

The Boy Next Door

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2,991

"Nothing eases suffering like human touch"

- Bobby Fisher

Lola thrashed about in her bed, the sheets caught around her flailing arms and legs. She wanted to run but her feet were rooted to the ground beneath her. The darkness was closing in around her as she cried, "No! Stop! Please don't come near me. They'll see! They'll take me!"

In the darkness, a bright figure was slowly walking towards her, arms outstretched, calling her name. As it reached her and gently laid its hands over her shoulders, she let out a scream. It wasn't the touch out of the shadows that scared her, but the fear of what might follow. She knew she had to leave. She shouldn't be there. She willed herself to move and turned to run, but it was too late. The shrill sound of sirens surrounded her and the doors to the van opened.

"SHRIEK! SHRIEK! SHRIEK!" Lola sat bolt upright, breathing fast, trying to block out the screech of the alarm clock. She'd had the same dream for weeks now and although she no longer had a need for the alarm, it had become a welcome relief from her dreams each morning.

"Woof! Woof", she heard Max barreling down the hallway, skidding into the bedroom. He bounced up to her bed licking her face, his tail moving at a million miles an hour. "What are you so happy about?" Lola groaned, rolling over and

pulling him in for a cuddle. "Are you not sick of me yet?! What are we going to do today Maxie? Holiday in the kitchen, the balcony or the lounge room?" Max cocked his head quizzically. She crawled out of bed, "I need coffee". And so, another groundhog day began.

It had been eight months, one week, three days, 10 hours and 22 minutes since social isolation had begun. Lola started to wonder if she would ever be allowed out to interact again. If someone had told her a year ago she would go from a successful lawyer working 80 plus hours a week to unemployed, stuck inside the four walls of her shoebox apartment and rarely making it out of her pyjamas. She would have told them they were crazy. This global pandemic had literally shut down the world. Guards were patrolling the cobbled streets, waving their batons, and making sure everyone was following the "rules". Groceries had to be delivered, left in bags outside the apartment door and medical appointments by telephone. The only reason Lola could leave the house was to take Max for a 15-minute walk.

She desperately missed her family and her friends, longed for the warmth of another person's embrace. But apparently, isolation was the "only" way to prevent the rising death toll that chillingly flashed across her television screen every night. It was a dystopian nightmare.

Lola had watched from her balcony as guards blew their whistles, barking loudly at people "Where are you going? Get over here! Show your pet registration papers! Explain!" and load everyday people into the back of their vans. Rumour had it they were being held in detention centres, one person per cell, not allowed to leave under any circumstance. No time outdoors, no sunshine, nothing. She had heard mutterings in the supermarket about cruel and unusual punishments, beatings, lashings and the like, but brushed this off as bored fanciful musings of her rumourmongering neighbours.

Lola followed the rules, only leaving her apartment to take Max out for his 15 minutes a day and each time it was the same. Out of her apartment, down the creaking, cracked staircase, and out through the rusty wrought iron gates. "Stop! Papers? Where do you think you are going?" the guard would bark. She would pull Max's registration papers from her bag and say, "I will be back in 15 minutes". The guards would look at her wryly as they waved her through.

The usually vibrant streets were dim and grey. The previously bustling restaurants and cafes dotted along the main street were now empty, with thick planks of rotting wood nailed across their entrances. Weeds were growing through the cracks in the footpath. She didn't dare venture further than a quick trip around the block, afraid of being out for longer than the allotted time. Lola found her walks a depressing

reminder of the changes the City had endured in just eight months.

On that particular day, Lola pottered around her cramped apartment, reading her book with Max curled at her feet. She glanced up from her book, the orange and pink hues across the balcony catching her eye. Her favourite time of the day was approaching. The sun was low in the sky, a flaming ball throwing coloured light across the dull dilapidated streetscape around her. She stepped out onto the balcony stealing a hopeful glimpse across the way. Her heart skipped a beat as she locked eyes with the boy next door, the crimson rising in her cheeks. He looked to be a similar age to her, tanned skin and large dark eyes, his white t-shirt tight around his moulded arms. She had seen him on his balcony most afternoons in the warm sunshine, strumming his guitar with his furry red companion sitting by his side. The boy next door seemed to like twilight as much as she did. Lola gave him a meek wave and quickly shuffled over to her deck chair, book in hand.

