

Two empty-nesters, Barney and Alice, separate to pursue their lives, post 60 - he to China, Tibet and Nepal, she to a new partner and a post-grad degree. But life-changing events and offspring force them to rethink their futures.

## **THE BLUE-EYED BOY**

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# **THE BLUE-EYED BOY**

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## CHAPTER 1

**B**arney Roper was on the horns of a dilemma. 11.15 a.m. by his pocket watch. In another forty-five minutes it would be resolved, one way or the other. At his age he should have seen it coming. He was so busy working on his five-year plan that he hadn't noticed until it was too late. Being a 3rd Age explorer, as he liked to think of himself, he knew it was important to stay open to all possibilities. But he hadn't reckoned on becoming infatuated – not at 70.

Pacing up and down the Vancouver waterfront, he puzzled over how he had allowed this situation to arise. His plan to travel to China, Tibet and Nepal to explore the wisdom of the Far East depended on him going unencumbered. This was a journey only he could make and he had waited a long time to do it. Was he going to mess it up at this late stage by becoming involved with a woman he barely knew?

He looked again at his pocket watch. 11.30. Still too early. Roz painted every morning until noon. Compared to him, her self-discipline was daunting. He resumed his pacing along the dockside at Coal Harbour in front of her apartment building. All the arguments he put forward in favour of going alone melted away when he thought of her. Who would have guessed that a seventy year old man could feel as strongly about a woman as an eighteen year old youth? He positively ached with longing – it was ludicrous, he told himself. But now

TERRY OLIVER

that he'd made his decision and bought his ticket he had to know what she would say.

All his efforts to extricate himself from a thirty-year marriage that stultified him would be wasted if he now embroiled himself with someone else. Still. Somehow, he felt, he might be able to compromise – how he hated that word. All his life he had to compromise when what he wanted was to dare to act. Goethe's ringing declaration haunted him – 'whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Therefore be bold!'

Barney quickened his pace, threw his shoulders back and sucked in his little pot belly. He would go as far as the Canada Place centre, its huge white sails glinting in the morning sunshine. By the time he got back, Roz should be waiting for him. He smiled and set off on the seawall, rehearsing his speech as he marched along.

Seagulls scolded him as they scattered from his path. Visions of himself and Roz floating through China and Tibet, unravelling the mysteries of the East, filled his mind. She would sketch and paint; he would explore and meditate – where was the conflict? How simple things were when you saw clearly. And from now on he would see with a clear mind, practising the Buddha's insights to live this stage of his life mindfully – awake to all the possibilities of his 3rd age.

11:45 a.m. "Therefore be bold," he said aloud as he stood on the furthest promontory of the conference centre deck, the great sails billowing out behind him. He turned his back on the familiar Vancouver skyline and strode – boldly – back toward Coal Harbour.

So much for rational behaviour, he mused now, as he glanced again at his pocket watch. Noon at last. He left the

THE BLUE-EYED BOY

seawall and headed towards Roz's apartment building. Blanking out the contradictions from his mind, he jabbed the little button labelled 901, R. LeClair. He peered at the plate glass door, smoothing his thinning white hair. No reply. He hesitated, counting to ten and then turned to leave.

"Hello? Who is it?"

He turned back and spoke into the intercom. "Roz, it's me, Barney."

"Oh hello, Barney."

"You still working, or..."

"Yes, but come up. I've stopped now." The door buzzer sounded and he entered and took the familiar elevator to the 9th floor. Sucking in his stomach, he stepped out into the hallway. She waited at her open door, brushing back wisps of graying hair that had escaped from her French roll.

"Sorry, bad timing," he said.

"It's okay. I was looking for an excuse to stop." She offered her cheek and he breathed in her smell of cologne and oil paint.

She led him into the living room and he saw the door to the balcony was open. A painting of a narrow country lane stood on her easel. "Would you like a beer? We could sit out here if you help me shift this stuff."

"I'll split one with you," said Barney, as he folded the easel and leaned it against the balcony railing. "I hoped you might be free to go for a walk on the seawall later, or maybe come down to the *Sea Mist* and meet Hunter. There's something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Could it wait? I'm meeting a gallery owner later on Granville Street about a possible show." She gave him the beer and an encouraging smile.

TERRY OLIVER

"Are you still planning your annual painting trip to Europe?" he began, searching for an opening.

"God, yes. That's my bread and butter work. I expect I'll be going to paint on the continent when I'm eighty." She spoke as though it were half a lifetime away.

"You'll be on the second time around by then, at the rate you turn them out." He remembered her telling him how she first started to finance her painting trips to Europe by doing bespoke paintings for homesick immigrants in Vancouver.

"Well, I thought of going further afield – take up an offer from an old friend. Girard wants to go to Nepal and do some painting around Annapurna. He asked me to go with him." She rose and crossed to study the painting on her easel.

This mention of Girard made Barney frown. He knew the Frenchman was a man from her past, or at least he hoped so.

"I thought you said it was all over between you?"

She moved to an old gilt-framed mirror, with her back to him, tucking in loose strands of long graying auburn hair that had come unpinned while she worked.

"It is. This is strictly a painting trip. We meant to do it years ago but..."

"Why didn't you?"

"Usual thing – it was all his idea and he always expected me to drop whatever I was doing and fall in with his plans." She shrugged. "He's French," she added by way of explanation.

"Was that why you split up?"

She nodded, "I vowed then that I was through with men – at least painters. They're the worst. Never think of anyone else."

"I'm glad I'm not a painter, then," said Barney.

She laughed, "Definitely makes you more appealing."

*THE BLUE-EYED BOY*

Seeing his opening, he plunged in. "Have you ever thought of the Far East?"

"Yes. There's lots of Koreans and Chinese here in Vancouver. I haven't saturated the market yet," she said.

"And Vietnamese and Malaysians and Indonesians – think of all those Asian cafés and restaurants here, all just waiting for you to do them one of your nostalgic paintings of their home village."

Roz scrubbed at a smudge of paint on her cheek, checking it in the mirror. Barney had time to study her profile from the rear. He liked what he saw. Her pear-shaped figure reminded him of a succulent Doyenne de Comice. No, a Bartlett, he decided as she slipped off her paint-stained smock. Not as full as a Comice but more mouth-watering. He tried not to recall that she was thirteen years younger than him.

"And don't forget all those sushi bars," he went on. "The Japanese are supposed to be great art lovers – and loaded too."

