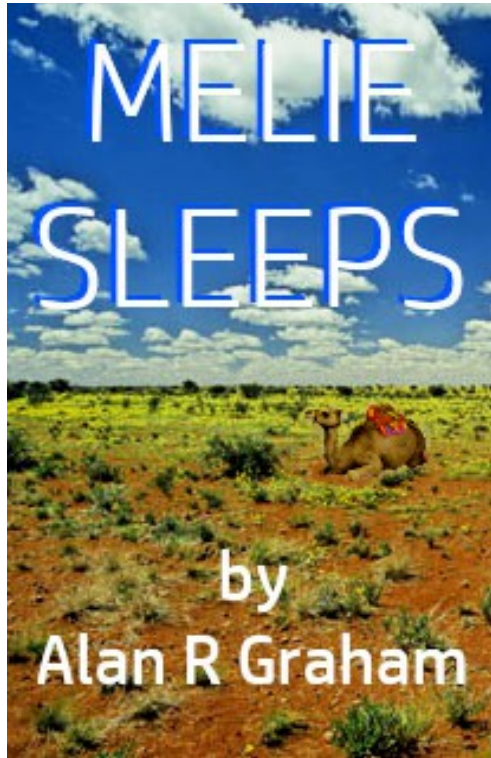


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Melie Sleeps

A Devastating Family Drama

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THE AWAKENING

Melie sleeps in the soft down of my senses, wrapped in melodies of moments I recall. She is resting, lies tranquil, as if after a tiresome day. She is safe and warm and home. My best wishes are flowers I have placed about her in a mass of colour, petals of a paradise which I have conjured through childhood eyes; and I come to her via my thoughts, like a puppy in the early morning with wet nose and a curious grin, eager to be in the company of the one he loves. Yes, I keep her alive this way: Melie, my little sister, who lived a life-time in only 25 years; who owes nothing and who is owed so very much.

I loved Melie when she was alive. I say love, but recently I have had time to reflect. Trouble is, I still understand so little of its nature. I was taught from an early age that there were many different types of love. At the time this made sense. Simple examples were used to convey an idea which someone else had and which that someone else wished to impress upon me: You can love life, they'd say; there's love of music; loving people; and, the love of God; different expressions of love toward different things. But

the love I once felt for my sister was none of these and nothing like the love I now have for her and so, rather than say she was somehow different back then, I suspect I'd never really loved her at all.

This might seem harsh. Oh sure, I could be forgiven for feeling ashamed of my earlier, pea-sized affection toward her, due to the enormous, emotional trauma caused by her abhorrent death. Or I could have gone on hiding in popular mythology, excusing myself with plagiaristic quotes from families and friends. That is, until I learned that love is not a thing one acquires from time to time... it is not really a thing as such. It is part of us all.

By the age of fourteen I was already on the way to a successful career in the sciences. Though biology was awkward – far too unpredictable in its ways – chemistry and physics were easy for me to comprehend. There was never any question of consistency with them, everything was neatly packaged in little bundles, each connected in some practical way; in fact, there were never any questions at all in physics. The bizarre nature of life, on the other hand, was difficult for me as a child. And with maturity blooming, that very subject of biology was, of course, soon to outwit me altogether. Back then, it was easy to say, 'I love Melie,' but I never asked myself why, or what... or if! At that age we all clung to the predictability of life, as if it were a huge tree poking up in desolation above the rising flood waters of destiny. My sister was just there, and that was that; and it was silly to think she, or anyone else, could just disappear. She was all I'd ever known, that integral part of me, a third leg, a pleasure and a pain; that long haired, impetuous, 10 year old kid.

Melie grew up fast. Soon into everything, she was quicker off the blocks than I still fumbling my way through adolescence. Broad of mind and narrow in the limbs, Melie promised to be both beautiful and intelligent. However, first she would have to survive the stigma of being someone's daughter.

We had a strict upbringing, to cross our parents was deadly. This lesson was learned quickly by me. As the older of the two

children I was the one most astutely directed; I was nurtured with ambition, drilled and dressed for practicality. I took it well – I think – at least, I came out of it unscathed. Growing up for my sister, on the other hand, was without rehearsal: a nightmare. Her explosive personality regularly consumed the family stage, blackening characters our parents had long thought established. The script soon lost, the play was swiftly turned into a shambles.

A belt would then often be drawn from my father's cupboard. I would go upstairs. Never once did I hear her cry. She could take anything, just by reversing the pain.

Melie was not to be tied down, nor could she be fobbed off as easily as me, her brother. She refused to yield, she was obstinate as hell; stuck uncompromisingly to young ideals, while discerning voices clattered like cracked bells through the caverns of her mind. “Authority is plain greed, it fails the truth,” she later wrote. Yet, with all those contradictions churning about inside her, I look back in wonder at how she managed to excel at school. Either she had a hidden sense of discipline or learning just came naturally to her. Once in a fit of childish rage I asked her how, without once studying a damn thing, she could waltz into an O Level exam at nine o'clock in the morning and two hours later come out with an A.

She snapped back, “Cos’ you learn what you want to, not what you have to – otherwise it’s only borrowed.” And then, without hesitation she added: “My teacher’s cool, see... he understands. Not like mum and dad. They just shout stuff at you and expect you to learn... like they’re afraid of you or something.”

