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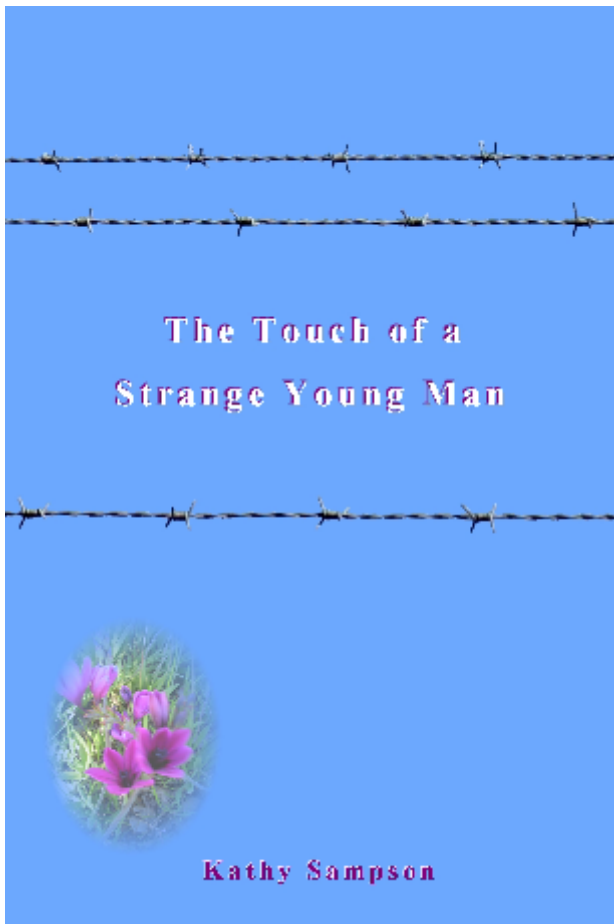


Kathy Sampson's prophetic, thought-provoking new novel

The Touch of a Strange Young Man

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The Touch of a Strange Young Man by Kathy Sampson

He arrives in the night seeking a room to rent, a charismatic young man whose presence alone seems to offer peace and nothing more sinister than a little mystery. Then come the dreams, and with them the revelation of his calling. Daniel's vision of a brave new world is exciting, believable and very possible; but some are about to discover that the terrible price they will ultimately have to pay is far too high.

As his power over people increases, the three friends who took him into their home find themselves caught up in his fanatical desire for absolute control, slaves to his bidding. And his influence is spreading through the community like a disease. If he is not stopped before he becomes too strong, there may be no going back. Perhaps that time has already arrived!

freedom: the state of being at liberty
rather than in confinement or under restraint

Kathy Sampson's

THE TOUCH OF A STRANGE YOUNG MAN

Book One

The Awakening According to Barry

ISBN-13: 978-1-4566-2051-6
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Published in eBook format by eBookIt.com
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To Father Michael Griffith:

This will be my third attempt to record what has happened. No-one should doubt that the story needs to be told - at least I don't - but I find it increasingly difficult to remain objective, being caught in the middle as I am.

I began by trying to state simple facts, not offering opinions, hoping that you would be able to make up your own mind, but I destroyed these pages. I did it because you are already familiar with the salient points; however, without the background, subjective though it might be, you will never know the whole truth. So, I am beginning again, this time telling my story as it happened, expressing my thoughts as they occurred.

Bear in mind that my time is limited, so frequent re-writes are luxuries I may not be able to afford. Consequently, events and characters, especially characters, appear and behave as I remember them. Their attitudes, their ideals, the loves of their lives - and their fears - will tend to change with the influence of the climate to which I perceive they were exposed. If they seem rather fickle and pseudomorphic, that is because I could not be sure of their true feelings and had to make assumptions based on my own interpretation of their words and deeds.

Considering that I, too, was affected by these same influences, perhaps this will compound existing errors and confusion. So be it. I do not profess to be perfect, neither do I fully understand how I, or anyone, can be so enamoured one minute and disenchanted the next. I imagine that is the price we pay for being human, for allowing emotion to dominate our short lives.

Mine, I am afraid, seems destined to be shorter than most. What they have already done to me has seen to that. If I was the only one they were pursuing, they could sit back and let time finish the job for them; but it isn't just me. I have something they desperately want and they will never give up the search. Fanatics rarely do. Then, I guess, it will be over for me, whereas the torment for the rest of you may be just beginning.

I suppose that sounds a little melodramatic, but I believe what has happened, what may eventually come to pass, is of sufficient importance to warrant at least some emotion. After all, it was a moment of passion which created it, and the end will surely be the same. I seriously doubt I shall be around to witness that part of the story. I hope not.

What really matters is Daniel and what he stands for. People like him have been popping up throughout history. His wide circle of ever-changing friends is testimony to his gregarious nature. If, by now, you have met him, you will already have made up your own mind about his character. Whether this opinion reinforces or conflicts with mine is of little consequence - the fact remains that he is here, in our time, and he makes things happen: strange things; unbelievable things; frightening things.

He is certainly no ordinary man, and he has made the promise of an extraordinary world, one which you will have to live in. It is best you are prepared, so let me tell you about a young man called Daniel.

B.F.C.

CHAPTER ONE

1

I moved to Perth shortly after the accident. It was nothing too serious, although it did put me in hospital for a few weeks which cost me my job at the supermarket. Not that I ever enjoyed working there, but the local newspaper had all the budding journalists it could handle and it was the only offer open to me at the time. They were very apologetic, of course, and were, in their own opinion, generous to a fault. Whatever I felt about their lousy store and the decision to 'let me go' was irrelevant. I was more concerned over the strong possibility of going through life with a permanent limp. Being out of work was, at the time, the least of my worries.

Then Dad fell sick. Angina pectoris, the doctors called it, a manageable condition as long as he took things much easier. Can you imagine how a man who has spent his entire adult life trying to cram thirty exhaustive hours into a single day would take such a suggestion? His one other option was to sell up, and I gathered he was not quite ready to exercise it, because he announced finally that we would have to employ a farmhand to cope with the bulk of the heavy work which neither myself nor my father could manage. The farm, of course, could barely support this extravagance, let alone two invalids. It was time, I decided, to cut the apron strings. So, I packed my metaphorical spotted handkerchief, tied it to a stick, and set off to explore a world far more cruel and complicated than I had envisaged or was prepared for.

I arrived at my destination on a Monday morning in mid-January. It was hot, nearly forty degrees Celsius, and if the weight of the battered suitcase was insufficient to compound my discomfort, then the burden of an enormous guilt complex was. I hadn't asked for the money, didn't want to take it. I knew how tight things were for my parents, but they had both insisted and managed to accomplish their individual deeds of charity furtively and supposedly unbeknown to each other. No amount of refusing would dissuade them. They meant well, but instead of lending me the security they had intended, it made me feel extremely insecure, conscience committing me to one hundred percent success. There was no way I could return home the penniless prodigal. Despite these misgivings, I was still riding high. This was my first real adventure and I was exhilarated by it.

The constant bustle within the confines of Perth railway station fed the excitement and changed my thinking. What was important to me and my parents was irrelevant there. Amidst the teeming throng of jostling people, I was just another commuter, a person from somewhere, going some place. Everyone seemed as confused and bewildered as I. Once outside, however, my confidence and exhilaration were soon dampened: the city appeared gigantic, much larger than anything a poor country cripple could handle. I was sure it would swallow me up without so much as a hiccup.

I suppose it did, in a way, and I was quickly processed and circulated to the organ where I would be of most benefit. I doubt that Fremantle was aware of my metabolic transfer, except as a statistic. I was merely a number which moved in to replace a similar number which had moved out. I increased the listed unemployed and those drawing the dole by one; and later decreased both totals by the same amount when I finally found myself a job. I don't know if I featured on any list pertaining to individuals in lodgings, but that soon changed, anyway.

An artist was staying at the same boarding house, a strange girl, but likeable nevertheless. I call her a girl, when actually she would have been a few years older

than me and in her late twenties; but her flighty, almost naive behaviour gave one the impression that she was still a teenager. Evie certainly was, at heart, and if it was all an act, she deserved an Oscar for it. I think she adopted me as a hapless lame duck and fussed around me like an older sister. As an only child I had no experience to draw on and just hoped that I responded appropriately. I think I did. At least, Evie never complained and I have to admit I was flattered by the attention. From my point of view, it was simply a casual relationship, so when Evie suggested that we move into our own place - *together!* - I was speechless and my cheeks burned like fire.

She looked at me sideways from beneath those delightfully long eyelashes, a cute smile on her unpainted lips and a well-what's-all-this-then? twinkle in her eyes. "Are you embarrassed?" she asked in amazement.

I tried to think of something clever, a diversion to cover the rush of blood to my face, and stammered out: "I... I... No, of course I'm not."

"You are," she chuckled, but not in a spiteful way, not this time, although her tongue did have a keen edge as I discovered later when I incited her wrath. She turned square on to me, appearing momentarily as the gentle sibling. "There's nothing to worry about. I don't intend to ravage you."

Thank Heavens for that. I should have felt relieved, then I realised that I was quite the opposite - I was disappointed. Can you believe that? My face bloomed again like a summer rose. She must have detected my mixed feelings and began playing with me by adding: "Unless, of course, that's what you want."

I was aware of my eyes popping. When I tried to reply I had forgotten to breathe and there was nothing to speak *with*. It was just as well because I could think of little to say that wouldn't plunge me into a deeper quandary. I pulled at the neck of my sweater and felt the heat rise.

"I've been asking around," she said at last, apparently convinced that an intelligent reply would not be forthcoming. "There's this fantastic old house, absolutely oozing atmosphere, heaps of rooms and the garden's like a jungle. It's totally right, and in it's in Freo, just up the road." Her enthusiasm was an avalanche which swept all before it, including Evie. She prattled on: "I could have my own studio; and you could have... well, you could have one, too. You could start art classes and we could go together. Wouldn't that be awesome? It's unfurnished, of course, but we could pick up some cheap things from the Salvos and paint them all sorts of really neat colours..."

I let her go on, my own deep thoughts eventually providing a barrier against the hard-sell patter. I didn't have the heart to tell her that I had already bought the idea - she was really enjoying herself and her dreams. I only hoped, for both our sakes that when the reality of the proposed situation dawned, it would not smack us in the face like a wet cod. For now, however, I considered the idea exciting. In retrospect, my most erotic experience to date paled to insignificance, such is rural life.

The room seemed to fill with silence. I withdrew from my contemplation to see Evie leaning forward, her eyebrows raised, her head bobbing slightly as if urging me to comment. "Well?" She prompted finally, her voice squeaky with childish anticipation. "Do we go for it?"

I made an attempt at indifference. "If you like."

I don't think it worked. Evie let out a small shriek, leapt at me, wrestled my neck briefly, then rushed to the door. "I'll get my bag. Back in five. And I must go to the loo. God, this is going to be so cool!" And she was gone.

Cool was not quite the word I would have used to describe the house. Cold, yes, even on a warm summer's night; impressive in a bizarre way; but in the fashion that Evie used the expression, cool, it was not.

In the struggle for supremacy, the garden had won long ago and the victory was decisive. The house was barely visible from the road while the surrounding vegetation was all-too obvious. Billowing mountains of trees and shrubs overflowed broken paling fences. It was a tangled mass of greenery, crawling and scrabbling for a mere glimpse of a sun which was unlikely to penetrate the umbrageous gloom below. As we fought our way along the path, talking in whispers because it seemed to be a requirement of the surroundings, I noticed the building had a slight cant to it and was somewhat unnerved at the time to receive the impression that it was leaning to get a better look at the intruders, watching us coming closer with a critical, suspicious eye. It was a relief to discover that the walls remained out-of-plumb, even when we were standing before the austere colonial porch.

Evie seemed to have most eventualities covered. She obviously knew me better than I knew myself and had picked up a key from the agent that morning in anticipation of my accepting her idea. She had also thought to bring a small torch, just in case there was no power on. The key didn't seem to work at first, but with a bit of jiggling it eventually turned in the lock. Following a moment's hesitation and a deep breath, Evie grasped the tarnished brass knob and pushed. The door stuck momentarily, then opened with a shudder, but surprisingly it didn't creak. As it happened, none of the doors did. A smell of fresh oil pervaded the air and I was grateful - it reminded me of modern times when nothing else in the house did. I tried the light switch just inside the door. A small click resounded, but nothing more. A narrow shaft of light from Evie's torch pierced the gloom. If anything, it only served to intensify the dark interior. We ventured in, Evie confident and effervescing, I with trepidation.

There certainly were many rooms and Evie had been right about the atmosphere. Not only did it ooze; it was so thick that I was having difficulty breathing. It circulated through a dense mixture of must and decay, and if the agent had thought to open the place prior to our inspection, the fresh air had not deigned to enter. I was beginning to suspect it was wiser than me. I jumped as Evie touched my shoulder lightly. "Isn't it fantastic?" she whispered like an arch conspirator. Her voice skittered around the room before disappearing through the door to explore the rest of the house on its own. She swung the torch-beam up until it shone in my face.

I held up a hand to shield my eyes from the brightness. "It's er... very large," I replied hesitantly. What I meant to say was that I was fantasising wildly about the house which, having lost its soul was now soliciting mine as a replacement. "I don't imagine we could afford a place this size," I added hopefully. Evie's reply was subdued and unintelligible. It was too dark to actually see her reaction to my pessimism; I did gather, however, that she was hurt, and that made me feel ungrateful. After that, I chose my comments with extra care. If Evie decided she wanted to live in that place, it was fine; if she changed her mind and opted for a smaller, less-archaic abode, that was okay, too; and if she wanted me to share either with her, then that was definitely cool.

We moved in the next day. Well, actually, Evie did most of the moving with the help of some of her friends: I had to work and was loathe to request time off, having only been in the job a short time. When I arrived home - sometime during the day I had started to think of it as such - the house and grounds were overflowing with arty types. It was

doubtful the residence had witnessed so much gaiety and colour for many a long year, if at all. I had already met some of Evie's friends and had found them to be warm, if a mite overpowering. I supposed it to be a pre-requisite for the profession and tried to reciprocate in my bumbling, country way. Two hours and some plastic cups of cheap wine later, it was as if we had coexisted there forever. The initial cacophony had mellowed to a more harmonious cadence, the only discords being those emanating from the various discussion groups littered about the rooms and hallways. One such cluster of human oddities was debating Surrealism and Rene Magritte. I listened for a while, intoxicated equally by their discourse and the Fruity Lexia, until the latter won me over and the background noise became a lullaby I could no longer resist.

It was as well the next day was a Sunday and I did not have to work. I awoke early in a cold sweat on the outside while something fermenting and tempestuous boiled internally. Unaware that I was probably stiff from sleeping on the bare boards, I flew up and dashed outside in time to vomit unceremoniously over a jumble of tangled ferns. On my way back to the house I noticed that I was not the first to greet the new day in such a manner. I wondered if this was an accepted practice following a Bacchanalian debauch. If so, we would not need to fertilise the garden for quite some time.

As I was dragging my weary, abused person back into the house, I experienced an uncomfortable feeling deep inside, a sensation of apprehension. I thought at first it was the house, or maybe the after-effects of the wine, but when I found myself searching through the bodies littered around, I realised I was looking for Evie; and what was more important, hoping that I would not find her sleeping with another man, yet suspecting that I probably would. My jealousy was uncalled for, I know. After all, I didn't own her, any more than she owned me, but I fretted over the problem, nevertheless.

She met me in the hallway, a steaming cup of coffee in each hand. "Why don't we breakfast on the terrace?" she suggested, too cheerfully for my liking.

"Do we have one?" I rasped moodily, my throat still burning from its recent acidic encounter.

"I don't know." If she picked up on my jealousy, she hid the fact well. "Let's find out." She brushed past, heading for the front door, stopping when she failed to hear signs that I was following. "Come on, Barry." She always called me that, not Bazza which I hated. "We'll find a quiet spot and talk."

The offer sounded reasonable, so I trotted after her. A brief safari through the front garden proved fruitless, so we adjourned to the jungle at the back. There was no terrace there either, but we did find a dilapidated gazebo which was unoccupied. She allowed me to sip at my coffee in silence. It might have been scalding water for all the flavour my soured taste buds were able to detect - a just reward for over-indulgence. Evie must have sensed my masked irritation and was watching, I assumed, for some positive affirmation. Being the object of her in-depth study only served to further agitate my jealousy. "Did you sleep well?" I probed.

"Terrible." She shuddered. "I started off in a room with Cass and Marcia until I found out they were lesbians." She shuddered again. "So I went in with Nick and David." My heart sank.

"They were both drunk as skunks, so I figured I wouldn't get pestered."

"And did you?" I whispered sheepishly through my coffee.

Evie shook her head. A bobby pin fell from her silky auburn hair. She stooped to pick it up. "I suffered their snoring and farting until I couldn't stand it any longer." She waited.

"So, where did you spend the night?" I urged.

She smiled softly. "Why don't you ask, with who? It's what's on your mind."

I felt myself blushing. "Fair go, Evie. What gave you that idea?"

"I know you, Barry. I knew you'd agree to take this place, and I know what you're thinking now."

"Alright," I conceded, "With *whom*?"

She darted a look around the garden to ensure she would not be overheard, then leaned close and lowered her voice conspiratorially. "With you, you drunken sot." She sat up and grinned. "You were the closest thing I could find to a dead monk."

3

During the next fortnight I came to appreciate a new sense of freedom hitherto unknown to me and also the limitations imposed by the associated responsibilities. I still had to seek permission to bang nails into the wall to hang my favourite pictures - not that I had any - but I could do almost anything else that took my fancy, short of demolishing the place.

When Evie and I took out the lease in joint names and we signed the relevant documents, I experienced an overwhelming sense of power and achievement - we were householders! I was a householder, a lessee. Not a lodger, or a guest. Not even a family member resident at the same address as the owner, but a tenant in common with Evie. We could lock our doors against whomsoever we pleased - except, of course, the landlord and his agent who retained the right to access at any reasonable time. We could keep pets, throw parties and have the lights burning all night if we wanted to.

There was another side, too, and I felt a childish exhilaration the day I returned from the mailbox clutching the morning delivery. Amongst the usual junk were two items which I considered most important - an envelope addressed to "The Householder", and another bearing our names flawlessly typed and radiating through a misty, cellophane window set in the face of the white rectangle. I glowed with pride and even after we discovered both envelopes to contain appeals to our simple-natured affluence, I still could not help feeling very important. Later, when the bills began to pile up, I learned to mistrust and fear those dreaded windowed envelopes to the extent that I would conveniently forget to check the mailbox for days at a time. It was this sad and deteriorating state of affairs which forced us to reconsider our financial position. We arrived at the conclusion that we would either have to take in lodgers, or be forced to move out and forfeit the lease. If this was indeed reality, I despised it.

I believe Evie had similar misgivings. Far from being the flamboyant, promiscuous nymph of her self-projected image, she was, at heart, very homely and extremely choosy about whom she invited to our house - the moving-in orgy was a once-off, I'm glad to say. As a consequence, she was as protective of our privacy as I, although she managed to hide her true feelings much better.

I suppose it could seem that I was making mountains out of molehills. After all, what was really so bad about moving, or renting out one or two rooms when we had so many? Yet that was how I felt. One thing should be understood here: although my previous amorous entanglements were few and far between, and visiting the big city had certainly broadened my perceptual horizons, in the practical sense I was a mere neophyte. At least, I had been. Evie changed that and she had done it in such a subtle way that I hardly realised what was happening, until one day I woke up to the fact that I had acquired a lover. It was quite a unique feeling and far more satisfying than being only a tenant in common.

Over a considerably short period, our relationship exploded into a torrid affair. At least, it seemed that way to me. Then, suddenly, with bankruptcy peering round the corner, it appeared that my ivory tower was about to collapse unceremoniously about my ears. The thought of our euphoric existence being torn apart by interlopers would, I felt, not only undermine my new-found self-confidence, but also sound the death knell over those personal freedoms I had come to cherish: simple things like walking around naked, making love on the floor of a different room each night; even our candle-lit dinners wouldn't be the same any more.

Unfortunately, there was no other way out that we could see, so we advertised in the weekend papers. That was Evie's idea and it surprised me. I had assumed when she first broached the subject that she had some prospective clients in mind - perhaps a couple of her artistic friends and associates - but I was wrong. "You've got to be joking!" she declared when I suggested the possibility. "They're a bunch of freeloading, no-hopers. We need some real lodgers who'll pay their way and won't treat our home like a bum's doss house! There must be a world of really, really interesting people out there just looking for a place to crash. Anyway," she added as she came down off her high horse, "One artist in the family's enough."

When I look back, I think that was my first inkling of Evie's subconscious desire - to be 'mother' to a unique assembly of incredibly cool people. Had I recognised her secret intentions then, I might have escaped both the involvement with her volatile scheme and the dire consequences; as it was, I continued to be blinded by my love for her and viewed the suggestion as a harmless whim. Retrospectively, what I might or might not have done is irrelevant - we did place the ad and if it failed to change our lives significantly at the time I, for one, was soon to discover that everything has a price which we must eventually pay. It was such a simple, innocent mistake, made in good faith. Why did it have to prove so costly?

We received quite a few replies, all forwarded by the newspaper - Evie was more than happy to use a box number because, she said, we didn't need a heap of deros and perverts calling round. The selection process we employed was laborious and exacting. We each had our own ideas about the kind of person who would be suitable and as our list of provisos grew, more and more of the applications were dismissed until they were all on the reject pile. "Perhaps we're being a bit too critical," I suggested.

"Bulldust!" Evie exploded. "They can all get stuffed!" And with that, she picked up the lot and threw them into the waste bin, then bustled out of the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" I asked, worried that she might really be as upset as she made out.

"To get a shower!"

"The water's cold."

"I'll keep my clothes on, then!"

I heard the shower running and waited for a few minutes before going to her. True to her word, she was standing in the recess, water cascading over her flattened hair, then descending invisibly through her clothing to reappear as rivulets which streamed from the hem of her skirt. She scowled as I watched in silence. "I'm mad!" she declared unnecessarily. I had no doubt that she was referring to her temper and not her state of mind.

"I know."

She pouted, then laughed. We both did. "Come on in - the water's lousy." She beckoned seductively.

"Alright." I began to undress.

"What are you doing?"

My shoes were off and I had started to undo my belt. "Being conservative."

"Bragging, more like."

So I said: "What the hell!" and climbed in the shower.

When we had dried off, Evie retrieved the applications from the waste bin and we started afresh, this time sitting on the lounge-room floor in our underwear. It seemed more natural and helped us to be less critical of our prospective tenants. At least we managed to produce a short list. "What about this one?" I asked, holding up a sheet of lined paper. "Doesn't sound too bad."

"She's the one doing theology at Murdoch, isn't she? A bit of religion around the place wouldn't kill us." Evie winked. "Why did you pick her?"

I wasn't quite sure myself. I just had a feeling - I don't know why - that here was a country girl trying to make good in the big city and I had an affinity with her. There was something else, too. I was unable to put my finger on it, but she seemed *right*, somehow. "From her letter she sounds quite nice," I said, after consideration. I had no intention of confessing my innermost thoughts. "I don't think she'll be a nuisance like some of the others."

Evie grinned. "I take it you're referring to the muso?"

"And the ballet dancer."

She stiffened and frowned. "What have you got against her?"

"To start with, she could be a he - how can you tell with a name like Sam? To put it bluntly, I don't fancy having to fend off amorous advances if he's that way inclined."

Evie sniggered. "And for another thing, can you imagine a string bean in tights serving up Swan Lake for breakfast, lunch and tea."

"Peasant!" she jibed as she tossed the respective applications into the bin. "Farewell, sweet culture." She looked closely again at the letter I had given her. "Okay, Trish Carrington, student of theology - you're in." She put the paper aside. "We need one more."

"I thought we decided on three altogether?"

"I'd like to try it with two." She brushed her head gently against my shoulder. "We're losing enough of our space as it is. So, a bloke, or a sheila?"

"I don't mind. You choose."

Evie closed her eyes and dipped into the pile, then looked at her selection. "Tony Duffield, truck driver. He says he has a dog."

"Didn't we reject that one?"

"I reinstated him. Truckies get good money."

"Unless he's paying off for his machine. Do you know how much those things cost?"

"Do you?"

"No," I admitted awkwardly, "But I bet it's heaps."

Evie produced an expression of uncertainty. It lasted but a moment. "We can always chuck him out if he gets behind with his rent."

"Hah!" I snorted. "Just hark at Auntie Jack! What you really mean is / can chuck him out. Unless he's a quadraplegic dwarf, I don't think, somehow, I'll be up to it."

"Wimp!"

"Wimp, yourself."

The following five minutes were taken up with a rather one-sided wrestling match, the victor of which I refused to recognise because she cheated. Grinning smugly, she took up the letter once more, pressed the creases out of it between her palms, and said:

"Look at it this way - if he's a long-distance truckie, he won't be here much. Anyway, I

like dogs."

I frowned. "You should have told me. I'd have bought you a pet."

She smiled, arching her eyebrows knowingly. Gathering I had graduated to cuddly status, I blushed and hurried on with the selection. "You're sure about this Tony? He could be a boozer, or anything."

"We'll ask the dog." She put the truck driver's letter with that of the university student's and placed them both on top of our final selection pile. "We'll hang on to the rest, just in case. Why don't you lock up while I boil the kettle?"

I padded barefoot through the house, hearing the boards creaking and the wind ululating in the eaves. It had taken me a while to become used to the strange sounds of the old house, despite being brought up on a farm where noises are a natural part of life. Something scratched and shuffled through the roof cavity overhead. I dismissed it as a possum, smiled, and continued to the front door. Then, I stopped dead.

I cocked my head to listen, but it was not a sound that had arrested my attention. Neither was there anything untoward; at least, not that was obviously apparent in the dimly lit corridor. I sniffed and my hair stood on end. A sweet fragrance seemed to be coming from the door on my right. Shrugging off my unreasonable fears, I turned the handle and entered. The room was empty as it should have been. It was one of those not yet delegated a purpose in the scheme of Evie's vague domestic plan. Facing south as it did, the temperature would have remained pleasant, even on a blistering summer's day. We had considered it as a bedroom; but it was on the small side and as we had an entire house of empty rooms to choose from, this one had been set aside for future use, as yet undecided.

If this had truly been the source of the disturbing fragrance, one would have expected the scent to intensify once inside, but the room was surprisingly free of odour. Not even the persistent smell of must was in evidence, though neither the door nor the window had been opened for at least three weeks until that moment. I was about to leave when something on the floor caught my eye. I wonder now how I ever managed to see it in the poor light, it was so small. Forgetting all about locking up, I took it to Evie. She was in the kitchen spooning Milo into our mugs. "Is this yours?" I asked, showing her the tiny gold earring. "I found it in one of the spare rooms."

She glanced at it and touched a similar piece of jewellery adorning her ear. "Not mine," she replied indifferently. "Maybe the previous tenants dropped it. Have you locked up yet?"

"Just going." I placed the earring on the mantelpiece and was in the process of retracing my steps when Evie stopped me.

"If you take the key with you this time, you might find it easier."

My ears burned and I beat a hasty retreat, snatching the key from the hook on the wall as I passed. I was fumbling it into the front-door lock when I sensed that strange odour again. I say, sensed, because I am unsure that the fragrance actually existed, except in my memory. If it had, I would have been more than surprised because the second time I identified it as the scent of freesias; and freesias, being a spring flower, simply aren't around in a West Australian summer.

Then there was a sharp knock at the door. I almost jumped out of my skin. I must have stood there for a few moments, attempting to compose myself, wondering who would be inconsiderate enough to come calling at such a late hour. Deciding that it was probably one of Evie's friends, I buried my nervous disposition beneath a veil of tempered annoyance and opened the door. Still only scantily dressed, I peered around the edge. On the step was a man, young from what little I could see of him in the

shadows of the porch. He was holding a sports bag in one hand while the other was raised. I assumed that this was for the express purpose of repeating his knock on the door. "Yes, what is it?" I asked in a voice as mature and severe as I could muster.

The man opened his raised hand so that the palm faced me, fingers together and pointing up. It was a strange gesture, the meaning of which I did not fully appreciate at the time. "Sorry to disturb you so late," he apologised in a voice which was neither high nor low, but seemed a harmonious duet of the two. I guessed my hearing had been affected as well as my nerves. "I've come about the room," he explained.

I was going to pass some comment - although I am unsure what it was - when something tugged inside my chest and I knew instantly why: how did this man know our address? We had used a box number!

4

"You've come...?" Astonishment neutralised my powers of speech. Even an attempt to repeat his words as a delaying tactic while I realigned my thoughts was a miserable failure.

"Yes," he confirmed, unaffected by his reception, "I have." Then he smiled; at least, I think he did. "I don't mind waiting," he added.

Goose flesh rose tingling over my entire body: I had already decided that I must discuss this with Evie before allowing it to go further; surely he hadn't been reading my mind? No, I decided: he had been expecting reluctance; who wouldn't? A complete stranger knocking on doors in the middle of the night would be immediately suspect. "Won't be long," I mumbled apologetically. Shutting the door on him, I hurried back to the kitchen and the comfort of Evie. The small room was empty except for the aroma of malted chocolate and cooking oil. I panicked. "Evie! Evie, where are you?"

"In the lounge," came her reply.

I rushed through, cheered by the familiar sounds of her voice, vaguely aware of dampness on my cheeks and forehead. I believe I had convinced myself she would not be there and that the dream I had been living for the past few weeks had suddenly shattered. When I did see her, I almost fainted with relief. She was sitting cross-legged on a pile of assorted cushions and looked up as I entered. Her expression registered concern. "Are you okay? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"No, I..." The hairs on the back of my neck were prickling. "There's someone at the door." The way it came out, I seemed to be expecting Evie to rationalise the phenomenon for me.