Lola felt something gently graze her leg. Looking around, her eyes rested on a white paper plane on the balcony floor by her feet. She picked it up, feeling confused, looking around. The boy next door was smiling at her. Her fingertip lingered on the delicate folds of the plane, tracing the streamlined shape. She turned it in her fingers, the scrawling writing

catching her eye. "Hola! Hello. My name is Marco. What's yours?" The corners of her lips curled upwards, and she felt her heart thud in her chest. She raced inside, picked up the pen and wrote, "Hi Marco, I'm Lola" embellished with a tiny shooting star. Lola stepped across her deck chair, making her way to the edge of the balcony. The boy next door pointed downwards, slapping his palm to his forehead. Lola looked down to the cobbled street below where a small pile of failed flights had laid to rest.

Lola covered her mouth to hide her smile and with a graceful flick of her wrist, sent her message gliding over the railing into the warm air. She watched in awe at the majestic, graceful movement of the little plane, caught in the gentle breeze, floating and flipping like a tiny bird. It unceremoniously hit the crumbling grey brickwork of the building across the street and joined the pile of failed attempts in the street below.

The boy next door held his stomach in laughter, shrugged his shoulders and smiled at Lola. It took Lola five attempts of furiously folded paper planes with varying adjustments to the wingspan, length, and weight, before one successfully sailed to the balcony of the boy next door. He clapped and cheered, his furry companion barking joyfully and bouncing on his hind-quarters.

Over the next week Lola and Marco sent many gliders across the great divide, often with tiny origami animals or shapes folded within their wings; always with a question, an answer and a tiny shooting star tucked away beneath a delicate fold. Lola quickly realised there was more to the boy next door. He had fled from an impoverished life in Mexico and worked hard to build a new life here. All that seemed to be crashing down in the midst of the pandemic. He was alone and scared, longing for companionship, for some contact, and the paper planes allowed them to exchange their troubled thoughts and hopeful dreams.

On a particularly purple dusk, Lola walked hopefully onto her balcony, and she wasn't disappointed. A bright yellow plane had landed perfectly between the arm rail of her deck chair. The boy next door was nowhere to be seen. She opened the careful folds to find his scrawl. "Let's meet. Take Max for a walk to Marigold Park tomorrow at 8:30 a.m." Her breath caught in her tightening chest, "But we can't. We shouldn't... should we?" she asked herself.

The next morning Lola grabbed Max's collar and lead. She patted her bag to feel for his papers and made her way down the stairs and the iron gates. "STOP! PAPERS!" the short plump guard seemed particularly on edge. Lola watched as the guard from across the street strode over to them. He was as tall as he was wide, his face looked red and blotchy, and he smelled

strongly of cigarette smoke. "Early to be out isn't it girly?" he spat. Lola fumbled and passed him Max's registration papers, her hands visibly shaking. "I just want to walk my dog".

That is when she saw the boy next door saunter through the gates opposite where she was standing, no longer a guard to question him, and hasten around the corner with his furry companion in toe. The guard followed her gaze and she quickly looked to the ground in front of her. "Not today girly. STAY HOME. You ain't going anywhere" he snarled, shoving the papers back at her. She knew better than to argue. Lola ran up the old stairs and flung open the door to her apartment, searching for paper and pen. She hastily scribbled "Tomorrow? 12 p.m?" and meticulously folded the wings, straightened the nose, and sailed her message across the great divide.

It was a new guard today. He was short and stumpy with a lazy eye and thinning grey hair. "Morning love. Have you got some paper there for me?" Lola relaxed and smiled back at him handing over Max's papers. Maybe this wasn't such a bad idea after all, maybe it really would work.

