera. From his demeanour a visitor might wonder whether he actually knew the man grasping his hand. The room is shabby and cramped. There is insufficient room to store the years of junk and clutter.

The Qur'an has been recited and the forty-day mourning is complete. The ladies sit at either end of the sofa, disinterested and drab. The widow is fifty. She wears grey. Her mother-in-law is well over seventy, no one can say by how many years. Her leathery hands clutch a dark, wooden stick. The house feels empty. The air is cold between them. A clatter of loose wood somewhere outside announces the hulunghu monsoon. The trees beyond the gate begin to rattle. They wait for the day to begin.

Farida's call to breakfast stirs them. Farida is nineteen and pretty. She likes the noise of Male'. Though her schooling is finished she is determined not to return to her island, where only marriage and babies await. Farida has higher ambitions. Boys on motorbikes idle by the gate each evening and the ladies purse their lips as she parades. The shinier the motorbike, the more the girl shows interest. It is difficult to advise the girl. The ladies need a man in the house. They shuffle in silence to the kitchen.

Farida clatters two saucers of pale omelette onto the table. She has neglected to add the chillies and there are no forks. There is a bowl of the previous night's roshi. It is dry and floury, to the taste of neither woman. Farida bangs down a small jar of jam. The women ignore the jar, knowing their fingers will be unable to unscrew the lid. Farida twists it open and leaves it out of their reach. The jar is almost empty. Farida pours two cups of lukewarm coffee from the flask. She spills a little. The mother-in-law glares at her. Her walking stick drops to the floor. Farida ignores it. Please God my son can't see this from his grave, the old lady thinks. How can life have become like this?

Farida sits on Mohamed Khaleel's chair, still set at the head of the table. The

widow watches a line of ants carry crumbs across the table. Farida swings back on the chair and sips her well-sugared tea. She pushes the walking stick with her foot, further under the table. The mother-in-law grinds her remaining teeth. The widow concentrates on the ants and attempts to swallow her roshi.

My son was too weak, the mother-in-law tells herself. He had married too young, spoiled his wife from the start. 'I need a new dress, buy me those bangles.' The old lady could hear her voice even now. 'How could she possibly walk to her friends' houses for tea?' 'What was his motorbike for?' In her own day women stayed at home, ensuring the island girls cooked and cleaned. If a man said 'Jump!' a woman jumped. And if needed a little, light beating didn't cause any harm. Her own husband even, had hit her before his death, though only of course when absolutely necessary. Her son should have chosen a respectable wife, a Male' woman who would bring him children. She herself should have been taking tea with beyfulun folk, comparing their plump, clever children. Instead she was plagued by the woman's family, bony fishermen from the islands, slurping tea from saucers and shamelessly belching, slovenly women with incessant medical problems, perched in heaps in the house and taking no hint to leave. Mohamed Khaleel should have been stronger. They all took him away from her. The wife, his work; even The Minister, taking her son, leaving her alone, and bereft.

A single ant crawls towards the widow's cup. 'You won't find sugar at this end of the table,' she thinks. The cup is white with yellow flowers. All the cups are the same. After their wedding Mohamed Khaleel had bought her a set of beautiful red mugs with matching milk and sugar bowls. She had displayed them on the table, the first gifts anyone had bought her. How modern and bright they had looked. Her mother-in-law had tutted. Crockery should be delicate and flowered. Though she had argued with her husband, even cried, Mohamed Khaleel had given the cups away, to whom she could not now recall. The sugar bowl he had kept in their bedroom to store his spare laari, until Farida in a fit of dusting, knocked it to the floor. It had smashed to pieces, the coins rolling under the furniture, where they remained.

Most of her time in the bedroom had been alone, she recalled. Soon after their marriage, she knew, he had had an affair. A flat-chested waif according to the photograph she happened upon in his wallet whilst picking his trousers from the floor. She had placed it on the table for her mother-in-law's view with the cheap-scented letter from the girl, demanding that he leave his plain, barren wife (the words burned her soul even now). She wanted to show the old woman exactly what a husband her son had turned out to be. But his mother, she knew, would pass the blame onto her. 'You should have given him children. You should have attended to his needs,' the woman would have said. 'Then he would have had no need to stray.' The letter had disappeared and the affair tailed away. Despite his philandering, despite the time he

spent with The Minister, she still wanted her husband, and yearned for him to end her loneliness.

Most evenings, following Isha prayer (Mohamed Khaleel always prayed the night prayer at the Central Mosque, where there were more people in attendance), they would loll in the joalhi, enjoying the warm scents of the night. Following his late meal he would break araca nuts with his silver cutters, a gift from The Minister he said. The ladies would admire the well-groomed nails of his fingers. He was a plump man, shorter than the women with smooth dark skin. His hair was fine, more white than grey, oiled flat to his skull. His wife came to believe that he might be vain. Daring to mention this to her mother-in-law one day she was informed that men who moved in high circles must pay attention to their appearance. He wasn't a simple fisherman, didn't she know?

He loved to speak of The Minister. He would hint of late night meetings, secret telephone calls and whispered advice. Whenever there was tension between the women such talk would calm them down. He was proud of his skill in managing them. He felt like a wise judge mediating. They were always impressed. The Minister was a powerful man, perhaps the third most important in the country. 'Knowledge is power,' Mohamed Khaleel had read. 'It is not what you know, it's who,' he constantly announced. The women nodded as he made his excuses leaving them to bicker once again.

That evening he sat in the compound and wrapped the araca nuts in betel leaves. He chewed slowly, juice spurring onto his chin.

'There are rumours in the tea shops,' he said. It was his habit to take tea every afternoon with his business colleagues. 'There are plans of a coup.'

Neither woman spoke.

'The Minister himself informed me.' The more he spoke of The Minister, the straighter he sat. His mother's jaw dropped slightly. Mohamed Khaleel leaned forward and lowered his voice. 'There is dissatisfaction with the President.'

The President had been in power for years. His family and business partners held the Government positions. No opposition was tolerated.

'The Minister says that the talk in the fish-market is of arms from overseas.' He meant Colombo, the base of banished dissidents.

His mother shook her head. 'What will the President say?' The thought of disorder frightened her.

'What will The Minister do?' asked the wife. She knew where to steer the conversation.

'The Minister will know which way the wind is blowing.' He arched his back. 'The Minister will make plans. We will discuss the situation tonight when we meet.' He flicked a speck of betel from his stomach. 'First I must bathe and change my clothes.'

His mother squeezed from the joalhi to fetch a clean shirt from his room. Before she could lift herself into the house his wife had rushed past her.

'Darling, wear the white shirt. And the blue, flowered tie I brought you. The Minister will like that, very much.'

The mother pulled herself into the kitchen. She banged a glass into the sink. 'Farida! These dishes aren't clean.' She sat grim-faced at the table and pretended to read the newspaper until Mohamed Khaleel came from his room. As she had known would happen his wife smoothed his tie over his stomach, checking that his shirt was tucked in neatly all round.

'You look handsome, my darling,' the wife said. 'And your perfume is perfect.'

'It's the scent I bought for his birthday. I always know what suits my son.'

