

Burnout 1994

I take a quick look into the waiting room, as usual, four or five people waiting and the doors have only been open five minutes, it's going to be a busy morning.

I'll get through it somehow, plodding as usual, but I hope I don't cry today. I can't go on breaking my heart every day, it's scraping my nerves raw. I'm being accused of over emotional involvement; I can hear the boss's voice in my head quite clearly,

'It just doesn't get through the work swiftly enough, all that empathy.'

I have to get my act together and stop mothering and smothering people, if I could just be strong and detached today for a few hours, I'll be fine. I take a deep breath as I usher the first clients into the interview room, wishing I could fill up with wisdom as easily as filling up with air.

First are two young men. They have the empty eyed and empty pocket look of those who've slept rough. They are dirty, tired looking, and have no luggage understanding of English. It's easy to call up the language line on the phone, instant translation twenty-four hours a day, modern techno magic at the prohibitive cost of eight pounds a minute.

The boss lady's voice invades my head again,

'Think of the budget, Maggie, pretend it's your own money, then you won't squander it.'

Good advice of course, but if it was my money I would put it straight into their empty pockets. After six minutes of question, answer and translation I feel a soft choking sensation in my throat as if a sob is hanging in there and the all too familiar prickling starts behind my eyes.

Please good God let me get a grip, and try to detach myself from this tale of flight and desperation. These two young men have been travelling for nine days in the back of a lorry, cold as ice with little food and not much sleep, holding on to a

dream of sanctuary in a country where they've been told they won't have to keep running from violence and killing. They've been running long enough.

They count on their dirty fingers their family members who are dead or missing in the fall out from some ethnic cleansing. They are both rather thin and not very tall, one has fiery red hair and pale skin and the other has dark eyes, black curls and a handsome look under all the grime. I'm mistaken, they're not men, just young boys, hungry, frightened and probably just out of school.

The lorry dropped them off in the middle of London in the middle of the night in the middle of winter, like bundles of rubbish, a familiar story. An address is sewn to the lining of a jacket, a friend of the family who has come before them and found his way to sunny Brighton. The authorities are delighted to use this tenuous link to clear up the statistics and send these damaged boys to the coast. They are fleeing a war that they can't find the words to describe to me, but I feel the pain. I know less about their politics than about nuclear physics which is a disgrace really, but I hope that in this seaside town they can find some peace after all their trauma. I hope they'll find time to grieve for their losses, family, friends, homes and homeland, which they will probably never see again.

It's not really my job to cluck over them like an old hen, all I have to do is keep calm, give them food vouchers, a list of accommodation and a map to the college where they can sign up for English lessons. Now don't for heaven sake let me dwell on all the emotional stuff.

They try to thank me in their native Farsi, I don't understand the words but the meaning is clear.

My sons have never known such hardship and I hope they never will. Their greatest worry is not where they will be sleeping tonight or if their parents are dead or alive. They worry if we're getting the full sky package or just the sports. These boys from Azerbaijan have been dealt a harsh hand but I have to move on, my tear bags are getting too near my eyes.

Next in line, oh no, a couple and the woman is pregnant, looks about seven months. The man has enough English to make himself understood so the translation budget is safe for the moment. Their story is of religious persecution, violence and six days in a container truck. Now having survived all that, they should find the food voucher system, health registration and dealing with the Home Office a bit of a dawdle, not to mention finding a lawyer and even more difficult, a dentist.

I chat about health visitors, doctors and English lessons but manage to skilfully avoid mentioning crooked landlords, crowded flats and no interpreter facility on the maternity ward. This couple cling to each other and smile bravely, they feel they have come through the worst of times and survived against all the odds. They are so happy and grateful to be here. I begin to swallow hard and fight against the tears because I know they can't begin to anticipate the racism and plain bad feeling that is starting to surface, like scum on a pond in this traditionally friendly holiday town. Their biggest fear is for the baby's condition. I tell them that babies are more resilient than us but the antenatal care is essential. I think hubby's translation is getting a bit ragged, he looks tired, so I send them off with the map and directions to the hospital and a whole load of paperwork to worry about.

