

CHAPTER 21

On a warm August day, Bill Martin admitted to Dolly that he felt "Pretty bad". In fact he said, "I feel so bad, Dolly, that I think we'd better take a walk up to Saint Leonard's, just to let them have a look at me."

She knew that Bill didn't want to go to St. Leonard's, but on the other hand, he had nightmares about dying in the house, and frightening the children. He didn't want their last memories of him to be sad, he wanted them to remember the times he had played with them, times he had sat them on his lap and listened to them read. He had changed a lot over the last five years, from being a brute mainly to his wife and daughter Elizabeth. Would he have changed he wondered if he hadn't become so ill and dependant on his family, or would he have carried on getting drunk down at the Duke, and coming home and giving the family a belting. The family never knew that Bill Martin often looked back over his life and regretted the suffering he had caused his family.

The Sunday lunchtimes he had rolled home at three o'clock just as Dolly Martin would be putting the family's dinner on the big old scrubbed wooden table, and Dolly Martin would begin to nag, nag, nag. "Oh, so you have come home then, left me with all the kids as usual. Violet and Rosie have been fighting all morning and that little bugger Alan's broken Mrs. Bignal's window again with his ball. All I am here is a bloody servant, washing, cooking, cleaning, "and so it went on, until Bill Martin could stand it no longer and would upend the table so that the Sunday dinners slipped down it and would go crashing to the floor. There would be cries of ' you beast Dad ",

and then Dad would give them all a good hiding, including Dolly Martin for nagging. Sobbing they would hug each other for comfort, and a feeling of safety. "There that will shut you all up, now I'm going to bed." Yes, he regretted many things.

He had been in Saint Leonard's almost four weeks. Dolly visited every day and stayed as long as the matron would let her. Dolly watched her husband, sad inside, but brave outwardly to him.

She would pull her chair up to the bed, and sit and hold his hand. When Elizabeth popped in unexpectedly one day she felt quite embarrassed to see them holding hands. Every day his questions were always the same, "How are the children? I miss the children. How much longer before Nellie's baby's born?"

Dolly answered all his questions, and would always add, "Don't keep on talking Bill, you're exhausting yourself." Bill Martin hardly made a bump in the bed now, he was so thin. The nurses made him as comfortable as possible, and always had a kind word for him, and he would try to joke and say, "If I was twenty years younger, I'd chase you around this bed."

The matron in her dark blue frock, and stiffly starched apron and flower like hat, did not find this amusing, but let him get away with it, because she knew he was dying. The nurses were terrified of Matron, and practically ran to do her

bidding, she ruled her ward with a rod of iron, and for this she had a scrupulously clean ward, and patients who were tended with efficiency, but also loving care.

Nellie gave birth to baby James on the fifteenth of September, and the family was delighted it was a boy, now their father would be happy. Mrs. Martin couldn't wait to get to the hospital that evening, and tell Bill the wonderful news.

"Bill, Bill", she said happily, "We've got our first grandson, and Nellie is going to name him after Jimmy, isn't that wonderful?"

"Wonderful, just bloody wonderful. I want you to bring him to the hospital." He saw the look on her face. "No, not here in the hospital. If you stand over the road, I'll be able to lean up in my bed, and see him out of the window."

"You can't do that Bill, you'll hurt yourself," Dolly Martin spoke quietly.

"I want you to do it. Promise me?" Bill coughed his need to see the baby. His face screwed up with the pain of coughing.

Matron had heard him, and sent a young nurse to see if she could ease Bill's discomfort.

"Would you like a little drink, Mr. Martin", she asked.

"No thank you nurse. I've just got a bit excited. I've become a grandfather, I've got a grandson." he smiled wanly.

"Congratulations, that's wonderful news", she said kindly.

Matron popped along to see that nurse was doing her job. "Everything alright Mr. Martin?"

"Yes thank you Matron, everything's fine."

Matron rang the bell for all visitors to leave, but told Mrs. Martin if she wanted to stay she could.

"Thank you, but I've got to get along, my daughter's had a baby boy, and I want to pop around and see him before it gets dark." She kissed Bill and, as she left, he whispered, "You won't forget will you Dolly, about me seeing the baby?"

"No Bill, as soon as he is a week old, and Nellie's been to the church to be blessed, I promise I'll bring him up for you to see."

