

Chapter One

Los Angeles

31 March 1994 ‘Jem, oh Jem, this says that they may have to cut off my leg, or an arm or part of a limb, I can’t bear it, it’s too much, I can’t sign this.’

He holds me as tenderly as he would hold his small daughters, clear blue eyes soft with love and concern, his skin, a shade paler than mine, taunt over his fine features. ‘It’s all right. It’s really all right, I knew there would be something like this, it’s America, they’re worried about law suits. You have to agree that they can do whatever they think necessary in surgery. Of course, the chances of their having to amputate a limb are virtually zero. This is just a formality. But,’ there’s a muscle that twitches in his face, a slither of silver, ‘they won’t operate unless you sign.’ He need not worry, the half whisper of despair has melted in the air.

For a moment, I am outside myself. Again, my consciousness is no longer with my body. From some other vantage point, I see Jem, my brother, seated beside me in the bleak hospital administration office. Hospital forms fan before us. I am tanned, frail and luminous. Behind me is a mass of Light. I put the word ‘being’ to it. Without my understanding how, or why. I am as certain of this Light, in this moment, as I am of my own existence — still — in the world. I have known it constantly in recent months. The guidance of this Light is

what has led me on, and pointed the direction when doctor after doctor denied there was any real problem. It was this Light that warned of death, that pushed me to search for my physical salvation. I owe the possibility of saving my life, to this Light. I am immersed in it, I believe in it. But I do not understand. In the moment, I believe in my survival. I will live. But, more than that, whatever the outcome I will be well. It is the message of the Light.

St Vincent's Priory is on the crest of a hill, in downtown Los Angeles. It's a Catholic hospital. Across a busy road is the House Ear Clinic, where I became a patient yesterday. This Clinic is one of the few centres of excellence in the world that specialise in removing acoustic neuromas — the tumour rooted on my acoustic nerve, pressing its bulk, like a peach I am told, against my brain.

Jeremy, my brother and a British qualified doctor working in New York, identified House a week ago. With my life in the balance and British medicine failing me, he turned to Medline, an information file on computer. Who did the most acoustic neuroma removals in America, and with the best results?

Jeremy rang me at home in London early in the morning. Speaking tersely, 'Shel, I've found a guy, Brackmann, in Los Angeles, I think he's your man.' What time is it for Jem in America? Where is he? Managing Director of a biotech firm, with an amazing schedule to meet, he could be anywhere in the States, or Europe.

'I've spoken to him, he sounds impressive.' His voice is exhausted. 'Brackmann wants you to FedEx your scans today, so he can see exactly what it looks like. He'll shift his schedule to operate immediately, if that's what it means. I think he's the one. Let's not waste time now. We have to make a decision. Let me give you his number — call him and

talk. And send the scans today. I'm very encouraged. I think we should go for it. Call me when you've spoken to him. You need to decide. Love you. Bye.'

He's right. Derald Brackmann feels OK. His published work, the number of patients he has operated on, all support the claim to his being the right man. Brackmann wants me to start taking steroids immediately, and come directly to Los Angeles. But it's my daughter's end-of-term play, she has a lead part. I can't come before the play, that's Friday.

'I'm coming with you, Mum. You're not going to America without me.' At ten, my daughter's certainty is impressive. Ellie is no pushover. 'You can't stop me. I won't let you go.' She puts her thin arms around my shoulders, my beautiful daughter, with her long dark hair and green eyes so like my own. Now filled with tears. She doesn't cry. She's hardly cried through all the months — years — of my being ill.

Long ago, when first learning to juggle her life between her divorced and so disparate parents, she learnt Pollyanna's 'glad game'. It has not been a device. In her sweetness, she will look for the good in every situation and be glad. She is certain I will not die. A certainty born of her desperate need for me to live? Or her conviction that this will not be asked of her? Or something else?

The House Ear Clinic surgeons operate at St Vincent's hospital. My surgery is scheduled for 31 March 1994, report at 6.00am.

Bumping in the back of a yellow cab, which cuts the corners and jumps the lights in the near deserted, early morning streets, I see derelicts around Echo park and smog rising. Even before 6.00am, in spring. Run-down stores, people on the sidewalk with no where else to go. I see the hills far away. I want them. I feel them. I am alive and I want to live. This operation will save my life, or take it. Or save my life at the

cost of disfiguring my face. I will lose my hearing on the right-hand side in the process. The tumour pressing on my brain will be removed. What else will go?

Mostly Mexicans and other immigrants live in this part of town. The majority of buildings are two or three storey. The junky LA taxi draws up outside a tall modern building, a landmark. Jeremy and I enter the lobby. In the empty space, with its marble floor and black vinyl chairs, I see only the statue of the Christ, that stands beside the door. A plaque says this place is a Healing Centre. A non-Christian, joy and relief flood through me. It will be well. I will be well. How can I know? But I do.

I sign the forms. Jeremy's face relaxes, a little. 'Second floor, Lowther Ward, the elevator's on your right-hand side — they'll be waiting for you,' the unusually restrained hospital administrator directs us. No 'have a nice day'. Past a pair of double doors marked Chapel — how glad I am. Across the foyer to the lift. Second floor.