I need a break, now. I stand at the back door like an outcast with a few fellow addicts, coffee in one hand, fag in the other and my coat collar turned up against the bracing weather. Nobody seems to enjoy smoking anymore, maybe it's because it's winter and you have to put your coat on to do it but there is still a feeling of brotherhood between addicts. I could create a new car sticker, 'smokers do it in overcoats'.

Next up, two men, one crying, one interpreting, but the accent is too convoluted for me to understand, so I call up the language line again. Obviously something is terribly wrong and it takes quite a while to gather details. This crying man appears to have lost his wife between a small town in Kosovo and Dover. They

were put in separate trucks and their life savings given to one of the drivers. It all went wrong, their convoy got separated, and he is destroyed with worry and guilt. He looks like he is ready to break into little pieces which I won't be able to put together again. They think she might be in a camp in Dover, but alone and frightened. The struggling interpreter has calmed down a bit and manages to articulate that this man was a fearless journalist in Kosovo, his house burned and his parents tortured, and now he sits before me and cries like a lost child.

Who wouldn't cry with him, not me please, I'm definitely going to lose this job if I can't get a grip. Six phone calls later, and a lengthy argument with a jobsworth receptionist

at the holding centre at Dover and we have a glimmer of hope. The Red Cross are already trying to reunite three couples and they are the experts. They promise to call back when they have names.

These men have no money and their food vouchers are stamped no alcohol or tobacco, in line with government guidelines of course, what a prissy nation we've become. I detect a stale smell of smoke from their clothes and I slip a packet of cigarettes from my desk drawer and hand them to the crying one, totally against the rules. He cries even harder for a few moments but accepts the smokes, it's part of the brotherhood thing.

My throat is almost closing over with the effort not to sob, please god don't let this man's wife be dead, lost is bad enough. While waiting for the call back I try to detach my thoughts, I sometimes have this wonderful fantasy of working in the food hall of Marks and Spencer, what a nice job that would be. Everyone smiling and happy looking, buying nice food and chatting about nothing important, nothing upsetting. The till even works out the change you have to give so you don't even have to use your brain much, except to socialise. Good food in clean plastic bags, a staff discount and no emotional roller coaster. It's a good dream, I'm a bit calmer now and the phone rings with excellent news, the wife is alive

and well enough in Dover. Smiles and thanks and more tears all round and these two are sent off with hope, some cigarettes and a travel warrant for the train to Dover.

The phone rings again, my boss lady from her sanctuary on the fourth floor gives me a bit of advice,

'The waiting room is now full Maggie, you would probably get more work done if you didn't chat to the asylum seekers so much.'

She also reminds me that my job remit is quite clear and simple, I just have to follow the government guidelines, blah de blah de blah. Silly bitch! I don't think I can do this job anymore, I'm stretched like a bit of old knicker elastic, an emotional wreck. It's summer now and the sun is streaming in the window as I sit at my checkout in Asda. I didn't quite make Marks and Spencer but this is grand. I've got the 'no brain needed' cash register and the staff discount and I don't feel the need to cry every day. However, give me the pensioner counting out his pennies for twelve tea bags or the teenager with a baby sitting on her hip buying coke and crisps for the dinner, and the old needles stir behind my eyes just to let me know I'm still alive and the emotions are still in there somewhere. Some days a mind numbing boredom grips me but this is predictable and bearable. I cried one time too often at the old job and was told politely they would have to let me go, end of career in social work, end of that story. Ping goes the barcode magic, smile,

'How are you today?'

A young man with a basket of shopping and a food voucher appears before me. I look up and instantly recognise him from the cold winter months. He has fiery red hair, and he's smiling. He says hello and in stilted formal English he says he will always remember the kindness shown to him and his friend at the most desperate and frightening time in their lives. He tells me they had slept on the street before coming to my office and he was so sorry for how dirty and smelly they'd been. He is proud of his English and is able to tell me he did some nursing

training in his home town and is hoping to start work soon as an auxiliary in a nursing home. He has done so well, he looks very different. He talks of his family and how he still misses them every day. I can tell from the slight shake in his voice that the emotional scars still have some healing to do, I recognise the feeling. My boss walks by and sees me crying and hugging a young man over the conveyor belt. She walks on. Later she may have a word with me for chatting too long with the customers, but that's fine, I can take it, I feel good, and I only feel truly alive when my tear bags are near my eyes.