



Leaving for Australia

'I don't want you to see me off at the airport,' John's tone had an air of finality to it; he wasn't going to accept any argument. 'I don't want to remember you being upset as you wave me off. I want to rather see your smiling face when I get back.'

'But I can't let you go without saying goodbye properly.' 'We'll say goodbye at the house, it will be better that way.' On and off over the next few days I attempted to change his mind, but with no success. I resigned myself to the fact that I wasn't going to the airport with him. It was hard to believe that only three months had gone by since he had broken the news to me, in November 1992: 'I want to close the company and take some time out for myself as soon as the contract in Richards Bay is finished. I'll go backpacking in Australia for three months. Once I have recharged my batteries we can start up something else. I just need to get away for a bit to clear my head, then I'll be ready to start again.'

It all made a lot of sense to me. He had started his industrial painting company eight years ago and spent most of that time working long hours in godforsaken places, all over the country, getting out of it only stress and aggravation. It had never been easy, but lately it was a con

stant battle to get payments in on time to keep both staff and creditors happy. He deserved a break; the strain was starting to take its toll on him. Signs of stress lined his face and there was only a hint of his usual smile. He was drinking heavily, becoming aggressive and was prone to sudden mood swings. This wasn't the John I knew. 'I know we don't have a lot of money,' he said, 'so I won't keep in too much contact. I'll use my Diner's Club card so you'll see where I am and that I am ok.' I took a deep breath. Logically, I knew all of this made sense but it scared me. 'I don't want anyone to know that I am going to Australia otherwise they will think I am considering emigrating, which I'm not. I'm going to tell them I am going to Mozambique to do contract work, that way they won't wonder what I am up to.' I agreed to go with his story, but was uncomfortable at the deception. Why couldn't we just be honest with everyone? I thought to myself. I knew we would struggle financially and was prepared for that. He had to go; he was close to burn-out. His phone calls to me from Richards Bay had become sporadic. I couldn't be sure but it felt like he was starting to distance himself from me, preparing me for his months away. 'We will have to sell the house. It will give us enough money to buy another one which needs renovating, then I'll do it up for resale. I can work on my own, no staff problems and it will give us a good income. You can put the house on the market while I'm away and look for another one for me to renovate when I get back.' I swallowed hard; I didn't want him to see the tears welling in my eyes. I loved our house; it wasn't anything special but it was home and had been for seven years. We moved in just after we were married and it held many happy memories, but if we had to move, so be it. John was not going to change his mind about going away, that was clear. I knew I had to make the most of what was going to happen and support him in his plan. There were three months before he left anyway, but in the months leading up to his departure we did not see that much of each other. He was finishing off the contract in Richards Bay and was working long hours and most weekends so he had very little

opportunity to come home to Mondeor before Christmas. He would be leaving in early February, so time was short. We planned to have our usual Christmas lunch at home; we always invited friends to join us. It was traditionally a noisy, happy occasion and I was determined that this time would be no different. I wanted it to be special, as he would be leaving for Australia soon. I shopped for all the goodies to make it a special day, crackers, fun gifts for everyone and of course the food: turkey, gammon, Christmas pudding, mince pies, not to mention Champagne, wine, whiskey. I loved the preparations; it was all part of the build up. I made sure I had presents for everyone, even those who were last-minute additions. Nigel would join us of course. I don't think he had ever missed a Christmas with us. Nigel had been a part of our lives since we first arrived in South Africa. He was Irish, from Cork, a plumber by trade and almost the same age as John. Christmas Eve morning arrived. John was still not home; it had been a few days since I had heard from him. I went to the post box to collect the mail, plenty of Christmas cards and the Diner's Club statement. I checked out the charges, just one stood out, an air ticket to South America; the passenger name, 'Miss T Riekert'. Who could that be? The name sounded familiar, I couldn't work out why. I picked up the phone and called Robbie Sharpe, our travel agent. 'It is the correct charge,' he said. 'But who is the passenger?' I asked. 'A friend of John's,' he replied. I went cold, battling to breathe, what was this all about I asked myself? 'I think you should ask John about it, I'm sorry I can't give you any more details.' I struggled to maintain my composure. 'Of course,' I replied, not wanting Robbie to see how upset I was. 'I'll speak to him later, thanks for your help.' 'I'm sorry Mary,' he said, as the line went dead. I paced around the garden, trying to make sense of what I had just heard. What was going on? I repeated the name over and over, why did