The wife ignored the old lady's grin. 'I'll wait up for you, darling. Don't stay too late at these important meetings.' She smiled, as though to imply that they had made love more than once in the preceding three years.

'Don't waste your breath, dear,' thought the old woman. 'You'll be snoring long before my son has finished with The Minister.'

Mohamed Khaleel smiled at their attention. He closed the gate behind him.

\* \* \*

Midnight had passed. The noise from the streets had faded. The women slumped in the moonlit compound. Neither had the energy to check whether Farida had completed her chores. The girl had been gone for hours, flirting no doubt with the boys. The mother-in-law recited some prayers. The wife tried to count the stars. They didn't want to sleep before Mohamed Khaleel's return. At the creak of the gate each awoke with a start, the old lady with a bleat like a goat.

'There is no need to worry,' said Mohamed Khaleel, his hands raised in the air. 'All will be fine. There will be no coup. My friend The Minister has everything under control.' He smiled reassuringly. 'I will of course be called away. These are difficult and dangerous times. You may not see much of me.' He lowered into the joalhi and levered off his shoes. 'Farida! The ladies were surprised to see the girl. She must have slipped in without their noticing. 'Polish my shoes. I will be out very early in the morning.'

Farida smiled. She carried his shoes to her room, as a mother cradles a child.

The following morning he was nowhere to be seen. The remains of his breakfast lay on the table. His wife walked into the compound. It was empty. The bolts of the gate were undone. The old lady joined her, looking confused. To both women the noises of the day seemed different. The rustle of the palm leaves was louder. Crows cawed undisturbed. Of the coconut seller, the man who delivered the fish, regular early morning arrivals, there was no sign. The old lady told her daughter-in-law to poke her

head around the gate, herself peering over her shoulder. The store across the lane was closed. There was no traffic. The street was empty of people. The women didn't know what to say. Where was Farida? The girl seemed more out of the house than in these days. Had she gone to find a shop that was open? Where was Mohamed Khaleel? The radio, from which the 'Voice of Maldives' usually blared, emitted only a low crackle. The ladies looked at each other. The lack of noise was eerie. The quiet was shattered by gunshots.

The mother-in-law dived to the ground, astonishing the wife with her speed. The wife followed, banging the bridge of her nose on the old lady's shank. The hard bone made her eyes water. They crouched on hands and knees in the dust, neither daring to speak. The radio continued to hiss. There was another spatter of gunfire, a muffled scream from across the lane. They found themselves cuddling like children, barely able to breathe.

'He is in danger,' croaked the mother-in-law. The women looked into each other's eyes, probably for the first time in years. 'It must be the coup! You have to find my son.'

The wife's heart thumped loudly. Surely her mother-in-law would hear it.

'I am frightened,' said the old lady. 'You must bring him back.'

The wife clambered to her feet, sweat and dust on her palms. She pulled on her shoes and made for the gate.

'Hurry, you fool!' said the old lady. 'Think about your husband for once.' She pushed her daughter-in-law across the compound and out through the gate.

The lane was deserted. Where chatting women fingered uncooked rice and children shouted by trays of drying fish, where laughing schoolgirls hauled huge satchels to the early school shift, there was no one. Even the wizened maama from the opposite house, usually coughing on cigarettes in the doorway was gone. Mohamed Khaleel's motorbike had been pushed onto its side. The mirror had twisted and would be irreparable. Her husband would be livid. Aside from the jittery trees and cries of disturbed birds there was silence. She suddenly felt the wind. She could sense cold rain on its way. She shivered and turned to re-enter the house. The gate wouldn't move. 'Mother!' she shouted.

'Find him,' came the command from over the wall. 'It is the coup. He will be with The Minister.'

The gate bolt snapped into place.

Despite her fear she refused to bang on the gate and humiliate herself. She scurried to the junction. There was a way to The Minister's house along the back lanes. She could avoid the main roads and the Government buildings where trouble, if it was a coup, was most likely to occur. When she had found Khaleel they could shelter in his office, one street away. The sky was heavy and the rain was close. There seemed so many crows, hulking in the branches, observing her. Palm leaves scraped as the wind

flurried in from the sea. She huddled at each corner, scraping her skin on the coral walls, ran at the edge of every lane. Despite the cold she was covered with sweat. An armoured vehicle belched past and the smoke stung her lungs. She cowered at the violence of the noise. Two white-shirted Bangladeshi men skirted the lane, bowed down as though their lives were in peril. No one else was in sight. At the end of the next lane stood The Minister's house. Armed guards crouched before the closed metal gates. She darted across the road to the nearest guard. He was pock-marked and severe. He pointed his rifle straight into her face.

'Please,' she gasped. 'My husband is with The Minister. I must see him.'

The guard jabbed his rifle towards her. 'Get away, woman. Are you stupid?'

'Please! He must be here. He's The Minister's friend.'

'Don't you know what is happening?' the guard spat. 'The Minister has left the country. Get back to your island, before someone shoots you!' He jabbed her in the chest. She sprawled, shocked, in the puddles. The guard aimed his rifle at her as she scrambled away.

The door to her husband's office was locked. She squinted through the dirt of the windows. The office should be crammed with people. But not even the Bangladeshi boy was to be seen. Could her husband be in the storeroom at the rear? Someone must be there, someone who could tell her where he might be found. She clambered over piles of cardboard in the alleyway and pushed open the storeroom door. On a mattress of flattened boxes lay Farida. The girl's eyes were glazed. Lying on top of her, trousers at his ankles, was Mohamed Khaleel. She couldn't bear to look. The odour of sweat made her gag. She turned to run as Farida scabbled like a crab from under the grunting man.

She fled along the lane, trying to block the image from her mind. All thoughts of safety were gone. A hand grabbed her arm and she reeled onto the sand.

'It wasn't my doing,' shouted Farida. 'He made me do it. He made me!'

She pulled away from the girl, who leaned over her, pleading.

'You mustn't tell anyone. It wasn't my fault. He made me do it.'

She stood up and raised her hand. She slapped the girl in the side of the face and walked quickly away.

Farida clutched her arm again, half-running alongside. She now spoke quietly. 'Do you think I was the only one?'

She stopped and faced the girl.

'It's because of you. You never gave him what he wanted.' The girl let go of her arm. 'You're so stupid,' she said.

The wife raised her hand once more.

'There were always girls. Even before me. Every time he said he was with The

Minister, he was with one of us. Do you think he actually went there? Do you think The Minister would have anything to do with that pathetic man? He's hardly met The Minister in his entire life!

She punched Farida in the face. The girl fell. Mohamed Khaleel charged from the alley, shouting the name of his wife.

A crack of gunfire raced across the sky. Crows leaped angrily. Mohamed Khaleel collapsed on the pavement. She heard a bone snap in his body. Blood spread across the white of his shirt and the blue flowery tie. He uttered his wife's name once. Then everything seemed to be still.

