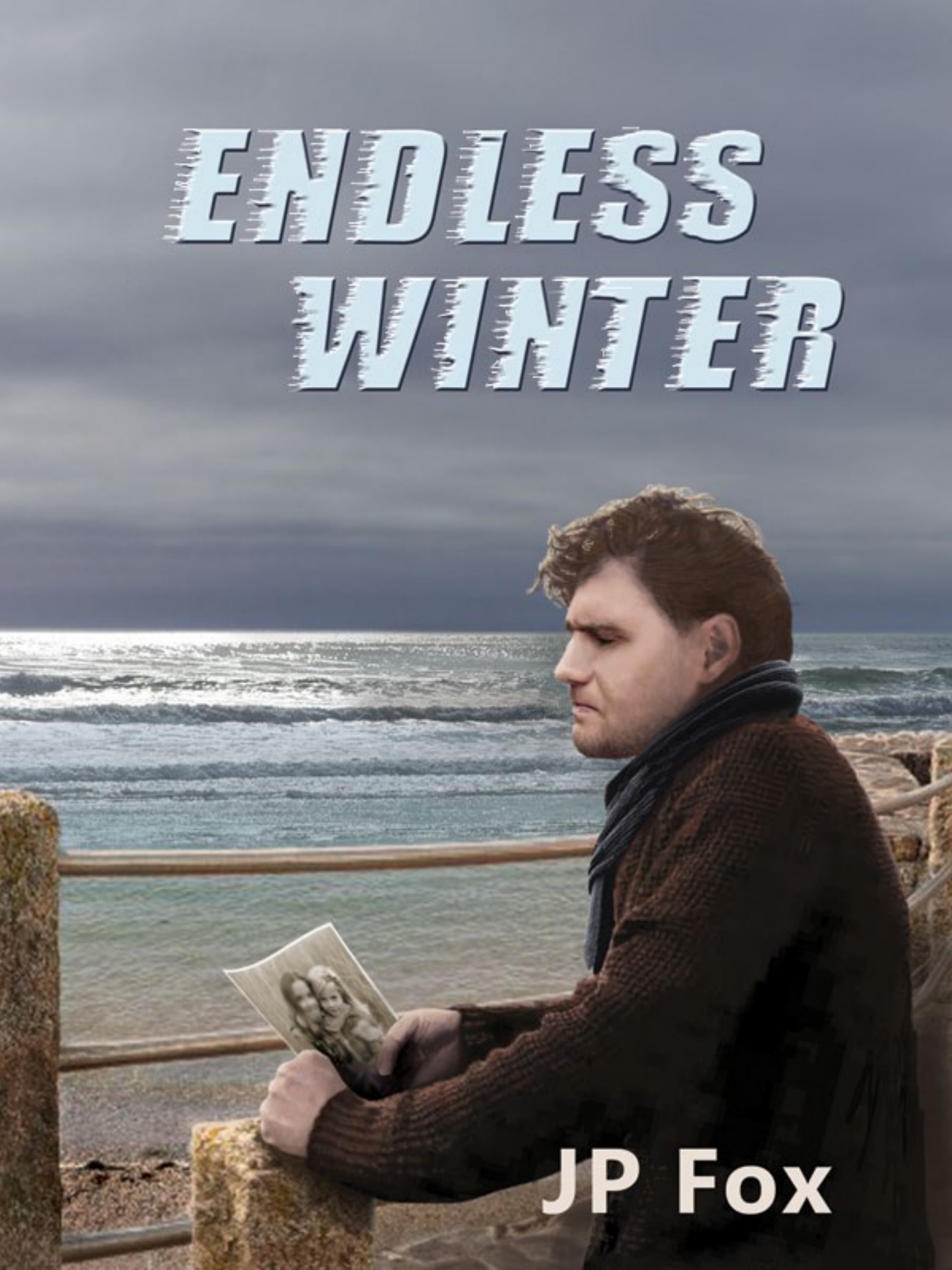
ENDLESS WINTER



JP Fox

Endless Winter

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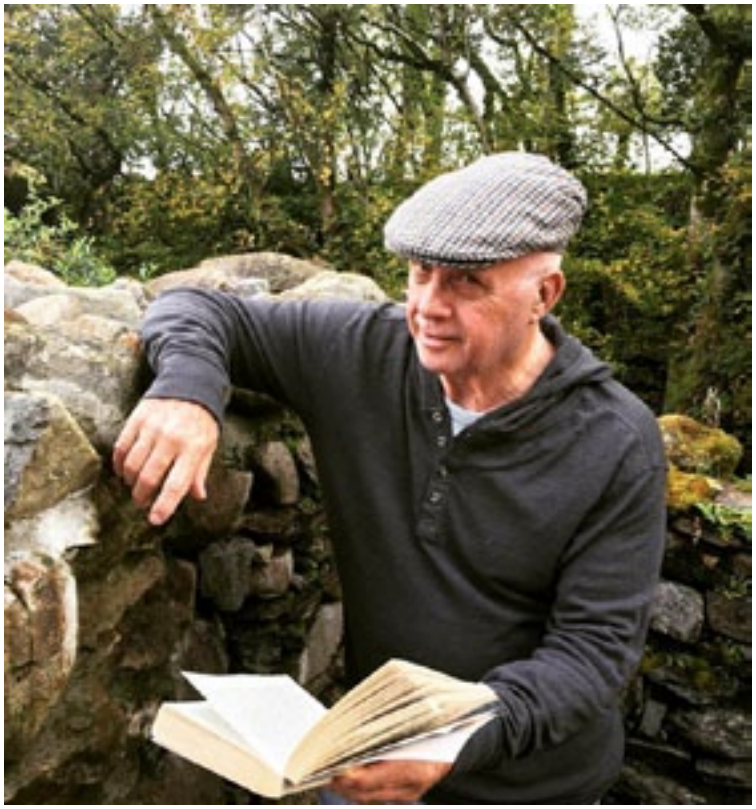
About the author

Born in Ireland, the land of the storytellers, JP Fox began writing as a personal challenge more than anything else. Inspired by his daughter's idea for a children's book with illustrations, he wondered if he could write a story. After three months, he had 100,000 words. From then on, manuscripts piled up in a bottom drawer. He gave little thought that his stories might end up on someone else's bookshelf.

In his leisure time, John enjoys woodcraft, watching snooker on YouTube, and loves a good courtroom drama.



Story Line

After the tragic death of his two-year-old daughter, Stephy, washed up by the tide, and the disappearance of his beloved wife, Elizabeth, missing believed drowned, Ben Tavistock exiles himself from the community. Convinced that nothing or no one can give him solace, he spirals downward in his depression. Allowing only his mother, Rosa, to visit, on this last occasion she finds a letter – unopened and months old – at his request she reads it. Not wanting to give her grieving son more worries, she keeps quiet about the contents; and until she can ascertain what the letter really means, Rosa Tavistock sets out to quiz Ben's long-time friend, Billy Turner.

Meantime, and despite his emotional storm, Ben draws up enough courage to retrace Elizbeth's and Stephy's final movements, from their house to the promenade…

Chapter 1

Ordinarily, Ben's thinking leaned towards the opinion that wintertime was the season when sensible people stayed indoors and built huge log fires and watched television or read of new bridges or the latest concept in skyscrapers or, as Elizabeth had encouraged him, to be more daring in his reading choices, to travel across the world's oceans and terrains via atlases and biographies, follow the footsteps of famous explorers Jacques-Yves Cousteau or Burke and Wills.

