

DANDELION

(a Requiem for the Human Soul)

A short story by Alan Jones

Part 1 - Leah & Eppie

Prelude

I sit in a room with a piano in it. You see pictures on the piano top. My parents. My dog. My wife. Our wedding. And her. Sunlight breaks through the curtains and I pick up my glasses from a side-table. I read. After a moment you hear me talking to you. The narrator. Every story has one.

I'm reading a diary. It's supposed to help you remember. Remind you that you once meant something. Felt something, Thought things. Did things. Nowadays another type of diary gets you noticed. You show yourself in a paperless world. Who you are. How you look. What you think. How relevant you are.

I'm not good at that. But I've always had a diary and written down my thoughts and much more besides. It doesn't have any dates in it. Just a series of happenings. And I was relevant. At least to her.

This is the story of our happening.

1 The Meeting

I saw her first as they played in the fields near the river. My wife had died eight weeks earlier. I'd spent the last six months looking after her. Before that I'd had a full life. No children but lots of children. I'd been head of a Department of Child Care Services. I still was. They'd been patient. Felt sorry for me. The worst type of kindness.

They'd given me a leave of absence during her illness. Now they wanted me back. At first as a sort of interim carer. An assessor if you like. There were concerns about a mother and daughter. Refugees or maybe illegal immigrants. No decision about that had been made. Not yet. They wanted me to check them out. The fields were a neutral place to meet.

"It won't be for long Michael."

"Define long."

"Two weeks, maybe three – until school starts."

"That's a month away."

"Yes."

"Great."

"You know how stretched we are – and this is a special case."

"I seem to remember they're all special cases."

"The mother's Kurdish – arrived in a boat from France six months ago – speaks some English. The daughter's eight and doesn't speak anything. You could say that's not surprising considering their journey. But you could say there's something wrong. They've been in a reception centre and two temporary homes. The mother's refused to cooperate. She hasn't given us any details of her background and hasn't tried to explain her daughter's behavior. As yet we've no clear grounds to separate them. So we'd just like you to take them in, assess the situation and report back in a few weeks."

I knew what that meant. I'd been there before. We think there's something wrong and we can't risk there being something wrong, but we don't know what to do about it. We have to cover ourselves.

"You know the story Michael. Human rights lawyers always looking over our shoulders."

"So you want me to find the *"grounds"* for separation?"

My colleague smiled and said nothing. I'd always been blunt.

"And the fact I'm not a she or a they?"

"That doesn't matter – and there's no one more credible than you. Anyway the one thing we were able to ascertain is that she has no problem in sharing a home with a man. In fact I think she wants to."

It was hard to say no, living alone in a 4-bedroom house. So I took them in and that's when it started.

2 Faraway home

The mother was quiet. But contrary to what I'd been told, her English was fluent. She'd been an English teacher. Her name was Leah. Her daughter's – Eppie. It meant star or something like that. That much took me half a day to learn. So I found myself talking. Talking a lot. Talking too much. I told her of my birthplace up North. My parents who were both musicians and their move to London when I was very young. I told her how I met my wife. How I saw her watching me at a dance hall in the West End. How I was too shy to approach her and how she'd asked for a dance. Gloria Estefan. *"I Will Survive"*. How she winked at me after the music stopped as if to say - *"If we can survive that with your two left feet we can survive anything!"*

I thought Leah smiled, but it was hard to tell. Her eyes were deep dark. Holding the light. Smiles didn't come easy.

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“She was like that. Straightforward. No nonsense. Even when she died she went without fuss. As if embarrassed by her death. Embarrassed to be a nuisance after twenty-five years together. You see her life had been about supporting me. Letting me get on. Not wanting much.”

That memory hit me hard. I felt a tear well up and held it back. I didn't want her to notice. Not someone with those eyes. Not a stranger.

But she stared at me, daring me to cry. Then told me her husband had been killed in the war in Kurdistan. He was twenty-five years old. They'd been together for six. No one has a monopoly on grief. I felt a fool and an awkward silence engulfed us before her daughter came into the room to see us staring at each other. I caught her hand as she turned to leave.