"Sounds like you've just mapped out my career for the next ten years." She came over to sit opposite him and crossed her tanned muscular legs. She wore faded shorts and straw-soled sandals that laced up her calves. Espadrilles, he thought – is that what they called them?

Distracted by her closeness and his failing nerve, Barney got up to lean over the balcony railing. He studied the ranks of white hulls moored in the yacht basin below, feeling his heart pounding, then pulled in his little pot belly with a deep breath and turned to her. "I've been planning a trip to China myself, Roz. I was thinking – maybe we could go together."

Roz squinted up at him in the sunlight. "I've always travelled alone, wherever my fancy took me. I wouldn't be very good at keeping to an itinerary."



TERRY OLIVER

"But you just said you were going to Nepal with Girard."

She gestured dismissively with one of her paint-daubed hands. "Oh Girard. I'll probably only see him at mealtimes. When he's painting, no one else exists."

"Anyway, I didn't mean go everywhere together, just that it might be nice to meet up from time to time. You know, see a familiar face."

"Where were you thinking of going first?"

"Well, I've booked to go to Shanghai next month." Roz made a face and he hurried on, "but I only took it because it was the cheapest place to start. We could meet up somewhere else if you weren't ready by then."

"Shanghai holds no appeal for me, I'm afraid. The new modern China sounds horrendous. If I go it will be to the rural areas and small towns and villages. Besides, that's what my clients will want – the old China, not the new. They can get that right here."

"Perhaps we can talk about it over a meal," said Barney. "In a Chinese restaurant," he added. "You can start drumming up business while we eat."

She laughed and rose to carry the empty beer glasses out to the kitchen. "If I get offered a deal today, I'll treat. How about tomorrow night?"

"And if you don't, then it's on me," he said, "and you can still tout for prospective clients."

She rinsed the glasses in the sink. "What will you do on this trip while I paint pictures for homesick Chinese?"

"Fulfill a lifetime ambition," he said. "I've wanted to go to China since I was nineteen – and I can continue my 3rd age explorations."

*THE BLUE-EYED BOY*

“Ah yes, your 3rd age,” she said, smothering a smile with her palm, “I remember you told me about that before – bit of an obsession with you, isn’t it? I hope China measures up for you. Sounds like you have high expectations.”

“No, it’s a win-win situation. If I love it, great – and if I hate it, I’ll have satisfied my curiosity. Shall I call you tonight?”

“Yes, wish me luck, Barney.”

He gave her an awkward hug. “Good luck.”

He decided to walk back to his boat and took the back lanes up the hill from Coal Harbour, the warmth of the False Creek side of the West End matching his good mood. He smiled to himself at Roz’s dig at him about his obsession with the 3<sup>rd</sup> age. He had become intrigued with the idea when he read about the Hindu notion of the four ages of life. First is the child and student, second comes the householder with all its preoccupations with work and family. The 3<sup>rd</sup> age is the shedding of all responsibilities and going into the forest to sit, reflect and meditate. And finally the fourth age of the wandering ascetic, waiting peacefully for the end.

Barney liked to think he was fully into the 3<sup>rd</sup> age but he was finding it wasn’t so easy shedding all the ties of family and companionship. Like Roz, for instance. Although Roz hadn’t said yes to joining him in China, she was at least thinking it over. If he could encourage her to go on this painting trip with Girard in Nepal she might then be persuaded to continue on to join him in western China.

But he would have to tread gingerly. Let her suggest it, maybe. Still, a promising start. He strode along the beach and stopped to skip a stone over the water. And to think that he had almost funkled asking her at all. He skimmed another stone

TERRY OLIVER

and counted the skips. Eight – wasn't that a lucky number in China?

Despite the fact that he had known Roz for a year, he didn't know her very well. Most of his information came from her student admirers. Although he had lived in her apartment for several months last year, ate at her table and even slept in her bed, she herself had been absent, renting it to him while she was off in Europe, sketching and painting. He had met her once when she left and again on her return, before he too had to leave to rescue his son Hunter from jail in London. When he returned he had tried to explain what had happened.

"One minute we were together at the student art show gala and the next you had disappeared," she said.

"I'm sorry, Roz. It was such a shock when the police told me Hunter had been arrested for kidnapping a baby."

"My god! Had he really?"

"No, as it turned out. He'd only been trying to see what he thought was his child but the mother refused to let him see it. In fact, it was another man's and she had just been using Hunter as a cover so her husband wouldn't suspect her real boyfriend."

"I don't understand – how did Hunter find out?" asked Roz.

"The police did a DNA test and the woman dropped the charge – it's a long story."

"And Hunter had to go to jail?"

"Until she dropped the charge, yes. He was in a bad way by the time I arrived – still convinced the baby was his, at least until the DNA tests."

*THE BLUE-EYED BOY*

"Poor Hunter, it must have done his head in," she said. "I hope I can meet him soon. He sounds so different from Cassie."

"Alice thought it would be good for him to get away from London for awhile so that's why I brought him back here. I figured helping me work on the boat would be good therapy for him. He loves it – that and being smack in the middle of Vancouver in False Creek."

"One of the reasons Girard and I broke up was because I wanted to have a child and he refused," said Roz, twisting a strand of hair that had escaped from her French roll.

"What were his objections?"

"Oh, he said that painting and babies don't mix and anyway we were too old."

"And you never met someone else – I mean someone who felt like you did?"

She shook her head. "No, but by that time Girard had gone back to Paris."

"Kids take up a lot of your time, alright," said Barney. "Maybe Girard was right."

"Maybe," she said, sounding unconvinced. "Renoir had three kids. Picasso had four."

Since returning from England this time, he was determined to get to know her better. He had thought about her a lot while he was away, remembering her long auburn hair, graying at the temples that she wore in a French roll a style he found both attractive and sophisticated.

He continued on the seawall until he reached the little ferry dock beside Burrard Bridge. Looking across the water of False Creek with its constant flow of small boat traffic, he could

TERRY OLIVER

see the Fishermen's Wharf but not the *Sea Mist* – she was lost amid a forest of masts and radar antennae.

As he sat and waited for the ferry, he wondered whether he could keep up this juggling act of pursuing his 3<sup>rd</sup> age dream of exploring the wisdom of the east while having a relationship with Roz at the same time. He had a nagging feeling that they could prove incompatible because each would demand all his time. Wasn't it Byron who said 'man's love is of man's life a thing apart – 'tis woman's whole vocation.' But Roz was different, he told himself. She cherished her independence just like he did.