Two years later, and with a month left before sitting her A Levels, Melie ran away from home. It sounds dramatic, 'she ran away', but actually she was only seventeen and nowhere near prepared for the outside world. We stayed in touch, she would write letters when she could; always buoyant and cheerful words, though I sensed she was cushioning me from the harsher side of reality. By that time I had left school and was working in a communications company. I was assistant technician at just twenty one and was

fairly sure of myself. Future events would say which of us was more prepared for the real world.

It was about that time when I had my first relationship. Suddenly the word love meant something tangible. I'd loved the family Labrador. The same age as me, when he died at fifteen, I was devastated. I'd always loved my parents (and since they retired to Devon a few years back it has become all the more easy). But this..! This new thing. Shocking. A something mysterious, of devastating toxicity. I was curious – sure – but not curious enough to ask myself what it was, what it meant; I just wanted more of that physical rush. Like some crazed warrior before the dawn of battle, I found myself standing in the open, arms stretched wide beneath the enveloping storm, a human lightning rod ready for my next surge. It had so much to do with me and, I suppose, so little to do with her. When I hugged her I was embracing this thing, squeezing it from her, trying to extract every last drop of whatever it was from within her. A kiss was a way of splurging on its very source; there I'd be, holding on like a barnacle to the lip of a submerging whale.

I'd never had a girlfriend at school, so this experience coming quite late in my development was, no doubt, exaggerated by under-exposure. But I had not been looking for it, had merely stumbled upon it: as if, on being forced by the rising flood to climb to the very highest branch, I had suddenly discovered I was in a fruit tree.

This girl and I had met in a pub. I don't really know how it all happened, but the next day I could think of nothing but her; I could smell her when I closed my eyes, I could feel her breath in a breeze and the hairs on my body would vibrate like tiny, tuning forks at the sound of her voice. Within a matter of weeks I'd developed hidden strengths: I dared turn up late to work one morning.., and laughed. While the rest of the world – it seemed – was groping about in the smog of normality, I was seeing with a kind of clarity one could only experience from a parallel universe. Not long after she found someone else, but the craving in me remained, my emptiness crying out like a hungry child. And so I

was driven to seek out a replacement. I later decided that this sensation was not love because it was the exact same feeling no matter who I was dating. I had imagined love to be different depending on the partner; a slight variation on the theme, as one might expect of one's favourite dish if created by two different chefs, something unique every time. Apparently, I was wrong.

Girls would soon become women, I thought, they would reach altitude and leave turbulence behind. I would understand them, one day, and then perhaps, love. As I grew older I fancifully thought I would grow wiser and things would become clearer. But, by 24, this was obviously not happening. I remember a date once: a would-be girlfriend sweetly saying to me over supper, having prepared this romantic dinner, "I'm afraid the steaks are a little tough."

"Really..? they're fine," I said with a mouth full, trying to make her feel better. Only to find out – as she was slamming the door in my face a few weeks later – that I was ignorant, that I always disagreed with her; that it was I who'd bought the damn steaks and rather than saying she was wrong, I should have apologised.

I tried to explain, hollered down the corridor something about 'words never lying'. It only confused me more. Communication was not as simple as reading the signal down a telephone line. However, Melie would complicate matters further by writing that, I'd been afraid to let go. I had, in her words, become a part of that tree, soon to be lifeless driftwood washed up on the shore of tomorrow. Well, I had adopted my way of life – true – I was a graft off old stock; while she was a true individual, a seed with her own, new and spreading root system, I remember thinking. *But afraid?* What was she talking about?

Melie had never adopted anything in her life, from anybody. Nothing for her was fact until it had been an experience. With her long, fluffy pony tail and those thin, bare legs, she would stride into school as if she knew exactly what the day would bring. She had, but an hour earlier, been shouting at mum in the kitchen about how

rock music was poetry and that her packed lunch was for vegetarians, to drop from the school bus in a crackle of confidence. That was my younger sister, Melie! A girl so huge inside it was hard to believe such a small body could container her. She'd said to me in one of her 'passionate moments' – she was about fifteen at the time – that, what was right and what was true could never be proved to be so, that there were in fact many truths and so it remained only to do what was best. "Best for who?" I contested loudly. "Best by you," she replied, with a sweep of a disappearing ponytail.

Such self-assurance. Yet with all that pride inside, never a bad word did she have for anyone – except, occasionally, for mum and dad. I had often presented her like that to them, but they always refused to accept Melie was anything but a rotten apple. Indeed, she once wrote that she was; that she had willingly ruptured her own skin; that, rather than fall from the tree, ripe, with others at the allotted time and float off on a tide of misgivings, she had denied fate a hand in her future by plunging deliberately into its depths.

"How could she have just walked out like that... done this to us," I can hear my mother cry. "To us, to your father – Christ – imagine the pain and suffering we have had to endure, all these years."

And her? What about Melie's feelings? I wanted to say. But didn't.

Melie never felt pain. Nothing but nonsense could hurt her. When she argued with mum and dad there was no malice towards them, just a loathing of their knack for complicating everything; she hated inflexibility. Her tactile mind was capable of reaching into places others, like myself, feared to go; to rearrange seeming solid fundamentals and produce new order by a lightness of touch that could unwind a spider's web without breaking the thread. At sixteen, she had begun to formulate her own principles, she was already developing the persona that would later become her adult self; though sadly, I never got to see it. Pain and hurt were distinct

species, in her mind; one was disappointment the other, depressing.