“Eppie” I said, pulling myself together. “I'd like to know about your favourite things. And if you don't want to tell me – I'm going to tell you about mine. And that could take all day because I've lived a long life and have a lot to choose from.”

I could see she understood every word, but she said nothing.

“Ok then.” I continued. “The top of my list is playing the piano and I'm going to play you a song. A new one I've just thought of for you. But on one condition. You must give it a name. Are we agreed?”

She looked at her mother, who nodded.

I sat by my piano. Thought a moment about my childhood - how distant it all seemed and played a few notesthen more

“So what shall we call it?”

She whispered to her mother.

“Faraway Home.” Leah said. “She wants you to call it Faraway Home”.

3 Lockdown

Things began to go wrong during the first lockdown which happened during what people now call the *Corona Time*. Before that there'd been some good days. I felt we were making progress. I'd join them on their walks in the park. I'd see them playing hide and seek and laughing together. I saw nothing to concern me about the child's well-being or her mother's care. Eppie still didn't talk much to me, but she let me give her piano lessons and was a quick learner. Playing by ear. The lessons went on for hours.

She began to trust me. And her mother noticed.

But then with lockdown, crazy things started to happen. What we took for granted couldn't be found anymore. Lost in cloud of unreality. Fear consuming us in only four words "*Stay Home. Stay Safe.*" All sorts of restrictions descended from on high. Walks you couldn't take. Benches you couldn't sit on. Shops you couldn't go into except at certain times and then only if you wore masks you couldn't breathe through. People – family – friends you couldn't see. Schools closed. Lovers separated.

I remember thinking this must be how Leah and Eppie felt all the time. Alive but in a strange new world.

They began to close in on themselves again and I couldn't break through. Whatever trust I'd established vanished. And things started to go missing. Small things at first. A leather bound book of *Gulliver's Travels*. A silk scarf. Things I hadn't needed for a while. At first I thought I'd mislaid them. Then one evening, just after the first lockdown, I caught Leah and Eppie in my study, standing near my desk. Talking like conspirators.

"Is everything alright." I said.

"Why shouldn't it be?"

That night I left a stainless steel bracelet on the kitchen table. In the morning it was gone. Later that day a watch given to me by my wife went missing. It was a gift on my 30th birthday. I'd taken it out of my desk and shown it to Leah and Eppie the previous week. I hadn't worn it for ages – the strap had broken - but I'd told them it was another of my

favourite things. Now I knew Leah had been stealing from me. Not just the odd trinket - the theft of a memory. And I was angry.

Next morning I emailed my interim report to the Department. I kept it short.

“The mother is an uncertain influence on the child. She takes care of her daily needs and they are close. Too close. This explains the girl’s awkwardness in a wider social setting. In the initial two weeks I believed that barriers could be overcome. The daughter has a gift for music and had started taking piano lessons. I thought that would help. But she remains introverted and in my view extremely unhappy.

“Moreover I have reason to believe the mother has been stealing items of my personnel property and in the circumstances I must admit to a concern that such a close mother-daughter relationship is not healthy. I shall continue to monitor them and will issue my final recommendation before the schools reopen when I hope you will relieve me of this responsibility.”

4 Revelations

I felt uneasy. I saw deception in every setting. In the morning Leah would walk into the garden and look back at the house. Then during the day the two of them moved around it as one. Strangers taking stock of my possessions. I started to lock my study and bedroom doors at night.

They’d talk to each other for hours on end. Mostly in the garden. The girl sometimes laughing, sometimes crying. And the mother reading books to her – English books – as she taught her the language. Then at five we’d have our supper. After the dishes were done we’d go to the living room. The tv never went on. There was nothing good on it. Only men in dark suits with darker words. But the piano lessons continued, bringing the only calmness to my day and as time went by I started to look forward to them.

We would sit in the living room together. Leah in the corner reading a book. Eppie on a piano stool next to me, her small hands moving over the keys like a butterfly dancing from one flower to another. At eight Eppie would be taken to her bedroom where her mother

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would settle her down for the night. Sometimes Leah would come downstairs again to read. Sometimes I wouldn't see her until she stepped out into the garden once more in the morning.

