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Unravelling Oliver

Written by Liz Nugent

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Unravelling Oliver

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For my mum, with love and gratitude

1. Oliver

I expected more of a reaction the first time I hit her. She just lay on the floor holding her jaw. Staring at me. Silent. She didn't even seem to be surprised.

I was surprised. I hadn't planned to do it. Usually when you hear about this kind of thing, it is the 1950s, and the husband comes home drunk to his slovenly wife from the pub and finds that his dinner is cold. On the contrary, it was 12 November 2011, a wintry Saturday evening on a south Dublin avenue, and Alice had prepared a delicious meal: lamb tagine, served on a bed of couscous, with pitta bread and a side dish of mint yoghurt. Though the lamb was a tad lukewarm by the time she presented it, I really couldn't fault it. I had washed the meal down with two glasses of Sancerre, while Alice prepared the raspberry roulade for serving. I certainly wasn't drunk.

But now, here she lay; the lower half of her body nearly hidden behind the legs of our mahogany dining table, her arms, head and torso curled inwards like a question mark. How had she fallen into that shape? There must have been considerable force behind my closed fist. If the glass had been in my hand, would I have stopped and put it down before I hit her? Or would I have smashed it into her face? Would it have shattered on contact and torn her pale skin? Could I have scarred her for life? It's very hard to know.

The words that come to mind are 'circumstances beyond our control'. I emphasize the word 'our', because, although I should not have done it, she really should not have provoked me.

The phone rang. Maybe I should have ignored it, but it might have been important.

'Hello?'

'Oliver. It's Moya. How are things?'

These rhetorical questions irritate me. 'How are things?', indeed.

Sorry, Moya, I've just punched Alice in the face and she's lying on the floor. And we've had a marvellous dinner.

Of course, I didn't say that. I made some ham-fisted attempt at an excuse and bade her farewell. I waited for the reciprocal adieu.

There was a moment's silence and then:

'Don't you want to know how I am? Where I am?'

I was short and to the point. 'No.'

Another silence. And then, whispered, 'Oh right, OK, is Alice there?'

Go away, you stupid irritating woman.

I didn't say that either. I told her that now was not a good time. She tried to inveigle me into a conversation, prattling about her new life in France. Even amid the turmoil, I could tell that she wanted me to be jealous. Bloody Moya. I ended the conversation politely but firmly.

I thought that the decent thing to do was for me to leave the house immediately. Not permanently, you understand. I thought there was more chance of Alice getting up off the floor if I wasn't looming over her. I went to get my coat from its peg in the hall. It was a little difficult to do up

the buttons. My hands suddenly seemed to be too large for my gloves.

Two hours later, I was on my third brandy in Nash's. Nervously, I buttoned and unbuttoned my shirt cuffs. It is a habit from childhood, a thing I do when I am distressed. Even John-Joe commented on my rattled demeanour when he served me. Brandy would not have been my normal tipple. But I had had a shock, you see. Now I *was* drunk.

I wanted to phone Alice to see if she was all right, but I had left my mobile behind and I thought that perhaps borrowing somebody's phone would make a bigger deal of the situation than it warranted. Don't get me wrong, I knew it was serious. A significant error of judgement had been made. She should not have ended up on the floor.

I am aware that I am not the easiest of people. Alice has told me so. I have no friends, for example. I used to, many years ago, but that really didn't work out. We drifted apart and I let them go – voluntarily, I suppose. Friends are just people who remind you of your failings. I have several acquaintances. I have no family either to speak of. Not in the sense that matters.

Over the years, Alice has never pried, has never been too curious. In fact, I would describe her as habitually obedient with just an occasional rebellion. I am not, have never been, violent.

I went to the bar and bought a packet of cigarettes. Strong ones. I was worried that my hands were still unsteady. Isn't brandy supposed to help at a time like this? Or is that an old wives' tale? Old wives.

Outside in the 'beer garden' (a yard with half a roof beside the front door), I lit my first cigarette in years. Barney Dwyer, a neighbour from the Villas, approached from the public bar. Barney spent more time in the beer garden than inside the pub.

'Thought you were off them?' he said.

'I am.'

'Jaysus,' said he, a swagger in his voice and sucking on a Rothmans, 'they couldn't break me.'

