

The background of the cover is a surreal landscape painting. In the foreground, a small, dark silhouette of a person stands on a vast, flat, brownish-yellow plain. To the left, there is a gnarled, dead tree. In the distance, there are faint, hazy mountains. The sky is a mix of light blue and pale yellow. A large, pale blue sphere, resembling a moon or a planet, dominates the upper half of the image. A woman's face, with dark hair and a serene expression, is superimposed on the right side of the sphere, looking towards the left.

Recall the Deeds as if They're all
Someone Else's Atrocious Story

It Wasn't Me; I Wasn't There!

A Novel

Philip B. Ashton

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A LeanPub Book

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Recall the Deeds as if They're all Someone Else's Atrocious Story OR It Wasn't Me; I Wasn't There! (A Novel)



“A house divided against itself cannot stand.” — Abraham Lincoln

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Family Tree

ON the left is an extensive family tree representing the relationships of the main characters in this story. I hope it serves as a helpful reference point in keeping track of who's who in the story of family betrayals, divorces, feuds, grudges, marriages and other relationships.

Key

A dashed/severed line (—) represents a divorce.

A dotted line (....) represents a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Note: Tammy Jenkins is Richard's former girlfriend, his later one being Lezaan Botha. The relations of other characters, whom are seldom mentioned (such as Ian's siblings, Sheryl and Steve), are not shown here, for the sake of simplicity and space constraints.

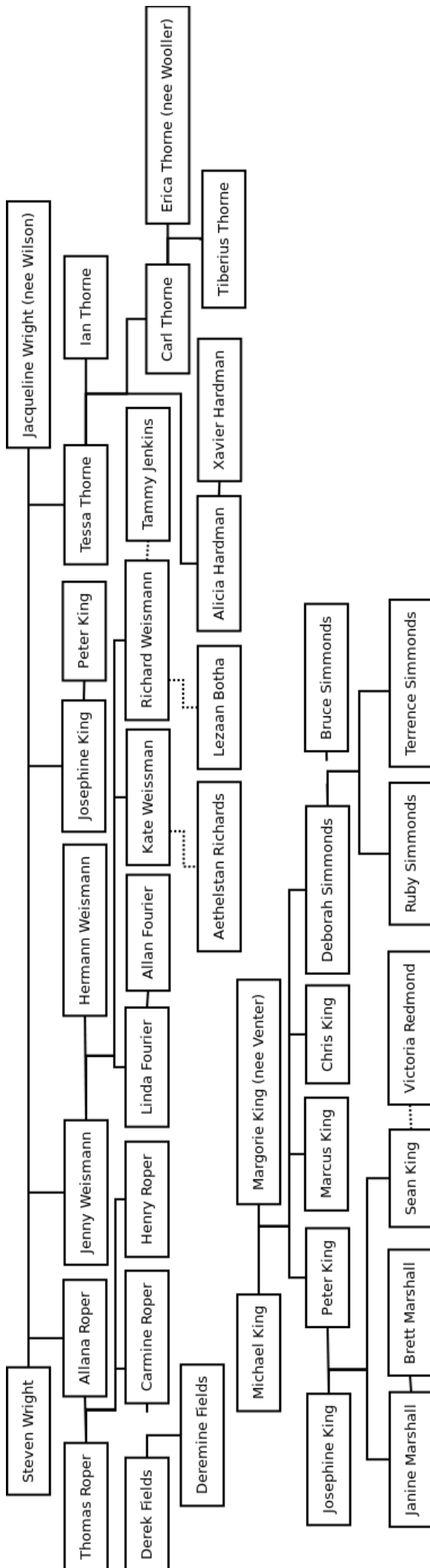


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“... Recall the deeds as if they’re all
Someone else’s atrocious story.

“[...] ... And not to pull your halo down
Around your neck
And tug you to the ground ...

“[...] With your halo slipping
Down
To choke you now ...”

— A Perfect Circle/Keenan James Maynard; The Noose; **Thirteenth Step**

Author’s Note

THIS novel is loosely based on a true story (although exactly how much of it is true, I can’t determine, having been fed a pap of distortions, misrepresentations, untruths and outright lies about the events in question, over many years). Since writers are encouraged to write what they know, I am relating this story in much the same way as it was related to me. I know it well, having played a part in it. Names have been changed to protect the guilty, but the characters should still be recognisable to their real-world counterparts. (I am convinced that *almost everyone* involved is/was guilty of at least *some* wrong-doing, even I, excepting the infants. The question is, “what is/was it?”. For my part, I picked the wrong side in the false hope that nobody would turn on me, not that I am normally one to pick any side but my own, for good reason. Circumstances, however, were not so kind, but that is a story for another time and another book, if I ever write it.)

As Josephine reflects at one point, a wiser person would not have got involved in other people’s petty squabble(s). Wiser people would have kept their opinions to themselves and their mouths shut, but we didn’t. Exactly what the personal (emotional, mental and psychological) cost will be, all told, I cannot calculate. Perhaps I don’t care to.

Content Warning

This work contains themes of alcohol and drug abuse, bigotry and discrimination, COVID-19, mental illness in various forms, racism, sexual assault, strong language, violence and other unpleasant real-life/world topics. Reader discretion is advised.

Dedication

TL;DR: For this, I shall take an excerpt from a song by Visual Auditory Sensory Theatre (AKA VAST):

“Here’s to all the people I have lost. I sometimes wonder just how much you have missed. I’d like to think it isn’t much.”

— VAST/John Crosby; Here’s to All the People I Have Lost

I have made my apologies to “Allana” and “Carmine”, whom had the grace to not just accept them, but even clear me of any wrong-doing. For their grace and generosity, I am grateful. “Janine” and “Josephine”, however, will not forgive me my trespasses, just as I do not forgive those whom have trespassed against me; a trait I get from my grandfather, apparently ...

Out of spite, if nothing else, this book is dedicated to the latter two (my mother and sister), as well as all the good people they have back-stabbed, betrayed, cut off, gaslighted, lied to, manipulated or otherwise ostracised and shunned in pursuit of achieving their own ends: A false narrative that suits them and of which they have convinced themselves and others whom don’t know the whole story. Without all of the people involved, the telling (and retelling) of this story would not be possible (or would likely be no longer than the introduction and prologue).