She tossed her head back and waited, the fingers of one hand sliding up and down the fine gold chain around her neck. When I failed to expand on the statement, she asked: "What do they want?"

"It's a 'he'."

"Well, what does *he* want?"

"A room." I felt my finger touching my lips and knew I was about to begin chewing on the nail, an annoying habit which I thought Evie had cured me of. I consciously dragged my hand down. "Did you tell anyone; I mean, apart from running the newspaper ad?" Evie shook her head. "Do I turn him away, then?" I was surprised she did not appear to share my concern. Perhaps the man's unsolicited arrival had brought him into immediate disfavour and I fully expected her to concur with my suggestion.

"Let's see him," she declared instead. Her attitude became excited and effervescent as a look of childish, even impish curiosity spread over her face.

My intention had been to advise against such a potentially dangerous course of action, but for some unfathomable reason I too became intrigued by the possibilities. So, I changed my mind and said: "Yes, why not?" As I was leaving to return to our waiting visitor, I noticed Evie settling back on the cushions, a distant gaze in her eyes. "Shouldn't we put some clothes on?" I queried.

Evie broke from her contemplations. "Why? It's our house: we can wear what we like; or not, as the case may be."

I hesitated in the doorway as another thought occurred to me. "You wouldn't... I mean, you wouldn't let the lodgers see you... well, you know, totally... naked?" I groaned as the heat rose to my face.

"God, Barry," she sighed. "Sometimes you are such a dag."

I knew it. I also knew it was the twenty first century and that mature people accepted and discussed all manner of subjects now which even thirty years ago would have been taboo. "I'm sorry, but I can't help it." I smiled an apology and hurried away.

The young man was still waiting patiently on the step. His pleasant, rather bland expression surprised me. He didn't appear concerned, anxious, nor hopeful; in fact he didn't show any of the emotions one might have expected. Before I could utter a word, he said: "Thank you," and picked up his bag.

Goose flesh tingled over my entire body. He couldn't have known we had agreed to see him, he just couldn't! I stood aside, holding the door open. He stepped past me and halted a few paces along the corridor for me to join him. "This way," I offered as I passed.

I had been thinking lately of the dingy passageway and how we could improve the lighting before someone broke their neck; at that moment, however, with consideration for my state of undress, I was very glad that we had made no improvements in that area. Not that our guest seemed to mind. If he had noticed at all, he utilised sufficient tact to appear indifferent. At least he hadn't looked me up and down with distaste. After a few seconds, I became aware that I was walking alone. I could not even hear his footsteps behind me and turned to see what had happened to him. He was standing before the door to the room where I had first smelled that peculiar sweet fragrance. My skin prickled. He made no comment, just smiled and started walking again. I tried to dismiss it as coincidence, unsuccessfully, I might add. Then I hurried on, keen to discover if Evie had reneged on her decision to remain scantily clad. She had not.

Entering a room for the first time, most people tend to familiarise themselves with the new surroundings immediately. Often they will pass some comment, usually intended as a compliment, such as: 'Oh, I do like your wallpaper (even though it is clearly hideous); or, if they are unable to find anything worthy of mention, they might say: 'Aren't these old houses fascinating?' (and trust to good fortune that it isn't a ten-year-old, architectural disaster). Our new arrival, however, seemed neither impressed nor disappointed with what he found. It was as if he had lived there all of his life and had merely returned from an evening out. I know if I had been in his shoes - he wore Nike joggers which had seen better days - I would have been critically appraising both my prospective home and my landlords. He did neither, simply walked past me and stopped before Evie.

He stood for a moment, lean, tall - over six feet by a good two inches, I judged - then sank to a crouch. He raised his hand in that odd salute with which he had greeted me at the front door. Witnessing it objectively as I was, I could not help smiling: it was the gesture of a paleface to an Indian squaw. He spoke to Evie in that same two-tone voice: "Hello, I'm Daniel."

Evie had been relaxing on the cushions, a Cleopatra awaiting the attentions befitting her station, and I had the distinct feeling that Daniel was about to suffer humiliation at the hands of this suburban Queen. She was not normally that way inclined, of course, except when confronted by someone particularly obnoxious. On those occasions, it was advisable to stay well out of range. I had omitted to do so a couple of times, a stinging experience which had since prompted me to look for signs. They were there, subtle changes to her body language which a stranger would surely overlook. Her head was tilted slightly back and cocked just enough so that her hair fell down over one eye. If at all possible, that was the eye to watch, the one which betrayed mischievous intent. Another tell-tale sign was the moisture on her lips. When they were dry, then she was in normal mode; but watch out if they glistened - lovers might thank their lucky stars and hope that they had the staying power to endure what was coming their way; enemies, on the other hand, would be best affecting a strategic withdrawal, post haste.

There were other mannerisms, too, such as twiddling her earring, or stroking the chain on a necklace. At that point in time, her fingertips were resting on her sternum, lightly tracing up and down the cleavage between her breasts. I'm glad to say that these ample attractions were securely, if not adequately (for my liking) covered. I was unsure of the message that the stroking implied; suffice to say that it was arousing my jealousy. I wasn't too impressed, either, with the over-relaxed way her legs were arranged. If I had not known better, I would have said that Evie was presenting a very good example of a brazen come-on. One thing was certain - propriety was not her main consideration. It would not have been surprising to watch her offer him a drooping hand to kiss. Instead, she curled her legs beneath her, sat forward, her face radiating peace and tranquillity. She raised her hand and emulated his gesture. "Hello, Daniel. I'm Evie."

Something had gone wrong with my evaluation. I was certain I had read all the signs correctly. She was self-primed and ready to engage, but not in mortal combat, it would seem. There was only one other possibility that I could fathom and it stirred that little green devil within me. I hastily searched my memory for a replay of her words to him, and her most recent actions. Had there been a breathless hesitation in her greeting? Was her breast quivering to the beat of a racing heart? Had I been cast aside so that *he* could now become the object of her fascination? My stomach knotted. Embarrassed or not, I knew I had to break the spell he had conjured. I strode over to settle on the cushions beside Evie. "And I'm Barry," I declared hurriedly. There had to be something else I could add, a few choice words to define my territorial boundaries which encompassed, among other things, the lady of the house; but then he looked at me and I was completely stumped.

Have you ever been confronted by something so rare and beautiful that it defies adequate description? Living on a farm for so many years, I had witnessed hundreds of natural births. They eventually became commonplace, but I shall never forget the first time and the wonder I experienced. That same feeling overwhelmed me then, and to such an extent that my reservations departed as if they had never been. In Evie's words, it was really, really amazing, a mega experience. No-one could possibly understand unless they had met Daniel.

I tried to discover the reason for the feeling. Perhaps, I thought, it had something to do with *his* body language and it was my intention to analyse the image he was projecting. In fact, all I managed to do was stare at his face and I don't believe I even saw that. I seemed to be looking beyond the mask. There I discovered not a person, but nirvana. His aura radiated the peace of creation and the suffering of the entire Universe. If he had declared: 'I am life', I would have believed him unquestioningly. I was aware of

nothing but a sensation of well-being; nothing, until I felt a soft touch. Looking down, I saw his hand on mine. When I think of that moment now my skin crawls, but at the time I did not consider it a strange or perverse thing for a man to do: it seemed right; necessary. That's the only way I can explain it. His other hand was on Evie's.

The words he spoke keep coming back to me. I shall remember them forever, sometimes with pain and sadness, and often bitterly because they promised so much which was not fulfilled. At the time, however, I accepted them with an untarnished faith. "Your trust in me is rewarded," lilted the strange voice as he brought our hands into contact and held them there with his own. "You will be together always."

Pity me for the fool that I am - I believed him. I was so grateful and relieved to hear him say that Evie and I would never, ever be apart, that I believed; every single, solitary, God-damned word!

I have no idea how long we sat gazing at each other. Perhaps no time at all, although it seemed an eternity; and when the trance was broken, I felt exhausted. Evie, too, appeared drained of energy, and after Daniel released our hands, she held onto mine, squeezing gently. Eventually, she broke the silence. "Would you like to see your room?" As she asked the question of Daniel, her eyes were seeking other assurances of their own - from me. In fact, they were imploring me. They seemed to be saying: *'You won't do anything to upset him, will you? For my sake, for our sakes, will you just sit there and say nothing? We need this young man in our house, more than we've needed anything, ever before. Don't, please don't drive him away!'*

I felt sure those were the words she would have said to me, but didn't. I can't believe I imagined it and that I was alone in my fervent desire to have Daniel become a member of our family: Evie wanted it too. We waited in anticipation, two changed people, born-again's desperate for his acceptance. It sounds ridiculous, I know, but it's true - we, the landlords, were praying that he, the prospective tenant, would like us enough to want to stay in our house.

He smiled. "It's fine, thank you," he said. You would have thought I might have been relieved, if not eternally grateful to hear those blessed words, but I had, apparently, not been entirely enchanted by his charisma. There was something not quite right in what he said and it awoke my suspicious mind from its lethargy. I considered his words - 'It's fine'. Not: 'I'm sure it *will* be fine'; just: it *is* fine. Remember, we are talking about the room here, the one Evie had suggested he view. But it seemed Daniel didn't need to. It was as if he knew exactly where the room was situated and he had already inspected it to his satisfaction. That hadn't been the case, of course. He *had* paused outside one of the spare rooms, certainly; and I had not become aware of that fact for a few seconds; but it was only a few, not enough time for him to open the door and look inside. No, I'm sure, now, that he had accepted his new lodgings, sight unseen - and he had *liked* them! With a mental shrug, I laid my scepticism to rest. What did it matter? He liked the room, he liked us, and he was staying. I put it out of my thoughts. Only later did it return to tell me: *You should have heeded your doubts. Now it's probably too late!*

With the formalities, or lack of them, dispensed with, I offered Daniel a choice of tea, coffee, or Milo, supposedly to seal our unspoken agreement. He declined, asking instead for a glass of water. "Anything else keeps me awake," he explained.

I noticed he was absently stroking his ear lobe. When his hand dropped away, I could see the object of his preoccupation - a small, gold earring. While in the kitchen pouring Daniel's water, I looked for the item of jewellery I had found earlier. There was no sign of it. I assumed Evie had picked it up and put it away with the rest of her trinkets. I asked her about it in bed later that night.

"No, I haven't got it," she replied, "Why?"

"Because it's gone."

Evie shrugged. "So?"

I frowned and hesitated, not knowing quite how to phrase my suspicions. "Daniel was wearing an earring, but I don't remember noticing it when he first came in."

She rolled onto her front, propped her chin on her cupped hands, and stared quizzically at me. "So?"

I knew she was watching my face change colour. It was time for me to exit, stage right. I tried to look unconcerned as I said: "Nothing, really. I must have been imagining things. It's not important."

As it turned out, I don't think it was. The issue was never resolved to my satisfaction. It was probably one of those ordinary mysteries which has a perfectly rational explanation. I simply never found one. I mention it only as evidence of my normality. Everyone makes errors of judgement; I only wish all my others were as painless and irrelevant as this one.

5

The following day was Thursday, not the best part of the week for me because it was late-night shopping and I had to work through until nine o'clock in the evening. We had also overslept, a direct result of discussing Daniel until the early hours. It mattered little to Evie, of course - her time was her own and her latest artistic creation progressed at a rate dependent on inspiration as opposed to the clock. She could start work when she pleased, or not at all if she was lacking motivation; I, however, had to miss breakfast.

My mood soured as the day wore on and my temper frayed accordingly. By closing time, I could willingly have abused the store manager to the point where he would have dismissed me, but he chose not to give me the satisfaction and left early. With my job miraculously still intact, I began the nightly trudge from the heart of Fremantle. The walk was not a long one, not for a healthy person with two good legs; being unable to meet at least one of these criteria, however, I was forced to limp my way home and would continue to do so until our financial situation permitted the extravagance of a twice-daily bus fare.

I could not foresee that happening just yet. Even though we had acquired a lodger, no mention had been made of payment for room and board. I only hoped that Evie would have taken the initiative and discussed the matter with Daniel in my absence. The reason being that money had never been one of my happier concerns. There was either not enough of it, or none at all, and I often found myself appreciating the simpler pleasures because I could afford no others. Having to go without never bothered me as long as I did not owe more than I was able to pay. I received an application for a credit card once and promptly tore it up. What never failed to worry me, though, was *being* owed. That was down to honour versus mistrust - there was never any doubt that I would settle my own accounts, whereas others would not always reciprocate in my favour, a shortcoming I was loath to remind them of. So, with respect to the new lodger, if it was left up to me to broach the subject of remuneration, I would more than likely invent excuses not to and spend hours brooding over my cowardice and Daniel's lack of consideration in not coming forward voluntarily.

These were the thoughts going through my head as I continued my trudge home. I fought with the dilemma, imagining discussions, arguments, and excuses which might eventuate. By the time I had struggled to the top of the hill, I was physically and

mentally exhausted. Pausing to catch my breath, I massaged my aching leg, and attempted to put the chaos my thoughts had created back into perspective. I was worrying over nothing, wasn't I? Evie was, beneath her frivolous mask, a business woman who would not allow the situation to get out of hand as I would have done. Anyway, Daniel did not strike me as the kind of person who would take advantage of another's generosity. I was wrong on both counts, although not for the reasons I had imagined; neither were the consequences as I might have forecast.

As I opened the front door, I could hear voices coming from the lounge. I was still plagued by the subject of rent and finances, and was wondering how to bring the matter up during the course of light conversation without appearing mercenary. Whatever preparations I had rehearsed deserted my memory when I entered the room - there were not two, but three people sitting on the floor! Daniel and the girl looked up and smiled. Evie beamed and struggled to her feet. "Hello, darling." She rushed over, caught my arm and began dragging me towards the others. "Come and meet Trish. She's absolutely gorgeous."

It was the worst thing Evie could have done or said. Anticipating that the girl would be embarrassed by the introduction, I blushed for both of us and stumbled after Evie. Trish remained seated on the cushions, so I stooped and extended a hand towards her. "Pleased to meet you, Trish."

She made no attempt to take my hand, but raised her own. *Good grief, another Danielism - it was catching.* I smiled, straightened and moved back a few paces, feeling conspicuous and rather like an intruder. "Hi, Barry," she said in a sweet, girlish voice which reminded me of green paddocks on a spring afternoon. "I've been hearing a lot about you."

As a budding writer, I prefer to avoid clichés wherever possible: sounding like a reject from a Bogart movie is not my idea of sophistication; when you write, however, you have the time to create thoughtfully, a luxury not often granted during impromptu meetings. So, I replied: "Not all bad, I hope," and tried to look cool instead.

"Oh, no. The way Evie talked about you, I was expecting a cross between Tom Cruise and George Clooney"

The conversation was becoming far too personal for my liking. If it continued, I was sure to burst into flames. "Sorry to disappoint you," I mumbled. "Long John Silver and Quasimodo would have been better comparisons."

"False modesty is another form of conceit," said Daniel unexpectedly. "Be glad of what you are, for I have need of your imperfections."

How would you feel if someone said that to you? I couldn't decide whether my ears were playing up, or whether I had simply imagined it all. Certainly, it seemed out of time and place, even if it was in the right context. What he meant was a mystery - at the time, anyway. Then, Trish said: "Well, I think you're cute."

And Evie added: "He's a spunk."

Suddenly, I had more to worry about than weird observations, especially with two attractive women almost undressing me in public. I responded in my usual confused way, but was not so far off-balance that I failed to notice the ladies' reactions regarding Daniel's sagely advice to me or, at least, a complete lack of them. For all they seemed to care, Daniel might have said nothing.

With the introductions out of the way, conversation returned to a more relaxed plane and I was able to blend myself conveniently into the background. I interjected with the odd comment and made pleasant noises so that I could remain inconspicuous without appearing moody. What I was really doing, though, was observing and evaluating.

Daniel's words to me kept coming back; at least, what I thought he had said. *False modesty is another form of conceit.* It was profound, painfully true, and sufficiently pompous to warrant inclusion in my own philosophical writings without embellishment - Evie maintained my essays read like an eighteenth century dictionary - but what did he mean he had *need of my imperfections?*

I began to study him. It was probably the first opportunity I had found to really see Daniel: the previous evening he had been more an experience, a happening, than an actual person; now, with the mystifying confusion of that first meeting behind me, I was able to add substance to the enigma which was Daniel, and this time I was determined not to be diverted by his aura. I would say he was in his mid-twenties. His long, wavy hair was flaxen and the highlights shimmered like white gold. Most of the time his eyes appeared to me as blue, yet occasionally they took on an iridescence which was both startling and hypnotic. With features gently undulating, Daniel would have been the cartoonist's nightmare for, apart from a wispy, blond moustache, there was nothing memorable or exaggerated about his face at all.

As I had previously observed, he was tall and slim. His tight, denim jeans and clinging, white T shirt only served to accentuate his stature. He had discarded the shoes and the faded denim jacket he had arrived in and seemed quite at home sitting on the floor with his back against the old easy chair - I'm not sure why we had bothered to acquire this particular item of furniture, because nobody ever seemed to use it. One of his legs was out straight in front of him; the other was bent and cradled by his hands which were clasped in front of his shin. The interlocked fingers were slender and unblemished, the nails clean and well manicured. They did not appear to have experienced much by way of manual labour; not recently, anyway.

Far from being disturbed or even aware of my unsolicited attentions, Daniel was quite placid, smiling gently and looking straight at me as if being stared at was quite a natural occurrence. He might even have been looking into or through me for all the reaction my staring promoted. Perhaps he was acknowledging my disquiet relating to his own advice to me, and was of the opinion that my lapsed inhibitions and discourteous behaviour were a direct result of shock. I think that may well have been the case, because when I realised what I had been doing - and had been caught out doing it - I began to stammer an apology. Daniel said simply: "I don't mind. You are doing nothing to me that I have not already done to you."

What did he mean by that? All I had done was stare and ask myself a few questions about him. So, what had he already done to me? The same, perhaps? A nagging feeling inside warned that his investigation of me was far more revealing than might have been concluded from mere supposition. I shifted uncomfortably and hoped the girls had missed the interplay between us.

Daniel pushed forward and stood up in a single, fluid movement. "If you don't mind," he said, looking at each of us in turn, "I think I'll go to my room."

Evie appeared concerned. "You're alright, aren't you? You're not sick?"

Daniel was on his way out. "Never better." He patted her hand reassuringly as he passed. "I need to be alone sometimes."

"Do you meditate?" chirped in Trish. "I tried once or twice, but it didn't work for me. Is that what it is, meditation?"

He paused in the doorway to look back at her. "Meditation," he repeated, apparently contemplating the meaning of it deeply. "Yes, I suppose it is, in a way. Goodnight all."

The three of us stared at the spot where Daniel had been, each, I would imagine, with his or her own thoughts; then, the spell was broken and a sense of normality returned.

"Who's for tucker?" asked Evie, padding off through the kitchen door. "We've got eggs, beans, franks, or toast," she called. We could hear her rummaging through the cupboard. There was a brief pause. "Scrub the toast - bread's mouldy."

I shrugged apologetically at Trish. "Sorry. You wouldn't think I worked in a supermarket, would you? We usually shop on Saturday. At least, I do and Evie meets me after work to help carry the stuff home."

Trish was studying my face with interest, a knowing smile spreading across her own. "I didn't believe it when she told me, but Evie was right."

"About what?"

"You certainly do get embarrassed very easily." Her light-hearted mood changed to concern when she noticed my increased discomfort and presumably deduced that her innocent observation had been the cause of it. She blushed herself. "I am sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel awkward."

We stood for a few moments, gazing at one another, our cheeks ruddy. I believe that was the point where I ceased to regard Trish as a mere tenant and began to think of her as a friend. Then I was feeling more foolish and needed to break the silence. I extended her a helping hand. She took it. The bond had been sealed. I gave her a rosy smile. "Come on, let's help Evie."

As we went into the kitchen, she asked: "Are you sure it's alright?"

"Alright?" I frowned, unable to associate the question with my most recent thoughts.

"Well," she explained, "I wasn't expecting to move in till the weekend at the earliest, never mind about having dinner. I wouldn't want you to go short, and my grant doesn't come through until next week, so I won't be able to pay my rent for a few days."

That was music to my ears. At least one of our guests was expecting to contribute appropriately to the running of the house. So, why did I suddenly feel such a Shylock? I fought back the desire to waive the financial considerations, knowing full well that I would kick myself afterwards if I did. Lord only knew what Evie would do to me.

"Whatever," I said, finally, "And don't worry about the food: our needs are like our minds - simple and uncomplicated."

Even if it was a slight exaggeration, Trish obviously appreciated the sentiments behind my confession. She was no stranger to hard times herself, or so I gathered from her conduct in the kitchen. Thanks to her impressive display of selective surgery with a carving knife, most of the bread was saved at the expense of the crusts. At least there would be something to soak up the sauce from the baked beans. When it became clear from the odd puzzled, slightly irritated frown in my direction, I gathered I was merely serving as nuisance value and took my leave to have a shower which, I hoped, would not only wash away the grime of the day, but also some of the confusion from my mind. Perhaps then, I might discover some space for positive thinking. There was certainly much to think *about*.

After our evening meal - I use the term loosely because anyone other than an individual on the verge of starvation would have regarded it as a mere snack - the three of us sat down to talk. Far from being intimidated by two total strangers who were also her landlords, Trish prattled in a relaxed, friendly manner. She was unafraid to ask questions and more than willing to answer any put to her. As the night wore on, I became quite relaxed and even more sure that Evie had made the right decision in phoning the young student. I would estimate that she was barely twenty, although we

did not ask her age. Apparently, neither of us considered it relevant. I, for one, did not. Age, like academic qualifications, is rarely an adequate guide to either a person's suitability or maturity. As for intelligence, first impressions don't always count; and, anyway, we were after tenants, not nuclear physicists.

If Trish had one fault - and you could hardly call it that in this fitness-conscious age - she was too thin. Not anorexic or anything so bizarre, but she gave one the impression that she would benefit from a good feed. We had hardly done our duty in that respect. Her clothes were of light cotton. The sleeveless white blouse was tucked loosely into a pale yellow skirt which was a little short, but not indecently so. Being the secret lecher that I am, I could not help noticing that she wore no bra, although, judging by the size of her breasts which occasionally brushed the flimsy material of her top, there was hardly much to put in one. Her arms were like match-sticks, her hands dainty and, sitting as she was with them at full stretch, her long, slender legs suggested that she would be quite tall when, in fact, she was just a fraction over five feet. At that time, she wore no shoes, but I had seen a pair of leather sandals against the wall by the door and they were far too small to be Evie's.

Trish spread her knees and placed the soles of her feet together, preserving her modesty by pushing the skirt down between her thighs as she did so. She was considering my question: why had she decided to major in theology? Her head rocked from side to side as if to indicate that she was unsure herself. "Oh, I don't know," she said at last, "There was nothing else I really wanted to do and I've always been interested in the way people relate to religion."

"Sometimes too heavily," put in Evie, herself a confirmed atheist, except when artistic inspiration dictated otherwise. "There are enough problems without religious geeks shoving their oars in. They're so incredibly fanatical. Is that how your lecturers come across?"

"Only one or two," said Trish mildly. I had the feeling that she was treating this particular topic like a busman's holiday and would rather have been discussing heavy metal or surfing. "Sometimes they're quite dogmatic and I can't get them to see my point of view, no matter how valid my argument."

"I know exactly what you mean, honey," said Evie. I could tell she was about to launch a crusade. "Art critics are the same. Show them a dead dog in the road and they'll hail it as the greatest achievement since the Last Supper. They'll even be able to tell you what the driver was thinking about just as he hit it, even though his car wrapped itself round a power pole immediately afterwards, killing him instantly!"

Tension was building, if only slightly, and I knew a change of subject was imperative if we were to preserve the relaxed atmosphere. Unfortunately, I tended to consider it prime entertainment when Evie began to run off at the mouth - probably some deep masochistic desire on my part - so, I was unable to prevent myself from stoking the fire. "You're just peeved they slammed your last exhibition," I goaded.

"Peeved!" Evie scowled at a distant wall where, no doubt, her imagination had conjured up a grandstand of art experts all blowing raspberries at her. "Pissed off would be a better way of putting it. Know-nothing wannabe's, the lot of them!"

If it had been possible for Trish to retract her original statement, or even delete the entire conversation, she would have. Tendons in her neck stood out as she grimaced. The expression seemed to be saying: *'Oh, God, what have I done now?'* Being the young lady that she was, she said, instead: "Sorry, seem to have stepped on a few corns. Let's talk about something else. My Dad always used to say, keep off sport, politics and religion, unless you want an argument."

"Not a bad judge," I agreed, relieved in a way that one of us had the fortitude to abort the abrasive subject; on the other hand, I was disappointed - Evie with steam puffing from her ears was a sight to behold. "Trouble is, there's not much left after those three, not that's stimulating, anyway."

"Well," continued Trish, determined that the evening should not conclude in uproar, "We've each told our life story, but there's someone else in the house I'm dying to know about."

"Daniel," I interpreted, unsure that he was not another subject of discussion to be avoided.

"Yes!" hissed our lodger with as much passion as she might have exhibited on the point of orgasm. "Tell me about him - everything."

I shrugged. "There's not a lot to tell. I haven't had the opportunity to talk with him. Evie'd know more than I would," I turned to my paramour. "You've been with him all day, sweetheart. What did you find out?"

"Who do you think I am - The Grand Inquisitor?" She was obviously still smarting from her self-inflicted injuries. I smiled and she began to mellow. "Actually, he was out most of the day."

"Where?" I asked, intrigued.

"How should I know? I didn't ask - I'm his landlady, not his mother!"

"Shouldn't that be *landperson*?" corrected Trish with a giggle.

Evie frowned at her. "You're not a bloody feminist, are you?"

Trish shrank back slightly on the cushions. "No. I gather you don't think too much of the institution."

"Bloody emancipationists!" Evie confirmed bitterly. "Do you know," she offered, leaning towards the two of us, "Before they came along, we women had it made; we really had it made! Liberation - their kind - was a retrograde step. Trouble is, the majority of women were sucked in, opening the gate for a few self-important lesbians with hairy legs and deep voices to call the shots."

I gathered that the heat of her argument had spread to her body. She stripped off her tank-top and threw it across the room. I assumed she left the bra in place, not out of any sense of modesty, but because discarding it was coming to be seen as a symbol of the movement she was attempting to throw into disrepute.

"They used to be ladies," she continued, "Women in general, I'm talking about. Their men adored them, opened doors for them, bought them flowers. They would have walked through fire for them. Now what's happened? - while the men do the cooking and make the beds, the women are reduced to fixing cars, chopping wood, and cleaning out the dunny with their bare hands when it gets backed up!"

This, in my humble opinion, was far better than the topic of religion. It was turning into quite an amusing interlude, although Evie wasn't smiling. Her face had already taken on a decidedly stormy aspect. I just hoped that she wasn't running short of fuel and thought it would be only gentlemanly of me to restock the depleted reserves. "How do you know they don't like what they're now able to do?" I asked as earnestly as I was able. I felt a grin coming on and hustled it away.

"Of course they don't!" snorted Evie as if it was the most illogical statement ever made. "How can you enjoy something when you either haven't the knowledge or experience to do it properly? Anyway, a lot of the time it's a physical impossibility, unless you're butch!"

I raised my clenched fist in the symbol of power. "Death before dishonour! Liberated Woman can overcome!"

"NO SHE CAN'T!" defended Evie, "And knickers to you, bloody chauvinist!" She shifted position again as if trying to elevate herself higher than the present pulpit would allow. "The only reason the silly bitches even attempt these masculine things is because some naive drongo told her in the first place that she couldn't! Forget the bras - burn the damned feminists, then we'll all get a better night's sleep!"

"Sorry about this," I said to Trish in a theatrical aside, "But they have to let her out on weekends to prevent the hospital staff from going bananas."

Evie's cork popped. "You back-stabbing toad!" she shrieked and threw a cushion at me.

It was as well she had: neither Trish nor I could have held our mirth in check for much longer. Trish started it. I had noticed the twinkle in her eyes some time back; then the corners of her mouth began to quiver. Evie's outburst was the final straw. Unable to restrain herself, Trish began with a grating nasal sound as she exhaled, then was forced to cover her face as the laughter exploded. Being the main instigator, I managed a few more seconds of serious composure, but then I saw Trish's eyes. They appeared bit by bit as she dragged her fingers down, stretching the skin of her cheeks. She looked like an apologetic bloodhound. "I'm sorry, Evie," she mumbled through her hands. Finally, her face began to crease and tremble again.

Evie glared momentarily, but at me as usual, not Trish. That was it. I couldn't help myself. Finally, Evie capitulated. Within seconds the three of us were rolling around the floor, clutching our sides, weeping, sniggering, moaning and performing all of those actions and utterances associated with hysteria. It took us a while to calm down and, in the tradition of the thespian who insists on trying for an Oscar in the dying scene, our hilarity kept rising for numerous curtain calls. Eventually, we were able to bob, sob a little, and wipe our faces, wet and streaked with tears.

"Strewth, I've got a mouth on me," admitted Evie and snorted one more laugh.

That was when it happened - a terrifying, heart-rending scream! It seemed to shake the house. I jumped. I assume the ladies must have too because, like me, they were sitting bewildered and petrified, staring agape at the doorway to the hall. Then they both turned to me. I was not sure what they expected. After all, I was the original, self-confessed coward; always had been, always would be. Unfortunately, fate had decreed that I be born male, and even if I had not developed into a domineering one in the macho sense, both Evie and Trish seemed to be waiting for me to take control. I would willingly have passed the buck to any feminist, obnoxious or not, but, as is so often the case with policemen and buses, there's never one around when you need them.

