

THE INHERITANCE.

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My whole life was changed one Tuesday afternoon.

Kylie had just come home from school and was having a snack 'to keep her going' before dinner and I was finishing up a letter to my cousin in Australia. (Tuesday was my day off, because I work Saturdays) Then the front doorbell rang.

Now in our house, the front doorbell doesn't ring very often. Everyone knows to come in the back door, which is always unlocked - when there's someone in, that is - and we don't get a lot of door-to-door salespeople here. So, it was quite a surprise to hear the doorbell.

"I'll get it!" called Kylie. I heard her going to the front door in her wooden sandals and the key turning as she unlocked it. Then there was the indistinct sound of someone talking, followed by Kylie clattering along the hall and into the dining room where I was. "It's for you, Dad," she said. The man at the door will only talk to you."

Unable to figure out why on earth a stranger should be at the door and wanting to talk to me, I made my way along the hall to the front of the house. A man was standing there, but that was all I could make out through the patterned glass.

I opened the door, and said to the man, "Yes?"

The visitor replied, "Are you Stephen Charles Morton?"

"Yes, I am," I replied, "but who wants to know?"

"Excuse me for being formal," said the man, "but before we can proceed, I will need to see some proof of identity."

"Just what is all this about?" I asked. "I'm starting to get a bit annoyed."

"Well, if I could come in, then ..." he began.

"I'm not in the habit of inviting people who knock at my door and won't tell me their business into my house. Just what is your problem?" I demanded.

I suppose I should have been ready for the reply. The whole scene was playing out like a scene from a film. However, I hadn't seen it coming.

The stranger said, "I'm sorry, sir. I can't tell you anything more without proof of identity. I have been given strict instructions to be sure that I am talking to the correct person before I divulge the contents of this package I have for you."

There was nothing else for it. I left the stranger waiting on the front step again, while I went to find my passport. Fortunately, I am a tidy person, so it didn't take long. I presented it to the man at the door, who looked at it, returned it to me and said, "Thank you, Mr. Morton. I am now in the position of being able to deliver to you the package I have, along with a message. May I come in?"

I demurred at this, the man having told me nothing about himself or having shown me any identification. He then produced his passport, which identified him as Martin Jones, along with a visiting card, showing that he was with a respectable firm of solicitors in London. I wasn't completely convinced, but I let him in.

As we entered the lounge, Mr. Jones said, "This concerns your daughter, Kylie, as well. It is necessary for her to be present as well. I take it she was the one who answered the door."

Accordingly, I called Kylie to come in, then offered Mr. Jones a cup of tea, which he declined. "I'd like to get right down to business," he said. "I have come a long way to deliver this package to you today."

I looked at the packet in Mr. Jones' hand. It didn't seem unusual, but the solicitor's words seemed to imply that it was somehow valuable. I wondered what could possibly be in it.

"I'll come straight to the point, Mr. Morton," said Mr. Jones, interrupting my musing. "You are almost certainly unaware that you have, or rather had, an uncle in Sussex."

"I definitely didn't know anything of this uncle," I replied.

"As we thought. Your uncle had had no dealings with your father for almost twenty years; since he married your mother, that is. It was not a happy parting of the ways, I understand. However your uncle, who was the Honourable Charles Edward Morton, has now, unfortunately, passed away, leaving behind neither widow nor heir. The provisions of his will mean that the nearest blood relative on the male side will inherit all of Charles Morton's property."

The solicitor paused to clear his throat. He went on, "However, there are some conditions. The inheritor must take up residence within a year of Charles' demise; he must be married, and he must take up the responsibilities as Lord of the Manor of the village which comes as part of his estate. I understand that the reason for the estrangement between your father and your uncle was that he refused to take on the requisite burden, leaving the estate to your Uncle Charles."

"Didn't my uncle have any children?" I asked.

"Unfortunately not. They did have one son, but he passed away through meningitis when he was in his teens. Charles' wife herself passed away not much later; they say she had lost the will to live."

"And did my uncle not remarry?"

"No, he didn't."

"But what of the condition that he must be married?" I asked.

"The full condition is that, if the heir has not reached the age of majority, he must have a guardian until the age of 21 or until he marries, whichever is sooner. If he is an adult, he must be either already married, or marry within a year of taking up his responsibilities. Thereafter, if he divorces or his spouse passes away, before he has been fifteen years as Lord of the Manor, then he must remarry within the year."

"So, because my wife is no longer with us, if I wish to accept the inheritance, then I must be married again in the next twelve months. Is that correct?"

"In essence, that is correct," Mr. Jones replied.

"What would happen should I decline the inheritance?"

"Then, I am afraid, the Manor would in all probability be broken up. There are no other surviving male relatives of a close enough degree. I might add that there are several property developers who are at the moment rubbing their hands in the expectation of a forthcoming sale, so that they can buy up the land cheaply and make a lot of money building an expensive new housing estate, which would be devastating for the local community and, I fear, costly to the environment."

"You're asking a lot of me and my daughter," I said. "I've lived all my life in Northumberland. I've hardly ever been to London, and know nothing of the south-east."

I turned to Kylie, who had remained dutifully silent until then. "What do you think?" I asked her.

"Well, Dad, it sounds a bit scary, but also like a big adventure. I wouldn't mind going to live in a big country house, but I think I'd miss my friends at first. The biggest thing for me is this talk of you having to find another wife. I miss Mum, and don't know if anyone could replace her. On the other hand, I wouldn't mind the chance of having a little brother or sister. I don't know. It's for you to say, Dad."

I turned back to Mr. Jones. "How long have I got to make up my mind - and if I decide to say yes, by when do I have to be married?"