Given the scandalous nature of the story you’re about to read, the idea was to keep it hidden, unpublished and suppressed until all of the people involved had passed away or at least out of the author’s life, so as to avoid any further unpleasantness. (Further unpleasantness of a different kind happened, anyway, but not as expected.) Most of the people concerned are gone, one way or another. However, since I can neither escape nor outrun those few that remain (despite my best efforts to be free of them), they despise my very existence and find my

presence insufferable anyway, or, simply because I no longer give a fuck about them, I'm going ahead with publishing this, expecting no forgiveness for doing so ... I don't expect the consequences to be any worse than what I've already endured, but I could well be drastically underestimating them.

"It wasn't me;
I wasn't there.
I was stone drunk and it's not clear.

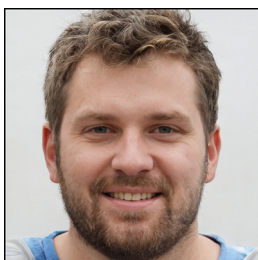
"[...] They smile and shake through the harm they've done,
But it's your little red wagon
And you've got to pull it."

—Jenny Lewis and the Watson Twins; It Wasn't Me; **Rabbit Fur Coat**

Richard is still a dick and a mommy's boy. I don't expect he'll ever tell the truth or apologise for the harm he's done. I don't expect that his parents will, either.

I'm definitely not given to violent tendencies or revenge fantasies for the most part, but I've more than half a mind to kick Richard's real-world counterpart's spine through his hat given half a chance, as Grandpa "Steve" would say. Ditto for Hermann's. The difficulty in that lies not so much in locating them overseas, but in finding any semblance of a spine in either. Every time I edit or reread this story (at least four passes now, by the time you're reading it), I feel so inclined. Failing that, this novel is my vengeance upon my family and it is indeed a dish served cold (but not devoid of spice).

Philip B. Ashton,
March 2024



Introduction: The COVID-19 Years

THE lock-down in 2020 for the COVID-19 pandemic gave me a gift: Time. It made the writing of this story possible, but it is definitely *not* a recounting of our pandemic experiences. If I was to put down in words what happened and what we learned during the viral outbreak, that tale would be a long, boring and semi-biographical book similar to many others. (Instead, I have penned what I hope is a long, interesting and semi-biographical book about something else entirely, which just so happens to have life in the time of that global pandemic as one of its many settings/themes.)

Everyone who is old enough to remember 2019-2021 has a lock-down or COVID-19 story. “COVID” became the new C word that no one wanted to say, but which everyone said anyway, over which we shared jokes, facts and misinformation on social media. TV “news” had never been easier, since it was practically handed to the talking heads on a plate; a seemingly endless loop of numbers and graphs, of interviews with serious politicians and stressed doctors, microbiologists and charity or social workers. I could go on, but that is all I will write about that ordeal.

The hours of blank time were what I had been given, having been required to stay home. Having hours to think helped the past fall into perspective. Imagining a future amidst this chaos was impossible and fruitless. For decades, I had forged ahead relentlessly. My life was structured and productive. I moved rapidly from the office to home, to caring for my family, to shopping, to teaching my yoga class and gardening. A great deal of time was spent visiting my mother and sorting out *her* life, not just my own. The clock was my mistress, punctuality my master. I feared that if I stopped, I would never catch up, so I kept going. I strived, I worked, organised and juggled. I stressed out and thought about how to keep us afloat, how to balance the budget, what would be best for our children. Story sums like we did at junior school kept me awake at night: John earns \$1 200, his mortgage is \$600, electricity \$150, his car payment \$500. The difference was that at school we didn't work with negative amounts. I found out how to calm the demons and keep them at bay — at least most of the time. I became an insomniac; pondering, considering and questioning, but I never found the solutions to life's domestic equations. Still, I kept moving forward, driven by busyness and necessity. Giving up was never an option. That is simply what it was: Giving up was not an option.

There is no one in the world with whom I would rather spend five weeks of lock-down than my beloved husband of thirty-eight years. Thirty-eight years of marriage, that is. Pete has grey in his beard and has been my centre, my sanity and my love since I was seventeen years old. I wouldn't recommend marrying young as a recipe for lasting love, but it has worked for us. We have had times where one or both of us wanted to walk out of the door without looking back. We didn't, because we couldn't afford to leave, we are too responsible and we love each other.

Shaun was with us, too, at this time. Over the years, criticisms both voiced and unsaid, from various corners, have asked why a thirty-something year old son still lives at home. The short answer is, "It's none of your business", but now I know most parents long to have their chicks safely tucked under their wings. He had lived in a place of his own for quite a while, but we decided he should come home (at least until the madness was over), instead of being alone, much as he likes having his own company and struggles to relate to other people.

Janine was only an hour's drive away, down the coast with her significant other of several years, but they might as well have been in another country during lock-down. We sent messages, chatted and kept in contact, but she seemed so far away, what with our cars confined to the locked garage or the parking lot of the local grocery store.

Philosophy has taught me to live in the present moment, although I often found myself thinking of the future: Always planning, anticipating and worrying. Regrets and memories took me to the past and — in the wide-awake spaces of the night — I would try to calm my mind and focus on the present; the warmth of my bed, Pete's soft breathing or snores or the distant call of a fiery-necked nightjar. I controlled my breath. It was an effort; it took work and strength and it was exhausting.

"Something has to give", I thought. "I can't carry on like this for much longer."