The decision on what to do was taken from all of us. Daniel appeared in the doorway, his face drained of colour, eyes staring trance-like at nothing. His lips were moving, but he was saying no words that I could hear. He was drenched in perspiration, his hair matted. The white T shirt was saturated and almost transparent, sticking to his body like a second skin. He had sweated so much that the denim of his jeans below the waist-band was now a darker blue where the moisture had run down and soaked through. He just stood there, not moving, not saying anything, his arms dangling paralytically at his sides.

We were all struggling to our feet, having overcome the effects of temporary shock. Evie was the quickest to react and was by his side first. "Daniel," she said to him breathlessly, "Daniel, what's the matter?" His head turned slowly. He lowered it to look down at her. There was just a glimmer of recognition in his otherwise blank expression. "Daniel?" repeated Evie. She stretched up a hand and placed it on his forehead. Snatching it away hastily, she cast an anguished glance at us. "My God, he's burning

up!"

The three of us stood like statues of supreme ignorance. Then Trish said: "Water. When my Dad was running a high temperature once, Mum put him in a tepid bath."

"We haven't got a bath," was my only contribution.

Momentarily stunned, Evie stared wide-eyed, fearful that there was no answer to the crisis, no remedy. Then she came up with one. "The shower!" she blurted out, looking straight at me. "Take him in the shower and get his clothes off, quick! I'll run down to phone the quack."

"Me?" I was amazed. Never had I imagined that the day would arrive when I would have to remove a grown man's clothes. Despite the emergency, the idea of it repulsed me.

Evie threw up her hands in desperation. "Jesus, Barry! Sometimes you really are a God-damned prude! Just go and phone the doctor - we'll manage here."

I hesitated. "But you're *women*! And he's..."

"A man, Barry?" she chided. "When we get him stripped entirely and absolutely stark, bollick naked, we'll find out, won't we? If he's had a sex change, we'll be sure to let you know. Now, for Christ's sake, will you bugger off to the phone before he snuffs it!!"

7

The public phone box was in the next street, just a short, leisurely walk from our house under normal circumstances; considering the emergency, however, and my leg being what it was, the prospect was about as daunting as an Olympic marathon. As I made what haste I could, I was sure I would dislocate my hip, or my kneecap would spring off, assuming, of course that I didn't collapse and die of exhaustion first. Eventually, the phone box loomed closer and I was able to distinguish details of the structure. My elation and relief began to crumble, imitating the booth's state of disrepair. The vandals had beaten me to it!

I hobbled on, believing that appearances could sometimes be deceptive. Leaning heavily against the inside of the box, or what remained of it, I lifted the receiver with a trembling hand. My legs were like jelly. They almost gave way completely when I heard the dial tone. Fumbling in a pocket, I brought out some loose change and a scrap of paper with the doctor's phone number pencilled on it in a hasty scribble. I knew it was all a waste of time - something would go awry, it had to. The number would be wrong, or it would be engaged. If neither, then I would simply not get through. What was more likely than all of these was that the coin slots would be stuck up with chewing gum and I would be unable to put my money in.

I took a deep breath and held it as my shaking fingers pushed the twenty-cent piece home. Klink! My heart missed a beat - the infernal machine had actually accepted my payment, at least part of it, anyway. I tried another coin. Ding! I could hardly believe my luck. It was like a count-down sequence when a single inconsistency would result in the entire procedure being aborted. When the time came to punch out the number, I was supremely confident that this would be the final let-down. The line went quiet. That's it, I thought. I knew it, I just knew it! It truly wasn't my day. Then I heard the ringing and my heart stalled again. A lady answered and not only listened politely to my request, but also extended an assurance that the doctor would call at his earliest convenience. At that, I think I nearly fainted. Mind you, it really all depended on your interpretation of *convenient*, but at least I had got through. I gasped out my appreciation, then hung up the phone.

Daniel was lucid when I finally arrived home. He was sitting on the lounge-room floor, wrapped in a blanket and talking cheerfully but quietly to Trish. If anything, he looked better than I myself felt. I could hear Evie in the kitchen and after gasping out a breathless greeting to our two tenants, I staggered through the connecting door to submit my report. I was only too aware of the concern my unavoidable tardiness might have caused and was anticipating being both interrogated and berated. Evie did neither. In fact, she apologised profusely for her former treatment of me which, she claimed, was bitchy and uncalled for. In all honesty, I could accuse her of neither. I'm glad to say, she did omit to enlighten me regarding Daniel's anatomy, and I gathered from the lack of a declaration to the contrary, that the status quo relating to the male/female ratio within the household had been maintained.

A doctor arrived some three hours later. Typically by then, most of the symptoms which had caused us to summon him in the first place had disappeared. He did not seem over-concerned by this, conducting his examination pleasantly and efficiently, an attitude which he upheld to the time he wrote out his account and I saw him to the door. Rejoining the ladies who were hovering in the hallway, I glanced briefly at the final total on the statement and felt our bank account run for cover. Reaching Daniel's door before the others, I knocked and stuck my head into the room. "Can we come in, or would you rather be left alone?"

He smiled weakly and shook his head. I nodded assurance to the girls and waited for them to approach. As Evie reached me, I passed her the prescription and the doctor's account. She studied the latter and her eyes popped, then she looked at Daniel's door with a frown. "Did he do a transplant or something?" she hissed, astonished by the charges. "It's a bloody lot of money just for a poke around and a script. What is it, anyway?" She held out the prescription for a second opinion.

I blinked at the spidery scrawl on the notelet the doctor had torn from his pad. "Something-il. I can't read it. Antibiotics, I should imagine."

Evie tutted. "Probably thinks it's flu or something, doddery old sod."

"It might be," said Trish.

"At least he came," I added.

"From Darwin, judging by the length of time it took him to get here," grumbled Evie.

"His answering service did say he was attending another call," I offered in the doctor's defence.

"Well, it's not good enough!" she continued adamantly. "Daniel could have been dying for all he knew."

"But he wasn't. Be reasonable, Evie," I pleaded, "I mean, Daniel's alright now, isn't he? That's what counts."

Her hands went up in submission. "Okay, I'm sorry. Let's go in and find out, shall we?"

We shuffled through the door and stood in a small group, peering at Daniel like a bunch of first-year medical students. "How do you feel?" I asked.

He smiled, but it was obviously forced. "Okay. It's nothing to worry about. It will pass soon."

Trish went over and sat by him. "You said that as if it's happened before." When she received no reply, she urged: "Has it?"

"A few times," Daniel confessed. "Each new one seems to be stronger than the last."

"What's it like? What happens?" Persisted Trish, her curiosity becoming obsessive. "Can you tell us about it?" She was gazing down at him, wide-eyed, a small child pleading for a bed-time story.

No-one was more eager to hear what had occurred to Daniel than I, but I recognised, as Trish obviously had not, that talking about one's own adversities, especially when they concerned one's health and were of rather a personal nature, might prove painful and embarrassing. I certainly knew enough about that particular incapacity. Unfortunately, I was never a good advocate; and even if I had been, how could I tell Trish, a girl whom I hardly knew, to stop pestering Daniel and leave him alone?

Evie resolved the dilemma. "Fair go Trish," she said so gently that no offence could be taken. "I don't think he's ready for an instant replay. Anyway, it's really none of our business."

Trish blushed and hung her head. "Oh, I am sorry. I wasn't thinking. Forget I ever said anything. Me and my big mouth." She began to rise.

Daniel caught her hand and drew her back down beside him. "Stay, please." Then he looked at the two of us. "Come and sit too. I'll tell you what I can."

"Honestly, Daniel," I said, taking my lead and courage from Evie's example. "You don't owe us any explanation."

"But I do," he insisted and waved us towards him. "You must know sooner or later. It will happen again and it is best you understand a little, if not all. You may wish me to leave. If you do, I will not hold it against you. But, before you decide, let me talk. Please, come to me."

The way he expressed this simple request struck me as odd. Perhaps he wasn't thinking straight after his ordeal which had obviously drained him. Then again, there was nothing wrong with the rest of his conversation, so I gathered it must have been me. Maybe I had missed a word or two.

At that point, Evie and I were still at the foot of the bed. Daniel's eyes were sparkling directly at me. Was he reading my mind? I felt Evie brush past and attempted to follow her. *What the hell..?* I couldn't move! My eyes were locked on Daniel's. I tried to pull them away and was unable to achieve even that! *Oh My God, what have we done? Who is this person we've taken into our home? WHAT is he?*

"Are you coming?" I heard Evie ask from somewhere within the depths of my jumbled thoughts. "Or are you waiting to turn into a pumpkin?"

I snapped out of my trance. When I attempted to move this time, I did so with a sense of extreme urgency and a very real fear that I might discover I was actually paralysed. I heaved forward like a knight in a very cumbersome suit of armour, but there was nothing holding me back - nothing at all! *Had I been hypnotised, or was it all in my imagination?* I stumbled, almost fell, then managed to regain my balance. Evie's smirk annoyed me, so I poked out my tongue. "Just wait till you get to my age," I grumbled.

We drifted to Daniel's bedside. Was that because we were truly interested in what he might have had to say, or we simply had no choice? Summoned or not, once up close and personal, reason mattered little and the best we could do was listen. Before he even started, I was of the opinion that Daniel's true personality, like Pandora's Box, might be best left unopened. After he began, the lid was off and it was too late.

Daniel's explanation of his recent traumatic experience should have been a stimulating discussion topic. After all, three of us had been witness to it. One would have thought that any disagreement would be relative to our own personal interpretations and opinions, not a disputation of the actual facts; but that is just what occurred. While we were comparing notes later, I remember thinking that I had defined the true nature of

the man we knew as Daniel Shippart. Being unable to explain what had happened to me in the bedroom, I decided to be entirely rational about it and convinced myself that nothing had: I had been confused and preoccupied, that was all. Without this particular inconsistency, my picture of Daniel was, I thought, pretty true to life.

Then the arguments started. They were just about small details at first, bits and pieces of Daniel's story on which we were unable to agree. When it was eventually decided that we should each relate what we recalled of Daniel's autobiography from start to finish, it became clear that we were discussing three separate people! I was quite snappy when it became apparent to me that both Evie and Trish had simply not been listening to Daniel. They had invented some facts and distorted others to suit the character they were sketching; and those characters were suspiciously similar to their current moods.

I told them so. Trish went quiet to nurse her bruised feelings; Evie, however, was never one to take an insult lying down and returned a counter accusation. We were like witnesses to a traffic accident, all of whom had our backs turned at the moment of impact. It would take cross-examination by an astute lawyer before we would admit that our sworn statements were based mainly on assumption. Of course, we were lacking both the barrister and due process of law, not to mention any personal sagacity, so we stuck adamantly to our guns.

The disagreement and resultant stalemate unsettled me and I brooded on it for a few days. I had always prided myself on my ability to quote the words of others almost verbatim and I was positive my memory had not failed me in this instance. I set out to prove my point and restore self-confidence. I began to listen more carefully whenever Daniel spoke and transcribed his words in my notepad as soon as an opportunity presented itself. Sometimes, what he said was so profound and meaningful to me that I would excuse myself immediately and rush off to write it down. It was a practice I was forced to eventually abandon when Evie became concerned over my unnaturally frequent excursions to the bathroom. "Have you caught something that I should know about?" she asked, finally.

Although only short-lived, it was a worthwhile exercise. Armed with an accurate record of Daniel's conversations, I was able to compare what he had actually said with what the others thought they had heard. My findings shocked me. In the main, the sentiments were similar, but the interpretations and phraseology was always typically suited to the ideals and personality of the individual listener. It was as if he was saying the same thing, but we were each receiving it in a different way, one which was perfectly tuned to our wavelength.

So, I would ask you to bear this in mind, especially if you have heard Daniel speak, or know someone who has. I am neither inventing nor embellishing his monologue - it would serve no interest, personal or otherwise - I am merely repeating it in the form it was relayed to me. And I apologise for diversifying, but I needed to explain about the effect Daniel has on people. Now, I will return to his "confession".

We were sitting on his bed, Trish on one side, Evie and I on the other. I made sure that Evie provided a buffer between myself and Daniel. Not that I was afraid of contracting anything, but if there was any hand-holding to be done, I preferred not to be the one to do it; at least, not with him. Daniel, however, didn't need hands: he touched me with his eyes; those fascinating, piercing eyes. As they descended on me, I was overcome by a sense of warmth and security the like of which had never been equalled in my limited experience. I assumed that the other two were similarly affected, but, at

the time, I didn't really care: I was protected by a mantle of serenity beneath which fear and tension were unknown concepts. Soon, I knew, everything would be clear to me: in a moment, *He* would speak.

"I have no recollection of the earlier years," Daniel began. He gazed at the far corner of the ceiling and beyond, as if by doing so he would be transported back in time. "I merely see my childhood as you do yours - a compendium of emotions, a journey which flashed past in the blink of an eye."

How did he know? How could he, unless...?

"I was still at school when they first started," he continued. "I thought they were just dreams and nightmares because I would always wake suddenly bathed in perspiration, my heart pounding. I was unable to remember the content of the dreams. The family doctor seemed unconcerned and was of the opinion that my condition was brought on by the stress of my studies and the forthcoming examinations - I was in my final year of high school.

"My parents were satisfied with the diagnosis until the exam results came through - I had failed in every subject. They were good people, content with the simple pleasures of their lifestyle, but were ambitious for their son. They wanted more for me than they had managed to achieve themselves. At first, when it became clear that I was not living up to their expectations, they were naturally disappointed; but eventually they accepted that my health was far more important than academic excellence. Ever the faithful, optimistic parents, they were still confident that my overall condition would improve now that the pressure had eased. Instead, it grew worse. The dreams were more intense, more frequent, and I began to remember something of them." He paused as if searching for the right words, ones which we would comprehend.

The room was quiet, peaceful, yet somehow empty without that hypnotic, two-tone voice echoing through it. Needless to say, I was the only one who missed it in that particular form - to Evie, it was medium pitch, gentle, yet undeniably masculine; Trish experienced a deep, rich, fatherly voice exuding confidence. When the voice failed to return, my hypnotic state began to lift. Then silence filled the room. It was like a cold-water drenching. I started to wonder if I had missed something. Perhaps Daniel had asked me a question and they were all waiting for my reply; but the girls' attention was fixed on Daniel, not me; and he was oblivious to all of us. I noticed Trish beginning to fidget. Eventually, she could hold her impatience in check no longer. "What did you see?" she whispered, her eyes popping. "Was it terrifying?"

"Trish!" hissed Evie, expressing an entire diatribe of censure in the single word. Trish lowered her eyes, blushed, and muttered an apology.

"I actually saw nothing," continued Daniel, taking his lead but no offence from the interruption. "Rather, I experienced sensations - disappointment, anger, frustration; on occasions, even despair. I was unable to relate these vague emotional recollections to anything in my daily life, and my confusion mounted. I became so preoccupied with my dilemma that I would puzzle the meaning of the riddles throughout the day. At the time, I was assisting my father. He was a roof tiler - still is, as far as I know. He employed me on sufferance in order to keep a watchful eye on me rather than for any benefit he might have gained financially. I am ashamed to say, I was not a very good tiler's assistant. He would remind me constantly, but in a gentle, concerned way, of my shortcomings when I would fetch the wrong materials or returned to him empty-handed, having forgotten what he sent me for in the first place. He had the patience and tolerance of a Saint. Then, one day, while in deep reverie, I slipped and fell from a roof."

A small movement caught my eye and I cast an anxious glance at Trish. She was bristling with curiosity. *Please, God, don't let her ask to see his operation!* Her mouth opened, then closed again.

Daniel went on: "The injuries I sustained were quite minor - a few broken bones and some bruising - but, in my father's eyes, the accident was a warning, a prediction of imminent disaster about to befall me if something was not done to diagnose and treat my condition. I was sent to the best doctors and specialists my father could afford, and was subjected to every conceivable test, all to no avail. I was only too aware of what this burden was doing to my parents' mental and financial situation and I could not allow it to continue. Over a period of a month, I feigned a 'miraculous' recovery which pleased them both and gave the doctors cause to congratulate themselves on finding the cure - not that they ever divulged what it was, or the complaint they were supposed to have cured. I then intimated to my current psychiatrist that a change of scenery might further speed recovery and she relayed the suggestion to my father as if it were her own..."

I bet she did.

"...He agreed wholeheartedly. I departed for Melbourne the following week." He paused again, but this time looked up at Evie "Do you think I might have a drink of water? I'm a little dry."

While Evie went to the kitchen, we sat quietly, not talking, mulling over what had been said, trying not to anticipate what was yet to be revealed. I suppose I should really be passing comments on my own thoughts, rather than making assumptions on those of the others, but I didn't have to be a mind reader to know where Trish's priorities lay - her wide eyes were glued to Daniel, her hands clasped together on her lap. She was gnawing absently at her lip and, although to all intents and purposes she was stationary, her mind was definitely still in drive.

I glanced sideways at Daniel, realised my mistake, and quickly diverted my eyes: if he intended to hypnotise me again, he would have to work for it. I was almost sure this was what he had done before; but the fact that I had retained at least a percentage of my natural cynicism confirmed that I had not been entirely under his control. Nevertheless, forewarned was forearmed - maybe.

Evie returned with the water. As she passed it to Daniel, I noticed dribbles of moisture on the back of her hand where she had spilt some of the contents of the mug - she had been in a hurry. Apparently, Evie, too, was another listener eagerly awaiting the next episode.

Daniel passed the mug back. He smiled his thanks, then stared at the far wall and blinked. "That was more than five years ago," he continued, like a recording which had just been on pause.

Five years ago? What was? Something about... a psychiatrist... No, after that. Ah, yes - going to Melbourne: the Myer Music Bowl, Moomba, and four seasons of weather in one day.

"The dreams, of course, continued. They had never, in fact, stopped. For quite some time I was bewildered by the infrequency. I could go a month without one, then have three or four in a single week. And they were about nothing I could relate to. Sometimes I responded violently, or so I was informed by an elderly lady in a house where I was staying. I assumed this to be a recurring incident. It would certainly explain the flimsy excuses so many landlords offered when suggesting that I seek other accommodation."

That's why he said we might not want him to stay!

"Then, one day, they became more than just dreams - I discovered a connection. The

nightmare in question relayed agonising pain coupled with deep exasperation. It was so strong that I felt its inspirational source was very close to me. Though it was the middle of the night, I searched the house where I was staying. I woke every person to enquire of their welfare. Nothing was amiss with any of them except that their tempers were somewhat strained by having their sleep interrupted. I returned to my room and began to pack, feeling sure that I would, once again, be asked to leave the very next day. Then I heard the sirens in the street outside. From my window, I could see the fire engine and I could hear someone banging on the front door of the neighbouring house. They were calling out. The matter sounded extremely urgent.

"I ran down and out into the garden. Others quickly followed, probably wondering what else I had been up to. We were in time to witness a fire officer break into the house next door and enter through a billowing cloud of smoke. The fire was, apparently, only a small one in the back kitchen. It was soon under control and I still did not connect it with my dream; not until the ambulance arrived and they carried out the remains of our neighbour on a stretcher with her face covered. As her body passed near me, I felt those same sensations rush in to fill my mind. They faded as she was transported away to the waiting ambulance.

"I desperately needed to know what had befallen her and asked an attending fireman. He told me that, although an invalid who really ought to have been in a nursing home, she insisted on retaining her independence, muddling along on her own as best she could. Presumably, she had tipped a pan of hot fat down herself while cooking a late-night supper. It had ignited and, the officer had concluded, because of her age and debility, she had been able to do no more than lay on the kitchen floor and burn to death!"

9

My eyes were popping. Oh, Dear Jesus, I can see it! He's hypnotised me again and I can see it, plain as day! The leaping flames, the sizzling flesh, the wispy grey hair gone in a flash. Mercy, she must have used a whole can of lacquer on it! And I can HEAR the gurgling, pathetic cries of a dying woman. I can even smell her burning flesh! This isn't fair, Daniel. I don't want to be in your mind. I want to get out. PLEASE let me out. For pity's sake, please! I truly was experiencing all of this and it couldn't have been a product of my imagination. I have never thought like that, certainly not in such graphic, hideous detail.

Someone made a sound and I was back in Daniel's bedroom. Evie was beside me. The scent of her deodorant was strong - she must have been sweating. It's strange what a person thinks about, the things one clings to in times of panic. I inhaled deeply, savouring the smell of musk. It was natural, comfortable. I would have liked to have touched her, held her close, but I did not dare. Instead, I glanced at her face, then across to Trish, and back again, making a conscious effort to dip my eyes as they passed Daniel. I don't know how long we waited. The silence was relative. No-one spoke, but I could hear breathing, movement. The tension was alive and tangible. We were like greedy trolls, salivating at the thought of devouring the forthcoming repast, if only it would just cross the bridge. Daniel must have sensed our bestial greed. He would have had to be both blind and stupid to miss it; and Daniel was neither. "I think, perhaps, I have said too much," he commented with a sigh of self-reproach.

You theatrical teaser, Daniel! You can't leave us like this; and you don't intend to, do you? Get on with it, you ham. Finish it before we all explode! But it didn't seem as if he

was going to and I heard myself pleading: "Go on, Daniel. Please! You can't stop now!"

He nodded slowly as if agreeing with a voice inside of him; or maybe he had calculated that the intentional pause was just about long enough. "Very well," he said finally. "I returned to my room, but was unable to sleep, being constantly plagued by visions of the wretched, terrified old woman dying in burning agony..."

I know - I saw it. You showed me!

"...tortured by the guilt that I could have saved her if only I could have interpreted my dream..."

Yes, I can feel it too. That's why you showed me because words could never be enough. I'm sorry for doubting your motivations, Daniel. Forgive me. Then there was a voice inside my head saying: *"It's alright, Barry."* And the voice smiled gently, compassionately.

"I chose not to stay and face my guilt: I ran from it, or tried to. I finished my packing and left before dawn. I remember walking out of the gate and along the road, but nothing more until I found myself wandering in an unfamiliar area. I had a newspaper in my hand, although I do not recall buying it, and I noticed it was folded inside out showing the classified section. One of the advertisements was ringed in ball-point - I assumed I had done this. It was offering a room for rent in the very same street where I was standing at the time. Accepting that I had suffered temporary amnesia brought on by the recent traumatic shock, I rented the room and hoped that the new surroundings might assist in healing my mental scars. Three days later, it happened again."

I felt myself shudder. Someone's left an outside door open. It's a draught. In the middle of summer, a cold draught? Who are you trying to kid? It's you, you big sook! Pull yourself together. It's just a story. Isn't it?

"This time, the emotions were clearer, more detailed and I had the feeling that I was living a few moments of somebody's life. First came the sensation of confusion, of everything around occurring so fast it was impossible to focus on any one thing long enough to rationalise it. When it had risen to a pitch, the confusion gave way to depression, then utter despair. I felt..."

So cold and lonely. The sole survivor on a dying world. Nowhere to go, no-one to turn to, nothing to look forward to. Suddenly I was not just Daniel, but at the same time the object of his distress. Far from being concerned over what it was doing to my mind, I merely accepted the strange insight as necessary for complete understanding.

"Then, in a flash, came the solution. Yet it was not really that - rather the only option remaining; a final gesture; an end to the misery. Afterwards, there was nothing: no sensations, no emotion, not even any recall; just nothing - a void. It was as if the life I had been living by proxy had suddenly ceased to exist. I confess that I panicked. I had not asked for the gift of foresight, nor would I have, except in conjunction with the means to act on it. I felt that I could do no more for the poor soul who was radiating the emotions than I had been able to save the old lady next door.

"So, I ran. Hastily throwing my belongings in my bag, I rushed from the house. I had no idea where I was going. I just knew that I wanted to get away, beyond the range of the psychic transmissions; so far, in fact, that I would not only be powerless to interfere, but would not even be aware of whatever was about to happen. I remember I was running. It was dark, but even so, the road I was following was busy. I could hear cars rushing past and actually felt the slip-stream of the heavier vehicles. I did not notice the woman at first, though the lights from the traffic must have illuminated her. Then, the sensations of my dream returned.

"They filled my mind, halting me in my tracks. Suddenly, there she was, ahead of me on the side of the road. I stared at her, not wanting to believe that she was the source of the emotions; yet, at the same time, praying that she was. You see, unlike the old woman, she was still alive. *She* was not beyond salvation. Her confusion was replaced by despair and I knew something dreadful was about to happen to her. Even so, there was still time. If I could only get to her, hold her, talk to her, I was sure I could ease her pain and my own conscience.

"She had turned and was looking back up the road towards me. I thought for an instant that she had noticed me and I was suddenly afraid that my mere presence might panic her, but she was studying the traffic. Then, the tension in my mind relaxed and I knew instinctively that she had reached her decision. I hesitated briefly, unsure what that decision was, fascinated that a mind could be so utterly confused and tortured one second, then so at peace the next. I delayed a few moments, no more; but it was too long.

"I saw her watching the road behind me. She was waiting for the right time. It arrived. She stepped into the lane closest to her. The truck buffeted me as it swept past. My mind blanked. When I looked to the spot where the woman had been standing, it was empty. I could hear the air brakes of the truck as it pulled over, and I could see its rear lights shining bright red further down the road. There was no sign of the body, but I knew it was laying..."

Crushed and broken where it had been dragged. Got to run. Got to get away - anywhere!

"I spent the next few weeks asking questions of myself to which there were no answers. Why had the vision appeared to me? Was it so that I could intervene and prevent a catastrophe? If that was the reason, why had I been so slow to react? Was it simply inexperience? Would I need to practise in order to sharpen my wits? How many lives would I waste before I became sufficiently competent to save one? The greatest question of all was, naturally, the most obvious."

His head sagged as he buried his face in his hands. It was a gesture of weariness, of sad resignation, an admission of defeat by the cruel reality of human weakness. Evie moved closer to him. She hitched up the blanket which had slipped from his shoulders, then gently coaxed his head towards her until it rested against her breast. Trish, too, shuffled along the bed towards him. She took his hands and drew them down so that she could see his eyes and he would be forced to look into hers. "We're here now, Daniel," she said quietly, exuding confidence, "You're not alone anymore."

He gazed sadly at her. Tears brimmed, then trickled down his cheeks. He swallowed, then asked: "But why *me*? Why *me*?"

Trish was blinking at him. She was swallowing too. At last her head drooped and began to shake slowly. "I don't know."

A complete contrast to my forays into Daniel's visions, I felt suddenly detached and remote from the tableau. I was the theatre audience during the intermission. While the story was unfolding, I had been part of it, totally engrossed in the plot and the characters; as soon as it had paused, I was back in my seat, only too aware of the discomfort which surrounded me, annoyed with myself for believing that this had been anything but a well-told fairy tale. How could I have been duped so easily? The mystical - dare I say, supernatural? - overtones should have been sufficient to place me on my guard. Unfortunately, my initial involvement and gullibility had over-ridden caution, had joined forces to blanket my instinctive scepticism. I was beginning to see Daniel as a seer, a prophet; and his apparent reluctance to be so only served to

endorse that opinion.

My unquestioning acceptance of this simple honesty, fortunately for me, was of short duration. Maybe it was the result of the story-teller's hypnotic voice. Once it was silent, my cynical mistrust returned. It just seems to come naturally to me. It may be my one redeeming feature and I believe it to be the consideration Daniel underestimated. At the time, though, I only knew that the show had paused and the facetious thoughts in my head had stepped in to play the intermission. Had I walked out then, I might not be writing this now; but fool that I am, I just sat there, waiting for more.

The attentions of Evie and Trish seemed to have had the desired effect and Daniel was soon able to continue. Before he did so, he looked at me. I'm sure he did: I could feel his eyes staring, coaxing, daring me to return the gaze; but I refused the challenge. I'm not sure what I was afraid of - perhaps losing my soul, if there is such a thing. After a few, very long moments, I felt his energy subside and the magnet turn away, replaced by the sound of his voice. Suppressing a huge sigh of relief, I listened, determined not to be drawn in by the mind trick again. Sadly, I failed.

"I was driven on by my dreams," he continued, "And that unknown force which seemed to control my movements while I was in a state of shock..."

Tell me about it. No, forget I thought that. Sorry.

"...There were two more incidents of a similar nature, neither of which I was able to prevent happening. I was beginning to wonder if the doctors in Sydney had not conspired to trick me and had, somehow, placed me in a long-lasting hypnotic trance which would eventually shock me back to reality; but I knew this to be untrue and merely an excuse on my part. I was unsure why, but after that, I returned to a state of confusion similar to the early days when I had nothing tangible to link the dreams with. I still had them, but they were, once more, unrelated to any person I met, or any accident I was unfortunate enough to witness. The only connection I could make with my daily life seemed to be tied to my nomadic wanderings: sometimes it would take two or three nightmares, but eventually I would move on, recalling nothing until I was where I imagined I was supposed to be. Which was how I came to be in Perth and the reason I arrived on your doorstep. Nobody told me where you lived, or that you had a vacancy - I simply knew, because I was brought here."

He fell silent and I wondered what was coming next. I hoped there would be something, otherwise I would feel cheated. After all, the villain is always thwarted, the fair maiden rescued. Even in the worst of endings, the ones I tend to be involved in myself, the hero and heroine die in each other's arms and the rest of the characters live in sadness and misery forever more. Surely there was something else?

Evie must have read my mind. "You said the meaning of the dreams became confused again. What about tonight?" She paused as if wondering whether she really wanted to know the answer to her next question. Finally, she asked: "Do you understand what this latest one means?"

Daniel heaved a long sigh and began nodding his head slowly. "Yes, I do understand. At last, everything is clear. At last I know I am where I should be; and I believe I know what it is I have to do." He looked first at Evie, then at me. This time I was unprepared and was transfixed by his gaze. "Do you wish me to leave, to find another place to stay?"

I knew I should have accepted his suggestion, but I was trapped by his eyes, hypnotised by them. "Come on, Daniel," I heard myself saying, "Why would we want you to do that?"

"I shall be unable to pay my way," he replied humbly.