And so it went on, a state of paranoia as I wondered what they were talking about for so long and why the girl was so quiet in my company. Three weeks after the first lockdown ended I found out.

I sat under a pergola in the garden as the bats circled overhead. Three of them. Small things, feasting on the summer flies intoxicated by the aroma of the flowers wafting up into the warm evening air. Leah had just put Eppie to bed, walked across the lawn and sat down beside me.

"I have decided Mr. Bentley that you are the one."

I looked at her for a moment not quite sure what to say. She continued.

"Perhaps to be more accurate I should say *we've* decided."

"I'm sorry what have you decided?"

"That you shall look after Eppie when I die."

I said nothing. Just stared at her.

"You see I've been looking for some time for the right person. Of course you have your faults. But hopefully there will be time – how do you say it – *to iron them out*. But what I do know is that in general terms you are a good person and will be a suitable father and parent for Eppie."

"Leah – I have no idea what you are talking about and I'm not sure I like this conversation."

"I have an illness. A cancer. A bad one. It's one of the reasons we left Kurdistan. I told you my husband was killed. I have no family there. It's the last place on earth I want my daughter to grow up in. Coming here was not easy but the hardest part of my journey has been to find the right home. I've been in others and rejected them all. I made sure we

wouldn't be accepted in any of them. Maybe my behavior was a little extreme. But it was the only way to escape them. To keep searching. And here – with you – this is the place.”

She looked at me with those black eyes of hers whose depths I couldn't fathom. I had a hundred questions to ask but she stopped me from asking any.

“Don't make this more difficult than it needs to be Mr Bentley – Michael. Please. It's hard enough already. Sleep on it. Think about what I've said and we can talk again tomorrow.

“And this is for you.” She took something out of her pocket. “It's the watch your wife gave you. It needed a new strap and some repairs. I picked it up this week from the jewelry shop. It's a thank you for what's to come. I borrowed your bracelet as well to check the size. You've grown bigger in the last twenty years. You need to be careful with your weight.”

She gave me the watch, got up from the bench and left. I sat there till well after midnight thinking of what she'd said and all that had happened in the weeks before. Behind the intermittent clouds I could see a waning moon – where the light portion gets smaller and the darker portion gets bigger.

Like all portents you can dismiss them or believe in them.

I refused to believe it – all of it - but I couldn't dismiss it either.

Part 2 – Leah & I

5 Hope

The next day we didn't talk about it. Instead I arranged an appointment in Harley Street with an old school mate of mine, Dr Tom Kelly, a consultant oncologist. Leah didn't stop me and I didn't ask for her permission. We just went into a kind of tunnel together, but there wasn't much light at the end of it.

“It’s a serious cancer Michael,” Kelly said. “There’s nothing that can be done about it. I’d say she’s got six to twelve months. Maybe more. Maybe less. Everyone’s different. Who knows we may even come up with something in the meantime – because I don’t think she’ll die of it.”

“What?”

“She has a chronic heart condition. Her pulmonary valve is as fragile as a dragonfly’s wing. Severe pulmonary stenosis. There’s not much we can do about that either. Not in her condition. Any stress or exertion could kill her. That’s what will get her. I’m sorry. Is she close to you?”

I didn’t answer. Got up from the chair and left the clinic. Leah sat with Eppie in a coffee shop across the road. She smiled as I approached. I remember thinking – a first smile. There’s hope. There’s got to be.

In the weeks that followed our relationship changed. Bound up in a double spiral of sadness and joy. Every day a new beginning as we grew closer together. All three of us. Every day a new ending as we tried not to count them down until we were two.

It’s funny that – I mean not really funny but strange – when you don’t think about time or when you feel you have all the time in the world your days merge into each other. Ingredients in a kind of bottomless soup. When you know that things will change - when time is limited – you calibrate the minutes and hours. All the pointless trivialities and thoughts of the day finding their way into the rubbish heap so that each one you keep becomes part of a banquet. A feast fit for royalty. But in trying harder to cut out the chaff you lose a sense of reality. Because you stop asking the difficult questions. The questions whose answers define the reality coming towards you.