Here we go. Barney prided himself on his forty-a-day habit. When the smoking ban was introduced, most of us did our best to quit. I am proud to say that I was the first to succeed. I became known as the man with a 'will of iron'. Barney, on the other hand, made no such attempt. If Barney had never smoked, he would have started the day the ban was introduced. A contrary bugger if ever there was one. Thin head, big ears.

'Welcome back,' he said.

'I'm not *back*, I'm just having the one. It's been a bad day.'

'Jaysus, Oliver, it's never just the one. You're back on the fags. Face it.'

I threw my almost smoked cigarette on the ground. Stamped on it. Tossed the packet containing nineteen cigarettes at Barney.

'Keep them,' I said. 'Go on, kill yourself.'

My wife had finally brought out the worst in me. It was most unexpected. I had always been fond of her, in my way. She was a marvellous cook, for example, after all the gourmet cuisine courses I made sure she attended. Also, she could be very athletic in bed, which was nice. It is

terribly sad to think of such things now, considering her current state.

We met at the launch of a book she had illustrated back in 1982. My agent wanted me to meet her with a view to her doing the illustrations for a children's book I had written that he was pushing around to publishers. I resisted the idea of illustrations initially. They would just distract from my text, I thought, but my agent, I admit it, was right. The drawings made my books far more marketable. We were introduced and I like to think there was an immediate . . . something. Spark is not the right word, but an acknowledgement of sorts. Some people call that love at first sight. I am not so naïve.

Neither of us was in the first flush of youth. Both in our late twenties, I think. But she was lovely in a soft way. I liked her quietness and she made few or no demands on me. She just accepted whatever attention I gave her, and then withdrew into the background without complaint when I did not require her presence.

The wedding happened very quickly. There was nothing to be gained by hanging about. Her frail mother and half-witted brother stood behind us at the altar. No family on my side, of course. We didn't bother with the palaver of a hotel reception. We had a rowdy meal in a city-centre bistro owned by a former college friend, Michael. Barney was there. Back then I quite liked him. He was very emotional at the wedding, more than anybody else. One couldn't blame him, I suppose.

We rented a spacious flat in Merrion Square for a few years. I insisted on a big place because I needed privacy to write. I can only write behind a locked door.

Those were good times. We made a bit of money when nobody else did. It made financial sense that we would collaborate on what was becoming quite a successful series. During the day we would retreat to our separate corners to work. Me, producing my books. She, cleverly matching pictures to my words. She was good at it too. Her work flattered mine appropriately.

I became quite well known as a critic and occasional scribe for the weekend newspapers and for an infrequent guest spot on televised chat shows. In those days, everyone was more discreet and low key about their achievements, their successes. Not like current times – I can't tell you how often in the last decade I was approached about partaking in a 'reality' show. Heaven forbid. Alice avoided all of that, which suited me really. She did not like the limelight and she underestimated her own contribution to the success of my books, insisting that my work was more important, that she was just a doodler. She was timid and didn't even want it known that we were a husband and wife team in case she would be 'forced on to the telly'. Rather sweet, and it meant that for a lot of the time I could continue my life as a seemingly single man. It had its rewards. Truthfully, she could not have been a better helpmate.

Alice's mother died suddenly in 1986, at the end of our fourth year of marriage. Thanks be to God. I can't stand old people. Can't stand it even more now that I am getting to be one.

I used to make excuses to avoid visiting her and her doily-draped furniture. Used to pretend to be too busy to eat with them when she came to visit us. It was never

pleasant to witness her struggling with her dentures, the half-wit dribbling by her side. Her death was a mixed blessing. We got the house. But we also got Alice's imbecilic brother. The house is quite a pile on Pembroke Avenue. The brother goes by the name of Eugene.

Alice begged me to let her keep him. Until now, that was the biggest upset in our marriage. Bad enough to have a child, but this was a 27-year-old, fifteen-stone dolt we were talking about. Eventually, I had him accommodated in a home for the 'mentally handicapped', or those with 'special needs', or whatever they are calling them this year, at considerable personal expense.

When we got engaged, I made it very clear that children were not on the agenda. Well, I said I didn't want children, and she agreed. I should have got that in writing. She must have been extraordinarily besotted with me to sacrifice something so fundamental to her in order to marry me. Maybe she thought I would change my mind, because it seems that lots of men do. Or maybe she knew that if I didn't marry her, I'd marry the next quiet one that came along.