How strange the nurses at the central reception desk look. British nurses would not have their hair falling around their faces, or over the shoulders. The girl who takes my arm is wearing nail varnish. I feel my skin taut under her hand. My face is stretched tight too. This morning I did as instructed, showered for the second time with the prescription surgical soap, washed my hair and face in it. Applied nothing else to my complaining skin. Or wire wool, stripped hair.

Where is the ward, where are the beds? Instead, I see a row of doors. The nurse is steering us towards one, diagonally opposite the desk. She opens the door, I glimpse a tiny wash basin, I think, on my left, could be a lavatory. In front of me is a bed that occupies most of a tiny bare room. There's a double-glazed, blue-tinted window and a chair. Standing beside the bed, I turn back to the door and,

looking up, see an enormous television screen. Not likely to want that.

‘You get changed now,’ the oriental-looking nurse with the nail varnish is saying to me, indicating a gown laid out on the bed. ‘He can stay,’ gesturing to my brother, ‘you give him handbag, put clothes here,’ a shelf I hadn’t noticed.

‘I’ll wait outside, Shel.’

‘No need,’ no modesty left. ‘Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to hide,’ nothing — I hear Janis Joplin’s voice. He turns his back as I take my clothes off. The vast green gown drowns my body. No option now but to sit on the bed. I am tired. Tired beyond belief. Tired way past my too bright smile and quick movements. Let me lie down. How uncomfortable the semi-reclined bed is. It doesn’t matter, don’t let it matter.

Jeremy sits on the chair beside me, leaning forward. He holds my hand. A doctor, he knows more of what’s to come than I do. Much more. A man, he grapples with the possibility that I may be about to lose the facial beauty that has been my birthright. The surgery may sever my facial nerve, which would cause paralysis to one side of my face, a stroke-like effect, depriving me of the ability to move my lips, flare my nostril or even to close my eye, though I do not know that. Yet . . . I am not thinking about it. Denial? Perhaps. My thoughts are concentrated in faith, and trust. The words of the Lord’s Prayer run ceaselessly as a sub-text through my mind.

He needs me. My brother needs me to talk, to take some of the terrible weight from him. Loving him, I give him the only gift I can. My attention. We talk of love, his love for his wife, the central relationships in his life. Perhaps I will die. Then let me say what I really think, what might be of most use to him.

There’s a knock on the door, which opens simultaneously.

A Filipino-looking nurse, or nursing aid. 'I come to put on your stockings.'

'Surgical stockings, Shel, probably to prevent blood clots,' Jem murmurs.

She undoes a cellophane package, removing two long cream-coloured tentacles. Starting at my toes, she rolls the first one up my leg. 'It's very tight,' I say, 'and the seam on the toes, there, is in the wrong place. Could you straighten it, please.'

'Oh, no matter, good, very good and tight, no blood clot.'

In the days ahead, the wrinkled seam will come to be a saw across my toes, but for now I am too weak to dispute such cheerful indifference.

I am smiling, chatting, slower now, not much energy left. 'I don't know how to thank you for all your trouble, and it is such a busy time for you too.'

'It's nothing,' his eyes filling with tears. 'You'd do the same for me.'

An orderly knocks and enters. He is wheeling a mobile bed, like the one I am lying on; it fits exactly beside me. Single-handed, he moves me from one bed to the other. I feel so frail, powerless. Jem hovers. Will he come with me, I want to ask, weak in the instant, but say nothing.

'I have to go now Shel,' his voice is breaking. 'Good luck.' He kisses me hastily and, without meeting my eyes, turns so I cannot see the tears in his. But I know.

'Goodbye and thank you,' I wish him well, smiling with my voice and eyes.

Lying on my back as the orderly pushes the bed along the corridors, I see lights flashing by on the ceiling, and feel the motion in a curious, disconnected way. Am I in or out of my body? Is the Light above or behind me? I feel the presence nearby, but do not look for it.

6 Down the lift, through large swing doors, two sets, there's

a crispness in the air. Gowned masked figures pass, one comes to take charge of me. Oh God, I am no longer a person, just a body on a bed. This place is bare, scrubbed and dingy.

‘Hi honey,’ the masked face leers at me, ‘you still awake? It says here you haven’t had a sedative ’cause you want to see the anaesthetist first. Well, he’ll be out real soon, they’re taking a little longer than we thought, sure you want to wait?’

‘Yes, I’m sure, I’d like to see the anaesthetist,’ the person I am, or was, replies. I know how important the role anaesthetists play in operations is. Somehow I am still clinging to control, as if it could matter at this stage, whether I meet the man. What difference will it make, his acknowledging me as a person?

‘Right honey, just like you want,’ and she moves off, leaving the trolley at an awkward angle to the wall. I sense no order in this space, no spatial relations I understand, is how I’d put it. No relations of any kind I can make sense of. Now I know why they did not want me to be conscious here. A ghastly groaning starts from some other bed I hadn’t registered. No-one pauses to investigate.