"We don't want your money," said Evie flatly.
Who cares about money? I caught myself thinking, and couldn't stop myself saying:
"Please stay, Daniel."

10

It was later that same evening. Having left Daniel to rest, the two ladies and I had adjourned to talk over what had eventuated. We were all over-tired, irritable and spent the best part of an hour bickering. It was the problem I referred to earlier - we each remembered the details of Daniel's story in the way that best suited us as individuals and none of us were prepared to concede that we might be embroidering, not even a bit. Bear in mind, by then I was far enough from Daniel's influence and had returned to my old cynical self, so when Trish asked me what in my estimation was a highly explosive question, it was the final straw and sent me storming from the room. Needless to say, the question remained unanswered and, as I lay on the bed listening to the sounds of Evie and Trish clearing away dishes and locking up, I was beginning to recognise my petulant behaviour as an extremely immature over-reaction.

Then Evie sauntered in. Far from being exhausted by her labours, she seemed to be brimming with excess vigour and it was fairly obvious that she was about to wage a campaign. "Right!" she said, sitting cross-legged on the bed before me, "Out with it!"

I was not quite prepared for that particular level of confrontation. "What?" I asked, feigning surprise.

Her eyes narrowed and she distended her nostrils to produce that expression of reproach she employed whenever I was being obtuse. Then she folded her arms and I knew she meant business. "Barry Chester," she began with her voice of condescending authority, "We've been living together long enough now to know that we can't keep secrets from each other. You may like to think you can disguise your feelings, but take it from me pal, Christopher Walken, you ain't. So, are you going to talk to me, or do I fetch the cavalry?"

By 'the cavalry' I assumed she meant Daniel and Trish. Bearing my soul to Evie would be difficult enough; allowing the other two access to my inner thoughts would be, on the one hand irrelevant and on the other, a total embarrassment. I breathed a heavy sigh of defeat and nodded my acceptance of the surrender conditions. I narrowed my eyes at her. "You promise not to get mad?"

Her expression softened and she took my hand. "Just say it. I won't get mad."

I was not so sure and hesitated. Did I tell her what had been going through my mind? Did I really know what that was? I shrugged mentally and plunged in, head first. "It's about Daniel." *Brilliant! Of course it was about Daniel. Get on with it, you idiot!* "And what Trish said, about him being like Jesus," I stammered, almost choking on the name.

The interjection I was expecting never came. Evie waited patiently, maternally, coaxing the explanation from me with a gentle, loving smile. Obviously she wasn't going to make it easy. If only she had argued, I could have blurted it out in a fit of exasperation, could have said what I really meant and excused myself afterwards by saying that I didn't. "You know what I feel about religion," I muttered cagily. *Did she? Did I? Of course I did:* "Daniel's no more Jesus than I am." I continued. "He's as human as the rest of us. He's just a little... strange, that's all..." I petered out. Boy, did I ever have a penchant for stating the obvious! Strange wasn't the word at all - stark, raving bonkers might be a better description. Then another word came to mind, one which summed up Daniel and what I firmly believed he stood for; and before I was able

to reconsider or rephrase it, I heard it coming out of my mouth: "And he's dangerous!"

A cloud descended over Evie. I'm not sure whether she was concerned for my unstable state of mind, or for Daniel and what I had just said about him. Her eyes were piercing, full of accusation. Or was it pity? She seemed to be holding herself back, or at least suppressing the disagreement which she no doubt felt. Finally, she said quietly: "Why do you think that?"

I looked around the room, trying to find something to focus on the way Daniel had, but for me there were only cobwebs and shadows. I would have to trust in my own judgement. "Bear in mind that we don't know a lot about him," I began, trying to give myself a way out, in case I got in too deep. "But already I've started to think of him as a very close friend, one I've known for years."

"And that's a bad thing?"

"Not in itself, but it generally takes me a while to accept people. I don't often take them at face value. In the past, on the rare occasions when I have, I've usually discovered, too late, that I've been conned."

"But you've learned by experience," Evie suggested tentatively. She was not at all convinced that I was telling everything. "You're on your guard now."

"I thought I was on my guard in the bedroom when he was relating his story. Some odd things happened to me in there, Evie, things I don't understand."

"What kind of things?"

"I'd rather not say. You'll think I'm nuts."

She chuckled. "You are, that's why I love you."

"And I love you, which is why I'd rather not tell you, not everything, anyway; not until I've got it straight in my own mind. Let's just say that I knew what my true feelings ought to have been, but for some reason I can't explain, I was made to feel something entirely different, as if I'd been hypnotised."

"And Daniel did that to you?"

"I think so. I'm not sure. Maybe it was self-induced and I just blamed Daniel because I was jealous of him, of the attention he was getting from you and Trish. All I know is that it scared me at the time, more so now."

She was frowning and looking at me sideways as if trying to assess how I would react to what she was about to say. "What are you really afraid of - becoming a convert?"

The suggestion jarred me. Perhaps that was the root of my problem - I dreaded the thought of turning into an unwitting, born-again whatever Daniel might be. Then, as I pondered this unlikely yet fearful possibility, another occurred to me, one far more obnoxious than the threatened sanctity of my own beliefs: what if *Evie* had already fallen under this same spell? "Does that mean you believe he's some kind of holy man?" I asked with trepidation.

Evie seemed puzzled. I don't think it was my question which had stumped her. I'm sure she was simply analysing her own feelings, and her findings had come as something of a shock. Eventually, she dispelled whatever doubts she might have had with a shake of the head. "Of course not. He's just Daniel." She smiled reassuringly.

While reassurance was the attitude she would have hoped to convey, I was positive I noticed a slight tremor at the corner of her mouth which was inconsistent with her apparent sincerity. "And you don't see him as anything more?" I couldn't find the words to express my feelings which would not, at the same time, offend Evie, so I dried up.

Evie, unfortunately, was already on the defensive. "More than what?" She shifted her position. It was the action of someone digging in to prepare for a very long siege. "This isn't just about weird things that happened in Daniel's bedroom, is it? It's this anti-

religion gig you carry about with you like a totem. Trish's question about Daniel being like Jesus really got to you, didn't it? Why, Barry? What are you afraid of?"

Until that point, I was beginning to think that I had got away with it, that Evie had forgotten the topic which had driven me to retreat with my tail between my legs; but the day of reckoning had inevitably dawned and I could feel the chill of its icy claws raking at my heart. "Look." I spread my fingers and turned my palms upwards as if opening an invisible book. "Everything was simple before Daniel came. Despair, unbearable pain, despondency, the fear of eternal loneliness." I was counting off on my fingers. "They were someone else's problems and all on the outside, somewhere else. I could close my eyes and pretend they weren't there. I can't do that any more. I don't know how or why, but Daniel showed them to me. I was in the safety of my own home, surrounded by people I care for and who care about me, yet I could see all of those terrible things he talked about." I stared wild-eyed at her. "I was *there*, Evie. I was really *there*!"

I shivered at the mere mention of those terrible visions. It would have been nice if she could have made the effort to hug me then, the way she had done on other occasions when I needed more than a comforting smile, but she simply sat, twiddling her earring, studying me with half-closed eyes. "You're still evading the issue, Barry," she warned. And it was a warning.

I took a deep breath and tried to calm myself. "What really disturbs me is, if Daniel has that effect on me, a sceptic, what will his presence and power do to someone more gullible?"

"You mean me, don't you?" There was no mistaking the animosity.

I could feel my ears burning. "I mean anyone! You, Trish, anyone!"

"That's crap!"

"It's a simple extrapolation."

"A what? Can't you speak English, for God's sake?"

"Alright, I'm sorry. What I'm trying to say is that it's a logical progression. Think about it, Evie - Daniel is almost a carbon copy of Jesus."

Evie tossed her head and hair fell across one of her eyes. "That's more than crap, Barry. That is really, really sad - pathetic."

"Oh, is it?" I countered acidly. "Trish obviously considered the possibility, and I can understand why. There is a striking similarity. Both appear to be men of peace; both are merely suggestive of a moral code which we all know to be ideal, except that we might have to work a bit harder to achieve it; both possess a certain charisma which seems to be irresistible..."

"And Jesus had dreams, I suppose?" Evie's eyebrow was raised, the one behind the wave of hair.

I could see it was time to retreat. "I don't know. He probably did." Evie's eyebrow had come down and she was regarding me intently, waiting to move in for the kill. "He must have: everyone does..." I sighed and looked at the floor for a moment. "Evie." I looked up again. "Can we start this conversation again? I think it lost me somewhere along the way."

"I've got a better idea," she said, and the intonation hinted at anything but capitulation.

"Oh?" I was ninety-nine percent sure I would be disadvantaged by whatever she had in mind, but I said: "What might that be?"

She tossed her head and flicked the hair off her face. "Let's turn out the light." A plainly sensuous grin spread across her lips.

I think I almost collapsed with relief. Despite the physical and mental exhaustion under which I had been labouring, I managed to switch off the light and was in bed beside Evie

in little more than a minute. As we moved close, my head began to swim and my troubles seemed to melt away.

Evie's lips brushed my cheek. "Barry?"

"Yes?" I whispered in reply as I returned the kiss.

There was a long pause - too long - then she said: "You don't really think Daniel's Jesus, do you?"

A deep hole had suddenly appeared in my stomach. I tensed in an effort to make it go away. "No, he's just Daniel." The assurance seemed as hollow as I felt internally, so I added: "But if he starts bringing people home like stray dogs and turning the place into some kind of freaky commune, I'm going to wrap him up and mail him to the Pope."

Evie chuckled and nipped my ear. "He wouldn't do that - not Daniel," she said. Then she hesitated. "He wouldn't, would he?"

I replied as confidently as I knew how. "No, I shouldn't think so."

CHAPTER TWO

1

Tony, our third and, I hoped, final lodger arrived on a Saturday. I was still in bed, taking advantage of my rostered day off to catch up on some much-needed sleep, when I heard him knock. After a few moments, he knocked again. The absence of approaching footsteps led me to assume that the others were either out of earshot or had turned conveniently deaf. Muttering my way out of bed, I hastily drew on a pair of tracksuit bottoms and trudged along the hallway to the front door. I gave it a hefty tug. It usually resisted any attempt to swing freely, but this time it surprised me by lurching open as if someone was pushing from the other side.

"Ge' Back!" a man's voice growled. I complied with a small, inelegant jump. "Mongrel!" cursed the voice, and I wondered what I had done to incur his displeasure. The door continued to swing open. On the front porch was a man, an overnight bag, and an extremely large dog. The man's beam spread into his stubbled cheeks. "G'day. Tony Duffield," he announced in a voice approximately one octave higher than the one he had employed a moment before. "Got the message about the room." He looked down and nudged the animal with the side of his knee. "This is Queenie." He noticed my suspicion and the fact that I had not advanced from my position against the wall some two metres away. "It's alright - she doesn't bite."

I pondered the verisimilitude of the advice and decided to reserve my judgement. Queenie was no lap dog: she was almost gargantuan. Even sitting, the top of her head was level with her master's waist. Admittedly, he was on the short side, but, nevertheless, she had won my immediate respect. Apart from differences in size compared to their respective species, they were very similar. In fact, as my critical gaze shifted from Queenie, to the bag, then to Tony and back, I came to the conclusion that the three matched like a set of coordinated travel baggage. All were bitsers - even the bag had a strap no doubt salvaged from a previous one which had died a natural death - all had a good few years before they would be approaching the prime of life and, judging by their somewhat frayed appearances, not one had escaped physical abuse in one form or another. Tony frowned, cocking his head in the same fashion as his dog. "Something wrong?"

I gathered that my silent assessment of the new arrivals had been more obvious than I had intended. "No." I rummaged among my sluggish thoughts for a suitable excuse which might help to explain my stand-offishness. "She's a very *big* dog." Stepping forward, I wondered how Queenie would respond if I offered Tony my hand. There was only one way to find out. I leaned through the doorway. "I'm Barry Chester."

Queenie rose on her hind legs and placed two enormous paws on our forearms either side of our joined hands. Saliva dripped onto my wrist from her jowls which quivered as she panted. I hoped she was laughing. She christened my face with a slurp from her huge, pink tongue. "Ge' down, mongrel," grumbled Tony.

"That's alright," I said, relieved that none of my bodily parts had been removed prior to being carried to a suitable spot in the garden for burial. "I think she likes me."

"She likes everyone," he confirmed with an air of disappointment. "Got her originally to guard the truck, but she's about as much use as tits on a bull. Been better off with a bloody poodle, I reckon."

There was probably a considerable amount of truth in the crude observation. It

certainly required no further comment from me. "Come in," I said, "And I'll show you round."

We were on our way along the hallway with Queenie scouting ahead, when Tony said: "Sorry if we got you out of bed."

"You didn't," I lied.

"Oh." He paused thoughtfully. "You usually wear your pants like that, then, do you?"

I looked down. I had them on back to front. My cheeks and ears began to heat up. "I was *about* to get up," I said defensively and hurried on, hoping it was not going to be one of those days.

Evie was sweeping the lounge. She looked up as we entered. "Hi," she called across the room. "You must be Tony." Then she saw the dog. "Oh, *Darling!*" Queenie barged past and padded over. "Aren't you absolutely gorgeous." Evie sank to her knees, allowing Queenie to drown her with slobbering licks. "And what's your name?" I actually believe the way she talked to and addressed the dog directly that she expected the animal to reply. Tony introduced his dog, but it made no difference to Evie. "*Queenie*," she repeated, staring with delight into the dog's eyes. "I should have known." Queenie produced a small whine. "What's the matter then, chook?" This was an invitation for the animal to present her repertoire of doggy noises, uttered for the express purpose of soliciting anything from a piece of the biscuit you were eating to a game of fetch-the-stick. Evie, of course, understood every whimper. "Do you want some tucker? Doesn't he feed you, then?"

"Wroof!"

"Come on. Let's see what we can find for you." Evie rocked back and stood up, then made her way to the kitchen. Queenie needed no further encouragement and trotted by Evie's side, looking up at her, that giant tongue lolling and dripping from the corner of her laughing mouth. Evie paused in the doorway and turned back to us. "Can you show Tony to his room?" She paused and directed an emphatic yet indifferent gaze at my legs. "And if I were you, I'd go back to bed and try getting up and dressed again with my brain in forward gear."

Later that day, I caught a glimpse of Tony's truck. As I might already have guessed, it was the fourth item in the inseparable Duffield collection. The chromium letters across the front declared it to be a MA K, but it was incontrovertibly a bastardised example. Still, as Tony confirmed, it went and, despite its outward appearance and doubtful lineage, would probably continue to do so for many a good year. Not that any of this mattered: neither Evie nor I were snobs and as long as our paying guests did just that, what they looked and dressed like was of little concern. What did worry me was whether Tony would fit in - compared to myself, Trish and Daniel, he seemed a little rough around the edges and far from sensitive.

We had to wait to discover the effect of Tony and Queenie on our household: apparently, they were leaving to collect a trailer from the depot, then were taking it to Port Hedland and would not be back for over a week. I hoped a pro-rata discount on the rent would not be expected, but need not have worried: Tony paid for a month in advance before he and Queenie left. Despite my earlier doubts, it was turning into a red-letter day. With Tony's money added to what we had already saved, there was sufficient not only to keep the agents off our backs, but also enough left to replenish the larder.

After relieving us of our dirty laundry, Evie sent Daniel and me shopping. It was such a pleasant day and mostly downhill, so we agreed to walk into town. We were alongside Memorial Park when Daniel stopped. He gazed past the trees on the grassy slope to

the monument on top of the hill which overlooked the Port City of Fremantle. "Do you want to go up?" I asked: the shops were open all day and we were in no rush. "There's quite an impressive view."

Deep in thought, it was a while before he replied and I was beginning to wonder if he had heard me at all. Then he said: "No, there is already enough pain in the world. Sad memories can only serve to drive it deeper."

I assumed that the memorial and not the view was the inspiration for this profound observation. The sentiments, however, started me wondering. He was too young to have participated in any of the recent wars and he had never mentioned being in the armed forces. I concluded that the 'sad memories' must refer to friends or relations who had suffered. Whatever the case, it was not my place to revive the anguish of those memories, so I let the matter drop.

Apart from that small interlude, nothing unusual occurred until after we had finished the shopping. I suppose 'unusual' is the wrong word; interesting would have been more suitable. At least, I thought it worthy of mentioning to Evie and Trish later when Daniel had gone to his room to meditate, or do whatever he did. "Go on," urged Evie, scraping the remains of strawberry cheesecake from her plate with a teaspoon - having a surplus of money was always reason enough to indulge ourselves.

"I'm getting there," I declared testily, becoming annoyed as any story-teller might be with an impatient audience.

"Well, don't take too long," she continued to complain. "I need time to make out my will before I start to decompose."

"I either tell it my way, or not at all!" I glared at her.

"Alright," she said, throwing up her hands in surrender. "Sorry I criticised." She turned theatrically to Trish with a loud aside: "If Barry was as particular with the cleaning as he is with his stories, you could eat off the floor." She noticed my deepening frown. "Sorry, sorry. Hush my mouth!"

I waited before continuing. There was just the sound of breathing. Evie was pan-faced. I noticed Trish trying hard to look serious and decided I had best get on with it before she lost control completely. "Well," I began again, hoping the interruption had not destroyed my train of thought. "We were walking back through the Mall. It was busy as usual. Even the small groups of old Italians, with their bushy eyebrows and dark suits, were forced by the crowds to continue their secretive discussions in tight huddles." Evie groaned. I grinned at her. "That's what you get for being picky. Anyway, there at the end just opposite the Town Hall was the obligatory street squawker. He was the standard born-again-but-only-yesterday Christian..."

Trish giggled.

"...Young, naive-looking, hadn't eaten for a week. He was telling anyone who would listen how Jesus saves, and was quoting Bible passages he'd learned by rote. The footpath around him was strewn with yellow sheets which he'd handed to people who had walked a few paces and dropped them. No-one was paying him any attention; no-one, that is, except for Daniel."

I paused for effect. Evie poked me in the ribs with her foot. How could I ignore such a gracious prompt? "Our Daniel had that far-away look in his eye as he approached the young man. He took one of the leaflets, read through it, then slipped it into the back pocket of his jeans. All this time, he had been standing directly in front of the apprentice evangelist. As for him, the inadequacies of his training told. He had lost his rhythm, forgotten his patter, and was staring at Daniel who looked him straight in the eye, smiled, and said: 'Tell me'."

"Just that?" Evie was now a captive audience.

"Tell me," I repeated and paused again, prolonging the agony.

"Well?" said Trish, unable to contain her curiosity. "What did the young man say?"

"Pardon," I stated simply.

"Pardon?" said Evie, almost incredulously.

"Pardon," I confirmed, quite enjoying myself. "So Daniel said: 'Tell me what you have been told to tell me'. The way he came out with it, I had the feeling I was involved in some peculiar spy movie where the hero has to identify his contact using a laughable, pre-rehearsed conversation, totally out of context with the situation. The young man hesitated. Daniel stood before him, smiling, patiently waiting. So, the apprentice began his spiel. Needless to say, it had lost much of its impact, having been written with the intention of bellowing it out in phrases punctuated by intervals devoted to leaflet distribution; strung together and spoken in a quiet, extremely nervous voice, it was simply uncoordinated. Quite pathetic, really. I was embarrassed for the guy.

"Having concluded his recitation, the young man stared, no doubt awaiting Daniel's response. His forehead was beaded with perspiration and he was breathless. I believe his heart may have stopped when Daniel asked: 'When did you last see Jesus?'"

If I had been listening to someone else telling my story, I think I would have been brimming over with sarcastic comments by that time. I was waiting for one of the girls to do just that, but they sat there in silence, apparently captivated. I would like to think that they were over-awed by my story-telling expertise, but I think it was Daniel and anything about him that was the object of their intense fascination. "At first, the young man was lost for words," I continued eventually. "Then he asked Daniel: 'What do you mean?' So, Daniel replied: 'You have been telling me what Jesus will do for me. I naturally assumed that you must have discussed it with him. I've never met him myself, but I would certainly like to. Would you take me to him?'"

"By then, a small crowd had gathered. They obviously found the incident amusing. Most of them were satisfied to remain spectators, but the odd one found it necessary to add a loud comment or two in the hopes of encouraging Daniel, no doubt assuming him to be just another disruptive heckler. I don't believe any of them, including the young man, thought for a moment that he was serious."

"And was he?" demanded Trish excitedly.

I shrugged. "I can't be sure, but I think he was. He certainly didn't take too kindly to the insensitivity of the crowd because he turned on them."

Both women caught their breath. Even I, who knew the story, had actually been a witness to it, felt my heart beating faster. "He stood there, not saying a word, just staring. I don't mind telling you, I was expecting anything to happen. I was ready to grab Daniel and run. Not that I could have made a very good job of it, but I was ready to try. As it turned out - and here's the really amazing part - we didn't have to. I don't know what Daniel did. I'm sure he never said a word, but suddenly, everyone walked away as if nothing had happened!" Trish had her mouth open. Evie was frowning. "It's true, every single word," I confirmed. "The people there just carried on doing what they were doing as if we had never been there."

"What about the evangelist?" asked Evie.

"He seemed to be in a trance. His eyes were popping and his mouth was open - like yours, Trish." She closed it and I noticed a pink flush spread across her face. "Then he came out of it and left, as fast as his spindly legs could carry him. I don't imagine we'll be seeing *him* in the Mall again; at least, not hawking salvation." I sat back and folded my arms.

"Is that it?" Evie sounded disappointed.

"Do you want more?" I grinned smugly.

"Is there any?"

I sat forward again. "I did ask Daniel about it, on our way home." The following silence I presented to the ladies was extremely effective, and very cruel.

"Are you going to finish this, you miserable bugger, or do I have to wang you one?" Evie almost screeched. "What did he say?"

"Well," I started slowly, "I asked him if he had meant what he'd said to the young man. He confirmed that he had. 'I have never had the opportunity to meet Jesus,' he said, 'but I would really like to.'"

"He was funning, of course," said Trish. It was clear that she needed a positive response. I was not sure of the answer myself and remained silent. I believe it was the worst thing I could have done, under the circumstances. Trish accepted it as if it was all she might have expected. She deflated like a leaking balloon, an expression of gloom on her face.

Evie just looked puzzled. She seemed to be mulling something over. She became alert as she reached a sudden decision. "If Daniel isn't Jesus, then who is he?"

The poser came as a shock and thrust me back to the evening discussion after Daniel's last dream. I think I might have lapsed into another mood, had it not been for the distraction of a scuffing sound from the doorway. I turned and saw Daniel.

None of us dared breathe. The only sound that could be heard was from Daniel's sneakers as he walked slowly towards us. He stopped and looked down at us, his gaze moving from one to another in turn. I felt like a naughty child caught with my hand in the cookie jar. I think we all did.

Then, he smiled. "I believe," he began, as he lowered himself to sit cross-legged on the floor, "That I am Daniel."

2

As I remember, little came out of the conversation that evening, except Daniel's affirmation that his confrontation with the young man in the Mall had been a serious matter. When I persisted with my doubts and made the suggestion that he had, perhaps, baited the inexperienced preacher for personal reasons, Daniel put me squarely in my place. "We need no assistance in making fools of ourselves." He was looking straight at me. "And encouraging the continuance of foolishness does not amuse me."

"Then, why did you ask what you did?"

"I have already told you."

I frowned. "You honestly thought that stupid person could introduce you to Jesus?"

"It was a possibility."

"But Jesus of Nazareth has been dead for two thousand years!" I exclaimed. Despite his reassurance to the contrary, it seemed that he was toying with me. I hoped that to be the case; otherwise, I thought, we might have a very sick man on our hands. I cast a worried glance at Evie, but she averted her eyes. If she shared my concern, she was not prepared to support me at that stage. I pressed on alone: "Really what you wanted was for the young man to think again, to re-evaluate his beliefs, isn't that right?"

Daniel smiled. "If the explanation satisfies you, it would be wrong of me to refute it."

That wasn't what I wanted to hear, but I could see I was getting nowhere on my present tack. For a man of plain words, Daniel certainly knew how to use them to

advantage. I tried something else: "You said before that you thought you knew what the dreams meant, you had discovered why you were here. Was that part of it - what happened today? Is it something to do with..." I almost choked on the word and swallowed. "...religion?"

The far wall had his attention for a moment. "I am here," he said, and turned back to us, "Because it is time."

"Time," repeated Trish in a whisper. She turned the simple word into a wondrous tome. After pondering it for a moment, she asked: "Time for what?"

There was a hush throughout the room. I'm not sure what we expected: words of wisdom, perhaps, or a revelation; a thought-provoking answer, at the very least.

"Time... for me to be here," said Daniel, his expression one of quiet contemplation. "Time to take orders."

"Orders?" Evie was gazing up, her head canted, presumably considering the hidden meaning of this intellectual confession.

I watched Daniel's eyes. Much as they disturbed me, I felt sure that if there was any hint of insanity brewing within the man, the eyes would be the first to betray it. They flickered. My heart missed a beat. "Yes," he said after a brief pause. A broad smile appeared as he stood up. "Orders: who wants what - coffee, tea, Milo, or cup-a-soup?"

His laughter stayed with me for some time and I can still hear it ringing through the house each time I recall the incident. It was important to me because, with a simple, commonplace diversion - the playing of a joke, albeit a mild, harmless one - Daniel had become a real person; not a spectre, not a fairy-tale prophet, nor even a harbinger of inevitable doom, but a human being like the rest of us, one with a very human quality - a sense of humour. It was also a signal event because laughter, as I came to discover, tended to be a rare commodity which Daniel was often reluctant to share. He smiled, of course. He did that a lot, but one was never quite sure what to infer when he did. It is only now, as I look back, that I realise how little he did laugh. Perhaps he knew only too well what his conscience (or his God) expected of him. Any sane man able to see the kind of future Daniel was about to embark upon would find little reason to be amused.

At the time, however, it was cause for inner celebration. I felt much easier in my mind and freer in my conversations with him, less afraid of bruising his sensitivity with thoughtless comment, far less cautious and selective over the questions I put to him. It was as if, with a laugh and a joke, Daniel had swept away most of the broken glass we had been painstakingly avoiding.

It was a comparatively wonderful, refreshing experience. Coupled with our recent return to affluence - or, should I say, relative solvency - life took on a very pleasant hue for all of us. Considering we were five very different individuals - six, counting Queenie - of varying temperaments and backgrounds, our interaction was surprisingly harmonious. When we were all in attendance, the house seemed quite small, but never irritably so. In fact, rarely did an hour go by when at least one of us wasn't laughing. Even the diversity of our occupations and the hours we were forced to keep did little to upset the smooth-running of our commune. Daniel, of course, had more of a pre-occupation than an actual job; however, we accepted it wholeheartedly. Not one of us questioned that his contribution was other than financial, nor did we resent it. Daniel was one of those gifted people who seem to inject meaning into the lives of others by their mere presence.

Actually, to be fair to him, he did supply some of our practical needs. Most days he would go walkabout - that was Tony's terminology. Occasionally, he would return with fruit, vegetables, flowers, and sometimes clothing and linen. Daniel's source of supply

was not, as Tony had suggested, the result of an inadvertent tumble from the back of a truck, but the generous and sympathetic people he had encountered. "It was," he said, "Manna from an inner Heaven." I assumed he was referring to kind hearts; the true spirit of man, if you like. We certainly would not have dreamed of turning it away, and not even Tony pressed for a comprehensive explanation of the circumstances surrounding each new windfall. It was accepted; like the sun rising and setting; like Queenie's morning wake-up call; like Daniel's dreams which would continue to reappear, shattering our comfortable illusions.

The next one occurred slightly after one o'clock early on a Sunday morning. There was no precursor, nothing to indicate Daniel was troubled or out of sorts. He was, in fact, extremely cheerful when he went to bed at ten in the evening. Tony had followed shortly after, having just returned from one of his long, exhaustive trips to the northwest. Evie, Trish, and I were playing cards - gin rummy - and I was losing convincingly, as usual. Ever the faithful companion when food was in the offing, Queenie was watching the opened snack packets with an eagle eye and drooling in anticipation. We were arguing quietly about a variation in the rules and did not notice the dog's departure. Only when we heard her claws pattering along the bare boards of the hallway did we realise she had deserted our gathering. It was assumed she had gone in search of a comfortable bed, and we thought no more of it. Then she howled. It was a most mournful, desperate wail that stopped conversation in mid-sentence and turned our heads to the door.

We scrambled up and hurried towards the sound. The doors to both Tony's and Daniel's rooms were open. Tony's was the first to be reached. It was empty and so was his bed, the covers having been tossed carelessly aside. We continued on to discover the three of them in Daniel's room. Queenie announced our arrival with another howl, her neck at full stretch, baying at some invisible moon. Tony's head jerked round to look at us. He was leaning over the bed, his face a picture of bewilderment and confusion. "He's chuckin' some kind of wobbly," he diagnosed unprofessionally. "Queenie dragged me out of bed. Now she keeps making that bloody racket. I've never seen her like this before."

Tony's euphemism was quite an accurate description of Daniel's condition: he was sitting bolt upright, his eyes staring wide, mouth agape, and his entire body was shaking uncontrollably. His arms flopped uselessly at his sides as if they had no feeling in them and as his head shook, the flesh of his neck and cheeks appeared to be rippling like that of a sky-diver in free-fall. "Should I get the quack?" asked Tony as we rushed to the bedside.

"No," said Evie, climbing onto the bed so that she could hold Daniel close in an attempt to calm his shaking. "It's happened before. There's nothing a doctor can do for him. He'll come out of it soon."

I only hoped she was right. Until that moment, we had only heard about the dreams from Daniel himself. He had never described the physical symptoms of them and I had assumed it was merely a disturbance in the imagination. I was certainly unprepared for the bodily tortures we were witnessing. It seemed like an epileptic fit, although, to be honest, I had never seen one of those either, so I could not be sure. I don't know how long the episode lasted. Thinking back, I would judge it to be only a few minutes, five at the most I guess; however, our inability to quell or even fully understand the spasmodic convulsions which racked Daniel's body made it seem an eternity.