Of course, five years into our marriage, Alice began to whinge, and grew more shrill with each passing month. I reminded her of our agreement. She claimed that at the time, that was what she had wanted too, but now she desperately wanted a child. I am nothing if not a man of my word.

I couldn't depend on her to protect herself, so I took control. I made a ritual of bedtime cocoa with a little crushed pill as an added extra. Alice thought that was so romantic.

I haven't exactly been a saint within our marriage. Women, by and large, are attracted to me and I do not like to disappoint them. Women you would never expect. Even Moya, for God's sake. I eventually resent the ones who try to cling.

In later years, I had begun to satisfy myself with some tarts that operated near the canal. I never objected to them, even before I became a client. They were objects of curiosity. They were cheaper and more desperate, mostly addicts with raddled bodies and ropey veins, but perfectly adequate for my needs. I would order them into a shower before any congress was allowed and I always provided a new toothbrush. Some of them took it for a gift. Pathetic. They are usually too emaciated to be good-looking. One would think that they might make an effort to make themselves attractive. Alas, they were only selling their various orifices; the packaging was immaterial. But still, they held a fascination for me. After all, my mother was one, or so my father said.

Returning to the house on the night Alice pushed me too far, I fumbled with the key in the door. I stepped into the dining room. She wasn't on the floor, thank God. She was sitting in the kitchen, nursing a mug of tea. Her hand rubbed at her face. She looked at me without affection. I noticed that her jaw was quite red on the right-hand side. No bruise. Yet. I looked at her. Smiled.

The wooden box in which I had locked away my darkest secrets lay open on the table in the hall, its lid agape, lock smashed, contents violated.

'Liar!' she said, her voice breaking.

It was clear that she intended to ruin me.

The second time I hit Alice, I just couldn't stop. I am very sorry about that indeed. I have been in control of my life since I was eighteen years old, and to lose control is a failing. Needless to say, I am not allowed to visit her in hospital. It is silly really. It is February 2012, so it's been three months now. In her condition, she wouldn't know if I was there or not.

It turns out that I am a violent man after all. It comes as a shock to me. I have been psychologically assessed. I decided to tell them almost everything. Apparently, I have been harbouring bitterness, resentment and frustration since my childhood. Now, there's a surprise.

What will the neighbours think? What will anybody think?

I really couldn't care less.

2. Barney

Alice O'Reilly was Avenue and we were Villas. That made all the difference in our neighbourhood. It still does. The houses on the Avenue are four times the size of ours, and their back gardens run along the gable wall of our terrace. Villas is a stupid name for our houses, as if we were somewhere foreign in the sunshine with beaches on our doorstep, when they're really only pebble-dashed council houses.

The Poshies (as we used to call them) from the Avenue didn't mix much with us. They went to different schools and hung out in different gangs, but Alice's family were different from the rest. They weren't snobby at all and didn't look down their noses like the rest of them on the Avenue. My little sister Susan used to be invited to tea in the O'Reillys', and my ma would boast about it to the other mams. I didn't pay much attention when we were nippers, but I kind of knew it was a big deal when Alice came round our house because my ma would make us polish our shoes. It used to annoy me, to be honest. As if Alice was ever going to be inspecting our shoes. She was quiet, not especially pretty and seemed sort of ordinary, if you ask me.

The mother, Breda, was quite religious and Alice wasn't allowed out that much. She was never at any of the dances or social occasions in the neighbourhood, not at ours and not at the posh tennis club ones either, so I heard. And

that was probably because of Eugene. If you ask me, I'd say it was the age of the mother that caused Eugene to be the way he was. Alice's ma was the oldest of all the mothers around. She was probably forty when Alice was born, and Eugene was born four or five years after that. We didn't notice much until he got a bit older. He was about seven by the time he'd learned to walk, and his speech was strange too. I'd say that's probably why the other posh ones in the Avenue didn't want to be associating with the O'Reillys – in case poor old Eugene dribbled on their furniture. I don't remember exactly when the da died, but it wasn't long after Eugene was born. I certainly don't remember ever seeing him. The da was a civil servant of some kind, I think. High up, like. I think he was in the Land Registry office, on good money too, I'd say.

