

NO TRACES BACKWARDS

A novel by Andrew Ryan

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*For my daughter
Elise*

THANKS

To Jan for her unflagging support and patience during the process of reviewing and editing this book.

PROLOGUE

1964

“Hello, Lauren speaking.”

“Good morning, my name is Neil and I’m calling you ...”

“This is not a survey is it, because if it is I really don’t have the time right now?”

“No it’s not,” he positively replied. “I am endeavouring to locate a missing relative and from the research I have done I am hoping you may be able to help me.”

“Oh goodness, ok, what is the person’s name?”

“Walter Bransby. Do you know a person of that name?”

“No...yes...“I’m sorry, my father’s name was Walter Bransby but he passed away many years ago so I am afraid I can’t help you.”

“I don’t wish to be intrusive but am I speaking to Lauren Bransby?”

“Yes.”

“May I ask if you were born in Western Australia?”

“Look here, where are you getting this information from and what is the real nature of your call?”

“I’m calling from Western Australia so please don’t hang up on me ma’am,” he implored. “I sighted your name in the electoral roll and to tell you honestly you are my last hope of trying to put the pieces together.”

“I really can’t see how I can be of any help. Besides you’ve caught me at a bad time as I was about to walk out the door.”

“Please, it will only take a few seconds. I’m endeavouring to put an elderly man’s life back together before he; well I guess you know what I mean.”

“I don’t know what that has to do with me. Besides, how did you get my phone number?”

“Would you mind if I explain in a letter?”

“If you wish, but as I say I can’t see how I can be of any help. I’m sorry I must go as I’m already late visiting my mother in the nursing home.”

“Thank you ma’am I will do that and thank you for your time, good day.”

CHAPTER ONE

Perth Western Australia Circa the 1930's great depression

From the window of his cramped bed-sitter flat, Walter Bransby checked his watch for the umpteenth time wondering what excuse the postman would elect to explain why the delivery of the King's mail seemed to get later with each passing day. Was the chap purposely taking his time to spite him, singling him out simply because he had had the nerve to gripe about the delays? This day however he made up his mind not to raise the issue as it would not make any difference to the postie if his application for the engineer's job in the country was successful or not.

Forcing his head and shoulders through the open window he scanned the length of the street. 'Was that a whistle?' his senses alerted him. Claspng the sill he competed for a better view, his ears aspiring for confirmation of the sounds he had been waiting for all day.

In his haste to meet the postie he had forgotten about his tall body and his head collided with the sash. "Ah shit!" he snarled, rubbing the back of his head striding down the stairs.

"Gawd, you ain't half keen," said the postie, dismounting his bicycle.

“I’ve been waiting a whole bloody week for a letter so I hope you’ve got it today,” said Walter, cursing the graze on his head.

“You’re out of luck again today mate, but your no orphan; seems to me there’s hardly a person on my round who isn’t waiting for a letter of sorts these days.”

“That so,” replied Walter. “Then I guess I should apologise for being curt with you the other day.”

“Think nothing of it, it’s part of the job, though it never used to be as bad as it is, it’s all this talk of a depression I reckon.”

“We’re too far away from America to worry us Aussies,” Walter responded.

“Well I hope you’re right mate,” said the postie, mounting his bike. “The Labor Party reckons they’re on the right track; I hope so anyway ‘cos I’ve got a wife and two kids to support. Well I’d better get on me way; may be you’ll get your letter tomorra,” he called, cycling away.

“Yeah, I hope so,” Walter mumbled.

Returning to his flat he paused to reflect what he had said to the postie regarding Australia’s isolation from America. Did he really believe what he said or had he simply repeated what his neighbours were saying of late. ‘Poor beggars, what hope do they have of keeping their jobs, or for that matter finding one should the situation get any worse,’ he muttered mounting the stairs.

A man so attached to the soil, Walter held only a mild interest in politics, preferring instead to take a wait and see attitude each time the major parties proffered their solution to the rising unemployment. Would the situation get any worse than it is? He hoped not, though he had to admit the present economic climate appeared to be slipping into a ravine so deep it appeared that not one political party knew the way out.

Having attained his degree in civil engineering he felt reasonably assured his qualifications gave him an advantage over the poor hopeless souls wandering the streets for work.

With the talk of a depression on everyone's lips he looked forward to breaking free from his one room flat where only weeks ago found him swatting for his final exams, let alone waiting for news if his application for the job in the bush was successful.

'The Bush,' how often did it annoy him each time he overheard a city slicker denigrate the pioneering men and women who abandoned the comforts of urban life to clear the virgin bush.