\* \* \*

The ladies are finished with their breakfast. The coffee is too cold to drink. The old lady cannot bend to collect her walking stick from under the table. For the few steps from the kitchen she will have to offer her arm for her daughter-in-law to take. She feels heavy. Even breathing seems a burden. The ladies sit apart on the sofa. The sky remains dark. The old lady shudders. She feels betrayed. There has been no news from The Minister, no visit or letter of condolence. He didn't attend the mosque for the funeral prayers, nor mention her son when the coup plot was foiled. She feels a deep disappointment, at times anger. Surely the Government should have commemorated his death. Her son is a martyr of the coup.

In the widow's mind is a vision of her husband splayed in the road, white shirt bloodied, his blue tie splayed like a rope. In the staring of his eyes and the croak of his breath was a plea, perhaps for help, maybe forgiveness, she would never be certain. His body lay, inert and silent as Farida tore out her hair and yelled like a dog.

Mohamed Khaleel's shoes lie by the doorway, still with the insoles designed to build up his height. Each morning the two women had rushed to polish them, determined to outdo the other in the shine produced. His mother had neglected her Fajr prayers, to be first to grab the shoes. Now, Farida walks from the kitchen and picks them up. She looks at the ladies and polishes.

The widow feels nothing for her husband. She only feels grief for herself. The months and years of bitterness and rancour between her and the old lady seem wasted. The fights about crockery and shirts, shoes and children, the struggle for his approval; all seem now petty. For the first time she feels close to her mother-in-law. She wants to protect her. She reaches across to touch the old lady's hand, coarse and blotted with liver spots.

'He was such a good man,' says the mother. 'No one could have asked for a better son.'

'And husband, too. Allah brought me the very best.'

They watch as Farida polishes the warm, black leather.

'We worked so hard for my son. We gave him our very best.'

The widow finds that her mouth has gone dry. 'We must pray to Allah to cherish his memory.'

'That girl is a bad one,' the mother whispers. 'She is not to be trusted.'

The widow says nothing.

The line of ants has marched across the linoleum and begun to crawl on Farida's bare foot. The girl kicks the insects off and squashes them under her heel.

A dull light slips into the room. The two ladies move closer on the sofa, holding each other's hands, until the hard morning rain sets in.

# 2nd Place

## FEAR

by Sarah Evans

She walks, the bint, with a sure hip-sway. Not cocky. Not cop-a-look at me. Just fearless. Or don't care less.

Easy game.

Jez eases himself away from the wall, out of the shadows, to settle into a rhythm behind her. He's walking quiet, but he can hear the mouse-squeak of trainer soles. Needs a new pair. Needs a pair not Nike-fakes. He waits for her to flick a look behind. Waits for her head to hunker down, disappearing into the shell of her jacket. Watches for her hand to clutch her bag. Waits for her steps to quicken to a power-walk, trying to look like she's just wanting to get on home. Trying to look like she ain't scared.

Only this one don't do any of that stuff.

Her head's high, her hair loose and flapping like a scarf in the breeze. Looking like she's got all the time in the world, an excess of the stuff, so much of it she's scattering it around her like pound coins.

Jez pulls himself back. No point catching up too quick. He knows the subways with their twists and forks and exits. Knows the corners and the lights that flicker. Knows the darkest, dampest, piss-stench spot, the point where you're least likely to find traffic. The point she's heading for. She should know better. Ain't no one told her she oughtn't walk home late at night, not on her own, not in the dark, not on an evening when the rain and wind have driven people indoors, cosyng themselves up to fake fires and supersize TVs.

He's edging closer. His heels squeak. Hers echo sharp and brave.

It ain't anything to him. Scared. Not scared. He'll get what's due. A kind of tariff. For walking his tunnels. For the fact that with her smart coat and dancing steps and head held high, she's got it better than him.

He needs to focus. He's homing in. His hand grasps the knife in his pocket. He cops a closer glimpse of her as she turns the corner through a pool of jaundiced light. Pretty. Not as young as he was supposing. More woman than girl. It's all the same to him.

She disappears, but only for a moment. It's him turning now. They're heading to the spot. His lucky charm spot. He likes doing things to a pattern. Ten lights in from the

corner. He's counting. Ten, nine...

...three, two...

Except quick as a knife-flick she stops and swivels round. Her eyes look right at him and he knows she's known all along that he was there. He pulls his woollen cap down.

She's standing still and straight and he's at a standstill too, looking at her, looking at him. Can only be a second, but it feels much longer. She reminds him of someone. That boldness in her look. It ain't supposed to go like this. He's lost the impetus, the momentum forward.

"Are you following me?" she asks. Like she just wants to know. A polite enquiry.

His hand is deep in his pocket, his fingers curving round the handle, his thumb feeling for the lever, and itching to pull.

He tries to stare her out. The two of them are in the space between lamps and her face is in shadow, and his will be in shadow too. Light flickers off the moist surface of her eyes.

"It's just," she continues, "I'm not very good at judging these things. So I thought I'd ask."

Her words echo, brave like her steps. He continues staring. Her eyes cast down, so he figures he's won, only he don't quite know what to do with it. His fingers slip over the steel in his pocket; it feels warm and alive.

"But," she carries on, that same even tone, like it's all the same to her one way or the other. "I'm sorry if I've got this wrong. Perhaps you're just heading somewhere too. As I said, I'm not good at judging these things."

The woman looks at him and smiles. Not a terror-stricken, trying to placate him, smile. A friendly type of smile.

"Cash." He spits out the word. "Mobile. Jewellery."

He draws his hand from his pocket, and presses on the lever, thrilling to the flick of the blade. He moves in close, catching the tang of wine-scented breath. He pictures shoving her back against the concrete so the whole length of him is laid the length of her and his knee is pushing between her trembling thighs and his free hand is kneading the soft, useless flesh of her. He pictures her face draining of blood and the metal pressed against her cheek. He'll smell her sweat-drenched terror. Feel her thumping heart.

It don't go further. Mug's game to hand around, to leave behind a splurge of DNA. He does just enough to scramble their brains so they don't remember in too much detail afterwards.

"Oh," she says. "I see. Guess I should have taken a cab. Anyway. Cash. I don't have much. My mobile's only one of those you buy in Tesco and I don't wear jewellery." She reaches into her bag. Usually he'd grab it off her. Who knows what she

might have in there. Because they do that sometimes. Women. Girls. Carry sprays of stuff, or scissors, thinking themselves prepared, not thinking how it might be turned against them. Only this time, he just watches.

Her purse bulges. "I've got two tens," she says. "D'you mind if I keep the change."

Usually he takes the lot. They plead to keep their keys. As if he cares that they'll be stuck on their doorstep at two am, with all that cosiness locked away inside.

He grabs the notes from her and mobile, and the watch, though he didn't ask for it. He turns and runs.

Above, it blusters cold and he thinks of heading for the all-night grease joint. Only he's not hungry. He looks at the watch, its pink strap and heart-pattern dial.

A down-and-out sits huddled under blankets, a brown-skinned sponger type, cross-legged like some Buddha. The type whose clothes will reek if he gets near.

"Any change?" the type asks. He's smiling. Not a real smile. A muscle-aching *kiss your arse* smile.

