

Gisèle Pelicot

SHAME HAS TO CHANGE SIDES



A HYMN TO LIFE

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GISÈLE PELICOT

with Judith Perrignon

Translated from the French by
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O N E

I always set the table for breakfast the night before. I put out coffee cups, plates, cutlery, napkins, pots of honey and jam. Almost as a way of reaching across the hours of darkness that I fear, of proclaiming the harmony of the day to come. Then all there is to do in the morning is get out the butter, put on the kettle, and wait for the smell of coffee and toast to fill the air. All will be well.

That evening, as usual, I got everything ready. Even Dominique's clothes. Let's call him Dominique. I never used to call him that, I preferred affectionate nicknames – Doumé, Mino – but afterwards I didn't know what to call him any more. I called him Monsieur. Monsieur Pelicot. Now that it is time to tell our story, I have decided to use his first name. I put out a pair of bottle-green corduroy trousers and a pink Lacoste polo shirt the children had given him.

We had to be at the police station the following morning; the appointment was at 9.30. After we woke up, we drank our coffee and listened to the news on RTL. The global Covid pandemic had picked up with a vengeance and another lockdown was in force. I looked up at the sky through the kitchen window facing me. It was going to be a lovely day,

so I suggested a long walk after lunch as a way of defying the government's restrictions, and as an antidote to the morning's summons. Dominique sat opposite me and said nothing. I reminded him it was November 2nd; my brother, Michel, would have been sixty-nine today. He sighed and said he didn't like November, it was never a good month, no doubt an allusion to all the bills and notices of unpaid invoices that were about to come in. My ghosts and our money problems hung there between us in the kitchen for a moment. But we had always lived with them. And in a way, they had brought us closer. Dominique went to take a shower while I cleared the table. As we were about to leave, he pulled on a jacket that did not go at all with the outfit I had put together for him. I told him so, and he shrugged. We took my car. He drove us to the Carpentras police station.

Two months earlier, I had been staying with our daughter, Caroline, and her husband, Pierre, outside Paris, looking after my grandson until school started, and we had gone to spend the weekend at their holiday home on the Ile de Ré, off the Atlantic coast of France. That's where I was when Dominique called me sounding unusually agitated. He stammered something about having lost his mobile, he needed a code to activate the new one he had just bought to replace it, he'd had it sent to my number. I gave him the code, but everything about this usually methodical and organised man seemed suddenly in disarray. When he came to pick me up at the station a few days later he looked gaunt. We got home and he burst into tears. He said he couldn't bear to lose me. I thought immediately of my father's grief when my

mother died. Dominique sat beside me, shaking with sobs, and I was unable to console him. I feared he might be ill, that his cancer might have returned to take him away for good.

When Dominique finally confessed to me that the previous week he had done something foolish at the Carpentras branch of the Leclerc supermarket – he'd been caught by a security guard filming under three women's skirts, ended up at the police station and had his phone and computer seized – I was upset but I was also, in a way, almost relieved. It was terrible to think of my husband stalking these women, unbearable to imagine him as an offender, but it could have been so much worse. This was not irreversible. My fears were measured on a different scale: only death really frightened me.

So I told him that we would keep the incident between us; I wouldn't tell the children, so as not to hurt them. And I wasn't about to give up on him, but he absolutely had to apologise to the women he had filmed, and see a therapist. There wouldn't be a next time, because if there was, I would leave. 'I promise you,' he said, 'it won't happen again.' I would never be able to forget what he had done. It was a warning sign – but a warning of what? I had no idea. I just wanted our life to go back to normal. Life resumed in our little yellow house with blue shutters, the backdrop to our life in retirement in the South of France. The pool cover was on. The oleanders had finished blooming. Autumn was drawing near.

In mid-October I had gone up to Paris, this time to look after the children of my son David, who was due to undergo minor surgery. I was always going back and forth whenever I was

needed to look after one or another set of grandchildren. The school-holiday schedule became my own. I rushed up to Paris any time there was a problem too. I was Maminou, the travelling grandma. I wasn't afraid of getting old; I knew it was a privilege. Obviously when I was at David's I spent most of the time with my granddaughters. Every morning, Charlize stubbornly refused to wear anything but a tracksuit. Clémence, her twin sister, was always changing outfits and had a penchant for princess dresses. They were nine years old, the age I was when I lost my mother.