During the seizure, he spoke not a word, nor uttered a sound. Even his breathing was so shallow and regular, a complete contrast to his muscular exertions, that it was almost

imperceptible. While the girls sat beside him in attendance, Tony, Queenie, and I stood by, helpless observers. I felt tension mounting by the second as I awaited the sound I did not want to hear - that dreadful, blood-curdling scream which would herald Daniel's release from his torture. I noticed, as did the others, that the convulsions were beginning to abate and I braced myself in anticipation. The jerking gave way to rapid trembling. He inhaled deeply and held the breath. His arms stiffened and his hands curled into fists. His eyes flickered from side to side. Then, he let it out - a long, long sigh.

He looked around at us, put up a hand to feel the blanket Evie and Trish had wrapped around him. His eyes radiated a weary gratitude, but his lips said nothing. Queenie had moved close. Her chin was resting on the covers at the foot of the bed, her large, intelligent eyes rolled up slightly and fixed on Daniel. As he smiled at her, a wave of understanding seemed to pass between them. She climbed up to settle herself contentedly beside him. At least, two of our number appeared to know what was going on.

Trish asked: "Can I get you something?"

"I must go to church," said Daniel unexpectedly and seemingly unaware of Trish's question.

"Good day for it," commented Tony with a puzzled, apprehensive expression on his face.

"We'll take you later, when you're fully recovered," suggested Evie.

"I have to go *now*," he insisted stonily.

"They're all closed now, mate," advised Tony.

Daniel's brow creased in a frown. "Why? Why are they closed?"

I checked my watch. "It's nearly one thirty - middle of the night."

Daniel turned to Trish. "They are open in the middle of the day, aren't they?"

"Of course," she replied, her answer sounding like a question. "Otherwise people couldn't get in."

"I am a person, and I want to get in now."

"Can't expect preachers to work a twenty-four hour day, pal," put in Tony, "Not for what they get paid. And anyway, I reckon even the old guy in the sky has to sleep sometime."

"He never sleeps," replied Daniel flatly as he fell back onto the pillows and stared at the ceiling.

In the space of the brief silence that ensued, I attempted to understand Daniel's comments. Surely he had not lived his twenty-five years in ignorance of one of the fundamental institutions of our society? Even I, a comparative heathen, knew something of the workings of the church. I was beginning to wonder if he had experienced growing up at all: he was behaving as if he had just this minute popped out of a Christmas cracker.

Daniel said: "When *do* they open?" He sounded extremely tired, defeated.

"I'm not sure exactly," replied Trish, her tone apologetic as if she felt that the nature of her studies ought to have enabled her to provide a more definite reply. "But there will be a service this morning." Her voice wavered with uncertainty as she caught Evie's look of disapproval. She added: "I think you ought to leave it this week, though, until you're stronger."

"I am well enough."

Tony shook his head in dismay. "It'll still be there next week. What's the rush?"

Daniel flicked his eyebrows at Tony. The expression on his face seemed to be saying:

'Will it? Will it still be there?' He actually said: "It was in the dream. I must go." I was getting annoyed. "What's so all-fired important that it can't wait a week?" "I told you," replied Daniel soberly, "It is time."

3

Mankind is a slave to it. I suppose there are other races, distant alien peoples whose lives are ruled by it, too. According to our philosophies, it marches on, heals all wounds, and it will tell; but in the final analysis, probably the greatest single factor contributing to stress in the individual and the ultimate future downfall of our species is our almost blind and total reliance on it. Time, we maintain, is of the essence - and we believe it. Time seems as necessary to us as the air we breathe. Occasionally, it drags and we will it to pass quickly; more often than not, there is simply not enough to achieve what we would like to. I could probably think of a hundred ways to describe it and could ramble on for hours in the process, but I don't believe I could ever have made it sound as mysterious and ominous as Daniel did that night. Suddenly, it was no longer just a word, nor even a consideration relative to a familiar concept. It was like a new discovery, something so different from anything that I ever knew, something so terrible, so wonderful, so complex, that it was impossible to explain. In fact, to even try and describe it would be the ultimate insult, sacrilege.

From that night on, the more I thought about Daniel's 'revelation', the more unsettled I became. Not that I had become neurotic, or anything so melodramatic, but I did begin to take more notice of both the immediate, and the distant world around me. Anything relatively important which happened could, I felt, be associated in some way with the event which Daniel had predicted, whatever that was. Mind you, I could not, for the life of me, see how an earthquake in Japan or a catastrophic train derailment in India had anything to do with Daniel, but I considered them, nevertheless.

I was, of course, assuming that he wasn't playing another joke. If he was, it was a pretty sick one. You have to bear in mind, as well, that I had not known Daniel for long and still considered him to be a very likeable young man, if a rather strange, somewhat disturbed one. Apart from his effect on my mental stability, I had no reason to fear or mistrust him. Neither had I any reason to disbelieve the eventuality of his "timely" event. I only wished I knew what it was. Looking back, I can see how close I must have been to identifying it. I was, in fact, so close that I probably didn't recognise the signs. It wasn't stupid of me - I was just being human.

So, as I've said, I'm glad I was aware of something historical about to unfold, but I wish I had seen it from afar and in retrospect the way most people will. If they are lucky, that will be the case and they will not have to suffer as I have. Hopefully, it will soon be over. There is, however, no use wishing. I was involved and still am. I can't simply watch - I have an obligation to take an active part. I will do what I have to, rightly or wrongly, because it is what I believe to be necessary.

I may go down in history as mankind's greatest enemy, or I may even make a martyr of myself yet. More likely, I will merely cease to exist and no-one will remember. No-one, that is, except for you, Father Michael. You will remember. Whether you will do so with kindness, pity, or antipathy, I have no idea. But like it or not, you *will* remember.

"What do I wear?" Evie was standing before the open wardrobe, scratching her head. It was Sunday morning, a few hours after Daniel's latest dream and we were preparing to go to church.

"Clothes are quite fashionable this time of year," I replied, not in the kindest of tones. I was dreading this experience: at home, Daniel had become as refreshing as a tonic and as necessary to our health, both mental and physical, as a balanced diet; wandering the streets freely, he was an erratic pinball, an unpredictable, if sometimes worrying entertainment. In the great outdoors, at least, he had space; in the confines of a church even God might be a little apprehensive of Daniel's attendance. We had tried our utmost to dissuade him, but his determination was unshakeable - Daniel was going to church, no matter what.

Evie pulled out some clothes on a hanger, studied them critically, then thrust them back into the wardrobe. "Help me, Barry," she pleaded. "I haven't been inside a church since I was a kid."

"Neither have I."

She turned and glared at me. Her mouth fell open. She looked me up and down. "You can't go dressed like that!"

I was in the process of tucking a sleeveless T shirt into my faded, acid-washed jeans. "Why not?"

"Because... because you can't, that's why! We're going to *church*, for Christ's sake, not the bloody footy!" Her legs were astride, hands on hips, her chin thrust forward defiantly. "Honestly, Barry, sometimes you give me the screaming pip! Normally, you'd be bending over backwards to remain inconspicuous, but any mention of religion and you go wading in like a Mallee bull! Are you just being contrary and bloody-minded as usual, or are you afraid if you dress conservatively that you might start believing in God?"

I tried to appear phlegmatic, even though my face was overheating. "Not much chance of that with me, but I suspect you might be."

It was intended as a joke, a friendly dig, but Evie didn't seem to take it that way. Standing naked before me as she was, I couldn't help but notice the sudden tightening of her torso muscles. Her jaw also stiffened. "Well, maybe I am!" she said, and confirmed the statement with a dipping of her eyelids. "Maybe there is a God after all! Maybe I just never looked hard enough!" She turned away.

In my estimation, that was quite a shocking admission, one which convinced me even more that we were doing the wrong thing by taking Daniel to church. If he had that much influence over Evie, where would it end? I tried to keep my tone light-hearted as I added smugly: "And maybe Daniel's charisma is beginning to take effect."

"Daniel's got nothing whatever to do with this!" She tossed her head in fury.

"Oh," I said in surprise, "Pardon me. I had a sneaking suspicion - just a tiny inkling, mind - that Daniel was the reason for all this fuss. I wonder where I could have got that idea?"

Evie produced an unintelligible snort of frustration. Then she glared at the floor between us. "So, you aren't going to change, then?"

"What for?"

She brought her head up slowly. Her smile was wicked. "Okay, you arrogant bugger! Then, I'm going like this! How do you like them apples, smartypants?"

I gave a small, unsure chuckle. "Don't be ridiculous." I watched as she went to the

bed, picked up a canvas bag and slung it casually over her shoulder. She was certainly playing her advantage for all that it was worth. What she failed to realise was that I could see right through her bluff. My supreme confidence wavered slightly as she padded across the bedroom, and a bit more as she reached for the door knob; but I just knew that she wouldn't go through with it.

She glanced back over her shoulder. "Come on, or we'll be late."

She was taking it right to the edge. I reminded myself not to play poker with her, ever, and I waited for her to abort her suicide mission. Then the door was open and Evie was stepping out into the hallway. "Alright, alright!" I was up and running. Grabbing her shoulder, I dragged her back into the room and slammed the door, then leaned heavily against it. "You win," I panted, my heart beating nineteen to the dozen, "I'll change, okay? I'll wear whatever you want. Now, will you put some clothes on before one of the others sees you?"

Her expression was fixed, noncommittal. Then something pinked snaked out from between her pursed lips as she poked her tongue at me. She withdrew it. A dizzy smile spread across her face and she strutted her way back to the wardrobe, hips swinging provocatively like a Hollywood starlet of the fifties.

5

Our arrival at the church certainly turned a few heads. It also promoted some half-smiles to float in our direction and laced the prim, cordial atmosphere with suspicion. I can only conclude that the tepid reception was generated by our mere, alien presence and not the cut of our clothes because, with the exception of Daniel who was wearing (wouldn't you know it) jeans and a T shirt, we were all casually, but suitably attired. When I say *all*, I refer to myself, Daniel and the two ladies: Tony had elected to stay behind to work on his truck. That particular excuse was the end of a long, sad list he had employed to support his case for abstinence. Queenie would have been only too delighted to deputise for her master and had actually started out with us. Her enthusiasm was nipped in the bud and she spent the rest of the morning tied to the gate post where, Tony told us later, she had flopped down and stared gloomily along the road, whimpering and whining, and being about 'as miserable as a pork chop that had missed the barbecue'.

I found it hard to sympathise with her; in fact, I would have gladly swapped places. As we entered quietly and I was able to look on the backs of heads set out in neat yet incomplete rows, I had the distinct feeling that we were gate-crashing a very private party. Once into the main body of the church, I was sure of it.

Churches are like libraries - it is almost impossible to avoid making a noise of some kind, and when you do there is always someone to berate you for it. If it was not bad enough that we were already conspicuous, we were also late and the rear pews were full to overflowing. We tip-toed our way down the central aisle and seemed to be caught in some acoustic warp which amplified the smallest sounds and projected them outwards to the farthest corners of the building. Heads snapped round at us. Christian eyes blazed with hellfire and damnation. They followed us and continued boring their displeasure into our backs after we had passed. Whispers rippled through the congregation.

I was aware of a compulsion growing within me. It was the kind which breeds extroverts and engenders a need to behave in an outlandish manner, not necessarily to attract attention; more by way of a protest. I was unsure what I would have done if I'd

had the courage: maybe called out a profanity, or asked someone: who was topping the bill? Fortunately, my natural cowardice held all such whims in check.

There was ample seating further forward and I was beginning to wonder if the regulars knew something that we didn't. Perhaps those in the rear were just shy. On the other hand, there might be some special significance to retaining a seat as far from the altar and as close to the exit as was humanly possible. Our party slowed and began to shuffle around near the first vacant seats. Some people towards the centre of the pew next to us slid along, making more room for us, or creating a safe margin *from* us. We looked at each other, our eyes saying: *'Shall we? This is alright, isn't it? Or would you rather sit somewhere else?'* Daniel made the decision for us and strode on. I tossed a look of dismay at Evie and followed him. He led us to the front of the Nave and sat down in the very first row just left of the aisle.

I groaned. We had the entire pew and a quarter of the church to ourselves. A little old lady with a walking stick and wearing heavy support hose was the sole occupant of the seating on the other side of the aisle. I fully expected her to glare her disapproval at us, but she just stared ahead through her pink-rimmed spectacles, apparently oblivious of us or anything else of a remotely earthly persuasion. Evie chose to sit next to Daniel while I, preferring not to step out of character, secreted myself between her and Trish. I was glad that Evie had stood her ground on the clothing issue: my brown shirt and pants blended in quite well with the polished wooden seat. I made myself as small and insignificant as I was able and waited.

The organ had been buzzing a rambling, unknown dirge. A door clicked open somewhere behind the pillars supporting the large domed roof above the altar. The humble organist was transformed instantaneously into the Phantom of the Opera, releasing all stops which enabled him to belt out the anonymous tune, but in a far more emotional way. I could hear the shuffling of feet. A man in a black cassock and white billowing surplice appeared. He was carrying a stout, polished wooden pole atop which was a shining, ornate brass cross. As he moved along the far wall, others similarly dressed followed him. They, however, had no crosses, and the man who did, knew it well.

The procession ambled its way to the back, turned behind the rear pews and turned again to make one final, ostentatious parade along the central aisle. I watched the heads as they rustled past us and on into the Chancel. Not one turned in our direction, not until the Vicar passed. He greeted us with a small, almost imperceptible nod. We had been noticed!

While the server racked his cross, the choir filed into their polished-wood stalls. The Vicar took his place, sorted through books and papers while waiting patiently for the organist to suffocate his bellowing rendition.

Affixed to the walls either side of the Chancel were two small boards on which had been displayed a series of numbers. Having assumed that they were directly related to those in the hymn book at rest on the shelf in front of my pew, I had already turned to the first on the list. The Vicar must have known this and so, without even so much as a leer in my direction, he invited us to sing the third one down. I was not alone in my consternation, or so I gathered from the irritated mutter of disapproval which rose from behind, coupled with the rustling of pages as the congregation panicked to find the right words before the organist finished his introduction.

I cannot say that it was all that I had hoped for, but certain facets reflected my expectations. The ancient Music Hall line came to mind - nobody leaves till the fat lady sings. Well, she did. To be more precise, *they* did, accompanied by moderately

upholstered and even thin ladies. These were joined by hen-pecked husbands, virgin daughters, reluctant sons, elderly and not-so-elderly spinsters and confirmed bachelors. The choir made a valiant attempt to compensate for the congregation's errant vocalisation, while the organist tried his damndest to drown the lot of them and almost succeeded.

In my opinion, the entire affair was a shameful waste of a Sunday morning and nothing that I saw or heard came even close to changing my mind. The pomp, the ceremony, the tinsel and trappings, all seemed remote and distinct from what most people regard as normality. I could only assume that the spectacle was engineered to enamour and seduce the gullible and the hopelessly lost. If that had been the original intention, somewhere along the way the reins had slipped and the horse was beginning to wander: there was no enthusiasm evident and even the Vicar - although, to give him his due, he did sing with gusto, if a mite flat - even he seemed bored by the routine.

The incantations (which was how I understood them) and the responses were delivered apathetically, their true meanings lost through frequent repetition. The congregation mumbled its way through the prayers in a low emotionless monotone and I would be surprised if more than a handful really thought about what they were saying. The highlight of the morning was not the sermon or its content as the vicar might have hoped, but a babe-in-arms in the third row which ceased its crying momentarily to vomit down the front of its mother's dress. The gentle Reverend, appropriately compassionate, paused while it was carried gurgling away by a pale-faced lady dripping bile from her skirt and muttering apologies.

I daresay you may be disappointed, even offended by my comments, Father Michael. Please understand, it is not my intention to be disrespectful, neither of your brand of religion, nor that of the opposition; or of any other, come to that. I am simply relating the thoughts going through my head on that occasion because they are pertinent to what came next. Remember, based on his apparent naivety and seemingly innocent curiosity, I had no idea that Daniel might be having similar misgivings, and certainly never expected his forthcoming reactions. Had I known his plan was so radical, I wouldn't have agreed to go there in the first place.

In that regard, my time was not solely devoted to cynical interpretations of Christian religious practices. In fact, much of the first half-hour was spent casting worried and surreptitious glances in Daniel's direction: I was afraid he might unthinkingly do something inappropriate. He had given us no indication of his reasons for wanting to attend church, nor of his intentions while he was there. He had only offered those few, awe-inspiring words - 'It is time'. I was keeping my fingers crossed that the *time* in question would be after the service and not during it. Despite my concern, he had made no moves to embarrass us or disrupt the proceedings. He had merely sat quietly. Even when everyone else was standing, Daniel remained seated - watching, listening, absorbing.

As the sermon dragged on, I could hear people fidgeting behind and coins tinkling. Someone dropped a handful on the floor. A twenty cent piece rolled out into the centre of the aisle and flopped on its side, waiting to be retrieved. It never was, not while I was watching. I saw it as a sign, not just of spiralling inflation, but that our ordeal might soon be over.

"...be amongst you and remain with you always," chanted the Vicar in closing. "Now, let us sing, hymn..."

A sigh of relief broke from the congregation. Legs stretched, people whispered and the one who had been sniffing all through the sermon was at last able to blow his nose.

The organist played an introductory line. The choir and Vicar began the hymn, followed shortly by the ragged lowing of the assembly.

Daniel sat, listening, unsmiling.

Unsmiling.

We were all standing; Daniel was seated.

I should have realised something was afoot when he rose. He stepped out into the aisle and began walking casually towards the Chancel.

6

We all hesitated, then Evie moved to go after him. She scowled as I held her back. I am not sure why I even bothered. I have already expressed my views on religion and this particular celebration of the Anglican variety, but I do respect the right of people to worship the God of their choice in whatever manner they deem fit, provided they do not interfere with the similar rights of others. I would hope that this was my reason for restraining Evie, believing that further disruption could only compound the problem; however, I have a sneaking suspicion that my motives were not entirely honourable and that I was intrigued to see how the situation would develop.

Daniel had ascended the few marble steps and diverged to his right towards the lectern. He studied the single fluted column, then the ornate brass eagle it supported. The polished metal bird was ready to take-off and, presumably, might have but for the heavy Bible opened across and resting on its outspread wings. Daniel stepped onto the small raised dais and glanced at the book for a moment.

The hymn began to falter as the fortitude of the congregation shuddered and they either lost their places or stopped singing completely. A contagious giggle spread along the two lines of choirboys facing each other across the Chancel. Members of the bass and tenor sections behind them leaned forward to restore order with a few curt hisses and grunts of disapproval. The boys let into the hymn with renewed vigour and broad grins on their faces. Tucked away behind the choir stalls, the organist pounded his keys and rearranged his stops in sweet oblivion. The Reverend was genuflecting before the altar, saying *au revoir* to his God, unaware that his church was undergoing an inspection.

Daniel gave the pulpit a sweeping, cursory glance before turning into the Chancel. He advanced steadily towards the altar, gazing about at architectural features and carved wood furnishings, unabashed by the bewildered, amused and, in certain cases, horrified faces of the choir. He reached the altar rail.

The server who had led the procession with his brass cross moved from his seat at the far end of the choir stalls to intercept. He hesitated as Daniel paused with one foot on the raised edge of the Sanctuary, perhaps hoping (and praying?) that the intruder might abort his sacrilegious pilgrimage of his own accord. His wide-angle appreciation completed, Daniel stepped into the Sanctuary and began to wander across the mosaic floor for a closer inspection of the mystical recess.

With the opportunity for timely intervention past, the server hovered uncertainly beside the choir stalls. There was a look of stunned disbelief on his face as he turned to the senior choristers for support and counsel. A large, ruddy-faced man with a heavy black beard and bushy eyebrows glared and puffed his way from the bass section half way along the stall, treading on toes and knocking books to the floor as he passed them. After glowering at Daniel and receiving no response, he leaned against the server and began whispering.

Although we witnessed the resultant confrontation, the actual dialogue was lost to us as the organist, being hurriedly informed of the drama by a nervous lady contralto, started the same hymn from the beginning again. I have pieced together what was overheard by those closest to the scene, but cannot vouch for its authenticity.

The server and the man from the choir entered the Sanctuary just as the Vicar was rising. All three converged on Daniel. He was working his way along the semi-circular wall, studying paintings. They depicted, as one might expect, the important events of Jesus' life, each rendered in an individual alcove bordered by rambling Gothic sculptures in bas-relief. Daniel leaned close to inspect the workmanship. The clergyman stretched out a hand to Daniel's shoulder and pulled him back gently.

"Excuse me."

Daniel turned and smiled. "I was hoping to see an example of genuine frescos, but it seems to be oil paint."

"What do you think you're playing at?" grumbled the bearded chorister.

"I shall have to ask you to return to your seat," said the Vicar in a pleasant voice, at the same time darting a frown of rebuke at the first speaker.

"I would just like to look around," explained Daniel. "I won't damage anything."

"But we're in the middle of a service," said the Vicar.

"I thought it was almost finished," commented Daniel as he moved to the next painting.

"Not quite," said the Reverend, hurrying after him. "We still have the final procession." He tugged nervously at his collar which was probably becoming rather damp.

"If you don't leave," growled the man with the beard, catching hold of Daniel's elbow, "We'll have to..."

"*Mister* Parkinson, please..." appealed the Vicar. "I don't believe that will be necessary." He switched his voice to a more sagely tone. "We must remember that this is God's house."

"Oh?" Daniel turned to face the Vicar, then looked at the other two men. "So, I *am* in the right place! I was beginning to wonder."

The server had been silent up to that point, but Daniel's remark had apparently touched a personal nerve. "What the devil do you mean by that?" His words trailed off as soon as he had uttered the profanity and he mumbled an apology, casting a terrified glance at the domed ceiling above.

The Vicar ignored the indiscretions, both Daniel's and that of the servant of his church. "If you would care to return to the congregation," he suggested, diplomatically, "We can meet afterwards to discuss your problem."

Daniel frowned at him. "I don't have a problem, but I think *you* do."

The Vicar chose to make no comment. He was too busy trying to coax Daniel away from the altar towards which he was moving. "Please leave and allow us to finish our worship," he pleaded in exasperation.

"You see," continued Daniel as if he had never been interrupted. He stretched out his hand. "It's a question of barriers." He stroked the embossed design embroidered on the ornate altar cloth.

"Please don't touch that," complained the Reverend.

"You have erected them to distance yourselves from the people. You refer to them as the Children of God, but you treat them like an audience. You distract them with ostentatious displays and icons while you perform mystical ceremonies to invoke the spirits of your fantasy world..."

"This has gone far enough!" blustered the Vicar.

"...with outmoded, meaningless incantations. You refuse to allow them onto your

stage for fear of them discovering the truth."

There had been commotion at the rear of the building for some minutes. I turned round to discover that many of the congregation in the back seats had played their jokers and left. The more intrigued held on, watching as a small band of concerned vigilantes edged their way along the east wall of the Nave towards the seat of the disturbance. The choir had, in the meantime, almost reached the end of the hymn for the second time.

"I resent your blasphemous implications, young man," croaked the Vicar in a low voice, "But I do not intend to give you satisfaction by playing your game. Have your say, if you must. Present your misguided version of the truth, then leave!"

"It's right here." Daniel swept his arm around the Sanctuary. "Nothing but a few baubles and some fancy artwork. Not even a rabbit that pops out of a hat."

The Reverend was wringing his hands in desperation. "The congregation isn't here for miracles! These people come for hope, for salvation!"

Daniel shook his head sadly. "And you give them a fashion show and a singalong, then send them home. Look at them, Man!" Daniel pointed at the congregation with an outstretched hand. "Look into their eyes! Do you think they really believe all this mumbo-jumbo? They come because they're confused and frightened, not for entertainment. They've nowhere else to go. They spend their lives in fear of misery and poverty, of exploitation, of robbery, of rape, of murder, and of growing old alone. They come to you for *protection*, Man! They want some answers. They come because they're not sure any more that there *is* a God, but they want so desperately for someone to prove to them that there is!"

Daniel glared into the dumbfounded Vicar's eyes. "And what do you do? You offer the same old, tired remedies and excuses you've been doling out for centuries! When are you going to wise up? How long will it take before you and your precious church actually goes out and helps them to solve their problems? Why don't you begin with the people here? Find out what's troubling them. Protect them against being mugged and ripped off. Help them not to be afraid of wars and nuclear holocaust..."

The vigilantes had reached the back of the choir stalls and were creeping along the altar rail at the front of the Sanctuary.

Daniel ignored them. "...Inspire their foundering courage..."

They were entering the sanctuary,

"...Lead them..."

advancing on Daniel in a huddle,

"...to the factories and the laboratories..."

crowding round him,

"...and stop the bombs and weapons of death being made."

then, bustling him to the opening in the rail;

"Make their lives safer, better."

down the single step,

"Show them that there..."

along the rail towards the vestry,

"...*is* a God who cares about them and..."

through the door.

"...*loves them!*"

The organ trebled in volume, rattling windows.

The Vicar straightened his surplice.

The server hurriedly took the cross from its rack and began to lead the procession out.

If there was ever a time for diplomacy, it had arrived. I considered it unlikely that any real harm would come to Daniel, but, judging by the expressions on their faces, Evie and Trish believed exactly the opposite. I could sense Evie's temper rising to the boil and her face was like thunder. Trish was simply horrified. Evie was first into the central aisle. Trish would have been a close second, except that I was in her way, a minor inconvenience resolved by an anxious push. I stumbled after the pair of them.

The procession was half-way along the Chancel, the senior choristers still filing out from the stalls while the choirboys trudged after the cross, smirking, sniggering and casting backward glances in the direction of the vestry. It being their ultimate destination, they were, no doubt, anticipating a delightful, free show which they would be able to enjoy from the best seats in the house.

I don't believe Evie had even thought about this as a progressive eventuality. In fact, it was apparent that she was not thinking at all. She marched across the procession's intended course, past the lectern and turned into the corridor behind the choir stalls. I moved as quickly as my disability would allow, offering a weak, apologetic smile as I passed the old lady in the front row. She was standing, supporting her frailty with a combination of her walking stick and the bookshelf in front of her pew. She turned towards the aisle. I wondered if the disruptions had confused her to the point where she had forgotten about the procession which was due to pass her at any moment. If she continued in the same direction at a similar speed, she would be the cause of yet another interesting diversion. It was turning into a service which the congregation would remember for many a year to come.

As I diverged into the passageway, I could hear raised voices, even above the thunderous recital booming from the organ. Evie and Trish were on the landing at the top of a small flight of stone steps, engaged in a heated argument with a man who was refusing them entry to the vestry. The door behind him opened and a head poked out. The girls moved suddenly on the man, pushing him backwards against the heavy, polished door. It swung inwards, taking the inquisitive head with it and the conglutinated trio disappeared through the entrance.

I limped up the steps, cursing my leg and the architect of this superfluous obstruction, certain that my slow progress would result in the door being slammed in my face; but I was lucky: the girls' timely breach of the ecclesiastical defences had resulted in utter confusion. The vestry was Bedlam. It was only ever a small room. Considering the number of choristers and other church officials who might reasonably be expected to be in attendance at any one time, it was inadequate, to say the least. The scene which greeted me confirmed this. Including Daniel, Evie, and Trish, there were nine people milling and shuffling about. They were arguing and shouting all at once; bumping into one another; cannoning off chairs and against the wooden lockers which lined three of the four walls. Two men were attempting, unsuccessfully, to block the girls' advance towards the group which was holding Daniel at bay in one corner, while an ageing, bespectacled skirmisher was flitting about in no-man's land, adding to the confusion.

A small gap had opened to one side and I took advantage of it to join the fray. The roving auxiliary spied me and altered course to intercept my flanking movement. Whereas I had youth on my side, the little man, despite his age, had a decided advantage with respect to manoeuvrability and was soon barring my way. Producing the fiercest expression I could muster, I let out a deep-throated roar. He balked, his eyes popping behind a pair of smeared bifocals. I hopped around him and blundered

on to discover Daniel on his knees and bent double in one corner clutching his stomach, gasping for air. The three men were still there with their backs to me. They had stepped away from their fallen adversary and were looking down at him. I pushed through between the two closest to me. Someone tugged at my shirt. I ignored them.

"You shouldn't have done that, John," I heard someone say in a distressed tone.

"It just happened," growled a rough voice to my left.

I glared at the speaker. It was the heavy-set chorister with the beard, his right fist still clenched. "You stupid oaf!" I snarled at him. I had reached Daniel and tried to lower myself to inspect his injuries, but my knee refused to bend any further. Pain shot up my leg causing me to grimace. I staggered against one of the cupboards and called out: "Evie! Trish! Quickly - Daniel's hurt!"

"I'm all... righ..t," gasped Daniel, trying to straighten. "Just need... a moment... catch my breath."

Trish was by his side, brushing hair out of his eyes. I could see her own were moist. "Oh, Daniel," was all she said.

Evie was more eloquent. Having satisfied herself that Daniel was not seriously incapacitated, she spun on the bearded man. "You bloody gorilla! Call yourself a Christian? Couldn't wait to put the boot in, could you?"

"I didn't start this," grumbled the man defensively. "He asked for everything he got. I was just defending myself."

The three of us looked at him in amazement. I, for one, could not believe Daniel had provoked a violent reaction and said: "Bulldust!"

"He put his hands up to strike me!" bleated the chorister in an attempt to redeem himself.

"Like this?" asked Evie, simulating Daniel's habitual greeting.

"Both hands," corrected the man, as if it made a difference.