Plod hoppers, Cockies and other disparaging expressions that belied their determination to make a new life in the untamed country. Praiseworthy individuals who took on the task of creating new settlements in order to supply the burgeoning need for primary producers.

Aware how the open spaces influenced his outlook he deeply appreciated his deceased parents for having laboured so hard to grant him a first-rate education, and though he regretted having sold the farm to finance his degree he determined to repay their efforts by habitually swatting his way through a mountain of technical books to ensure he pass his final exams, for if he did not the exorbitant price would have been too unbearable to stomach.

Opening the window to await the sound of the postie's whistle had become a daily habit, and remembering his altercation with the sash he determined to play safe when looking down at what was happening below.

A group of barefooted boys had gathered around the iceman's horse and cart, bickering over the left over slivers of ice from a full block the iceman had picked away for a customer whom Walter assumed could only afford half. But it was the tiny lad that had darted onto the street carrying a converted kerosene tin in the form of a bucket that aroused his interest the most.

Crouched near the side of the road, eager small hands clutching a spade gallantly swooped on a pile of fresh horse manure, the expression on the lad's face affirming his bounteous good fortune.

From somewhere down the street the postman's whistle caught Walter's attention again. 'It better be here to day or else,' he growled, dashing down the stairs without giving a second thought what he meant by 'or else.'

"No luck today mate, maybe tomorra," the postie dolefully declared.

"Damn, damn bloody damn," Walter cursed. "It's now two weeks and they promised me I would hear from them in a week." He knew of course the postie wouldn't have a clue why the letter was so important; his angst was such that he was beyond caring.

"Well as I said, maybe tomorra," the postie repeated.

"Yeah, well I bloody well hope so."

Returning to his flat, Walter pondered what Helen might have to say when he told her he was still in a state of indecision. It wasn't difficult to imagine her reaction, for he could see her now with her head crooked to one side, peering at him through narrowed eyes, her lips tight and misgiving whenever he was the focus of her displeasure. Why she should contort her pretty face that way remained a mystery as it belied everything he felt for her.

Their disparate natures became more apparent to him only a few days ago when she presented him with the ultimatum, that if he accepted the job in the country he would leave her with no option than to end their relationship. Expressly pointing out to him that she was not about to give up her career as principal buyer for the City's largest department store simply to follow him for a life in the bush.

Her ultimatum disturbed him immensely, leaving him to wonder if she considered their lovemaking a passing fad. Then in all fairness he began questioning his motives in the whole affair.

Eager for a plausible explanation he wondered if he had been bull-headed about his decision to leave the city for the bush, or perhaps had unconsciously allowed it to overrule everything he felt for her; that he had lulled himself into believing that given time, their affection for each other would find a solution that

suiting them both. Then it occurred to him that amidst the challenge there was a letter that would assuredly decide the issue for good.

He didn't need a shrink to remind him Helen is a city girl, a sophisticated young lady enamoured by the city's attractions, the movie houses and of course her position with the department store, or that their differences had reached a stalemate of sorts. Helen's preference to remain in the city and his yearning to return to the country suggested that any chance of a suitable compromise was about as predictable as a rooster laying an egg.

He had often wondered why Helen had singled him out from the well turned out young men she was acquainted with, as it was his opinion that at the drop of a hat she had the power to twist them around her little finger, yet for reasons that escaped him she had chosen him despite the fact he was three years her junior.

He had asked her about it one time and she simply brushed the matter aside, leading him to believe that it was perhaps his agrarian appearance and demeanour that attracted her to him.

Their preferences still unresolved, he reached for the newspaper hoping the diversion might lessen his angst. Flicking through the pages he put it down again, concluding it had little to report other than the same depressive news how the economic depression was threatening to take over the world.

He considered if taking a walk in the fresh air might clear his mind and was about to arise from the chair when he sat back again. Not given to talking about his private life so openly, he recalled telling his fellow university mate, Jack Halliday the problem he was having with Helen's ultimatum. Jack's response was: 'You can take the boy out of the country but can you take the country out of the boy?' For sure he had heard that phrase many times before, but until recently had not realised how pertinent Jack's question was in the light of his present tight spot with Helen.

Had Jack implied that he should stick to his resolve to return to the country and let Helen go, or was Jack simply waffling off the top of his head? After all, what did Jack know about country life, or the possibility of farmers walking off their properties should they fail to meet the banks demands to bring their accounts in order. Jack's Uni and living expenses were covered by his father, a doctor with a flourishing medical practice in the suburbs.