I didn't hear the phone ring that morning. I was sitting at the tennis courts. Clémence and I were watching Charlize as she ran after the ball. Her forehand had improved. I saw I had missed a call. Unknown number. I called back a little later. 'Bonjour, were you trying to reach me?' The man introduced himself: 'This is Deputy Sergeant Perret from the Carpentras police. Are you aware that we interviewed your husband a few weeks ago? Do you have any idea what this is about?' Yes, I said, my husband had told me everything. My answer resounded inside me like a quiet victory: transparency and trust were at the heart of our long marriage. And, I added, I had lived with this man for fifty years and he had never yet let me down.

'When will you be back?'

'On October 21st. I can come and see you straight away.'

'No, no. We have too much work to do. Come with your husband on November 2nd.'

*

And so November 2nd arrived. Dominique had no reason to sob like Papa had when Maman died. 'Don't worry, it's only a formality,' I said to Dominique as we arrived at the police station, a low, unassuming, modern building, yellow like our house, the colour of Provence. We walked in, each masked up with one of those pale-blue rectangles that now covered every mouth on the planet. We had just reported to the reception desk when a man with a crew cut leaned over the balustrade on the first floor of the police station. It was Deputy Sergeant Perret.

'I'll see Monsieur Pelicot first, then Madame afterwards,' he called down. Dominique walked up the staircase in his ill-matching jacket without looking back. A short while later the police officer reappeared and motioned for me to follow him. I went briskly up the stairs, assuming that I would find Dominique in Perret's office. He wasn't there. The police officer indicated the chair opposite him, far enough away from his desk that I could take off my mask. I immediately apologised profusely for what my husband had done. The man across from me was tall and solidly built, with a strong face above his wide shoulders. He seemed to embody authority, and yet there was something gentle and cautious in the way he talked to me. He asked me to confirm my identity and the date and place of my birth: December 7th 1952 in Villingen, in Germany. Maiden name: Guillou. Parents' names: Yves Guillou and Jeanne Prot. He asked me how Dominique and I first met, and I told him it was at my mother's sister's house in July 1971. It was, I added, a genuine case of love at first sight. He wanted to know how I would describe my husband's character.

‘He’s kind, attentive. He’s a lovely guy. That’s why we’re still together.’

He asked if we liked to entertain. I replied that we often had friends over. He asked me to describe a typical evening. I said we didn’t really have a routine, we weren’t that old yet. He asked me what time I went to bed, whether it was at the same time as my husband, whether I took a nap in the afternoon. I was a little taken aback by his questions.

‘Are you into swinging?’

I didn’t understand any more. I heard myself replying no, never, how ghastly, I heard myself spluttering that swinging was not something I would ever consider. That I couldn’t imagine anyone else touching me. That, for me, there needs to be love with sex. He asked me if I thought I knew my husband well, and whether I trusted that he would never hide anything from me. I said yes.

‘I am going to show you some photographs and videos that you are not going to like.’

I sensed something rising in his voice – not only embarrassment, but a curious mix of danger and protectiveness. He told me that Dominique had been taken into custody for aggravated rape and for administering toxic substances. I think I burst into tears. I moved towards his desk and put my mask back on. He picked up a photograph and held it out to me. A woman in a suspender belt lying on her side. A Black man behind her, penetrating her.

‘That’s you in the photograph.’

‘No, that’s not me.’

I got out my glasses; he got out another photograph. The same woman on her back, a tattooed man alongside her.

‘That’s you.’

‘No.’

I did not recognise those men. Nor that woman. Her cheek was so floppy, her mouth so limp. She looked like a rag doll.

A third photograph. The man had kept his firefighter’s sweater on.

I couldn’t hear what the police officer was saying. Or rather, I could hear him but it had nothing to do with me. It was like the echo of a faraway voice. ‘This is your bedroom. Aren’t those your bedside lamps?’

So? That is not me lying lifeless on the bed. It’s a photo-shopped picture. Made by someone trying to hurt Dominique. Just last night while we were watching the news on television, there was a woman who had been intubated because of Covid, and he’d said how he would hate to see me like that.