When Elizabeth became sick, he would often join her on the veranda during his days off and on weekends. For reasons he couldn't figure out, Elizabeth took to the outdoors more often, despite the weather. He didn't delve into her rationale; he assumed it was down to her illness that gave her a different slant on life and living. Unless it was pouring the heavens down, she would—as often as her homely duties, or her well-being, allowed—aim for the back porch or the garden as her preferred place to be.

She wasn't a great gardener, more of a learner, but she loved what she did. It was not Ben's personal choice to sit in near-arctic conditions, as he viewed winter, but out of love for her he joined her; only after donning several jumpers and a parka. He remembered how she swapped anecdotes with him about his inferior metabolism and thin blood, and how he needed to build himself up for a *real* cold snap.

As he ventured into the frigid air, the best the veranda could offer, he reflected on Elizabeth's humorous digs at him and despite the warm memory of her laughing face, his lips could muster up the thinnest of smiles. A robin appeared on the paint-worn wooden rail barely six feet away and eyed the man wrapped up in layers of garments that helped to ward off the thick, frost-laden, creeping air. The only parts of his body uncovered were his eyes, nose and the upper part of his mouth, showing a thick black moustache from razor neglect. The rest of his body was resolutely wrapped in winter woollens. He looked to the wrought-iron table beside him for a piece of bread. Elizabeth always had a morsel for the birds.