it ring such a bell? Of course, that's right, I thought, I've seen it on a cheque. I ran back into the house and rummaged in the filing drawer. There they were, several cheques made out to cash with the name 'Riekert' written on the back. John had always maintained they were for supplies, obviously not. Still no sign of John, the excitement of Christmas Eve was turning into apprehension. But I knew he would arrive at the last minute as usual and then we would make our annual pilgrimage to Sandton City. True to form he phoned from the airport that afternoon. 'Hello sweetheart, I'm here, please come and fetch me, then let's go shopping.' I dashed to the airport, knowing that we would need to hurry around the shops before closing time. John's face lit up in a wide grin as I drew up outside the arrivals hall. 'Bet you thought that I wouldn't make it in time!' he said. 'Oh, I knew you would,' I replied, happy that he was home but disconcerted to see that he had been drinking heavily again. This was happening too frequently these days. I couldn't have the conversation about the air ticket with him now, he was almost incoherent. It would serve no purpose. And so we set off for our annual shopping spree. It wasn't too late when we got home and I started preparing the vegetables for the next day. It was all part of my routine; I played the tape of King's College Choir, Carols from King's, and thought of my mother. It had been her Christmas ritual to prepare the vegetables every Christmas Eve at 3 p.m. as carols from King's was broadcast on BBC radio. I continued the tradition and kept her in my thoughts as I did. We went to bed early but tossed and turned. We both knew that there was something wrong, but the time wasn't right to address it. We had all our friends arriving for Christmas and had to make sure they enjoyed themselves. Christmas lunch was long and festive as usual. I loved being surrounded by friends. It was always a day full of fun and laughter, but this Christmas was so different. It was soured by my apprehension about John's going away and the uncertainty of what the next three months would hold, not

to mention the revelation of the previous day and what that meant. We smiled and joked as usual but it was all show. I tried to block everything out and enjoy the moment, but it wasn't that easy. Eventually everyone left except for Nigel. He always stayed until Boxing Day, and we settled down to relax and watch some videos. He had known us long enough to feel the tension in the air and soon excused himself, going to sleep in the guest cottage at the bottom of the garden. Now was my chance to speak to John. I just hadn't been able to confront him before. Once Nigel was out of earshot, we had our privacy. I showed him the Diner's Club statement. 'Robbie says this person is a friend of yours.' He went pale. 'Sweetheart, I'm so sorry. I wanted to tell you, I just didn't know how.' 'Tell me now,' I replied as the tears ran freely down my cheeks. 'Who is she? What is going on?' 'She's a friend of mine. I met her when Jimmy and I went hiking in the Drakensberg, the time you and Kathryn went to Cyprus after your mother died.' 'But that was 1989, over three years ago.' Then it all came out. He told me how he had been living with Tracey when he was working in Richards Bay, how they had been renovating a house together in the East Rand. She even attended work functions with him. His travelling around the country working on contracts made it all so easy. I sobbed uncontrollably, 'I thought you loved me.' 'I do, I love you so much.' 'Then how can you do this to me?' 'I don't know, it just happened, I didn't mean for it to be like this. I thought it would be over by now. I can't choose between you. That's why I need to get away, to clear my head; I'm just so confused. I'm sending her to South America, for three months too, so there will be no contact with her either.' 'Great, so you both go swanning off around the world while I just keep the home fires burning,' I retorted, furious at the way everything had been worked out.

