TORN

Tony Webster



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Tony Webster

Edited by Elaine Elizabeth Webster



Unlocked Publishing

Dedicated to the memory of

Stacey Leanne Clarke

who lives on in all the lives she touched.

She was truly a force of nature,
and the most powerful example to all.

Her light shines on.

7th November 1984 - 16th April 2022

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Where to begin? Life teaches us all many lessons. Some are learned, some are neglected or avoided, and some take us down entirely misleading paths until we discover the reason for the detour. I was educated in a time and place, when, and where, I was told on a regular basis by different people in authority that I, and my life, would amount to nothing. It's fair to say that alongside the doubters were the encouragers. But, for some reason, when I was young, the positive voices seemed to be less convincing.

One of the doubters was a teacher, an educator, a person who, I imagine, was trusted to bring out the best in his pupils; he was a person I respected, even when he made what I now see as a life changing statement: 'You'll find yourself behind bars, Webster.' Growing up as best I could in working class Wigan, Lancashire, and the rough and tumble of a Catholic secondary modern school, it came as something of a shock to me.

The detractor did indeed turn out to be right. In a way. I actually spent 19 years of my life 'behind bars,' but not as he had suggested. Instead I became a prison officer. I think one of the reasons was to serve those who may have been condemned by similar put-downs, but unfortunately never got the chance, through better life circumstances, to prove them wrong. There by the grace of God! However, I must acknowledge that man's influence in my personal growth.

I have sometimes found inspiration for this story in the darkest of places, the most painful of experiences, and in the suffering of those I would have swapped places with, at the drop of a hat, to free them from their pain.

Among the people I want to thank are my daughters, Claire and Zara, my grandsons J.W.D. and O.B. And, of course, R.J.S. Each of you has inspired me beyond anything you could ever imagine. I find your determination and courage humbling. I am truly blessed.

I owe also a great debt of gratitude to those who have offered their assistance and expertise in the completion of this book. They are my sister-in-law, Elaine, who selflessly gave her time and literary skill in the editing process over the three years of writing, and my older brother, Stan, who encouraged me and challenged me to find other dimensions in my writing and within my real-life storyline. My younger daughter Zara read and offered guidance and support through the early rewrites. My elder daughter Claire spent hour upon hour listening to the unwritten original version and also challenged me to make painful decisions on behalf of the characters, who are now real people to all of us.

Thank you also to 'first readers' Ronnie Marsden and my niece Helen Webster for their helpful comments and observations.

It has become clear to me during the editing process of *Torn* that all my life I have been fighting a form of dyslexia, never diagnosed, of course, which has tried to hold me back. With gratitude I salute the technologies of autocorrect and computer programs that can transform dictation into the printed word. You may notice more than usual spacing between paragraphs. This was to help me read my own book, and I hope it will be of assistance to others with similar problems.

Last, but not least, I need to ‘thank’ the dreamscape from which I woke, early one morning during the first Covid lockdown in 2020. I had a big question in my head. In an attempt to answer the question, I embarked upon a mission, and that was to tell the story of Jennifer, David and Father Seth.

EDITOR'S NOTE

You are about to read a story that - I believe - will live on vividly in your memory. The characters in Torn have become utterly real people to Tony and to me. They are people who have, like us all, experienced overwhelming feelings of love, joy and pain.

I would like to thank Tony for his incredibly generous and calm attitude to my oft-used 'red pen'. I could sometimes be brutal, too, because editors have to be. I have edited many things during my life, including most of my own writing, and I have always had to be particularly brutal with that.

Tony has also been very generous in allowing me to get inside his characters' heads, and to get to know them almost as well as he does. My suggestions have been met with equanimity and gratitude, even when preceded by much animated discussion. We have found a great common ground of understanding in caring for the people who inhabit these pages.

When I began combing through the earliest manuscripts, I could not have known that something would soon happen in my own life - unexpected and amazing in equal measure - that would directly mirror events in the story I was editing. To say what that was would be to spoil the story. But let me just say this, that the people who trot out that old saying about life being stranger than fiction, well, they can be utterly believed.

E. E. W.

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Chapter 1

Arrival

The journey through the Transvaal had been long and tiring for the two travellers.

Waiting by a black saloon at the busy Johannesburg Park Station was a young man with dark good looks, curly-haired, tall, slim and tanned. He was peering uncertainly into and beyond the crowds.