The table was empty save for a half-filled bowl of ice. Not even a drop of water to offer the little fellow, he thought. Elizabeth would not have been so remiss! The little creature hopped back and forth on the rail, unperturbed by the absence of crumbs. Ben thought the robin showed no signs of offence whatever; rather the bird's merrily hopping about

was a sign of gratitude for all the times Elizabeth *had* made provisions for it and the rest of his avian friends.

Ben purposely sat in the chair she used to occupy. He shifted and nestled into the shape of the chair. The memory of a sweet aroma filled his nostrils, the unique scent that belonged to Elizabeth. More memories flooded back. He felt he could reach his hand out and find her fingers caressing his; he closed his eyes and savoured the moment. Reality made it only a fleeting glimpse before salty water welled up in his pained, dark-ringed and sleep-deprived eyes. In the short-lived mental recall, he saw her clean eyes and infectious grin: the eyes that were fresh and gentle, the smile that reached out to others and invited them to share hers. Especially did he love the frequently-made symmetrical hollows her smile created on her soft cheeks. How often he had kissed them.

He sprung his eyes open and aimed them where he expected her to be; standing before him and holding their infant girl on her hip. Instead, he found a hazy sun striving to climb above the young hawthorn bush they planted four years earlier, before Stephie came along. The tears flowed easily at first when he recalled the excitement she showed on seeing the tree produce its brand-new petals of pink-red among a sea of tri-fingered dark-green leaves.

Tears flowed fast and hard knowing that she would not see the colours of the spring again, nor would he have the pleasure of soaking up her joy. He wept out loud, his chest heaving in sympathy with his aching heart, his tears meeting up with the flow of the incoming tide in the distance. He felt they would not abate until ebb tide, or maybe not at all, so overwhelmed was he with the loss of his first and only love. How he hated that cruel ocean!

The robin flew away.

Was the sociable bird responding to his tears and couldn't bear the sorrow, couldn't share the grief? Ben was sure that's how Elizabeth would have reasoned, anyway, although the birds didn't fly away when she tended their daily needs. She didn't stir up sadness in any person nor any creature. It was not in her nature.

His thoughts transferred voluntarily to a happy time he spent with her, in the cool of late autumn, on the veranda overlooking the sea. Elizabeth used to sit and watch the many subtle movements of frothed waves drifting towards the shore, sometimes dying before they reached any size at all. She wondered where they came from to reach their final destination. And while she pensively raised the question, she really

was pondering her deeper thoughts aloud, as if querying the whys and wherefores of life.

She would ask quietly: Had these little waves explored the world's oceans, enjoyed the whole experience, left a little ripple in oceanic history and then died an unobserved death in a small obscure cove? Like a salmon ends its existence after an unforgiving voyage from universal waters to a familiar stream in the mountains, finally shedding the next generation of eggs before surrendering to nonentity?

Ben remembered the occasion when he left to make a hot cup of tea, and butter the scones Elizabeth made the previous evening; he noted a worrisome frown spread across her face. Taking no particular notice of it at the time, he put it down to part of her on-going musings on the reasons for life, especially a life shortened by tragedy fatale. He wished he had shown more interest, wished she had invited him into her thoughts.

How could he have known what the next day would bring?

Stephie's chubby face flashed before him for the millionth time during the last few months. He could see her eyes skipping about under her eyelids when he checked on her while the kettle boiled and the scones warmed in the microwave. Fast asleep and clearly in childhood dreamland, the two-year-old sorted out experiences and knowledge gained in the previous twenty-four hours, slotting into memory cells that make sense only to infantile order. Under his breath, he heard his own words repeat how beautiful she looked, just lying there, so innocent and perfect. His mind played back her lovely eyes, a near copy of her mother's; her round face, a reproduction of her grandfather's cheery features.

His daughter got all her looks from Elizabeth's side of the family, he almost regretted, but in retrospect, he thought, with a father's pride, Stephie would have grown up with his quick brain and partiality for mathematics. He wept again for his child. She would never see the inside of a school nor learn of how numbers relate to the world around her or where Kenya or Peru is; she would never know why the wind blows or the need for forests on hillsides. Nor would she go through puberty or give her parents trouble as a teenager; nor fall in love nor marry nor produce grandchildren for her parents to be proud of and visit often.