I didn’t think of what I would do when Leah died, but each day in some way or another she made me ready. Ironing out the wrinkles she would say as I listened to her talking to her daughter. And it wasn’t hard to see she was talking to me too.

6 The Garden

One afternoon we were in the field together. We sat on the grass as Eppie made a dandelion chain.

“Look. These flowers make lovely bracelets Mama, don’t they?”

“Some say they’re not flowers but weeds.”

“Why do they say that? They’re beautiful like little suns.”

“Because they grow freely, everywhere, out of control and they say there shouldn’t be any place for them in a garden where everything should be neat and tidy.”

“Why should everything be neat and tidy?”

“Because that’s what gardeners want and it’s easier to control the garden if everything is properly in its place.”

“Why do they want to control the garden Mama?”

“Good question Eppie. Maybe because they feel they know what’s best for the garden.”

“Why do they think they know what’s best?”

“Because they believe it’s their job and they have the right to do that job because only they know all the answers.”

“Wow – it must feel so good to know all the answers.”

“Yes it must. But no one knows all the answers – not even about a garden.

“Let me tell you Eppie. Many years ago a Prince, the son of a great King, was looking at his garden and he wanted to get rid of the dandelions because they were doing it no good. Shooting up everywhere. Totally out of control. No good at all. But whatever he tried to do and whoever he asked he couldn’t stop them growing. So what do you think he did?”

“Stop gardening.”

Leah laughed.

“No. He went to ask his father’s gardener what to do....but the Prince had done all the things he’d suggestedSo they sat down together for a long time in silence looking at the dandelions and finally the gardener said; *“Well, then, the only thing I can suggest is that you learn to love them.”* Good advice eh – to love them even though they grow freely and you can’t control them and however different they may be.”

“Yes Mamaand they make excellent bracelets.”

And so it went on – Eppie asking questions. All the time. Leah answering them.

But I didn’t ask her any. I didn’t even ask myself. Not consciously. Because subconsciously I refused to take responsibility. I didn’t want to ask the questions that mattered.

Was I really going to take on Eppie? How could I? A refugee. A girl of eight from a place I couldn’t even imagine? How could I take her as my ward, my adopted daughter, even if I’d wanted to? I’d never had a child even though I’d spent my whole life looking after children. How could I start now? Better the State took control. Isn’t that what’s it for?

As it turned out I didn’t have to ask any questions. Leah had already asked them and answered them all for me.

7 Love

You might ask if we fell in love – as if love catches you and falling is the way to get there. I wouldn’t know how to answer that except to say the highs and lows we went through involved a lot of falling, but it wasn’t love that caught us. It was Eppie. The realization that her life depended on how we came through that time together.

But if you ask me if I loved Leah – yes I did. By the end I did.

I loved the way the way she could smile through dark eyes. The way she looked at me and knew what I was thinking. Her courage and determination. Yes in the end I loved her. Everything about herand I know it now. All these years later. I loved her for giving me a purpose.

And her – what did she feel about me?

Well on that one I'll give you a politician's answer. That depends on what love is. And I know that's a bad answer. A coward's answer. One in which I don't commit. But at the time I couldn't commit. I didn't have the confidence to. There were too many reasons why she couldn't love me; didn't love me; at least not in the romantic sense. The age gap. The culture gap. The fact all her energy was devoted to her daughter.

Still one night she came into my room. I was lying in my bed. Naked as always since a boy. She slipped the covers off me and laid down beside me. She said nothing. Just rolled over, placing her head on my chest and her right arm around my waist. I put my arm around her and waited.

Her breathing was heavy and she began to cry. The first and last time I heard her cry. And I said nothing. Her tears fell down her cheeks. A tremor ... then another.... and I said nothing. All I did was hold her. And all she did was hold me. Speech seemed meaningless. After an hour she fell asleep in my arms. As light came through the blinds in my room she woke and looked at me. Disappointment or uncertainty in her eyes – I couldn't work out which - I hadn't slept a wink. My judgment had left me as soon as she'd climbed into my bed.