The following evening Mrs. Martin left the hospital at eight o'clock, and rushed straight around to see her daughter Nellie and baby Jimmy. As she entered the bedroom, she thought what a lovely picture they made, plump glowing Nellie, with little Jimmy suckling at her breast. He was a deliciously fat baby with not a hair on his head. She thought how lucky they were to have been allocated a new flat. No bugs or mice for them.

"How is he, Nell?" she asked, taking him from Nellie now that he had stopped feeding.

"Fine Mum, greedy little devil never wants to stop feeding."

Fred, who was standing at the foot of the bed, said proudly, "If he eats well, he'll grow up into a fine big boy."

"Of course he will, he's a Martin." Dolly said with pride.

"No Mrs. Martin, he's an Eaton."

"Sorry Fred, you know how I like to brag about my family, and I'm so proud I've got a grandson."

She told Nellie and Fred how pleased Bill was that the baby was a boy, and how he had asked to see him. Nellie and Fred agreed that in a week's time, they would all three go together and hold him up for him to see.

It was while they were discussing this that Rosie arrived with Violet in tow, "Mum, Mum you've got to go home straight away. A policeman called at the house and Joanie and Lenny have gone to the hospital."

Mrs. Martin ran so fast that she outran the skinny Rosie who was being held back by Violet. "Come on Vie, run faster", she yelled.

As they got closer to their house, the terrible noise hit them. The wailing and sobbing filled the air. As they entered the passage, they saw Alan sitting on the bottom of the stairs. His shoulders were hunched, and his elbows rested on his knees, and his hands were cupping his tear stained face.

"Don't go up there, it's terrible. Dad's dead."

The two girls pushed past him, and ran into the room, where their mother enfolded them in her arms. Her tears mingled with theirs, as their faces pushed against each other. All the family, were together now, except for Doris who was in hospital again, and Nellie who was in bed with her new-born son. Elizabeth, Lenny, and Joan hugged each other for comfort. Adults they might be, but they cried like babies.

An autopsy was done on Bill Martin. 'What the bloody hell do they want to do that for? They know what he died from. I'm sure some people just like cutting up bodies.' Mrs. Martin wanted her Bill left alone.

On a warm sunny late September day, when Elizabeth was alone in the house, four men brought Bill Martin home in his coffin. Elizabeth let them in, and showed them the small back room with the white sheeted trestle table on which they gently laid the coffin. She was afraid of the body so she quickly shut the door behind her, let the men out, and went back upstairs to the living room.

She made herself a cup of tea, but could hardly drink it, as her hand shook so much with fear. "Fancy Mum leaving me alone to let the men bring the coffin. She should have been here," thought Elizabeth. Dolly Martin had known the body was coming home that afternoon, but she had to go to the coroner's office to pick up important papers, and she had also gone to Hawkes the funeral people to pay them the rest of the money for the funeral.

"I'm sorry I couldn't have been here with you Elizabeth, but you managed alright. I must go down and see him Elizabeth, are you coming?"

"Me? No, not me." Elizabeth looked at her mother aghast, as if to say "how could you suggest such a thing."

"Come, come Elizabeth, don't be afraid, he can't hurt you, he will look as if he's just fallen asleep."

Dolly Martin took Elizabeth's unwilling hand, and together they walked down the stairs to the little back room. As they entered the sun shone through the new lace gold curtains that Mrs. Martin had hung at the window, it beamed across the golden coffin with its shiny brass handles. Mrs. Martin gently pulled Elizabeth towards the top of the coffin, "See, what did I tell you, he just looks asleep." Mrs. Martin gently stroked Bill Martin's grey hair.

Elizabeth allowed herself to look at her father. She took in the beautiful soft silky satin that lined the coffin, and then looked at his face.

"Oh no", she cried inside, "He doesn't look asleep, he looks like a cold white marble statue, just like the heads of the Roman emperors she had seen in the British Museum." She tried hard not to let her mother see how afraid she was. "Come on Mum, let's go, I've seen him now."

"You go upstairs Elizabeth, I want to stay with your father for a while longer. Make a cup of tea, I'll be up shortly."

Elizabeth left the room quickly, the sweet odour of death seemed overpowering. She went upstairs and was sick. The body stayed in the room, until the day of the funeral, Monday. This gave the relatives two

days to come and pay their last respects. White sheets covered the two big windows at the front of the house. The young ones asked, 'Why Mum?' 'It's an old custom to keep the evil spirits out, the sheets stop them from getting into the body.' The children were already afraid, now they were terrified.