How could I be so stupid, why didn't I see the signs? I said to myself. John's behaviour had become increasingly erratic. It had worried me. I had never known him like this, but I had just put it down to the pressures of work, not realising that this was aggravated by the pressure of leading a double life. I felt like a sleepwalker, out of touch with the real world. Everything I had relied on had been turned upside down. I had always been so certain of John's love for me, that had always been the one thing I could depend on. He said he loved me, but how could he if he had done this to me? We had arranged for Nigel to drop us at the airport a few days later as we had booked to spend New Year at The Polana hotel in Mozambique. We had visited it some months earlier and had fallen in love with its elegance and feel of colonial splendour. It seemed like a good place to see in New Year 1993. We were only going to be there for three days but as usual my case was packed to overflowing. There was a dinner dance planned for New Year's Eve and I had bought a beautiful dress for the occasion. When I had seen it in the shop window I had instantly fallen in love with it, but was more than aware that it was figure hugging and unlikely to look too good on my frame. I took the plunge and decided to try it on, I wasn't too hopeful as I knew the limitations of my figure only too well. To my amazement, it fitted, not only that, it was actually too big! I asked the assistant to find me one in a smaller size and, to my surprise, it fitted perfectly. It was only then I realised how much weight I had lost as the strain of John's betrayal and his imminent departure took their toll. We arrived at the airport in Maputo and the heat and humidity enveloped us. Our clothes stuck to us and our faces were glistening with a thin layer of perspiration. It was far hotter than when we had last been there in August. We had done all the tours on our previous trip so were content to laze around the hotel pool and walk into town to visit the local restaurants. We tried to relax but there was an unmistakable tension between us. We were trying hard to ignore the fact that this would be our last trip together for a while and were trying to make it seem as normal as possible, but there was no doubt we were both feeling the

pressure. I knew, too, that when he came back it would by no means be plain sailing. There was so much unfinished business. He was going to Australia, Tracey was going to South America and I was going absolutely nowhere. New Year's Eve arrived. I changed into my beautiful new dress, applied my make up in the bathroom and emerged to parade in front of John. He glanced up from the magazine he was reading, a look of appreciation in his eyes, 'Wow, you look incredible. Amazing.' Then an acknowledgement of the strain he had put me under. 'I didn't realise how much weight you had lost; I've never seen you so thin.' It was true, I looked fabulous but was almost unhealthily thin, and I wasn't built to be too skinny. If I lost any more weight I would start looking haggard. We decided to take photos in the room before we left for dinner in all our finery. We looked great but I still couldn't shift the hollow feeling in my heart. I wanted a record of our New Year together, and made sure we took some photos. We were going through the motions, attempting to enjoy ourselves but we weren't fooling anyone, least of all ourselves. We ate a sumptuous dinner in the ballroom; the setting was exquisite, crystal glasses, red and white table settings, and red roses. The food was spectacular, rare roast fillet of beef, prawns and baked Alaska for dessert. Once dinner was over, we danced around the pool, to the sounds of the band, toasting in the New Year with French champagne before going back to our room. I burst into tears as we wished each other Happy New Year, I couldn't keep up the pretence any more. I turned to John as we lay in bed and said, 'This probably wasn't the best idea; we should have stayed at home.' 'I wanted it to be special for you,' he replied. 'How can it be? It can never be special again.' We had always been so happy together; he loved me, so how could he be living a double life? He held me tight, 'It will be all right, we'll work it out. I don't want to lose you.' I so wanted to believe him, but I couldn't stop the feeling of foreboding that was constantly with me. I went into 1993 with a heavy

heart, knowing it was going to be a trying year. Even the New Year's Eve photos of us at The Polana hadn't come out, nothing seemed to be going right.

A month went by and I tossed and turned that February night, lying in bed, trying to sleep, listening to the sound of cars in the distance. John was leaving the next day, I wanted the last hours before he left to be happy ones but I just couldn't settle. I finally decided to get up and fetch a glass of water from the kitchen, maybe that would help. I stubbed my toe on the armchair as I made for the door, letting out a cry of pain. 'Are you all right, sweetheart?' John asked, woken by the noise. 'I'm fine, just thirsty.' 'Come back to bed.' I slid under the duvet; he turned over and cuddled me. 'It's going to be ok, I promise, try to sleep now.' But would it, I thought. How could it ever be ok again? I snuggled into the warmth of his body and eventually managed to doze off. All too soon the clock radio announced the new day. I had to go to work, life was going to carry on as usual today, same routines, just one thing was going to be different. When I got home, John wasn't going to be there. He would be on his way to Sydney. 'I'll make you some coffee,' he said to me as I showered. 'That will be nice,' I responded, wondering how I was going to be able to get it down my throat. An overwhelming sense of panic mingled with a violent nausea gripped me. How was I ever going to get through this day? Be strong I told myself, you don't want John's last picture of you to be that of a hysterical, snivelling female. I was determined to look my best so that his last memory of me would be a good one. I got out of the shower, dried myself off and padded to the bedroom to get dressed and dry my hair. I had had my hair cut a few weeks before and it was really looking good. I smiled at the mirror; despite everything, I wasn't looking too bad. I went to the wardrobe and picked out the blue and pink floral suit that John liked so much. I was pulling out all the stops today. It fitted well, even better than