"There are no specific provisions on that score. No action will be taken towards breaking up the estate before a year from this date. However, you will need to leave enough time for all the legalities to be completed, so I would recommend that you come to a decision within nine months, one way or another. Now, I am to hand over to you this package, which contains copies of your uncle's will, the charter of the Manor, a brief history of the Estate, a personal letter to you from your uncle, written shortly before his demise, and a cheque for £10,000 which represents a special bequest from your uncle."

He handed the package over to me, and insisted I checked the contents, before having me sign a form to say that I had received it. Mr. Jones then gave me his business card and told me to be in touch as soon as I made my decision and was ready to meet the terms of the will. I promised to do so, and he took his leave, having once again declined any refreshment, saying that his train would leave in just 45 minutes, and he didn't want to miss it.

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Following the solicitor's visit, I took a deep breath - then we both dissolved into giggles. "Should I make a list of possible brides for you?" Kylie asked once we had calmed down. That set us off again, but before long, reality kicked in. I began to wonder just how and if I could find the right person to take the place of my lost bride in both mine and my daughter's lives.

Kylie and I had a serious talk after that, and we both agreed that we needed to be very careful just who we told about the incredible situation we found ourselves in. We decided to tell nobody for at least 24 hours, not even my mother, who lived nearby and would certainly have to be told - and who probably already knew something about the Manor in Sussex.

That night I had a dream, or more correctly, a nightmare. I was being pursued by a number of young women dressed in bridal gowns, all saying, "Take me, take me!" Just before I woke up, I tripped and fell, allowing these women to catch up with me. First one took hold of me, and said, "I've got you. You're mine!" Then another grabbed me, and another, until I was down on the ground, being smothered by the brides. I woke up to find myself completely tangled up in the bedclothes and covered in sweat.

In the morning, Kylie and I decided to tell my mother the news, that Kylie would tell only her best friend Amy, swearing her to secrecy, and I would tell my cousin in Australia and my closest colleague from work, Ron Fischer. He and I have been friends for years, and when I lost my Julia in the accident, his wife kept bringing round meals for us, and cleaned

the house - without being asked. Perhaps I should mention here that I work in a small factory as a Supervisor. It's the main employer in this small town, though, and so just about everyone knows me.

I had my opportunity to tell Ron during our lunch break. He was not surprisingly first sceptical then absolutely gob-smacked as the implications of the news sank in. "How are you going to find a woman who can take up the task of being lady of the Manor up here in the wilds of Northumberland - that's always supposing you take on the challenge?," he said.

"I don't know," I replied. In fact, I'm not sure whether I even want to start looking. I've got a good life here, Kylie and I are happy, so why disrupt things?"

"Well, there are a few good answers to that," said Ron. "For one thing, there's the chance of a lot of money and the opportunity to do something different. Then, there's the responsibility of keeping the community going. Also, think of the possibilities that will open up for Kylie - top schools, the chance to travel and see places..."

"Yes, I know all that," I said, cutting him off in mid-sentence. But would I be right to do this - and if I do take up the challenge, then how on earth could I know if any woman I choose as my potential wife is going along with me for the money, or for love? Also, in the back of my mind, it still feels like a betrayal of Julia."

"Only you can decide that, but you can't have too long to make your mind up. A year isn't a long time to meet the right woman, get to know her and for all of you to make the move down south. Personally, I don't want you to go, but I can also see you as being a very good Lord of the Manor. You're really good with people - like you were born to it, which I suppose in one way you were."

"That's another thing I keep thinking about," I said. Why did my dad decline what should have been his duty? Was he scared he'd fail, or was there something else? I expect my mum could shed some light on that mystery. Why did neither of them ever tell me about that part of their past?"

"Look, Stephen, I can't give you all the answers. Your mum may be able to fill in some gaps, but life is much different now from what it was when your dad was young. Remember, you're forty years old now. Your clock is ticking. I say, grab this opportunity."

"Thanks, Ron. I'm going round to mum's this evening, and then I'm going to try and get my head round all this."

"Just one more thing, before we finish," Ron added. "You could always try praying about it, and find out the Almighty's opinion!"

That was typical of Ron, one of the stalwarts of the local chapel. He never missed an opportunity to mention God - in a nice way, though.

When Kylie came home from school, I asked her how her friend Amy had reacted about the news. "She totally freaked," Kylie answered. "Amy said that was the weirdest news she'd ever heard and she'd absolutely got to text all her friends straight away and tell them. I nearly freaked at that, but I managed to stop her by telling her that this had to be a secret or my Dad could never find the right woman, and anyway, we hadn't decided whether to go for it or not. 'Oh, you absolutely *must*. I mean, being a Lord of the Manor and all that - it's just too way out not to do it,' she replied. I made her promise she wouldn't

tell anyone at all for at least two weeks - but I'm not sure she'll last that long. A secret this big is too much for her to keep to herself."

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After tea, we both went round to my mum's. She was always complaining she didn't see enough of her granddaughter, and now I was going to tell her we might be moving somewhere a long way away. She wouldn't like *that* idea, I was sure. The thing I wanted from the evening was to find out if Mum knew anything about the Manor and why Dad had rejected his birthright.

Mum was on good form. She'd spent the day working in her garden, which was her pride and joy. She often said that if she hadn't had the garden, losing Dad would probably have been the end for her as well.

After some chit-chat and a crazy board-game, Mum made some drinks and a snack, and then I told her our news. Her jaw didn't actually drop, but you could see that she was taken aback by what I told her. She was silent for a while, then she spoke.