A big family a few doors along from the Martins were the Braithwaites. Only two weeks before they had buried their much loved daughter, Sophie. Sophie had been just twenty when she died, but the doctors could find no real cause for death, they said they had tried their hardest to keep her alive, but "she seemed to want to die."

The family firmly believed she had died of a broken heart. When her boyfriend jilted her, they could hear her gently sobbing herself to sleep every night.

Mrs. Braithwaite called at Mrs. Martin's with an armful of black costumes for her and her daughters to wear to their father's funeral. She also gave them hats, and shoes.

"Don't thank me Mrs. Martin, I know money's tight, and I thought you could make use of them, we can't bear to look at them, since we buried our beautiful Sophie," with a sob in her voice Mrs. Braithwaite hurried away.

On the day of the funeral, all the Martins and their hordes of Aunties, Uncles and cousins gathered in the tiny house in Maria Street. All wore black.

The pavement was covered in wreaths and bouquets. When the coffin was finally brought out of the house, the crying and wailing started up again. Mrs. Martin's large white cross with a single red rose in the centre was laid very gently on top of the coffin. The sun shone on the gleaming gold of the polished wood.

Ray had been away when Bill Martin died, but had managed to get back in time for the funeral. Elizabeth was glad of his comforting arm about her shoulders as she sobbed her grief. Mrs. Martin was crying and trying to keep her arms around her youngest three. Fred sat in the back of one of the black limousines trying to be of help to Nellie but she was distraught. She had left her baby Jimmy with her mother in law.

"Fred" she asked, "Do you think that it's possible, that Dad's soul could go into Jimmy? I would like to think that. People say that as one person dies, another is born."

Fred gave her the answer she wanted to hear. "Of course. How many people, including your mother have said how much like your father he is." She was a little comforted, but continued to sob all the way to the cemetery at Stoke Newington.

When Bill Martin was finally laid to rest, the sobbing gradually ceased, and people became a little more composed. Back at the house, a spread of

ham, cheese, pork pies, and cake was laid out. The men drank beer, and the ladies gin and tonic, or sherry. They even began to joke a little about Bill's early life, and how he had always been the life and soul of the party.

Auntie lizzie said yet again to Elizabeth, "I did tell you he wouldn't make old bones."

Ray was furious, and although he wasn't a member of the family he snapped, "I don't think Elizabeth needs reminding of that."

The clan's heads lifted as one. They looked at him as if to say, "How dare you speak to one of our family like that, you are not family." He was cold-shouldered by all except the immediate Martin family. Ray didn't care, his sole objective in life was to love, and protect Elizabeth.

Auntie Rose who had known Bill since she was a little girl, drank too much gin, and began to weep, and talk about Bill incoherently, until she slid down the wall, her glass still in her hand.

Auntie Nellie who had never got on with her sister Rose, reminded everyone of the Christmas Eve all four sisters had gone to Hoxton market and bought a chicken each for their families dinner on the following day. It was evening. The shops and pubs stayed open until twelve o'clock in the morning if there were still customers about, and they decided to pop into a local pub, although

unaccompanied ladies were frowned upon, and have a couple of glasses of beer or gin. By the time they arrived back at Dolly Martin's house they were all a little bit tipsy. Auntie Nellie called Auntie Rose a right old snob, because she had insisted on her chicken having the giblets removed. A row ensued, and as Auntie Rose lost her temper she said, "I hope your bird is tough and stringy like your miserable self". Taking her chicken out of its brown carrier bag, Auntie Nellie swung the chicken by its legs towards Auntie Rose's face, whereupon it curled itself about her neck like a white feather boa.

Auntie Rose was too drunk to take offence at this story being told at Bill's funeral.

Mrs. Martin was glad when, at half past ten, the last of her relations left so that she could start to get her life in order, and this she did with a quick, "Off to bed kids, school in the morning. And you three", she said nodding at Lenny, Joanie and Elizabeth, "Need to get your sleep if you are going to get up for work tomorrow."

As she went slowly down the stairs to her bedroom, she knew life would never be the same.

CHAPTER 22

Elizabeth and the rest of the family carried on their lives as normal; all seemed to have shut their father up inside their hearts. They no longer cried after the funeral, and very rarely talked about him. They kept their thoughts about the loss of their father to themselves. Their mother was so busy as usual taking care of the family, that she only allowed herself the comfort of crying when she was alone in her bed. Elizabeth was still sharing her bedroom with Violet and Rose, although not all in one bed any longer, so she could not let her emotions out by crying, although every night was a torment.