... And then something did give: COVID-19 arrived and the whole world had to give up a way of life and learn some new way of survival. The calculations and balancing of finances were no longer relevant, since we were not permitted to travel to work and thus no longer had an income. The well-groomed, brave business face was rested at home. The strain of "the customer is always right" and keeping everyone happy, ensuring Pete's business kept clients and attracted more, the well-planned lessons of downward dogs and breathing techniques ... stopped, almost as if overnight. All the donating of my life blood to various worthy causes ceased. I spent the first week of lock-down inactive. My mind stopped racing and my body followed. Warm autumn afternoons were spent on the bed, my book fallen to the side as I slept, sometimes with

a dog or two beside me. My only decisions were about what to make for dinner and whether I should take a bath or a shower. Being organised meant there was enough food in the house. Laundry detergent and toothpaste were in stock and even if they weren't, I didn't need to pop in to the shops on my way to somewhere else. I could wait for a delivery. I could relinquish my duties. It's no wonder I could hardly stay awake, not having anything critical nor urgent to occupy my mind. I had permission to stop. There were no more expectations, self-imposed or otherwise.

Quiet contemplation illuminated the pointlessness of what Mum referred to as "the family rift". The utter futility of it had already been apparent to some, but I wondered if it had occurred to the others. The worldwide pandemic and the uncertainty of it shone a massive spotlight on all that was excessive, unnecessary or wrong with not just the world and with society, but with my family too. I no longer knew if all of the members of the family were healthy, but I would have heard if they had died (from the pandemic or otherwise). It brought this story sharply into focus, but the telling of it is more complicated than that (as you will soon find out).



Prologue: A Stupid Family Rift

A WEEK before the lock-down, Mum turned ninety. A ninetieth birthday is a milestone worth celebrating, especially for a well-loved mother. Tessa and I decided to follow Mum's wishes to have a quiet, simple celebration with the family. Tessa's daughter, Alicia, and her daughter-in-law are skilled professional chefs, so we knew "simple" would still mean "delicious". I shopped for table décor: Staying with a theme of prettiness, I chose Mum's favourite colours and followed the brief of not spending excessively, nor being overly elaborate.

Then, a ball crashed in from left field. A speeding cricket ball through a plate-glass window could not have been more unexpected, nor as completely unwelcome. Allana wanted to come to the party. My little sister Allana, whom had not spoken to me in six years, wanted to come to the party! I could scarcely believe it. She and Tessa had a distantly polite relationship. The distance was geographical, as well as the two of them having barely anything in common, other than birth parents and both of them being women (the sisters, not the parents). Tessa's intelligence and drive are the opposite of Allana's usual pale persona. (Allana's a real Betty-Sue.) Being number two and four in the paper doll string of four daughters meant Allana was only eleven when Tessa left home to pursue her career in nursing.

This surprising message pinged through on my phone, from Tessa:

I was chatting to Allana about Carmine's divorce. She said she wants to come to Mum's party! Can you believe it?!

The phone lay in my hand as I stared at it, reread the message, then stared some more. I'm unable to define what I felt or thought in that moment. The recent news of the broken marriage hadn't been fully digested yet, but now this latest drama in a long line of Allana's dramas ... The information startled Pete, whom was in the kitchen pouring some wine for both of us. One eyebrow rose, then he took a breath, but said nothing. He is a taciturn man at the best of times, but now he was speechless.

"I don't know what to make of this", I said. "Why *now*, after all this time? If I think of all the times I begged her to join us for Christmas or birthdays and she flatly refused for some stupid reason or other, holding a grudge over some perceived insult or slight..."

I paused, then I took a deep breath in an attempt to calm the flutter in my chest.

“It will be difficult for all of us if she *does* come! I imagine Tom, Carmine and Henry will come too.”

“Don’t forget the baby. Not *one* of them ever seems to have an opinion that Allana has not told them to have in advance, the gormless, spineless idiots! ‘Difficult’ is not strong enough a word to describe how awkward it will be!”

My husband put an arm around my shoulders.

“We will just have to behave impeccably. We will do the right thing and we will rise above.”

Pete handed me a glass of wine, wondering if he should have poured a large one.

“Mum will be thrilled, of course. We’ll do this for her. That’s how we’ll get through it.”

My mind was skipping from thought to thought, from what had been said to what needed to be done.

My phone was gripped in my hand and I typed a response:

This is mind-blowing. Maybe she is seeing sense at last?! Maybe because of the divorce, she is feeling isolated or it has made her re-evaluate what is important in life? Who knows what goes on in her birdbrained head, though?

I have absolutely *no* idea! It could just be another attention-seeking ploy, another of her dramas, for all we know. It will make Mum happy; that’s the main thing.

That was my sister’s response. Neither of us said anything further; we needed to digest this. Janine was unhappy when I told her.

“It will be awful, Mom, and so *awkward*. I’m already *so* over it, before we’ve even seen them!”

However, she did agree that we would go through the “awkward” ordeal for her grandmother’s sake, if not for our own. (“Awkward”, “arbitrary”, or “arb” for short, and “average” are three of Janine’s favourite overused words, as is the phrase “so over it”. Janine is “so over” many things.)

Birth order is thought to be important, but no matter what role it played in our family, the middle children grew up to be resilient, strong and sensible. As I mentioned, Allana is my little sister and I loved her. I am not sure what I feel now after all the anger, the many dramas and the long separation. I have become accustomed to her absence in my life and it no longer hurts. Indifference is possibly the best word befitting my outlook. The *almost* three years that separate us in age meant that we were close friends and allies, but as children she was noticeably the younger. (In some ways, she still is.)

Our Dad loved to travel. He enjoyed discovering new places and he took us with him on little adventures, creating many memorable family holidays. His lack of forethought and planning sometimes left us stranded on a deserted roadside without a spare tyre or staying overnight in a frost-encrusted caravan park while a small-town mechanic repaired the car engine. On our first caravan trip, Mum named the brand new caravan “Shadow” because we watched and laughed as the distorted shadow of the car and caravan wobbled along the embankment next to us like a cartoon of a vehicle travelling too fast. Wherever we went on holiday, Shadow was behind us. The remote places we lived had musical names that are foreign to most: Blantyre, Mbabane, Zomba. The distances we travelled were *vast*; from colonial Africa to Johannesburg to stop over with our maternal grandmother. From there, we travelled to the bleached beaches of Mozambique, tropical KwaZulu-Natal (just Natal in those days) or the sophistication of Cape Town. The corrugated, pot-holed dusty roads meant slow travel and there was a canvas bag of water hung on the front of the car to keep cool. If the dust was overwhelming, Dad would pour some of this water onto handkerchiefs for us to hold over our faces so we could breathe. There were few petrol stations along the way, so Mum would pack a basket of apples, Marie biscuits, sandwiches and a flask of tea. We would lick melted chocolate from our grubby fingers and eat hard-boiled eggs that would sit uncomfortably in my stomach. Dad would steer us into the night until we found a safe place to stop. Sometimes when it got late and we were far from our destination, we would bed down in the car. Before we fell asleep (somewhat uncomfortably at times), the four of us would lie in our sleeping bags, feet towards the station wagon tail gate and watch the blue hump of the caravan change to purple in the brake lights, then back to blue again.