The same gowned figure returns to me. ‘I’m going to shave your hair now honey,’ fingering the long tresses going down to my shoulders. ‘Which side was it, the left one?’

‘No, the right. I’d better have a sedative now.’ And I turn to concentrate on the Light.

Chapter Two

Life

London, October 1987 The street light shines through the uncurtained windows and the screen of the year's last remaining leaves, into the crowded Bloomsbury room. I haven't got the hang of this — going to parties on my own, let alone dating.

'Scuse me.' A man's just emerged from the gloom, tapped the friend I'm dancing with on the shoulder and stepped between us. 'You're fabulous,' he announces to me, enunciating the words carefully, but with the air of a chap who knows that what he says matters, even when he's the worse for wear.

me? No, you wouldn't want to say yes to that, yet, would you? Just dance with me, come on.'

What do I say? 'Hey, thank you, but could you have had a little too much to drink?' I'm used to being married. Since I was twenty. For most of the last fifteen years. People don't approach you like that when you're married, or at least they didn't approach me like that.

'Ah, come on,' the tipsy one shows no sign of fading away. 'I'm Simon Blue, I can get you into television, into places you never dreamed of going.'

My friend — not lover, past, present or future — is not looking comfortable. He knows very well who Simon Blue is, a powerful man, a man on the make, a rising star. 'C'mon baby, dance with me, you won't forget it, you won't regret it.'

In a clumsy parody, I shrink backwards, trying not to make it obvious.

He lurches forward, and peers into my face. 'You're so fabulous, all I want to do is dance with you, hold you, tell you you're gorgeous, because you are . . .'

December 1987 It is Friday night. I am standing beside the wired glass of our panelled front door, with the two troughs of trailing ivy and patch of woody lavender, long passed its prime, in front of me, waving her goodbye. A small three-year-old with shoulder-length brown curls, round cheeks and my green eyes. She is hurrying along beside the privet hedge to catch up with the tall man ahead of her.

Such are the realities of divorce. Am I glad or sad she is going away for the weekend? Will she be properly looked after? Can her father disentangle his attitude and feelings towards me and the failed marriage, from those he shows to her? Can any parent — without conscious effort? How do two parents who have failed to come to agreement in

marriage agree on so contentious an undertaking as bringing up a child, especially after a divorce? How can a mother and a child not be regarded as a unit? Or a father and a child? I don't know. I do know I need this scrap of time to myself. This role, as single working mother of two — even without the hurricane of divorce — is too much.

I turn to go indoors, the familiar, once gilt-rimmed hall mirror shows my tension and fatigue. I sit at the round kitchen table that I painted a pale green to cover the polished black, with a cup of weak, milky earl grey tea. Then it hits. A nagging pain in my lower abdomen. It's a cramp, if I straighten out it will dissolve. Lie down, that will help, fetch a hot water bottle. The manner that has dealt with a hundred childhood ailments, soothed others a thousand times is turned on myself.

I need to go upstairs. My bedroom is on the second floor. If I hold the banister I can do it. I reach the first-floor landing and pass the open living room door. I see the trees and the terrace on the other side of the street, the gap that opens over a row of scrubby west London back gardens, with the church spire at the end. Now I am standing, holding my breath, on the last landing. The pain is cutting through me.

I go into the bathroom, to fill a hot water bottle. If I keep all my concentration on what I am doing, I will be able to continue to stand up. Then, I am holding the heat of the rubber bottle to my belly and crawling, curling beneath the duvet. In a minute I'll find a comfortable place.

Why isn't the pain receding? Let it go, just relax and let it go, I tell myself. But it won't. It has its teeth in my belly and it's tearing me apart. My knees are raised to my chest, I hear my breathing: it's erratic, wave after wave assaults me. Ridiculous, this is ridiculous, some everyday part of my brain reprimands. It cannot be happening. The pain is so

intense I can't think.

Later Through the lines of the blind, I can see that the light outside has almost faded. How long has it been? It's as if I have reached an island in this sea of suffering. A doctor, I need a doctor. I haven't registered with one since moving, after the divorce. Morgan will help. I call her. A doctor's daughter, she doesn't just hand out a number, she comes hurrying in her long black coat, with the tenderness and solicitousness inbred by the black nannies of our shared colonial background.

'Dr Ruston is wonderful,' she says. 'The surgery's just behind Kensington High Street. I'll call.'

'I'm taking you to the surgery,' she says calmly, putting the phone down. 'Dr Ruston's just finished, but she'll wait for you.'

I don't know how she manoeuvres me down the stairs. Morgan has taken charge, with the confidence of an adult dealing with a childhood trauma. It's dark outside. I don't recognise the route. Lights pass. It's Kensington High Street, elements of normality beginning to creep back. Is the pain receding, or the simple practicalities reintroducing some order?

On Dr Jane Ruston's consulting table, it hits again as I try to straighten my legs. This is no chimera. Looking up into her blonde-rimmed face, I feel the confidence of a child — I know she will take care of me. When the injection comes, I welcome the sharp pin prick and dull, focused ache that follows. Within seconds, a diffuse molten warmth spreads from my buttocks through all my muscles. It's almost instantaneous. If this is what a fix is like, now I understand. Relaxation, that's the word.