He thinks of the way the woman smiled, as if she didn't hate him. Open. Defiant. Fearless. Like his sister, way back. Way back when Mum's blockhead bloke got home red-faced drunk and fist-tight angry, and Jez was nothing but a snivelling kid, with his big sis standing up for him. Way back before he learned how to act that way too.

He tosses the watch into the gutter. His fingers finger the notes. They feel grimy. Not his. Not properly earned.

He shoves the notes into the begging cup. He keeps on walking.

\* \* \*

Ravi places the polystyrene cup onto the tray, more coke than anyone could drink. He smiles at the mean-look, shift-eyed man as he adds the outsize burger and a couple of those fried pastries that explode hot-lava apple. The man does not smile back. His face is stretched tight over his skull and his wrists swarm with blue tattoos. He will probably punch Ravi if he tells him to have a good day the way Ravi has been trained to. Probably, he thinks Ravi should crawl back to where he came from. The scarred hand drops a scrunched up note onto the counter.

Ravi is three hours down and five to go.

They are past the post-pub bulge and the rush for the last tube; they have headed into the thin, early hours. Only now, when the elbowing queues space out, does the tiredness seep in and the weariness press down. Behind him the burger-flippers all speak rapidly in an East European language. The seconds ooze by.

Ravi tours the plastic tables, swabbing down the greasy surfaces. He's about to sweep the splurging debris into the bin, when something glitters. His fingers reach for

it. Surely it cannot be real? He slips the small chain inside his server's apron. His skin is sweating guilt, as he feels the security camera's close eye on him, though he'll return the bracelet if anyone comes back.

His fingers chafe against the metal all through the slow trade. He thinks of the girl from two days ago, her hair cut to points to frame her ears, and her earrings – star-shaped – dancing in the light. She lingered at the counter, her lips pouting as she sucked the straw, her smile glistening when he told her he was named for the Hindu god of the sun. He remembers the bright glint of her laughter and the giggles from her friends.

The tubes start their morning grind and Ravi catches the beginnings of the breakfast rush.

At 07:05 he looks at his reflection in the glass above the cracked sink in the staff toilet. His stubble forms a ridge of iron filings and his hair is heavy with grease and sweat. He reeks of the charred flesh he himself is forbidden from eating. Holding the bracelet up, it gleams in the grubby light. It is almost certainly fake, but pretty; perhaps his sister might like it, or the girl. He strips to the waist and bundles his shirt into his rucksack, slips on a sweatshirt and his jacket. His mobile is sleek and smooth as he transfers it to the jacket pocket; it contains the girl's number, which she scrawled in biro on the back of his hand.

Outside, London is waking up.

Ravi merges into the flow of people and heads down into the underworld. City types press in all around. Umbrellas drip. His rucksack bulges. A few months have passed now since the terror of that day in July, but fear is still thick and heavy all around. He sees the slanted looks, and people holding themselves apart. Brown skin plus rucksack: everyone is always adding it up to the wrong answer. Do they think he has no fear; he would not mind being blown to pieces?

Bodies crowd closer on the platform. People retreat into iPods, books and papers. A man flicks his Blackberry open. He sees Ravi look and puts it away, as if Ravi might mug him, even on a busy platform. Ravi fingers the mobile in his pocket.

"What is your number?" he had asked the girl, trying to sound off-hand. He can still feel the tickle of the pen on his hand, and the prickling of his skin all over. The number is probably false. Afterwards her laughter mingled with the sniggers of her friends.

The train arrives on a whoosh of air. Wave after wave of busy people spill out. The crowds jostle back. There is no space for anyone to shuffle away from his rucksack, or his breath, or the lingering stink of fat on his clothes.

He is lifted forward by the throng and captures a spot by one of the poles. A woman's hand is above his. He is not meaning to look, but their eyes meet, breaking rule number one: no eye contact. He snaps his glance away, but not before he catches

her smile. No one smiles on the tube, not an open, I could like you, smile. She is twice his age and out of his league. She is dressed up smart for air-conditioned, sitting at a desk type work. "In computers," the girl had said. Why would she be interested in a burger server?

Not that he plans serving burgers for long. The night hours fit with his days at college.

The train lurches forward. A minute later, it slaps to a stop. The woman starts to fall and his arms reach out and catch her.

"I'm so sorry." She smiles as if she means it and he jolts with the shock of eye-contact again. Her dark hair billows out; the brush of it on the back of his hand is rabbit-fur soft.

The lights go out leaving only dim security lights and he senses alarm all around. He pulls his rucksack closer, and perhaps that is a mistake, because he hears the whispers: not the words, but the panicked shape of them.

"I don't suppose you have the time?" The voice close by startles him. *The time for what?* "Only I sort of lost my watch."

The woman leans in close, like the girl leaning over the counter to take his hand, except now it is early morning and there is nothing flirtatious. Suspicion tightens. Why would she be so friendly? He lifts his arm away from the pole to reach for his mobile with its glowing digits, and the train chooses that moment to pitch forward. This time it is her putting out a hand to rescue him, and the lights come back on and her smile is saying that she trusts him, just like the way the girl smiled at him as she wrote her number.

"It is seven-thirty."

"Thank-you."

Several stops later and he emerges into a sharp, sunlit day. He has the gold chain in his pocket, and the memory of the woman's bold smile. He has the number for the girl that he transferred straight into his mobile. He brings the number up, and presses dial. It picks up at the second ring.

"It is Ravi," he says. "Do you remember? From the burger-bar."

A minute later, he swings into the entrance of his Lego-brick, tower-block. His mouth stretches up. The middle-aged woman passing smiles back, before her expression twists into puzzlement.

\* \* \*

Aggie paces to the window; below, people scuttle the street in darting lines. Her head swims and her insides twist and her heart is fluttering like a trapped mouse.

She squeezes her hands. *Just do it!*

Her watch reads nearly eight and she has to leave the flat – soon – if she's to get there. Walking takes time.

She looks down at her crumpled sheet of paper with its step by step plan. It's supposed to help.

Only what if...

What if, she didn't go?

What if, she stayed indoors?

She needn't leave the house, needn't face the outside with all its hazard. She could sit tight and take care and it would all be alright.

Except she knows where that thinking gets her.

She stares at her list. Step 1: she will pick up her bag, put on her coat and open her door. Step 2: she will step out of her flat, close the door and lock it. Listing it out, visualising it step by step, is supposed to help.

It doesn't.

Her heart agitates faster and blood drains from her head and her mouth turns bleached-bone dry. She reaches out a hand to steady herself. These are classic fight or flee symptoms, she has been told. She neither wants to fight nor flee. She wants to stay right here, here where she is safe.

Her hands tighten. *Just do it!* All she has to do is leave the flat and walk. She will pass by other people and they will not notice her and it will be alright. She understands these statements to be true.

She doesn't believe them.

She looks at her watch, a pretty watch, with delicate silver loops. A present from her sister. Usually, Amanda comes with her. Today is a test to see if she can do it on her own. Amanda is counting on her to get better. They could go shopping together, to the cinema, the way they used to. She needs to leave. Now! She picks her bag up. After the first step, the next will be easier.

Except...