And looking back now maybe she'd wanted me to do more than hold her. Maybe in her final days she needed to remember what it was like to be needed. Loved in a physical sense. Alive. And then. Maybe then she'd felt rejected. Pushed back into the reality of her frailty. Her loneliness. Her despair. And that thought - that she'd felt I'd rejected her - is the most painful to bear. Not least because it would have meant the world to me to love her in that way. To be loved again in that way.

So you see it's easier for me to say she didn't love me. For then I have no regrets.

8 Anger

The second lockdown was harder. By then we'd tasted a bit of the freedom we'd lost. Leah started to rebel. She refused to take the vaccinations and wouldn't let Eppie go anywhere near them.

“Rules. Rules. Rules. I’m sick of rules. I’m going into that park and I’m going to play with my daughter and then when I’m tired I’m going to sit on that bench and I don’t give a fuck about anyone – least of all you. And to hell with any vaccinations. I have enough going on inside me without becoming some pin-cushion for some politician or so called expert who knows fuck all about me. They may take everything else away, but they won’t tell me how to die.”

She was angry. Bitter. Whatever days she had left were being controlled. Stolen. So I tried not to argue with her. I remembered what Kelly had said about her heart. But I was concerned what might happen if she didn’t go along with it all. The Department had finally remembered us. Read my first report and called me promising to take them “*Off my hands*” as soon as lockdown ended and a “*new situation*” found for the girl.

I didn’t argue with them. There was no point. I didn’t tell them I’d been a fool to accuse Leah of theft. That it was just a misunderstanding based on an old man’s prejudice. They wouldn’t have believed me. They had their own prejudices. I didn’t tell them she was dying. They would have taken Eppie away in a flash and that would have been the end of it.

So I plodded on like some old tractor in a muddy field leaving ever deeper tracks behind me as I searched for a way out. Not sure I wanted to find it. Every exit, every track seemed to be muddier. Angrier than the last. And perhaps all I wanted was to be left alone with Leah and Eppie hoping for some miracle.

Part 3 – Eppie & I

9 Wrath of God

On the morning they came she’d given me her phone and borrowed mine as I stayed home with Eppie. She was going to see Kelly at his clinic and I insisted she took a taxi. She told me to look at her phone. There were photos and videos on it that would be important to share with Eppie one day. I told her she could share them herself. I smiled.

“And Michael. There’s a file on there for you. Make sure you open it when I’ve passed on but not before I’m serious.”

“There’s no need for you to be. You’ll be around longer than me.”

It was her turn to smile.

She’d been gone for a couple of hours when they arrived in force. Two civilian cars, a police car and an ambulance. Ex- colleagues at the Department walked up the drive and knocked at my front door. Eppie was practicing at the piano and I left her there to answer it.

“Hope you got our message Michael.”

“What message?”

“Ah - sorry I texted you on your phone about an hour ago. It was a bit short notice. Obviously we didn’t want to give them much time to think it over. The foster parents are in the car over there ready to take Eppie and we’ll take Leah off your hands, back to the Centre. The police, the ambulance - well you know that’s just standard procedure. You’ve been a great help. Really. Got us out of a tight spot.”

I stared at them both, not comprehending what was happening.

“Can we come in?”

“No.” I heard myself say. “No” I said even louder. “Show me the paperwork.”

They looked surprised. Not expecting this. They passed me a Court Order. An Emergency Protection Order citing immediate concerns for the child’s safety and referencing my first report. I would have expected some pre-separation notice seeking voluntary consent, but they’d gone for the nuclear option. The affidavit attached to the Order was signed on my behalf by my Deputy. I tore the whole lot up and called the two police officers over.

“There’s no reason for you to know this Officers but I am the Director of this Department and I did not approve this Order. Please give me a moment. I will need to discuss it with my colleagues.”