Again, Ben became agitated by the negativity his reclusive thoughts punished him with. His mother had lovingly warned him about isolation, that it wasn't good for him. And through his mother his doctor

encouraged him to connect with his family and friends during his awful term of grief and loss; that time *would* come to his rescue, that he *would* feel better, that he was strong enough to cope with the deep hurt. Ben doubted all their opinions.

'What do they know of my pain?' he convinced himself on a daily basis, that he alone understood the gnawing, grinding ache that mercilessly invaded all his organs and spilled over into abject anger at all segments of society that offered no reprieve, no solace. There were days he hated himself for being so angry, especially towards his mother. She did not deserve such treatment from a son who owed her so much. No, not for a mother who put her own grief to one side while she guided her only son, her only child, through the painful aftermath of his father's tragic death.

In his teenage years, the time of life when a boy needs the manly, fatherly role model for reassurance, for comparisons, for ease into manhood, Ben's father took no part. A wild youth with a learner's permit, too much alcohol and a few of his pals urging him to test the car for speed, made sure of that. His father survived in an unconscious state for several hours before succumbing to 'too much damage to his insides', as the surgeon tactfully explained, or tried to, at least.

Ben recalled the emptiness, the numbness that swept through his body in the taxi home from the hospital. Even the normally warm, maternal hug his mother gripped him with offered him no amnesty from the void that filled his chest cavity. He felt angry with his father for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. At night in his bed, he poured out voluminous hatred on the boy who took a fearsome weapon in the shape of a small car and stampeded the life out of his dad. The same boy was released from a correction centre, having paid for his foolishness at the expense of taxpayer's money, and then got straight behind the wheel of a new car, courtesy of his parents.

They were thrilled to have their son released earlier than anticipated and rewarded him with another weapon of destruction, believing incarceration had taught him a valuable lesson: that he would *never* drive drunk again. Due to overcrowding in the prison, but not given as a reason, the warden scrawled his Parker-driven moniker across a document that suggested a pattern of 'good behaviour', the warden's way of finding spaces for the next intake of juvenile criminals. What his parents *did not* see, mainly because their favourite son had not shown it or felt it, was a sign of sorrow for his youthful error.

Nor did Ben or his mother ever receive an apology from the convicted teenage drunk or his parents, neither before, during or any time after the trial. For years, Ben tried to get his head around the fairness in sending a person to prison for six months for taking the life of another person. Even now, nearly twenty years later, the judgment handed down remained a thorny impasse, one that remained difficult to deal with. And now with Elizabeth and Stephie gone, and with no one to take the blame for their deaths, the persistent impasse, the absence of justice, cut a deeper groove in his sensibilities.

He got up suddenly and frightened a thrush. The bird had landed on the table in search of a bite and had not discerned the camouflaged figure in winter greys. The young bird startled him as he startled the bird; he questioned why he stood up so abruptly. Somewhere in the coldness, a rhythmic hammering banged inside his brain. The noise could have come from anywhere, so dislocated was he from the world beyond his sadness. He listened consciously. He gave more attention to the tap-tapping and having identified that it came from the metal gate at the side entrance—until it morphed into his mother's voice calling out his name.

'Ben! Benjamin! Are you there?' Rosa Tavistock called out sharply, her voice teetering on the border of agitation. Ben turned his attention in the direction of the shrill sounds. His mother, his ever-faithful mother, had come to cheer him up. Sucking in a deep breath, he resigned himself to letting her in. What he didn't want was more encouragement to mix with people and 'heal' among friends and family instead of remaining isolated and morose. But it was also hard for him to ignore his mother as though she didn't matter, as though her tender concern had no merit whatever.

He couldn't deny the support she had been to him in his growing up years without his father. Imagining that suffering such pain was unique to him and him alone, one day his mother spoke sharply to him that she had lost the man she loved as well. It was a turning point in his sorrow; it gave him a new perspective on pain and he began to reciprocate the hurt with her. Their relationship entered a new level when feelings aired and shared brought them closer.

In his early twenties, when he brought girls home to meet his mother, Rosa was able to direct and advise him accordingly. The last girl he brought home was Elizabeth. Instantly, the two women had liked each

other. Elizabeth was the only girl he brought home after that. She and Ben were married twelve months later.