It is a fact: rotten apples are soft. But for some reason everyone always thought of her as tough – even I. That hard, outer casing of her personality was, however, doubtless glazed by others, not by her; dipped, she was, like a toffee apple; because that's what we so often do when confused, our beliefs questioned or we become frustrated. To think, she could be cracked like an egg with a plastic spoon to reach that softer tissue beneath, and yet most still chose to confront her with a chainsaw.

Melie was now in Saudi Arabia. It was autumn, 1992.

I could just imagine her striding out across the dunes, sand in her hair, a sweat-caked brow, and that wide, white smile competing effortlessly with the sun for attention; enduring the worst just to find out what lay beyond the horizon. Never a month went by without a letter from her. I would pour out my pains to her and in response she would intertwine her unfolding life with prescriptions for me to take. Throughout all those years, it was I who would bring stories of her affairs to Sunday lunch with mum and dad. Just the three of us... It was a sad few years. Each of us unhappy for our own particular reasons; selfish reasons, no doubt. Because Melie had done nothing to us but open our eyes.

“Married!” my mum yelled at the top of her voice, one day. “Oh Christ, how could she... how could she not tell us – and what of the boy? Is he... is he..?”

“No, mum. He’s English,” I replied. That was Terry Bates, 2nd. Lieutenant in Engineering Corps, posted to a training facility in Riyadh. She’d married him at 22 – he was somewhat older. A bit of an arrogant sod, I got the impression.

Terry and I didn’t get on too well, even though we’d never met. We’d only exchanged a few emails. It was such a surprise – possibly a let down – to contemplate the dull husband of a woman so intense. One might have imagined a charismatic creature, a stallion of wit and charm to have been grappled to the ground by that tiger. But quite the contrary: here was a badger, picky to the

point of obsession, enviously complaining about everything as if he had nothing. Odd, with so much to say, he seemed to have little or no ambition. There was, however, some blessing in this arrangement as it tied Melie down. I was pleased for her in this respect – though didn't say it – because my greatest concern was that she might one day float away out of reach altogether and be lost forever. Melie, like a helium balloon at a fairground, had been purchased and was now safely fastened to the pram, though still allowed that privilege of flying high above the rest of us.

A promotion to junior engineer the following year, suddenly saw me thrust into executive class. My first real challenge came weeks later when I was bundled off to West Africa to supervise the extension of a government communications grid. It didn't take long to realize that the towers we were erecting, though broadly advertised as a 'peoples project', were a military move designed to support elements battling to subdue unrest in the northern most part of the country. Communications were poor to say the least. Information passed slowly by truck from one village to the next, if you were lucky. The postal service was precarious; odds of delivery, it was often joked, were better by stuffing a letter in a bottle and tossing into the desert, hoping that a passing camel train would spot it. Staying in touch with the outside world in this isolated spot of misery – as our business had to do regularly – could only be achieved by newly developed satellite phones. So I was glad to be out of there after only a couple of months. Upon my return to England I found a stream of communication from Melie telling me all the latest news. Letters had become emails – freedom at last. She sounded happy enough, though I did sense early reserve over Terry's increasing desire to start a family.

"Well, honestly! I'm just 24, still a child at heart; so much still to discover, to appreciate, so many things still to do," I quote from one of her last messages. And I agreed. It would have been wrong to burden her with such a weight before she had reached the horizon. Six years is all she'd really had of life – was that it for a woman these days? "If he'd wanted a breeder he should have married one," I snapped at my computer screen. Yes, I got a little

cross, even wrote him an email directly. He never responded.

As for me, I was still single. A couple of downhill affairs had come and gone, that was it... not even a pleasant memory could I put on my resume. I was bored of love – or then again – had I been watching too much television? Those carefully crafted realities I could sink into from my sofa were never quite as real as real life. Life did not react to a plot with such discipline. Well, mine didn't! Life was unpredictable, women incomprehensible and love..?

I was shipped back to West Africa the following Christmas of 1994. Being single, our department decided it was fairer on the married folk that I should be the one to go during the holiday season. And besides, I knew the place. I wrote and told Melie I was off again. Then I went down to see mum and dad for an early Christmas 'do'. We sat about and played our parts: dad waffling on about being part of a team, about respect for the company; and there was mum again, whining on about my sister. "Really, if she weren't our daughter, we wouldn't want anything to do with her," mum charged in plural. "And then she goes and marries a nobody, doesn't even have the courtesy to inform us – not even a letter."

Melie had written to them before the wedding, she told me so. That was the month they'd begun the move to Devon; mum and dad were living with friends at the time. Not that it mattered much anymore. One or two letters had fluttered over to Devon from Saudi across the years, but I guess Melie never heard back. I say that because I've asked mum about it and I always get the same reply: "Don't be silly. If she wants to speak to us that badly, well, she can come home, can't she?"

"So, what's he like?" mum would often inquire of me. "Toby.., Tim, is it? You know, the husband?"

That December I was again confronted by her curiosity. I might even say there was a hint of intrigue behind the usual expression of contempt. She was on about Terry. Then said that Melie, in one of her letters, had written about me; that the reason

why she had married Terry was because he was a lot like me. Mum had laughed, said my sister was just trying to make it sound all right... But I knew my sister, she never lied about anything, least of all for endearment. A stirring came over me, not of conscious origin – not a thought had passed across my mind – as if emanating from deep within the gut. Mum raved on. I sat precariously on my chair above a convulsion of turkey stuffing, croquette potatoes and gravy, too confused to eat. *What had my sister thought of me all these years? Who did she think I was, now? So long since I'd last seen her, spoken to her – since I'd last heard her voice. Were we the same old brother and sister from before?* All these questions suddenly needed answering.