Scanning the latest batch of passengers hurrying through the ticket barrier, he soon spotted them, a large, black-clad man and his young, female companion, both wheeling cases. She stood out, even at this distance, a dainty young nun dressed in white, not a regular sight hereabouts. She might even be pretty, thought David, narrowing his eyes. He tried not to squint too hard in her direction, though he dearly wanted to.

Father Seth Rossouw was always easy to pick out in a crowd. A tall, imposing priest with more than three decades in the pulpit, he was still handsome with a jawline that hadn't surrendered to jowls, bespectacled hazel eyes that missed nothing, and wavy, greying hair, smartly parted to the right.

He no longer had the trim figure of his youth, but his well-cut clothes hid his portly torso well. He had the look of a man who regularly enjoyed good food and wine. Well over six feet tall, healthy, strong and, in his full cassock of black, he struck an intimidating figure.

‘David,’ he said in a monotone, nodding proprietorially and omitting any greeting.

With an obedient smile, the younger man bowed his head of black curly hair, keeping his eyes low. He turned his face away from them and then stooped even further to avoid their gaze.

The priest had spoken only his name, but it carried a thousand meanings, a voice disconcertingly deep, with its undertone of threat. David almost flinched, hearing it again after the short break he’d had from it. This was the same voice he had heard all his life, employed at length and with great effect from the pulpit, imposing the fear of hell fire and retribution into anyone unfortunate enough to be listening.

The parish priest of St Brigid’s took pleasure in berating his flock for their real or imagined transgressions, and David had often been the parishioner in closest proximity, living as he did in the presbytery. Most of them dreaded going to confession, so these days, fewer and fewer did. Young and old, when they spoke of him, it was with whispers and cautious looks. He had alienated and angered so many over the years that some hadn’t stayed after childhood, rejecting their faith or finding religious comfort elsewhere. Enough of them remained to keep Father Seth in a job.

‘Hello.’ Again, one word, but a bigger contrast could not be imagined. A light voice, this time, sweet and gentle, from the young woman in white.

David glanced at her, smiled again, and quickly looked away. This girl, barely a woman, was not just pretty, he decided, in an instant. She was a natural, dazzling

beauty, even dressed like this. Her head, showing just wisps of auburn hair, was covered by a starched wimple which contoured the glowing skin of her forehead and high cheeks, leading to a delicate, dimpled chin. Her eyebrows were rich auburn, curved and sleek, highlighting blue eyes that glistened in the light. It had been the swiftest of glances, but David took it all in.

She was small, and even though her habit was designed to cover her body modestly from shoulder to toe, he could still make out the shape of her. He felt suddenly hot, and then had to add guilt, shame and embarrassment to his list of personal difficulties.

In spite of the effect her presence must have had on most people she met, the young woman seemed innocently unaware. She unconsciously ran delicate fingers through the emerald-coloured rosary beads which hung from her belt. She smoothed down the material beneath it with her other hand. David was entranced by her simple movements, but dared not show it. He didn't trust himself to answer her greeting, apart from a polite nod of acknowledgement.

As they stood by the car, awkwardly, a crowd of mostly young women bubbled through the station forecourt and the three of them turned round at the noise.

'Oh, it must be…' said Sister Jennifer, on tiptoes now, smiling and spotting a tall black figure at the centre of the moving crowd.

Father Seth interrupted her, impatient to get going. He brought her attention back, announcing that, as David should already know, this was Sister Jennifer on leave from the convent in Cape Town, and that he had been

to Newcastle in KwaZulu-Natal province to collect her from her home. David had also gathered that the visitor was visiting Johannesburg to meet the archbishop before taking her final vows, and that she was the daughter of an old family friend, one whose name he'd overheard in many telephone conversations.

The novice smiled at him and concurred with a nod. David, stealing another glance, shifted so awkwardly that she immediately sensed his shyness and discomfort.

She stared at the skinny young man before her. He must be about her own age, she thought, maybe a little younger. She decided he had the saddest brown eyes she had ever seen and he looked, well, burdened, by something. She wondered why.

He was definitely good looking, though, in spite of the burden he was carrying, she was certain of that, and maybe he was all the more fascinating because of it. Perhaps she could make him smile before long, and light up his serious face. She delighted in making people smile and forget themselves.