The officer says a number. He tells me fifty-three men had come to my house to rape me. I ask for water. My mouth is paralysed. A psychologist comes into the office. A young woman. I don’t need her. I am far away, even though we are in the same room. I am secure in my happiness, *our* happiness. Our fiftieth wedding anniversary is coming up, and the memory of how we met is still clear in my mind. His smile. His shy expression. His long, curly hair falling to his shoulders. His Breton sweater. He was going to love me. My brain shut down in Deputy Sergeant Perret’s office.

T W O

It was July 1971. I had come to stay with my Aunt Andrée for a few days after she'd lost her husband. I wanted to be there for her as she had always been there for me. Almost as soon as I arrived she started telling me about a young man called Dominique she had recently employed. Now that my uncle had passed away, she and her son needed help keeping their small electrical business afloat. It was right next to their house, a company called Gagneux, a wooden-fronted workshop covered with billboards advertising all kinds of new electrical technology. Modernisation was moving full steam ahead in the French countryside. 'There's so much work to do,' my aunt often said.

I recognised in her the mute suffering of the local people, the obligation to keep pace with the changing times, but I also saw my mother's milky skin. My mother had died nine years earlier in our house, which was almost right next door. In my aunt's gestures and voice I spied similarities and echoes of her sister, her favourite sister, they'd been like twins, so close, thick as thieves. I had come back to the countryside of my childhood, to the turbid source of my melancholy and my joy. I listened to my aunt talking about this new employee, who was currently helping my cousin put in

electrical installations in neighbouring farms. I would get to meet him, she promised; he tended to stick around after work. He sometimes even stayed for dinner. His red Citroën 2CV was parked in front of the house, on the road between Châtillon-sur-Indre and Azay-le-Ferron. Nothing bad was ever going to happen to me here.

To get a sense of this place, you have to imagine the chateaux dotted around the landscape, the sometimes sumptuous, sometimes crumbling old buildings that were visible from the road or the train, and seemed to open doors on to other centuries, other worlds. When we were little, our mother brought my brother and me to stay every summer. I spent my childhood running around the grounds of empty castles. I don't think I ever dreamed of being a princess, or made up stories about Prince Charming, even though the round towers and pointed roofs of the Château d'Azay-le-Ferron might have come straight out of a fairy tale. I knew where I came from: my brother and I were the grandchildren of Marie and Roger Prot, peasants from the hamlet of Le Châtelier. I walked with my grandmother behind the goats and the dog, I watched her making cheese in the cellar, pulling the scalding laundry from the tub, piling it into the wheelbarrow to go and rinse it with a paddle in the public washing place in the village. And I drank *miot*, a mixture of water, sugar and wine, in which we dunked pieces of bread when we helped out at the grape harvest with our horse.

Lying in my little bed in the morning, I heard the voice of my grandfather, a carpenter, offering coffee to the workers. I listened to the reassuring ballet of the adults around me, felt

their presence, their roles, their love. On the long kitchen table, there was always a big four-pound loaf of bread cut into thick slices, a steaming pot of coffee, a bowl of fromage blanc, freshly picked peaches.

I think it is the memory of that table that I am holding on to as I set the breakfast table every evening; it is nestled inside me, like those extensions tucked underneath old wooden tables, ready to be pulled out to their full length for family celebrations. I would like to extend its promises into infinity. In my memory, the cockerel still crows. The sun creeps through the slats in the shutters.

This setting should have grown hazy and picturesque, a distant memory of holidays, but the twentieth century was seeing dramatic changes. World War Two was slowly receding into a profound silence. Young people were leaving the countryside for the city and the suburbs, just as Maman and some of her brothers and sisters already had. Land consolidation in the countryside would soon expand estates and wipe out smallholders, with their little fields full of hedgerows, thickets and rocky slopes where snakes hid. Soon, the baker's and butcher's vans would no longer come to the village, honking their horns before cutting the motor and opening up their back doors. All those rough linen sheets, washed with methylene blue and hung out to dry in the sun, would end up in flea markets. But in 1957, in a move that ran counter to the rest of the world, our family relocated back there. The course of life was reversed.

I was five years old, my brother six, around the age when

memories become fixed. Our parents rented an unheated house, originally an outbuilding of the chateau. We lived on the second floor in a suite of large rooms with high ceilings and huge chimneys. There was a kitchen at the back. No bathroom, just a jug and a basin filled with water that we heated in the winter and drew from the big tub left outside in the summer to warm up in the sun. We only had to cross the meadow to go and find Aunt Jeanne. Our grandparents were a few minutes away by foot. The house was at the end of the main road that led to the Château d'Azay-le-Ferron.