There was no sign of Hunter as he approached the *Sea Mist* and he walked along the dock inspecting the work they had been doing to the hull. The boat had been through one or two reincarnations before he bought it on the advice of his sailing friend, Clive. It had lain unloved at the dock for over two years and had needed a lot of attention to bring it back into use as a live-aboard. Even so, much of what he and Clive had done was makeshift and rushed as he was anxious to put it into service. Coming back to it this trip he saw with a more objective eye how much still needed doing to bring the *Sea Mist* back to her former glory.

"That new guy from the wharf office came around," said Hunter, stretched full-length on the sunny deck, his pale face half-hidden behind motorcycle cop sunglasses. "He says we're booked into the marina dry-dock for Sunday morning high tide."

"Good. I've been itching to get all those barnacles off and see what shape the hull is in."

*THE BLUE-EYED BOY*

Hunter picked up his mallet and wood chisels to continue hacking out some rotten wood from the stern and Barney clambered below deck to write in his journal at a makeshift desk in the cabin.

He had written a journal for years – from the time he went to England to live, after university, until he retired and returned to Canada – alone, minus his English wife and children. He had piles of old notebooks and ring binders dating back over fifty years – sometimes with gaps of several years, but always he went back to them. Some event like his birthday or the New Year would trigger a renewed spate of entries and he liked to look back over them to try to make sense of his life.

He remembered Kierkegaard's saying that the problem was we had to live our lives forward but only understood them backwards. He had been puzzling away at his current dilemma for some time and this morning's decision to buy his ticket was the culmination of much agonising. It wasn't that he didn't want to go to China. He had factored this into his five-year retirement plan and it had been on the cards for years. Barney was much given to five-year plans – a throwback to his revolutionary days, he supposed.

Despite what he had said to Roz this morning, he was not so sure it really was a win-win situation. For one thing, he felt that this was not the right time to be going. There was his son to consider. Maybe he should stick around and make sure Hunter settled into his new life here. But he didn't want to hurry him or push him into something unsuitable. And he was enjoying their new-found friendship. Was that the right word? Did fathers and sons ever become friends? Whatever their relationship, he was finding it very satisfying and Hunter seemed to like it too.

TERRY OLIVER

Barney was chary of getting too involved in his children's lives, feeling that his role was to help them become independent. He felt this more and more since he turned seventy. He wouldn't be around forever to protect them from the world. He had friends who had paved the way ahead, smoothing out the bumps for their children, only to find that they wandered off this well-groomed high road into blind alleys and dark cul-de-sacs of their own devising.

More than once, he and his wife Alice had locked horns over how much they should be engaged in their kids' lives. When did support spill over into interference? Alice said he pushed Hunter out of the family nest too soon and maybe she had been right. Perhaps his son would never have got into the terrible mess which had landed him in jail if Barney hadn't been so insistent on him standing on his own two feet from the day he turned eighteen.

Their daughters on the other hand, had thrived on it. They couldn't wait to leave and when they did, they were both sure-footed as gazelles, leaping over all the obstacles in their paths with breath-taking ease. Or so it appeared to him. Alice viewed it differently and refused to relinquish her maternal role without a struggle.

She made a point of inserting herself into their lives as free spirits, periodically making inspection visits on one pretext or another. Despite Barney's protests and appeals to him from first Netta, his step-daughter and later Cassie, their youngest child, Alice vetted accommodation, flat mates, diet and most of all, boyfriends.

No matter that the girls fled to the farthest reaches of the British Isles to escape her – Netta to Manchester and Cassie to

*THE BLUE-EYED BOY*

Edinburgh for their undergraduate education, Alice winkled them out and appeared on their doorsteps, refusing to budge.

“She insists on a mother’s God-given right to interfere,” Netta complained to Barney.

In truth, the protests were only token and Alice knew enough never to overstay her visits. Both the girls benefited from their mother’s largesse on these occasions, taking the opportunity to go on shopping sprees and finishing with meals in posh restaurants which their student budgets would never allow.

Alice returned home reassured that her beautiful wayward daughters were not caught up in vice rings or endless rounds of drug-fuelled parties but were living the typical student life of too much drink, too much sex and too much junk food. None of which seemed to have the smallest effect on their ability to obtain good solid degrees. Netta took English, Cassie took French.

And Barney reaped the rewards of her forays into their children’s lives. Alice came home contented and ready to concede that he was right. Between them they had somehow managed, like Miss Jean Brody, the tricky ‘business of putting old heads on young shoulders.’

He was rewarded further by a happy compliant wife who took him off to bed on her return and indulged his every sexual whim and a few of her own, until they fell asleep exhausted and content – smug even, in their clever guise as model parents.

When the breakup came it was rancorous, with Barney insisting he needed to go off and explore his 3<sup>rd</sup> age wherever it took him and not remain at home to dwindle into suburban senility brought on by endless rounds of vacuous dinner



TERRY OLIVER

parties punctuated by occasional visits from grownup offspring.

Alice had made heavy weather of their parting and the few contacts since were brief, accusing and acrimonious. How long would it take, he wondered, to heal the wound of separation? Nearly two years now and they still had not managed to move on from this obstinate silence to any new relationship/friendship basis.

Barney closed his journal and leaned back in the old wooden swivel chair he had rescued from a dumpster on Granville Island. It was all so long ago, he thought and now here he was, half a world away engaged on yet another project when he really wanted to be off in pursuit of the wisdom of the Far East.

As they sat in the Chinese restaurant Barney had selected from a rave review in *The Georgia Strait*, Roz studied the menu and he studied her. Thirteen years is quite a gap, especially when you're seventy and look it, he reminded himself yet again. She wouldn't be sixty for three years and apart from a few streaks of grey hair near her temples looked more like fifty. He had caught her in an expansive mood, as her interview with the Granville Street gallery owner had been a success.

"So what's the deal then?" asked Barney

"He's going to mount a special exhibition of my current stuff for the whole of next month," said Roz, beckoning the waitress over and ordering some champagne to celebrate. "After all these years – it's hard to believe. Pinch me, Barney. Prove I'm not dreaming." She held out her arm.

"I've got a better idea." He gripped her arm and pulled her forward across the table to kiss her firmly on the mouth.