Unlocking the gate, he did just enough to acknowledge his mother's existence and led her back to the porch and through the French doors. No words were exchanged. In the kitchen, Rosa gave him a warm and tender look and a strong hug; it replaced the words she wanted to say to him. She went straight to the kettle and filled it, then took a plastic container of homemade vegetable soup from a shopping bag and loaded it into the microwave. Ben removed some of his clothing and put a few logs on a neglected fire. He loved a roaring fire at any time, even though the radiators oozed sufficient heat to keep most people comfortable.

He obeyed his mother's order to sit down. She placed the steaming soup before him and a hot cuppa for her. In between the gaps she remarked how thin he looked; how he needed to keep eating well; that a shave would cheer him up. What she really felt was it would cheer her up to see him coming to terms with losing Elizabeth and Stephie. He made an acknowledgement of her concern. It came out as a grunt.

'I rang you several times this morning, Ben.'

He played with the spoon, moving it back and forward in the bowl, shifting a circle of soft carrot from one side to the other.

'You really must try to answer the phone, if only to let me know you are…alright! I worry so much about you, son.' She glanced towards the telephone and saw the receiver dangling over the edge of the table; the distinct beep-beep-beep singing its monotonous song confirmed Ben had removed it purposely; she decided to make no further comment.

'Carla asked me to visit her soon. Your uncle Simon is not getting better; his heart is starting to push against his ribs.' Ben responded with the barest glance at his mother's face. He raised the spoon to his lips and blew indifferently on the hot food. She shook her head when he put it back in the bowl uneaten, untasted. She tried to coax him to eat, but her words only irritated him. He wanted to bark at her for her interfering in his personal loss and for trying to dictate to him when and how he should get over it. He knew he was exaggerating her well-meant mother-concern; that she wasn't really the domineering type, and deep down he knew she was truly distressed over his ordeal. He cushioned his annoyance with the pretext that he wasn't hungry right now.

'I had a piece of toast earlier, Mum. Really, I'll heat this up again… later, when I feel like it.'

Rosa resigned herself to the stalemate once again. It was clear that her

son was spiralling downhill in his depression. She asked him between sips was he taking the tablets Dr Ames prescribed for him, and did he need a prescription filled. Ben snapped at her.

'Please, Mum! Stop! I'm not depressed! I'm *hurting*! Can't you see that? I've lost the two people that gave me reason for getting up in the morning. The loves of my life that made me whistle on my way to work; to sing and skip about with so much happiness that it made others jealous…' He stopped and bit his lip in a vain attempt to control the emotion that swept over him as an overwhelming wave swamps a little boat.

He sobbed uncontrollably, his arms flailing left and right as though searching for a place to settle, a rope to cling to for safety, a lifebuoy to hang onto in his emotional storm. Covering his face with his hands, he wept bitterly on the tablecloth. He tried to speak but his sobbing blocked his air pipe; partial words came out. Had his mother been able to decipher his anguish she would have heard him gibber about saving his wife and child from the malicious waters that first sapped their energy and then saturated their lungs; stole their lives like a kidnapper steals for a ransom. But instead of money, the sea wanted his happiness snuffed out, as a downpour extinguishes a warm fire. That was the price he paid, whether the demand was real or imagined. He would rather have given his life for theirs.

If only someone had asked him.

Rosa Tavistock bore the pain, not just for her personal loss of Elizabeth and Stephie, but also for her son's loss. She stretched across the table and stroked his hair with both her hands, trying to inject some comfort into her boy, but the moment was too much for her; she felt useless as a mother to soothe his pain as she once was able to in his early childhood. His sobbing groans vibrated in her fingertips and quivered all the way to her heart. She joined him in his tears.

Ben continued to struggle in the turbulent waters of his anguish. Somehow he had managed to grab hold of a tiny hand and haul her little body out and drag himself and her onto the ocean's edge. The water burnt his eyes; his nostrils filled with salt; the spicy tickle in the back of his throat stung his tongue and gums, and made him gag. He raised his head from his mother's caress and wiped the tears that leaked past his lips.