"Good Morning, Sir". "Ah don't call me Sir, love. The name's Angus. You have a good walk, hey. But do remember, it's 15 minutes". He winked at her and stepped aside to allow her out to the street. She hurried past the eerie empty streets towards Marigold Park, a vibrant flower garden that sat in the

middle of the City. Lola hated to think how dead and in despair the once most beautiful part of the City had become. She started to jog, Max scampering to keep up, and came to the diverged roads that surrounded the park. Turning left, she drew a deep breath and with wide eyes, took in the warm pink and red heart rose floral archway that stood grand as ever. Behind the archway, the tulip garden was in full bloom. The orange and red cup shaped flowers were opened, their tall stems reaching to the sun. The sweet citrus scent filling the air. Lola was taken aback; she never expected the Marigold Park to be more vibrant than ever while the rest of the City seemed to be slowly dying. She followed the path around the garden, watching the sun beams dance on the flowers as Max tried to catch butterflies. Movement on the path that tracked the right side of the garden caught Lola's eye.

Max suddenly raced forward, dragging Lola behind him. They came to the end of the garden path where the cool, bubbling fountain sat and Lola stopped in her tracks, doubled over and breathing hard. At her feet Max was licking and nudging another puppy with red shaggy fur. Lola looked up and her eyes met his, the boy next door.

There they stood for what felt like an eternity, soaking in the close physical presence of one another but still 6 feet apart, not daring to break the rules. "Hola, Lola", he whispered, a tear rolling down his tanned cheek. "It's you"

Lola said. "It's really you!". She reached her hand towards him, longing to feel the warmth of his body, to feel touch. She felt the tingling electricity pulse through her body, extending to her finger tips reaching for her boy next door. In what felt like slow motion, Lola watched Marco stretch his hand to meet hers.

Without thinking she took a step forward, her fingers interlacing with his. She traced the soft skin on his hands, his calloused fingertips. Marco took his hand from hers and traced the shape of her mouth, the crease on her forehead and brushed her hair back behind her ear.

In that moment, the world stopped and time stood still, they could have been anywhere. Surrounded by the gentle sound of the water streaming down the fountain and the fragrant citrus scent of the tulip garden, Marco and Lola stood simply holding hands. Silent tears rolled down their faces, the sheer elation at simple human connection.

The piercing of whistles pealed around them, "OI! STOP NOW! MOVE AWAY! YOU ARE UNDER ARREST".

Two guards were running towards them. Marco dropped her hand, flinging her backwards and turning to stand tall between Lola and the guards. Lola started, "I have papers!" She flinched as she recognised the imposing stature of one of the guards, "I don't care about your papers girly. You are under

arrest for breaking the section 2 of the Physical Contact Act 2019. There is no getting out of this one.

What about you boy? Who are you? Where should you be?" he snarled, standing over Marco. "Me llamo Marco, My name is Marco" he stuttered in broken English. Another two guards arrived, one was the guard with the lazy eye.

"She's right lads, I'll deal with this one" Angus interjected, grabbed her by the elbow, firmly escorting her away and taking the dog's lead from Marco hands. "I'll see to it she and her dogs get what they deserve".

"No! Marco!" Lola cried. "Come on love, trust me," Angus muttered under his breath picking up his pace. Lola looked back at Marco, tears streaming down her face. She watched helplessly as the guards beat the back of Marco's legs. He fell to the ground like a rag doll as they continued to beat him. "No!!!!!!!!!!!!!" she screamed. As she and Angus rounded the corner, the last thing she saw was the guards scoop up Marco's limp body, dump him into the back of their van and drive away with her boy next door.

Angus rushed her back down the drab grey cobbled street, gently pushing her back behind the rusted wrought iron gates. "Go home. Stay home. Don't speak to anyone", he said handing her the other dog lead.

Back inside the apartment, Lola headed straight for the balcony and sat on the deck chair trying to digest what had just happened. With swollen eyes she looked across the great divide and Marco's apartment was in darkness. Max came and sat at her feet, his new mate following close behind. Lola bent down and looked at the dog's collar, 'Bella'. She scooped Bella up in her lap, gently stroking her red fur, tears silently streaming down her face. She never meant for this to happen.