THE BLUE-EYED BOY

"Is this a foretaste of what I can expect if I follow you to China?" she said as she leaned back in her chair.

Barney grinned. "I hope so."

The champagne arrived and the waitress poured it out. He raised his glass. "To your brilliant new career."

"Thanks – and to you, my good luck charm."

"Better than a fortune cookie, I am," he said, draining his champagne and holding out his glass.

Now that he had committed to buying his ticket to China, Barney settled down to prepare for the trip. He took a short introductory course in Mandarin at the Kitsilano community centre. He was fascinated with the simple grammatical structure compared to English and European languages. The tutor, Mr. Li, a short athletic Chinese man who came from Shanghai, soon had them all chanting the sing-song four-tone pronunciation of this standardised Mandarin. He bounded up and down the aisles bending to catch their hesitant attempts.

"Mandarin is very simple – very easy," said Mr. Li. "Only four tones. Not like my language, Cantonese – nine tones. Much more difficult to learn."

By the end of the ten weeks, he predicted, they would all stand up and make a speech to the class totally in Chinese. Everyone laughed in disbelief but true to his word, the last class had been devoted to short two-minute mangled approximations to this language, used by one and a quarter billion Chinese plus twenty-two astonished Canadians. They all filed out of the class, bowing and calling their '*sài jiàn's*' in Mandarin.

He had tried to persuade Roz to join the class with him but she only laughed at the idea.

TERRY OLIVER

“How can anyone possibly grasp a language as ancient and rich as Chinese in ten lessons?”

He repeated Mr. Li’s assurance about how easy it was to speak Mandarin but she remained unconvinced. She would place her faith in the Lonely Planet phrasebook – and Barney, if he was around, to get her fed, watered and sheltered for the night.

They had agreed on a tentative joint travel schedule, on condition Roz could keep it open-ended to cater for any detours she might want to make once she landed in China. He admired her fierce independence but felt it made her a bit spiky. He would have to take his time winning her confidence if he were ever to penetrate the armourplate that surrounded her.

In the days and weeks leading up to his departure, Barney alternated between his own preparations and helping his son restore the *Sea Mist* – although Hunter said it suited him fine the way it was.

When the *Sea Mist* floated onto the dry-dock under Burrard Bridge, Hunter was over the side and scraping barnacles while the water was still receding. Barney had only one pair of safety goggles so he wore them to apply the powerful new anti-fouling paint.

“How much time have we got, Dad?”

“Enough to put on a second coat before the tide turns. Use the old Plimsoll line for your guide.”

There was not quite enough anti-fouling for a full second coat so Barney concentrated on the areas where he had seen the most weed and barnacles clinging. He stood crouched under the stern, using up the last of the precious liquid in the

*THE BLUE-EYED BOY*

awkward angles around the prop shaft, jabbing his loaded brush into the joins of the metal with the wood. The paint splattered and some drops fell on to his face.

Without thinking, he rubbed at them with his hand and brushed one eye. The powerful chemical stung his eyeball and he dropped the brush and stumbled back with a yelp. Hunter rushed round from the far side of the hull, brush in hand.

“What? What happened?”

Barney fumbled for his handkerchief, pressing his eye hard with the back of his hand to stop the stinging. “I got some of this stuff in my eye – hurts like hell.”

“Where’s the goggles? I gave them to you when I stopped rollering.”

“They kept fogging up and I couldn’t see properly so I took them off to do the last bits.”

“Chrissake, Dad. Here, let me see.” He lifted the handkerchief Barney was using to rub his eye. “Don’t rub it, you’ll make it worse.”

“I can’t help it – it’s stinging so much. Can you see anything?”

“Not really, it just looks all watery and inflamed – we’d better get you to the hospital.”

“We can’t leave the boat like this, the tide will be in soon. I’ll go to the clinic on Granville Island. You’ll have to stay here and finish off.”

“You sure you’ll be okay to go on your own?”

“I think so. I can see enough with my other eye. Tie the dinghy to the stern so you can come and collect me when the tide’s in. I should be back in a couple of hours.”

“Don’t worry about me, Dad. Just get that eye seen to. Here, I’ll give you a hand.” He helped Barney off the slippery

TERRY OLIVER

decking and onto the dry quayside where he made his way unsteadily up the steep gangway to the landing then looked back at his son's anxious face. He waved and set off under the bridge towards the Granville Island complex, trying to recall where he had seen the clinic.

Less than an hour later, Barney was sitting in the market café drinking coffee and looking across to the fishermen's dock. He wore a gauze bandage on his eye and a black eye patch over that to keep it clean. In his pocket was an appointment to see an eye specialist at St Paul's in a week's time. He peered across the water with his good eye and thought he could make out Hunter on the deck of the *Sea Mist* but it was all a bit blurry. In the window of the café he contemplated his reflection and grinned at his piratical appearance. A small boy sitting at a nearby table with his mother studied him intently and Barney winked at him with his good eye.

He finished his coffee and headed back to see how Hunter was coping with the incoming tide which he judged to be on the flood by now. As he approached the wharf he could make Hunter out, standing in the dinghy which he had tied to the boat's rail, carefully finishing off the dark blue line at the bow. The water was too deep for Barney to wade out to the boat so he sat on the wharf to watch his son painting and absorbed the last weak rays of the afternoon sun before it sank behind the great hulking mass of Burrard Bridge. Hunter had not seen him approach and worked on in deep concentration.

With the hull now sound and repainted, Barney felt he could afford to ease up on the work and let Hunter carry on at his own pace. Besides, he had plenty of his own problems to deal with. Not least was whether today's little setback would

*THE BLUE-EYED BOY*

delay his plans and force him to reschedule his flight. He leaned back on the bench and let the last of the sun warm his face while he pondered the long-term effects of his momentary carelessness. In terms of his five-year plan it was probably only negligible. What were a few weeks one way or the other? He could use the time getting to know Roz a little better – a prospect which made him smile.

As a 3rd Age explorer, he decided, setbacks were to be expected, welcomed even, as opportunities to investigate other avenues and stay focused on living in the present. It was so easy to slip into old habits and regard every little hiccup in his life in a negative light. What was the point of trying to live the Buddhist path of staying in the present moment if he was thrown off balance by the first obstacle he met? Breast-beating was a waste of time he decided, just roll with the punches, get up and move on. Lesson learned.