She was filled with sorrow, anger and guilt. "Why oh why, did he have to go and leave me when we had just become good friends?" her thoughts filled her with torment day and night. Outwardly she seemed her normal self, just a little quieter.

Before she left for work at the Co-op one morning her mother asked, "Are you alright Elizabeth, you look a little pale?"

"Yes, of course I'm alright, if I look a little pale I'll put a bit more rouge on."

Immediately she took out her little box of Phulnana rouge, and rubbed the soft little pad over her cheeks.

"There, do I look better now?" She smiled, and gave her mother a quick peck on the cheek, before going off to work. She no longer ran along the road, her legs felt as heavy as her heart. "Oh God, why did you have to go and die Dad? No, no, I won't let myself cry, my eyes will be all red. I have got to be brave like my mother", all these thoughts raced through her head, until by the time she got to work, and waved a cheery hello to the girls, she had a thumping headache.

She fooled everyone, but Ray.

She had distanced herself from him, and refused all his offers of taking her to the pictures, he wasn't much of a dancer so he didn't suggest they go dancing, he didn't want to make himself a fool in front of Elizabeth. Also he thought jealously, all the young men at the Tottenham Royal would want to partner her. Although she had grown a little quieter, she still looked a million dollars, and still turned heads wherever she went. Every day she would change her hairstyle. Sometimes it would be a mass of tiny curls bobbing about on top of her head, another day she would wear it loose like some exotic gypsy. She never left the house without her bright red lipstick and thick mascara on her eyelashes. She joked with her mother, "It's a service for the public, I don't want to frighten them with my bare face."

Lenny joked with her, "Yes, I can see how much better looking you are with a baboon's bottom painted on your face." Elizabeth playfully punched him.

Seven months passed before Elizabeth began to feel remotely like her old self. So feeling a little bored, when Ray asked her if she would like a ride up to Epping Forest as it was such a beautiful May day, she was surprised to hear herself say yes. Ray was over the moon, but just managed to conceal his great joy.

Looking through her clothes, Elizabeth decided that her black and white checked dress with its matching headband would be her best bet. It had a full skirt and she would be better able to peddle without showing all and sundry her legs. On the other hand she hoped that the skirt wouldn't catch in the chain or she would probably end up over the handlebars. She put on a pair of flat black shoes, how she hated flat shoes, she only owned the one pair for emergencies.

Mrs. Martin watched them walk down the street together from behind her lacy curtains. She loved Ray like a son, and her dearest wish was that somehow Ray could persuade Elizabeth to marry him. She didn't hold out much hope, because Elizabeth had always been drawn to men who excited her, and Ray was a gentle quiet man, who gave in to Elizabeth no matter what she said or did.

Ray and Elizabeth hired two bicycles from a man in Pownall Road, at one and sixpence for the day each, and they set off for Epping Forest. Ray was a bit worried about Elizabeth cycling the seven miles to the forest, but he need not have worried, she was as strong as a horse. When they reached the

little green shed opposite the Rising Sun pub, they stopped to have a cup of tea, and a piece of their delicious bread pudding. Wheeling their bikes back across the road to the lake opposite, they found a soft grassy secluded spot to sit, they put their cardigans against the springy hedge and leaned back, the warm May sun warming their faces. Elizabeth straightened her skirt, saying, "Damn, I've got grease on my dress from that bike."

"Don't worry about it Elizabeth I've got some good stuff back home that will remove that, working with lorries now there's not much I don't know about removing grease."

"Thanks Ray, you are good to me, even when I treat you badly."

"Of course you don't treat me badly, if you do I must ask for it," he took this as a sign that Elizabeth was beginning to like him more than as a brother, and he gently picked her hand up, and cupped it gently between both of his.

Elizabeth jumped away, as though she had been struck, "Don't do that Ray. I've told you a million times, there can never be anything between us. I haven't had any real feelings for men for years."

"I think it's because you're all mixed up, your father's death seems to have hit you really hard, not surprising really, he was such a good man."

"Good man?" It was like an explosion, it was said with such ferocity." You don't know what you're talking about. You want to know why I'm mixed up, well I'll tell you."