“I am not sure you have to approve it Sir. It’s a Court order.”

“Just give us a few moments please.” I turned to my colleagues.

“I’ll go and get Eppie. Then we’ll go into the park to discuss this. It will be less stressful for her there.”

I closed the door in their faces, not giving them a chance to respond, went inside and sat next to Eppie as she played the piano. She stopped.

“We’re going out to the park with some friends. Go get your coat on please. Would you like to make some dandelion chains?” She nodded.

I put her coat on and walked outside holding her hand as tight as a I could. No one was going to take her from me.

We crossed the road and walked into the park. My colleagues followed us with the two police officers and two paramedics tacking behind. The foster parents stood at the entrance. Once Eppie had settled in the field I turned to my colleagues.

“There are some things you should know.” They considered me and waited.

“The mother – Leah doesn’t have long to live. She’s been seeing a cancer specialist and it’s only a matter of time.”

“Even more reason to sort this out now.”

“Don’t be so ridiculous. What effect do you think it will have on the child if you separate them now.”

They said nothing.

“And my first report was a mistake.”

“Mistake?”

“Yes none of my belongings went missing. I was wrong about her. Listen to me. Leah is a good mother wanting nothing more than the best for Eppie. She loves her a lot. They love each other a lot

“Thank ...you ...Michael.” I turned around and saw Leah behind me. Bent over. Breathless. She’d run from the house into the park.

“What are you doing here?”

“Your phone – I saw their message and came straight back. They can’t take her..... they can’t.” She fell to the floor.

I bent down and held her as Eppie walked towards us.

“Are you ok Mama?”

“Look at that file.....the one I left you on my phone it’s all there.”

Then she took her last breath with Eppie weeping beside her and everyone else standing around in shock. The paramedics ran over and after a few frantic moments one of them held her limp hand and shook his head. I picked up Eppie and stared at my colleagues as Leah was put on a stretcher and carried to the ambulance.

“You won’t be taking this girl today – and not tomorrow either.”

Raging inside I pushed past the two police officers and started walking towards the exit from the park.

Eppie clung to my chest as the ambulance left. No one stopped me. No one dared.

10 Awakening

So what happened next?

I opened my eyes. That’s what happened next. I opened them to Eppie. To us. I realised I had to take responsibility for her. I wanted to take responsibility for her and no bureaucracy, no nameless official would take control. Not again. Not anymore.

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As I carried her back to my home that day I understood I couldn't fight them by myself. I knew too much about the system. I'd been a part of it all my life. I knew how easy it was for the State to persuade us it knew best. That our freedoms were a gift bestowed on us by its benevolence. That it knew more about humanity than every single one of us who call ourselves human.

But what I hadn't appreciated then was that Leah had already thought through every move. Like a chess player who sees the last position in play even before play has begun. And her Queen was Eppie. Eppie was the key to it all.

She grew stronger each day. More like her mother. She would watch me as I prepared dinner in the kitchen. Correct the place settings as I got them wrong. Tidy up corners where I left a mess. She still spoke very little, but when she did, every word was fluent. Thoughtful and to the point. She'd made up her mind, she said. She wanted to tell me directly. She'd known for months that her mother was dying and she wanted to stay with me now. If that was ok Mr Bentley? Only if you call me Michael. I'd said. She smiled then asked me again.

"I want to stay with you, Michael. Please."

I hugged her. Tight. I didn't want her to see me cry.

That first night she took my hand and walked me to her room. From under her bed she picked up a copy of Gulliver's Travel and gave it to me.

"I'm sorry I took it without asking. I won't do that again."

"It's alright Eppie. Here...it's yours." I didn't know what else to say.

I read from it for an hour until she fell asleep hoping sleep would take her into a far off world of tiny people and horses who could talk.

Time passed. I started to work from home. Technically I was still Head of the Department. I began to review child cases again. Everyone except Eppie's. I wouldn't set myself up for a conflict. I began to think about a school for her. She played the piano and read books every

day but needed other children to play with, to learn with. Still matters weren't settled and it wasn't until the fifth week after Leah's passing that we had the funeral. Everything had broken down, including the way we said goodbye to the dead.