"So Charles has kicked the proverbial bucket," she said. "And now it comes around again."

"What do you mean, Mum? Tell us what happened all those years ago."

"Well, there's a lot I could say, but I'd rather just give you the short version. You see, I wasn't brought up to life in the Manor like your father. I was from the village, just a peasant in the eyes of the high and mighty. However, Bill, your Dad, went to the local Grammar School rather than a public school. His parents thought they were being more egalitarian that way. I also passed my eleven plus and went to the Grammar School, so we travelled together. We didn't really notice each other until one day I tripped as I was getting off the bus, and sprained my ankle. Bill came to the rescue, and helped me get home. He didn't let on who he was, but my parents knew, and after he'd gone, they told me to have nothing more to do with that stuck-up lot at the Manor.

Of course, being a teenager, that was exactly what I *didn't* do.

"We grew closer, and often helped each other with homework, and talked about getting married, although we realised that would be impossible. Then, when Bill was 17, his father died suddenly, and that changed everything. I'd already left school - there was no question of staying on to the sixth form - but up to that point Bill was heading for University. After his father's death, however, the pressure was on for him to find a suitable wife and take up his destined role as Lord of the Manor. However archaic that sounds, that was his family's attitude, and from what you've told me, it still is.

"This story is getting a bit longer than I expected, but believe me, this *is* the short, or shorter, version. Anyway, Bill said that he wouldn't marry anyone but me, but his family, most of all his mother, wouldn't or couldn't accept that. Then the lawyers got involved. You've heard the conditions. Bill had a year from his eighteenth birthday to either marry 'appropriately' or give up his rightful inheritance. I'm happy to say, he chose me, and we moved as far away from his family as we could. From then on, just about the only contact we had with our respective families was Christmas and birthday cards.

"Now, as they say, 'What goes around comes around' and you have to make your choice. For me, I wouldn't touch it with a bargepole. It's like a poisoned chalice, in my view. But now we're in the 21st century, and things may change, or be already changing. Maybe you

have the opportunity to do some good. But remember, Stephen, you're already past forty. Finding the right wife won't be easy, and then, adjusting to a new role would be a huge challenge, one which you might regret taking up. "

Mum took a deep breath at that point, and seemed on the point of tears. Eventually, she continued, "However, it may be your destiny. It was certainly your father's right. And for me, the chance to visit my childhood haunts would be nice, but I've lived here a long time now, and here is where I belong, so even if you went, I'd stay here.."

After Kylie and I got home, and she had gone to bed, I decided to take Ron's advice and pray. "If nothing else, it may help sort out my confused mind," I thought.

It must have helped, because I slept peacefully, and almost didn't wake up when my alarm went off.

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I got Kylie's and my lunches ready, we had breakfast and then left the house together, as usual. We parted at the bus stop, where Kylie waited for the school bus, and I continued on the short distance to the factory.

At lunchtime, I was sitting on my own in the staff canteen, when I was joined by Kay. She was working in the payroll section, and we'd passed the time of day a few times. "Do you mind if I join you?" she asked.

"Sure, go ahead," I replied. I was a bit surprised by her request, and wondered if she was just needing company or if there was anything else going on in her mind. I soon found out. We chatted a little, and then Kay asked me, "There's a ceilidh in Bamburgh this Saturday, and some friends of mine are borrowing a mini-bus to go there. I was wondering if you'd like to go there with me. I haven't been out to a dance for ages, and I really could do with a partner. I know you can dance - I've seen you before..."

I interrupted her flow of words. "I'd love to go to the ceilidh," I said. "I, too, haven't been out in ages - and I'm really flattered you should think of me to invite."

"That's great," she said. "Sorry I rabbited on. I was just so nervous about asking you."

We arranged to meet outside the pub near the factory at 6 on Saturday. I started to feel excited. Could this be an answer to prayer? - or was I just wanting to wrap things up too quickly.? I told myself to slow down. There's a long way to go yet.

Still, the rest of the day passed with me hardly concentrating on what I was doing. When I told Kylie, she was thrilled for me. "It's about time, Dad. Have a great time on Saturday. I expect you'll ask Grandma to baby-sit - or maybe I could stay the night there and leave you free to do what you want?"

"Cheeky!" I replied. You ring Grandma, then, and let her decide what's best for you. All right?"

As I expected, Mum was only too pleased to have Kylie stay the night with her, so that was arranged. Time then seemed to drag until 6 o'clock on Saturday. I barely had time to change out of my work clothes before going out again to get on the mini-bus. Kay had told me there'd be plenty to eat, so I didn't bother with dinner.

The evening was a great success. I hadn't enjoyed myself so much for ages. As well as there being plenty of food, there was also an abundance of beer, and I'm afraid I indulged rather too freely of that. Kay was a good dancer, and she had bags of energy. At the end

of the evening, the band played a slow dance, and Kay and I danced, hugged together, happy in each others' arms.

On the way home, I thought about inviting her in, but I just couldn't do it. Kay looked a bit disappointed when I said nothing, but we parted with a long smoochy kiss.

I woke up late on Sunday, with a rather sore head. I skipped breakfast and pottered round the garden for the rest of the morning. Mum came over for Sunday dinner, rather she came over to *do* Sunday dinner, and of course she brought Kylie back.

We were just about to sit down to eat when the phone rang. It was Ron. "We missed you at chapel this morning. Are you all right?" he said.

I told him I'd had a late night and just slept in. Ron seemed satisfied with that explanation and he rang off, but not before saying, "See you this evening then."