Some of the fellas in our gang used to tease Eugene and make fun of him, but Alice was always there to defend him, and somehow no one ever wanted to upset Alice. She was a strange one herself, shy and mannerly; never said boo to a goose. She seemed to spend a lot of time with her head in a book. We all thought she'd end up in the convent; there was so many nuns visiting that house that we thought the mother had plans in that direction. Susan reported that their house was full of holy pictures. Most of them had been painted by Alice. Susan had dinner there a few times; she said Alice had to spoon-feed Eugene like a baby. The food was awful, she said, everything boiled to blandness and mush. We were surprised. We thought them on the Avenue would be having cucumber sandwiches on silver plates and all. Looking at it now, I'd say the plain food was for Eugene's sake. He would never tolerate

anything out of the ordinary, unless it was a biscuit or a fancy cake, but sure you'd only have them at Christmas, or if it was a birthday. Breda probably thought it was a great Catholic sacrifice for them all to make. I distinctly remember that on the rare occasion when Alice came to ours for dinner, she ate all round her and always complimented my mother on the food. Mam was delighted.

Susan and Alice were in the same class but different schools, so the odd time they'd be doing their homework together out of the same books and all. Alice definitely wasn't as smart as Susan, not going by her reports anyway. Susan was the cleverest in our family, showing me up with her As and Bs. Alice would be getting steady Cs with an A or a B in Art. If you ask me, it wasn't a lack of intelligence. She never had any time to be doing homework because looking after Eugene was a full-time job. The ma had arthritis, which got worse as she got older, but I think she realized that it wasn't fair to Alice to have her minding Eugene for the rest of her life, so she made Alice pick something to do in college. Once Alice told us that, I was pretty sure we wouldn't see much of her again. No one in the Villas ever went to college. I was kind of sorry for Susan because she was going to be losing a good pal.

Alice surprised us all by being accepted into art college. I couldn't believe she was going there of all places. Firstly, you're either good at drawing or you're not. She said it was about 'technique' and all, but if you ask me, the stuff she was drawing before she went in was as good as the stuff she drew when she finished. Nowadays, nearly all the young ones are at the coloured hair and the cross-dressing and you hardly know if they're boys or girls, and maybe

that's what passes for fashion these days, but back in the seventies the art students were the only ones at that lark. Some of them were vegetarians. That says it all.

I said she wouldn't last a week, but I guess she must have got on all right, because she was there three or four years. I was wrong about her disappearing too. She still lived at home because of Eugene, and it was Susan who pulled away from the friendship more than Alice, because Susan started going out with Dave.

Alice was certainly good with her hands. I remember a sculpture thing that she made for Susan's birthday; some kind of ceramic swan-shaped yoke. I told her there and then that it was so good she could sell it. She smiled at me.

That was the first time I realized that she wouldn't be going near any convent. The smile was a bit cheeky. The years in the art college must have shaken the nun out of her. Though she still dressed very modestly, I'm not sure that she had many boyfriends, or indeed any, during her college years. Maybe those fellas scared her with their drugs and loud music.

Susan disappeared off to London after Dave within a few years and got a job as a hospital cook; married there, eventually. She never came back here to live after that. Still there now, married to DIY Dave, with four grown-up children. Chiswick. The 'w' is silent.

I had finished my apprenticeship as a mechanic and was working in my Uncle Harry's garage at that stage. I had a few bob in my pocket. I had moved into a flat in town. Had my own car. Lovely it was. A Ford Granada. It was enough to impress plenty of girls. I didn't see as much of Alice any more with Susan gone and me living in town.

The odd time when I called to see Mam, I would see Alice leading Eugene by the hand to the local shop. If you ask me, I'd say they did too much for him. He might have learned to fend for himself a bit more had he been let.

Mam said that Alice had some sort of job designing pictures for calendars or something like that. She said that one of the rooms in the house had been turned into a 'studio'. There were rooms in that house that hadn't been used in years, so it made sense.

Then Mam said I should ask her out. That was a bit of a shocker. She was Avenue. I was Villas. Mam said it didn't look like anyone else was ever going to ask her out, so I might as well. I don't think Mam thought we'd have any big love affair or anything; just that Alice might like the company and it would be manners. I wasn't sure myself. I was twenty-eight by then and she wasn't far behind me. She was such a quiet one, I wouldn't know what to be saying to her, and besides, I wasn't sure that we'd be able to go anywhere without Eugene, but Mam insisted, as if it would be an act of charity. But it wasn't an act of charity. Not to me. I always liked her.