Her heart is like an alien inside her, trying to burst out. The world blurs and she feels sick.

Just a few steps. Just see how far she gets. *Just do it!* That's supposed to be her mantra. It sounds easy coming from her therapist. If only there were pills to dissolve away her fears.

*Just do it!*

She clenches everything tight and opens the door and steps outside.

Footsteps echo up the stairwell and she catches a glimpse of dark hair. It will be one of those Muslim types from the floor above, whose pungent spices seep down the corridors. He will look at her oddly. He will stare and laugh and sneer.

Her face is burning up and her lungs lock and her hand grips her keys. She'll go

back; she'll wait for the hazard to pass. She will be secure within her flat.

Her hand is halfway to the door but the footsteps are closing in and her legs are stunted to the ground.

"A beautiful day." The voice is unexpectedly soft. She turns. He's only a boy really. She has turned and is staring at him before she's thought not to.

"The beginnings of a really beautiful day outside," he repeats.

She used to like the outdoors, and days of autumn sunshine. No wonder she gets fearful, shut inside all day.

She puts her keys very deliberately in her bag. She takes one step towards the stairs.

*Just do it!*

Her breathing is heavy from her head-down, shoulder-hunched walk to get here. She looks at her list. Step 10: she will climb the stairs, open the door and sit in the reception area and wait.

Indoors, the air smells of camomile. The door swings back heavily, trapping her. A woman is there, invading the mint-green space. What is Aggie thinking, coming here?

The woman looks up. Her hair waves over her shoulders. She is looking at Aggie and seeing how odd and different she is.

"Hello," she says, her smile wide.

Aggie doesn't smile back.

"I'm afraid things seem to be running late," the woman says. "She isn't here yet."

*Not here?* Aggie now has the excuse to run back home. She pictures her feet pounding step by step. She could manage it in thirty minutes if she ran; it isn't even her fault.

The woman yawns. "Sorry. I had a late night. Have you been coming long?"

Aggie cannot answer.

The woman smiles. She doesn't seem to have noticed that Aggie is turned to stone, her cheeks glowing like burning coals, her hand jittering as she reaches to the door to stop herself keeling forward.

"I haven't been here before," the woman says. "But I've seen other doctors. Rather a lot of them."

Aggie would like to be like her, so carefree with her careless smile. She doesn't look afraid. But she must be; otherwise she wouldn't be here.

"And do you think..." Aggie hears her own voice, low and strangled, but she needs to know. "You can overcome it? The fear?"

The woman's smile stays strong, as if at a private joke. "I think so."

Aggie fists her hands.

She pushes herself towards the corner and clamps her arms across her battering

chest and folds her body into the half-moon chair.

*Just do it!*

\* \* \*

Dr Frobisher is packed onto the train, her body jigsawing into the spaces left by others. Her hand holds the rail firmly. Her eyes are softly closed as she pictures lying in a fresh, green glade beside a tumbling stream. She focuses on even breathing.

The sound system whines, jarring her back into the sweating crush. A voice says: "Apologies for the further delay. We will be moving as soon as we can."

She grips the rail a little tighter and looks at her fob-watch; she is running late. Her fingers caress the glassy metal. Worrying will not make the train move sooner.

The minutes have accumulated, building up into muttered expletives and foot-shuffling. A woman is jammed up against her, her breath rasping; a man in a suit smears beads of sweat across his forehead.

In a carriage packed with a hundred people, two are likely to be experiencing panic. She thinks of all the possible phobias. The fear of being locked in an enclosed space, of other people's bodies; the fear of fainting, of being touched, of long waits; fear of death, or fire, or explosions; fear of crowds, of people, of smells, of being stared at; fear of strangers; fear of everything.

The range of fears is wide; she's studied them. The counselled turned counsellor.

The wing-beat in her stomach teases, her body getting primed for flight or fight. She senses the menace crowding at the edges of her mind, the thoughts clamouring like noisy children, wanting to be let in. They have pressed harder since July seventh.

The chances of anything happening today are less than the chances of a big lottery win. She never buys lottery tickets; she understands the odds. Security alerts like this are routine.

*No harm will come to you:* her mind understands it is true. The day following the bombings she followed her usual route to work. Avoidance behaviour needs to be avoided. Now, she clears her thoughts and thinks of a cool, leafy space. She catches her own orange-blossom scent and concentrates on steady breathing.

She is an hour late as she pushes open the door into the foliage tones of her consulting rooms. Her skin itches with dried-out sweat. She allows herself a moment's satisfaction: a difficult journey successfully negotiated. Both her first two appointments are waiting.

"I'm so sorry to be late. I'll try not to keep you too long," she says to Aggie, who is cowering in the corner, like a frightened hedgehog. "Glad you made it." She smiles encouragement and hopes she will not scoot off.

“You must be Rebecca,” she says to the woman with long hair. Dr Frobisher’s mouth curves up spontaneously, mirroring back the generous smile beamed her way. “Do come through.”

At her desk, she glances through her notes. Rebecca is an interesting case, a referral from a neurosurgeon.

Rebecca’s condition is rare: calcification to the amygdala in each of her anterior-medial temporal lobes. Tests show no motor or sensory impairment; no deficits in intelligence, memory, or language function. But subtle changes to the brain have devastating impact. Rebecca lacks a normal fear response. She can understand – intellectually – what fear is; she no longer experiences the gut-wrench, heart-stop emotion.

She feels no fear.

Rebecca is still smiling warmly and Dr Frobisher’s notes tell her that her attitude can be considered unusually positive. She is excessively and inappropriately forthcoming. She knows no suspicion and lacks any natural urge to hold back. None of which matters in Dr Frobisher’s calm office.

Dr Frobisher asks routine questions. She listens carefully to the answers.

“Give me an example of something recent,” she says. “Something threatening.”

Rebecca recounts being mugged.

“So you didn’t feel frightened? Not even when he pulled a knife.”

“No,” Rebecca pulls a wry face. “I mean it’s not I didn’t understand that he might hurt me. Except there was no real reason for him to was there? He wanted cash and I was offering it. Even if he’d wanted to hurt me, well there wasn’t much I could do to stop him. He’d have been stronger and faster than me.”

Dr Frobisher jots down tidy notes. Her mind reaches through her accumulated knowledge.

Her journey started twenty years ago. People forget quickly. 1987. King’s Cross. The fire. Accident rather than terrorist. She can remember the smoke and heat-filled horror, the paralysing aftermath.

But she has turned her own experience around. Through years of counselling and study she has achieved a deeper understanding of herself. She has learnt how to help others.

But Rebecca is outside her usual scope.

“What should I have done?” Rebecca says, eyes wide with trust.

“Well,” Dr Frobisher says, “a normal fear response would be to scream and run.”

“Would that have helped?” Rebecca asks.

Dr Frobisher looks at the trusting face before her, defenceless, unprotected. She feels herself fill up with pity, pity mingled with yearning.