'I think it's irritable bowel syndrome,' Dr Jane smiles, in her hazy, lazy Auzzie way, full of the joys of life. 'Nothing

serious, but it can be real mean. The injection should take care of it for now, perhaps you better come back next week and we can talk about it.'

Monday and Tuesday I work at home, keeping quiet. Wednesday, lunch with Tobias Boxer and Steven McCloud, the managing director and editorial chief of T.S.L. Titles, the publishing house, who want to discuss setting up a film company under the T.S.L. banner. With my impassive mask and Max Mara suit, my pain has no place, where am I to put it?

We lunch at the Groucho club, media London's mecca. Piece of cake, I tell myself, stepping through the brass revolving door, onto the dark blue carpet. Like a kid going into someone else's den, walking through the contrasting turquoise and salmon-pink interior. Only I've visited this place often enough, and it still doesn't feel comfortable.

We walk through the open lounge, with its companionable sofas, club chairs and casually strewn newspapers, past the bar along one side, to the dining room. The chairs are high backed, our table just far enough away from our neighbours so as not to overhear, or be overheard.

'Let's meet again, when you have done a little more work on the idea.' Tobias and Steven are smiling.

Back to see Dr Jane. 'It's all emotional, you know.' I nod my head. 'It's stress — you have to do something about it,' she says in her sweet, blonde way.

What can I do? Life goes on.

22 December Tobias, Steven and I meet again, this time with T.S.L.'s accountant, in their airy headquarters. Down the street is a famous hospital for nervous diseases. Actually I ought to be there. But I don't know it. Tobias plays his role with energy and enthusiasm. 'I'll work on the figures,' I promise, secretly unconvinced.

Christmas comes and goes. It is not my year to spend it with the children. Adult jollity is empty. I take the children to Ireland for a New Year's Eve party. To Morgan's husband's family seat. Kinnock House stands unexpectedly on a corner of the Liffey, on the outskirts of Dublin.

When Morgan's husband was a boy, his parents remembered fields, stretching from the steep banks around the house to the curving hills in the medium distance. Where now there's an almost impenetrable beech glen, with the river and a dual carriageway below, was once fifteen gardeners' province, with the boathouse on the far side of the river. Today, stories of raids from local boys have a more authentic ring; the backs of terrace houses and thin wisps of smoke fill in the middle distance.

We approach past the cow parlour, and the redbrick farm workers' cottage complex. A wing rises up like a pink, painted institution, scaled by drainpipes. There's a scraggled fence and the ramshackle feel of a semi-neglected kitchen yard. Then we turn the corner to the front of the house and I see the orchard it faces. Gnarled trees, caught in every direction; softened by the gloom, dozens of greens, despite December. Dark conifers shading the background, unclothed tree shapes extending ahead.

Later my host will recite for me, walnut, lime, beech, for the benefit of the horticultural blank my colonial transplantation has helped produce. But the pleasure more than amply compensates for my ignorance, with branches at every angle, forms organised to complement shapes. I recognise the landscape gardener's art, even under nature's rule.

Turning back to the house for a wider view, a gracious portico, hung with creepers, reaches out, doors half open despite the wintry weather. Proportion is restored in the

windows on either side. A light shines, a token to the time, and a torrent of children run out into the evening and away, around the house.

Into the wide hall, with its shaded heights and depths, peeling wallpaper along with elegant prints. Whose father's father, or mother's mother, was responsible for the profligate layout — gun room, boot room, rod room, and beyond with a place for muddy riding boots beside the worn rush mat on the ancient flag floor?

Later in the evening, the old house comes alive with lights, as first the young bloods arrive, fresh from London for the party. The girls are wearing high heels, and short-skirted cocktail dresses, along with confidence and excitement. Men in black tie. Everyone knows everyone else. All, most anyway, are related to or married to someone. In my long skirt of many seasons' service, I take pleasure in watching, from the outside, for a while.

The dining room is a dull cobalt blue, the impression of the Japanese prints which almost paper the walls, in the flicker of the candelabra. After dinner, the party swells. Eccentricity is prized here in Dublin society. One woman wears a feather head dress, another an orange-lined cloak as from some dressing-up box, a drunken girl with jewels at her throat — too many people. A photographer from *Tatler* stalks the ballroom; its enormous fire place accommodating a blazing forest. A man dances with his daughter, the honourable miss's dark head below her father's waist, her tartan skirts swirling.

A staircase winds to I know not where, another to the landing beside my cold damp bedroom, unchanged since early in my hostess's mother-in-law's time. The walls are stained. I escape the conflagration, but not even along these corridors and around these turns, the sound, entirely. It is a very successful party.

11 January 1988 Today, I drive from London to the Berkshire headquarters of the Laura Ashley organisation. I am working as a management consultant for an international operation, in a job that materialised along with the end of the marriage, and grew. Surprisingly, so it seems to me, with my background as a television reporter, I am good at it. It suits me because it pays well. Even more important, because it pays well it enables me to work part time, to make home and children the focus of my time as I want. My boss, the boss, is Rupert Hamilton.