There were six of us at the funeral. My two colleagues, the two foster parents, Eppie and I. It was a humanist ceremony. I'd never asked Leah about her religion and she'd never told me. It hadn't seemed to matter. After the service my colleagues approached me. Of course I'd been expecting it, despite hoping they'd leave us alone.

"We need to talk Michael."

I didn't see the need to fight them then. Not there. I looked at Eppie, who was holding my hand.

"Go with this lady for a little while Eppie and have a drink. You'll be ok. I won't be long." I unclenched her fingers and passed her hand to one of my colleagues who seemed surprised. I stood there alone with my Deputy.

"There's still the question of the Order. We've been more than indulgent, I think you appreciate that."

"Do I?"

"We have the right to take her from you at any time. You must know that?"

"No. I don't know that. But this isn't the time or place to discuss it. Come to my house tomorrow morning. And bring a copy of your Order with you. I have something for you too."

I was ready.

11 Resolution

I'd set the scene and rehearsed each step. There was coffee brewing in the kitchen. A side light was on in my study. It lit the framed picture of me receiving an award from the Mayor for services to the community. Next to it a picture of my wife and I at the Council's offices

taken the day I'd started my job as Head of Department. And in the living room Eppie was playing the piano.

They arrived just as before. Two of my colleagues, two police officers, the foster parents and the paramedics.

"You didn't need to bring them all."

"Standard procedure. You know that."

"Yes – there seems to be a lot I know. Coffee?" They looked at each other then nodded.

"Please wait in here when I get it. Oh that's Eppie playing the piano. Pretty good isn't she?"

I led them into my study and then went to the kitchen to get the coffee.

There are three ways to win an argument. Each has a different methodology. Each has a different end game for the person you are arguing with. They can feel defeated, cheated or resigned. I strived for resignation. It was the most conclusive and least painful. Despite what people said it was never easy to get that "win- win" situation where everyone walked away happy. But to get to resignation you had to make them feel there were no other options.

I sat down in front of them as they drank their coffee and asked what they wanted.

"We want the best for Eppie."

The standard answer – the first move.

"I do too."

Move two.

"Then we don't need to explain to you that we already have a Court Order ordering her placement with foster parents before adoption."

"Based on my evidence."

“And others.”

Three, four and five.

“Can I see the Order again.”

“You tore it up – remember.

“I mean the copy.”

They handed it to me and I turned to its last page. Then smiled.

“Is there anything wrong?”

“No. It’s as I expected.”

Moves six to eight.

“I have two things for you.” I picked up a large A4 envelope from my desk.

“It’s her Last Will and Testament. It’s not long. She didn’t have much to attend to except Eppie. I suggest you skip to paragraph 5 on the second page. Please read it aloud so we can all hear it.”

My deputy took the Will out of the envelope and started reading.

“After careful consideration, consultation with my consultant, Doctor Thomas Kelly, and lengthy, but appropriate, conversations with my daughter, Eppie Shalnah, and bearing in mind that I have no other relatives or close acquaintances in the United Kingdom, I hereby appoint Mr Michael Bentley of 3 Spring Tree Drive, Kingston, Surrey as the guardian of my said daughter to take full parental responsibility for her in the event of my temporary or permanent physical or mental incapacity or death.....”

Check.

“This means nothing. She can’t just decide who looks after Eppie – not then, when she was already under investigation and the subject of an Emergency Child Protection Order.”

“She may have been under investigation as you put it – but she wasn’t subject to any Order - not when she died.”

I could see the pennies drop. The Order was never served on Leah. I'd torn it up. And on its last page it read ...*"To be effective immediately upon service on Leah Shalnah presently a resident of 3 Spring Tree Drive, Kingston, Surrey....."* That didn't happen. And now it could never happen.

Still I knew it wasn't enough. I had one more move.

"She also left me this for you to listen to. It's a recording of you discussing her in one of your interview sessions when you assumed she couldn't understand English and what was going on."

I pressed the button on her phone.