Desperate to be there when Marco returned, Lola did not leave the balcony until darkness had well and truly fallen. It was after midnight when Lola finally dragged herself back inside and climbed wearily into bed. She could not get the image of Marco laying limp on the ground out of her mind. She had dreams that night she would never wish upon anybody, waking in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, gasping for air and her heart racing.

As the light of dawn peeked through the window, Lola shuffled out of bed and back to the deck chair, watching and waiting for the boy next door. She sent a small winged messenger over the balcony. She wanted him to know she was still there, that he wasn't alone. Feeling numb, she sat in the deck chair until nightfall again, hoping, desperately hoping, he was alive and safe.

And so, the coming days, weeks and months followed in much the same way. Always waiting, always watching, always hoping. A pile of unread planes had collected in a pile on the balcony of the boy next door. The seasons changed and the rain and wind of Winter washed away the pile of planes from Marco's balcony. Lola watched as the wind gracefully lifted them from the balcony floor and danced them through the air, never to be seen again. She wondered where they would end up, who might find them, whether they might wonder where they had come from and what they meant.

Eventually the Summer sun came around again and Lola, laying on the couch inside her apartment, looked up from her book, the sky a brilliant shade of pink. She stepped out onto the balcony smiling fondly as she recalled that brief moment amongst the flowers and sunshine. She brushed the dead leaves and cobwebs from the deckchair and sat down to bask in the brilliance of the warm Summer sunset.

Tomorrow would signal the start of a new beginning. The news reports had flashed across her television all day, the crisis was finally over. From midnight, the world was finally free to leave their homes and re-build their broken lives. She longed to be at her parent's home, to hold them in her arms and feel their warm, safe embrace. She wasn't going to be alone anymore. Lola took one last glance across the great divide and was again met with nothing but darkness. She walked

to the edge of her balcony searching his apartment for any sign of light, or life. She gripped the handrail tightly and closed her eyes, imagining the strum of his guitar, ready to say her final goodbye to her boy next door.

As she slowly opened her eyes, a light flickered on in his apartment. "Marco?"

END

The Diary

By Robyn King

2998 words

Sarah woke with the sound of hammering coming from the rear of the house.

Steve, her husband of fourteen days was up early, ready to test his handyman skills and repair some rotting floorboards under the kitchen sink. On returning, from Bunnings, he noticed Sarah was still asleep, so he proceeded to repair the water pipes where the leak was dripping from.

The Richard Street house was built in the Nineteen thirty's as a simple, single fronted dwelling, with two bedrooms, kitchen, bathroom, and toilet off the laundry. Sarah and Steve planned to redesign the décor. Down the end of the passageway, was a small lounge room with an open fireplace in the middle of the rear wall. Embers scorched the edge of the carpet. Some of the looped threads were damaged. The last room before the laundry and toilet was the kitchen. White laced curtains hung proudly across the window, a wood potbelly stove, that warmed the whole house when burning strong. The linoleum was old, dull and well worn.

Steve heard Sarah enter the room. He pointed to a wooden box on the kitchen table.

"Look at what was under the floorboards."

Sarah still half asleep walked over to the table and studied the box. She released the latch.

"What is this?" asked Sarah.

"Don't know, take a look"

"Oh, wow, Look at that," whispered Sarah.

"What is it?" asked Steve, curiously.

"A handkerchief. The embroidery is so fine" explained Sarah under her breathe as she caressed it lovingly.

"A bow shaped brooch was wrapped by the handkerchief." Steve pulled out a diary and handed it to Sarah. Something fell to the ground.

It was a picture of a pretty brunette, in a nurses uniform, and tall dark headed man in a white jacket. He had his arm around her waist. Both were smiling. The back of the photo had the initials. A.S. N.C. 1960.

Sarah placed the photo back in the diary, and turned the pages. The writings started in May 1960 to February 1961 Sarah made two cups of coffee and told Steve she will be in the bedroom if he needed her. She propped the pillows up on the bed.