Not having eaten anything until then and having recovered from my Saturday night excesses, I put away a good roast dinner and we went out together for a stroll a bit later. I put in an appearance at evening chapel, and heard a rousing sermon on "Don't be anxious about tomorrow. Today's troubles are enough"

On Monday, I met Kay at lunch, and the rest of the week we spent a lot of time together. One day, I went over to her place for dinner, and Kylie came too. We really seemed to enjoy each others' company, and I began to think I might have hit the jackpot first time. However, pride comes before a fall, as they say, and great was the fall on Saturday.

Kylie and I were having a late breakfast when the door opened and in stormed Kay. Without any hello, she shoved a copy of the local weekly paper under my nose, and said. "Take a look at that and tell me it's not true!."

I looked at the paper. The banner headline on the front page read "WINDFALL - FACTORY FOREMAN'S FORTUNE." I looked at the article underneath. There were the basic facts of my inheritance, but nothing about the circumstances or conditions except for this: "There's one snag - our inheritor has to get married before he can lay hands on the property, so watch out all you eligible ladies."

I was furious after reading the article. Someone had given this information to the newspaper and they hadn't had the courtesy to get in contact with me before going to press. Not that there was legally anything I could do - there was no libel, just enough to screw up my prospects of finding the right woman.

I turned to Kay. "It's essentially true, but it's not complete. There's a complicated situation, which I didn't want to get round everywhere, partly because of the marriage condition."

"And just *when* were you going to get round to telling me? Before or after proposing marriage?" Kay replied angrily.

"Now hold on. You came to me, remember. Please calm down, and I'll tell you everything. then you can walk out if you want."

Kay calmed down and accepted a cup of tea from Kylie, which she sipped as I told her the events of the previous week. "So you see, we didn't think we should tell anyone, especially as we haven't decided whether to accept the inheritance yet," I concluded.

For the next couple of minutes, Kay just sat there, saying nothing, then she spoke. "I can see your dilemma, but I'm still angry. I don't know what to say to colleagues at work. They all know we've been together a lot this week, and I'd bet some of them are already getting

going with the gossip. I think it's best if we put things on hold for a time. I was becoming quite fond of you as well." She sniffed back a tear as she said this.

Reluctantly, I agreed with Kay, but I added, "When you sat beside me in the staff canteen, I wondered if it was an answer to prayer. Right now, it doesn't feel like it, but I can't be sure we're not meant for each other. I really like you, and I'm glad everything's now out in the open. We'll give each other some space." I kissed her then, and we agreed to talk again in about a month.

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A week later, the schools broke up for their summer holiday. For the first time ever, Kylie and I were having holidays in different places. Kylie was going with Amy and her family for a week in the Canary Islands. Amy's family always went away the first week of the summer holidays, and this year Amy had persuaded her Mum and Dad to let her bring Kylie. Amy, like Kylie, was an only child, and as she told her parents, "It's really boring sitting with adults all evening while they get drunk and go dancing."

So, Kylie went off early on Saturday morning and I waved goodbye to her from my bedroom window.

My plans were a bit different. I planned to walk the route of Hadrian's Wall in my week away. I'd booked the Youth Hostels, and got all my maps together. I packed my rucksack, had breakfast, locked the house up and caught the bus to the nearest railway station, Alnmouth. Then I went by train to Newcastle to start my walk.

I fell in with a group of hikers about my own age who were also setting out to walk the Wall. They were happy for me to join them, and I was glad of the company. The first day, we took things quite easily, to get our legs and lungs used to the walking and we had a relaxed evening together. One of the group was a woman called Martine. She told me her mother was French and her father was English, and that this was also her first time on Hadrian's Wall. I told her something of my life as well.

We got on well, and after that we mostly walked together. Martine didn't seem especially close to anyone else in the group. The others were regular walking club members. Martine had only joined through seeing an advert in the Post Office. Like me, she walked a lot, and she had long wanted to do the walk, but had hesitated because she wondered if she was up to it.

Anyway, we didn't disgrace ourselves, and kept up with the others until, about half way through the week, Martine slipped and sprained her ankle. I helped her hobble as far as the Youth Hostel where we got some medical advice, which was to pack it with ice and rest up for 24 hours. That left us in a dilemma. The rest of the group were eager to press on and complete the walk, so I volunteered to stay behind. Martine decided that was really noble of me, and she gave me a very affectionate kiss.

The next day we rested up, and saw a big improvement to Martine's ankle. We did a lot of talking and told each other a lot about our lives. I learned that Martine's grandmother had come from Morocco, which accounted for her dark complexion.

In the morning, Martine decided she could manage to walk, so we set off. We took things slowly, and we knew that we couldn't now finish the walk within the week, but we both

wanted to do as much as possible. I helped Martine in all the difficult places, so we had a lot of physical contact. In the evening, we seemed to draw closer together, and we indulged in some kissing and cuddling.

By the time I went to bed, I was getting quite confused. Was I falling for Martine? Was she the one, or should I keep faith with Kay, or...?

On the last day of walking, I found myself telling her all about my inheritance. Martine was a good listener and asked the right questions to help me fill in the details. When I'd finished, she said, "That's quite a big problem you've got there. You know, I felt a lot of tension in you, which didn't leave you, even though walking is very good for helping you to relax. I also now understand your hesitation when we kissed. You are very unsure of yourself and your future, but if you become this big Lord of the Manor, you will need to be very strong and know who you are and be very certain of your position. I know, because my French uncle has a similar estate. My mother says she was very glad to be born a girl and that it was her younger brother who had to take on the burden of responsibility.

That left me thinking and wondering whether or not I could actually cope with taking up the inheritance.