Rosa watched him stiffen and gaze straight ahead. She thought he was about to say something profound, something that he had discovered

about himself and was ready to move on from his grief. But he disclosed nothing of his thoughts. His lips remained tightly closed while he trembled. That horrible afternoon Stephie's little body was found on the beach was like a dream to him; no matter how many times he recalled the scene, it continued to be surreal. He remembered pushing his way through the crowd that had gathered and feeling they were deliberately blocking his approach to his little girl to prevent him from seeing her white face, her lifeless two-year-old innocent personality laid out on a bed of sand next to a slimy frond of green-black, tangled seaweed.

Rosa silently urged him to speak. More than once she begged him to let out his feelings, good or bad, angry or subdued; she would listen without disparagement or blame. He told her, often, *if only* he had been at home that day, things would have been different, likely they would have been together, then this whole grim reaper scenario would have not happened.

'Do you know, Mum, that Stephie still had red paint on her toes? Her shoes and socks were gone, but the nail polish Elizabeth painted on her tiny toenails a few nights before was still there. Bright red, scarlet.'

Ben spoke calmly, as though he was relating a personality trait Stephie had displayed to him just yesterday. His voice was tender in telling the anecdote, with the hint of a proud smile for his daughter's development. Rosa was afraid to comment in case he started bawling again. The doctor told her it was good for him to cry; it was a release of his tensions, of his anger, of his torment. Or, she was slow to speak because *she* didn't want to feel the pain of it all through his distress. She had her own suffering to bear.

At least she was able to talk to her friends, her doctor, others, and as hard as that was, it brought huge relief to her spirit. It also took the emphasis away from her distress, allowing her to sympathise with her son's. He had lost more than she had, but sometimes, yes sometimes, it was difficult for her to evenly divide or compare her personal loss with his.

'I loved Stephie so much, Ben, I…loved…them so much…I…I know I'm going to need help…to bear the loss. I can only imagine the emotional hammering you are going through. I…think we…we need each other, Ben?'

Ben managed a weak, counterfeit smile and rested his hand on his mother's, an acknowledgement of her request, but whether he could deliver was another matter. A week or so after the accident, he had

agreed to stay at his mother's house, for her sake really. Preferring his own company, where no one could preach their brand of 'cure' for his pain, he returned to 'his place of grief', where the scent of Elizabeth and Stephie persisted. Staying at his mother's only lasted a few days. That was when he discovered the broken window in the bathroom.

The skin on his face, he felt, was tightly drawn, that his cheekbones protruded unnaturally, that the muscles that allowed for normal human expressions were in spasm, locked together by life's hand-outs. He thought he would never laugh again; that some *laugh manager* who doled out the stuff like medicine was doled out on a once-only prescription and now the medicine was all gone. It was like someone had taken away his ability to enjoy married life, raise children, indeed, enjoy life itself, like a man is struck in a hit-and-run and is left paralysed by the accident. He can no longer walk or run as he once did. The tragedy that took away his pleasure, his humour, his smile, took away his family, his happiness, his reason for living, in one devious, vindictive act.

How he hated that cruel ocean for mismanaging his happiness.

Instantly, he felt guilty for being so selfish. Elizabeth and Stephie would *never*, *never* laugh again! Anger surged into his chest and throat. That the ocean, the familiar waters that filled the bay in view of his home, would repay his sweet wife for her loyalty by rewarding her with such contempt! How could the very entity that Elizabeth loved—the sea, the waves, the boats that she let sail on her liquid energy, the multitudinous creatures that she sustained—how could the sea be so malicious?

Didn't the sea *know* that Elizabeth loved her many moods and marvel at her wonders? Did the sea *not know* Elizabeth was in awe of the setting sun on her waters, spreading its orange hues across its placid ebb tide? Did the sea not know that Elizabeth *appreciated* the cooperation between the sea and the sun to give pleasure to people; how her waters reflected the blues, reds, greens, and greys— the continuum of the beautiful variety of colours—of the sky throughout the year?

His mother watched his face tighten in contorted anger, his eyes narrowing in hidden disapproval, his lips taut over teeth ground together, vexed. She could not tell what he was thinking, but she knew it wasn't good. Not wanting to provoke a reason for his portrayal of anger she let it slide, wishing he'd allow his emotions to calm. Instead, Rosa aimed a forced smile at her son and let the moment find its own answer.

Would Elizabeth have blamed the sea for taking her daughter alive and disgorging the once happy toddler onto a heartless and cold beach dead? Ben agonised. Or would she have blamed the wind? After all, the wind stirs up the waters; the storm creates monster waves that capsize boats and sink ships; the rip wrenches inexperienced swimmers out to sea.