# 3rd PLACE

## INDIVIDUAL AT RISK

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by Sarah Evans

Already Rebecca's pad had accumulated a one-to-six list of actions. Midway through the weekly round-up meeting and Moira Edwards, who headed up Campaigns, was still full flow, her pearly nails swirling dust-motes. Behind her, rain pebble-dashed the office window. Rebecca added a curlicue beneath Action Six and stifled a yawn.

A quick tap to the door snapped her alert.

The door swung open and Kay stood there. Her eyes creased together in a frown as they met Rebecca's, then she turned to Moira. 'Sorry,' she said, 'to interrupt. But this arrived in your inbox and I thought you'd want to see it immediately.' She passed a sheet of A4 paper to Moira who said, 'Thank-you,' somewhat curtly, before lifting her necklace of pink-rimmed glasses to perch on the end of her nose. Moira nodded slowly and repeated, 'Thank-you.' Then she flashed a glossy smile over at Rebecca while passing the paper across. 'One of yours,' she said. 'Get onto it straight away.'

Rebecca took in the Foreign Office logo and the heading: Press Release. She scanned down the printed text, couched with the usual Civil Service deliberation. Unconfirmed reports. Cautiously optimistic. But they wouldn't issue a press release, or use words like optimistic, not unless they were fairly sure.

Rebecca's throat seized mid-swallow as her chair scratched back over the carpet. 'I'll go and make some calls,' she said, her voice as neutral as possible. 'See what I can find out.'

'Can the rest of us know?' Tim, their latest volunteer, asked.

Rebecca looked at Moira who nodded her assent.

'Alex Sanderson,' Rebecca said, her vocal chords straining oddly over the name. 'There are rumours, still unconfirmed, that she's about to be freed.'

'Fabulous!' Tim said, his grin spreading across his acned face. His straightforward delight was mirrored on the faces of Rebecca's other colleagues.

'Fabulous,' Rebecca echoed. 'If it's true.' She avoided looking at Kay, not wanting to witness her silent questions. Kay was the only one in the office who knew about Rebecca and Paul.

Rebecca sat at her desk amidst her Jenga-tower of papers and multi-coloured post-it

notes. She bit away a piece of loose skin around her thumb, clenched her hands and consciously released them. The rain continued unabated, streaking down in rivulets and dissolving away all colour from the world. It was good news; of course it was.

Her hand scrawled a list of people she should ring to try and get the inside story. She wrote down Paul in firm letters, not because she needed the reminder, clearly, but setting out his name in black ink made him feel more definite. Would he have already heard? Might he have tried to ring her? She switched her mobile on, but there were no new messages. She brought up his number and listened as it clicked to voicemail.

'Paul, it's me,' she said, then paused. Better perhaps for this to come from someone else. Better for it to be a real conversation not a one-way recording. But she couldn't keep it to herself. 'It's about Alex.' She summarised the press release and added her own caveats then wished she'd waited to make a few calls which might have allowed her to say more. 'Anyway, talk soon,' she said and rang off. Her fingers toyed with her phone as she mentally replayed her message. She had been very clinical, sticking to the facts. She had not tried to say, I guess this must feel very strange for you. Nor had she ended the call with I love you. Doing so would have felt uncomfortable here amidst the maze of open-plan desks. But she wished she had.

The afternoon continued in a flurry of rumour and slowly accumulating information as she rang round her list of contacts. Her heart beat fast alongside each ring of her phone and every time she picked up and it was not Paul, she felt disappointment churn alongside relief. 'Yes,' she kept saying. 'Fabulous.' The reports were damped-down, confirmed, denied, until the moment when her contact at the Foreign Office press office told her to turn to the rolling BBC news channel right now. Usually the TV in the corner was left to flicker silently through its images all day; she walked over and reached behind the Yucca plant to de-mute it. She signalled Moira through the glass wall of her office. Others noticed and started gathering.

A book-promotion feature was brought abruptly to an end for breaking news. Dominic Fowler stood outside the Italianate white-grey stone of the King Charles Street building, his ruddy face sombre for the occasion. She thought of all those meetings in which he had assured her that the Government was doing all it could, smiling down to her as if she were a child who couldn't be expected to understand the complexities and compromises of the adult world. He cleared his throat and looked out directly from the screen. 'I am delighted to confirm that after three years held in an Azerbaijani jail, the journalist Alex Sanderson has now been released. She is currently with the British Embassy in Baku and ...' He paused to smile. 'As soon as we can make the arrangements an RAF plane will be bringing her home.'

A small cheer went up around the office, and someone thumped Rebecca on the back. She turned her head, the skin of her lips strained to splitting over her smile.

Moira was there, nodding with satisfaction.

The news commentator bumbled the background which Rebecca knew by heart.

A fearless campaigner for human rights and justice, Alex had been working undercover, investigating government corruption and a campaign of voter intimidation. She had been arrested on false charges of drug trafficking and sentenced to life in an overcrowded, brutal and unsanitary prison. Contact with the outside world was shut off. Extensive diplomatic efforts, together with a campaign headed by Alex's sister, Karen, and supported by Amnesty International, had failed to secure her release. Until today.

Rebecca noted Moira's smile at the mention of Amnesty. All good publicity.

The photo that flashed up was a familiar one, Alex's face in profile, her eyes gazing mistily into some visionary distance. Not so much beautiful as commanding; demanding of attention.

The camera switched to Karen, an older less arresting version of Alex, looking typically dishevelled. Rebecca had met with her numerous times too. Alex's family and friends were all very excited, she said. She herself would be flying out to join Alex in Baku.

Rebecca half expected someone to mention Paul. But he was old news now and thankfully no one did.

This didn't change anything. He'd always assured her of that. Nothing between them had changed.

The news moved on and Moira stepped forward to snap the TV back to mute. She turned to Rebecca. 'You'll draft a news update for the website,' she said, more command than question. 'And for the blog.'

'Yes, of course. I'll Tweet it as well.'

'And you'll see about a press pass for RAF Lyneham?'

Rebecca stared back.

'You're OK to go there tomorrow aren't you?'

'Yes,' Rebecca said on autopilot immediately wishing she'd prevaricated and taken a moment to think. Not that it would have made much difference. What excuse could she have offered?

'All excitement,' Tim said, grinning widely, his enthusiasm heightening Rebecca's sense of watching this across a frozen landscape.

'You OK?' Kay asked, her face awkward with not knowing whether to offer congratulations or sympathy.

'Yes,' Rebecca said. 'Of course.'

She was back home first. The flat felt cold and she turned the thermostat up then pulled on a thick jumper. In the bathroom mirror she looked pale and lumpish and she went back to change into something more styled. She crossed her arms tightly across

her chest and turned the radio to Magic, allowing the presenter's pick of music to fill her mind with banal lyrics and foot-tapping tunes.

She thought about cooking, perhaps something requiring a bit more effort than their usual microwave dinners, but faffing with food seemed frivolous. She made coffee and ate a biscuit and then another.

She turned the radio off, the TV on and remained standing as she watched the rolling news channel, hearing the same sound bites over and over. Alex Sanderson. Alex Sanderson. Alex Sanderson. Her mind was stuck on it, like an irritating song. Blurry images showed Alex being led out by men in sunglasses and uniforms with gunbelts pinching in their waists. Alex's head was high, her gaze defiant. This was the moment, the commentator said, that her family and many supporters had waited for.