Elizabeth's face was filled with anger, but tears glistened in her eyes as she began to tell Ray the story of what happened to her when she was just a little fourteen year old girl, with a pudding basin haircut and short white socks.

"I had come back from evacuation expecting to start work straight away, but the authorities said I had to be fourteen during term time before I could leave and start work. So I had to attend Scawfell Street School, because my birthday was on the thirteenth of November. A true Scorpio I am," she allowed herself a wry smile. "At this school was a little blonde girl with pale blue eyes, she was so thin, I used to think of her as the little matchstick girl from the fairy story. I'd only been there a couple of weeks when I caught three of the school bullies, spitting at her, and kicking her bone thin legs.

As she had cowered against the wall, they also tormented her with shouts of "Your mother's dead, you're mother's dead."

Elizabeth, who had been looking down while she related her story to Ray, now looked up to see if he was really listening. Ray just nodded and said, "Go on."

"I waded into the three boys, and they soon ran off, not only was I a good fighter, but I also had a big brother Jimmy, and they knew it.

Veronica and I became good friends, wherever I went in school, Veronica followed like my shadow. After school I would walk with her to her home in Clangour Street in Hoxton, and was surprised to find it so much different to my own. It had carpets and rugs on the floor, and a green Rexene three piece suite in the front room. The back room she called the dining room and this housed a polished table and four chairs and, what I loved most of all, little pretty lacy doilies, sitting under plants or ornaments. Every evening we would play house until her father came home from work, and then we would get his tea ready, and I was always invited to stay. I really loved being with them. No longer was I getting a good hiding at home every time my father as much as looked at me. Why I had this effect on him I'll never know, my mother always said it was because I was so much like him.

Anyway, when half term arrived I decided to ask Veronica if I could stay the night. I lied and said it would be all right with my mother, because I had already told her about Veronica and her father. I had never mentioned that Veronica's mother had died the year before. One night turned into two and then to three, and before I knew it a week had passed, I was so happy. All day we played at "house" sweeping, dusting, and getting Veronica's father's tea ready. In the evenings all three of us sat in the front room playing games. We played snakes and ladders, lotto, and snap. Tom, Veronica's father seemed happier than when I had first met him, maybe he

was happy, because little Veronica was no longer lonely, or frightened to go to school, and then on the Friday night just as Veronica got the cards out, there was a terrible crashing on the door.

I somehow knew it would be my father, so I ran and opened the street door, before Tom or Veronica could get to it.

My father's face was contorted with rage; he stepped inside the passageway and grabbed me by my hair. Tom ran forward to help me, but my father was like a man demented. He smashed gentle Tom straight in the face, and blood began to pour from his nose. Veronica was terrified she was standing against the wall, stiff with fear. I somehow had the feeling that she had never been hit in her life, except by the bullies at school. Tom was holding on to the stair rail, when my father screamed at him:

"You bastard, you dirty filthy bastard. Thought you could get away with it did you? Sleeping with my fourteen-year-old daughter, the same age as your own daughter. The likes of you should be hung, and if I had a rope right now I'd do it."

The shock of horror on Tom's face was terrible to see, it seemed to drain any strength he had out of him. He started to say, "Mr. Martin", but my father just pulled me out of the house, and along the road. From Clinger Street to my house, he punched, kicked, and swore at me. He was still holding me by what

hair I had left on the top of my head, and every now and again he would put his face right up close to mine, and scream, "You whore, you effing whore. I always knew you'd turn out no good, and now you've proved it to me."

When we arrived at my house, I was glad that it was dark and cold, no one was standing on their doorsteps chatting, as they would do in the summer. I rushed up the stairs, and went over to my mother in the living room, and tried to explain to her quickly that I hadn't done anything wrong, I had only been playing with Veronica.

We had gaslight then, and my mother couldn't see just what my father had done to me, so she just said, "I think you had better get into bed quickly, be quick he's coming up the stairs now."

The next morning, I couldn't move. My whole body was a mass of bruises and cuts, my lips were split, and I had lost tufts of my hair.

My mother came in with a cup of tea as usual, and I could see by her face how shocked she was. She was frightened of my father too, but she ran downstairs and I could hear her screaming, "You've gone too far this time Bill, you could go to jail for what you've done to her." Of course no one ever went to jail for beating their kids; it was a regular occurrence in our street.