THE TRIAL

That thought stayed with me during the flight to Benin, then north bound on my connecting flight in an old DC10 towards the barren reaches of the Sahel Steppe. It would be months before I could get a response. So I vowed to see her. Yes, that would be my first plan of action on returning to England in April. Perhaps I could surprise her on her birthday? All I had to do was survive a few months in this horrible place: blinding heat by day, scorpions by night, not a spot of rain till March... then only maybe. *I could survive.., yes, I wouldn't get depressed, because I had a goal. It cheered me up no end to think that I was going to rebuild our relationship, create a lasting, physical bond; perhaps, even reappraise love. Why hadn't I done this sooner?* the thought struck me. I'd spent all this time, ten years, thinking about nothing but my future. *Well, not any more.* There I was, treading lightly between political unrest and a malnourished workforce, trying to get my job done, for a wage, for the man upstairs... *for what?* when all that could be conceived as real – life itself – was passing me right by. *Such a fool.*

I'd acted selfishly for too long. *Ah, but... perhaps even now this is selfish intent.* This desire to rediscover my sister, *yes, might it simply be for my own benefit?* It had been so long, and Melie had never returned. *Why?* Perhaps she didn't want to live in the past. For a few weeks I ground up the gritty bits of my consciousness, fearing all the while that I might unwittingly destroy the one thing that would see me through this awful place and get me back home to England in one piece.

I had hardly got up out of my bunk bed one morning on hearing a raucous outside the hut, when three men in shabby, military attire forced their way through the door. Two were carrying semi-automatic rifles, one, a large machete. He was pointing it this way and that and shouting angrily. My French is not good, but I heard reference to God and to patriotism, so I became instantly afraid. I was hurriedly shuffled out into the early morning haze by a man wearing old, wellington boots. He was stabbing me in the side with his gun so I agreed without a fuss. In the madness of that moment I can still recall some absurdities, as if the mind sought refuge from horror in such places: as my captor strode out across a dusty courtyard I noticed a tear in his left boot which opened and closed with each step he took, as if the gasping mouth of a small creature being stepped on. Us three white men, two Germans and myself, were thrust up into the bed of an aging, Toyota pick-up, then driven at serious speed towards town down a dirty, pot-holed road. Three rebels sat with us, four others stayed behind. Through the cloud of dust pouring out from under the truck I could barely see a line of workers fading into the distance, hands behind their heads, falling to the ground one by one; ragged garments, on finding themselves suddenly empty, haplessly crumpling into neat piles in the dirt. I never heard the gun fire, I just supposed – that was all.

At the edge of town we were blind-folded and forced onto the floor of the truck. We eventually came to rest and after a hurried scuffle through what seemed like endless passage ways, I ended up in my new home, stripped of everything but despair. A few days later and I could not remember for the life of me how long

I'd been there. Weeks... months..? A bowl of chili soup, floating lumps of cassava within, was slid under the door once a day; or was it twice a day? My nondescript cell, bare walled, was empty. How could I relate time to anything anymore when nothing changed, everything remained constant, day after day? No routine, no repetition, nothing to grasp, with which to become familiar; the cell – my cell – the longest night of my life; no sounds but the endless patter of feet outside and the wind through a slit high up in the wall. Those customary things which I had once used to link the chain of progress, gone. Time withdrawn, and an empty mind soon looked elsewhere for nourishment.

So there began a slow change in my perception, as I searched for anomalies, anything to focus upon. I began to see other sights, to hear other sounds, and a new order emerged. Amidst the chaos of confinement and the stifling heat, patterns of logic seemed to stretch out before me like thin strands of fibre. Vague yet familiar, fragile wisps of definition which at first confused me, even frightened me. But soon I settled in with them: They were moments in my life that were now free of progression, unconnected thoughts, could wind and weave randomly, as they pleased, and so they did. Ultimately, they became my alternate, dissociated reality. I now had a territory which I defended obstinately, with defiance; this was my world and I would give it up for no one. Fear ever present, yes, though minute in detail and localised, as was my world. Nothing outside my walls was relevant anymore. Memories became abstract and unresolved in time; they were my own little, film theatre. Depending on where the present moment happened to be, I could watch them from a distant future, or be there, involved, interacting with that past moment, as I pleased.

Then I remembered thinking, *what of the Germans?* Had heard other languages out in the corridors, but no German. *Executed? That'll teach you, Heir Lichtenstein, for inventing the Zeplin! Hair! Hair...*

And then that horrible nightmare returns. *No, get away*

from me; urh.., all over me; my toes, my nose, my stomach. I shuddered with disgust; reviled the sprouting of hair; cursed them like weeds in my lawn. An infestation; roots as if worms burrowing deeper and deeper into me, taking over my insides, *can't stop them... my head, they will strangle my soul... must stop them. No!* And then, as so often I would, I began ripping at my skin, tearing at my scalp, agonizing over trivialities, petrified of nothing, tears streaming helplessly down my cheeks to a filthy beard.

It was during one of those bouts that Melie first spoke to me. She wasn't by the door or in the cell; no, her voice echoed; *she must be in me*, I remember thinking. I could hear her, and I could respond. Sometimes she was calling my name then, other times I would hear her softly whimpering, as if she were upset. "No matter, no matter," I would whisper, to let her know there was nothing to fear, that the mould only grew in daylight; "Look, over there in the corner, don't lie there, too bright, it'll grow right over you while you're asleep." I would scratch away at the dirt floor in the corner and say, "My little farm, see – hungry?" She would tell me about home and I would laugh... and cry. Sometimes I would watch that episode two or three times in a row.

