

## Crossing the Road

Natalie decided to take the longer walk through the park. Now that Sarah was away at University weekends could be long and even lonely. It did not seem long since having to go out for the milk she had forgotten was an annoying intrusion into her timetable. Now it was a welcome diversion, especially on a bright Spring morning.

Bathed in sunshine reflected from every drop of lazy dew, the park was coming to life in a rainbow of daffodils, crocus and polyanthus. Natalie imagined she could hear buds bursting open. She must take some growing things from the garden to school to get the children to share the excitement of the Spring. She loved working with the children - they were her life. Her warm feelings were suddenly chilled as she caught sight of racist graffiti scrawled across a park bench. It was unusual in this almost totally white part of the town. Natalie, though appalled at the sentiments expressed on the bench, had to admit that lack of association with people of other races made her hesitant on the rare occasions she was confronted by someone of another culture. But then, she would say, 'it's the same with older people. I don't have much in common with them. I feel uncomfortable. I could never nurse them or be a carer.' Her own parents had died when she was in her teens.

Natalie did not know that in a very few moments she would be confronted by both racism and ageism. She may have imagined hearing chestnut buds bursting, but there was no doubt about the cry for help. The path turned left on to a wider roadway by huge rhododendron bushes. Natalie quickly strode round the corner. Immediately in front of her and on the other side of the road was a wheelchair leaning perilously towards a rose-bed with its front wheel stuck in a drain-cover. The occupant was a large, elderly Afro-Caribbean lady. Natalie crossed the road, took the handles of the wheelchair and pulled it on to level ground. As soon as the chair was righted, the lady thanked Natalie and then dissolved into a relieved fit of giggles.

Natalie found herself caught up in the infectious laughter. 'Are you on your own?' she asked.

'Yes, but don't tell anyone, will you.' The woman's face broadened into an enormous grin until it seemed laughter oozed from every wrinkle. 'My son will be so cross. My carer, you see, she's away for the weekend and we said we could cope. Then my boy was called into work urgently this morning. When that warm Mr. Sun beckoned through my windows, I felt I had to get out and meet him.' She laughed again. 'I knew I was really too weak to turn the wheels of this chair more than a few yards, but then I'm independent - stubborn like a mule my boy says.' She pushed on the wheels of her chair. 'I'd better get back now. He might just pop home and wonder where I am.'

It was not a sense of right or duty which made Natalie offer to push her home. Thinking about it later she knew she was attracted to this fun-loving woman, whose name she learned was Rachel. It was not a long journey to the downstairs flat close to the main entrance to the park, but it was time for more stories and laughter as Rachel told of how her father had brought her and her mother to England from Trinidad. Natalie learned of her family, her work as a nurse, her friends in her church.

'Do you have a church?' Rachel asked.

'I used to go,' Natalie replied. 'But that was a long time ago. I'm thinking of going again now I've more free time most weekends. It was strange. Only last night she had thought how she longed to have the real faith she found as a teenager when God was real and life was full of dreams of changing the world.'

'Welcome to my home.' Rachel pulled off her headscarf and eased herself from wheelchair to armchair. 'Thank you my dear.'

'Can I get you a drink?' Natalie asked.

'Have you time? I'd love you to stay a bit longer!' Rachel was genuinely pleased.

On her way from the kitchen, Natalie paused by a picture on the wall. It was a seascape with beach and palm trees and strangely alive and full of light.

'Do you like it?' Rachel asked. 'It is one of my Dad's. He was an artist. Have a look at the others.' It was only then that Natalie noticed how many pictures there were around the room. She made coffee for them both, guided by Rachel who shouted instructions from the living room, and brought the drinks through.

'That's my favourite,' Rachel pointed to the picture above her chair. Again it had a strange brightness about it. 'Can you see what it is?'

Natalie had already taken in the theme of the picture before Rachel added, 'It's the good Samaritan.' and she saw the title scribbled in the corner, 'Cross over the road.' In the picture were people of all races walking along a busy street. A man, possibly the painter himself, had hurriedly dropped his bicycle at the side of the road before crossing to tend to a white young man lying bruised in a shop doorway. No-one else seemed concerned. 'It's happening all the time you know.' Rachel said, as Natalie sat down. 'You've been my good Samaritan today.'

They chatted and laughed together for a while before Natalie remembered she had come out for milk and the shop would be closing at lunch-time. 'Will you come and see me again? Friends from the church come some times, but it's lovely to have someone young and bright to talk to.' Natalie promised to come.

It was while walking back through the park, wondering at her own attitudes and responses, she suddenly felt she was not alone. Coming to the place where she had crossed to help Rachel, the picture of 'Cross over the Road' flashed into her mind and her words, 'You've been my good Samaritan today.' She felt a tingling shiver - a surge of love and kindness right through her. She turned, fully expecting to see someone behind her. There was no one except a child chasing a ball across the grass. Sunshine drew gold from daffodils. Natalie realised there **was** someone. Just like many years ago, she felt again the presence of the one who first told the story of a Samaritan crossing a lonely road.