My mother came back up the stairs and screamed at Violet and Rose to go downstairs. They were not old enough for school yet, so she told them to wait until she came down, and she would make them some tea and toast. Nellie she sent downstairs to get the tin of Germolene, and between them they washed all my cuts and grazes, and applied a thick coating of Germolene."

It was at this moment that a little grey squirrel decided to run across the grass, he ran straight up a tree, and settling on a branch, sat staring down at them with his sharp beady eyes. Neither Ray nor Elizabeth commented on the squirrel, as they were both feeling so emotional.

Elizabeth allowed Ray to put his arms about her, and hold her close to his chest, as he did so the floodgates opened and Elizabeth began sobbing.

"That's right Elizabeth, let it all out, you will feel so much better after you've cried." He held her closer to comfort her; he was shocked listening to her story. He had never seen Bill Martin do anything more than give the kids a back-hander when they spoke out of turn.

'Why didn't your mother do more to protect you Elizabeth?'

"She did, but she often got a good hiding herself, and she always seemed to have the mentality that whatever my father said was right. She once said she'd always vote Labour, because my father voted Labour. So I

carried on as usual until I was sixteen, and I told him I would kill him if he ever laid a hand on me again. He never did, but the mental cruelty never stopped until after I came out of the ATS."

Ray gently wiped Elizabeth's eyes with his handkerchief. "Tell me Elizabeth, what happened after that morning?"

"Well, I didn't go to school, because apart from all the bruising, and cuts, I also had two black eyes, in fact I never went back to school. My mother sent the usual sick notes in, and at Christmas I started work. I felt really sorry for my mother, she was seven months pregnant with Alan and she was forty-two. After that, thank God, she was too old to have any more babies. She was too embarrassed to ask me about Tom, but I think she knew that nothing had happened. Even the family never ever asked me about that night, so all these years I have never spoken about it."

"Now that you have told me Elizabeth, I bet you will begin to feel better. Always try and remember that you and your father ended up the best of friends before he died. Think how terrible it would have been if you had still been full of hate."

Elizabeth pulled away from Ray, and ran her hands through her hair, she looked into Ray's soft blue eyes saying, "I once read somewhere that hate is really love turned around. I believe that, because although I hated my

father when I was young, I couldn't help hoping that one day he would love me like the rest of the family."

Just as Ray wiped Elizabeth's tear stained face again, an elderly couple out for a walk in the forest, looked at Elizabeth, and almost glared at Ray. "Are you all right dear", they asked.

"I'm fine thank you, I just had some grit in my eye", she lied.

The grey haired old couple waved their walking sticks at them smiled, and went on their way.

Elizabeth heard the old lady say, "A lover's tiff no doubt."

CHAPTER 23

On returning home from the forest Elizabeth felt strangely at peace for the first time in years. Ray had understood how mixed up she had felt about her love hate relationship with her father, he didn't criticise her father, he just told her he understood, and felt great sympathy for her.

The house was bedlam as they walked into the living room. Alan, Violet and Rose were quarrelling over what to call the new puppy and Lenny was playing cards with his friend Dave. Nellie had called in with baby Jimmy and Mrs. Martin was singing to the baby, "Bye Baby Bunting, Daddy's gone a hunting, gone to fetch a rabbit skin to wrap my Baby Bunting in. The only person missing was Joan, and Elizabeth guessed that she was out with her new boyfriend Denis. Joan was besotted with Denis, and the family realised that an engagement was in the offing.

After the tranquillity of the forest, Elizabeth found the noise emanating from the family too much.

"I think I'll just pop up the road and get some cigarettes from Bright's, I seem to have run out."

'What do you want to go up to Bright's for, Bignal's on the corner will have them." Mrs. Martin looked at her quizzically, "Everything alright Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth jumped down her mother's throat. "Will you stop asking me if everything's alright, of course everything's alright. I've had a lovely day in the forest, and now I think I'll go out. Is that OK with you," she snapped. She changed her shoes for a pair of high heels, and pulled a black jacket on. The May evening had turned a little chilly.

Mrs. Martin just raised her eyebrows to Nellie as if to say, "I know something's wrong," but she carried on singing to the baby and rocked him back and forth, and baby Jimmy closed his eyes and went to sleep amid all the noise going on in the room.

Ray caught up with her by the time she reached Kingsland Road. "Can I walk with you Elizabeth, I know you left the house to get some peace and quiet?"