No sense, no time, no need for either. Just moments together, a string of thoughts, going nowhere, round and round. With nothing to relate to and with no beginning nor end of anything, the mind – as with dreaming – simply forged an illusion of progress ...

Suddenly, one day, my cosy niche was shattered. Hands took hold of me, grabbing me, hoisting me to my feet. "Let go! Go away!" Then a light... blinding. I remember flashes of colour and thin streaks, like shards of glass flying passed me. Muscles ached, head throbbed. Abruptly, as in one of those timeless moments, I felt myself being raised off the ground and was flying, limply through the air. I floated, turning, rolling in a breeze, over and over, suspended by the bright, paralyzing light... And then time returned to me in earnest agony.

I heard my knees crack as I landed, pain burning up one leg.

I was in a sea of fire... coughing, shaking with fear. Opened my eyes a chink and considered my surroundings. A street? It was dry, dusty; I could feel it, horribly soft and warm, so unlike my comfortable cell. I was confused, didn't want to be in a street, wanted to return to my little place, the place where all my thoughts were stashed away... home. But then a familiar soft ringing in my ear caught me, calmed me, and I was able to breath. She was telling me that it was time for tea, that we should bring in some windfalls, mum was waiting, apple crumble for supper. Sweet angel, everything was going to be okay: Melie was here; though far away this time, high up above me in the sky. I rolled over and stared up through swollen eyelids. Sweat oozed from my brow and dribbled down between the flesh where once had been my eyelashes. The salty stuff stung and I struggled to see clearly. Then there, up there from her remoteness, suspended in a blaze of light, I saw my sister peering down at me. She looked lovely. That smile, those big, brown eyes, hair in a pony tail flopped loosely over one shoulder; an angel... my angel.

* * *

They say I was unconscious for three weeks. I came around to find myself alone, lying, staring at a light bulb dangling from the ceiling above me. I would stay in that hospital for another week. I was somewhere in London. My first visitor was a colleague from work who explained that I'd been kidnapped by rebels and that I'd miraculously escaped, and that the company was paying for this private ward. He said that the French Embassy had got me out, flown me from Dori to Timbuktu, then direct to Heathrow. I asked him how long I'd been held captive. He said it was June the 11th. I said: "How long?"

"17 months," he replied, cautiously.

Christ, I thought. It seemed like weeks, not years. I began to pick about in my head, trying to fill the enormous gap in my life with something tangible, anything... But found nothing. He left quickly, before I had a chance to ask him for more.

A few days later I got another visitor. It was dad.

“Ah, Peter. Good to see you up,” he said. “Your mother’s doing some shopping, she’ll be over in a bit. You know what shopping is like in Devon...” A laugh.

He looked much older, somehow. He looked grim, but then he always did. No, there was something else. He continued. “Look, Peter. I don’t know how much you know. Do you feel up to it?”

“Up to what, dad?”

“It’s about Terry. He’s in London, and I thought... well, I imagine it’s been pretty tough for you, so maybe...”

“What about Melie?” I said hurriedly, “Are they both here? Back from Saudi, at last?” I was eager for some good news. It was about time.

“Oh, I see. So no one’s told you, yet,” he muttered. “I’d come to tell you about Terry, but I...”

“Told me what, dad?” I urged.

“About Melissa. Look, I’ll start from the beginning. It’s good that your mother’s not here just yet, she’d only make matters worse. You see, Melissa is... well, she died, Peter. She died trying to get you out of there... Africa. Yup, she was trying to bring you back home.”

Things slowly slipped away out of reach and I was falling, tumbling down this all consuming hole. My head screaming, I could not think. I could not speak, my throat painfully swollen as if I’d swallowed an apple, whole. Could not see, tears washing my father and the room away in a single flush. I was numb, useless, without life. The one thing that had kept me alive for so long was now gone, and I was moments from disintegration...

“How, dad?” a crumbling voice cried.

“Look, maybe later, I’ll just pop out and get a...”

“NO! Now,” another me from somewhere managed to scream. For all the pain that there was I could not let a moment pass unscrutinised, fearing I would miss some detail or other, just the slightest thing, a scrap, however insignificant. No, I needed everything and I needed it now.

“Well,” he shrugged, “Er... Terry phoned and explained it all. He said he wanted to come over and see us, but you know what your mother is like. Really, she couldn’t take it, the visit, the stress of him being there – you know, with the funeral and all. So I thought you could speak to him. Maybe invite him over sometime to your flat, instead.”

“Yes, dad.”

“Good. That’s settled then. “Oh, but I have to warn you, he’s not very happy with you. Silly fellow seems to think it was all your fault... her death. You know.”

I eventually got it out of dad. Poor man, I felt sorry for him, he was always so afraid of showing emotion. And mum, well, she finally turned up. The shopping spree had helped, a sort of therapy which enabled her to cope with me. Truth is, I didn’t care much; didn’t care about anything, anymore. After they left I had a few days to myself. A blessing. The enormity of the crisis was sinking in and it gave me some time to consider the circumstances of my sister’s death. Time also to consider myself. Those long hours lying face up on a bed in a strange room, all alone, though somehow comforting, were deadly. I did not realise at the time but I was deteriorating rapidly. I was still locked in that tiny cell I’d made, the corroded bits of my mind forever branded to the inside of my skull, surviving only because I had an angel. Now I was alone in a different room, having lost my reason for living. Could I survive? I needed the truth... something my sister said did not exist. So I retold her story, over and over again, hoping for release.