"She's a nuisance – you'd think there'd be some gratitude wouldn't you. That's the second home she's been kicked out of. And what for this time? The food wasn't good enough and the sheets weren't clean. Well she's lucky to get any. Why don't these people stay where they belong if it's so bad here? I'm really not sure what more we can do – apart from you know – separation."

"There's always Michael – why not get his advice?"

"Michael. Yes that's a good idea – why not place them with him?"

"What? I didn't mean that. He's ..."

"Yes?"

"Old – and a man. Bit passed it – he's only clinging onto to his job because the Department feels sorry for him losing his wife and you fancy him."

Laughter.

"No – he's perfect. He'll do what we suggest ---- come up with a report to get us out of this mess and besides we don't discriminate on age and gender anymore do we? And even if we do – which we don't – there's no one more solid a person than Michael – no one more credible to have around a child"

"No one more dull and boring !!!"

More laughter....

“Michael – really this was justjust banter...”

“No it’s ok. At first I wasn’t sure whether to take it as a compliment or an insult but then decided it was probably fairly accurate - *no one more credible to have around a child* works for me And there’s one I want to be around for a while. Who knows she may even make me more exciting. But to get there I’ll need time – lots of it.”

I picked up two more pieces of paper.

“This is my resignation from the Department and my recommendation as to who should take over from me.” I looked at my Deputy. It’s effective immediately I give it to you. I’ve signed it already.

“And this is a statement confirming the Department has closed the case of Eppie Shalnah and has no objection to her guardian Mr Michael Bentley taking her into custody and further in the event of an application being made by him for the adoption of said Eppie the Department would support such application. Once you sign it you can take my letter with you.”

Checkmate.

My deputy walked out of the house towards the waiting foster parents, paramedics and police officers. They surrounded her in a huddle and she dismissed them all with a brusque wave of one hand, holding my resignation letter in her other.

It gave me little satisfaction to see them drive away.

12 Reflections

There was only one reason I had Eppie. Leah had run to my side that day. She’d run there because she knew she shouldn’t run. She couldn’t run. Her heart wouldn’t take it. But it was part of her plan. Only her death would achieve the result she desired.

Then her words came back to me. The personal message she’d left on her phone.

Dandelion (a Requiem for the Human Soul)
by Alan Jones

“I looked for you. I knew there was someone like you out there to care for my daughter. Someone I could trust to rebel when the time was right - and I’m glad I found you in the time I had. Now use yours well. For Eppie’s sake...mine...and yours.”

I heard Eppie playing Faraway Home in the living room. I walked to its open door, saw her and smiled. She sensed my presence and stopped.

“Mama wanted you to have this. She told me to give it to you on the day those people went away. They have gone away, haven’t they?”

“Yes they’ve gone away.”

From the side-table next to her she picked up a small parcel wrapped in a silk scarf. I untied it and saw a photo of Leah in a simple wooden frame. She was smiling and reaching out to the camera, holding a bunch of dandelions. We both looked at it.

“Michael.....when dandelions die their petals go white and you can blow them and make a wish. Mama told me that and I made lots of wishes but only one came true.”

“Well maybe we shall make some more today.”

She smiled and held my hand.

“It’s a nice photo isn’t it” she said “and I think I know what it means.”

“What do you think it means?”

“She’s telling us to be free isn’t she. Just like the dandelions. No one can control them.”

“Yes – no one can.”

Epilogue

So that's our story. Our happening.

A mother wanting to find a home for her daughter. A girl about to lose everything. A man finding a purpose.

Leah, Eppie and I.

But in the grand scheme of things no one life really matters. So this is a requiem for Leah, but also for the human soul. That part of us that represents our freedom to choose the way we live. To refuse to be controlled. Because if we are - if we can't take responsibility for ourselves and those we love - it dies.

Maybe I didn't tell it well enough. But that's what this story is about. That's what she taught me ... that's how she wanted me to see it.....

.....as I sit here in a room with a piano in it. With pictures on the piano top. My parents. My dog. My wife. Our wedding.

And her.