When the week was up, we had only reached Haltwhistle, but we both had to stop. We exchanged e-mail addresses and phone numbers and promised to keep in touch.

I got home in time to greet Kylie on her return. She said she'd had a great time - but she'd missed me and it was nice to be home again. I slept really well back in my own bed and was woken up by Kylie. She shouted through the bedroom door, "Dad, wake up! You've got to see this!"

I leapt out of bed, put my dressing-gown on and opened the door. There was Kylie with the Sunday Mirror in her hand. The paper was open at the centre pages. The headline read: WANTED: WOMAN TO SHARE WINDFALL! Underneath was a photograph of me in the garden. I didn't have any idea when that was taken, but then I'm not a particularly observant person.

The article after that was substantially the same as our local paper had printed, so it was easy to understand the source. Unfortunately, the article also named our town, so by the end of the day we had two local television crews prowling round. I was beyond anger - I just wanted them all to go away, and I refused to give an interview. That didn't stop some of my neighbours from talking to the reporters, and the item appeared on the local evening news.

As I got myself ready for bed that night, I thought to myself, "Now everyone in the country knows about this inheritance, how can I possibly come to a proper decision?" I prayed again, more earnestly this time, for wisdom and the right wife.

In the course of the next two weeks, I received quite a few letters. Although neither the newspaper nor the television had disclosed exactly where I lived, in our part of the world, letters even with quite incomplete addresses are often delivered. A name and the place are enough.

Maybe I was foolish, maybe not, but anyway I was curious enough to open the letters. Yes, I looked at every one. Some were just your standard begging letter. One example read like this:

“Dear Mr. Morton, I congratulate you on your good fortune in inheriting a most valuable piece of real estate. I, like you, live in this county, and I have fallen on hard times. I wonder if you could see your way to sharing with me just a small piece of your luck, and make a fellow Northumbrian happier with his lot in life.”

Other letters were from people who hate the aristocracy. “How can you even contemplate joining the ranks of the oppressors, when you have been brought up as a worker?” questioned one correspondent.

By far the majority, however, were marriage proposals, often including a photograph, sometimes in what may at best be classed as provocative, but more correctly termed pornographic poses. Most of these women totally ignored the fact that I had a daughter, a fact which had been mentioned both in print and on the television.

One or two of these letters possibly merited further attention, so I put them to one side, while destroying the rest. I did let Kylie see some of the more ridiculous letters, and she enjoyed the moments of fame she attracted at school by reading them out to her friends and classmates. I did make sure that there were no names or identifying details in the letters I let Kylie have.

The best things that happened to me in that period concerned Kay and Martine. First Kay told me how sorry she was about all the fuss the media had made, and then she told me that she may have overreacted when she found out about the inheritance. “Maybe we could try again soon,” she said.

A couple of days later, there was a phone call from Martine. “I couldn’t believe it when almost the first thing I saw on television when I arrived home was the item about you,” she said. “Those reporters have behaved abominably. They should not broadcast such stories. I hope that you were not too inconvenienced by their behaviour.”

I assured her that I had managed to cope without getting too angry, and that now my daughter and I were able to laugh about things. “It makes it harder for me to know what to do, however,” I said.

“Well, if you need to escape for a day or two, I’m not that far away, just the other side of Newcastle,” she reminded me.

I thanked her, and said that I may just go and see her some time soon.

Now I was even more confused. There were two lovely women who were both concerned for my welfare. I was attracted to both of them. I was aware that no commitment had been made or even implied, and I still didn’t know if either of them was the right one for me and a future in Sussex. Furthermore, I didn’t really desire to string anyone along, and raise false hopes. I prefer to be honest, but it seemed to me that my actions could be construed as deceitful. Whom could I consult for advice?

Ron invited Kylie and me to dinner the following Sunday. His younger daughter is only two years older than Kylie and they enjoy each others’ company, but I suspected the main reason behind the invitation was to have another chat with me about the future.

Accordingly, we both got up early on Sunday and attended the morning service at the chapel. I can remember the text that the minister used. It was, “Seek ye first the Kingdom

of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you.” That’s from Matthew’s gospel, Chapter 6. It’s one of the minister’s favourite texts, and he always quotes it in the old King James Version.

However, that Sunday, the words struck me. Later, after dinner, I asked Ron about it. “Does that text tell us that if we focus on doing God’s will, then He’ll sort things out for us?” “In essence, yes,” Ron answered, “but that doesn’t mean that we abdicate all responsibility for our lives. The main importance here is focus. Put God’s Kingdom first, and then trust Him for our daily bread. I suppose that you’re worrying about your own situation. Well, you will still have to make some decisions, but I believe that God will help you focus and decide in the right way. Now, let’s see if you can focus on a game of chess. Last time we played, you defeated me. I’m looking for revenge!”

Ron beat me easily. I wasn’t properly concentrating on the game, and he took full advantage. “Now you see how the right focus can affect the outcome,” he said, once the game was over.

The rest of the afternoon was relaxing for me, joining in with the family, sometimes serious, sometimes crazy. To see Ron and his wife Mary together with their children made me realise again how much I missed Julia, but also how much I’d like not to be a single parent for much longer.

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Two weeks after this, I took the Saturday off work and Kylie and I went to visit Martine for the weekend.

She made us feel very comfortable, and we had a really good time there. Kylie got on well with Martine. They did some shopping together while I watched sport on the television, and we had a meal out together on Saturday evening. Sunday was a day for walking. The weather was perfect and Kylie joined in without too much protest. We drove through Condett and Castleside and parked in a small place called Healeyfield. We then went up Cross Rigg. The weather was kind and the views were magnificent. After an early start, we were really ready for our packed lunch. We refrained from overeating, however, because we still had some more walking to do afterwards.