This was the semi official report from Scotland Yard, released only to immediate family and agencies involved:

Melissa Watkins had heard of her brother's kidnap through

the papers, some weeks after it had happened. Frantic conversations between her and her father revealed only that he had left the whole thing in the hands of the Foreign Office. "It was best that way," he had said, to officials. Melissa realised she was all alone, even her husband Terry Ingshield was with her father on the matter. But she couldn't just sit back. She began her own style of research and one thing led to another. Pretty soon she was on her way to the Sahel, taking with her an Arab friend from the Saudi armed forces. Terry was unaware she'd left until the next day – by then it was too late. Fearing that the more conventional airline flight direct to Niamey would raise suspicions and endanger her brother still further, Melissa came in from Sudan, crossing Chad into Niger's, Agadez Province, by Land Rover convoy as journalists, before proceeding on camels by caravan with a Bedouin family, eventually reaching the southern province of Dosso, where she believed her brother was being held near the border with Benin.

It took her three months, and by that time it was spring of the following year. She'd already done the ground work. She knew who to see but it was a case of when they would see her. In early May an attempt was made to meet with rebel sympathisers on the border; they would take her to the prisoners. It was hilly country, sparsely covered with parched vegetation among the rocks, the sand and the wind. Apparently, the meeting was a trap, Melissa and her companion barely managing to survive the encounter. They escaped on a camel, while others in their group were not so lucky. In desperation, Melissa confronted the situation head on. Responding to a tip off, she and her companion smuggled themselves across the Niger River into Benin and walked into the police station at Karbinda the next day, demanding to speak with the Chief of Police. It had been suspected that some in the police force were secretly plotting with rebel troops, there in the north. They were taking hostages to barter with the government. They wanted to be part of the regional process, the communications and electricity supply; calling for better rural infrastructure rather than the planned route following main roads to the wealthy border towns.

Upstairs in a dusty, colonial building of discoloured columns and cracked frescos, Melissa found the second in command standing alone in an enormous, empty office. Just one metal chair and a deserted desk sat sulking in a far corner, away from the tall French window where the officer was gazing out over a balcony and the street below. No papers, no pens, just a jug of water; nothing on the walls but a horizontal strip of grey paint a few feet above the floor. It's sharp edge had once run undisturbed around the length of the room, but was now pitted and worn. High up in one corner, a flush of bare wires appeared through the wall from some adjacent room. They circumnavigated the ceiling following the coving, draped precariously over nails like the exposed veins of a wounded animal, and left through another hole on the other side of the room. They were the only things in the room that inspired contemplation. The man still did not move. Nothing moved but for occasional sifts of sand which trickled from cracks in the wooden ceiling above their heads.

Melissa approached the policeman. It was immediately clear that he knew why the foreign woman was here, in the view of her companion, who was later able to express his thoughts in a statement to the authorities. The policeman poured a glass of water for his 'special guest' and guided her to the chair. Melissa reluctantly sat down. He stood back. She told him she had heard he had some foreign hostages. She suggested he release one out of good will and the government might respond favourably to the gesture. The policeman laughed. He was not interested in negotiating with the government. No, he clearly had other things in mind. So Melissa began to reel off anything she could think of to entice this man to part with her brother: money, cars, clothes, mobile phones, guns..? No, the policeman could get all these things easily enough from corrupt customs officials loyal to the cause. But there was something special she could offer ...

He approached her with a trembling smile. She looked up at him, those flush-red eyes and the curl of his channelled lip hiding nothing. They told her what it was he wanted. He wanted her.

Melissa turned away. Dropped her head in silence, and fought back the tears. She needed a moment, and she was given it. She then raised her head and nodded. "But," she demanded, "First I want to see that my brother goes free with my friend here," she pointed at her companion.

The policeman chuckled and with a howl he called an officer in and directed him to release the hostage. Suddenly this repulsive man was by her side and with the greatest courtesy was leading her by an elbow to the balcony.

When a torn, bleeding and bearded man was thrown into the dusty road beneath her, at first she wasn't sure if it was her brother. She called out to him, spoke of childhood memories and pleasant things. When the body rolled over she knew instantly it was him. Up from within the tatters of a man lying far bellow, the image of a brother she had once known so well, rose to the surface. She didn't need to force a smile, love was there. She hesitated for a second to covert the memory, then turned to her companion. "Take good care of him, dear friend."

That was the last the Saudi ever saw of Melissa, the last anyone saw of her alive, but for the man on the balcony beside her. A few days later her badly mutilated body was found by the roadside a couple of miles out of town.

REDEMPTION

So, what was I to think of all this? My own horrors pale by comparison. The courage it must have taken, the strength she must have had; while I, a mere coward, huddled in the corner of my cell writhing and moaning in self-pity. I was a fake, lying here in a comfortable hospital bed licking my wounds, asking for sympathy as if I had endured some terrible misfortune. *Why her? Why not me?* came the thought. My death would have been understandable, desirable even; hers was a travesty! To take the life of a champion, but to spare the life of a worthless pawn... What could I take from this, where was I to begin?

Once again my sister would come to my aid, would comfort me, and guide me through the process as she had always done whenever I was troubled, whether by my side or not.