Evie's head was shaking slowly, despondently. She stared into the man's dark eyes, a look of sad resignation on her face. "He was just saying peace and friendship, you Neanderthal sicko! Why don't you go look around the paintings in your own damned church? There's bound to be at least one showing Jesus doing the same thing. Would you have given him a bunch of fives as well?" She glared at the unrepentant aggressor, then shook her head again. "Don't bother to answer that."

"There's no need to take that tone, young lady," chimed in the little man who had been stalking me. "I'm sure Mister Parkinson didn't mean..."

"He *meant* to do what he *did*!" snapped Evie. "And thank you for telling me his name: if my solicitor decides to take this matter further, he'll want to know who to contact." She returned her attention to the big bearded man. "Then, Mister Parkinson, maybe you'll find out what it's like to be nailed to a cross!"

"Now then, now then," said a breathless voice from the doorway. It was the Vicar, returning hurriedly from outside the front of the church where he had hastily greeted the members of the congregation, then left them in the capable hands of the verger and the entire procession which had concluded its parade in the courtyard instead of the vestry. He bustled over to the group around Daniel, the dismay on his face intensifying as he encountered a bristling Evie. When his squinting eyes fell on Daniel who had still not fully recovered, his brow wrinkled in a frown. "What *is* going on?"

"Goliath, here's been chucking his weight around," spat Evie.

"Goliath?" stammered the Vicar. "I don't understand."

"Neither do I," Evie proclaimed. "He tried to punch Daniel's lights out! What kind of a circus are you running here?"

"I've had enough of this!" snarled Parkinson who had temporarily dropped into the background. He tried to push his way back to Evie. "I'm damned if I'll stand by and have my name smeared!"

Evie shrank away, placing the clergyman between herself and the advancing chorister. I knew that she was not afraid, but the Vicar didn't and accepted the theatrical display as genuine. He raised a protective arm, flaring his surplice like the wing of a giant bird. "Mister Parkinson, will you please control your ardour! Now, my dear," he said over his shoulder to Evie, "If you and your friends would like to go through, we'll see if we can't talk this over." He indicated a closed door in one wall. Then, he glowered at Parkinson and added, as much for the errant chorister's benefit as ours: "In a mature, peaceable manner."

Much as I enjoy the cut and thrust of lively debate, I felt that the situation was beyond amicable salvation at that time and that further discussion would only rekindle the embers of passion still glowing hot. "Thank you, Vicar," I said, hoping to sound like the voice of authority taking charge at last, "But I don't believe now is a very propitious time. Is there a back way out?"

"I'm alright now," said Daniel, "And there are things that need to be discussed."

"Later," said Evie in a matronly tone, "When the atmosphere's less hostile." She turned to the Vicar. "I'm sorry about the upset, but he's not been himself lately. The doctor says it's a virus."

"He's a raving lunatic," chimed in Parkinson, on cue. "He should be put away."

"You're the one who needs locking up," said Trish, able to express her true feelings now that Daniel seemed to have recovered. "Sadistic bully!"

The Vicar could see what was about to happen and stretched out his linen wings, gathering us up and leading us to a small flight of stairs which led down to a door at the bottom of a dark passageway. "If you're careful, you ought to be able to avoid the crowds," he said, then added: "Should your friend wish to talk, I am always available, but I would prefer it was not during a service."

"Thank you, Vicar," I said and waited to allow Evie and Trish to escort Daniel down the stairs and, I hoped, out of harm's way. "We may be in touch."

The Reverend stood at the head of the stairs, casting his shadow over us until the outer door opened, filling the passage with sunlight. "God be with you," he said.

Daniel stopped and turned to look up at him, smiling. "Yes, he is."

Evie bundled him quickly through the door.

Had I the capacity for reading minds the way Daniel appeared able to do, I might have foreseen the disastrous consequences of our Sunday morning outing. If I had possessed any sense at all, I would have taken Daniel to a church well away from our home. Unfortunately, I hadn't done either!

There was always the possibility that living in the same neighbourhood as the church which Daniel had deigned to visit his attentions on might be of little consequence: we rarely spoke to the people next door and knew nobody in the district, nor took much notice of them; but just because we respected their privacy and anonymity did not mean that they would necessarily reciprocate. When we arrived home safely without further incident and unassailed by vengeful Christians, I began to regard my apprehension as cynical pessimism and rather paranoid. For a few days afterwards, I was still plagued by doubt and would imagine reproachful eyes glaring at me when my back was turned

and could not help feeling that I was the subject of whispered conversations in the street and at my place of work.

One evening, during the following week, just when I had convinced myself that my phobia was psychosomatic, there came a knock at the front door. I went to answer it and was only part way along the corridor when the impatient caller knocked again, louder the second time. I muttered annoyance under my breath and slowed my pace appreciably. There was another knock, followed by a voice calling through the door: "Hello, is anyone there?" I strode the last few paces in my own inimitable fashion and yanked the door open. Holding it ajar and still shuddering, I stared coldly and in silence at the individual on the step.

He was hardly more than a schoolboy. His suit and neatly trimmed, curly hair were both unfashionable and far too mature for his age. The white shirt and sober tie were out of place on such a warm evening. My natural wariness increased at the sight of an open notebook in his hand. "Ah, good evening, Sir. Sorry to disturb you." He spoke in the oscillating yodel of a youth whose voice was on the verge of breaking. "I was hoping to speak to Daniel. Is he in?"

Had it not been for the notepad and the way he was peering over my shoulder into the dimly lit hallway, I might have assumed him to be someone Daniel had encountered while on walkabout and answered him more openly; as it was, I decided in favour of the cautious approach. "Who wants to know?"

"Ah." The youngster fumbled the notebook into his other hand, then began searching inside his jacket. He produced a wallet, tried to open it and dropped the notepad, stooped to retrieve it and dropped the wallet. He eventually rose with both items and removed a business card which he handed to me. "Carlton Jenner, journalist," he announced proudly. Trying hard not to smile, I examined his card, fancying I could almost smell the fresh ink. It provided me with his name, which I imagined to be an embellishment of the inadequate one his parents had provided him with, and his telephone number; nothing more. I passed the card back to him. "Keep it," he offered magnanimously. "I've got plenty more."

I'll bet you have, you little twerp. I wondered if my own jealousy from being rejected by the journalistic profession was not responsible for my unkind feelings toward the boy. "What's your rag?" I asked, folding the card and stuffing it into the front pocket of my jeans.

My lack of respect for his lovely new business card seemed to horrify him momentarily, then he frowned and looked uncertainly down at his clothes. "My what?"

"Your paper. For whom do you work?"

"Oh." He chuckled nervously at his misinterpretation. "Community News." It was almost too quiet to be heard.

Now I did smile. Not that I had anything against local newspapers. In fact, this particular group was a cut above the rest and I would have traded my position at the supermarket any day for this lad's job; but it was hardly the New York Times. Doubtless, the young reporter shared my sentiments which was the reason for his reluctance to advertise his employer's name unsolicited. I also suspected that this was a solo venture and that his boss had not the faintest idea what young Carlton was up to. "Well, Mister Jenner, what makes you think there is anyone by the name of Damien here?"

He frowned and hurriedly consulted his book. "Daniel. I'm looking for Daniel."

"Daniel, then." I waited.

"Er..." He flicked over the page, then looked at the number on the door. "Yes, this is

the place. She was very clear about..."

"Who was?"

"Miss... er..." He coughed and lowered his eyes, having realised that he had almost breached a confidentiality. "I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to say. May I see Daniel?"

"Daniel who?"

"Is there more than one?"

"I didn't say that."

"Then, someone called Daniel does live here?"

"I didn't say that either."

"Well," said the young journalist, not, apparently, as ruffled as I would have hoped I had made him. "If there were someone called Daniel living here, would you let me talk to him?"

"I doubt it."

"Can I quote you on that?"

I shrugged. "If you want to, but I don't know why you would."

"And you're not going to let me in?" He was scribbling furiously in his book.

"Certainly not."

He sucked the end of his pencil prior to pointing it at me. "And you are Mister...?"

"That's right," I said, "Goodnight, Carlton Jenner, journalist." And I shut the door. I would have hoped that the matter would end there, but the following evening I discovered to my surprise and dismay that someone had taken young Jenner seriously. I was in the shower at the time, having not long returned home from work. Evie was in the back garden and had left the door open. Daniel just happened to go out the front at that time and also left the door ajar. The situation was ripe for a gale to roar through the house, slamming one door, the other, or both of them. When this happened, Evie went to investigate.

She discovered Daniel in the front garden talking to a man who was taking notes. As soon as she learned that he was a reporter, she sent him packing in no uncertain terms, but not before the damage had been done. Our copy of the Fremantle Gazette was usually delivered on Tuesday mornings, so we had to wait until then to see whether Daniel's story was even newsworthy. Apparently, it was, just. The article read:

UNBELIEVER CHALLENGES THE CHURCH

The morning service at the Anglican Church of All Saints in East Fremantle was disrupted last Sunday when 26 year old Daniel Shippart, unemployed labourer, also of East Fremantle, decided to challenge the teachings and practices of the Christian Church.

He did so during the closing stages of the service and was, according to sources, abusive, blasphemous and disrespectful, upsetting many of the patrons and clergy.

A scuffle took place when Shippart refused to depart voluntarily and it was found necessary to forcibly remove him from the premises. It is also alleged that, at the time, blows were exchanged.

The laying of charges is under consideration.

I felt myself coming to the boil and thrust up from the table. "Shameless liars!" I ripped the newspaper in half on my way to the bin and tore it again before tossing it on the rubbish in disgust.

"Barry," said Evie, frowning, "What did you do that for?"

"It's the best place for gutter reporting!" I watched in amazement as she walked over to retrieve the remains from the bin. "You don't want to keep it, surely?"

Evie scowled back at me. "Don't be so bloody silly, but in your attempt to prove your emotional instability, you've also annihilated this week's TV programmes!"

9

The incident at the church simmered in our thoughts and was a regular item of conversation for some days. The newspaper article compounded our concern. Not that it said a great deal. When I had calmed down sufficiently to re-evaluate the piece, I was forced to retract my criticism and had to admit it to be a relatively accurate report, albeit such a brief resume as to invite obvious inferences. When we asked Daniel how he felt about being labelled a lawless, dole-bludging, trouble-making infidel, he replied: "They see what they are meant to see. They will do what they have to do."

"Doesn't that worry you?" asked Trish. "The world's full of nasty, vindictive people. Next time you could be seriously hurt."

"I hope there won't be a next time," I added hastily. Daniel looked at me condescendingly. I frowned, knowing only too well what he meant. "There will be another time, won't there?"

He smiled gently. "There will be many. Unfortunately, not all will be resolved as simply as this affair."

"You're not going to cool it, then?" said Evie. It was more a statement of fact than a question. Her concern was transmitted to her hand which squeezed mine so tightly that my fingers began to go numb. "You'll keep pushing, and they'll keep pushing back."

He shrugged. "It must be done. I cannot change who I am."

"I reckon you're a few bricks short of a load, mate," put in Tony. He had just come from the shower and was towelling his dark, unruly hair. "You've got a death wish. What're you trying to do, anyway? You can't beat the system: might as well live with it."

"The system is an excuse," replied Daniel, his smile fading. "*People* are the system; greed is the system; dishonesty and mistrust are the system. If the *people* will change, so will the system."

"And you reckon you can do it?" Tony chuckled. "One bloke?"

"That is not why I'm here."

"Why, then?" Evie released my hand and leaned towards Daniel expectantly. "Why are you here?"

"I have already told you..."

"Because it is time," I interrupted, not even attempting to hide my disappointment and frustration. "God knows what for!"

His smile returned. "I knew you would understand."

We didn't, of course, and we weren't the only ones. That same evening, someone threw a stone through the front window. It was always a possibility that the culprit was a mischievous child with nothing better to do, but the content of a note Evie discovered in the mail box the next day seemed too closely related to make it seem anything other than a deliberate act of terrorism. The words were boldly printed on a small sheet of

blue writing paper and appeared to be a quotation from the Bible - Trish later informed us that it was from the Book of Acts: *'Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee'*.

At least it wasn't from John which probably ruled out the Jehovah's Witnesses. Not that we ever thought it might be. There was no doubt in any of our minds that someone from All Saints was responsible for both the note and the act of vandalism. Only Daniel expressed no opinion, at least not regarding the letter, because Evie had decided to keep it from him. It was, I thought at the time, a wise decision, but an irrelevant one, as it turned out: the following Sunday when Daniel failed to show up for breakfast, Trish went to look in on him and found his room empty.

There were no prizes for guessing where he had gone. I hoped in one way that it was not to All Saints, his welcome there having been well and truly outstayed; but in another, there were too many churches for us to cover on foot with our limited resources. We arrived about the same time as the police. At first, there was no sign of Daniel, but it was reasonable to assume that, not only was he amongst the large gathering of people in the church courtyard, but was also the star attraction. As we came closer, the sound of the organ could be heard from inside the church. The voices singing the hymn were not as loud, but the fact that they were in evidence did confirm that a service was underway and had not been totally disrupted by what was going on outside.

I would have been surprised if it had been, for the courtyard meeting was orderly, or so it seemed, the attention of its members being directed towards the centre of the crowd. What worried me was the presence of the police and why they had been called. My silent question was answered when a tall man in a dark suit stepped quickly from the shadows of the doorway and hurried towards the police car parked in the street. Four uniformed officers were alighting and the man began speaking with them, casting frequent glances at the assembly behind him and occasionally pointing an accusatory finger. Trish had also seen the informer. "Damned Judas!" she hissed.

"We'd better get him away from that mob before the wallopers decide what they're going to do," advised Tony who had joined us on this occasion out of genuine concern for the two girls and not for Daniel who, he said, 'deserved a hefty boot up the arse for behaving like a bloody galah'. Being just another mere male, I assumed that I was supposed to take care of myself.

Setting aside his ulterior motives and the novel way he expressed his opinions, Tony was quite correct in his assessment of the situation: the Sergeant who seemed to be in charge was scratching his head, apparently unsure whether any laws had actually been broken and what to do about it if they had. Also, quite a few of Daniel's audience had now noticed the police presence and the looks on some of their faces reflected trouble in the making. They were a mixed bunch, mainly youngsters. Most appeared interested in what Daniel had to say. The exceptions were four, maybe five boys and two girls - in this day and age, clothing and current fashions are not always an accurate reflection of the wearer's sex. They were hovering on the fringe of the main gathering and looked, to me, like the kind who roamed the streets at night in gangs, seeking pleasure and profit at the expense of the unwary. Tony shared my opinion: "Watch out for those punks - they're bad news!"

We began to push our way into the crowd past a group dressed in loose-fitting, Indian-style clothes heavy with beads and charms and smelling of incense - perhaps it was marijuana, but having never been exposed to it, I could not be sure.

"...God isn't going to drop down out of the sky to pick up your pieces," Daniel was

saying. "He's not some Joe Soap you can con into doing your job for you. It doesn't work like that. And He doesn't want your money, either."

"What does he want, Daniel?" asked one of the pseudo-oriental women near us.

"God wants deeds, not prayers; positive commitments instead of whimpering and complaints." He glanced over the heads towards the police car. "Life's a bitch, a real bastard sometimes, but I don't have to tell you what you already know. Even so, you *can* do something to make it better. You *are* your brother's keeper; and your mother's, and your neighbour's. You are responsible for the safety and well-being of every single soul in your presence.

"Physical contact is the issue here, not some mystical claptrap about good thoughts and wanting to care. You can *want* all you like, but it doesn't get the job done!" He reached out to brush his hand across the cheek of a young girl in the front row.

"Touching is what it's about." He laid his open palm over the heart of the young man next to her. "Sensual experience." He turned to address the crowd behind him. "If you can feel someone, you can help them. If everyone in the world knew that the person standing next to them was interested in their welfare, who would be afraid to fall?"

There was a distinct possibility that Daniel's postulation was about to be tested: the police and the representative of the church had begun to advance. They were taking it slowly, apparently not wishing to incite opposition. They divided into pairs. The Sergeant and a young Constable of extremely muscular build were circling in the direction of the punk group. It was impossible that they had overheard Tony's warning about them to us, but the officer in charge, it seemed, harboured similar concerns and was conscious that if trouble did start, they might be the likely cause of it.

We edged closer to Daniel. I was looking around nervously for avenues of retreat. Tony appeared to be doing the same. The girls were between us, Trish captivated by Daniel's words, Evie listening while keeping one eye on the police. Daniel must have been aware of the various strategies being implemented around him, but he was unmoved by them. He was answering a question concerning charities: "Of course they need your help. I'm not suggesting you ignore their appeals or your own conscience. Give what you can of your money, your blood, your bodies..."

"You said God didn't want our money," heckled one of the punks. The members of his group laughed and one or two of the others sniggered; the majority of the gathering, however, turned to glare in their direction, some fearfully, most with unmistakable hostility.

Daniel raised his head to look at the punks. There was a faint hint of pity on his face as he said: "God doesn't, but people do: sick people; poor people."

"Too right," laughed the heckler. "Could do with a few extra bucks ourselves, eh guys?"

Laughter again.

Instead of replying immediately, Daniel glanced sideways at a lean youngster with a wispy, immature beard. Strings of coloured beads hung almost to his waist. Daniel smiled. The youth's eyes widened in apparent surprise. Not a word passed between them, until Daniel said to him: "Don't be afraid to ask." The boy's mouth fell open. He glanced nervously to the girl by his side, then back to Daniel. "You want me to give you a sign, isn't that so?"

The youth nodded vaguely and a whispered, 'Yes,' passed his trembling lips. Daniel's eyes were suddenly alive. Not wild or hysterical, but vibrant, the way those of a chess-master might look as he sees his opponent is about to spring the baited trap. I knew those eyes, had studied them, had been terrified by them and was only too aware of

their power. I daresay no-one else noticed, except, perhaps, the young man: he also knew what it was like to have Daniel in his mind, and he waited in awe. Daniel's arm stretched over the heads of those closest to him as he pointed at the punks. "There is your sign. That is the future which awaits you. You live in fear, and you *will* die in fear! The bullies and the criminals take what is yours and you expect a handful of police to protect you! How can they? They are so few and the unrighteous so many! But you are *more!*"

He turned slowly, circling his outstretched arm over the heads of the entire assembly. "If you say *stop*, they must listen. If you say *leave*, they must go. If you can prove yourselves worthy of this life, then you also prove your worthiness to God. Do this and He will reward you; continue to hide in fear and shame and He will surely turn his back on you because, although He loves you all, this world that you have permitted to be created offends Him!"

The implications of the hell and damnation speech affected the assembly in various ways. A few on the outside had started to shuffle away, either anticipating trouble, or recognising more than a little of themselves in the portrait Daniel had painted. Others, inspired by his provocation, had turned in the direction of the punks and seemed intent on making a very positive, if rather barbarous contribution to this brave new world of Daniel's.

"Uh-oh!" Tony nudged me in the ribs. "I think the shit just hit the fan. We'd better grab Daniel and shoot through."

I was inclined to agree with him. The gathering had split into factions. Our group comprised ourselves, Daniel, of course, and the starry-eyed, beautiful people, now captivated by Daniel's charisma more than ever. The undecided were couples and individuals hovering close enough to see what was about to happen, but far enough away to disclaim responsibility if anything untoward should. A few passers-by stopped, swelling the ranks of the spectators. Centre stage was occupied by the more volatile elements present. While the crusaders shuffled in defence of their individual and collective rights, the antagonistic punks shifted uncertainly, their clamorous bravado noticeably dampened by an unaccustomed act of open aggression by an unfavourably superior force. To give them credit, the gang of youths closed ranks behind their leader and appeared fearlessly determined, although that determination must have wavered when the police took up a commanding position in their rear.

In the meantime, we were having problems with Daniel. Instead of bowing to our wishes and utilising the opportunity of the diversion to vacate the scene, he was standing, gazing at the prospective combatants. "I knew it!" he exclaimed with pleasure and relief. "You see." He fanned his arm across the small band of people advancing on the punk gang. "They *can* change.'

"Daniel, please," urged Trish, attempting to turn him away.

I was moving to block his view when something strong and heavy locked onto my shoulder. I jerked round to find myself confronted by a tall policeman with a scar on his upper lip that added an unnerving kink to his sneer. Above it, the eyes were cold, almost indifferent. "Don't start anything," was the spoken warning; his aura, however, was saying: '*Come on then, bozo - take a swing and I'll break every bone in your body; and I might get a medal for it, eh?*'

I attempted to shrug off his iron grip in a way that expressed righteous indignation rather than antagonism. "I wasn't about to," I protested. The grip tightened and the scar stretched as the rows of teeth below it ground together. I had the distinct feeling I might have overplayed my hand, somewhat.

"Hey!" Tony saw what was happening to me. "Fair go, mate! We're all friends here."

"Yes, friends," confirmed one of the beautiful people.

"Yeah, Man. Peace," said another.

"We're just trying to get him out of here," explained Tony, pulling Daniel round by the arm. Trish joined in and the two of them began pushing Daniel in the direction of the church. The bead-and-incense brigade trailed along like loose threads in the breeze, leaving myself, my uniformed captor, and his associate in a tight group with Evie glaring before us.

She glanced at the punks and their rivals, then back to the Constable who still had hold of me. "He hasn't done anything wrong, so let him go, will you? Your problem's not with us, it's over there." She pointed. "And you'd better get your skates on, because I think the cork's about to pop."

I felt the grip slacken. The officer's eyes flicked towards his Sergeant, back to the other Constable beside him, then returned to us. The hand slid reluctantly off my shoulder. "Well, alright." He considered for a few seconds. "I'll give you the benefit of the doubt this time. Just don't start anything - or else!"

"Or else what?" demanded Evie. Her nostrils flared as she waited for an explanation. I groaned inwardly. It was okay for women: they could provoke, sometimes beyond endurance, and get away with it; but, in general, someone had to pay the price of their arrogance. I only hoped that scapegoat was not going to be me.

The policeman suffered internal torment as he fought for the right words. Eventually, his eyes narrowed. "Don't be here when we've finished sorting out that lot," he growled. "Come on, Mike!"

Whether Evie had been correct in her assessment of what was about to transpire, it seemed inadvisable to await a conclusion which promised to be anything but satisfactory; and I wasn't too keen to discover what 'or else' was, either. We caught up with Tony and Trish near the main entrance to the church. I could not imagine that it was their intention to seek sanctuary and I thought it unlikely that Daniel's new-found disciples had been there in the first place to avail themselves of the facilities within the building - they had probably just happened along about the time of Daniel's impromptu sermon; and Daniel, himself, being completely surrounded by concerned and doting followers, was hardly in a position to refresh his acquaintance with the All Saints' congregation. Nevertheless, the tall man who had talked to the police, was taking no chances. He had already closed and bolted one of the heavy, wooden doors and was swinging the other one to meet it, casting suspicious, frightened glances in our direction as he did so.

"Coward!" called out Trish.

"Yeah, Man," agreed the half-starved one Daniel had touched. "Really uncool."

One of the girls hooked fists under her breasts and began hopping and leaping towards the closing door, flapping her elbows and producing an extremely realistic imitation of a chicken which had just laid an egg. Shock elongated the features on the man's face, then the door slammed.

"Christian charity," I snorted in disgust.

"Yeah, Man. Unreal."

My eyes rolled in their sockets. I wondered how long we would be plagued by the presence and anachronistic clichés of this band of latter-day hippies. Soon they would be *freaking* out and *digging scenes*. *Yeah, Man!* If we were lucky they might come across another odd preoccupation to attach themselves to, but the possibility of a second Daniel being at large in the same vicinity was too much to hope for. At least

they seemed to mean well and, I supposed, there was safety in numbers.

As we turned around the side of the church. I looked back to the sound of raised voices. The four policemen had manoeuvred themselves between the rival factions, but apart from that, nothing physical had occurred. My initial impression of the Sergeant as being well-able to cope with most situations seemed to have been born out, but it wasn't the police who worried me. My main concern was for the nature of the punk gang, in particular the leader. He did not strike me as the kind who would take defeat lying down. He carried his arrogance like a shield emblazoned with the colours of his pride, neither of which he was prepared to surrender. Some might consider this display empty and immature; I had a horrible suspicion that neither applied in his case. He was doing what was necessary to retain his position of authority, and even though he could not hope to win this particular battle, he was, in his own mind, fighting a protracted war which would not be decided until the last shot had been fired; and even then, he would not retire gracefully. No, I was sure we had not seen the last of this gang.

I located him in the middle of his cohort and knew then that I was right. His eyes found mine and it was no coincidence: they were looking for a representative of our group and I was stupid enough to respond. Even across the considerable distance of the courtyard when they just appeared as dark craters on his unshaven face, they transmitted his unmistakable message. If I could have dusted off his gauntlet and handed it back to him with some words of contrition, I would have done so, willingly; but it was not that kind of challenge.

CHAPTER THREE

1

Sometimes I wondered why I always had to be so right. That isn't strictly true, of course, but we all tend to exaggerate when we are under pressure. There must have been plenty of instances when my pessimism had gone unrewarded. Unfortunately, this particular case wasn't one of them. The incident at the church was our main topic of conversation for a number of days and the conclusion drawn was invariably the same - some kind of retaliation was inevitable. We had no idea what form it would take and, being inveterate worry-worts we imagined all kinds of bizarre confrontations with the punk gang.

What we expected to happen was probably nothing like what actually would. Having experienced so little in the way of gang warfare and general criminal behaviour, our assumptions were by-products of media indoctrination. In order to smooth our troubled brows, we first took our fears to the extreme, laughed at the ridiculous scenarios our ignorant minds had created, and finally, through this process of personal brainwashing, convinced ourselves that any retaliation would be merely a token gesture and nothing whatever worth concerning ourselves over. In effect, we were chronic heart sufferers who had taken a couple of indigestion tablets and now felt better.

The we I refer to did not, of course, include Daniel. Although he did condescend to admit the possibility of an unwelcomed visit by the punk gang, he seemed unperturbed by it and sat in on our discussions, usually smiling, sometimes nodding, with an overall air of calm acceptance. "If it happens," he said, when specifically asked for his opinion which he seemed reluctant to offer of his own accord, "Then, it is pre-ordained and entirely necessary." He had omitted to confide *by whom* and *for what*.

This casual acceptance of whatever might transpire, good or bad, seemed to indicate that he was unperturbed, at least on the surface; but there was obviously more going on behind that serene countenance than any of us imagined. It's my guess that the overbearing stress of it was responsible for another of his dreams. It occurred that same night and, as was happening more frequently of late, when Daniel suffered, so did everyone else.

It was certainly a shock to my system because I was asleep at the time. I still tremble at the possibility that Daniel was there with me, in my head, sharing his torment as I believed he had when he had related the story of the old lady and the hot oil. I remember waking with a start. I was bathed in sweat and was firmly convinced that I was being strangled, which was partly true: my own disturbed gyrations had wrapped the sheet, damp and twisted, about my neck. Instantaneous confusion gave way to breathless panic as the clammy garrotte tightened. I clawed at it frantically and, although it was hard to breathe, I cried out for help, or thought I did. But maybe that was in my dreams and the actual sound was emitted by someone else. A movement beside me caused the sheet to free off some. I managed to force myself up onto my elbows and could see Evie's shape beside me, sitting bolt upright. Although too dark to discern her expression, I presumed it to be one of deep concern. But there was no accompanying sympathy - not for me, anyway - no comforting words; not even an aggravated: *'What the hell's up with you?'* She just let out a startled: "Daniel!" and bolted for the door.

Absurd though it might seem, despite the rude, almost disastrous awakening and the

serious implications which could be drawn from Evie's outburst, my main concern was not for Daniel and what Evie thought might have befallen him, but for the fact that my companion and one true love was running around the house stark naked! I managed to extricate myself from the troublesome bed-linen and dragged it with me as I rolled off the bed. The blanket was on the floor, yet another victim of the restless night. Deciding it would do to cover Evie, I scooped it up in passing and began lumbering after her.

I was soon shuffling my way along the corridor, hiding my modesty beneath a twisted mess of patched Egyptian cotton and acrylic Chinese tartan. As I reached Daniel's door, I caught sight of Tony leaving his own room and breathed an audible sigh of relief before hurrying in to join Evie - at least he hadn't seen her in the buff, not yet. She was there, leaning across the bed, stroking Daniel's hair back from his forehead which was damp with perspiration. This was merely a passing thought: my main concern was not for Daniel, nor so much for Evie herself, but for her body which was as wet as Daniel's brow and shimmering like the flesh of an oiled stripper in a steamy night club. I could hear Tony's footsteps just outside the door.

I was in such a hurry to disentangle the bedclothes and drape the blanket around Evie, that I forgot completely about my own state of dishabille. Not until I was satisfied that the blanket was doing its job and that Evie was aware that it must remain in place if dignity was to be preserved, did I return my attentions to my own predicament, too late, as it happened. The sheet was already cluttering the floor around my ankles. As I bent to retrieve it, I happened to notice someone on the far side of Daniel's bed. It was Trish! She didn't even acknowledge my presence, let alone my nakedness. Her eyes were fixed on Daniel and, I daresay, had not flinched from their vigil since entering the room. My display of full-frontal was, apparently, a rip-snorting non-event.

As I hastily wrapped my makeshift toga about me, I was suffering conflicting emotions - burning embarrassment and trampled ego. When I should have been grateful to Daniel for the diversion, I was, in effect, just a little resentful; perhaps even considerably so, because he had hogged the limelight.

Before I had time to complete my self-analysis, Tony was at my elbow and Queenie was pushing past. I believe even her canine heart stopped as Daniel threw his hands in the air and bellowed out an anguished: "NO!!!"

2

The ensuing silence was heavy in the air, the echoes of Daniel's distress a mere after-image, a declaration that all was soon to be revealed. Tension mounted. My stomach growled noisily, but only I seemed to notice. Daniel's hands covered his face. He was breathing slowly, deliberately. Evie's arm cradled his shoulders.