A moment Rebecca had waited for too. She'd been assigned the case from the beginning. She remembered researching the background and making an impassioned plea to the Amnesty Board that this cause – over and above several others – was one they should get involved in. Alex had been listed as one of their Individuals at Risk. Rebecca had ensured the story remained high profile, organising the usual letter campaigns and blogs and briefing journalists. She'd liaised with the campaign group set up by Karen, ensuring that their efforts were co-ordinated for maximum effect.

And through Karen, she had met Paul.

Paul. Please come home. She willed it. Please, come home soon.

Time passed and she waited.

She waited as time barely seemed to pass at all.

Most of evening and a bottle of wine had passed before she heard the clatter of the door. She rose and went to greet him.

'Hey,' she said softly. Where the fuck were you?

He seemed to be fascinated by the swirl of the carpet.

'Sorry,' he said. 'I should have rung.'

She swallowed everything back. 'You heard then?'

He looked at her, his gaze intent, his lips unsmiling, then he looked away. 'Yep,' he said so softly she could hardly hear. 'Karen rang.'

She could smell the whisky on his breath.

'When?' She hated her note of accusation.

'Just after lunch.'

A couple of hours before Rebecca had rung him. Why hadn't he called to tell her? Why hadn't he rung her back? Her face flared up hot. But she couldn't demand to know why. Very clearly she couldn't.

He looked so pale; his tall, slender frame appeared fragile, as if the slightest breeze might blow him away. His hair was damp with rain as he ran his fingers through it. He swallowed and she watched the rise and fall of his Adam's apple as he gazed

downwards.

She lifted her hand to touch his arm and she thought how she had been here before, standing just like this.

'It's fabulous news,' she said; she was still reeling out that stupid word.

'Yep.' Paul continued to stare down and then he started talking about how some of Alex's crowd had got together for a drink and that was why he was late. 'Sorry,' he said again. 'It was all a bit crazy; I kept meaning to ring you.'

'How do you feel?' she asked.

'Like you say, it's fabulous news.' His voice was flat. She thought how he hadn't answered her question, not at all. 'I should get something to eat.' For the first time he looked at her properly, his eyes intense. 'I'm sorry. I know it's difficult. But it doesn't change anything.'

And although she'd wanted so much to hear him say it, now he had, she wished he hadn't. He reminded her of Dominic and all his reassurances.

She wished that he had not thought it needed to be said.

In bed, she lay awake. Paul was awake too, or so she guessed. Not because he was restless; it was his complete stillness which felt unnatural. A train rumbled past in the distance. There was a cry, a baby perhaps, or just a cat. Someone walked by on the street talking loudly.

How do you feel? I mean really? It sounded too raw a plea for reassurance.

It wasn't as if they hadn't discussed this eventuality.

He'd persuaded Rebecca out for a drink – just a drink – and she'd been acutely aware of all the reasons why she shouldn't, but had accepted anyway. 'She's been gone for two years,' he said. 'I can't consider myself her partner. Not any more. I mean we'd only been seeing each other for a year.' She nodded, feeling the thrill of being chosen as confidante, the blood-surgingly thrilling and apprehension. 'One year dating; two years missing her. Not a great ratio,' he said and smiled ruefully. He shifted position and slugged back from his pint and his leg brushed against hers.

'I have to move on.' His voice was low and determined. 'Let go. I can't wait indefinitely. She wouldn't expect that. Does that make sense?'

'Yes,' she had said. All of what he said made perfect, logical sense. Except for the fact that love does not follow logic.

She woke with the feeling that she hadn't slept at all, though she must have done, clearly, else she wouldn't be jerking awake with a sense of panic. Light filtered softly through the curtains. Paul was no longer beside her; his side of the bed was cold. She found him downstairs, hands cupping round a mug of coffee.

'You'll be there today?' she asked.

He nodded. 'If that's OK?' But he could hardly really be asking her permission.

'How do you feel?' she asked, repeating herself from the night before.

'Nervous,' he said and laughed nervously. 'Don't know why. Guess I've just pictured this so often.'

She felt as if they were underwater, with no real way to communicate. In his early picturings he must have imagined the ardent reunion of lovers.

'I just don't know what to expect,' he continued. 'I mean how she will be. Three years is a long time. And after all she's been through.'

Three years of sharing a six foot by ten windowless cell with two other woman. Of virtually no contact with the outside world. Of cockroach infested, insanitary conditions and walls dripping with damp. No books. No radio. No stimulation. Appalling food. Rebecca thought over the facts that she had detailed over the years on the website.

Couldn't they have held her just a little longer. She hated herself for having such unworthy thoughts. Paul had been with Alex for a year; but Rebecca and Paul had only been a couple for ten months. It felt such a slight passage of time.

But they had been happy; she had been happy.

Paul looked at Rebecca closely as if trying to read her thoughts. 'Don't suppose I'll even talk to her much, not amidst all the crowd turning up,' he said. 'Mostly I just want this to be over and then to move on.'

He was already supposed to have moved on, she thought. Dating her and later moving in together, wasn't that already moving on? She remembered his pursuit of her, the casual text messages and their first dates, which weren't really dates because they held back from anything further than a social kiss. The flowers he sent, one per day for a week. And the evening when she told him that she didn't think that she could do this and he had said he understood, and she had thought she would not see him again. The evening when...

She checked the flow of memories and went over to touch his shoulder and kiss him on the cheek, breathing in the musky scent of him, feeling the light pressure of his hand in the small of her back and wishing he would hug her close. 'It will be fine,' she said.

'Anyway, I'd best get going,' he said. And he explained how he'd been offered a lift to the base by a trio of Alex's friends. 'Guess you'll have a busy day too.' He was up and out of the room, before she had the chance to say how she was heading that way as well. Not that there would have been room for her in the car anyway.

She took a train and then a taxi. Outside the base, her cab joined the slow moving queue towards the barbed-wire fence. She sank into the seat, closing her eyes, breathing in tarmac and leather, and longing to just turn around.

Finally she reached the front and got out of the cab and showed her pass to the

two men with uniforms and guns before joining the scrum on the other side. She felt out of place amidst the mass of professional journalists and their entourage of camera crews and photographers and sound recordists.

One or two people recognised her, which is to say their curt nods seemed to acknowledge that her features were familiar. She nodded back and kept her distance.

The milling chaos reminded her of airport cock-ups, with none of the people in uniforms able to explain the delay. She listened in while the BBC presenter smiled desperately wide and kept up a stream of repetitive banter: they had been assured that Alex was on her way and there'd be a better idea on timing very soon.

The air had turned heavy with drizzle, which was beginning to soak in. This morning she had dressed on autopilot, and now she was shivering in a linen jacket that was suitable for a day of overheated offices, but offered no protection against the damp wind whistling across the airfield. The air smelt of diesel and all around was the throb of people's chatter. She was hungry, but hadn't thought to bring anything to eat. The delay dragged. Behind her were the reception buildings. Somewhere in there Paul would be waiting too, conducting his vigil along with the crowd of friends and family whom he had at first drawn close to and then distanced himself from. She wished she were with him, wished she could offer some kind of fortitude and consolation. He'd been hopelessly in love with Alex; he told Rebecca that. Was it hopelessly, he'd said, or helpless? She was no longer sure.