Admiring his degree hanging proudly on the wall he honoured his parents for having made it all possible. However, there was more to it than honouring their bequest alone, it was the revelation prior to him receiving his inheritance that at this moment compelled him to set aside Helen's ultimatum and sit back in the chair to allow the heart rendering occasion run through his mind.

It began when he received a letter from Mr Emile Jordan, informing Walter he wished to see him at his earliest convenience. Aware that Jordan was the solicitor appointed to execute his parents' wills, Walter complied with his request, but it was the events following that thrust him into a deep sense of bewilderment.

"You are aware that following your father's demise, your mother became the sole beneficiary of the farm," said Jordan.

"The matter was never discussed after my father died, I simply assumed that was the case," replied Walter.

"I see," Jordan nodded. "Are you aware that following your mother's demise the property is bequeathed to you?"

"I thought that might be the case but the shock of losing Dad was such that Mother never mentioned it, the loss affected her very deeply and..."

"And you also I imagine," Jordan responded.

“Of course, but I was more concerned about my mother than to think about her will. You know it was only weeks after Father died that she followed him to the grave.”

“Yes, a most distressing string of events. However, as I am left with the duty of administering your mother’s will, I regret to inform you that before I can arrange for the property to pass to you, a problem has arisen, which in the will’s present state makes it difficult to execute.”

“A problem, what sort of a problem?” Walter asked.

“One that may cause you a great deal of consternation,” Jordan replied, leaning back in his chair to pull an abject face.

“I don’t understand what you’re getting at Mr Jordan,” Walter replied frowning heavily but meaning no disrespect.

“It is not a matter that can’t be overcome I assure you,” Jordan readily replied, “but having said that I must inform you that it has impaired the normal processes of executing the will to a speedy conclusion.”

“To tell you the truth Mr Jordan, I’m still none the wiser; exactly what is the problem?” Walter asked, swallowing the lump in his throat.

Jordan sat upright in his chair. “Your mother’s last testament expressly states that everything was to be left to her son, Walter James Bransby. That is you is it not?”

“Of course,” Walter decisively replied. “Who else could it be?”

“The problem is Mr Bransby, that when my clerk received the certified copy of your birth certificate from the Registrar, he was perplexed when he discovered your surname listed as Hopkins.”

“What?” Walter exclaimed. “How could that be?”

“I was hoping you may be able to tell me.”

“I haven’t a clue, it must be a mistake.”

“My clerk informed me he checked it out several times just to make sure, and here it is,” Jordan replied, passing the certificate for Walter to read.

Scrutinising the document Walter felt stumped for a plausible explanation. “It has to be a mistake,” he avowed most firmly. “My given names Walter James and date of birth are correct but I’m afraid I have no idea why Bransby, my proper name is listed as Hopkins.”

Recalling that day, Walter remembered how demoralised he felt after reading the certificate, yet it was only the beginning to the weeks of disappointment and grief that followed, all of it so soon after the death of his parents.

At the sink he filled the kettle, set a match to the gas, and then stood staring at the flames, wondering what had prompted him to recall that eventful day in Jordan’s office, and why at this moment he should feel the same vanquished emotion take hold.

Then he twigged why, it was not about his birth certificate, that irregularity eventually worked out just as Jordan explained, it was the standoff that he and Helen had emphatically arrived at.

Even the noise of the kettle bubbling and hissing could not influence him away from his thoughts; instead he remained staring at the flames, engulfed in a moment where nothing seemed to make any sense. Finally he reached for the lever to extinguish the gas; it went out with a thunderous poof, effectively dislodging his thoughts about Helen.

Seated at the table sipping his tea an uncanny sense of loyalty entered his mind, thinking how much his parents looked forward to him applying his newly-learned skills building roads and other infrastructure so necessary if towns in the bush were to survive the emergent need for primary produce. Could he dismiss the sacrifices they had made on his behalf for work in the city? He thought not.

Mulling the subject through his mind he decided it would take an extreme set of unforeseen circumstance to alter his chosen direction.

Six years had passed since Jordan advised him about the ambiguous circumstances surrounding his birth certificate, and although the news affected him in ways he could never have imagined, it nonetheless reinforced his belief that the proceeds from the sale of the farm should be used as a memorial to the two people who made it all possible.

Raised on a farm where the crackling sounds of a radio never invaded the peace, he realised he was pinned in a corner of uncertainty, not only in respect to where he stood with Helen but with all the doom and gloom talk of a world depression.