Allana and I were dubbed “the little girls”, as compared to Jenny and Tessa, the “big girls” or “older girls”.

Perhaps it is our differences that cemented a strong bond. We were sent to bed before the others and shadows of banana trees on the tent wall were monsters to Allana but leaves to me. We would hear a rustle in the bushes, followed by a conversation like this:

“What was that?”, she would whisper loudly.

“The wind”, I would answer or, “A nice fluffy owl. Go to sleep; we are safe. Think about the ice creams we will buy on the beach tomorrow.”

“I’ve spent all of my pocket money. Can I share yours?”

She *always* spent her pocket money in one go, even as a teenager. It’s really no wonder she went on extravagantly expensive holidays when not living a cash-strapped, hand-to-mouth existence as an adult.

We would kick the sheets off, gritty beach sand on our feet, and try to find a cool spot in which to lie.

I remember our games. Wherever we were, we played, using imaginations without bounds. Hours passed making a den in the shrubbery, or inventing families for our carefully dressed dolls or on a roundabout converted to a fantasy vehicle. Words were not necessary; our minds transported us to invented realms.

“Shy” was my label, but “cripplingly shy” would have been more accurate. It still is to some extent, but I have learned to overcome it. In spite of it, I made friends wherever we went and Allana tagged along like a lost puppy nobody wants, but doesn’t have the heart to shoo away. One holiday, she told me there was a boy who was bothering her and she asked me to tell him to leave her alone, so I did. The following day, she was happily playing with him, having told him she didn’t know why I had spoken to him like that. I walked away feeling embarrassed, but recognising her inconsistency. Even from a young age, she was a drama queen causing a scene for attention or pitting people against each other for her own entertainment.

Mum would tell anyone who would listen about how ridiculously shy I was. In those days, no one encouraged a child to overcome issues, no one molly-coddled us. We were told to cope, to deal with it ourselves, to be quiet and behave ourselves. Mum was particularly insensitive; one of her favourite pieces of advice was, “For Heaven’s sake, don’t be so wet”. Only Allana was allowed to be “wet”. It made us stronger though; we cope, we accept responsibility for our actions. Well, at least some of us do ...

Our frail mother was overjoyed when I told her Allana and her family would be joining us for her birthday celebration. Fortunately, my older sister, Jenny, and her family had emigrated a year previously. Thankfully, that removed the need to even *pretend* to consider them (seeing as they almost always only considered themselves).

“I was dreading my birthday”, she said. “I didn’t want *two* parties and we definitely don’t want a repeat of last year”.

The previous year, I had stopped by to see Mum on the morning of her birthday, knowing full well that Allana would be there for lunch. I thought I was early enough to miss her, but when I arrived, I saw her car parked under a tree. I decided to go and wish our mother a great day anyway. After all, I had just driven across town in the traffic and didn’t want to turn tail and go back home. My courage was summoned and I went in.

“Hello family”, I called out cheerfully.

Mum’s face lit up. I hugged her and wished her a happy birthday. The moment Allana saw me on the doorstep, her face clenched into an angry mask. Before I had crossed the floor, she picked up baby Deremine (yes, Deremine, not Kevin nor Derek Jr nor even Cameron¹) off the floor and marched outside with Carmine trailing behind her. Henry mumbled an embarrassed “hello”, while Tom went and stood outside the back door in solidarity with his angry wife. Mum was furious and I apologised for disrupting her day as I prepared to leave.

“You don’t need to apologise; you are always welcome in my home at any time.”

The scene left a bitter taste in many mouths, though. Before I left, Mum cut a large chunk out of the cake Allana had baked and told me to take it home with me. I saw the twinkle in her eye.

It was after some careful thought that I created a family chat group for those involved in planning Mum’s party. It was a practical and non-confrontational solution, or so I thought. Up

1 Nobody knows what possessed Carmine and her dopey recent ex-husband, Derek, to give their baby such an asinine and contrived name (apparently a mix of half each of theirs) when they had plenty of existing, if perhaps mundane or unadventurous, conventional ones from which to choose.

until then, Tessa had to relay all information to Allana because she had blocked my number on her phone many years back. The news that Tessa eventually had to impart to our youngest sister was that Allana's suggestion of having the birthday lunch at a smart hotel would not work for everyone and, more importantly, it was not what the birthday girl wanted. Mum wanted to have lunch at my home and I had agreed. Allana didn't like that idea at all. We should be in a "neutral space", she declared — as if our home was an enemy war zone. Mum was adamant on somewhere quiet; she can't hear in crowded spaces and there were two babies to consider. Babies do not know how to behave in restaurants, which makes it stressful for their parents. There would also be considerable cost involved and all of these issues would be solved by lunching at our house. As suddenly as she had changed her mind the first time, she changed it again and sent a message saying it would be "better for her" to not come to the party and she left the group. Better for *her*, always her first consideration, just like Jenny's. Several sarcastic and angry comments appeared on the group (about selfish behaviour and stupidity), to which Carmine accused us of being mean and unkind before she too left. I suggested to her that she could still come (since her mother's issues don't *have to* be hers), but she declined.

You are so down on my mother all of the time! When we spoke to Gran, she was fine with us not coming.

I am not down on your mother, but I do dislike how selfish and petty she is. Gran is *not* okay, FYI; she said she was "dreading having two parties because of the stupid family rift".