Rupert, tall, blond and jovial, loves driving, and sailing his boat, or piloting his helicopter. The firm's headquarters are outside London. Working from outside London suits him. I hate the drive. I dislike all drives, and always have since childhood. Driving, or being driven, makes me feel ill. Fine for men in their Mercedes, I think petulantly. Rupert loves his Merc, he purrs along with real pleasure.

My diary continues apace, my glittering, privileged, full life. Still. Dinner the following evening with Richard, of recent advertising agency fame, and Suzie. Her make up is impeccable. Friends matter.

Another T.S.L. Titles meeting follows. This time a friend, a figures wizard (chairman now of a public company) accompanies me, as financial adviser. Supper with an old girlfriend from America. The past seems so long ago. Lunch with a film actress. Then the final T.S.L. Titles meeting. The figures do not add up. Am I glad or sad?

Dinner with a new boyfriend, a psychiatrist, and friends of his, in a gothic house in Barnes. The friend, I discover, is a so-called international 'glamour' photographer, whose wife works with him. I suspect this relationship won't last long. Tea for my daughter and I with another working mother and her daughter.

Work steams ahead. I am supervising a film being made for a national newsagent's chain. There's a meeting where a colleague and I present to the unresponsive board of an international food company, then a much more successful presentation to a high street retail chain — I am in charge of a piece of research for them — and an encouraging meeting for Rupert with a supermarket group. I know that it would be interesting to work there, to see how the company plans to re-launch itself. I pitch for business at an international oil company. I think the deal will come off.

At the same time, I handle head teachers, class teachers, speech days, school assemblies, sports days, tears, troubles, bedtimes, night times, mornings, weekends, bad times, good times.

Divorce was deadly. A core of friends remained, others scattered like hail. 'I'm so sorry — I was coming to help you move house, but I've been invited to a party down in Sussex on the same day and there's someone coming I particularly want to meet.'

To my surprise, a well-known London hostess told me that she knew of cases where clairvoyance had been helpful in similar circumstances. Accurate even. Her future husband had been described to her right down to the detail of an old foot injury. (Do people assume a future husband to be my solution? Is it?) She gave me the clairvoyant's name. His address is in Knightsbridge. Behind Harrods.

In response to my timid ring on the doorbell of a large redbrick building, a quiet, civilised voice asks my name over the entry phone. I am shown into a room filled with furniture, masked by half light filtering through the net curtains. What seem like a dozen small Jack Russell terriers hold sway, colonising the stately chairs and firm sofas that fill the room.

distinct Irish accent, hauling his bulk to his feet as I am shown in. His manners are impeccable. His style, from his waistcoat to his neatly trimmed grey hair, is old-fashioned. At a word from him, two or three dogs leap to the ground, circle the central, circular piece of furniture and disappear for the nether regions, the others settling on an assortment of chairs and sofas. Every surface is covered with nick-nacks, papers, stones, ornaments, even what I take to be a collection of African figurines.

He seats me before him, a carved, dark wood table between us, a matching escritoire behind him. His back is to the window, a Royal photograph (Princess Anne, I think) and a bunch of artificial flowers to his left.

‘Now, please, if you’d put your hands on this,’ he places a crystal ball in front of me. Pause. ‘Thank you,’ moving the crystal ball away, ‘that’s enough. Please let me give you some paper, and do be sure to write everything down. You’ll want to have a record.’

Hard to say if, or how much of, what he tells me is accurate. ‘Nice gates, the place you’ll be working there’s a nice gateway,’ But he’s comforting and I like him.

In my despair, and desire to know what to do, I go again. But, heart of hearts, what I am looking for is not here. It is not a question of whether or not I believe in clairvoyance, or even in what is said in this instance.

Perhaps astrology could help? Long ago, I decided that Jung’s words, from the foreword to *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, ‘Whatever is born or done this moment, has the qualities of this moment of time,’ were true for me. Astrology, I believe, has little to do with the columns in the back of magazines. At the same time, I have always been pleased my mother could not remember the time of my birth. So, no definitive chart for me. Free will rules.

A while ago, a friend told me of a Jungian astrologer. I

went to see her, in a ground-floor flat near where I was living. I remember orange, was it the walls, or the colour she wore? Her eye shadow was dark, brown perhaps, and marked, her voice low. She swallowed her words. I remember little. Nothing resonated. I could not connect with the person she talked about. I didn't recognise myself. Perhaps I didn't hear. Failure, I thought.

Now, another friend, a writer, gives me the name of a woman he knows, who's been helpful to him and of whom he's had good reports — Anna Balfour. Her husband is a lawyer, apparently. Interesting. 'This is Anna Balfour. Leave your name and phone number and I'll call back.' No please, no thank you. A slight antipodean drawl.

Our first meeting takes place in Clapham. The address I have turns out to be an old redbrick mansion block, one of several, facing the park, with an external staircase. Anna Balfour opens the door to me. If I had any expectations, they're confounded. She's very attractive, with blonde hair cut in a bob, green eyes and a face that moves as she talks. She is a bit older than me. Late thirties, early forties perhaps.