When I called to the door to ask, I realized that I was nervous. That was a bit unusual for me. I can handle myself in all sorts of situations. It's just that she was a stranger to me really, though I'd known her all my life. She wasn't like the other girls I'd had a fumble with in the back of the Granada.

She answered the door herself, Eugene standing behind her in the hallway. I didn't know what words to use. I was embarrassed, like. But she smiled that smile again. Jesus, it was a lovely smile. I asked her if she'd like to come for a

drive with me on Sunday, out to Killiney for a walk on the beach and then for a cup of tea in the hotel. She asked if I meant her and Eugene or just her. I said just her. She grinned then and said that would be grand and I agreed to collect her at three on Sunday.

I washed the car and had my hair cut on the Saturday. I remember because the barber nipped my left ear. Never gone back to him since. Felt like an eejit sitting in the car with Alice, making conversation, and me with a bandage on my ear. She was wearing lipstick and a brown dress with flowers on it. Very nice. Talking to her was easier than I thought it would be, though I can't remember what we talked about. Actually, I'd say she talked more than me. I got a proper look at her when we were having our tea in the hotel. Quite good-looking, but not in a film-star way. She never went blonde like the rest of them. They nearly all go blonde in the end. From being a real skinny young one, she had filled out in all the right areas, with a kind of a rounded edge to her. Not fat, mind you. Shapely, like. Her face sort of glowed whenever she smiled, and then when she'd catch me looking at her, she'd blush and twist her fingers round each other. I realized that I really did fancy her then.

She asked if I'd teach her to drive. By God, I would.

That's how it began.

The lessons were bloody terrifying. She was an atrociously bad driver. After the first lesson, I had to remove a hedge from the front grille of my car, my pride and joy. I was even more afraid for myself than I was for the car, but somehow it was worth it. She had become more relaxed with me, a bit chatty even. Still shy and all and not exactly

flirty or anything like that, but good fun all the same, and afterwards we would often have a coffee and some cake in a cafe. Susan wasn't wrong about her appetite.

I was sort of worried that the mother would take against me because, you know, Villas and Avenue and all that, but fair play to her, she was very nice to me and Eugene was always wanting an arm-wrestle off me. I grew fond of him as well. It wasn't his fault that he was peculiar, but he had a way of laughing like a donkey that was hilarious, even though I didn't know what he was laughing about. Neither did he, I'm sure.

At the end of her third lesson, I kissed her and asked her to marry me. She laughed but she kissed me back, so that wasn't too bad. We started having proper dates then, but she never talked about the proposal again. I think she thought I was joking, but I wasn't. I didn't have the nerve to ask her again, not for a while. I got to know her inasmuch as anyone could back then.

I think I was good for Alice, when everyone else probably thought it was the other way round. We would go to local discos and dance halls. She made herself a dress of pink silk. She said it was 'ashes of roses', but if you ask me, it was pink. We began to have a bit of fumbling, if you know what I mean, nothing too heavy. I was afraid of pushing it too much with her in case I scared her off, and I reckoned she was pretty religious like her ma. We were all a bit religious in them days, I suppose. Not like now.

We could have gone all the way once when we went to the races in Galway. We drove down in the Granada. I booked us into a small hotel for the night, in separate rooms, obviously. Alice must have been a charm because I

won big on three races. I'd never had a day's luck before that. After our day out, I ordered a bottle of wine with our meal (she had seconds of everything). I wasn't used to wine then, only knew that there was red or white and that red seemed more sophisticated, so I pointed to the most expensive bottle of that on the menu (I'd had a few pints of plain already and was feeling generous). The uppity waiter asked if I was sure. I was, I said. Alice wasn't used to wine either. Within half an hour, she was talking nonsense about wanting to live in a house made of books or some such. Unusually for Alice, she began to get a bit sexy with me, a bit loose limbed. I hardly knew what to do, but then she leaned across the table in a kind of wanton way and kissed me loudly on the lips. I was in heaven, but the waiter came over and killed the moment by telling us that we were disturbing the other diners. The other diners consisted of a middle-aged couple and two old ladies. I think they were disturbed all right, but I didn't care.