"The stupid family rift", as if it was the first one in the family history on both sides of mine. (That's a matter for later, but suffice to mention at this point that both my parents had a "stupid family rift" of their own, with *their* parents or siblings, as did Pete's family.) It's no wonder that history repeats itself ...

"History repeats itself; first as tragedy, then as farce." — George Bernard Shaw

I think I write for all of us when I state that we were all left feeling confused and a little sad. The party made up for it, coming as it did three days before we were ordered to go home and re-

main there to hide from COVID-19, for what seemed like an endless procession of days full of anxiety and uncertainty.

Ian, Tessa and their family (Alicia, Carl, his wife Erica and baby Tiberius), then Richard, Kate and Linda arrived in convoy from Johannesburg. Seniority determined how they exited their cars; bounding out or climbing out slowly and stretching creaking limbs. Shaun arrived after work, to be enveloped by the family. There was more hugging, greeting and laughing. A hollow space under my ribs was soothed by the happiness of having my family near. I looked from face to face and felt grateful that I have so many truly good people to call my own.

The photographs and videos I had been sent of baby Tiberius did not prepare me for his soft plumpness, round-eyed stare and deep chuckles. There hadn't been a baby in the family for a long time and he was such a welcome, cuddly soul. (I had not been allowed to see or have any contact with Deremine.)

Saturday morning began with Tessa accompanying me to my yoga class. I'm a pupil in a class that is held under a fig tree on good weather days. It was a golden autumn day and we stretched, sweated and relaxed. Figs drop from the tree occasionally, making us flinch and a complaint of a dried fig under my mat was the reason the class dubbed me "The Princess", as in The Princess and the Pea.

We made a quick trip to fetch Mum, then went home. The kitchen was cluttered with platters and boxes, bunches of herbs and rich aromas. Linda was frowning at an architectural tower of chocolate cake that Erica had made, palette knife in hand, while Erica supported it gingerly on the opposite side, trying not to smudge the icing. Carl was pounding with the pestle and mortar (referred to in our family as the mortal and grinder, dubbed so by a young Janine).

Granny was greeted and hugged, became the instant centre of attention. How small and shrunken she seemed, enveloped in bear hugs by her vibrant, young grandchildren. She glowed and twinkled with the warmth of the family gathering, gratefully accepting a proffered cup of fragrant cha.

Janine and Brett arrived, the ring of the intercom sending the overexcited dogs into another frenzy of leaping and barking. Another round of greetings ensued, faces smiled, outfits were admired and Tiberius settled happily on the comfortable lap of his Great Grandmother. This is what I wanted; love, kindness and family. Allana was not mentioned and I never asked what she had told Mum, nor what she organised for her birthday. I didn't have the heart to. We savoured the lunch, drank toasts, swapped stories and enjoyed each other's company, amusing anecdotes, jokes and affectionate teasing. Mum was touched and overwhelmed; it was a birthday well celebrated.

The party had taken me a week to prepare: Shopping for food, cooking, cleaning the house, making up beds for guests, hosting, caring and organising. I was exhausted physically and emotionally. It was all the more poignant as we didn't know when we would see each other again. When Tessa and I drove off, having had taken our very tired Mum home, Tessa said:

"I hate this; I never know if I will ever see her again."

My throat couldn't answer; my eyes were heavy with tears. Every week after my visit, I feel this and, *bien sûr*, we never know what is going to happen.

Two days after the party, I woke up with a dry throat. When it became sore, I phoned my doctor.

"Stay at home, use a throat spray and paracetamol if you become feverish", he advised.

My nose started streaming, I coughed and I ordered Pete to move his pillows and a spare blanket to the guest bedroom, for his own sake.

"I've been in contact with Mum and Tiberius and everyone else. What if I have COVID and have spread it to the whole family?", I asked a reassuring Pete.

"It is probably just a cold", he said calmly.

Thankfully, that was all it was, a bad cold and no one else became ill, but my fear was real.

"What if I die?", I asked myself; "what if I die?"

There is nothing quite like a pandemic and mandatory lock-down to spark feelings of anxiety and paranoia (just ask the antivaccinators and tinfoil-hat-wearers), not to mention claustrophobia or hypochondria. I hadn't had a cold or flu in years! The last time I became ill was three years previously. That case was unexpected and more life-threatening. It's a sobering thing to face your own mortality, since it is far more tenuous than we realise.

There are hours in the night that seem darker, quieter and longer than any other time. They are old familiars visited on many occasions: After parties in my teenage years or lying

awake waiting for *my* teenage children to return from parties, during milky night feeds with a wide-awake infant, being summoned by a tousle-haired child waking from a nightmare and, more recently, during the rigid insomnia of menopause. For many years, migraines would wake me after midnight and were a constant in my life, until my hormones bled away, so I am no stranger to experiencing pain in the darkness.

I woke from a nightmare of vines penetrating my body and piercing my organs, but the clenched-fist punch of pain in my abdomen was no dream. A careful shift in position had no effect. A cautious deep breath increased my agony. The red digits of the clock showed 2:35. Pete, lying on his back, slack jawed, is wrapped in a crescendo of snores. I concentrated on the rise and fall of his rattling breath as fears of cancer and death flitted through my mind. The numbers on the clock slowed and I clenched my teeth as pain colonised my mind, clearing all thoughts except to endure.

Time crawled by, but my pain didn't diminish. The angular digits of the clock become 3:35, the witching hour. I had survived my suffering for an hour, but it seemed like a day or two had passed.

"Pete, wake up. I have such a horrible pain under my ribs."

He padded to the bathroom and rummaged in the cupboard, returning, his hands cupped around two pills and a glass of water. His duty done, his hair awry, he slid back off to sleep. The pills disappeared without a trace and the pain intensified.

The Hadedda Ibis is definitely not a song bird, by any stretch of the imagination. Its call is reminiscent of donkeys braying, so the dawn chorus it offers is not welcomed, even on the best of days. However, on that miserable grey dawn, the honking squawks cheered me up somewhat: Morning had arrived. My beloved husband silenced his alarm with a clumsy hand and covered a yawn.

