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## STRAITS AND NARROW

Despite coming from a generally law-abiding family (at least by Belfast standards), Grace McClurg always had a strange fascination with the world of crime. In fact, her earliest ambition was to see the inside of a prison. However, being too squeamish for violence and too clumsy for acquisitive crime, she opted for a career in forensic psychology.

After obtaining her doctorate of psychology in London, Grace went on to provide psychotherapy for thousands of serious offenders, including sex offenders and murderers. She has been an expert witness in many criminal and child protection court cases and has published a number of articles on offending behaviour in professional journals.

She currently lives in Singapore where she runs a private therapy practice and works as an adjunct assistant professor at the National University of Singapore.





# Straits and Narrow

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To TM

*For all the creativity, enthusiasm and, of course,  
red ink that you've invested in this book, thank you.  
I owe you a couple of Singapore Slings at Raffles.*










*‘No one who, like me, conjures up the most evil of those half-tamed demons that inhabit the human breast, and seeks to wrestle with them, can expect to come through the struggle unscathed.’*

–Sigmund Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, Dora (1905)





# 1

‘But he’s been dead for *years!*’ said Rachel, recklessly swinging back on the spindly hind legs of her chair. ‘Blimey, it must take news a hell of a long time to reach Malaysia.’

As soon as the words left her lips, Rachel regretted them.

Why did she allow herself to get drawn into these ridiculous pop-culture conversations anyway? It was bad enough when she was back home on familiar territory, but on this occasion she was in a beach bar in Penang, surrounded by strangers, and she had absolutely no idea what she was talking about.

And neither had anyone else, judging by the sea of incredulous faces fixed upon her.

After what felt like an age, a voice tentatively ventured out from the far end of the beer-soaked bar table. It was that of Brendan, Rachel’s boyfriend. Years of experience had rendered him an expert in unravelling her confusion.

‘Ah, Rach,’ he said patiently, ‘I think you’ll find that Sid Vicious *has* been dead for years, but what we just heard on the radio was that Syd *Barrett* died yesterday. You’re getting them mixed up.’

A series of muffled giggles broke out and Russ, the Australian, snorted loudly through his nose. ‘You ditz, Rachel!’ he laughed. ‘How the hell could you confuse those two? Syd Barrett was the Crazy Diamond from Pink Floyd. Took too much LSD and went nuts. He had to go live with his mummy, and that was the end of his rock-n-roll credibility.’

Brendan shifted in his chair and his eyes darted anxiously towards his girlfriend. Russ had struck a nerve, for although Brendan liked to think of himself as fairly far along the continuum of rock-n-

roll credibility, he had, in fact, been living at *his* mum's on and off for the past three years.

Oblivious to his new mate's discomfort, Russ continued. 'Now Sid Vicious was made of tougher stuff altogether. He stabbed his girlfriend to death in a New York hotel room, then cunningly avoided the electric chair by overdosing—or was it choking on his own vomit? Anyway, something *very* rock 'n' roll.'

Everyone around the table began laughing—everyone except Rachel, who was stinging with defensive embarrassment.

'And what's so funny about murdering the person you love?' she blurted out.

Brendan shot her a glance. 'Come on, Rach. We're just messing about.'

'Yeah, lighten up, girl. You're supposed to be on holiday,' added Philadelphia Phil.

Russ leant forward in his chair, rested his elbows on the table and pointed the glowing tip of his cigarette at Rachel. 'But could be Rachel's taking it personally. Could be she thinks Brendan here is planning to do away with her.' He suddenly pivoted to point the accusatory roll-up at Brendan. 'Strewth! You're not are you, mate?'

Brendan pulled an exaggerated thoughtful expression, as though Russ' question may have just planted an idea into his conscious. 'Hm ... well, we'll have to see how things pan out over the trip,' he said slowly. 'We only left Heathrow two days ago. I've got another three months to put up with her. Anything could happen.' He leant across the table to give Rachel a playful nudge. 'Seriously though, it's because she's a forensic psychologist. She tends to take this crime and murder stuff to heart.' Brendan reached for his guitar and quietly strummed a few chords, hoping to create a diversion.

Although Rachel loved to hear Brendan play, she'd had enough social interaction for one evening. She was exhausted. As her boyfriend glanced up from a mournful D minor chord, Rachel caught his eye and nodded towards the door. It was their usual signal.