Alice Sutcliffe

Thursday 2nd May 1960.

Dear Diary.....

I started working with Dr. Nicholas Clarke today.

I couldn't stop staring, as he reminded me of Errol Flynn. With a trimmed moustache and dark hair. He has the gentlest voice. He's very refined, articulate and a class above. All the nurses are talking about him. He doesn't wear a wedding ring. But that isn't unusual, as most doctors won't wear rings while handling patients and doing surgeries. He noticed me, as he smiled when

I handed him a scalpel. Typically, Sister Carr flirted with him but he ignored her and I smirked. She glared at me and told me to watch myself, as she brushed past.

Ernie goes to the pub on Thursdays. So he will be home late. Every night he wants steak, potatoes and peas. One night I put two Brussels sprouts on his plate to mix it up, and he threw the contents all over my new dress. At first I was shocked, but I realized he doesn't know what he's doing when he's drunk. While cleaning the mess, I could only find one sprout. The next day I looked up and there it was stuck to the ceiling.

I've been trying to get pregnant for ages. I just can't conceive. Our family doctor says she will get to the bottom of it. So Ernie and I have had all the tests possible. My results show I am not the problem. So it's Ernie turn to be tested.

Saturday 4th May. 6.30pm

Dear Diary.....

Today I met with Sister Ann Hutchins. Ann is plump, loud, and funny all at the same time. We sat in the lunchroom discussing Doctor Clarke and she agrees that he is easy to work with.

"He can use his stethoscope on me anytime. He must be queer, as no man is as gentle and sophisticated." Ann bellowed.

I was bursting at the seams with laughter. I told Ann that Ernie becomes aggressive when he's drinking. It makes me anxious. But my biggest worry is, I can't get pregnant.

"You have to have sex, you know that don't you? Asked Ann.

Blushing, "Yes, I know, we have been trying since we were first married".

Sunday 5th May. 7.30pm.

Dear Diary...

Last night, Ernie, being a tow truck driver, had to attend a fatality on Beach Road. South Melbourne. I knew he'd be gone most of the night so I rang Ann to come over, to share a bottle of champagne. Ann has plenty of ideas on how to improve the performance of the emergency ward. But I'm sure if we put it past

management first, we could get some of the ideas through.

Tomorrow I have to go to the clinic in South Melbourne to get the results on Ernie's test. Ann said that I shouldn't worry too much as there is a system where the doctors can get you pregnant by combining Ernie's sperm with my eggs. It's expensive, though.

I went to mass today. And prayed to Our Lady to pray for me. So I can conceive and become a mother.

Monday 6th May 2.30pm.

I saw Dr. Mary Mason, Ernie's sperm count is very low. Quite distressing. I am too afraid to tell him. He won't take it well. I cried all the way home. She told me that my chance of falling pregnant to Ernie would take a miracle. I can't believe it. I will never be a mother. I rang Ann. I needed some positive reinforcement, as she always cheers me up. She suggested we talk and drink more champagne.

Tuesday 7th May. 7.35 pm.

I haven't told Ernie, about the results, as I have come up with a plan. It's a long shot but I think I should be able to get away with it.

I am going to get pregnant with someone else's help.

Dr. Clarke has been paying me a lot of attention and today I bandaged a wound on his arm where a patient scratch him, and while I was applying some antiseptic, he asked me if I was married. I told him, I was. His reply was "That's a shame" We smiled at each other.

Ann tells me he's been asking about me.

Tomorrow I am working in ICU with Dr. Clarke. I am so excited.

Sarah wondered where is this woman now? Is she still aliv? What is Alice up to? What happened to Ernie? Ann Hutchins? The Doctor?

Sarah continued reading.

Wednesday 8th May 7.30pm.