"I am in agony; I need to see a doctor!", I croaked.

Clothes were pulled on hastily, the dogs let out into the dew-damp garden of a cobweb morning, the car reversed from the garage. Holding Pete's arm, I shuffled, bent over and clambered into the car with difficulty. Our progress through the wispy morning mist was both hurried and careful, avoiding potholes and gliding over speed humps. Some houses behind tangled hedges were still asleep behind closed curtains. High walls studded with spikes hid

barking dogs. Looming trees dripped moisture droplets onto pavements. I glanced at Sandra's house as we passed, still closed against the morning, slick dew glinting from gossamer-thin spiders' webs on the wide lawn. I was in a closed-eyed slump when we reached the hospital, my seat belt an instrument of torture.

Efficient doors glided open, sensibly-shod feet hurried and gentle hands helped me onto a bed.

"Mvissus Kving, on a scvale of vwone to ten, how bad is vour pain?"

"Eleven" I answered, then gasped.

"It must be bad", Pete added; "she normally doesn't feel pain."

Pete is also a master of the understatement. His highest praise for something he thoroughly enjoys is "very nice", sometimes even "quite nice".

I have a trained nursing sister for a mother, so I learned to stay quiet and endure all but extreme pain.²

At this point, wretched agony has emptied my mind of all but its insistent presence. My whole mortal being is consumed with intense pain.

I closed my eyes against the bright light, probing fingers and the sharp sting of a needle.

"Breathe, Mrs King, breathe deeply."

I was in a yoga class, listening to these familiar words, the very words I usually say to my pupils. Sluggish eyelids allowed a crack of light to reach my retinas. An unfamiliar face adorned with a cloth cap and kind eyes wavered in my line of sight.

"You are in the recovery room. You are doing well."

² "Pain" is such a small word for such a strong sensation. Fortunately (or perhaps unfortunately), there is a scale for measuring pain (in dols, if I recall correctly, not one to ten).

A warm cocoon encased me, soothing me to sleep. Blocks of ceiling and strips of light move like a conveyor belt overhead, until the end of the trolley bumps the ward door frame. Being helpless is foreign to me. I am the organiser, the manager, the *doer*, in control and on top of things.

Beige crouched apologetically in the room: Beige walls, taupe curtains, ecru blanket and the pale brown chair were my room mates. Investigations revealed three small dressings stuck on my abdomen. There was no pain, even when I probed gently. An absence of pain after such agony was such overwhelming nothingness. It had gone, departed, moved out and left normal in its place. Struggling to comprehend the change, I gave up and slept.

I love my husband's face: A dear familiar landscape, contour lines created by time and good humour. The warm hand onto which I have held so many times before was stroking my forehead, comforting me.

"How are you feeling? Are you sore?"

Shaking my head, I answered:

"I am just tired. What happened?"

The answer surprised me.

"You had your appendix out."

"All that pain and drama for an ordinary old appendix. I thought I was terminal."

"I was very worried about you, so I am relieved it was just an ordinary old appendix."

Words are no longer necessary; Pete held my hand while I attempted to stay awake. I obviously lost the battle because I woke up to find a nurse leaning over me. Next to her was a rotund little man of indeterminate age, probably a decade or so younger than Pete if I had to guess. His bold black eyebrows looked as though they were scribbled onto his balding forehead with a laundry marker.

"Ghello, Mvissus Kving."

His accent was foreign, the “H” pronounced like a clearing of the throat, some words with extra V’s.

“I dvon’t know if vou remember me, but I am Dr Pavlov. Last time I saw vou, vou were in bad vay. I ghave taken vour appendix ouvt. It vent vell, but it vas the vorst appendix I ever see. Ghave you been ghaving earlier pains, nausea?”

I shook my head, searching for my tongue in my dry mouth. I was in no mood to be witty, and I doubt the doctor would find “the name rings a bell” an amusing response, anyway. Ah, *esprit d’escalier* and all that jazz ...

“Vou mvust be *very strong*” he said emphatically, rolling the R’s.

It was stated with such conviction and in a clearly Eastern European/former Soviet Bloc accent, that I *almost* believed myself to be invincible ... almost. “Strong like Russia” popped into my mind, but is prob_ably not a politically correct expression any more.

“Vou are on antibiotik.”

The darting eyebrows briefly indicated the drip piercing my arm, then returned.

“Vour appendix vas nearly pervforated. Vas very serious.”

Patting my blanket-clad knee comfortingly, he continued:

“Tomorrvow, vou may feel vorse, like truck runs vou over, but ve vill manage vour pain.”

With that solemn pronouncement, Dr. Pavlov turned on his heel and strode out. My aura of un-assailable strength leaked away. Having my head-space taken over by pain and then analgesics was a brief respite. Circling thoughts and what-ifs are the usual residents. A drowsy fog nudged them away.

Being passive is not my usual habit. Being helped to shower is not my normal. Opening the locker next to my bed revealed my folded pyjamas, toothbrush and face cream. My book and reading glasses were tucked in with my cell phone and charger. A search for slippers unearthed a pair of grubby, canvas gardening shoes. I owned three pairs of slippers, but Pete is not good at finding things. A packet of ham in the fridge can be invisible, a freshly ironed shirt inexplicably lost. But his heart is in the right place.

Focussing on the bright cell phone screen was a challenge best tackled lying down, one eye squinted shut. I opened Janine's message first:

Mama Bear, Dad phoned me about your op. What happened? How are you? I will come and see you as soon as I can.
Lots of love, XXX

Three messages from Tessa:

Jo-Jo, how are you? How did the op go? You are too old to have appendicitis.

I have been so worried. Take care of yourself and feel better soon. Love you lots.

Are you going to be well enough for our ABC weekend? (No pressure.)

Every year, Tessa, Ian, Pete and I meet at Apple Blossom Cottage, about half-way between our regular abodes, for a long weekend. We were due to go in ten days' time. It seemed possible that I would never want to go anywhere again, except home.

There was also a message from my friend Sandra:

I'll be back home on Thursday. Please organise some sunshine. London is gloomy and grey.