Queenie had climbed her way onto the bed and lay at full stretch, head between her enormous paws, her intelligent, sad eyes fixed on Daniel. Her mouth opened and closed like a goldfish, her huge, slobbering tongue lolling out at each parting of her jaws. Intermittent drips of saliva produced a dark and growing stain on the sheet.

On the far side of the bed, Trish was effecting a series of brief sallies and retreats. Daniel was as flotsam on the beach, laying motionless just above high water mark. Trish, being the concerned ocean, foamed nervously close then, plagued by indecision and lack of self-confidence, ebbed away to a safe distance. She was wringing and drawing on one hand with the other as if trying to extrude the fingers.

I noticed Tony's lower jaw drop and his mouth open slightly. He was going to yawn. A hand came up quickly and spread across his mouth, no doubt to hide the indiscretion.

He made it look as if he was absently stroking the stubble of his cheek, but the stretching of skin over the cheek-bones and the squinting of the eyes told the real story. The furtive yawn completed, he rubbed the other cheek, then let his hand drop.

I was conscious of something caught between my toes. It felt sharp and uncomfortable. Like Tony with his yawn, I tried to hide my unsuccessful attempt to wriggle it out by spreading my toes against the bare floorboards as nonchalantly as I was able. Discomfort turned to pain as my fumbling drove the splinter home. Like a tap on the ankle under the dinner table, it put an end to my imprudent fidgeting. I placed the bulk of my weight on the other foot and tried to ignore my own needs while I, like the others, waited.

Daniel straightened slightly. His hands fell to his lap where Queenie nuzzled them. As he began to stroke her, he stared ahead, apparently unseeing. He blinked once, twice, then a third time. It was a voluntary, deliberate action necessary, perhaps, to clear his sight, or to return his attentions to reality. A single tear glistened briefly in the corner of one eye. It shimmered, then broke and became lost in the delta of perspiration trickling over his cheek. His mouth opened. I don't believe any of us breathed, not even Queenie. Without a sound, the lips closed again. Our nerves screamed. Frustration increased tenfold. Eventually, when we were least prepared, he spoke. His voice was soft, exhausted, laced with defeat, barely a whisper; but in the silent room it had the effect of a thunderclap. "I'm sorry," he said.

I was just recovering from the shock of the first sound in what must have been an extremely prolonged silence, when Daniel spoke again. The second time, the voice was clearer, stronger, and had far less impact. Even so, the actual words and his intonation sent a chill shuddering down my spine. "I'm sorry," he repeated, "So sorry."

I assumed he was referring to the fact that he had disturbed our sleep. Still annoyed about that and my own subsequent bumbling, I remember thinking: *Don't worry about it, Dan, old pal, old buddy - we like nothing better than to be dragged out of our beds in the middle of the night so that we can wrap up in bedclothes to attend the resident loony.* My heart jumped into my mouth as I realised what I was thinking and that Daniel might know it, too. I fully expected to be shivering in the draught as he entered my mind and left the door open. In this, I was disappointed, although I wasn't sure that I was entirely happy with the alternative. His eyes suddenly came into focus, but instead of fixing on me, they drifted round until they reached Trish. There they halted, studying her, seeing only her. It was as if there were only the two of them in the room - we did not exist. It put a whole new interpretation on Daniel's apology which he whispered softly a fourth and final time: "So truly sorry."

He maintained his gaze, his eyes never moving from the slight, shadowy figure beside his bed. I gather Evie must have concurred with my suspicions and felt that she, too, was intruding on a very private intercourse. She slid her arm from Daniel's shoulders, straightened, then took two steps back, pulling the blanket closely about her as she did so.

It was an intriguing tableau, more so because we had not the foggiest idea what it was all about. Had something been going on between Daniel and Trish of which we were all ignorant? It seemed unlikely, especially under our present living conditions. Keeping a secret of such magnitude would be impossible. So, what was Daniel so sorry about? From what I could see of the expression on Trish's face, she had no idea, either. She was chewing her lower lip, arms dangling loosely at her sides, and she was gazing in wonder - or was it disbelief? - at Daniel.

Tony coughed and muttered something about returning to bed. His words broke the

spell. He called softly to Queenie as he walked quietly to the door. The dog raised an eyebrow and an ear twitched, but she made no attempt to follow her master until a growled repeat of the command rumbled in from the hallway. She looked to Daniel for a reprieve. None was forthcoming, so she dragged herself reluctantly from the bed and sulked her way out.

Tony's lead was there to follow and I didn't need a second invitation. There seemed nothing more we could do, not that would be appreciated, anyway. I gathered up the blanket-covered Evie and tried to ghost the pair of us unobtrusively from what had become a very small room. Neither of us spoke. I could think of nothing appropriate that warranted breaking the electric silence and a sixth sense told me that Evie was labouring under the weight of a deep, yet inexplicable jealousy. She never actually admitted it to me, but it was obvious simply by her reluctance to even mention the possibility of its existence.

We returned to our room and closed the door on a situation which was none of our business. There were no fears for Trish. Even left alone in a man's room, scantily dressed and vulnerable as she was, we believed her to be as safe as a babe in her mother's arms. After all, she was with Daniel. So, when she stumbled into our room sometime later and crumpled beside the bed sobbing, we were confused, to say the least.

3

I was more than glad of the dark and grateful to Evie for not illuminating a situation which, I felt, was about to become awkward, to say the least. There seemed nothing physically wrong with Trish. If there had been, the solution would have been simpler. She had not been molested, abused, or mistreated in any way that she was prepared to mention. Her distress seemed to be of a purely psychological nature. The bed shifted as Evie rose to the challenge. I could sense her maternal instincts come to the fore. "What's the matter, Kiddo?" she enquired in a soft, cooing tone. Trish's reply was a renewed bout of sobbing.

This, I decided, was likely to be beyond the comprehension and tolerance of mere mortal man. It was secret women's business and I felt my presence would make it harder than it needed to be. "I'll go and put the kettle on, shall I?" My suggestion was appropriately quiet and sympathetic.

I had fully expected to be ignored, so Evie's curt affirmative came as a bit of a shock. It seemed my decision to extricate myself from the complex web of feminine emotion was a wise one after all. I began shuffling to the door, preserving modesty with one hand while groping with the other amongst the litter of clothes strewn about the floor for something to put on. I was dressing hurriedly out in the hallway when Evie's voice reached me. Her last-minute instructions confirmed suspicions that I was not required. "Don't rush," she called after me, "There's no panic."

How to deflate a man's ego in one easy lesson. My disappointment at being declared superficial progressed to anger. The emotion seemed to trigger a certain physical discomfort around my waist and legs. Snarling under my breath, I tugged at the tracksuit pants which were attempting to strangle me. When I switched on the kitchen light, the reason for the restriction became immediately obvious - I had picked up Evie's clothes by mistake. I gave the elastic waistband a final wrench, then stormed through the kitchen to the back door.

The wind was up again. Days in Fremantle when it wasn't were rare and often to be

mistrusted. At that moment I was glad of it. The blustery attack on the garden and myself was compatible with my thoughts. I sauntered dejectedly along the path to the gazebo. Shrubs and trees heaved frantically and noisily, tossed by a wind giving vent to feelings which I did not dare to. The wooden floor sagged and creaked under my weight as I stepped into the old building. It seemed to say: *'Oh, it's you. Got a problem, have we?'* I would have preferred a more amiable greeting but, as it was a product of my own imagination, it was appropriate to my mood. "Mind your own!" I snapped, surprised as I felt my mouth move and my vocal chords vibrate. Talking to himself was one thing, but who wouldn't ponder the sanity of a man who had taken to holding conversations with a dilapidated timber shelter? I shrugged: there was no-one out there to hear anyway, or so I thought.

When I heard the other voice, the prospect of being dragged screaming to the funny farm was not such an impossible fantasy. I spun round in a circle, taking in the angular construction of the gazebo and the indefinite, changing shapes of the wind-torn garden. Nothing I saw confirmed that I was anything but alone; and that, in itself, ought to have been testimony to my imminent insanity. Then something dark and bulky moved from the shadows into my field of vision. My eyes popped, my hair stood on end, air exploded from my lungs in a startled rush, and I felt my knees begin to buckle. "I didn't mean to creep up on you," said Daniel's voice from the depths of the looming spectre. I felt his hands on my arms, steadying me. "I'm sorry," he added.

Sorry? Sorry! That's your word of the month, isn't it? Annoyance replaced my fear. I was, in truth, angry at myself for being so foolish, for listening to hobgoblins, for believing in leprechauns, but I chose to exercise my wrath on Daniel instead. "What the hell have you done to Trish?"

Although I could not see them, I could sense his eyes burning into mine, searching out my innermost thoughts. There was no need for me to say any more under the circumstances - Daniel must have known how my opinion of him was changing. After a long, uncomfortable pause, he said: "You must understand something, Barry - I did not ask for this burden, but it is mine, and I must shoulder it alone."

Thy will, not mine, be done?

"What burden?" I heard myself ask in a squeaky tone. "And what's it got to do with Trish?"

"Trish..." he began to say, then hesitated. "Something is going to happen. She wi..."

"What's going to happen?" I was shocked and disorientated. Daniel had always been straightforward in the past, never at a loss for words to offer for consideration, and even when his explanations had fallen short of precision, we had always been satisfied. That, however, was before, when he was the pleasant enigma, when I trusted him. Now he was cautious, evasive and, with so much already left unsaid, not to mention the effect the sinister weather was having on my mood, I feared downright Machiavellian. "Spit it out, Daniel. We have a right to know. We're supposed to be friends," I added, aware that it was a cheap shot, but unable to contain my anger and frustration.

"Yes," he said. The word was long and emphatic, more so because it was uttered during a break in the wind. Perhaps, I fancied illogically, it was even responsible for it. "We *are* friends and this makes it hard."

I turned away in exasperation, then back again, determined to get to the bottom of a situation I was sure I would be better remaining in ignorance of. "For God's sake, Daniel!"

"Yes," he said again. "For God's sake, and everyone's; especially for your sake. For all of your sakes, I cannot tell you." He went on while I was still huffing and puffing my

inarticulate confusion. "What will be, *has to be*. I cannot allow you to interfere with what must come to pass, nor can I change it myself. Trish will come through it, not without scars, but one day she will understand. You *all* will."

My head was shaking. I am not sure whether I was trying to clear my thoughts or entirely expunge Daniel's words and the ramifications of them which spread to so many hideous possibilities. "You're making it impossible," I said at last. "Something's going to happen, *you* say. Trish is going to be hurt, *you* say; at least, that's what you're implying. And *then*, you say, even if there is something we can do about it, to prevent it, you're going to stop us doing it! Some friend you are, Daniel!" I made a move to push past him, but his outstretched arm prevented me.

"You *will* understand, Barry. Believe me."

"I don't think so," I grated, clenching my teeth as I tried in vain to force my way past. "All this mystery and sanctimonious rubbish! You're a nut, Daniel, a veritable fruit-cake! Anyone else has nightmares, but *you* have dreams, visions, angels delivering messages in your sleep, for pity's sake! And why can't you talk like any other human being, instead of singing a bloody duet with yourself? Maybe you should chuck in a few thee's and thou's and shalt not's? After all, the world really is in need of another Charlton Heston!"

I was running off at the mouth, I knew. It was everything that had built up inside, everything I had wanted to say, but for one reason or another had decided to keep to myself. To continue, however, would serve no purpose other than to confirm that I had completely lost the plot. I held up my hands and backed off a few paces, breaking contact with him, and hopefully my own anger. He just watched me, sympathetic and annoyingly complacent. When I eventually spoke, my voice was husky, weary. "I just want to know who you *really* are, Daniel."

"You know who I am, Barry," he said simply. His arm dropped slowly and he half-turned from me. "Deep inside you know. Perhaps when you understand, you will find it in your heart to forgive me. I hope so." Then he completed the turn and walked towards the house.

I watched his back for what seemed an age, and after it had disappeared through the open kitchen entrance I continued to stare until I began wondering if he had been in the garden at all. Maybe it was all in my imagination. Instead of following, I went back onto the gazebo. It held no solutions, I was sure of that, but it was old and with age usually comes wisdom, a quality I was in desperate need of.

I am unsure how long I remained there. The state of mind I was in, it might have been a thousand years and it would have made no difference. The wisdom I sought eluded me as did any form of recognisable insight. What really mattered was that something was going to happen to Trish. Daniel knew about it, perhaps even the form it would take, but he refused to help prevent it in any way. Maybe his faith would permit him to sit back and let Trish pay the price for his cruel indifference, but mine wouldn't!

4

Over the next few days and whenever it was practical, I was Trish's watchdog. If she went to make a phone call, I would decide that my leg was stiff and needed exercise. When she hung out the washing, I was there with the peg bag. Despite efforts to remain subliminal, I soon graduated from the comic relief to an obvious nuisance.

Tony took every opportunity to exercise his wit at my expense. Like a second shadow, Queenie was never far away, apparently intrigued by my strange, new behaviour. Trish

did not complain, although I could tell I was making her more nervous than she already was. While Daniel appeared unaffected by and oblivious to my unsolicited attentions, Evie was showing signs of acute aggravation. I was surprised. After all, it wasn't as if we hadn't talked over the events. She had even agreed that something ought to be done, but wasn't prepared to offer a solution. When I had suggested that maybe I could keep a furtive eye on Trish, Evie had said simply: "Go for it."

Thinking about it now, she was painting at the time and that might easily have had something to do with her responsiveness. She was blissfully unaware of any reality until the lime green she was mixing started turning to khaki. "Bloody Red!" she declared. "Where the hell did that come from?"

I might have suggested that it was, perhaps, the direct result of untidy habits and failing to clean her palette properly, but the atmosphere was already somewhat strained, so I asked instead: "What *did* she tell you?"

"Eh? What did who tell me?"

"Trish," I said.

"When?" She asked. The colour of the paint had deepened and seemed reflective of Evie's mood.

I tutted. "Haven't you been listening? This is important."

"So is this!" she retorted, stabbing her brush at the canvas on which she was working. A blob of paint flew from the bristles and deposited itself in the centre of the composition. "Sod it! Now look what you've made me do!"

I thought it politic not to defend the accusation and waited a moment until I had her attention. She glared at me. I tried to appear sympathetic. "When Trish came to our room after being with Daniel. Remember, she was upset? I went to put the kettle on? What did she tell you after I left?"

"Bugger all," she snapped sourly. Evie must have realised how apathetic she had sounded and added: "She was crying most of the time."

"She must have said something," I pressed. "Didn't she give you any idea what went on between her and Daniel?"

"Not really. Not that made any sense."

"Well, what *did* she say?"

"Jesus, Barry! How do you expect me to remember every little detail? It was late, for Christ's sake. Maybe she didn't actually speak."

"Oh please, not you too!" My head dropped into my hands.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I didn't bother to look up. "You make it sound like you were reading her mind. Been taking lessons from Daniel, have we?"

"Don't be so damned facetious. There's nothing magic about intuition."

"Spare me the lecture, please." I knew what she meant, though. I was experiencing the same thing at that moment, and *my* intuition told me that if I didn't make some offering to placate her, Evie would tear me limb from limb. "Sorry, darling," I said humbly. "I'm a bit rattled. If you can't recall what she said, just tell me what you think happened."

Her explanation could have been applied to any one of her paintings, it was so abstracted. Rather than hurting her feelings by pushing for a more realistic interpretation, I chose to insinuate. Apparently, while Trish was alone with him, it seemed Daniel had intimated that she was soon to experience a painful episode in her life. She would come through it, nevertheless, and would eventually regard it as an awakening. We all have a singular and true purpose in this life, he had said and this

was hers. Then, from the way Evie explained it, he had done the unforgivable - he had put thoughts into her head: pictures, feelings, fears. He had raped her mind, and I knew only too well how degrading and disturbing that could be. No wonder the girl was in such a state when she came to us.

I don't believe I listened too intently to what Evie had to say after that. I was so pre-occupied with feelings of mutual concern and I desperately wanted to tell Trish I knew exactly how she felt because it had happened to me; but I was too much of a coward. So, I did the next best thing and became her protector. I was sure Evie understood and condoned my efforts, but I guess they were somewhat over-zealous. I concluded this when Trish went for her evening shower and I followed to check the light socket in the hallway outside the bathroom, for the third time that week. Evie met me halfway and handed me a plastic back-scrubber and an umbrella. I got the message and ceased my vigil.

The following Friday evening, a selection of Evie's work was being previewed at the gallery, along with that of five other artists. Attendance at these functions was optional only if one was prepared to suffer Evie's wrath for failing to express undying loyalty. Timing, on this occasion, was unfortunate. I saw it as the ideal opportunity for fate to do the dastardly deed, and I would need a lot of luck if I was to foil the plot and keep Trish safe. Not knowing exactly what was to befall her, I was hoping that Tony would be available to provide the muscle and technique, should it be a physical confrontation. Unfortunately, he was away up North.

While I was steeling myself to battle on alone, Trish dropped the bombshell: she had to attend an evening lecture at the university and would not be back until late. She would try to pop into the gallery afterwards, if there was time. Her announcement caused the hairs on the back of my neck to bristle. The thought of Trish walking the streets of Fremantle at night and alone was courting disaster. I was about to offer my services when Evie's penetrating glare intercepted my intentions. Only a blind man could have misconstrued the warning. I bit my tongue and remained silent. Friday night, I thought, was going to be hell. How prophetic that observation would prove to be.

5

Fremantle locals are jealously protective of their city's various reputations, especially its claim to be the art Mecca of Western Australia. Practitioners flock to the area in droves hoping for recognition, studio space, inspiration, or simply to be around the 'right' people. Collectors regard it as an art supermarket. Patrons come seeking profits and protégés. Evie already had her studio in the right place, and the opportunity had presented itself for her to exhibit. Over and above that, all she needed was someone to "discover" her. Any other time, I would have been behind her one hundred percent, but on that occasion I would have been eternally grateful if the gallery showing Evie's latest work was to collapse or burst into flames.

During the day, those exact thoughts entered my mind. I began praying for something catastrophic and miraculous to eventuate, anything that would cause the preview to be cancelled. I wished so fervently, it seemed, that even Evie noticed, pre-occupied and nervous as she was. "Why don't you..." she began testily, then gritted her teeth and finished: "Go and make some coffee?" I was wondering what she had really meant to say, when she added: "And stop biting your nails - that won't help solve anything!"

"I'm just worried, that's all," I offered, struggling to free myself from a ravenous bean bag. I was about to qualify the statement by airing a long list of dire and possible

consequences concerning Trish, all of which might be avoided by a few simple alterations to our plans. Evie, however, must have read my mind.

"Trish will be alright," she declared positively.

"You don't know that."

"And you don't know shit, Barry!" Evie exploded. "I've got enough to worry about with the exhibition. I don't need you moping around my ankles, wailing about the end of the bloody world."

"I don't care about the world; just Trish."

"She'll be all-right, for God's sake!"

"What if something happens?" I started in again.

"What if it does?" She stood glaring at me, her tightly balled fists jammed defiantly on her hip bones. "You going to jump into a passing phone box and turn into Superdork? Get real, Barry - you couldn't even leap a bag of groceries in a fit, let alone a single bound..."

Her voice trailed off; and even if it hadn't, I doubt I would have heard any more. It was one thing to be a cripple, but to be reminded of it by someone you loved and in such a way was a bitter pill to swallow. I knew she didn't mean it, of course. It was merely a build-up of pressure over the forthcoming preview. I was also partly to blame: my immature fretting had become abrasive to both the situation and Evie's nerves. I suppose the part which hurt most was the honesty, and I wonder, even now, if the reference to the bag of groceries was just a lucky dip in the heat of the moment, or a veiled slant on my occupation. I know what I would wish it to have been.

The truth of the matter, however, was plain - I *was* a grocer and certainly no super hero. I was not a hero of any description. What had Daniel said outside the church? *If you can feel someone, you can help them.* It was a sad fact of life that if Trish fell and I tried to prevent it, I would probably fall over too. Some guardian angel! It would be laughable if it wasn't so pathetic.

"I am sorry, darling," Evie's voice was murmuring in my ear. I had visions of being in a cocoon. She was pressing against me, arms holding tightly, her head nestling between my neck and shoulder, her voice, softer now, reiterating apologies and regrets, over and over. As close as we were, and with my face burning away merrily, I was stifled, roasting where I stood; but I needed the re-affirmations of love and loyalty far more than fresh air, so I, too, held on and revelled in the immortal lover's game of making up.

For the remainder of the morning and early afternoon, it was bliss, a new day in our relationship with sadness and hostility banished in favour of requited love. Then the front door slammed and she had gone; gone to face her inquisition, leaving me to confront mine. Soon enough, the waiting would be over, for the both of us, as it happened, but Evie would at least have moral support. Whether the criticism was good, bad, or - what an artist fears most, indifferent - Evie would have Daniel and a host of noisy, artist friends to lean on or laugh with. I would be there too, but it would be merely a token presence because my true loyalties would be elsewhere.

I was beginning to regret having taken the day off work. With time to think, the problems were becoming more complex by the minute. How would Trish get from the university to the gallery? She would catch a bus - well, probably - so I could meet her at the stop; but *which* stop? And was there a possibility that she might go home first? Doubtful, but there was always the chance. I cursed myself for not making some concrete arrangements with her before she had left that morning. It was spilt milk, of course: no arrangements had been made, so what was meant to be, would be. That, in turn, illuminated the sixty-four thousand dollar question - what *did* I expect to happen?

Only Daniel knew the answer.

He was in his room when Evie had left - I heard her call out to him and also heard his reply. I limped along the hall, the syncopated rhythm of my footsteps echoing like an amplified heartbeat. The beat got faster. I seemed to be rushing. I made a conscious effort to slow down, to remain cool as Evie would have wished; except, I was far from composed. I tried to imagine how I would handle the situation, what I would say. Firm diplomacy was the way to go, but natural instincts rose to the surface, no matter how hard I attempted to suppress them. By the time I reached Daniel's room, an erratic fire blazed in my eyes and the silent insults forming on my trembling lips were anything but diplomatic.

The door was ajar. Without knocking, I thrust it open and burst through. The ultimatum I was to deliver would have been perfect, it was so well-rehearsed. The trouble was, I had three versions of the same opening line: *Right, Daniel, out with it.* Then: *Maybe you don't care about Trish, but I do.* Number three was something of a melodramatic cliché: *Time's run out, Daniel, and so has my patience,* but it was a reasonable stand-by. Somewhere between starting to pass through the entrance and actually doing it, a fourth possibility shot into my head, skittling the rest, then burst from my mouth in a squeaky rasp: "You Bastard!"

The oratorical masterpiece filled the room momentarily until it was absorbed by the soft furnishings. I stood blinking, my fists clenched, a truly sad figure. The warped mantle-shelf smiled back apologetically. Wind sniggered up the chimney and through the rafters. Daniel said nothing - he wasn't there!

It never dawned on me that, mystical and celestial though he often appeared, Daniel was, nevertheless, human and as much a slave to human necessity as the rest of us. That became clear when I heard the toilet cistern flushing. In a way, it was a reprieve. I had made an utter fool of myself and been given a second chance. There was time to disappear before he returned. Instead, I waited for him. When he entered, there was no hint that he was surprised to see me there. And he was smiling, but it was not in amusement. His expression was one of sympathy. I knew then that I was wasting my time and my energy. "You won't tell me, will you?" I said bitterly. It did not require an answer.

Daniel's eyelids drooped momentarily as he regarded the no-man's land between us. He looked up again and his apologetic gaze was all the comfort I was to receive.

6

Daniel and I arrived early. The gallery was nothing special. It had once been a souvenir store, tucked between other shops and the shipping agents' offices of the West End. Rents there were high which implied that it was a prime business location, but the various establishments seemed more attractive to grime than free-spending clients. The door between the two display windows was open, the lights were on, and a few figures could be seen wandering around. I caught sight of Evie, tugged at Daniel's sleeve, then started out towards her.

Some heads turned in our direction. A lean individual wearing clothes three sizes too big broke away from his conversation group and set course for us with a frown. He did not have a walk - it was more a light, tip-toeing glide as if he were on roller skates. His hands were those of a puppet, his long fingers dangling, pawing at the air delicately in time with his stride. I had the impression he was wading through molasses.

We paused and waited for him. Two metres from us, he slid to a halt with his feet

together. A hand came up to hover near his jaw, finger tips resting lightly on the taut, sallow skin. The action served no apparent function except, perhaps, to engage a memory which had so far failed to identify the newcomers. He raised his eyebrows and produced an insipid smile that put Mona Lisa to shame. "May I help you?" he asked in a lilting tone which seemed to imply that he didn't particularly want to, even if he could.

At another time I might have been forced to hold a tight rein on the host of facetious replies waiting to burst from my literary reservoirs, but the deep concern for Trish overshadowed any desire I might otherwise have nurtured to challenge his apparent distaste for us; so I said, simply: "We're with Evie." I nodded in her direction, in case he had doubts as to whom I was referring.

He glanced behind. At that moment, Evie saw us and gave an excited wave of welcome which we returned. The man looked back and caught us with our hands in the air and grins stretched across our faces. His eyes rolled upwards, a sign, I gathered, that such behaviour was to be frowned upon within the circles that *he* moved. "Of course," he said with an intonation that implied both apathy and disapproval. "I should have realised."

I could not, for the life of me, think why - I did not know the man from Adam. I could only assume from his extremely obvious but cursory inspection of our dress and bearing, and from the resultant lines of disapproval which crossed his brow, that he was referring to character type rather than specific, personal recall. When he said: "Excuse me," and glided away, I had the feeling that we had not merely been dismissed as superfluous, but had been stamped, catalogued and filed as straight, beer-and-barbecue, dressed by K Mart plebeians. In his eyes, and for the duration, we would cease to exist. At least one thing had gone right that day.

We made our way to Evie. She skipped over and began to greet us in her nervous, God-isn't-this-a-spin way which she reserved for previews and new paintings which were progressing exceptionally well. Then, half-way through a sentence, she broke off and darted across the floor to intercept someone else who had just arrived. It was going to be one of those nights. She had been exactly the same the very first preview we had attended together. As there was none of her own work in that particular exhibition, I could only assume that the environment had prompted a chemical reaction to take place, infusing her personality with an excessively active effervescence. I gradually learned to accept it and, on this occasion, had actually banked on it to cover my absence when I slunk away to meet Trish.

Labelled "unclean" and left to our own devices as we were, I became lost in my fears. I wandered aimlessly, pausing to stare occasionally at a painting. For all I remember of them, they might have been empty frames and part of some bizarre dream. As the gallery filled up, I was caught in a stuttering tidal flow which crept painfully slowly in a clock-wise direction around the walls. Every so often, small groups and individuals would detach themselves from the main stream and drift towards the centre of the vortex which was marked by a number of tables laden with glasses of wine, fruit juice, and plates of crackers and cheese.

It was approaching nine o'clock and there was no sign of Evie. Standing on tip-toe was not one of my recognisable talents; caught as I was in the midst of the jostling throng, it would have been impossible anyway. I pushed my way to the centre and languished in the doldrums to watch heads. At last, Evie floated by. She saw me, leaned over and grabbed an arm to pull me along with her. She was heady with joy. "Going well?" I asked hopefully, shuffling along to keep pace.

"Really wasted!" she retorted breathlessly.

The term, I assumed, had not been used literally. "Cool," I said. She released my arm and I let her drift on. There was nothing else to say. I had achieved my objective: Evie and I had spoken at one minute past nine. This brief encounter would keep her content for at least three quarters of an hour. I began worming my way to the door.

Once outside beyond the range of the noise and the light filtering from the gallery, the street lapsed into its normal, early-evening lethargy. I turned a corner and was in a different world, one of sinister shadows and clandestine meeting places. I hurried on as best I could, ignoring shapes in door-ways and the strange, echoing sounds which accompanied me. Nearing Market Street, I caught the scent of hops and malt. Drinking in hotels has never featured strongly in my modest lifestyle and I have to admit to regarding such places with a certain, if unreasonable, disdain; on this occasion, however, rather than being repulsed by the smell, I followed it gladly as I might a welcoming beacon.

Sounds of laughter and clinking glasses bolstered my confidence and I was aware of a smile on my face as I limped into the gutter to by-pass a couple of ageing companions, arms around each other's shoulders, tacking their way unsteadily along the footpath. To them, the pub was merely a watering-hole; to me, it was the radiance of civilisation on the edge of the wilderness. I had made it through safely, and here was life and normality. A few people were about, enough to dispel any remaining terrors lurking within an over-inventive imagination. The real fears, though, refused to leave. Even the presence of the two policemen walking their beat could not banish those.

I walked on to the end of the Mall where I glanced habitually up at the Town Hall clock. Nine forty-five! My heart missed a beat. I checked my watch - *it* said eight minutes past. Releasing the breath I had been holding, I remembered that the hands of the old clock had not moved for the past three weeks - it was under repair. I checked again, just to reassure myself - nine past. I had plenty of time to reach the stop where I was hoping Trish would embark, even if the bus was early. She might, of course, remain on board until it reached the terminus outside the railway station, but I would still see her and should be able to draw her attention.

It was fortunate that I had left the gallery with time to spare because the bus was early. I had been waiting barely a minute when it turned in and began to advance down the street towards me. I leaned into the night, squinting, sifting through the shapes of passenger's heads, trying to identify one as Trish. The bus pulled up. The doors opened with a hiss. People began to file out. I felt like a quality controller, sorting through the goods coming off the production line, rejecting each in turn as unsuitable. The queue between the seats in the bus gradually diminished until the final passengers were at the doors. Trish was not among them. My pulse raced as I searched through the remaining commuters, those travelling on to the terminus. There were only three - a business man, an old lady, and a young man with a guitar case perched on his lap. There was no sign of Trish.