Left with only his credentials to see him through the maze of uncertainties he felt the loss of his parent's wisdom and direction more than any other time in his life.

He believed he was mature enough to listen to his own counsel, but the fact he knew little about the commercial world remained a disquieting thought. Dipping into what was left of his inheritance only compounded the dilemmas now facing him, and he laboured to understand what other options were open to him should he fail to secure the job he applied for.

So many factors now governed his future, all of which weighed heavily on his mind; the most ambiguous where his relationship with Helen stood in the midst of them all.

Would she ever understand that his decision to study civil engineering arose not only from his keen sense of passion about the subject, but also his desire to be part of the growing number of dedicated men and women seeking a peaceful life in the bush? He doubted she would as her interpretation of 'living in the bush' was tantamount to reverting back to the dark ages.

The thought of another confrontation with Helen was too worrisome, and intending to put the matter aside for another time

he returned to peering at the street below. He didn't know why, it was just something to do for he had grown tired of analysing the pros and cons.

He was about to move away when he noticed his elderly neighbour Arthur Jacobs leisurely gazing up and down the street; his willowy grey hair flapping in the breeze from under a battered old hat that had seen better days. But it was the way Arthur stood supporting his trousers with his hands in his pockets less they fall to his knees that amused him. 'Poor old chap.' Walter murmured, 'what hope does he have should things get worse than they are, already his oversized bagged old pants are a sure testament he is fading away.'

The old fellow kept mostly to himself, only breaking the habit when necessity required him to call on his neighbours to borrow a cup of sugar now and then, or on odd occasions to narrate a tragic story that had occurred years ago in his life. Though Walter had heard the story many times, he always obliged the old man with a modicum of patience as he felt it a pity why any man should be reduced to such loneliness with only a budgerigar for company.

The budgie had Walter intrigued as it seemed that each time Arthur mounted the steps to his flat, the bird fell into a state of excitement, chirping incessantly much like a chick in the nest carries on when its parent returns with a feed. Was it Arthur's body odour that only the bird could sense so far away? Perhaps Walter conceded, as he felt sure soap and water didn't see eye to eye with Arthur very often. Nevertheless, how the bird knew when Arthur was approaching remained a phenomenon Walter had never encountered before.

Then there was Arthur's emaciated oval-like face, appearing chinked and grazed and not too dissimilar to the plate his mother had forgotten to retrieve from the oven after a day's baking.

Privy to the event that split Arthur's marriage apart, Walter grew to appreciate how fragile happiness and heartbreak hangs by

a thin thread; the point reinforced on his mind having endured the legal confusion to establish his rightful claim to his mother's will.

His mother, dear Henrietta Bransby, oh how could he deny the right to call her by that sacred name, the kindly compassionate mother he only knew, the one who so lovingly fostered him throughout his growing years.

Heart-rending as it was to learn the vague truth initiated by a lifeless documented birth certificate, he found it difficult to understand why the Bransby's had never told him the facts leading to his quasi adoption; their reason he could only deduce was perhaps the details were too humiliating for them to reveal. Yet despite their motive, he believed there must have been a compelling reason why his birth mother released her child to the care of an aging couple depleted of any hopes of ever raising a child of their own.

Would he ever arrive at the truth, and if he did would it make any difference in the annals of time? He believed not; the only indulgence he had left was one day having a family of his own, a loving wife and children he would cherish all his life.

A knock sounded on the door and suspecting it was Helen he opened it to find her glaring at him in a way she appeared ill pleased.

"Hi Helen, great to see you."

"Don't bother hi Helen-ing me," she snapped, pushing him aside.

Closing the door he turned hoping the smile on his face would dismantle the uneasiness that had suddenly filled the room. "I was looking out the window when you knocked; I'm at a loss why I didn't see you enter the building," he explained, attempting to relieve the tension between them.

"I decided to take the back entrance."

"Why did you do that?"

“Because I didn’t want any of your nosey neighbours see me arrive. You know how their minds work, always looking for an excuse to invent trashy gossip.”

“That’s hardly fair Helen, most of them are decent people,” Walter firmly replied, though he felt more concerned about Helen’s grim face than defending his neighbour’s credentials. “What’s going on, has something happened, you look flustered?”

“I’m pregnant that’s why,” she replied, drawing a deep breath.

“What! Are you sure?” Walter gasped.

“Of course I’m sure. Why do you think I bothered to make this special effort to see you?”

“How do you know you are?”

“Don’t be so bloody silly Walter, of course I know.”