Hopeless, as in hardly able to hope, not really, that this amazing woman might feel about him the way he felt about her.

Helpless, as in not able to help the way he felt.

Just as Rebecca had fallen hopelessly, helplessly in love with him. It had happened so quickly, so against her better judgement.

That evening...

The evening when they had been out for dinner and afterwards she had deflected his kiss, so his lips pressed against her cheek. And she had said she couldn't do this.

He told her he understood and she'd watched the hunch of his shoulders as he walked away.

She sat on her sofa in the dark and listened to the pit-a-pat of rain against her window and told herself she was doing the right thing. And then, she heard the buzz of her doorbell and she walked the hallway and down the stairs to open it.

He stood there, hunkered down on the doorstep, drenched through; his eyes flicked up to hers and then away, half hopeful, half fearful, as if he were the one who risked being hurt.

'You'd better come in,' she said.

He dripped behind her up the stairs. He stood in her hallway, water dripping onto the pale carpet like coffee stains, his T-shirt forming rippling waves where it clung to

his chest.

She fussed around, bringing him a warm, fluffy towel from the airing cupboard. 'You'd better get out of your wet stuff.' She wanted it to sound maternal; she did and did not want it to sound that way, and she blushed like a school girl as she stood and watched him pull the wet cotton over his head, his elbows getting tied up, the dark hair curling underarm. She took the sodden T-shirt and spread it over a radiator. He was there before her, his arms crossed tightly across his bare chest. His dark eyes hungry and uncertain. She stepped towards him, holding out the towel like a shield, dabbing at his hair and face, tracing his outline at one remove. Until slowly, inevitably, his lips met hers.

New information was spreading like a wave through the crowd and Rebecca's head tipped backwards, at one with everybody else's. A plane materialised out of a cloud high up above.

Edge of vision, Rebecca caught a surge of movement, as a second throng headed from the red-bricked building to join the swarm of press. The friends and family wanted now to be here too, out on the tarmac, wanting to get the first close-up glimpse. Rebecca tried to make out Paul, but failed to spot his tall figure amidst the crush of colourful scarves and wide smiles.

The noise of the aircraft boomed closer, overpowering the rising chatter. Rebecca felt the rush of air threatening to sweep her away. The aircraft materialised a few tens of yards away. The BBC presenter was babbling ten to the dozen but still not saying anything useful. Rebecca was caught up in the excitement, which felt indistinguishable from fear. Her breathing was hard and fast; the more she inhaled, the less oxygen there was.

An external staircase was wheeled into place in front of the aircraft doors. All around was the breath-hold of silence. Come on, come on, come on!

The door above opened.

A man in uniform appeared, and then another. And then a woman wearing a dark mac and jeans. Karen.

And then...

A roar emerged from the crowd and Rebecca herself seemed to contributing to it, her lungs operating on full-volume reflex.

Alex stood at the top of the stairway, tall and thin. She raised a hand to push back her long strands of blonde hair against the wind. She seemed to be looking over the tops of the crowd, into the distance, savouring her damp moment of homecoming. Her eyes dropped along with her hand as she waved at the roaring crowd.

She descended slowly, nearly tripping over the last step so Karen stepped close to support her. The two sisters leaned in together and smiled at one another. Then Alex

straightened and she stepped towards the barrier holding the crowd back and everyone fell silent.

The wind whistled in Rebecca's ears.

'Hello,' Alex said. 'It's quite a welcoming committee.' Her voice was clear and lilting. Rebecca's voice could never have been said to lilt. 'It's great to be here, great to be back home. But if you'll excuse me, I have some people I haven't seen for a while who I'm keen to see.'

Another cheer went up. Alex's smile was gracious. She was still commanding, Rebecca thought. Even so pale and worn and thin, she exuded a sense of presence, the aura of beauty.

You're lovely, Paul had said that first morning, when he smiled so easily to find her lying there beside him and just in a single night his face seemed to have rediscovered some of its youth. But she understood lovely to mean the way he saw her, rather than objective fact.

Alex's eyes skimmed over the assembled mass. The journalists. The personal contingent. She raised a hand to wave at someone, or at them all, it wasn't clear. Then her gaze seemed to halt and her smile became more fixed. Rebecca followed the direction of Alex's gaze. Paul was standing at the front now, his eyes locked onto Alex, the two of them gazing seriously at one another.

Or so it seemed. But it was over in a moment and Rebecca could easily have been imagining things, after all, how would she know who Alex was looking at, and why wouldn't Paul be looking at her the way everybody else was?

And why shouldn't two old friends – two former lovers – who hadn't seen each other for a long time gaze at one another?

Alex and Karen had moved now towards the large black car with smoked glass windows, which was waiting to take them to the buildings. The friends and family swarmed back too. The press were shuffling and that BBC woman was gushing about how exciting this was. Rebecca realised that she'd forgotten to take any photos. She only had a cheap camera anyway; there would be better press photos that the Amnesty site could borrow or point to. Slowly she peeled herself away from the crush of people and headed for the gate set between barbed wire. There would be a press conference later but she could no longer bear to stay here; she'd tell Moira she'd been taken unwell.

At home, she watched it again on the news. She tried different stations. Paul was given a passing mention as a friend who had been involved in campaigning for Alex's release.

Rebecca turned the TV off and sat waiting on the sofa in a horrible replay of the previous evening. Gradually, the light faded.

It was late when she heard a key in the door; she restrained herself from rushing towards it, waiting for him to come to her.

Which he did. But slowly. He came into the room, leaving the light off, and sat down beside her on the sofa, not speaking, his thigh parallel to hers, but leaving a small and crucial space.

'So?' she said, hating the way it sounded like a plea.

'So,' he echoed back, his voice heavy with the effort.

'How was it?'

'It was...' He shrugged as if unable to find the words and after all, it wasn't every day that the one time love of your life returned from three years of incarceration. 'Strange,' he offered, which as a word provided no explanation, none at all. 'Incredible. Incredibly strange. Unbelievably good as well.' He hesitated, recognising belatedly, perhaps, that she might not want to hear that. But then he carried on. Alex seemed so much herself, despite all she'd been through, she seemed so alive, so vibrant. She was an incredible woman.

Rebecca herself was all too believable, she thought. All too ordinary.

Perhaps that was – or had been – part of her attraction.

She listened as he talked. When she first met him he had been so anguished. In his time with her, the pain had drawn back to his inner core, no longer so nakedly on the surface. She heard it again now. The anguish and longing.

For a long time they sat silently, still not touching. She heard the faint rustle of movement beside her.

'I do love you,' he said eventually.

She thought how the word do seemed to undo the rest.

'But...' She said it for him.

'I need time,' he said quietly. 'Help me.'

Rebecca remained very still.

'I can't,' she said; she would do anything for him, but she could not help him with this. 'And I won't wait. You have to decide.'