usual, was loose because of the weight I had continued to lose in the last few weeks; stress had some compensation, I thought ruefully. At last I was ready, briefcase packed and dressed smartly. I joined John in the kitchen. He was sitting at the kitchen table staring bleary eyed into the distance as he clutched his early morning cup of coffee. 'Wow, you look beautiful,' a faint smile contrasted with the sadness reflected in his eyes. 'I've made you coffee and toast.' I sat down, putting the mug of hot coffee to my lips but hardly able to swallow a drop. He reached for my hand. 'I'll be back soon, it's just three months, it'll go quickly, you'll see.' I was trying so hard not to cry but I could feel the tears coming. 'I know, I know, but I'm going to miss you so much.' 'I'll be back before you know it.' He leaned over to give me one of his wonderful all-enveloping bear hugs, which always made me feel so safe and loved, only today it wasn't working, I felt shaky and vulnerable. 'Come on, it's time for you to go otherwise you'll be late for work. Give me your briefcase.' He followed me to the car and placed my briefcase in the boot. 'Don't be sad sweetheart, I'll be back soon. I'll phone you before I go to the airport. I love you very much.' 'I love you too,' I said as I got into the car. I lowered the car window and tried to smile bravely as I reversed out of the driveway. I watched John's smile fade as I drove away, unsettled by the image of his grim face. Why had I agreed not to go to the airport? But I had promised and so I must stick to what I had said. Concentrate, I said to myself as I drove through the rush-hour traffic, the last thing you want to do now is to have an accident. The cars sped by me in a blur and somehow I ended up safely at the office. It was a beautiful Highveld summer's morning, the kind of morning that would generally make my heart sing, but today all I could think about was making it through the day. We were like a family at work so everyone knew what was happening. I had told them that I wanted things to carry on as normal and they were trying to respect that, but every now and again I could spot them casting furtive glances in my direction, just checking that I was ok.

Nigel was going to drop John off at the airport. He idolised him, regarding him as a role model. Nigel had always been there for both of us, giving up weekends to help us renovate the old farmhouse we had bought outside Magaliesburg, and just generally being there whenever help was needed. He had agreed to be my 'minder' and look after and help me with anything I needed in the three months that John was going to be away. To many people, Nigel was unreliable, spending most of his free time at the pub, smoking and drinking too much and flirting with the girls, but we could always count on him and I really valued his friendship.

I glanced at my watch, almost twelve o'clock. Nigel and John would be leaving soon for the airport. I didn't want to stray too far from my desk; I had to be there for John's phone call. I made a feeble attempt to glance

at the papers on my desk but they were just a blur of images.

At long last the phone rang. 'Hi sweetheart, it's me; I'm on my way now.' His voice was thick with emotion: 'Be strong. I'll be back soon, I love you.' 'I love you too,' I responded, holding the phone to my ear long after he had put down. I felt the walls of the office closing in on me. I have to get out of here, I thought, get some air and walk. Anywhere will do. I knew I was in the middle of central Johannesburg, not the safest place to walk but I needed to get out to calm myself. I stepped out of the lift into the heat of the summer's day and lost myself in the busy streets. The rhythmic pounding of my steps on the pavement started to assist in slowing the pace of my heartbeat. I tried hard to stop myself from crying and after wandering aimlessly for six blocks I began to feel calmer. John was going to be gone for three months. He had worked away from home for weeks at a time before, what was the big deal? I couldn't put my finger on it but this time I had a strong sense of unease.