While we were walking, Martine said, “If you’ve enjoyed today, then maybe you’d like to join me on another walk. On August Bank Holiday weekend, they’re organising a Dark Peak Walk - that’s a kind of taster or preparation for the Pennine Way. It’s supposed to be very beautiful, and it can be done in three days, but it’s 42 miles. Are you interested?”

Kylie was the first to respond. “You can count me out of that one,” she said. “I’m okay with just the three of us together and doing a stroll like today, but I don’t want to be with a big group of ‘serious’ hikers.”

I said that I’d love to go - after all I didn’t manage to complete my previous ‘serious’ walk, and I hadn’t done it before. I told Kylie that she didn’t have to come, that maybe she could do something with her friends that weekend. “Think about it. There’s plenty of time to make some arrangements,” I told her.

We arrived back home quite late on Sunday evening. On the drive back, I kept thinking about asking Kylie what she thought of Martine, but I just couldn't bring myself to formulate the right question. In the end, I didn't have to.

When we'd unpacked the car, and were bringing the last things into the house, Kylie said suddenly, "It's all right, Dad. I really like Martine. She's fun to be with and she seems to understand me, although she hasn't got any children of her own. I know you're anxious about whether or not we get on well together, and I can tell you've been dying to ask me, but honestly, I really do think she's nice. But there's no need to get worked up about me. I'm sure that whoever you marry I'll be happy with. We've both missed Mum a lot, and I know no-one can ever take her place, but it would be good to have a mother around again. So cheer up. I won't make your life a misery telling you that I won't let you marry again because it wouldn't be fair to Mum's memory. I've read lots of books where that happens and the children hate their cruel stepmother, but I'm sure that reality isn't like that. I love you and trust you, Dad."

That was a very long speech for Kylie, and I had tears in my eyes when she finished, but I really appreciated what she'd said and told her so. I also gave her a hug, which she wriggled out of as soon as she could. "Okay, Dad. Let's not get emotional," she said, and went off to her room.

-8-

Two days later, on the afternoon of my day off, there was a ring at the door. On the doorstep stood a woman dressed in a strangely mismatched set of clothes. She wore a woollen knitted purple hat - unusual for the middle of summer - a long denim skirt, flat sandals, a bright yellow blouse and a red cape. She was also wearing glasses. Her handbag was made of cloth with a wooden handle, like a knitting bag.

When she saw me, she gave a wide smile. "Oh, here you are. I've found you at last," she said. "It's taken me a while, but now I've tracked you down."

I didn't know how to respond to this woman, but I didn't want all the neighbours watching, so I said, "You'd better come in, and tell me your tale."

Once the woman was inside the house, she came towards me and tried to draw me to her by linking her hands round the back of my neck, but I didn't allow her to complete the manoeuvre.

"Please, none of that," I said. "Just sit down here and tell me who you are and what this is all about." I indicated one of the kitchen chairs, and sat down myself on the far side of the table, facing her.

For a few seconds, she stood, irresolute, then she gave a sigh and sat. "Don't you feel it?" she said. "Who am I? I'm your soul-mate, destined from the beginning of time. I felt this the moment I saw you on the television. As I heard your story and then saw your face, I saw us linked together once more. Oh yes, we've been together in past lives too. Now it's time to be with each other once again. I couldn't come straight away, although I saw the invitation in your eyes, for I didn't know where you lived. But with the help of the spirit powers I found you, and here I am."

"Just where did you find my address?" I asked.

“You’re listed in the telephone directory,” said the woman, “I had to look at several before finding the right one.”

At that point, I was feeling quite angry about this invasion of my privacy, so I stood up and was about to order this woman out of my house. However, I controlled myself and asked her again what her name was.

“Charlotte,” she replied. “I’m Charlotte Vaughan, and I come from Manchester.”

“Well, Charlotte, I’m sorry to tell you that you have had a wasted journey. I am completely sure that you are not my soul-mate, and anyway, I don’t believe in all that horse dung about eternal soul-mates and psychic recognition.”

“Oh, but you must,” Charlotte insisted. “My guru James agrees with me. In fact, he has told me that together you and I are going to set up a psychic research centre and your wealth will be used to bring people together in peace and harmony.”

“And, don’t tell me. The director of the centre will be James,” I said.

“Yes!” cried Charlotte, excitedly. “You see, I was right. You do have a psychic connection with us.”

I began to wonder just how I was going to be rid of this woman, when Kylie walked in through the door. She’d been out on her bicycle. At that point, Charlotte jumped up, looking rather frightened. “What’s this?” she asked. “There shouldn’t be a child. You and I never had a child in our past lives,” she said. “Something is wrong.”

“Yes, you are,” I told her. “This is my daughter, and if she doesn’t fit in with your scheme, then obviously you must be mistaken, for I will not, cannot, give up my daughter. I opened the front door and gestured for Charlotte to leave. She jumped up, burst into tears and almost ran out of the house and down the road.

“What was that all about?” Kylie asked me, so I told her. “This will be a good story to tell my classmates,” she said. “It’s a pity it’s the summer holidays, but I think the story will still get around if I start with my friends here. Tell me again, Dad - every little detail.”

So I told her, and we had a good laugh about the weird Charlotte, but I wondered how many more problems there were going to be before our future became clear.