David opened the boot of the car and reached for their cases, glad for a distraction. Without need for further pleasantries, Father Seth passed his suitcase. Sister Jennifer, smiling, let David pick up her case, then placed her lighter hold-all to the side of it in the boot. As she did so, her hand brushed his back. It was the slightest, accidental touch, but he felt it like an electric shock and reacted by moving sharply away.

'Oh, I'm sorry,' she said, this time with a broader, reassuring smile, concerned at his overreaction. He

acknowledged with a half nod. She looked at the young man with curious eyes. She looked over to Father Seth, and then back at David, wonderingly. She had just witnessed something different in the priest she had known since childhood. This seemed like a different Father Seth to the one who had bounced her on his knee and gently encouraged her vocation.

David stood up stiffly and went to open the rear door of the car for Sister Jennifer but Father Seth climbed in instead and closed the door. Obediently, he made his way to the other rear door and opened it to allow her to get in on that side.

To his great surprise, Father Seth instructed him to offer her a seat in the front. He said, firmly, 'Why don't you acquaint yourselves. Sister will be with us for a little while.' David's anxiety deepened. He'd never had such a directive from the man who had given him virtually all the directives in his life. Father Seth had never wanted him to acquaint himself with anyone.

The journey was only a few minutes from the station, but it felt like a lifetime. She spoke to him gently and quietly as they pulled away from the kerb and joined the city traffic. Aware that he was painfully shy, she took charge of the situation and talked about the thunderstorm they had witnessed during the journey from Ladysmith. It had been spectacular.

He nodded and mumbled in what he hoped were the right places, trying to display a level of interest in spite of his nerves. She was just about to fill in more time by telling him about the minor commotion caused by a well-known athlete entering their train carriage when they pulled into the drive of the presbytery.

It wasn't a moment too soon for David. He hastily jumped out of the car and opened the door to allow Father Seth to alight, always having given him precedence, unless of course the archbishop was visiting.

'No, assist Sister Jennifer,' the priest instructed, somewhat irritably. David immediately went to open the front door and stepped back to allow her out of the car. She reacted with surprise to the tone of the priest's voice and twisted round from looking at him to look into David's anxious face. Distracted, she placed her weight uncertainly on to the newly gravelled drive and her sandal slipped. She reached out and grasped his hand to save herself from falling.

It was not the most graceful of arrivals. 'Whoops!' she cried out, nearly ending up fully sitting down in a cloud of gravel dust. 'Clumsy me!'

He had tensed his arm partly due to the touch of her soft hand, still in his. It was as he pulled her to her feet that he raised his gaze and dared to look into her eyes for the first time. She threw back her head and gave a full, throaty laugh. He laughed too, unable to stop himself, at the spectacle of her scrambling to regain balance. Father Seth broke the spell of the moment. 'Boot, David, get our suitcases and Sister Jennifer's hold-all.'

David obeyed him in a daze.

Chapter 2

Steps

Ethel came out to meet them. She was a black South African, less than five feet tall, but with her rotund build and efficient manner, she was obviously a powerful force in the small world of St Brigid's parish. The younger woman sensed it immediately.

Ethel had brought five children into the world and, as a widow for over twenty years, had relied on her income from her work at the presbytery to support her family. Hardworking and staunch in equal measure, she was blessed with a great sense of humour and didn't hesitate to use it.

However, in the presence of Father Seth, she was serious, dutiful and accommodating. Having witnessed the strange, almost comic arrival of the young nun and its effect on David, she pretended to ignore the event and simply said, 'Tea, Father?' She knew that she was in danger of laughing at their antics as much as the young woman but judged accurately, glancing at Father Seth's serious face, that it was not a joke that could be shared in the present moment.

Father Seth nodded peremptorily and made his way to the dining room with the housekeeper bustling behind him, leaving David and the new arrival in the hallway. She looked quizzically at David. Raising her eyebrows and contorting her deep red lips, she gave a puzzled shrug of her shoulders and a slight shake of the head.

He felt an uncontrollable smile fall across his face. The priest didn't see.

Calling to Ethel, he said, 'Excuse me, Mrs Gumede. Where is erm, Sister Jennifer to go?'