The groundskeeper knew us well – Michel, me and all our cousins. He would see us walking down the street, a few centimes tinkling in our pockets, stopping at Mother Tanchoux's little grocery shop and then emerging, mouths filled with toffees, or fingers sticky from packets of sherbet powder, before heading back to the estate. We were as happy playing among alleys of trees clipped into straight lines in the French style as we were running along nearby paths and through fields. We crossed borders and centuries without noticing, understood nothing about the divisions between men, or their wars, for which Papa – a professional soldier who was only ever briefly home on leave – was constantly setting off.

But we were able to distinguish between the 2CVs and 4CVs that belonged to the locals, and the Citroën DSs that belonged to the rich people who parked in front of the patisserie in Azay-le-Ferron, famous for its millefeuille and a cake shaped like a melon (from which it got its name, 'melon with almonds') that was served with crème anglaise. And we

knew why our grandmother always wore mourning dress even though our grandfather was still alive. I was with her and Maman the day one of my uncles came to tell us that Micheline had died. His eyes were red, and his two little boys stood next to him clutching their pillows. Their sister had got burnt when their mother was heating up the alcohol she used to pluck chickens; the liquid had spilled on her and she didn't survive the journey to the hospital. My cousin Micheline was dead. She was one of us, a little girl with cropped brown hair. Not the cousin I played with the most – she was older, twelve – but she was family. The next day, my grandmother put on the black dress that she would wear for the rest of her life. And all around us, the trees, fields and chateaux would bear witness to how we knew to hold our tears in.

Most of all, we knew that Maman was very ill. Sometimes she went to hospital and was brought back, pale and thin, on a trolley pushed by the ambulance drivers. I was always afraid that she would fall off, that she would roll on to the ground and never make it back inside the house. One day, as we were walking to school, one of my cousins let slip the word 'cancer'; she was talking about someone else, but the word stuck, it sounded like a possible explanation, and also like a death sentence. Soon after, Grand-mère began cycling over to our house to take care of everything, to look after us all, especially Maman. I watched her arrive in her black dress every morning, and leave every evening. Maman never cried, or at least never in front of us. So I never did either. I once heard her scream. The slightest pressure caused her pain. The cancer had reached her bones. No one could touch her any

more. I watched my grandmother unroll long bands of white cotton that she padded behind Maman's shoulders. Her pelvis was in a plaster cast. Her bed had been moved into the kitchen near the window so that she was never alone. There was the red Formica table next to it with the Telefunken radio sitting on top, and the smell of polish with which H  l  ne, the cleaner, gave a high shine to the copper pieces Papa brought back from Algeria, where he had been deployed.

These memories were still vivid when I returned to my aunt's house in the summer of 1971. Everything in me was trembling. I was unsteady on my feet. The past was pulling me in, with all its happiness and tragedy, as if my life had already been mapped out. And then Dominique walked into the kitchen. I'd been stung between the eyes by a wasp that day, the venom was circulating, my eyelids were so swollen I could barely see. I must have looked unrecognisable. He reminded me of the pop star Julien Clerc, with his shoulder-length curls and his striped sweater.

He stayed late at my aunt's house that evening, obviously putting off the moment he would have to go home to his parents in Châtillon-sur-Indre. He appeared very fond of my family, who offered him a warmth he seemed never to have encountered before. As if he were seeking some kind of reparation or affection. I was too.

I was nineteen that summer, and living in Paris with my father, brother and stepmother, working as a secretary at a printing press that produced bank cheques. To Dominique, I was a Parisienne, with everything that the countryside can project on to that word. In fact, we were just two kids who

had been pushed into working at a very young age. And we had both spent our childhood scraping our knees in this corner of the Indre. His shyness reassured me. He blushed a lot. He was not one of those self-assured young men. I knew nothing of love, I had never even had a flirtation, but I just knew that he was going to love me. The fact that I met him at Andrée's house was a sign, a sign from Maman that she was watching over me. This man was going to fall in love with me. And my life, which had lost its meaning, was about to take on a new purpose.