The story of my strange visitor spread rapidly around the community. When Kay got to hear of it, she paid me an evening visit at my house. She wanted to hear from my own lips what had happened, so I told her. At the end of my tale, she came over and kissed me. “You poor thing,” she said. “Fancy having to cope with someone like that.” Then she kissed me again. We began to get quite amorous, but then I remembered that Kylie was upstairs, probably playing games on the internet, so we cooled things down. When Kylie came down for a drink and to say goodnight we were both in the kitchen getting ourselves some supper. After supper, Kay felt it was time for her to leave, but as she left, she gave me a very sexy hug and kiss. By the evening’s events, I understood that, as far as Kay was concerned, she and I were ‘back on’.

That night, I couldn’t get to sleep. My mind was confused. Kay was young and vivacious, just 25 years old. Martine was also younger than me, but she was over 30. I liked both of them, and was flattered that Kay found me attractive, but there was quite a gulf between us intellectually. This wasn’t the case with Martine and myself. Although I hadn’t been to university, that was my choice, and I didn’t think myself inferior to any graduate. Martine

had studied economics at Leeds University, and she was working for a company with trade links to France.

Besides intellectual compatibility, there was our interests. Martine was, like me, interested in walking, while Kay shared my interest in gardening. Both of them were good with Kylie. Kay was rather more like an older sister, but Martine was like an aunt.

My mind ran on. Which of them would be better in Sussex? Or, maybe, more objectively, which one would be more of an asset? On that score, I felt that Martine would cope better with the responsibilities, but that the fact that she was dark-skinned might cause some prejudice. Then there was the big question. Would either of them marry me and who should I ask?

Underlying all this was the discomfort I felt about even having this dilemma. Wasn't I morally wrong to have two girls on the go at once? I tried rationalising that by arguing to myself that neither actually had the status of 'girlfriend', but I didn't believe that. I still had the intent to marry one of them.

These thoughts went round and round in my head until finally, at some time after three o'clock, I finally fell asleep. The next thing I knew was Kylie shaking me awake. "Dad, you've overslept! It's time to go to work," she said.

With difficulty, I aroused myself, accepted a cup of tea from my daughter, then went to the bathroom and got dressed. All the day I had difficulty in concentrating on my work, until Ron called for me. "You're no use here today," he told me. "Go home early and get a good night's sleep. And don't forget to pray!"

-9-

On my next day off, I took Kylie to Newcastle to do some shopping and to take her to the cinema. I suppose it was an excuse really, to make time together when we could talk about the future, but she really did need some new clothes. Unlike most fathers, I had to be aware of when my daughter was growing out of things and how her tastes changed as she got older.

We had a good time together, and finished up at a fast food establishment for our evening meal. I hesitate to call it a restaurant, because to my mind, the words 'fast food' and 'restaurant' don't go together, but anyway, we were eating together and I asked Kylie, "By the way, have you thought any more about possibly moving to Sussex?"

"I was waiting for that question," she replied. "You've been so attentive all day, I thought you wanted to talk about the future."

"When did you get so wise?" I asked her.

"Come on, Dad," she said, "I've been able to read you for a long time. All kids can read their parents like a book."

"All right, wise guy, can you answer my question now?"

"I've thought about it a lot, of course," Kylie answered. "There's a lot of things to sort out aren't there? I've got some good friends here, like Amy, but I can easily keep up with them on the internet. I'm not studying yet for any important exams, so that's good. I wouldn't want to move schools in the middle of getting ready for GCSE's. I'd probably feel a bit lonely at first in a new place, and I don't know how I'd get on with a new lot of boys and

girls. Plus, I've read some books where the local children hate the son or daughter of the Lord of the Manor, so that scares me a bit, but then I really *love* the idea of living somewhere historical. And it feels like a big adventure. Anyway, I want to be where you are. That's the most important bit. But please make your mind up soon, Dad. And before you ask, I don't mind if you marry Kay or Martine. I love them both. Now, can I get on with my chicken bits?"

After that long speech, I barely restrained myself from hugging my daughter, but I knew that hugs in public were one of her pet hates, so I managed to stop myself. Of course, her answer didn't solve anything for me, but it was good to know that she would be happy with whatever I chose.

After Kylie had gone to bed, I thought a bit more about what she had said. While I was pleased with my daughter's perception and level-headedness, unfortunately I wasn't any further forward in solving the dilemma, or, rather more accurately, the series of dilemmas then faced me.

I decided to take Ron's advice, and prayed - again - for wisdom and some solutions. Praying seemed to help, because I slept a lot better that night.

-10-

Over the rest of the school summer holiday, Kay and I spent a lot of time with each other, and we seemed to be getting closer and closer together. I wondered; was this the guidance I sought? We were comfortable with each other, we did a lot of things together, and we did a deal of kissing and cuddling, but I don't remember if either of us said those three words, "I love you."

Decision time was coming closer. I'd told myself that I really needed to make my mind up, or was it that I needed to be certain of my heart? August Bank Holiday was looming near, and I was looking forward to the Dark Peak walk, but also in a way dreading it. This wasn't the most romantic of venues, specially as there had been quite a bit of rain, meaning that we would probably end each day of the walk mud-spattered and not looking too attractive. Kylie went to stay with my mother on Friday evening, because I had an early start in the morning. I drove into Newcastle and met up with Martine and the rest of the walkers at the station. We changed trains at Sheffield, and decamped at Hathersage. There, everyone checked their equipment and we set off. The weather was kind to us, and we had magnificent views all day. By the evening, we were all tired. I was aching all over. "You haven't done enough training for this walk, have you?" said Martine. "I've been building up my muscles for the past three weeks, walking on the fells."