He sat in the warm sunshine and closing his one good eye, conjured up an image of his confident new self. Balanced lightly on the balls of his feet, shifting, sparring, dancing out of harm's way with an easy grace, smiling the little half-smile of the Buddha, he swung from lamp-posts like Gene Kelly; flouting convention, a modern-day Don Quixote – he held out his hand and Roz stepped into his path on her tanned legs. Taking his arm and keeping pace with him, she smiled and leaned close in order not to miss any witty remark; they danced on and on, Ginger Rogers to his Fred Astaire. What was it Ginger had said to a reporter? She had to do everything as well as Astaire – and backwards.

“Dad! – You okay?” Hunter called.

TERRY OLIVER

Barney, roused from his reverie, opened his good eye to see his son untying the dinghy and reaching for the oars. "Yeah, I'm fine. Did you finish the line?"

Hunter rowed across the gap to the wharf. "All done. How does she look?" He turned in the dinghy to admire his handiwork from a distance.

"Sleek," said Barney, climbing into the dinghy. "When I'm gone you'll have the girls queuing up for invitations aboard."

"Just one would be okay," grinned Hunter.

"You wouldn't be referring to Lottie by any chance?"

Hunter nodded. "She emailed me the other day – she hopes to come over to Vancouver soon."

Barney collected Roz the following day and brought her down to inspect the *Sea Mist*. She had seen it briefly the previous year before he returned to London and she was keen to see the changes they'd made. She also wanted to meet Hunter, who had bowed out of the Chinese meal.

The early September weather was more like summer than autumn as they walked across the downtown area towards False Creek. The street people were out in force on Burrard Street and Barney steadily worked his way through a pocketful of change. Roz watched his performance quizzically but made no comment at first. After they had been stopped for the fifth time, she spoke.

"Do you always give to everybody who asks? Or are you trying to show me what a generous guy you are?"

He shrugged. "Maybe. Mostly it's easier than listening to their long stories. Kind of a cop-out, I guess. How do you handle them?"

THE BLUE-EYED BOY

“Simple. I keep walking. Once you stop, they’ve got you. I learned that early on in Paris. They’re professionals over there. This bunch is just a gang of amateurs. I could probably get money from *them* if I wanted to.”

“And you don’t think any of them are genuine?”

“Genuine what – beggars?”

“Genuinely needy.”

Roz spread her arms, “Some probably. But how do you propose to find out – in-depth interviews with every panhandler in Vancouver? At this rate, you could take all day to get across town. Find some easier way to salve your conscience, Barney. Face it, you won’t solve this problem single-handed.”

“I suppose you’re right. I’m just not very good at saying no.”

“You could try my method. Develop a tin ear and keep moving. Just remember, stopping is fatal.”

“And what happens to the ones who really need help – tough luck?”

“Look, there’s a whole social network out there all geared up to help them. Give to those people if you want to. This nickel and dime stuff is just a sop to your liberal conscience.”

“I guess if the truth be known, I probably identify too closely with them. Part of me thinks one day I might be on the receiving end.”

“Then I hope you’ll have enough sense to go to the organised charities and save yourself a lot of trouble.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I mustn’t take it personally.”

“It’s the only way we’ll ever get to Granville Island in time for lunch,” said Roz.



TERRY OLIVER

“Okay, point taken.”

“And if you think I’m going to travel across Asia with a bleeding heart for a companion – think again. Come on, here’s a test heading our way. Remember, tin ear and keep moving.” She grabbed his arm and steered him expertly past the listing drunk who was aiming himself at Barney. He glanced back over his shoulder as the drunk stared after him.

“What is it about me that attracts them – do I have a label on me or something?”

“Yes,” she nodded, “it says ‘mug.’ Keep moving. I see another one who’s spotted you.”

The water traffic on False Creek was the usual steady stream brought out by the good weather. While they waited for the aquabus, they watched clouds of sailing dinghies swarm in clusters out in English Bay, practising spinnaker runs and terrorizing the big plastic powerboats forced by the rule of the sea to give way. Barney made his request stop known and the little tub ferry dropped them at the foot of the fishermen’s quay. One or two men working on their boats nodded to Barney as they went past.

“It must be rather fun living on board a boat, especially down here in the middle of the city. Do you like it, Barney?” asked Roz.

“Most of the time – but it has its downside. No garden.”

“It’s no worse than my apartment. You can’t grow much on a ninth floor balcony, either.”

Hunter was engrossed in shaping a curved section of Douglas fir to the gap he had created in the stern gunwale as they approached. Roz had brought her little Yorkie at Barney’s insistence and it sniffed around Hunter’s leg.

“Is this your dog?” he said, scratching Ralf’s ears.

THE BLUE-EYED BOY

Roz held out her hand. "He's Ralf and I'm Roz."

"Sounds like a comedy team," said Barney. "Ralf 'n Roz. This is my son, Hunter, Roz – excuse his appearance – he didn't know about lunch."

"What about lunch?" said Hunter, brushing wood shavings from his hair and shirt. "Was I supposed to be making it?"

"No, we're going to the market for some fish chowder."

"But not till I've seen the *Sea Mist*," said Roz. "Your dad tells me you've become an expert boat-builder, Hunter. Will you show me all the changes you've made?"

"They're mostly outside," said Hunter. "If we walk along the dock I can point some of them out to you. It's fresh out of dry-dock so her bottom is newly painted. Dad has a souvenir of that occasion."

"I must say a black eye-patch on someone on a boat does create quite an impression," she said.

"Yeah, it's hard to take him seriously, isn't it?"

"Well, it's serious enough from my point of view – I may have to delay my China trip," said Barney.

"Sorry," said Roz. "I'm sure it's very painful too. It's just that eye-patch – I mean, why black?"

"I chose it. The alternative was a ghastly so-called flesh pink colour."

"I see – not his style at all." She winked at Hunter.

"Pink," grinned Hunter. "Definitely not for someone as macho as Dad. All those Chinese women could get the wrong impression."

"If you two are quite finished mocking the afflicted," said Barney, "perhaps we can go and have that chowder now."

## CHAPTER 2

“Alice? – telephone.” She came down the narrow staircase to take the phone from Heck Savage, a big-boned man standing in the dark hallway. She had put on his old navy terry-cloth bathrobe, wrapping it round her full form and she held it together with one hand while she took the phone from him with the other.