My dear friend Sandra, travelling the world on business and always longing for home. Replying would take too much effort. The phone slipped onto the bed. Then a bear was roaring over and over. The cave echoed as he growled again and again. Mum's commanding, no-nonsense voice interrupted loudly, clear as a bell:

"Where will I find Josephine King?"

I opened my eyes, fighting the drowsiness I still felt. The bear was silenced and became the man across the hall, whom resumed retching, coughing and groaning.

"Mum", I croaked, willing my face to smile, hoping my expression covered my true state.

Soft white hair brushed my cheek, papery lips pressed my forehead. I attempted to sit up, but lifting my head momentarily had to suffice.

"How did you get here?"

"I drove", she announced proudly.

I am usually the designated driver. Octogenarian parents should not *have to* drive across town, but nobody stepped in to help, unsurprisingly. My big sister, Jenny, was always "too busy", "too tired" or otherwise disinterested in the needs of others. Jenny lived only ten minutes away, while Tessa lives in a distant city. Allana no longer exists, except in conversations with Mum.

"I needed to come and check for myself that you are alright. How are you feeling?"

"Fine, thanks", I lied as the fake smile struggled back.

The feet of the dull brown chair screeched in protest as she pulled it close to my bed.

“I had keyhole surgery, so it is not sore.”

I didn't want her to worry. Part of me wanted to lay my head on her shoulder and weep like a child, but there comes a time when the child becomes the parent. No matter how old the child is, the parent remains the worrier.

Mum chatted cheerfully, her stories jumping from one topic to the next: The story of her neighbour's roses, moving swiftly to a political analysis of a newspaper article and a reminiscence of an event long past. I fought to keep my eyes open. I listened and nodded. And then:

“I told Allana that you are in hospital; I thought she should know.”

This was stated with her familiar “don't argue with me” face.

“Oh.”

I inhaled slowly.

“I haven't heard from her and I don't expect to.”

“I do wish she could get over herself and stop being so petty”, Mum sighed.

Geriatric hair is haloed against the window. Low grey clouds mimic my mother's frown.

“She has always had a bit of a chip on her shoulder, ever since your school days.”

My inner voice sniggered, “a *bit* of a chip?”.

Simple conversation was a challenge for me and being generous even more so. I repeated a statement I have made before:

“I think it must be hard for her to see the three of us with stable careers and homes while she has nothing, having never learned to keep anything aside for a rainy day.”

It sounded like the lame excuse that it is, but it was the best effort of my drug-addled brain. Then Mum's response had me asking her this:

"What do you mean by 'shot herself in the foot'?"

"If she hadn't pulled that stunt with Thomas, they wouldn't have lost their house."

Seeing my obvious confusion, she elaborated:

"Surely you must remember the night they had a blazing row and Thomas went to the pub and she fled; before the divorce."

Thoughts shuffled through the cotton wool of my mind.

"The night Thomas left her? I didn't know he had only gone to the pub."

"To get away from the shrill and screaming Allana, I bet", my inner voice added.

"He said he was going out to cool off and when he got home, she was nowhere to be found, so he phoned me to ask if I knew where she was." She asked, "Didn't you know?"

I didn't know. However, I do remember that night clearly. Poor Allana phoned in a flood of tears:

"Tom has left me", she sobbed.

Peter went to fetch her from the coast. Our three-year old Shaun had suffered a *grand mal* seizure a couple of weeks before and I was devastated. I had arranged to go to a parents' support meeting organised by the Epilepsy League. It was important to me because I needed information and answers. But I ended up staying at home with the children while Pete "rescued" my younger sister. Allana languished in her bed for four days and wept, her dyed curls awry. The unusual sight of a (supposedly) grown-up aunt's constant crying upset my children. My busy days were made busier. A red-eyed Allana left to stay with Mum and, as I hugged her, she said this, mysteriously:

“I do love a bit of drama.”

I had wanted to smack her, but I bit back the words “I hate drama, especially yours”. I held my tongue; it was a difficult time for her.

This new information sheds a whole new light on the situation. Unbeknown to me, Tom had arrived home to find her gone. He tracked her down, but the damage had been done. She had lied to me and her three sisters have believed this fabrication for thirty years. Allana knew her husband was escaping to the pub, but that did not suit the script of her self-penned soap opera, so she invented some melodrama.

I shook my head.

“Pete would not have driven down in the dark to fetch her if we had known that. I would have told her to speak to her husband, not run away. I don’t know what to say! I am sure neither Jenny nor Tessa knows the real story, either. We have all believed this lie for thirty years. Allana would rather we thought Thomas weak and stupid than to tell us the truth.”

Mum’s expression was telling; she was filing away this information. She also recognised that I was telling the truth.

In every relationship, there is information that should be kept quiet out of fairness or respect for the other person. There are issues that are nobody else’s business. I don’t advertise Pete’s weaknesses or mistakes; It’s not that I lie; I just don’t tell.

After Mum left, I was restless. Allana is my little sister. I was a three-year-old with a dandelion cloud of hair when she arrived. I protected her, I stood up for her. I let her play with my friends when she had none and helped her with her homework. My younger sister was a giggling, freckled-nose girl who mispronounced her words. (When Carmine was young, she was the mirror image of her mother. In some ways, she still is.) She was a sharer of treats, a co-conspirator and confidant.

School was a challenge for Allana, both academically and socially. She was never strong nor brave. I ran behind and held her bicycle until she could balance. The other children she met were always “mean” or “unfriendly”, or so she claimed. Poor Allana ended up in a “friendless” class *every* time she was moved to a new school, which was often while we relocated in Africa, moving ever southward as the colonies gained independence or plunged into civil war.

At the age of twenty, it appeared she was suffering from depression and the blame was aimed at me. The psychiatrist was told that she had “lived in my shadow”. Surprised by this

accusation, I replied that I did not feel responsible and I really didn't. I mused to myself: Perhaps she was in my shadow because she was riding on my coat tails. Occasionally, there were little childhood squabbles, as is usual, but mostly I had been kind to her and was her protector.