All I had to do was think of her. I knew her every word.

As if my death would achieve anything but demean all she had done for me. I could not do that, could not give up. I had promised myself I would find my sister and care for her, not let her down again. She deserved better than this. Just as she had gone

after me, it was now my turn to act, to bring her back home. So I reached for her through the cold, stone walls of that cell, grabbed her by the hand and pulled her towards me. I filled myself with her and, in so doing, she was released from the hell that had her. Melie was safe. Mine now... within me; sleeping in the soft down of my senses, wrapped in melodies of moments from the past. Together and with her strength, we would see this through. I could do it, with her help I would rise from this bed and try and live again.

“Love is not a physical thing,” she once wrote. “Love is often nothing but a heavy word tossed into a lake of dispute, in desperation. And will usually sink quickly if that was the intent. Neither is love a feeling, though we can feel pleasure in its presence. It is, I believe, associated with intense pain, like the pain from a wound after a terrible accident, and the numbing pleasure we feel that protects us from that awful agony. Drawn involuntarily towards power we find relief in submission, as you might from a melancholy verse or the tortuous riff from a blues guitar. Has the pain now gone? Ah, but this is not love, because love is not given; it is that which sets love apart from emotion. No, love is hidden within awakening fears and the end of certainty... in the sudden realization of mortality.

“Here is the challenge,” she continued: “To swim beneath the surface and embrace our fears, not to deny them but to understand them; for they are the other side of love. Make ripples, tiny bubbles, then cause a stir. Set love free, flip it over, let love float, it is buoyant in a storm. Anyone can do it.”

Oh yes. I remember everything she wrote, everything she said and everything she did, and will for the rest of my life. Was she a poet? No, I think she was just a portal. It just came out of her, she hardly knew what she was saying or thinking. She was in such a hurry that her mind was ahead of her mouth, so she never stopped and looked back to consider or question. Life was always forwards. Her ideas sprang from experience, they were true, not taught, not sold. When she spoke it was from the soul, they were her words, that she had lived, intimately, and no one else's. She was

real life.

So I met Terry. I needed to ask him about Melissa. I suppose, I really wanted to hear what she had said of me during all those years in Saudi Arabia. It is an awful thing when someone who was once so close dies without a goodbye. You feel as if a part of you has been stolen, a part that rightfully belongs to you, and so you must go in search of that piece of your puzzle; that bit that is you. Terry had been on leave to England for a couple of weeks for the funeral and he'd accepted my invitation to drop in for a chat, the day before he left. I was frankly nervous, especially when I saw this tall, hunched-up figure standing in my doorway, head low, staring across at me from under a sprawling set of eyebrows. We sat down with a drink. There was much I wanted to discuss, and after some formalities I went at it as best I could:

“Look, it’s time to get things out in the open, don’t you think? and become friends. I mean, wow, it’s been five years and we’ve never even met. You don’t know me, I don’t know you. Maybe we like each other and we don’t even know it?”

“Melissa told me you were naive, and it seems you are,” he replied dryly, staring at his shoes. “We both know she was the thing between us, and with her gone there’s nothing left.”

“But, exactly. She was, and still is here... Don’t let her go,” I rattled on, trying to remember all the lines I had rehearsed. “It’s right that you should be angry, I mean, so am I – the shock – you know, it makes you blind sometimes. Hey, there’s good in everything and maybe we can get through this together. We can both sit around and enjoy –”

“She’s gone,” he cut in. “Don’t try and make something out of it. Grow up and get on with living, be a fighter, be somebody for once in your life.”

“I don’t want to fight it. Yes, I know it’s painful now. But see, we’re the only ones who really ever knew her. She was such a beautiful thing, and we mustn’t just throw her away like that. Together we can keep her memories alive, you know – enjoy her

company – as if she’s still with us.”

“Don’t you understand?” There was notable anxiety in his voice, “She’s dead. for God’s sake!”

“No, Terry,” I raised my voice in tune with his. “Not unless you let her die away. You have to face the horror and somehow live through the nightmare with her. Don’t desert her now, or you’ll never get her back.”

He lifted his head and looked at me for the first time. “She’s dead, and she’s dead because of you. She didn’t have to go out there, somebody else would have taken care of you. My wife... me, she was a part of me, it was like I got raped – ME! Can’t you understand?” He looked away. “Yeah, so it’s obvious she didn’t care that much for me. Well, she didn’t, did she? She went after her bloody brother, stupid enough to get himself caught by a bunch of novice soldiers. I don’t know why she bothered with you, you haven’t got anything I haven’t got. But at least I’m not stupid. And that’s it,” he tapped a finger to the temple: “Your weakness got her killed, your stupidity, Brother... You killed her.”

“Yes, Terry, I did. But for Christ’s sake, it was not like I meant to, it was her destiny.”

“What about my destiny? You ruined my life because you couldn’t take care of your own, stupid self. You just expected her to come out there... you knew she would. You wrote her all that mindless crap on the computer, like she was some kind of an angel. And you’re still talking crap now. You, with your pathetic ideals... you couldn’t find a woman stupid enough to fall in love with you, so you convinced her, instead.”

“That’s not how it was,” I replied, trying not to show how upset I was with his last remark. “We’ve got to stop talking about ourselves, stop feeling sorry for our own misfortunes. You know, we can learn so much from her.”