"Sure, I'm just going to walk along the road, and look in the shop windows. It'll be boring for you Ray, I'm only interested in looking at the ladies clothes, and shoes." She smiled at him, she didn't really want to be alone with her thoughts, and yet being with all the family after such a traumatic day had been too much for her to cope with.

When they came to a shop window full of bridal gowns Ray remarked, "You'd look beautiful in that Elizabeth."

“Now Ray”, she chided him, “What have I told you?”

“O.K Elizabeth, we’ll just be friends, but even friends can go to the pictures together. Let me take you on Wednesday, they’ve got a technicolour film on at the Savoy.”

Thinking back to how kind and understanding Ray had been throughout the day she shrugged and said, “if you like, but you know that it doesn’t mean anything.”

Wednesday arrived and if Elizabeth could have known the effect she was having on Ray, she probably never would have gone. As she entered the room she asked jokingly, “Will I do?”

“You look marvellous Elizabeth, you’re the best looking girl in the street.”

She had chosen a white crepe dress with red roses on it, white shoes and a handbag, and she had tucked a little artificial red flower fixed onto a comb in her hair. “I bet I really do look a bit like a gypsy girl now Ray?”

Ray blushed, and knew she was alluding to the fight he had over her down in the pub at Dorchester.

“Oh go out you two. Do you know Ray, she’s always fishing for compliments? You know you look good so why don’t you pack it in.” Young Rosie was nearly

fifteen and had blossomed at last. From a skinny, sallow little girl she now looked very much like Elizabeth, except she had a very large bust. "Probably comes from all that swimming you used to do," her mother had once said accusingly. Big busts weren't looked upon as very nice, but Rosie was pleased that all the young men thought they were very nice indeed, so she wasn't bothered about what her mother thought.

"What are you going to see Elizabeth?" she tried to hold back how pleased she was that Ray was taking her daughter out.

"It's a technicolour film at the Savoy, I believe Rhonda Fleming's in it, can't remember the title though. She always looks good in colour, her flame red hair against the blue dresses she wears, always gets her, her man."

"Oh it's one of those soppy old love films then?" Alan stopped playing with the puppy, now named Rex, to look up at them.

It was a lovely warm evening as they walked down the street, with all the chattering neighbours taking note. Elizabeth said "Hello" to them all as she passed, and whispered to Ray, "They will have us married before we get to the end of the street. Can you imagine me Ray, just like them, wearing a crossover pinny, with half a dozen kids around my ankles?"

"Would that be so terrible, Elizabeth?" Ray said quietly, "being married, I mean?"

Elizabeth said nothing.

They had a wonderful evening at the pictures, Ray of course as was the custom, bought all the cigarettes and sweets, as well as paying for the tickets. Sitting in the back row Elizabeth could feel the warmth of his arm next to hers. She was surprised to find she was tingling, and the fine hairs on her arm were standing up. She then shivered, she couldn't understand what she was feeling, and when Rhonda Fleming's lover died she found she was crying. What is wrong with me she thought, I've not felt as emotional as this for years.

On the way home, Ray slipped an arm around her waist and she didn't ask him to remove it, she found it comforting, and before they opened the street door Ray turned her towards him and gently kissed her on her lips. As she didn't push him away Ray kissed her again, but this time with all the pent up passion of years waiting. Elizabeth felt a flame flicker through her, and kissed him back just as passionately.

Ray realised he had lit a fire in Elizabeth and grabbed the moment. "Elizabeth, I know you probably think I'm rushing things, but if you married me, I would take care of you for the rest of your life, I would see that you never went without again. I will work my fingers to the bone for you, and promise you I will take you out of Maria street. I love you, Elizabeth, and will do so until I draw my last breath."

“Don’t be so dramatic Ray,” but she didn’t pull away when he began to caress her back, and ran his fingers through her hair. She leaned back and let him kiss her throat, as he did she felt the flame of love throughout her body. She kissed him with such intensity that she shocked herself.

“I think we’d better go in no Ray, what would the neighbours think if they could see us?”

Elizabeth felt almost afraid of her feelings, and when Ray asked her again to marry him, her feelings completely overwhelmed her, and she realised that here at long last she had found real love. It had been here for almost two years in this kind young man, but she had been unable to recognise it because she had been traumatised by events in her past.

Looking up at the midnight sky ablaze with it’s diamonds, Elizabeth said softly, “Yes Ray, I’ll marry you. What did Bette Davis say at the end of one of her films, why ask for the moon, when we have the stars.”