'Hello, how nice to meet you,' a professional but kind-sounding greeting. It is a beautiful, large-roomed mansion flat. The yellow-painted room she shows me into overlooks the common. The room doesn't look like her — square cane furniture, painted elephants and peacock feathers. Someone must live here, but whoever it is, they eradicate their traces very well.

Anna Balfour sits on a small sofa, opposite me. She is wearing a navy blue jacket with white trousers, a scarf holding back her chin-length hair.

The chart she has drawn for me is interesting. 'Of course, we can't know the house placements because we don't know the exact time of your birth,' she tells me, 'so it's pretty

general, but I think it's accurate.'

I think it may be too. As a character analysis, some of what I learnt from the Freudian analysis of my late teens and early twenties is alluded to. Her interpretation of the chart also seems to fit with certain ideas that I have picked up since. But how to proceed, where to go, what next? How do I know what is true anymore? Neither Anna Balfour nor the chart can answer any of those questions, but I will come again, I think.

1988 I left management consultancy. Driving, or something, seemed too much. I was constantly tired. Oddly disconnected from the world. Perhaps, if work was the problem, and it was certainly an element of it, I should return to my first love, television?

Over a decade, in a patchwork of freelance reporting (interspersed with consultancy) I had covered political and financial stories, social issues, the sexual abuse of children. I'd travelled up and down Britain, and abroad, taken up cudgels against multinational drug companies, fraudsters, government ministers, in short fought for what I thought of as social justice. Much less financially rewarding, but satisfaction of a different kind. Perhaps that was what I needed.

So I went back (can you ever?) first to the BBC. Then, I was offered a job with a company producing a novel idea for Britain's new fourth television channel. The programme's brief is to look at the press, find the stories behind the stories they are running. Expose reality, I think. It is a tremendous success. But, having my kind of scruples, and some experience of television as well as the world, hasn't served me well.

1989 'Michal, all I'm asking you to do is to read the

commentary, surely that's not too much? You're the programme's reporter, remember?'

Not that this looks like a television production office, I think, noticing how the wires hanging down on the landing behind him seem to spout from either side of Pete's head. We are standing in a sea of cardboard boxes, in a jumble of office furniture, probably from a bankrupt's auction. This is cheap space in the clothing wholesalers' district around Whitechapel, pressed into service by a money-wise man for his television production company.

'I'm sorry, but I still think there's a problem. Of course, I'll honour my contract, I'll do what's required, but I still don't think this story is OK.'

'Oh come on, this is ridiculous. This story is being handed to you on a plate. You haven't had to research it, you haven't had to film it, you haven't scripted it.'

It is a joke how a programme like this one, a huge success, in its second season, is run from hand-to-mouth. As ever, the pressure to perform, to find stories, is immense.

'What's the problem? We've got two very plausible victims — a middle-aged woman looking after her invalid mother. The mother's been put onto this pig's insulin stuff and they're both frightened out of their wits by the scare stories the tabloids have been running. Then we've got a little boy who's a diabetic too, and his parents have been given the heeby jeebies by reading all this rubbish, and now of course they don't want him to go on the new insulin. And we've got two docs, one hundred per cent OK, who say pig's insulin is totally safe for diabetics. It wouldn't have been okayed if it wasn't. The tabloids are just filling space, running stories like this . . . It's scaremongering! What more do you want?' Pete asks accusingly.

I can see he thinks I'm being difficult, but he's worried too that I know something he doesn't. There's a coffee stain

on his blue jeans and I know his wife is close to breaking point with a new baby. ‘Pete, they said thalidomide was safe.’

‘What’s that got to do with anything? This isn’t thalidomide.’

‘No, it’s not thalidomide. For all I know, giving humans insulin made from pigs is a great advance. Could well be completely safe. Or it might not be. Of course the majority of doctors will say it’s safe. Just like they said thalidomide was safe. But it was only because some journalist kept asking questions that they found out the real truth about thalidomide. Look at the way that was withdrawn and the huge compensation the manufacturers had to pay.’

‘Come on, this isn’t thalidomide, you said it yourself.’

‘No, probably not — the chances are very slim indeed. Like I said, it’s probably absolutely fine and a great invention. But it’s also absolutely fine for the newspapers to question it. Their methods, and the way they play on people’s emotions with over-coloured stories is another matter. I abhor that as much as you do, it’s not honest. But I’ll always defend the press’s right to question new drugs or medical advances. If we run this story, like this, what we’re doing is no different from what you say they’re doing — filling air time.’

I go back to the half-glazed booth that’s my office. I want to put my head on my desk and cry. But, of course, I don’t. What worries me doesn’t seem to worry him.

When I started working in television, reporting seemed much clearer. I thought it was about showing what was, or is, happening. True, that seems increasingly difficult to capture. But, have the goal posts moved subtly too? Consumer hunger is our concern. How to feed, how to tempt and lure viewers. What do the viewers want? Remember it’s not the same as what you and I would want.

‘More accessible.’ In other words, simpler, snappier and further from the truth?