“OK. So, why did she risk her life for you when we had plans, a future? We were going to have kids – for all I know she

could have been pregnant down there; and that... that fucking policeman... that... that thing..." his eyes were turning pink as he stammered on, "That bastard! You know, I was going to be a father... and then... and then that... Why? For hell's... why did she..?"

The voice trailed off into a desolate place, a place I had once been, and I swallowed. It was dreadful to see such pain, worse perhaps than feeling it. Powerless to control it, ugly voyeurism at the very least.

I said: "She did it because she had to. That is who she is. Come on, don't you know that?"

"Oh, right! Now you're going to be sarcastic – shit, you see – I knew it was stupid coming here." He was on his feet, a shirt sleeve to the tears, and I realized I was going to let it all slip away unless I acted quickly. Without thinking I began to talk, or perhaps it was Melie; blurted out a nonsense of a thing, completely unrehearsed:

"She... she must have been hard to live with. At least... that's the way I remember her. I mean, she was such a personality, wasn't she?"

Terry hesitated. "So she passed little messages to you, did she? about us – about me – on her damn computer." He turned back and looked beyond me to the kitchen. "And you had a good laugh about me, I suppose. Well, she was the crazy one, the one with all the sudden impulses. I couldn't get her to settle into family life. All I wanted was some stability, a bit of routine, but it was like living in an earthquake zone. I never knew when the fault would shift next, I just kept praying for another day of calm."

I tried a smile, he had hit her on the head. "She did tell me something once. Not about you, it was for my sake," I said, as Melie secretly began to emerge. "She told me about this tree, like the tree of life – of growing up – and how she'd decided not to hold onto the past. She didn't want to support anybody, I think she thought supporting herself was going to be hard enough. So she

jumped off and went her own way. That's what she wanted me to do, not to rely on anyone but myself."

"Did you take her advice?" Terry asked.

"I wanted to – I'm still trying. She said life was scary and the only way to deal with it was to jump right in. But you know, she's spent her life running away from things as opposed to into them."

It was funny... talking to him, rather than to myself, about Melie. I was recalling her exact words, and in this new light they felt different. As if I was finally listening to her, not reading or trying to decipher, but actually hearing her thoughts. Here was this other voice deep within her saying: never stop believing... in yourself, trusting yourself, giving everything a chance... giving all you've got. It was not the words I should have been considering all this time, but what she was trying to say.

"You know, I think she just wanted a friend," he said with a laugh. "Maybe she wasn't as smart as everyone thought she was, and she was really frightened of love. She wasn't much good at being responsible, but she always pretended she was; she always knew what was the best thing to do but she never did it herself. It was easy for her looking out over the world from her window... thinking she was helping others. She was clever – don't get me wrong – she loved people, like she had all the experience in the world, right there, inside her. Yeah... but she never let me in when I wanted to help her. That meant admitting defeat and she just couldn't handle that."

"You think she was frightened of herself?" I asked.

"Maybe. I couldn't get in to find out. It was like she'd built a wall around herself, and she was trying to recreate this old world inside... even our flat in Riyadh had to be just a certain way: 'Just the way mum likes it,' Melissa always said. She never let go of the past... no! It was her dream, as if she was pulling all those pieces together, replacing the broken bits of yesterday with familiar objects, similar things from today that she could trust. Did I fit in

there, somewhere? Did she love me? I just don't know what to think anymore. At parties, it was always Peter this, and dad that, but never good old Terry."

I lit a cigarette. "Terry, giving is the first act of love. Removing the fear. Melissa tried to tell me that – and she's right." I took a drag. "She happened to grow up with me, I was just there, and for that I'm grateful. But you! She chose you. Of all the men in the world... that was the greatest compliment she could have given, to anyone – and she gave it to you."

A pause. Then: "Yeah, maybe..." he said.

And in that moment I realised I had given her back to him. And he was accepting. It was time for her to leave, now, another was arriving; I had found a friend – perhaps, even, a brother. Melissa was home, she was where she was meant to be. She was with Terry, and he would one day know that she loved him more than me. Yes, I had succeeded. I had unravelled a mystery I didn't even know was there. Not that I necessarily understood, but in part I'd been able to see a way through, because I had faced myself, my fears. This most remarkable of things Melissa had shown me: that I had been quite wrong – about everything, even Terry – but that didn't matter. What mattered was self-belief and the courage to be individual. She, too, had been wrong much of the time, but she'd lived with intent to do good and to be fair, whatever the outcome. She had saved me twice, perhaps three times that year, not because of what she did but because of who she was. And now I live on, knowing that my happiness may be as a result of her unhappiness. Perhaps, it is best this way – perhaps she would agree.

My parents, yes, I love them. But rather than dig up that ancient myth with thoughts of questioning the thing, I will leave the autopsy to one side and simply say that I love them in that 'old fashioned way'. Terry comes over for Christmas every year, and brings Melie with him; and my mum cries, and my father nods. Yes, she is home, she is loved, she is forgiven for being who she was and cherished for being who she is. Her pictures, now, displayed proudly on the mantle piece; fondly touched, never to be

forgotten. I love you, Melie ...

As for me..? I'm married. I'm in love.

How do I know I'm in love?

I don't. But I know I am free of fear. I know I am no longer submerged in doubt. I know I float – therefore – I must be in love.

And there's a tree out there in our back garden. As you can see, two kids are struggling their way up between those old branches, competing to reach the very top. One is called Gerald, after my dad, he's twelve years old. The other is called Melissa, she's eight and a half. My children. My hope for a better World.

...END

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