As soon as I got back to Paris, I told my father about him. He poured cold water on my enthusiasm. He said that I was too young, that we had no life experience. As a career soldier, he disapproved of the fact that Dominique had avoided military service. I think he didn't want to let me go. I was not yet legally an adult, but I was earning my living, and every weekend I would take the train to the Indre to be with Dominique, bringing him gifts of sweaters and cologne I had bought in Paris. I was drawing him towards me, towards the city and away from his family, whom I was only beginning to get to know. His mother, Juliette, said that he would be unhappy in Paris. She was fifty, and already looked worn out by life. His father, Denis Pelicot, seemed to be constantly shouting. They often spoke admiringly of his brother, Joël, who was studying medicine in Tours, whereas Dominique had left school early and still handed over his electrician's salary to his parents each month. He shared a bedroom with Nicole, a little girl with a learning disability who was a ward of the state being fostered by the family. The other bedroom

was where his paternal grandfather slept. For many years he had been a porter at a grand hotel in Trouville, and from the way they said it, it was as if he had returned from a distant continent. He suffered from Parkinson's now. Dominique's parents slept in the living room. I sensed how bleak their world was, their sad lives behind all those closed doors.

And yet it was under that very roof that we made love for the first time. I kept putting the moment off, I wanted to be sure, I needed to know he was the One. He was in more of a hurry, but was prepared to wait until I was ready. It happened one night in May 1972. I was visiting for the weekend, staying at his parents' house, and since we weren't married, I had been given his grandfather's room. In the middle of the night Dominique sneaked in. It was my first time, and his too. I remember the softness of skin on skin, how shy we were, and obviously a little awkward. Afterwards he slipped back to his own room, leaving me with the impression that we had made a pact. We were lovers and we were twins. We would always be together; our suffering behind us, we would escape from our damaged families. I would be his cure and he would be mine. A few months later he came up to Paris to ask my father for my hand in marriage. My father didn't dare say no.

'For better or for worse,' declared the man who married us on April 14th 1973. I became Gisèle Pelicot. The celebration was a simple one. We had no money. Dominique wore a carnation in his buttonhole. There is a beautiful wedding photograph of the two of us, taken in the castle grounds, in the shadow of the Château d'Azay-le-Ferron.

I was starting a new life. I was in love.

THREE

I wanted to go home.

‘Will you be pressing charges?’ Deputy Sergeant Perret asked.

‘Yes.’ The word came out of my mouth sounding so meek. If he hadn’t asked the question, it never would have occurred to me. I just wanted this to stop. To go home. To get back to my normal life. I signed the crime report form he held out to me, as if signing a disclaimer. Then my statement. I scribbled PCT, the abbreviation of Pelicot, at the bottom of each page, without reading any of it, without seeing that I had also said yes: ‘Yes, that is me, that’s my room.’ Those are the words that are written on the document; those are the words the police heard me say. It’s all so different from what I remember. My head was screaming no – no, it’s not me, it’s not him. ‘I don’t know where I am any more.’ Those words are written too. That’s what I said.

Laurent Perret suggested a colleague take me home. ‘You should call someone, you mustn’t be alone,’ he said. When I finally left the police station, Dominique must have still been there. A police officer drove my car and parked in the gravel driveway in front of the garage. He did not come inside. He left immediately in the police vehicle that had followed us to

the house. I opened the front door with relief, as if coming home might erase the hours that had just passed – as if I could forget them, as I had forgotten so many things over the last few years. I'd forgotten what we'd done for my birthday only a day before. I'd forgotten saying goodbye to the children when they left. I'd forgotten I'd been to the hairdresser, even though I could see in the mirror that my hair had just been cut and coloured. I had been having more and more of these memory lapses. I dreaded them. I was afraid to drive, I was afraid to take the train, I was afraid I'd miss my station. I was afraid I was dying. But that day, I deliberately wanted to summon that emptiness into my head. I wanted to forget that I had just come home from the police station, alone.