I admitted that I'd neglected my preparations, but I told her that I'd manage to keep up. That night, I was asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow, in spite of my aches and pains. In the morning, I was a bit stiff to start with, but I soon loosened up. We made really good progress to start with, then the weather closed in. Low cloud reduced visibility considerably, and we made sure that none of us walked alone.

Despite the cloud, we still made good progress, and none of us got lost. As often happens, the clouds dispersed in the late afternoon, and the last couple of miles we were bathed in

evening sunshine. I was feeling better than I had the evening before, but Martine was complaining of backache, so I helped her with some massage.

We completed the walk in good time on the Monday, and we all felt a sense of achievement. "It was really good to finish this one, after last time," said Martine. I agreed with her, and we jumped around together, hugging each other.

On the way back up north, Martine invited me to stay over at her house that night.

I wasn't sure if I should accept or not, but by the time the train arrived at Newcastle, I wasn't feeling up to the drive home, so I accepted Martine's offer. I phoned Mum to tell her where I was, and I could almost see her raised eyebrow as she replied, "I see!"

"It's nothing like that, Mum," I said, to which she replied, "Says you!"

After a shower and a quick bite to eat, we both went to bed - in separate bedrooms. (Both of us are a bit old-fashioned, and I certainly couldn't just go to bed with someone I wasn't married to, due to my faith.)

In the morning, we really should have talked about what we felt for each other, but we didn't. I was still too confused, and I think Martine was just too shy. We had breakfast, hugged, and kissed goodbye, then I was off home.

-11-

The next Monday, Kylie started her new year at school. She said she felt quite strange, seeing that she would probably be a few hundred miles away from there by the end of the year. "Make your mind up soon," she told me, as she set off for the bus.

On Wednesday, Kay came up to me at work. "Can I come round and see you this evening?" she asked.

"Yes, of course," I replied. "What time?"

"I'll be there about eight," she said. "Is that all right?"

I was a bit puzzled at Kay's behaviour. She didn't normally ask like that about coming round. When she came, I realised why.

"I think it's time we had a serious talk," she began.

That sounded ominous. "Shouldn't that sentence be coming from my lips?" I thought.

As I answered, I tried to sound casual. "Oh yes, what about?" I asked.

"You know full well - you and me - do we have a future or not?"

I didn't answer straight away, because I didn't really know what to say. Unsure of my own feelings, I was also unsure of Kay's mind, especially about the inheritance.

Kay read a lot into my hesitation. "I see," she said. "Could it be that you're wondering if I would fit in down south? Maybe this northern lass isn't quite sophisticated for them."

"Nothing of the kind," I replied. "I just haven't been able to make my own mind up, let alone tell you what I'm planning."

I realised that my answer could seem rather lame, and I wasn't being entirely straight with Kay, part of my confusion coming from my relationship with Martine, which I didn't really want to discuss with her.

"Well, I have - made my own mind up, that is," Kay told me. "This is where I stand. I've been doing a lot of thinking and a lot of heart searching. I really like you. In fact, I think I love you. However, I just couldn't pack up and leave this place. It's my home, it's where I

belong. If I went down to Sussex, I'd be like a fish out of water. I don't know how to hob-nob with the landed gentry, and I certainly couldn't tell a bottle of fine wine from a bottle of plonk. I couldn't order servants about and I just don't think I could play the role of Lady of the Manor, having the peasants tip their hats to me and such like."

After that speech, I realised just how much Kay felt squeezed by the time pressure I was under about the inheritance, and how inadequate she felt she was to fit the role she would need to play if she married me and moved to Sussex. Now, I was going to have to let her down, because the one thing I had decided, I now saw, was that I wanted to accept the challenge of being Lord of the Manor, as it were, and so there would be no long-term future in my relationship with Kay, at least not in the way she wanted. What should I say?

"I think I love you too," I began, "which makes it all the harder to say what I have to say now. I hadn't realised it, but I have already made up my mind to take up the inheritance, partly for the challenge it represents, partly because I feel that it should have been my birthright, and partly because I want to be a different kind of landowner. I don't like the centuries-old system of big estates, with the workers bound to work in the Lord of the Manor's fields, and I'm not sure how much of a difference I could make, but I'd really love the opportunity to try. There's also my daughter's position to think of, and I want the best for her, which I think will come about by heading south. I'd like you to come too, but..."

Kay interrupted me. "So, you'll have me if I come with you, but not if I don't," she said, bluntly. "Well, good luck to you. I made my position perfectly clear, and now I understand where you are..."

At that, she broke down, put her head on my shoulder, and began to sob, her chest heaving. I wanted to comfort her, but I knew that any words I could say would only wound further, so I just held her. After a while, she grew calmer and stopped crying. Then she dried her eyes and said, "I really could do with a strong cup of tea," and she picked up the kettle.

Once we'd had our tea, we talked a bit more. Just before she left, Kay said, "Well, I'm still young enough to be able to keep looking for the right man, but I did think you were him. Let me know if you change your mind about going south."

As Kay left, I thought, "You'll be over me before too long - I hope."

-12-

The interview with Kay and the break-up that it produced left me feeling down and rather vulnerable. I began to wonder if I had burned my bridges, and now there would be no-one wanting to marry me. I wasn't discounting Martine, but although we were comfortable with each other and found each other fun, our relationship was very much on the 'just friends' side of the coin, or so it seemed to me, despite the kissing and cuddling we sometimes indulged in.

The question of what to do next kept on going round and round in my head. It affected my work, so that Ron asked me to step into his office for a minute.

"You're wool-gathering again, when you should be working, Stephen. I'm sure it's to do with this inheritance again, and believe me, I understand how it's eating you. But we can't have you working with only half of your concentration. Let me remind you again to share

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