“You’ve been to the doctor then?”

“Of course!”

Flabbergasted at the news Walter cupped his face in his hands.

“Don’t stand there looking like you’ve just lost your wits, I want to know what you think we should do?”

“I don’t know; it’s come as a shock,” he replied, raising his head to find her appearing angrier than ever.

“Is that all you can come up with?”

“At this moment I am at a complete loss not knowing whether to celebrate or...or.”

“What about me, how do you think I feel?” Helen exploded.

“Go easy Helen, I’m trying to think.”

“Then you had better come up with something quick otherwise...”

“Otherwise what?” Walter demanded. “What sort of question is that? This is a decision that calls for us to be level headed. Right now I haven’t a clue what to do so why don’t you tell me what’s in your mind.”

“That depends.”

“Depends on what? It appears to me we have no other alternative than get married,” he assertively replied.

“Not if you’re still hell-bent on accepting that job in the bush.”

“You’re only exacerbating the problem talking like that Helen.”

Disregarding his remark Helen stood her ground.

“We have to make a decision, and like I say there is no other option than get married.”

“Married!” Helen exclaimed. “I’ve told you before Walter that I have no intentions of following you up North or wherever your stupid job takes you. My home is here, and that’s that. If you are thinking of marriage then you may as well give up any plans of leaving the city.”

Shocked that her ultimatum remained forefront in her mind, Walter had expected that in the light of her pregnancy she would have given in.

“Have you received any word about your application to go bush?” Helen impatiently asked, thinking she may have won the point.

“Not yet, I’m hoping any day now.”

“You’re hoping? That sounds like your mind’s made up even after I’ve told you I’m pregnant.”

“Give me a break Helen; you know how much I’ve looked forward to getting out of the city. Anyway why are you putting the onus on me? The news of your pregnancy behoves us to be sensible rather than bickering about who stays where. We must for the baby’s sake...we must.”

Helen rolled her eyes, opting to remain silent.

“Do your parents know?”

“Don’t be silly, of course not, my father would hit the roof and likely come after you with a shot gun.”

“Well there’s no point standing here arguing, I’ll make a cup of tea and we can talk about it.”

“I’m in no mood so don’t bother. I have stated my case how I feel about living in the country. I need to know what you are

going to do if you get the job, and I want an answer right here and now.”

“Oh for Christ’s sake Helen, please be reasonable. You’ve arrived here with news that under normal circumstances would thrill me to my bones. We’ve talked about the circumstances surrounding my birth and you said you understood, so surely we can find a way around this problem.”

“If you think for one minute I’m going to sit around here while you’re up north wondering what the hell you’re up to, then you’ve got another think coming.”

“You’ve no reason to talk like that, you know me better, well at least I thought you did.”

“That’s a joke,” Helen sneered. “You’re asking me to believe you after this,” she replied, pointing to her belly. “You’re no different than all the other scums I’ve known.”

“So now you’re telling me it’s entirely my fault; that I forced you into having sex with me...that’s a joke Helen and you know it.”

“Well it’s me that’s stuck with the problem, leaving you as free as the breeze to inseminate any other sheila that takes your fancy.”

Again her attitude shocked him, this time leaving him floundering to understand why the news of her pregnancy had thrown her into a rage. It was as if she was blaming the unborn infant for coming between them, and if that were true then he wondered if their relationship had the substance required for a marriage to last.

“I can’t understand you Helen,” he said, appealing to her better judgement. “Surely a matter as serious as having a baby would make you realise you must set aside your single way of thinking and prepare yourself for motherhood. If I get this job it will be well paid, at least I will be employed. Besides, living in the country is an excellent way to bring up a child.”

“As I said, I’m left holding the baby, so now Walter I want a decision from you right here and now otherwise...”

“Otherwise what?”

“I will have an abortion.”

“An abortion!” Walter exploded. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Exactly that!”

“I can’t believe you said that, in fact you’re making me wonder if I ever knew you at all,” he blurted. “An abortion to destroy our child simply because you won’t live in the country; please Helen I beg you to reconsider.”

“Well that’s up to you then, isn’t it,” she responded, moving toward the door.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going home,” she said, turning sharply to look him in the face. “I’ll give you until the end of the week to let me know if you’ve changed your mind to remain in the city. This is an ultimatum I am not about to give into Walter, and it now rests on your decision whether this baby sees the light of day.”

She was about to step through the doorway when she turned again. “Meet me after work on Monday to let me know what you have decided.” At that she tossed her head, slamming the door behind her.