Impossible. While we were at the station, investigators had been to the house to carry out a search. They'd turned the whole place upside down. I started tidying up. Everything had to be back in its place. I put a load of laundry in the washing machine. Then I rang Pierre, my son-in-law, and left a message: 'Pierre, can you call me back? It's about Dominique.' That was it. No details. Telling and not telling. I had no idea what I was going to say to the children. I vacuumed the living room. I called my friend Sylvie: 'Can you come over? I have to talk to you.' No explanation, like my message to Pierre. She said she would come right away. I was still reeling. I hung Dominique's boxer shorts, pyjamas and trousers on the washing line in the garden. It was a sunny day, the clothes would dry in no time. Everything was nice and clean. I was like a dog waiting by the garden gate for its master. He'd be back soon. His car was

in the garage. I vacuumed the bedrooms and started on the pile of ironing.

Sylvie arrived. 'Are you ill?' She was afraid I had Covid. We sat down.

'Dominique's been arrested. He raped me. He brought people to the house to rape me, for years.'

I managed to find a way to say the thing that my whole being refused to hear, the thing that all the obsessive cleaning and tidying I had been doing for the last two hours had been an attempt to block out, as I begged the washing machine, the vacuum cleaner, the iron to give me back my life. A wave of shame swelled up inside me as I read the incredulity on Sylvie's face. She knew Dominique well, she'd known him for years. We had met at work originally; she was a reserved young woman in the resource management department at EDF, the French national electricity supplier. We'd struck up a friendship and began socialising as couples outside the office. She and her husband used to so enjoy staying with us during the summer that they decided to retire to Mazan too. She didn't understand. Her state of shock confirmed mine: it wasn't possible. But when the police officer called to check that someone was with me, that I wasn't alone, there was so much concern for me in his voice that it made me realise the weight and significance of the case file he was putting together.

'Can you look to see if you can find any medication in the house? We couldn't find any,' he said.

So that was what they had been looking for while we were at the police station. What it takes to change a woman into a

dead weight, her features melted on to the pillow so that she doesn't even have a face any more.

Pierre finally called early in the afternoon. He was also worried I might have Covid. That morning he had left a cheerful message for his father-in-law: the itinerary of the Tour de France had just been announced, and the ascent of Mont Ventoux would take place when they were staying with us in Mazan, what good news! And here I was, once again forced to say what I didn't want to hear.

'Your father-in-law's been arrested. He raped me and he had me raped by others.'

Pierre didn't say anything. I went on. I needed his help. I didn't know how to tell Caroline about what was happening. Of all my children, my daughter is the least predictable. She's one of those highly strung people who love and lose their temper in the same breath. She seems to have been filled since childhood with a feeling of insecurity that I have never really understood or been able to soothe. She was forty-one. I was afraid of telling her, afraid of how she would react. She was about to go through hell and back, that much I knew. I was worried about her. Pierre, who lived with her, understood. He said he'd let me know the minute she got home.

Deputy Sergeant Perret came to the house. He was relieved to see Sylvie. He wanted another strand of my hair – the sample taken that morning was insufficient. I let him take some of the fine hairs from the back of my neck. Later I learned they are traps for chemical substances and can reveal poisoning. The laundry hanging in the garden was already dry. Dominique's boxer shorts and trousers dangling over

a void. How I loved our garden and the single-storey house we had chosen for our old age. I pictured him a few weeks earlier, sitting on our leather sofa and weeping, saying he couldn't bear to lose me. Suddenly I realised he must have already known what was awaiting him; he knew what he was dragging us into, because his computer and his phone had already been seized by the police. And there I was imagining I was seeing the mirror image of my father's grief.

It gets dark early in November. I locked up and then drove behind Sylvie to her house. Her husband, Michel, had got out a bottle of champagne. Sylvie must have warned him before our arrival, and I imagined him trying to figure out what he could do or say, then putting the champagne in the fridge to blur the line between good times and bad. I drained my glass, grateful for the small gesture of positivity. Caroline called around seven o'clock. I didn't answer. I didn't want her to be alone when I told her. I sent another message to Pierre. He texted back that he would let me know as soon as she got home. 'You have to stay right by her side,' I insisted.

A short while later he messaged to say that she was outside parking the car. I waited five minutes before I called. 'Is Pierre with you? I think you should sit down.' I told her that her father was in custody. That he had drugged me and raped me. Brought other men to the house to rape me. She began to scream. A shriek of anguish. The howl of a wounded animal. My daughter was breaking down. The words I was saying to try and calm her were not getting through. Pierre took the phone from her, said a couple of words to me, and hung up.

Then I called David, my elder son. 'Sit down. I have bad