He winked and silently mouthed, 'See you later.'

Rachel winked back, waved to the others and quickly slipped away from the table.

Out on the beach, the air felt fractionally cooler. It was a beautiful evening. Even though it was well past midnight, the moon threw off enough light to illuminate the golden sand, and the sound of the sea lapping up and down the beach was hypnotically soothing.

How, she asked herself, had she ended up on a Malaysian beach, saddled with a crowd of people she wasn't sure she actually liked?

The answer was plain and simple: Brendan.

Of course they had both been keen to go on a long trip together. It was their way of celebrating the completion of Rachel's master's degree. When discussing destinations, she had wanted to start in Singapore, an island so full of history. Or maybe India or Thailand, or some other mythical place of self-discovery where she could look sexy in exotic clothes—the kind she'd never wear back home in England.

But Brendan had been unusually obstinate and insisted they began their adventure in Penang. His determination, however, had nothing to do with the colonial architecture of Georgetown, nor had he felt particularly compelled to immerse himself in the unique cross-cultural origins of Peranakan society. In truth, Brendan's enthusiasm had originated solely from the brief perusal of a random travel book, whereupon he had made the discovery that beer was remarkably cheap in Penang. And that had pretty much sewn up the start of the trip for Brendan. From there on out he reckoned he could make it up as he went along.

Within minutes of arriving on the Malaysian beach, the socially extroverted Brendan had befriended Russ; they'd bonded over a mutual aversion to a life plan and a mutual fondness for marijuana. Russ had then introduced them to the other travellers.

As she meandered across the sand, Rachel recalled the early days of her relationship with Brendan. They had met three years previously when Rachel was an undergraduate at the University of Liverpool. She was studying psychology, and Brendan was taking some time out

of his academic pursuits (a painting and decorating course) to, as he put it, ‘discover himself’. Brendan’s Dharma Path of Self Discovery had led him to a pub around the corner from his mum’s where, six nights a week, he played guitar and sang to stressed-out prison officers from Ashworth Maximum Security Hospital. On the seventh day, Brendan rested. Rachel pulled pints of flat tepid beer for the same clientele, but only on Friday and Saturday evenings. The remainder of the week she studied. Alongside what Rachel considered to be Brendan’s outstanding musical talents, there was also the fact that he was six years older than her, and she had found herself attracted by his knowledge of the world—or, to be more accurate, his knowledge of that chunk of the world immediately north of the River Mersey. She could hardly believe her luck when he asked her out one evening. Rachel firmly believed that Brendan was far too cool for her, and she suspected that he may well have agreed with her assessment.

Deep in thought, Rachel let herself into their room.

They had booked this hotel shortly before leaving the UK. Although it had looked rustic and charming on the Internet, in reality it was rather worse for wear; a faded layer of ochre-coloured paint covered the walls and the floorboards.

Taking the two short steps necessary to cross the bedroom, Rachel entered the dingy bathroom. Here the ochre hue once again dominated the walls, floorboards and, somehow, the fittings as well. She peered tentatively into the mottled shaving mirror, hoping that by some miracle she might find an image other than her own familiar face staring back at her. It was not to be. Rachel’s self-critical gaze ignored everything that was positive and immediately seized upon the areas of concern.

And that night there was a lot of material about which to be concerned.

Her eyes, generally her best feature being grey and rather feline, were alarmingly bloodshot. A blotch of sunburn streaked its way down the length of her nose.

‘Look like Rudolph on holiday,’ she mumbled as she turned off

the light.

After stumbling over the debris that spilled from their suitcases, Rachel hoisted herself up onto the bed. This was no mean feat as the ancient bedstead was unusually high, and the sides of the mattress were so worn that she had to position herself squarely in the middle, arms balanced outwards in order to avoid rolling down onto the alarmingly distant and grubby ochre floor.

Rachel silently concluded her thoughts on Brendan in the manner in which they were always concluded. Although she was well aware that her and her boyfriend's plans and desires were generally incompatible, she was still intrigued by him. She loved how he cared so much about music. She loved his sense of humour. She loved his extroversion, and she loved the anecdotes he recounted with a sparkle in his eye. With these warm and pleasant thoughts drifting through her tired mind, Rachel fell asleep.