We floated up the stairs arm in arm. I deposited her at the door of her room where we kissed passionately for a few moments. She asked if I wanted to spend the night in her room. Well, I was hardly likely to argue, was I? She flopped herself down on the bed and catapulted her shoes one after another with a steady aim towards the waste bin, missing both times by miles. My God, she was fabulous. I excused myself and ran to the bathroom at the end of the hall (well, let's just say it wasn't the Four Seasons). I stood in a plastic shower tray, soaping myself in a frenzy of preparation. I rinsed myself repeatedly under the trickle of lukewarm water dribbling out of the rusted shower head, and dried myself off in a fierce hurry using a towel so stiff

and thin that I practically sanded myself. I threw my dressing gown around me and headed back towards the room. I caught myself in the mirror halfway down the landing. My teeth and lips were coated in reddish-grey scum from the wine. I thought that Dracula might make a better impression than me. Thundering back into the bathroom in search of my toothbrush, I skidded cartoon-style in the puddle I had left behind me and, grabbing the washbasin on the way down, landed on my right elbow with water gushing over me from the detached pipe which had come away from the wall. Jesus, the pain. And the humiliation – when I looked up to see the manager and the elderly ladies and realized that my robe had flapped open, thereby exposing me to the four winds.

To make things worse, every penny I'd won had to be paid over to the hotel and the local doctor. When I eventually got back to Alice's room at 3.30 in the morning, she was in exactly the same place as I'd left her, fully clothed but snoring lightly. I was too tired and hung-over, not to mention suffering from the pain of my newly relocated elbow, to feel anything else. I went back to my own room and had an uncomfortable night's sleep.

The journey home was horrendous. Alice was purple with embarrassment at what she saw as her disgraceful behaviour, and I couldn't drive because of my arm, which meant that she had to take the wheel. I nearly fell out of love with her on the way home. We had five near-death experiences. I thought my shoulders would be permanently lodged in my ears, and to this day I get flashbacks to that corner in Kinnegad. There was a distinct cooling of our relationship after that.

A week later, I was giving my friend Gerry the highlights of what had happened in the hotel, showing him the hotel bill so that he could see how much the night had cost me. He took the almighty piss out of me for ordering a whole bottle of port.

Gradually, Alice and I got back to normal, though the question of spending a night together out of town was never raised again. When I eventually admitted to her that I had mistakenly ordered port instead of wine, it broke the ice and allowed us to blame the drink for the events of that night.

My mam was delighted that the two of us were going out. She often invited Alice for tea. Occasionally, Alice would bring Eugene with her and then Mam would make too big a fuss, making it awkward for me and roaring at Eugene as if he was deaf. Eugene would laugh at her. He never minded what anyone said to him.

I got on like a house on fire with Eugene. If you ask me, he was a great fella altogether really. He was a funny, happy child in a grown-up body. Always smiling. Now, I'm not saying he couldn't be difficult sometimes. For instance, he liked to dance. In public, at Mass or in the Quinnsworth usually, in front of everyone. But people understood that he was only a harmless eejit, God help him. We got into this game, him and me, where he'd be in his favourite chair and I'd come up behind him and lift up his arms and we'd pretend to be flying around the sitting room. He loved that game, so he did, and never got tired of it, and do you know what, it was a joy to be playing and to hear the laugh out of him like that. There's not many that could lift Eugene,

I can tell you. I'm as strong as an ox and he's no lightweight.

Eugene's bedtime was a lovely routine at the O'Reillys'. There'd be a pot of tea for us and a glass of milk for Eugene and a plate of buttered bread would go round. And then when it was washed up and the table scrubbed, there were prayers, everyone on their knees at the kitchen table saying the rosary, and after that Alice would read a story to Eugene, usually a fairy tale or maybe a nursery rhyme of some kind. She had a brilliant way of reading. She made all the people in the stories come alive with different voices and accents and all. I loved to listen to her almost as much as Eugene did.

After a while, Mam started quizzing me. Was I serious about Alice? Did I know what I'd be taking on? I think Mam meant well, but we had a few rows about it. It wasn't her business, after all. Mam thought it was great when I took Alice out the odd time and bought her cake, but she wanted to remind me that Alice would be responsible for Eugene when the mother died. If I married her, I'd be taking on the two of them. I made up my mind that that was fine with me. I really loved Alice by now, and if anything, Eugene would be a bonus.

Although nothing was ever said, I believed we had an understanding. We had been together for over a year. I hadn't reckoned with Oliver. Alice could be walking around now, hale and hearty, if I had reckoned with Oliver.