'Oh, Room 7, didn't I say?' she replied over her shoulder, as she hurried away. A mischievous smile spread across the young woman's face as she said quietly, 'What shenanigans!'

'Take her up, boy!' shouted the priest, striding towards his study. 'Show her to her room, and whilst you're doing that, you can take my suitcase to my bedroom.'

David looked at his patient charge and nodded towards the foot of the sweeping ebony staircase that led to the first floor. She reached out and retrieved her hold-all from him, their hands again momentarily touching as she did so. He dared to feel, this time, that he liked the soft, gentle touch of her skin but was immediately overwhelmed by the familiar sense of guilt. A well of frustration rose up inside him.

They made their way up the staircase, David carrying both cases. Fourteen steps in all, each step made of thick, black ebony, the spindles depicting different stations of the cross, all carved in ivory.

As they slowly went from step to step, she touched each one and whispered, 'So beautiful. It must have cost a fortune.'

Then, with further thought, she said, 'Such wealth, though, in a world of poverty and suffering. When this was built, I mean. I don't suppose the poverty is any

different today, not really.' Then, self-consciously she added, 'Oh, please excuse me for running on. Sometimes I think aloud.'

David nodded but remained silent, not wanting Father Seth to hear any comments about the church and its wealth. He completely agreed with her and thought that a simpler house for the parish priest could have sufficed, but any collusion on that subject would most certainly land him in trouble.

The landing separated left and right. Directly facing them was Father Seth's bedroom. The gold numeral at the top of the solid oak door indicated it was Room 1. He opened the door, entered and put the priest's large case onto a red sofa in the corner by the window then exited.

David then reached out to take the young nun's hold-all, which she'd balanced on the top of her case. She stopped him and said, 'No, it's all right, thanks. I'll carry it.'

For the first time, he spoke to her directly, looking straight into her eyes.

'It's just that the staircase to your room is a spiral one and it's quite narrow. I wouldn't want you to fall.'

She made a wry face. 'Well, of course you don't. You've seen already how clumsy I am!'

She seemed so at home in her own skin, David thought. And it was beautiful skin, too, the little bits he could see, anyway. Did she know how lovely she was? He banished the thought.

She handed the hold-all to him with a smile of appreciation. He felt a roll of excitement in his stomach as she looked at him, gratefully, but the guilt of the feelings she was triggering also raged through him. This was not good. He needed to rid himself of them. He'd go and do some hard digging in the garden later. That's what usually worked with uncomfortable thoughts.

They made their way further down the landing, the young woman looking all around, taking in the rich red Axminster carpet and the gold framed pictures. It felt like a comfortable old manor house.

There was a door to the left, marked PRIVATE.

David explained, 'This is Father Seth's personal bathroom, for his use only.' She nodded. It was to be expected that the parish priest would have such a luxury.

To their right, across the landing was another door. Room 2. David said, 'This is one of four en-suite guest rooms, the other three are at the other end of the landing, 4, 5, and 6. I'm not really sure why you have been allocated Room 7, because it has a shared bathroom with Room 3. I'm sorry about that.' He was squirming inside but trying not to show it, because he knew that Room 3 was his, and had always been his, and Father Seth knew this perfectly well.

'Oh, that's OK. I'm used to sharing,' she answered, lightly.

David tried to breathe normally through his discomfort and led her further down the landing to the foot of the narrow, twisting staircase which led to Room 7. He

signalled to her with a slight nod of his head but could not trust himself to catch her direct gaze again. She started to make her way up the staircase with him behind her, contorting his torso in the effort of carrying her suitcase and hold-all through the tightly confined space.

'Oh, thank you' she said, realising the difficulty of the task and the ease with which the fit young man accomplished it.

They reached the small, square landing at the top of the stairs. There was a roof light, a pane of glass framed and set in the pitched roof, lighting the landing and the access to two doors, a bedroom and a small bathroom, obviously for her use now, as well as David's.

She entered the room. It was picturesque and old fashioned. Set beneath the pitched roof was an old cast iron single bed, with a small wooden wardrobe, a chest of wooden drawers, and an otherwise empty bookcase, except for a copy of The Jerusalem Bible. Under the alcove window and the pitched roof stood a desk and chair and an old, green, enamelled reading lamp. The room was brightly but simply decorated, with clean, folded towels laid out on the freshly made bed, a jug of water and a glass on the small bedside table.