What an interesting day I had today. Dr. Clarke is.... is...well, he's just lovely. He followed me into the nurse's quarters wanting my opinion on something. I turned, took a step closer, looked him in the eyes. And said it. "You are never far from my thoughts. "I want you to make love to me," He looked at me with his big brown eyes and touched my face. I felt like I was floating. His passionate kisses were gentle and constant. I responded with intensity. He took my hand and lead me into the broom closet. Where it's dark and private. "Alice, I dream of you all the time. I picture us making love on the beach, while the waves tickle our feet. I think of you taking your nurse's uniform off and I am watching you from afar. It drives me crazy thinking that I might not ever have you." We stripped off and made love there, amongst the cleaning products in the broom closet. Dr. Clarke told me, that all he ever wanted to do is make passionate love to me. It's been driving him crazy. He kept telling me how beautiful I am and loves the feeling of his skin touching mine. I have never felt so wanted and so out of control all at the same time. He didn't ask me if I was enjoying myself, he made sure I was. I have never felt this much delight before. I felt weak at the knees.

Friday 10th May 7am.

Just a quick note for the diary, this morning.

Yesterday, being payday, Ernie went to the pub after work. Dr. Clarke and I met and went back to my place and made love at my home. While we were lying on the bed he handed me something. When I unfolded it, there was a brooch inside an embroidered handkerchief. It's exquisite. It belonged to his mother and he gave it to his wife on her twenty fifth birthday. But now he wanted me to have it. I also learned that Dr. Clarke was married but his wife passed away two years ago, with complications from an enlarged heart. She was twenty five. I really like Dr. Clarke. I wish I had met him when I was younger. But I'm

married to Ernie. I'm his forever.

Dr. Clarke had just left, when Ernie walked in the door. I wasn't expecting him to be home so early. Timing was too close for comfort. Ernie noticed that I had been singing a lot more than he was use to. He was happy that I was in a good mood. He was in good spirits also. I wondered if Ernie has taken on a lover. No, not Ernie. I couldn't see him doing such a thing.

Monday 13th May. 7.45pm

We were busy at the hospital today. A photographer was doing the rounds, taking snaps of the patients and staff for a promotion in the Sun newspaper. His camera was snapping all over the wards. The patients smiled as it lifted their spirits. It brought joy to the hospital for a day. His polaroid camera, was used to take photos of the staff and handed them out to us as a thank you gift. Dr. Clarke and I posed for one. I took it as a reminder of our time together. So I will keep it under the sink in my box of secrets. Away from prying eyes.

Sarah, took a break. Walked out to the kitchen where Steve was cleaning up.

"You won't believe this Alice Sutcliffe, Steve. She is one shrewd lady. I don't know if I like her or not. Her husband's sperm count is desperately low. She can't conceive, so to save money and going through doctors and procedures, she's taken on a lover. But, it seems she is enjoying him. I think her lover is falling in love with her. But she is using him, to become pregnant. Or is she? That is what I want to find out."

Sarah made a sandwich for both of them and went outside in the sunshine to finish reading the diary. She wasn't sure if Steve was listening.

Tuesday 21st May. 7.30pm

I have been too tired to write in my diary this week. Dr. Clarke walked past me the other day and didn't acknowledge me. I was hurt. I didn't know what was wrong. But something was. Later in the day, he pulled me aside and told me that he has the opportunity to do humanitarian work in Nairobi, Africa. Please Alice, come with me. I need a nurse to be my assistant. I want you. Not just as a nurse but to be my lover. I won't go without you. I love you Alice. I can't go alone. I kept shaking my head. Telling him I can't.

In my mind. I couldn't leave Ernie. That's not the plan. I love him and will never hurt him. "Please, think about it. I will pay for everything. You just have to pack a bag. We leave on the 1st August. I can take care of the all the formalities. You must come, my darling. I will look after you. I can't go without you. I won't", he persisted.

"What is he asking me? I am in a whirlwind. All I could think about is if I wasn't pregnant, I might run out of time. I don't want to go to Africa. I'm scared of flying. Africa would be exciting, another time or another life it could have worked. But I can't dwell on something that is impossible and just won't happen. Dr. Clarke could make love to me every day, the thought made me giggle, as I do like being with him. I'm so confused.