“Hello? Yes, this is Alice Roper speaking – who? Oh Dr. Turner. Hello, I didn’t recognize your voice.” She swivelled round to mime something to Heck who stood behind her in the narrow hallway.

“My Master’s thesis – yes, of course. I’d love to talk about it – lunch would be fine.” She pulled Heck’s head down to whisper in his ear and he went off into the living room, returning with a pen and paper for her.

“It was very good of you to agree to take me on when Professor Savage left the Archaeology department, Dr. Turner. Yes, it was a bit awkward.” She turned to stick her tongue out at Heck who put his hairy bare arms round her, sliding his hands into the folds of her bathrobe and nuzzling her neck.

“I can catch a train up to Oxford any time. I’m only twenty minutes from Paddington.” Once again she shoved Heck away and pointed to a chair. He pulled it over and sat down, pulling her on to his lap. She tried to scribble something on the paper he had given her while holding the phone against her shoulder but he was taking advantage of her hands being

*THE BLUE-EYED BOY*

occupied. He loosened the bathrobe and slid both hands over her breasts while she wrote on her knee.

“Yes, – I’m afraid it’s still mostly masses of notes so far.” Heck was now tipping her back to try kissing her again and she flailed at him with the paper gripped in her hand. “One o’clock, October 3rd – yes, fine, fine. As a matter of fact, I’m really looking forward to working with you, Dr. Turner. I’m sure your style will be much different from Professor Savage’s. Less of a hands-on approach – more scholarly. Pardon? Oh, definitely a rough diamond – oops!” She dropped the phone and Heck reluctantly released his hold to allow her to pick it up. “Sorry – yes, you too. Enjoy your trip to Knossos,” she called as he pried the phone from her and switched it off.

“Randy old fart,” said Heck, “trying to chat you up. Lunch, hah!”

Alice remained seated on his lap in the hallway. “Randy? You’re a fine one to talk.” She put her arms round his neck and began kissing him in her turn. “I can’t even speak to my tutor on the phone without you getting insanely jealous.”

“Jealous! Of The Dome? If he’s the only thing I have to worry about, I won’t lose any sleep.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I rather like bald men, it makes them look intellectual – and sexy.” She combed her fingers through his thick grey hair.

Heck snorted. “Dean Turner sexy? You must be desperate.”

Alice leaned back on his arm, letting the bathrobe fall open. “I knew it. Just because I let you take advantage of me, you think I’m a loose woman.”

TERRY OLIVER

Heck pushed the bathrobe off her shoulders and bent his head down to her neck. Alice circled her arms around him as he continued exploring her half-naked torso, coming to rest with a long sigh back under her ear.

"What did he want – calling you in the middle of the summer break?"

She unfolded the bit of scrumpled paper by the phone and smoothed it out. "You heard – he wants to discuss my M.A. thesis in the autumn."

"And what was all that stuff about me being hands-on and a rough diamond. Did he really say that?"

"No, I did – but he agreed," she sat up, straightening her bathrobe.

"I'm surprised you didn't tell him how good I am out on a dig, or have you forgotten," he said.

"I thought of it – but I didn't want to give the game away. Not after you made such a big palaver about leaving Oxford to come to London. We're not out of the woods yet – did he recognize your voice, do you think?"

Heck shrugged. "I doubt it. I didn't recognise his."

"Anyway, from now on, you'd better not answer my mobile," she said, getting off his lap and heading back upstairs. "What's happened to that brunch you were making?"

"It'll keep," he said, starting to follow her up the stairs, but she stopped and held out a restraining hand.

"Oh no, it won't – I'm starving. I'll be straight back down."

"You're so unromantic, Alice. All you ever think about is food."

*THE BLUE-EYED BOY*

She gasped at the blatant unfairness of this remark. "I have just spent the last hour and a half with you up in that bed wearing myself out – the least you could do is make me some breakfast before I faint."

Grumbling, Heck retreated, his tall bulky frame filling the narrow staircase as he headed back to the lean-to kitchen of the Victorian terrace house. He and Alice had moved in here for the summer on a sub-let from an archaeology colleague of his. He stumbled over boxes of his textbooks lining the dim hallway and swore in frustration. Upstairs, Alice heard him and smiled to herself as she dressed.

She was unused to living with such a big man compared to her ex-husband Barney, and he made the tiny terrace cottage seem like a doll's house. They had agreed to take it because it was near to where he would be teaching archaeology in the East End of London and they could spend their free time searching the area for a potential house to buy. She came downstairs now, to the smell of grilling bacon.

"God, I'm ravenous," she said, snatching a rasher off the plate Heck set on the kitchen table. He poured her coffee, then sat down to watch her eat. After a moment, she stopped eating and came round to sit on his lap.

"Do you think we made a mistake moving here, Heck?"

He stroked her back and shook his head. "Do you?"

"I'm confused – I don't know what I think anymore – things are moving too fast for me."

"Losing your nerve?"

"What do you mean by that?" she demanded.

"Afraid what people might think."

"What people?"

He shrugged, "The Dome, maybe –"

TERRY OLIVER

"I don't give a toss about the Dome – it's you I worry about. Us."

"Is that all? I thought it was something serious." He put his arms round her and squeezed. "You don't want to go back to Oxford, do you?"

Alice sighed and kissed him. "I don't know. I worry, that's all. It's what I do – I'm good at it."

"Could you possibly be more specific?"

"Well, should we be living together when I'm not even divorced, for one thing?"

"So get divorced. I'm sure Barney's willing from what you've told me."

"He may be, but I'm not ready – yet."

It had been over eighteen months since Barney had left her to go back to his native Canada. She had no wish to follow him and start a new life in Vancouver – it was nice enough to visit for a holiday but it could never feel like home to Alice. She had misjudged him though, when she told him he could choose between them – he chose Canada – to pursue the next stage of his life, he said – explore his 3rd age as he insisted on calling it.

So Alice had been left, hurt and outraged by turns; forced to pick up the pieces of her life and start again on her own. With her sixtieth birthday looming, she had made her choice, ending her stable career with social services and returning to university. She was amazed to find that the first Oxford college she applied to for a post-grad degree in Archaeology accepted her on the strength of a personal interview.

*THE BLUE-EYED BOY*

It was not at all surprising, Heck had later told her – most university departments have a strong bias towards mature students. He remembered his own professors telling him about the wave of older students which flooded the universities after the Second World War, putting them on their mettle, challenging everything; accepting nothing on trust. They had called it the golden age, the high point of their teaching careers.