We shared an untidy room, our lives and innermost thoughts for fourteen years, until I left home. She did not want to leave home. "Poor" became her prefix: "Poor Allana", but I loved her.

The circling thoughts were back, vultures in my blue sky. Self doubt was their companion. Regular yoga practice equipped me for living. Logic and philosophy are my scarecrows that scatter the scavenger thoughts that steal my inner peace. A frequent reminder is that in my class there are no comparisons, no judgements and no expectations. We are all on our yoga mats being ourselves. So why is it so easy to judge our family members? Why is it a family hobby we cannot shake, like the bad habit it is? Over fifty years of shared intimate history must have some value. Happiness, anger, mundane memories all jumbled in with half-remembered insults, grudges and embarrassing incidents. Somehow, it allows us to be experts on how we all *should* be, rather than who we *are*.

A metallic clatter was followed by the door opening and an enquiry:

"Would you like some tea, Mrs King?"

I turned to my phone again while I sipped my tea.

I responded to the messages on my phone. The multiple messages on the street chat group were left unopened; negativity and complaints are not welcome in my fragile state. Jenny's message read as follows:

Sorry to hear about the op. Get well soon. I am up to my eyebrows with work at the moment.

The excuse was not necessary, since a visit was not expected. Jenny is the oldest and most complex of the four of us. An enigma even to herself, denial and a mask of perfection are her weapons against the world. She married well in the financial sense. Hermann is a self-made man, burdened by proving that his humble origins do not define him. Wealth is his armour. The couple own several houses, one of which is occupied by Poor Allana and the others (bar the one in which they live) are rented out. Having sacrificed her first home to lies, Allana and Tom are

the tenants of Hermann's investment at the coast. A low rental agreement was struck while the renovations were to be carried out. The builder's rubble, noise and dust proved to be too much for Allana. Below-market rent, which was all that could be afforded, clearly did not compensate for the annoyance. Niggling complaints were messaged to Hermann. There was too much noise. The dust was unacceptable. She needed a wall built to stop the neighbour's dog from attacking her mutt. The niggle became a barrage of text messages, angry emails and phone calls. The normally accommodating and easy-going Hermann became annoyed. One sister phoned me and asked if the other had said anything to me. I lied and said no. The other asked the same question and I lied again. When this was repeated again and again, over several months, I urged them to talk to *each other*. It was not my business, but it was becoming my problem.

It came to a head one Saturday morning. Hermann and Jenny loaded the truck with building supplies and labourers. A concrete beam was leaning dangerously and it needed attention. As the vehicle drove through the gate, an irate Allana flew out of the house in her black satin dressing gown, high-heeled pom-pom slippers clicking angrily across the tiles.

"Get out of my fucking house", she screamed. "I cannot have this noise and mess any more. This is *my* weekend."

She continued hurling angry words, working herself into a frenzy. Thomas was seen through a window, disappearing up the passage. Then Allana pulled her signature move and collapsed dramatically, her expression stricken. Quivering legs permitted her to stagger inside, supported by her reluctant husband. The door slammed shut. The oval of Henry's little face ducked behind a curtain. Fence-sitting Hermann and non-confrontational Jenny were stunned. Mouths opened and lips closed on unspoken words. Hermann took his wife's shaking hands in his own and chased the silent workers back into the vehicle. The Weismanns turned tail and fled the hundred plus Kilometres back home, without another word.

Hermann told Peter that Thomas had neglected to put chemicals into the swimming pool, which had turned a bilious green. Weeds had invaded the new paving. A recently installed cabinet had been destroyed in a carelessly flooded bathroom. Both aggrieved parties contacted me over and over again. Allana was clearly in the wrong, but she didn't see it that way. She emailed and asked again for my opinion. Repeating my recommendation that the warring parties talk *to each other* would have been pointless. Jenny will complain about a person behind her back and smile to her face. Allana will fly into a rage and then fall apart. Neither of them ever apologise. Their inadequacies annoyed me; I was busy managing my own life. So I foolishly gave my opinion:

Dear Allana,

I have been reluctant to interfere in the issue between you (the Ropers) and the Weismanns, but since you have repeatedly asked my opinion, I have decided to write to you. I think you have behaved very badly. Your methods of dealing with conflict are to collapse and let others pick up the pieces or to shout and scream and bully people into submission, which is simply not okay.

You are, at best, a tenant in *Hermann's* house. You know your rent is low because of the inconvenience of the ongoing building. I still think the best option is for you and Thomas to talk (nicely) to Hermann and Jenny. If you are not prepared to do this, then move out of *their* house. Hermann is a generous and patient man, but even he has his limits, which you have stretched near to breaking point. Quite frankly, I think you owe him an apology.

With love and hope,

Josephine

I did not send it straight away. I reread it, I mulled it over. I removed some sentences, I changed words, I asked Pete's opinion. I knew it was not kind. I realised it would not be well-received, but some things needed to be put down in words. Do not ask an honest person for her opinion if you don't want to receive an honest answer. It was despatched, ignoring the rule of going with my gut feeling. In hindsight, perhaps I should have done the latter, but perhaps not.

No contemplation or time was taken for Allana's reactionary message to reach me. A hasty email was flung back. She was furious, reacting in her usual knee-jerk manner. Whatever came into her head was spewed out through her typing. There was no awareness of wrong-doing, nor of bad behaviour on her part. No one deserved an apology, as she saw it. She wanted nothing further to do with me, Hermann or Jenny. It came as no surprise, since it had happened before. What if I had let the permanently angry Allana sort out her own battle with the weak Jenny? It was what a wise sister would have done. Her self-pitying sentence lodged in my mind:

"I feel such a fool for spending all this time knowing the three of you have been talking about me behind my back, and to know that you all hate me really hurts."

Is that *really* what she took from my email? This was the overly dramatic beginning of how the four of us were split apart (or at least in three). It could have stayed as a petty and unremarkable family squabble, but it turned out to be the precursor to something far more horrible and interesting. As you will find out soon, things came to a head at Alicia and Xavier's wedding, when Ian's misgivings about Richard's character turned out to be well-founded ...