My mind set, and some experience of the world, aren’t serving me well in this situation, although there have been some coups, stories I have been delighted to uncover and excited to have a chance to tell. But I realise what I am fighting for cannot be achieved in the way I am working. Or by taking up arms. Over and over I see not the truth, but the truth of the moment, the truth for the benefit of this side or that, the truth of a pinhole perspective. ‘What is truth?’ said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer.’ Bacon was right in 1597.

It seemed that whatever life’s lessons by the late Eighties, I no longer fancy them, and I haven’t learnt to make the journey comfortable. I plan to resign from my role as a television reporter, when my current contract expires. For what? I don’t know. I make the relevant financial plan, adding the figures up over and over again. The children and I can last for so long without my earning. Then the house would have to go. Irresponsible action for the mother of a five- and a twelve-year-old? No, imperative in a way that only addicts know, but then resistance is their route to salvation.

‘Sorry luv, got to do a set-up in here.’ It’s a man carrying lighting equipment. This office is about to be used for filming an interview, and I am needed in the editing suite, a land of permanent gloom, coffee and smoke. But highly professional. The man who’s making the money from this outfit has had the sense to pay for a real pro to run the editing suite.

‘It’s not my job to say anything,’ he tells me. ‘I just do as I’m told.’ It would be so much easier if I could.

Chapter Three

Dowsing

October 1990 ‘Come to dinner, do,’ Suzie and Richard are good to me. I need goodness. We sit in a newly designed dining room. The stylish cutlery grates on the glass dining table. The surfaces are hard, walls reflective — brown-washed and glazed. Sound bounces back with a clear edge.

‘More salad? Just a little radicchio and some bits and pieces.’ The salad bowl is heavier than I can handle comfortably. My stomach refuses to relax. It won’t accept Suzie’s delicious, grown-up cuisine. My autonomic nervous system seems to have switched off. I concentrate on making sympathetic responses. My hands are cold, the habitual exhaustion hovers.

I sit with my back to the glass patio doors. Turning my head, I can see the garden in the gloom. It is prettily planted with white petunias, glowing in the semi-dark. The front pathway is laid out in small stones, like specially chosen *petit pois*.

Suzie is spiritual. Spirituality isn't part of my bag, I judge. Not that her spirituality — whatever it is — seems to interfere, as far as I can tell. I am stuck in a groove. What am I going to do?

'Why don't you go and see this incredible woman who's a dowser. She's really amazing.'

'What's a dowser, remind me — what does she dowse for?'

'Oh, love, don't be so silly,' a mock sharpness from Suzie. 'She uses a pendulum, you know, and goes down this list of everything that could be the matter with you, or that you need, and tells you what to do.'

'Sounds a bit odd to me.' I'm trying to be polite. I hardly know what I think about anything anymore. All I'm certain about is what I don't want, and that there's a weariness that troubles me. More than simply my distance from life.

'Go on, go and see her, she's just in Camden Town, and she's really amazing. Tell her I sent you.'

'Actually, I don't think so. I don't think I can bear the thought of hocus pocus, even if she might come up with something.'

'Honestly, she's altogether genuine, and frightfully high powered. She just does this at night, in the day she's a scientist I think, working for the government. No, really, you'd find her very interesting, whatever you thought.'

The journalist in me rises. Curiosity killed the cat.

Friday, 2 November 1990 Sheilagh Brownlow lives in a blue house in a tiny street behind the railway arches in Camden Town. It's hard to find her, I know the way, but not that night. No entries, no right and left turns, traffic intercedes. Finally, arriving.

A woman answers the door. 'You must be Suzie's friend.' 'Michal.' My name again, no-one knows how to say it, 'I'm

sorry I'm late, the traffic.'

Her skin is pale, red-brown hair, light eyes behind cold-rimmed glasses. Wrinkles, smile lines, no make-up I notice. I like something about her.

It could be anybody's house, Seventies 'modern' furniture and a swirly brown carpet. Thin curtains, more brown, floral. It's clinically tidy, and strangely characterless, as if someone has just moved in, or out. Empty cream walls. We sit on the sofa and she waves a pencil over a typewritten sheet. This is it, what I've come for.

'I don't know how this works,' she tells me.

'What is it?'

'I dowse,' she says.

'Dowse? Like a water diviner?' Mystified at what a process appropriate to the Australian outback could have to do with me.

She blushes. She is no more comfortable with this procedure than I am, but gripped by it somehow. She seems reluctant to speak, eager to complete the purpose of my visit.

'Let's just go through it and then I'll try and explain.'

Sitting side by side, if I look down I can see the top sheet resting on her clipboard. I spy with my little eye, but the words make no sense. Four squares, each with a list: etheric body, base chakra, star flower, gemstones, I glimpse at random.

Sheilagh wants me to talk. 'Why have you come?'

Years of psychoanalysis dance by. So many words to choose from. I am trying to focus on the sense of my malaise. Such good fortune from the world's perspective, why the malaise? What symptoms have I to tell, beyond a sense of not belonging, worries, fears, exhaustion and disenchantment at every finger tip, along with hope. Like

some inherited condition. Persistent, but more powerful.