He told her this in her cramped student flat where they had first begun their liaison, amid a heap of books and notes on Alice's window seat. These were often dumped on the floor to make room for them to stretch out and read choice excerpts aloud. They often lay together full-length, Alice's ample form half on top of his lanky frame on the cushioned alcove seating. And now here they were in London's East End, like an old married couple.

It had all happened too fast for Alice's liking; she would have preferred a much more leisurely pace. For a start, she was still married to Barney and they had three grown children to consider. Already she had been forced to admit to her youngest that she and Heck were sleeping together. Cassie had asked her outright and the lie she had prepared stuck in her throat. She could only nod guiltily as the colour flooded her face like some embarrassed teenager. When do our children pass us, becoming the mature adults and leaving us feeling like children again, she wondered?

Unsettled, Alice longed at times for the comfortable boredom of stability that nearly thirty years of marriage to Barney had produced. But now he was gone and Heck had filled that aching gap in her life so completely that she felt she had not had time to properly mourn her loss. Heck, six years



TERRY OLIVER

her junior, swept her along in such a flood of physical and intellectual stimulation that she had either to sink or swim. Being Alice, she swam. And loved every minute of it. But it was all such a rush.

Alice had been pleasantly surprised to discover that the East End of London had so many fine old Georgian streets and squares. Although many of them had now been gentrified, it was still possible to find old houses the developers had not yet managed to lay hands on. She and Heck walked miles exploring these terraces with a tattered AtoZ street guide, Alice skipping a step at times to keep up with his loping stride.

Often she went out alone in the afternoons to house hunt but also to worry away at the wisdom of her choice. She didn't like rash moves and she had made two in less than one year – first Oxford and now London.

Despite her grave reservations about Heck's decision to leave Oxford where he had been deputy head of the Archaeology Department at St Swithins, he himself had no regrets. He tried to reassure her that he would have left even if they hadn't become involved – he knew it was time to move on. Oxford was too small a place for them to have kept their relationship hidden for long. A nasty scare after a student discovered them together finally made him resolve to leave. With no more ethical conflicts about a teacher/student relationship, he and Alice were now free to live together openly, he told her. He could still be her unofficial advisor and she would have the benefit of his expertise any time she chose.

She was a Jekyll and Hyde character, she decided. On the outside bouncy and gregarious; on the inside sombre and unsure – at least when she was on her own. She envied Barney

*THE BLUE-EYED BOY*

his ability to spend days, weeks, months even, travelling about the world alone. He preferred it, he said, not having to worry about pleasing someone else.

Wandering about the shabby old Victorian back streets of the East End, she sometimes caught herself asking what she was doing. I am nearly sixty-one years old and acting like a love-sick undergraduate, she told herself sternly. This is no way for a serious person to behave. Alice liked to think of herself as a serious person, despite passing herself off at parties as 'deeply shallow.'

On such occasions, she abandoned her house-hunting and hurried back to the cramped little Victorian terrace, put on a Mozart horn concerto very loud and began cooking Heck a steak and kidney pie. The small butcher shops in the East End always had plenty of freshly prepared pie filling – the immigrant populations knew the value of offal and there was a steady demand.

The first time she had produced one of these steaming savoury pies, with her mother's chipped china blackbird stuck in the middle with its mouth agape to let out the fragrant aroma of the rich gravy, Heck had been speechless. He milled around the lean-to kitchen sniffing the air like a beagle, then hugged her from behind as she bent over the oven. She shooed him out into the hallway and to her surprise he went straight out the front door, re-appearing fifteen minutes later clutching a bottle of red wine.

"Look what I found at the corner shop. A decent French Burgundy, in behind all that California plonk and Aussie chardonnay. Proper stuff, see? – five years old."

Alice set the pie on the table while Heck poured the wine. She had made roast potatoes, too and baby peas,

TERRY OLIVER

topped with fresh mint pulled from the neglected garden. Raising her glass of red wine to him she saw the pleasure in his face and felt her eyes stinging. "So, eat – eat," she said, doing her Jewish mother impersonation to cover her sudden flood of emotion.

Later, in the cluttered living room, Heck lit a small fire in the grate even though it was only the end of August, and they finished off the Burgundy. Alice burrowed under his arm as they stretched out on the old battered sofa and listened to one of his Scott Joplin CDs – too lazy to dig out her own from the piles of boxes everywhere.

"So what gem did you find today?" asked Heck. "Anything I need to rush out and inspect?"

Alice drew her feet up under her and gazed into the fire. "Not really. Anyway, I quite like it here, don't you?"

"A bit cramped, but if you're happy – so am I."

She gave him a peck on the cheek. "I suddenly felt we were rushing things too much. I just want to slow down and savour our time together – is that okay?"

"I don't suppose it gets much better than this," agreed Heck, holding up his glass to the firelight.

"You're not hard to please. A bottle of Burgundy and a steak and kidney pie."

"And a fire – and you," he said, kissing the top of her head.

"Say something romantic to me," she demanded, burrowing deep under his arm.

"Okay, let's see – "A book of verses underneath the bough,

A jug of wine, a loaf of bread – and thou  
Beside me singing in the wilderness...'"

*THE BLUE-EYED BOY*

“Don’t stop, Heck.”

He studied his glass a moment, then recited, ““Oh for a beaker full of the warm south,  
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,  
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim  
And purple-stainèd mouth...’.”

“Purple-stainèd mouth,” repeated Alice. “God, Keats always makes me want to cry.” She burrowed closer.

In the early weeks of September, Alice abandoned house-hunting, choosing instead to catch up on her research into Roman villa life at the Museum of London, the V&A and the British Museum. She would often write up her notes in the magnificently restored Reading Room, sitting at the long study tables with their robin-egg blue leather desk tops. She laid out her fat gold-nibbed fountain pen in the old quill tray, propped up her sheaf of notes on the fold-out book readers and began to write up her findings.

Around her, other students sat with laptops in front of them but she found this too jarring a contrast in this ancient sanctuary, preferring pen and ink. She wrote in a flowing mix of copperplate letters and truncated italics which was borderline illegible to Heck, at least, who had complained loudly when she handed him her first assignment handwritten.

Heck often arranged to meet her for lunch under the new glass geodesic rotunda dome which surrounded the refurbished BM Reading Room. He too, was not immune to the appeal of this repository of written culture. Today, he ferreted her out from her reveries at the long curving leather-topped tables and the two of them wandered round the stacks in the outer wall, idly sampling books which caught their eye.