No! Elizabeth would not have made such accusation against the sea nor the wind nor anything else!

'This is all in your head,' Ben heard his thoughts echoing down a narrow tunnel of reality. He found himself at the end of the tunnel, forced to recognise his reasoning was faulty, despite the infringement on his view of justice, distorted or not. Elizabeth's fairness helped him to reach the right conclusion. He closed his eyes and wished she were beside him now, carrying Stephie on her hip, as she usually did when they welcomed him home from work each afternoon. Savouring the image for as long as possible, he covered his eyes with his hands to block out all knowledge of light from entering and so spoiling the vivid pictures of the two people he loved most.

It was too painful to keep watching, imagining. He became conscious of his mother across the table, a few feet away from his face, and wondered did she know his thoughts. Drawn to her eyes, he mapped her face, examining her features. There were features of Stephie around his mother's cheeks; her nose, too, was a reminder of Stephie's.

'Mum, have the police come up with anything else?'

Rosa was temporarily stunned by the sudden change in his demeanour. It took her a few seconds to adapt to the unexpected switch of emotions that reflected pain on his pitiable face, to a serious, matter-of-fact question on police investigations. All the information she passed on to him over the last few months clearly had little impact on him. Nothing, she concluded with a mother's understanding, could get past his broken heart. Now he seemed focused. Minutes, no seconds, earlier he was silently agonising over his loss. She stammered at first, to regain her composure, and then considered the question.

'Well…no. Nothing…nothing more than what Inspector Plinter said. Remember I told you, Ben. They…the police…called off any further investigation. Lost at sea…was their verdict. They said someone would come and talk to you…but it was too much for you at the time. The Inspector said he'd write. Have you checked your mail, Ben? I put the last lot on the sideboard…with the other letters.'

Ben glanced towards the living room through the glass panels. That he wasn't eager to get up was obvious, so she offered to get the mail for him; half way to the closed doors she turned to acknowledge his 'thanks, Mum'. She picked up a stack of unopened letters and several wrapped copies of *Reader's Digest* and one on bridges and roads. A letter slipped from the bundle and slid down between the timber top and the wall. Rosa stooped to retrieve it from the floor but she couldn't see it. She got down on her knees and saw two envelopes resting on the skirting board. Stretching in, she salvaged the letters from anonymity and placed the wad of mail in front of Ben.

He showed no interest in the envelopes that looked like bills and shoved them to one side as he fingered through them. Casually, he asked what she was doing on her knees in front of the sideboard. Rosa pointed to the delinquent letters, saying she retrieved them from the floor. The magazines he ignored and piled them in a neat stack on top of the demands for payment. He held a brown envelope, embossed with the police insignia, for an extended few seconds, then put it with the others. Elizabeth's name appeared on the next letter. He bit his lip to ward off any further flow and affectionately rubbed his forefinger across her name in the envelope's window, then passed it quickly to his mother.

'You open this one, Mum. Tell me what it says.'

Rosa searched for something in her handbag. She found a nail file and began to read. 'It's from a book club. Doubleday. They regret that the book Elizabeth ordered is unavailable at present…'

'What book?' he asked with heightened interest. Rosa scanned the page.

'*Oceans of the World*,' she shot out without thinking, and as if to punish her tongue for an inexcusable offence, she immediately grabbed her mouth and pressed hard against her lips. Ben leapt up. Once again, his hatred for the sea welled up in his chest. Rosa was taken aback. She stood up slowly. His face filled with rage and then the rage subsided, one part of his personality yielding to another.

'Elizabeth loved the ocean, Mum. I've been blaming the sea for taking her and Stephie. The *sea*! How stupid can a man get? She loved the sea; she loved nature, animals, the mountains, the natural surroundings. She has books galore on everything that hints of people and places, the earth's ecosystems… everything!'

Rosa leant forward to hold him. He fell into her arms and wept on

her shoulder. Gently rocking him as though a little boy who had a cherished toy crushed, she attempting to help him overcome his loss. How she wished that's all it was; a toy, something that could be repaired or replaced. But who was able to replace Elizabeth and Stephie? Rosa discarded the thought quickly before she was of use to anyone, before she ended up a blubbering mess in her son's arms.