Walter kept the appointment and was waiting for Helen to appear when he noticed the weather had turned nasty, and he wondered if that was the reason why several young female employees gave him a disdainful look when leaving the store, or that Helen had told them about her pregnancy. He suspected the latter.

Mystified why Helen had not appeared as the doorman was about to slide the door closed, Walter approached him. “I’m waiting for Helen, so why are you closing the door?”

“That’s it for the night mate, there’s nobody else to come,” said the doorman.

“Are you sure?” Walter asked, peering in disbelief.

“Yep, that’s it as I say, so if you don’t mind I’ll close the door and get home before the weather gets any worse.”

The following morning Walter boarded a tram in the hope of catching Helen before leaving home for work. Arriving at the gate to her house he noticed her father rushing down the footpath toward him.

“You bastard,” the ageing man shouted furiously. “Get off my property you swine and never darken my door again,” he added, flaying his arms about in the manner preparing for a fight.

Unprepared for a confrontation, Walter stood his ground. “Take it easy sir, I just...”

In a flash Helen’s father had lashed out with a punch that sent Walter reeling against the gate. “Now piss off you blackguard.”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Walter yelled, rubbing the side of his face. He knew it was a brainless thing to say but in the heat of the moment could not think of anything else.

“You dirty swine,” Swanson repeated. “Helen is in hospital fighting for her life because of you, you bloody mongrel. Now get going before I give you the hiding of your life.”

Stunned, Walter’s first reaction was to retaliate; instead he took cover behind the gate, oblivious of the man watering his garden next door.

“Turn the bloody thing on the bastard,” Swanson shouted to his neighbour.

Astounded by the commotion the neighbour dropped the hose.

“Don’t stand there like a bloody idiot, turn the fucking hose on the bastard or I’ll jump over the fence and do it for you,” Swanson bellowed.

Walter did not give him the chance; commonsense drove him to leave the scene knowing it was hopeless trying to reason with Swanson in his present state of mind.

Returning to his flat he peered in the mirror cursing the angry lump that had developed under his left eye. Splashing water on his

face he realised that despite his appearance he must get to the hospital to find out what happened to Helen. Donning a clean set of clothes he raced down the stairs in an urgent effort to be at her side.

“See, I told you it would arrive one day,” said the postie on meeting Walter in the lobby.

“It’s a moot point now,” Walter replied shoving the letter in his pocket.

“I thought you were looking forward to it,” the postie responded, appearing somewhat let down.

“It doesn’t matter now,” Walter replied, taking his leave. “I have to get to the hospital in a hurry.”

Arriving at the enquiry desk, he asked to see Helen.

“Are you a relative?” the receptionist asked in a monotone.

“She is pregnant with my baby,” Walter replied.

“I didn’t ask if she was pregnant.”

“I’m not her husband if that’s what you’re asking,” Walter curtly replied.

“Then you are not a relative, so I am afraid, sir I cannot...”

“I am the father of her expectant child, surely that makes me a relative,” Walter sternly replied.

“We have no proof of that,” the receptionist indignantly replied.

“Look madam, I am not here to argue about moral issues, I have been informed Helen is in a serious condition and I insist on seeing her.”

“What’s the trouble here?”

Walter swung around to find an elderly doctor peering over his spectacles.

“Doctor,” the receptionist replied. “This man is here to see a patient but as he is not a relative I informed him that in accordance with the rules he cannot see her.”

“The patient is pregnant with my child,” Walter hastened to inform the doctor. “And I am told because I am not married to the lady I am forbidden to see her.”

“What is the name of the patient?” asked the doctor.

“Helen Swanson.”

“Hmm, then you had best come with me,” said the doctor.

“To see Helen?” Walter hoped.

“I am afraid I have some bad news for you my lad,” said the doctor, leading Walter aside.

“What’s happened, quickly tell me what’s happened,” Walter implored.

“Helen passed away only a few minutes ago from a severe haemorrhage which I believe was the result of an unlawful abortion. No amount of blood transfusions could save her. I’m sorry but she left it too late before getting help.”

Stepping into the street Walter felt shame and remorse take hold of him.

Why had Helen not kept her appointment he asked himself, and why did she insist that he wait until the end of the week before he could inform her that he had given in to her request. That having given serious thought to her plight he decided that nothing could dissuade him from believing that the birth of their child was more important to him than any job in the country. That he had written a letter withdrawing his application intending to show proof of his intentions upon meeting her at the store after work. And why, or for what reason had she found it necessary to carry out her threat is what he so desperately wanted to know.