TERRY OLIVER

Later, seated in the museum café over a pot of Assam tea and the latest trendy concoction of salad leaves and ewe's milk cheese in a rough quadrant of artisan bread, Heck held up one long finger to her. Curious, she waited while he fished out of his pocket a little digital camera and leaned over to show her. He clicked through some shots of the last dig they had been on and then stopped at a photo of a pair of semi-detached houses. One side of the double dwelling was in reasonable condition but the other was in a bad way with boarded up windows, crumbling masonry and a roof with many slipped or missing slates.

"What is it?" asked Alice.

"Our future home," he said gesturing at the tiny photo.

"That? It looks practically derelict," she objected.

"Semi-derelict," corrected Heck. "A Georgian semi-derelict, semi-detached. Sounds rather grand, doesn't it?"

"Sounds disastrous to me," she said. "Are you sure it's Georgian, Heck?"

"Classic – look at those windows."

"What windows? I can't see any – they're all boarded up."

"Well look at next door, then. See? Perfect proportions. And here, look at this." He clicked on the next photo and stared at it. "I climbed over the gate at the side and went round the back. Unbelievable. But, if you don't like it." He shoved the tiny camera back in his pocket and picked up his sandwich.

"Wait a minute. I never said I didn't like it – let me see!" She grabbed at his arm but he munched on his bread, pretending to ignore her.

"You're probably right. It does look like a disaster," he said. "Shame about the garden, though."

*THE BLUE-EYED BOY*

“Heck – let me see!” She reached across him trying to fish the camera out of his pocket but he turned on his stool away from her grasp and her hand landed on his lap. She dug her fingers in and squeezed.

“Alice!” He dropped his sandwich on the plate and grabbed her hand.

“Will you show me the picture if I let go?” she demanded.

“Yes! Alice, people are staring,” he hissed.

She shrugged, “I don’t care. Give me the camera.”

He fumbled in his jacket pocket and handed it to her. She released her grip and calmly switched on the camera. “Where is it, Heck?”

He clasped his groin with one hand, pointing with the other. “Further on. There.”

Alice stared at the little square window in disbelief. “Is that a walled garden?”

He nodded. “Original brickwork – and look in the corner. There.”

“What – a glass-house?”

“An orangerie, genuine article,” he said. “Even has some of the original glass – hand blown.” He took the camera from her and clicked on a couple of frames, then handed it back to her. “Rear elevation.”

Alice studied the tiny picture. A second, curving lean-to conservatory ran the width of the house. “Where is it? I want to see it, Heck. Right now.”

He massaged his crotch surreptitiously. “That really hurt, you know. They’re not made of steel, Alice.”

TERRY OLIVER

“You said they were silver – the Family Silver. I remember.” She smiled, contrite. “Sorry, Heck – here, let me.” She placed her hand on top of his crotch and rubbed gently.

“Alice! For god’s sake....”

They rode the underground to Mile End and then walked into the quiet back streets of mean snaking Victorian terraces until they came into a small square of Georgian houses with wide pavements and London plane trees. Alice spotted the derelict semi-detached immediately, part way down the street. It stood out like a decaying front tooth in the row of Georgian houses.

Her breath caught for a moment as she savoured the prospect of this fine old square with its soft yellow brick houses in amongst the endless stretches of red brick Victoriana. As they approached, she began to make out some of the features which so endeared this style to her.

Even with the windows boarded up it was still possible to see that the proportions were right and the elegant uncluttered lines had not been tampered with by later builders. Heck showed her the detail of the brickwork with its tight pointing which was still in excellent order. He led her round the side and boosted her over the gate into the back garden.

Here and there in the old walls she made out the handmade iron hooks which had held the wires for the espaliered fruit trees, long since gone. Many of the windows of the wide conservatory had been smashed and it had that forlorn appearance of abandoned greenhouses everywhere. But the woodwork was still sound above the knee wall and all the old ironmongery for opening and closing windows and roof lights was still there.

*THE BLUE-EYED BOY*

Some of the ornamental shrubs and trees had spread half way across the overgrown lawn and they skirted them through the long grass on their way to inspect the orangerie against the south-facing rear garden wall. Alice looked inside and beckoned Heck over to her.

"Know what that is?" she asked, pointing to a twisted and gnarled tangle of branches inside. He shook his head. "A vine – a grapevine. Do you think it's still alive?"

"Only one way to find out," he pushed on the partly closed door at one end of the lean-to and stood aside to let her in first. She knelt beside the vine and traced some of the smaller branches back to the main stem, then bent one back. It snapped cleanly and she frowned and tried another further down. This one gave when she twisted it and she bent it harder. The vine splintered and the green wood showed beneath the bark. She grinned up at him.

"It's alive – just needs cutting way back to here," she indicated a fork in the vine.

"I can taste the wine already," said Heck. "What shall we call it – Chateau...?"

"What's the name of this street? I didn't even notice."

"Tiberius Road," he said.

She laughed, "Perfect. Chateau Tiberius. It must be an omen – how on earth did you find it?"

"One of the secretaries in the department heard I was looking for an old place and when she told me the name of the street I knew I had to take a look. Just the job for a couple of old Roman scholars, wouldn't you say?"

"But there's no sign out the front. Are you sure it's for sale?"



TERRY OLIVER

"The old lady who owns it went into a home, the secretary said. She wouldn't sell it because she hoped to come back one day."

"How old is she?"

"Eighty-eight." They looked at each other for a moment, then burst out laughing.

"Well," said Alice, "we could always go and visit her – she might change her mind."

"Make her an offer she couldn't refuse," he said. "Like inviting her to come and live here with us."

"Hang on a minute – we don't even know her yet."

"Do you want this place or not, Alice?"

She gripped his arm. "I'd sell my grandmother. Work the streets – anything."

"I don't think you'll need to go on the game, but you may have to take on someone else's granny to get it."

"Can we go inside, Heck – have you got a key?"

He shook his head. "No. The secretary said we'd have to ask the old lady herself. She did give me the address of the nursing home, though."

Two empty-nesters, Barney and Alice, separate to pursue their lives, post 60 - he to China, Tibet and Nepal, she to a new partner and a post-grad degree. But life-changing events and offspring force them to rethink their futures.

## **THE BLUE-EYED BOY**

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