'It's lovely, thank you,' said Sister Jennifer. 'May I see the bathroom, please, David?' she asked with a soft, encouraging smile.

Dreading this, he went out onto the landing and opened the bathroom door. To her obvious surprise, there were David's toiletries on a glass shelf over the sink, a razor,

shaving foam, toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant and a bottle of aftershave.

‘Oh, is there someone already in Room 3?’ she asked.

‘Well, yes, me, actually,’ he stuttered, the game up at last. ‘Room 3 is my room, I’m really sorry. But I can ask Father Seth if some other arrangement can be made while you’re here.’

‘Oh, no, it’s perfectly fine,’ she replied after a moment’s reflection. ‘We can lock the door, can’t we?’ She smiled again. She smiled a lot, he thought, relieved by her answer. It was a lovely smile.

He nodded in embarrassment, knowing the difficulties of the bedtimes and the mornings to come. Father Seth must have known about this inconvenience. Surely there could have been a better allocation of rooms, he thought.

‘Lunch is ready!’ shouted Ethel from the kitchen. She had a powerful voice that carried easily up two flights of stairs. David was relieved to be rescued from his current discomfort.

He started down the staircase before her. Needing to warn her of the narrowing of the steps to their right and the obvious danger of her long habit, he advised, ‘Be careful to stay to the left, Sister.’

‘You’re very thoughtful, David. ‘But please, just call me Jennifer.’

Jennifer. He could call her that. Wow. He felt suddenly privileged. He nodded and hid a small secret smile as they slowly descended the creaking steps.

Now on the landing and making their way to the main staircase, she asked, 'Do you work, David? Do you have a job?' Her question seemed to put him on the spot.

He looked at his feet and replied with some embarrassment. 'No not really. I do the gardening here. I also help maintain the presbytery and the church and help Father by picking people up from the station or the airport and running errands. I don't really have what you'd call a proper job.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'That sounds very much like a proper job to me.'

'It's not a job as such. There's no official arrangement. I don't have a wage. I just live here for free. It suits me. I get a small allowance for personal items, but I don't really need much,' he said, suddenly feeling the need to explain himself.

A look of disbelief crossed her face as they made their way down the stairs and into the dining room. He started to feel apprehensive and fearful that she would say something about their conversation to Father Seth. He wished fervently that he had stayed silent.

His worries were interrupted by Ethel as she greeted Jennifer with a broad smile. 'So, welcome to Johannesburg, Sister. I'm sorry it's a little belated! I was rushing around to get things ready. How is your room, dear?'

‘It’s both fine and comfortable, thank you,’ answered Jennifer.

‘You will have to share the bathroom with David,’ Father Seth interrupted, pointing at him as though he were an exhibit in a museum.

He continued, ‘I am expecting other guests, and all the rooms will be full. Four seminarians are going to join us tomorrow. I’m afraid they take precedence.’

Here we go, thought Jennifer, though she smiled politely. Good old church misogyny in action, yet again. She was well used to the ways of older priests, but also knew there was little point in tackling them head on. She trusted the ways of the old faith would change in time.

‘I understand Father. The church is very blessed with those young men,’ she replied generously, with a smile.

David avoided the priest’s piercing stare, as she continued, fearlessly, ‘But in my opinion, Father, the church is equally blessed with those who labour with little or no reward. At least those young men from the seminary will be rewarded with a generous stipend.’

She looked at David, reassuringly. She wasn’t going to pass over the issue of his employment status, or lack of it, especially given this golden opportunity. She had often gently challenged Father Seth, the old family friend, on many subjects over the years. He usually took it well, coming from her.

‘Those who do God’s work with no earthly reward will be rewarded in heaven,’ Father Seth replied, following

her gaze, perfectly understanding the meaning of her words.

'That's also true' the young woman replied, about to launch further into her cause.

She was interrupted by Ethel who, having heard the latter part of the conversation and not comprehending Jennifer's specific meaning, added her own wisdom, 'The reward of heaven is what we all search for, Father, but some recompense in this life helps pave the way to heaven, don't you think?'

Ethel also knew the priest of old and what she could get away with. Seeing his reaction, she started to laugh at her own boldness. 'It is easy to impose the graces of poverty from a place of abundance. The reality of holy poverty is somewhat different to those that really live it,' she said with a wry face.