My body feels different in some ways. I could be imagining it. My breasts are tender and I feel squeamish in the morning. But I can't compare it to anything because I don't know what it's like to be carrying a child

Sarah read on through to the end of June. Then in July, Alice found out she was pregnant, and was due February 27th 1961. Her plan had worked and she was

ecstatic. She became a little distant towards Dr. Clarke as she thought it was best for both of them that she ended it with him.

July 31st 7.30pm

Dr. Clarke approached me today. He wanted to know if I was pregnant, as everyone was talking and he noticed a bump. I told him that I was. And that Ernie and I are very happy we are going to be parents. He glared at me.

I told him, I couldn't go to Africa. And the best thing to do is that we don't see each other any more. I won't leave my husband. I can't divorce, the church won't allow it. I thanked him for being so loving to me. He laughed at me. I detected sarcasm in his tone. Then he walked off.

I meant to return the brooch and the handkerchief, but never had the opportunity to do so. Before I knew it, he was gone. I achieved what set out to do but I feel strangely torn; it's harder than I thought.

Alice wrote in her diary periodically. Sister Carr went to Africa with Dr. Clarke. Alice mentioned she thought of Dr. Clarke but was excited to be with Ernie and having a baby.

Alice worked until Christmas, until Ernie wanted her to stop and stay home to prepare for the baby.

A healthy, bouncing baby boy was born on the 28th February. 1961. 8lb. 13oz. Twenty-one inches long.

Alice took one look at him, with a mop of dark brown hair, dark eyes, fair complexion. Perfectly proportioned face, just like Alice's lover.

Ernie was so proud of his son and of Alice. Drinks all

round at the pub that night.

Alice still stands by her decision. They never discussed the sperm count.

She felt she did it for Ernie. And herself.

Sarah closed the diary. Stood up and stretched.

"Hello, neighbour" said a voice from over the fence. Sarah saw a lady peering over, with a straw hat and pruning shears in her hand.

"Hello, I'm Sarah, nice to meet you."

"Welcome to the neighbourhood. I'm Pat. How are you settling in?"

Really well, thanks." Have you lived here long, Pat?"

"All my life. Grew up in this house."

Sarah walked over to the fence. "Did you know the Sutcliffe's that lived here?"

"Yes, Ernie and Alice's Sutcliffe. Ernie was her first Husband. Back in '73, he died coming home from the pub, three men jumped him, knocked him senseless. Just at the end of this street." Pat pointed.

"Alice was so distraught. Thought she'd never get over it. Alice's second husband Nick Clarke was a doctor, worked in Africa for a while and returned with a bout of Malaria. They married in 1975. Five years ago Alice was put in a nursing home with dementia but passed away. Beautiful couple, they adored each other. It proves you can fall in love twice."

Sarah felt a pang of sadness.

"How many children did they have?" queried Sarah.

"Funny you should ask, Ernie and Alice had a boy, Joe, fine-looking lad, but everything Ernie was the boy wasn't."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Ernie was short, stocky, auburn hair, full of freckles. Green eyes.

Joe was tall, dark, softly spoken just like Alice's second husband. We all thought it strange. But the timing is out of wack."

"What happened to Joe?"

He left home many years ago, mixed with the wrong crowd. Wasn't the same after Ernie was killed. Dropped out of school. Became a recluse. He doesn't want to be found. There was talk he moved up to the east coast of N.S.W. Joined a commune.

Sarah, listened without comment.

"If you want to know more, Alice's best friend, Ann Hutchins lives in the greenhouse on the corner of the street."

Sarah's ears pricked up.

"Well, thanks Pat, lovely talking to you. We'll talk again soon.

Sarah, with diary, headed inside. She packed the handkerchief, brooch, photo and the diary in the box and

walked with a spring in her step to Ann Hutchins house.
Before she could knock a grey-haired lady opened the door.

"Can I help you?"

"Hello Ann?"

"Yes"

I've just moved into the Clarke house across the way,
I found something you might be interested in."

Sarah handed her the wooden box.

"Thank you."

Ann watched Sarah walk out the gate and back down the
street. Without saying another word she went in the house.
Curious by what was just handed to her.

END