Does she want to hear? I don't think she is listening, I'm the background music. She's concentrating on the clipboard, but the pencil isn't making any marks. She flips the sheet, same thing again on a fresh page, only this time the list looks longer, and without the squares. My voice trails . . .

Does she live alone? The room looks too neat. Messy hallway, but no children's clutter. Is she shaking slightly? A squint of concentration, and could it be distress, blood so close beneath the white Celtic skin?

'It's funny,' she says, 'but I can't come up with much. Only osteopathy really, it seems.'

'Osteopathy? That's one thing I don't have — physical aches or pains. My body's OK, it always has been.' My mantra, 'I get tired, have done for a few years now, but that's life. What's this about, can you explain what you've been doing?'

She sighs. 'Really, all I've done is write down every possible treatment, or diagnosis, that I know for all four realms, and then tried to see if any of them come up for you. You could dowse each one separately, with a pendulum — it's quite a common practise, putting a question to a pendulum.'

Yes, I think I know about that, I've seen people playing with crystals, usually on chains. I've even tried it, not seriously. But it hasn't worked. It never seemed to me a very profound process, a little like newspaper horoscopes. But what's this about the four realms?

'It's very simple. It's the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. Those are the dimensions of the whole body, including the energy body around us, and I'm simply looking for any treatment you could need in any of those realms. I don't know how it works.' Lamely. Pause.

I've heard a bit about these sort of notions before. I haven't judged one way or the other. Usually they have simply seemed a little flaky, or even mixed up with quantities of dope, which has never appealed. Fringe I'd say, but fringe weird. Sheilagh Brownlow isn't weird. Her face is open. There's a clean plainness in her hands. I trust that.

So, gently I ask, 'Are you trying to decide from what I tell you what's the matter, or is it something different? I know about pendulums, but I don't quite see how it fits.'

'No, that's not it.' My rationality almost embarrasses her, could be it's hers too. 'My pencil is my pendulum. I tried it by chance and found it worked. I've done this lots of times, which is how I came to draw up the lists. It was much quicker than trying to decide what could be the matter, then using a pendulum to confirm it and decide how to treat it. I use homeopathy too.'

Homeopathy, I've recently started using that. The homeopath Anna Balfour recommended seems to have cured my irritable bowel condition completely. But what do I think about the rest of her explanation? 'Four realms' sounds like a metaphor of sorts that's perhaps not very relevant. What her diagnoses or treatments could be I can't imagine — star flower! I'm curious, she's no flake.

'How did you come to this, how does it relate to the rest of your life, to your job?' I am reluctant to ask directly what she does, it seems impertinent. I sense a certain reticence, along with compulsion in her manner.

'Oh I just do this at night, when I can. But everything is a little difficult right now, personal things, and I'm under quite a lot of pressure. It's got nothing to do with my work — they'd be horrified if they knew I did this, I'm a scientist, you see. People aren't very tolerant. I'm sorry I haven't got much time now — when you called, you sounded as if you needed it so much, I agreed to see you.' I'm nodding, the

pieces are coming together.

‘I don’t know why so little has come up,’ Sheilagh continues. ‘Usually people get a lot more, but you seem different. I’ve got a funny feeling about you, but I don’t know why. Osteopathy would be good though, did you say you had back trouble?’

‘No.’

‘Well, I don’t know why, like I said, but it’s usually right, if you know an osteopath I’d go and see him, or her.’

‘I know an osteopath who’s been recommended. Funny, because I got his name only recently, for my mum, and he works just around the corner from me.’

Driving home from Camden Town to West London, all the lights are green and it takes no time. Sheilagh Brownlow has something, but I don’t know what. I recognise this feeling. My journalistic nose tells me that there is something here. This feeling has led me into trouble before, opposing others, seeing issues or angles, often unpopular, no-one else recognises (or wants to). Usually it’s been correct, which hasn’t always won me friends. Now I know there is something here, but what? Osteopathy for me? Why bother? That’s one problem I don’t have, or need.

My sleep is disturbed. I dream a dream repeatedly that makes no sense to me. I am showing a property to prospective purchasers. The property is close to where I live in real life. I have no actual experience of selling property — at least not professionally. It’s an unusual building, largely made of wood and like a place of worship, or perhaps a New England picture-book barn. However, its potential as a dwelling place is not immediately obvious. But to me it is clear that this is the most astonishing opportunity to occupy a magnificent and vast space. The prospective purchasers seem uninspired. I am amazed at their lack of insight.

Two, three, four times I dream this dream. Then, in the

dream it occurs to me — why not buy the property myself? The finances would be easy to arrange. I myself could live in this wondrous space. What bliss. The dream does not reoccur. But a few nights later, another stays with me. I am living in quite cramped quarters, with my children, in what looks from the outside as if it should be a large home, but somehow isn't.

I am worried about having enough space and about our finances. I walk up and down the stairs and through the rooms as if there is some solution to be found in the activity. Then, pressing on a wall, it gives way, revealing a low and lovely attic area. With room beyond room visible. I am overjoyed. Why did I not realise I owned all this space already?