Father Seth was used to hearing Ethel's take on the church from time to time but he was momentarily nonplussed at this forthright and sudden alliance of like-minded women and, for once, didn't answer. He quickly changed the subject to the forthcoming visit of the seminarians and what activities were planned.

David felt a strange trickle of appreciation. He was acutely aware that the priest was being challenged and, strangely it seemed, on his behalf. However, he reminded himself that this conversation might bear consequences for him later, and he silently looked down at his plate. It was simpler that way.

Lunch ended and Ethel started to clear the table as Father Seth went to his study.

‘Can I help you, Mrs Gumede?’ Jennifer asked.

‘Sorry, please excuse me, Sister, er, Jennifer, but I am meant to do that,’ interrupted David.

‘What? Another duty to add to your extending job description?’ Jennifer’s eyebrows shot up.

‘Go to your room and rest, or solve something on your computer, David,’ said Ethel, waving him off. ‘It will be nice to have the company of the young lady, so go, boy, go.’

He looked at them both. They were smiling, and Jennifer nodded enthusiastically, saying, ‘Yes, go, have a little time for yourself while you can.’

‘Come on, dear, let’s take these things into the kitchen and mind the step down. It isn’t obvious if you’re not aware of it.’ Jennifer nodded as she picked up a tray of cutlery and crockery.

As he climbed the stairs, David felt there was something new happening in the presbytery. He had never experienced Ethel challenge Father Seth quite like that. And to hear a young woman of a similar age to himself doing so was astounding. He couldn’t begin to imagine the self-possession that such a thing would demand.

He went to his room and lay on his bed but could not rest. He felt uneasy about Father Seth finding out that he hadn’t helped Ethel as usual, so he made his way downstairs and into the dining room. The door to the kitchen ajar, he overheard the conversation of the two women as the crockery was being dried and put away.

Jennifer was speaking. ‘Perhaps I shouldn’t say this, Mrs Gumede, and maybe it’s not my place, but do you know David doesn’t actually get paid for what he does?’

Ethel stopped in her tracks as she took in the information. She was outraged. He could hear it in her voice as he stood listening behind the door.

‘What? Nothing? Nothing at all? Gracious me, I never knew that. I thought he must pay him something,’ she said. ‘That poor boy works so hard for Father Seth, always has done, all his life.’

She paused for a moment and shook her head, ‘You know his history, do you? Left on the step just days old, bless him? I was the one to find him! With just a note pinned to him, saying his name was Davi, poor mite. His mother was never found. She must have been desperate.’

Ethel looked sad at the memory, and Jennifer instinctively touched her arm. Ethel sniffed and rummaged for a tissue. ‘We didn’t know what surname to give him, and Father said he looked as if he might be of Hispanic origin, with his lovely dark hair, and olive skin, and on the note his poor mother signed herself Mamma.

‘But Father said he didn’t want to give him a name that might mark him out as different so he settled on David and then the surname of a Dutch footballer – Blind. You spell it like blind but you say it to rhyme with mint.’

Jennifer couldn’t help commenting on the obvious irony. ‘But a lot of people won’t know how to

pronounce that, if they just see it written down, would they?' she asked. 'Not even in South Africa.'

'I know!' said Ethel. 'When I first saw it written down I thought it a strange name to choose, too and I hadn't heard of the footballer, what's his name…Danny Blind. But Father has always loved his football, and I think it was just before some big international thing at the time, and of course he always follows the Dutch teams. So for good or for ill, that's how poor David got his name.'

She mimed holding a new-born baby, rocking to and fro.

'Actually, we found out Davi is a form of David in Portuguese, so he really must have Hispanic blood. Father was very good, taking him in, but I think he's been very strict with him, from being very small. I think of David as one of my own, you know, but I've had to be careful how I've shown it. Father wanted to toughen him up. He used to call me Auntie in secret when he was little, but Father heard him one day and soon put a stop to that.'

Jennifer took in a deep breath as she processed Ethel's words. So all of this was probably the reason for the brokenness she had sensed in David. She was silent for a few moments, taking in the enormity of the information.

Finally she said, 'Dear God, it must be so painful never to know where you came from. How can anyone ever truly know who they are if they don't know that?'