It was he who needed the specialised attention now. Hers would come later.

But where could she start? After all, the police came up with nothing solid. Elizabeth's movements on that fatal day were explored ardently; everyone who had come in contact with her and Stephie came forward, from the time they left the house until little Stephie's body washed up on the beach. Some had brief conversations with Elizabeth. Others had marginal contact: a 'good morning' or a wave from across the street as the young mother pushed the stroller towards the town centre. Nobody, however, offered tangible clues for what really happened; and yet, someone out there knew and had not come forward.

And how? How did they end up in the water? Did Stephie fall in, somehow, and did Elizabeth jump off the wharf to save her child? Did she let the stroller go for just a second and turn to see it roll over the edge? Didn't anyone see that happen? Besides, even if it did happen that way, Rosa queried, as she did hundreds of times during the past several months, how did Stephie—she wept along with her son as she thought of her beautiful granddaughter's lifeless body on the sand—how did Stephie get two hundred metres from the marina?

And what happened to the stroller? It wasn't sunk at the quayside; divers found a supermarket trolley and other bits and pieces, but no stroller. Rosa stopped herself thinking on what wasn't discovered, what answers remained *hidden*. While the *unknown* disturbed her, it did her no good to re-examine questions the police had already investigated and had come up with nothing conclusive. The last person who *thought* she saw Elizabeth and Stephie—it could have been another mother and child—was Mrs Freda Oughter.

Freda had a reputation for knowing *everything* and *everybody*; the elderly lady believed the person she saw pushing the pram along the promenade was Elizabeth. When asked to positively answer, she couldn't say with complete certainty. Twenty metres or so turned out to be nearly forty metres when angles and locations were established. Anyway, it was a *fleeting* glimpse the old lady had, and had she not

been startled by what she described as the noise of a car backfiring, she wouldn't have looked behind her to see the mother and child in the distance.

Freda complained she might have gotten everything wrong, being distraught by the news of the tragedy later and imagining there was a connection between the drowning and the sighting she had of the young mother and child near the bus-stop. Rosa had a vivid picture of Inspector Plinter offering to clean Freda's glasses for her. The old lady declined the offer. He did, however, draw out of her the last time she had an eye test. Apparently, she wore the same glasses for the last fifteen years!

What made things even harder was the rainstorm that followed. Before Mrs Oughter had reached home the rain drenched her and the tote bag she carried bread and milk in, and a packet of gingernut biscuits. Elizabeth and Stephie were very likely caught in the downpour, it was surmised. Possibly, Plinter had said, Elizabeth had lost her grip on the pram and it was swept by the strong wind, careered into the promenade railings, and tossed the child out and into the water. It was only guesswork, Plinter reminded her, but a plausible outcome in view of the available evidence. Rosa recalled telling Ben what the police had said, but she was convinced his grief blocked any or all reasoning or comprehension.

Ben drew away from his mother and thanked her for coming. Rosa took a seat again and he did likewise; he toyed with the two envelopes as though undecided what to do with them. He put one on the pile; the other was addressed with scrawled handwriting. On the reverse side, the letter B was written in equally untidy script.

'It's from…I'm not sure, probably Billy. It looks like his scribble. Yeah, must be.'

Rosa nodded, acknowledging it as the one hidden behind the cupboard. 'Billy wanted to see you, Ben, he asked me over and over. Then he stopped asking.' She thought before saying anything further, in case it made Ben feel bad about isolating himself. Ben vaguely recalled the door being hammered, the bell ringing, piercing his eardrums, Billy's worried, high-pitched voice pleading with Ben to open up, and he, wishing the caller, albeit his friend, *would simply go away*. He had a vague recollection of something his mother told him about Billy wanting to see him but couldn't recall what it was exactly. Something about his mother dancing in the rain and when Billy had taken care of her, he'd be over to see him.

At what point he disconnected the doorbell he couldn't remember, but its silence reminded him he didn't want interfering busybodies telling him how to deal with or how to overcome his pain. Taking the phone off the hook was the only way to stop them creeping into his domain, to extinguish their invasive voices blaring at him down thin wires, pounding his ears with offers to help, to console, to pity. What he wanted was *not* pity, *not* soothing words of consolation, *not* hope, *not* deliverance from mental trauma or heartache that time allegedly would take care of. No! None of these things! What he wanted was his wife and child back home, close to him, to hold and hug and kiss.