I watched hopelessly as the bus pulled away. The doors hissed closed. The sound was like a heavy sigh, a pneumatic I-told-you-so. The other passengers were dissipating, going their separate ways. In vain hope that I might have missed seeing her, I searched through their shadows, both left and right as they became swallowed by the dark. Not one looked remotely like a maiden in distress, let alone Trish. Perhaps she had missed the bus. There would be another soon. There had to be!

Plagued by doubt, I set to chewing what was left of my nails as I went back over the details. Had I remembered correctly? She'd said Uni of WA, I was sure she had, but why would she have to go there when she was attending Murdoch? No longer positive

about anything, I fretted and waited for the next bus. It eventually arrived at ten o'clock, after I had spent the longest half hour of my life, and it was almost empty. It took only seconds to verify that Trish was not on this one, either.

Terror gripped me and I felt faint. I must have staggered because I felt hands on my arms and seem to remember someone, a man, asking if I was alright. If I answered him, I do not recall the words, only the thoughts racing through my spinning head - *Trish is in danger! It - whatever IT is - is happening NOW! Or has it already happened?*

She needed someone, needed *me*, but where was she? Still at uni? Lying at the side of the road? Or in some dark bushes, broken, dying? God, it was so unfair! Damn Daniel! God Damn Him!!!

7

I was beginning to understand and appreciate the term, 'pain threshold'. People tend to sneer at the suggestion that, with willpower and positive motivation, it can be overcome. My philosophy had always been: when it begins to hurt, you quit; those who don't are crazy. That was what I used to think.

Somewhere in the depths of my befuddled brain I managed to deduce that Trish might have been offered an alternative to public transport. Perhaps another student with a car had given her a lift. That being the case, unconfirmed though it was, she could have gone straight home. The possibility that she may have tried hitch-hiking did not even bear thinking about. Surely, she was at home. This was where I was headed. Naturally, I did not have the foresight to take any money with me before leaving for the gallery - that would have been too much to expect. And why would I need it, anyway? For a cab, of course! So, who needed a cab? Right then, I did, but there was little I could do to rectify the oversight and it did not dawn on me to pay at my destination. So, I suffered.

The pain - the real pain, not the dull ache in my leg which was always present to some degree - had begun after two minutes of commencing my unique style of running. It was a kind-of hop and skip, swinging my useless leg in a shallow arc beside me. At first, I experienced the usual twinge behind the patella each time my foot hit the ground, then the hip joint began to misbehave. I would have been surprised if the exertions had not thrown it out completely. Maybe they had, but there was neither the time nor the inclination to examine the possibility at length. Very soon, the other leg which was, in effect, my main source of propulsion, started to flag. I drove it on relentlessly. Illuminated displays in shop windows flashed past in a blur. It was a mental rather than an actual experience. I was unable to travel fast, but my racing thoughts gave me the impression that I was almost flying. Meanwhile, the pain increased in both legs.

I crossed roads, avoided cars and pedestrians, skirted traffic signs and street trees in large concrete receptacles, but the attention I paid them was merely with regard to their speedy and successful avoidance. And the pain grew. Then came the stomach cramp - stitch, they call it. *They* say it is a result of inadequate or irregular breathing. They also say that it can be overcome by steady and concentrated respiration - slowly in through the nose; slowly out through the mouth; repeat, etcetera. Well, *they* were not in the panic that I was, could not possibly appreciate the horror and frustration of being such an impotent chevalier, and my breathing had deteriorated to an agonised wheeze that defied regulation. Only stopping would ease the symptoms, and that was unthinkable.

Thus, I broke the pain threshold. The hurt was still there, but it was so intense and

from so many different sources that it could only continue or diminish - it could not get worse. I plodded mechanically, employing my adopted, natural rhythm - if it could be called that - as a distraction. I began counting: one, two, three; one, two, three. It was not waltz time, because the two, three was much slower than the one. It was more a simplified foxtrot. Then I was on a gradient and climbing. I made a concerted effort to maintain the same pace I had managed on the flat, and did for a while, but the hill got the better of me and I soon found myself heaving with my good leg and dragging the crippled one. The customised foxtrot had become a one, scrape; one, scrape. Bela Lugosi would have been envious. I can imagine now the spectacle I must have presented and wonder how many women and children might have shrunk from my approach. If anyone reacted in that way, I was as ignorant of the fact as I was of most other considerations.

I had ceased looking at my watch. When I was able to read the figures through the blur of tears and perspiration, it seemed minutes were fleeting by in seconds, just when I would have preferred the opposite. The only way I could think of to slow the passage of time was to disregard it altogether. Had I continued to monitor it and given more thought to its direct relationship to the official event of the evening, I would have realised that the preview was drawing to a close and Evie would be descending from cloud nine. It was, however, the unofficial segment of that night's programme which held my undivided attention, and Evie's disappointment at finding me gone was something I would have to seek contrition for at a later date.

I could not have known it at the time, but I would have no regrets on that score. In fact, the chain of events which had already been set in motion would change many things, not the least being my own set of values which I had come to think of as inviolable. I would, however, continue to blame myself, and still do. Even knowing what I do now and despite Daniel's - and everyone's - assurances that I could have changed nothing, no matter how hard I had tried, I still believe that it was my fault. Maybe I was powerless to prevent it, but I could at least have stopped it from going as far as it did; if I had been more than half a man.

These, however, are reminiscences. My actual thoughts as I groaned and limped my tortuous way home were far more basic. I could only think: *Move, damn you, MOVE!* to my leg; *Trish, hold on, Trish - I'm coming;* and *God, the pain! It doesn't hurt. Yes, it does. Yes, it does!!*

When I rounded the corner of our street, I discovered reserves of energy which I never dreamed I possessed, those which only ever exist in the imagination of creative writers and their avid, gullible readers. With a final, hopping spurt I made it to the gate. What greeted me there brought me to a shuddering, gawping halt.

8

I still cannot believe that I failed to hear it and can only assume that most of my senses were already so overtaxed that they could accept no new stimuli, but there was nothing wrong with my sight, apart from being a little blurred.

It came along the garden path, a single white light, shimmering, blinding, growing for a second or two. I know now what propelled it, but at that moment it seemed like a solitary, white-hot comet rushing straight at me. I relived that moment every night for a week. Sometimes the nightmare repeated itself with disconcerting regularity. Always, it was the same, viewed with the same sense of futility and impotence. It became a shrine to my lack of expedience, to my deformity, to all of those things which had

caused me to arrive too late, far too late; and I prayed before it to receive an absolution which I could not, in all honesty, grant to myself. So many considerations, so much guilt for such a fleeting incident.

I seem to recall being struck by something very powerful. The next thing I remembered was laying on the footpath with my back against the front fence. Exactly why I was there had something to do with a white light. It came back to me with a whump, a combination of sound and sensation which described the impact of the light as it collided with me. Then I heard the voices. It was hard to tell how many there were. All I can say is that they were close by and one, at least, was raised in anger. There were grunts as if a number of people were straining at a difficult task. These sounds culminated in a loud, splintering crack accompanied by the tinkle of breaking of glass. "Shit!" bellowed an angry male voice. Another curse followed and I heard a dull thud as if a heavy object had been thrown back into the garden.

A brief period of relative silence excited my curiosity, and as I was straining to hear more, a sudden roar exploded so close to me that I went completely deaf for a few seconds. When I was able to hear again, my predicament, everything, became clear. Even my phantom white light was no longer a mystery when I heard the deep, rhythmical throb of a motor cycle. No wonder I felt so sore! I must have been run down by it. My immediate thought was - punks! It had to be them, seemed so obvious. But what about Trish? Was she there? Did they know she was? Had she run? Had they caught her?

There were more motorcycles. They were on the driveway ramp beside me. *Will you, for pity's sake, just leave so that I can go to Trish!* They must have read my mind. A volley of loose gravel peppered my face and body as they shot into the road. I waited a few moments until their thundering and whining engines were a distant buzz, then I began to inch my way towards the gatepost. It was little more than a conglomeration of crumbling splinters after the bike had collided with it, but still retained sufficient rigidity to assist any vaguely healthy man to become again what his creator had intended - homo erectus. I gathered from my failed attempt that I did not even fall into this dubious category and began the long, painful crawl along the path to the front door.

The duration of my journey was unlikely to have been more than a few minutes, but each agonising lurch made it longer than I care to remember. It was not so much the pain that was distressing, although that in itself was, at times, excruciating, but the fact that it slowed me down to a snail's pace. I may not have been looking forward to whatever awaited me inside the house, but that I had to see it for myself was never in doubt - and quickly. There was always a slim possibility that the gang had simply paid a visit and been unable to gain entry. This meagre hope remained with me up until the moment when I pushed against the front door and it swung open.

The house was in darkness. There was nothing I could do to rectify the situation; nothing, at least, which would not have caused unbearable pain. As it turned out, any effort to switch on the light would have been wasted - every single bulb in the house had been smashed. Once over the threshold, I found myself in an unfamiliar, eerie world. Queenie might have been able to register subtle changes to the environment, even in the dark, but I had never viewed our home from such an unusual, inhuman angle before and the enormity of everything looming so tall above me was a frightening experience, the kind phobias stem from.

I noticed an overall smell about the place which I did not recognise. It was not that friendly mixture of habitation to which I had become accustomed. The former individual contributions were still there: the onions and spices of last evening's meal; the perfumes

of talcum powder, aftershave and deodorant; Queenie's unique combination of dog and diesel fuel; but over-riding these was an additional, far more pungent smell. It, too, was made up of many parts. The acetone and excrement were unmistakable. If these were not puzzling and obnoxious enough, there were others, but I had neither the time nor the stomach for guessing games. The sanctity of our home had been violated and I felt sick enough about that without going into the forensic details.

I pushed on while I was still physically able. Daniel's room was the first I came to. I paused at the entrance and looked in. It was hard to discern more than vague shapes in the dim light filtering through the door. It had only ever been furnished with the bare essentials; just a bed and a small chest of drawers. His needs, Daniel had said, were simple. Well, even those simple needs had been dismembered and scattered about in gay abandon.

"Trish?" I called out. The voice was so faint and strained that I was barely able to hear it myself. I crawled into the room and began to snake around those obstructions I was unable to push aside. Trish was not there, so I moved back to the hallway.

As my search progressed, I became uneasy. Not that I had felt comfortable for days, nor at any time that evening, but instinct told me I was getting closer to something... unthinkable! Each room I tried was infected with the same aura. It was like an air of foreboding which permeated the empty rooms and passageways. It had a distinct odour, not normal or disgustingly vulgar like some of the others, but one of decay and - dare I say it? - pestilence.

It is said that the dead radiate a unique fragrance. Not the smell of putrefaction when the body has begun to decompose, but immediately after death. I had never experienced it myself and began to wonder if that was what I was following - a trail of death. The thought made the task ahead of me seem abominable. If Trish was there - *and please God, let it not be so* - then she must be alive. She *had* to be! To believe otherwise was a sin I refused to commit.

In the doorway to the lounge-room, the smell hit me. The air in the room was thick with it, the stench appalling. I reeled aside and vomited. My head thumped against the door-frame. I left it there for a moment or two, resting, throbbing, bile dribbling from open mouth. After that, the smell didn't seem as bad. Perhaps retching had neutralised my palate. Pushing through the obstructions in the doorway, I dragged my body into the large room. Glass crunched beneath my hand and slivers drove into my palm. I would never have believed that such a minor injury could cause so much pain, not with every bone, muscle and sinew already screaming out for sympathy, but it was neither an old wound nor one so great that my brain had problems with assimilation. It was fresh, relatively small, and it hurt like blazes!

I rolled onto my back and lay gasping, staring up at the shadows of trees ghosting on the barely perceptible ceiling. At least it was something I could identify with. This distraction and the pain in my hand reminded me where I was and what I had come for. A thump from the kitchen startled me, set my pulse racing even faster. "Trish?" The desperate plea was hoarse and exacerbated the raging pain in my chest, triggering an agonising bout of coughing. I rolled onto my front and crawled towards the sound. It came again and with it, a chill breeze. The third time, I recognised the sound of the back door blowing in the wind, and that was the last thing I remembered because I must have passed out.

My next recollection was of consciousness returning. I had no idea how much time had elapsed or even where I was, just that I was laying on something hard. My hand brushed absently across the surface - bare boards! What was I doing on the floor? Then it came back to me: what had happened, my quest to find Trish and a dreadful guilt because I had fallen asleep on the job! When something touched me I jerked, crying out as my pain was revived. Also in surprise, I suppose, believing myself to be alone. The contact increased in pressure and I began to panic. I was sure it was the punks and that they'd come back. Trying to break the grip, I could feel hands clawing and groping ever closer to my neck. *This is it!* I thought. *I'm gone.* Then the attacker spoke: "Barry, it's me." The voice was so feeble and inconsistent with the image that haunted me that I became confused. "Thank God it's you," it continued, and I recognised it as Trish.

With the build-up of tension suddenly relieved, I collapsed in a gelatinous mass. "Trish?" I gasped, "I thought..." but I stopped short of revealing what had really gone through my mind. "Are you okay?"

Stupid question, meat-head! Of course she isn't! Who would be after what she's been through - what I imagine she's been through?

"I'm..." she started to say, then broke off with a tiny shriek of pain. "I hurt, Barry..." The understatement dissolved into a pitiful crying. It seemed to communicate the pain of the terrible ordeal and the relief she experienced now that it was truly over. I moved towards her, ignoring my body's protestations, angry that it should display such selfishness. I felt my way along her arm, found her shoulder and she winced. Apologising softly, I shunted closer, my hand moving behind her back, more cautious the second time, afraid to inflict unnecessary pain. I touched her flesh. It rippled beneath as nerves jumped. Her ribs and backbone were so prominent, she felt almost emaciated, and so frail and cold. I moved as close as I could and hugged her gently but tentatively in case my motives might have been misconstrued. She was not repulsed, and responded by pressing against me, sobbing.

She was naked, of course, totally. Though it might sound apathetic, I would have expected nothing less, and for once I was not embarrassed. Not that I would have needed to be because she was just a dark shadow in the dim light; but; apart from this, I reasoned that modesty was the last thing Trish apparently cared about. I could worry about my own feelings in due course. For the moment, all she needed was a friend, and that I could manage to be.

We must have spent some minutes that way. I believe I probably derived as much comfort and reassurance as I imparted, and might have been content to wait for help to arrive; but it might not be for ages and I had no way of knowing how badly injured Trish was. She could have been bleeding to death in my arms and I would not have known. I didn't think moving was such a great idea, but I had to do something. When I eventually decided on a course of action and had plucked up enough courage to implement it, I released Trish and attempted to roll away from her. The sudden movement triggered a violent spasm as she clung to me, her fingers digging into my back, her face pressing hard against my chest. I was, it seemed, her last vestige of hope and she would not let go for anything. "Trish," I said gently, "Trish, I must go for help." The final word rushed from my lungs as she squeezed tighter. It was amazing how she found the strength to exert so much pressure. "Trish, it's alright," I assured her, "You're okay now, but I must get help. I can't do it on my own."

I might as well have said nothing. There was no reaction whatever. "Trish," I said finally, "I won't be gone long. I'll just go next door and ask them to call an ambulance, then I'll be right back. I promise."

"NO!" Her head rocked violently from side to side beneath my chin. "Don't leave me, Barry. Don't ever leave me! Just hold me... Please!"

What could I do? She was petrified, at her wit's end. I was convinced it would be as cruel to leave her alone as it would be to delay seeking medical assistance. I was in a real quandary, so I took the easy way out and did nothing. Surely, Evie and Daniel would be home soon?

We both went rigid as we heard the disquieting sound of motorcycle engines approaching the house along the driveway. Trish began shaking with terror. She still held on tightly, but seemed to shrink to half her size, drawing up her knees to her chest and assuming a foetal position. It was extremely uncomfortable for me, but did reduce her strength sufficiently to afford me some movement. Using the freedom to advantage, I pushed further away until I was able to break her grip altogether.

Her arms were like elastic and snapped back to wrap around her knees into which she buried her head. She huddled beside me, a dark, shapeless mound. Only her trembling distinguished her from the piles of debris which were once furniture. I would have given anything to curl myself up alongside her, but my conscience and the fear of what might happen to us if I did nothing dictated otherwise. I only hoped that my survival instinct was enough to keep us both alive - we had little else going for us.

The sound of the front door rattling as it swung back on its hinges and hit the wall spurred me into action. At that moment, I wished for the natural talents of a superhero, but it must have been the genie's night off. No matter how I tried, I couldn't summon the energy to race, leap, or dash. I just grovelled and groped, feeling for anything I might employ as a weapon. I realised that accepting the role of champion and protector was merely a gesture, but I did not intend to give up Trish without a fight, albeit a token one.

Footsteps were thumping along the hallway. I scabbled about. My hand touched a likely prospect. It was smooth - some kind of polished stick, I thought - and there was a heavy, splintered attachment at the end with at least one nail protruding. It would make an ideal club, a vicious weapon capable of tearing living flesh, shattering bone, even crushing a man's skull. I knew I could do all of those dreadful things, if only given half a chance. As inhuman and uncharacteristic as it might sound, I prayed for the strength to do just that.

I lumbered around until I found something sufficiently large and stable with which I might pull myself upright. When I did and the altitude increased, blood began to roar in my ears and pain jangled through every conceivable corner of my body. Then, I was having to fight off waves of nausea. As soon as my head started to clear, I shuffled round to face the doorway and raised my primitive cudgel above my head. At that moment, the first of them entered. I had never felt as scared in my entire life. I forced myself to wait for the huge, menacing shape to blunder within range, then brought down the club with a yell and as much strength as I could muster.

What transpired after that was somewhat of a mystery interspersed with tangible snatches of memory. I have since juggled the pieces and filled in the gaps to come up with a relatively consistent sequence of events.

The raider had entered the room and I did swing my club, but in the dim light and with

most of my faculties operating on reduced power, my timing was off and my aim so poor that I missed completely. Even if I had managed to strike where I had intended, it would have been to no avail because my target changed course. The advancing figure, as hampered by the dark as I was - probably more so - failed to see the obstructions littered about the floor and tripped over them. Then, with feet suitably entangled, the intruder took a headlong dive, catching me full in the stomach with a sickening blow. Needless to say, I was out for the count. It was a minute or two before I regained consciousness and was able to express regret for my murderous attempt - it seemed I had almost succeeded in braining Evie!

"I don't understand," was my only comment when Evie first explained. "The motor bikes..."

"When we couldn't find you at the gallery, Don and Steve gave us a ride home."

"How did you know where I'd be?"

"Daniel. I assumed you'd told him."

I knew what I wanted to say, but Trish was more important than my personal feelings for the one I considered to be the real villain of the piece, so I lied. "Guess I must have. Is Trish alright?"

"Trish?" Evie sounded shocked. "My God, is she *here*? I didn't realise..." She whipped her hand from the back of my neck and began rummaging aimlessly amongst the destruction. "Trish!" she was calling. "Trish, where are you, Kiddo? It's me - Evie. Trish!!" When there was no reply, she rushed back to me. "Where is?"

"Evie!" I rasped as sternly and loudly as I was able. "Shut up!" When I was certain of no more interruptions, I lowered my voice and spoke precisely and rather condescendingly. "Please listen. Trish is badly hurt." I had hold of her and felt her starting to pull away. It was an instinctive reaction as the confused saviour within her rose and tried to burst free. I tightened my grip. "Just go and call the ambulance."

"But, Trish...!!"

"The ambulance, Evie," I repeated. *Just toddle along and do that one simple thing, for Christ's sake, will you? Leave the man to do a man's work, to be the hero, to brave the tortures and agony as he drags his pulverised body through the ruins of battle to rescue the fair princess. I feel like shit, Evie, but I want to do this one last, brave thing. I....*

"Steve's gone to do that," she interrupted and burst my glorious bubble at the same time. "Daniel and Don are trying to find some light. Now, where is she?"

A dull, yellow flicker illuminated the kitchen doorway. It waxed and waned as it was carried around and was accompanied by sounds of someone fumbling noisily through utensils, pans, and broken crockery. The doorway went black momentarily. There was a distinctive click as the disposable lighter was rekindled. I had pushed up onto my elbows and waited for the faint glow to wash across the lounge-room once more.

Jesus, what a mess! I searched among the shapes and shadows until I located Trish's huddled form. She was where I had left her, still curled into a tight, naked ball. "There." I nodded my head, well aware that to point would be my literal downfall.

"Where?"

"There!" my exasperated voice shrieked. "There, beside the bean bag."

Evie saw her and scuttled over. She sank to her knees, emitting soft, cooing noises, rocking and bobbing as she bent over the terrified girl. Evie's head came up. She barked at the kitchen door: "Daniel, get me a couple of blankets, quickly!"

Footsteps pattered out of the kitchen and proceeded to thump along the hallway in the direction of the bedrooms. Daniel amazed me. Well, not so much the person, but his dogged adherence to his non-participation vow. Even if one could appreciate his point

of view - which / couldn't - one would have thought that now it was all over, he could at least have put his intuitive powers to full use. What I mean to say is that he shouldn't have needed Evie to ask - he should have been there with the wretched blankets already!

The soft glow in the kitchen remained. I gathered Don was still looking for candles. Meanwhile, my neck and shoulders were aching. I remember the pain clearly and also that I lowered myself back until I was laying flat on the floor again. It was the second time that night that a relatively minor discomfort seemed of far greater importance than the rest of my injuries which had regressed to a deep, rhythmic throbbing. Even the lacerated hand was numb by then. I lay watching the interplay of light and shade on the ceiling, listened to the sounds and employed deduction to ascertain how they were made and by whom. It was rather a lazy pastime, an extraneous one under the circumstances, but I had been declared redundant and there was nothing else to do.

I must have dozed off again. When I awoke, I was cold and shivering. Air temperature had little to do with my condition - it was a nervous reaction occasioned by shock. I wrapped my arms about me, hoping it would pass, loathe to call for assistance. I had caused enough problems for one night, yet it did feel so damnably cold. The chattering of my teeth reached a point where the sound became as much a source of annoyance as the tension which caused every muscle in my body to strain and knot. Just as it reached a pitch which I thought I could no longer tolerate, something warm and soft descended over me. I felt the delicate prickle of wool on my cheek. Comforting though it was, the effect was not immediate and I continued to tremble for some time. Gradually, the involuntary spasms began to abate and I was able to focus on the figure which crouched beside me.

I suppose I did not really have to see him - I knew instinctively it was Daniel. He was quite still, his features soft and undefined, shrouded by the familiar, yet invisible aura which conveyed his character and inner self far better than any graphic illustration. "You were very brave," he said simply.

Brave? Brave! "Brave?" I hissed eventually in disbelief. My throat was dry and my tongue fought for moisture within the arid desert of my mouth. "I was run over by a motor bike! What the hell was brave about that?"

"You did what you could, all that was required of you."

"By whom, Daniel?" I demanded. "Who has that right?"

Daniel ignored the question. "You came to help Trish with no thought for your own safety."

"Don't patronise me, please. I know what a coward I am. Apart from Trish, all I *did* think about was my own survival. *You*, you bastard, didn't leave me any choice. Not that it made any difference."

"You were there when she needed you most," he interrupted softly. "You gave comfort and reassurance. The physical wounds will heal..."

"She was beaten and raped," I cut in, then, while I was still running high on emotion, I repeated the last word as if it might elicit some genuine sympathy and understanding from him: "Raped, Daniel, and Christ knows what else!"

"I know, I know," he said.

"You could have stopped it!" I blurted out in exasperation, at the same time trying to keep my voice low so that Trish did not overhear. "You just let it happen!"

"Barry," he said, once again without apology. "What has occurred here is not all it seems. It is both terrible and wonderful, and you have been a party to it. One day it will be clear, and then..."

Daniel's voice petered out as someone came into the room. I closed my eyes as a strong light swept over us and paused on my face. The voice of a strange man said: "Excuse me." My arm was squeezed lightly, then I felt Daniel move away and stand up. When the stranger spoke again, his voice was quieter as if he had turned his back on me: "He'll be okay now. We'll look after him." I gathered he was addressing Daniel. "Could you clear a way for the stretchers?"

A corner of the blanket was lifted gently off me and the man asked: "Now, where does it hurt?"

I think I groaned. I do know my eyes rolled in their sockets. I tried to smile. "Everywhere," I said, and the smile faded.

CHAPTER FOUR

1

I thought I would be glad to be released from hospital. Initially, when my injuries had been diagnosed as superficial and it was decided that I would be kept in for observation and allowed to return home after twenty-four hours, I ought to have felt relief; I was, instead, disappointed. I couldn't help feeling jealous of Trish who would doubtless be receiving far more attention than I could possibly hope for. Although she was the major victim, whereas I was merely collateral damage, I would have expected at least some extended pampering.

So, when I was informed next day of a slight complication which necessitated a further twenty-four hours under the watchful eye of the experts, I was secretly elated, although I believe I managed to convey an air of mild inconvenience quite successfully. Then some cracked ribs came to light, prolonging my confinement even further. This, I thought, was more like it. By the end of the following week, however, the irritation had ceased to be a fabricated emotion. The entire staff, both professional and support, had become my mortal enemies. I was convinced that my body had degenerated into one enormous complication. Everything became an unnecessary aggravation - the routine, the nurses and especially the food. Even visitors were a nuisance, when they bothered to come at all. As a result I became more intolerant and intolerable.

The hospital and I eventually parted company by mutual agreement. The occasion was marked by a meagre ceremony, garlanded with plastic smiles, insincerities and, when out of each other's earshot, heavy sighs of relief. I was quite excited as I groaned my way into the taxi. After all, I was on the mend, it was a beautiful day despite the rain, and I was going home.

The house looked the same, although the mailbox was slightly askew. I gave it a friendly pat in passing: having absorbed some of the force of the motor bike which had run me down, it may have been instrumental in saving my life and had certainly prevented more serious injuries than those I had actually sustained; *and* it had taken out the headlight of one of the bikes, so at least a blow, of sorts, had been struck in our defence.

The smell of fresh paint greeted me as I entered the hallway. Stark, white walls reminded me of the hospital, except this job was far less professional and seemed unfinished. Closer inspection revealed the patchy effect to be due to dark areas beneath and showing through the top coat. "Graffiti," snarled Evie when she noticed me looking. The word was laced with hatred. "The bastards covered the place with it," she explained, then lapsed into a moody silence. My mind skipped back to the strange smell of acetone I had experienced on the night and I wondered whether any aerosol spray cans had been found and maybe checked for fingerprints. That thought raised another - I hadn't seen hide nor hair of a policeman since the incident. Perhaps my statement was considered to be irrelevant.

I glanced further along the corridor. Apart from the paintwork, nothing else appeared new or changed; then I entered the lounge. I hesitated inside the door, the scene which greeted me was so unexpected. At first I thought it might be a welcome-home party about to take off once the guest of honour arrived, but the faces which turned towards me acknowledged my entrance with bland indifference and, what stunned me most, they were as unknown to me as I apparently was to them. If there was one remarkable

characteristic about them, it was their similarity to each other. The men wore plain white T shirts, denim jeans, and Nike joggers, most of which seemed new; and, not only was their hair styled and cut in the same way, but it was all the same colour, that of bronzed straw. This was no natural coincidence, but a chemically induced one, or so I gathered from the varying shades of eyebrows and moustaches which had escaped treatment and differed, often considerably, from the streaked blond mops on their heads.

The women present all wore shirts of French voile with the sleeves rolled up, the front panels knotted casually in the vicinity of the waistline, and the tails hanging out at the back. Like the men, their hair was the same as the rest of their gender - long and auburn. I had an uncomfortable feeling of déjà-vu. In a moment, I realised why. Very gently, Evie pushed her way past me and entered the room. It was only then that I really noticed what she was wearing - a red voile shirt over green corduroy slacks! My mouth was suddenly dry.

I was so taken aback by this discovery, that I initially failed to notice the stir that Evie's entrance had caused, but now that I was regarding the group with a critical rather than a vague stare, I could detect a definite transformation taking place. The blank expressions had melted. Suddenly, the faces were alive, happy, excited even; and, it seemed, all because Evie had arrived. Then the sea of faces lit up. The ecstatic response coincided with movement at my side. Daniel edged past. I watched his back and felt my eyes widening - he was wearing the same attire as the other men. More correctly, they were wearing the same as he.

To say I was shocked would be an understatement, and speech was beyond my capabilities. My condition worsened as the peculiar, uniformed group rose to greet Evie and Daniel. This, I decided, could not possibly be a chance meeting, neither was it a simple social gathering. These people had been waiting for just this moment, and their collective emotion on seeing Daniel and Evie far transcended casual pleasure. I was witnessing brazen idolatry! I suppose I might have expected something like that with regard to Daniel - his magnetic charisma had even wooed me, a dyed-in-the-wool cynic - but suddenly and under my very nose, Evie had become more deeply involved than I could have imagined possible. Daniel's influence, once an amusing phenomenon, had incubated a communicable disease.

I caught myself gazing at a bizarre assembly of mirror images. It was like being in a fun house, except I was not laughing. I looked for Evie and thought I recognised her back, but could not be sure. Fear replaced amazement. I was a small child who had lost his mother. One male doppelganger turned to me and extended a welcoming arm. "Come and meet your friends, Barry." It sounded like Daniel. The voice had that familiar dual tone which I now took so much for granted, but I had to look twice to confirm the observation.

Confusion reigned. It was all so unexpected. Next, I was beset by a further complication - I could hear my name being repeated over and over. I looked to the faces, and they looked back. Two minutes before, I had been of no more interest than the doorway in which I stood; now I was the object of their undivided attention, and the only reason I could think of for this change of heart was the fact that Daniel had mentioned my name. It continued to be uttered, but by so many voices that the echoes had meshed into an almost incomprehensible buzz. What had I done to deserve this accolade? Or was it that? Perhaps, because of my desire for recognition in my own home, I had misread the gathering's true feelings towards me.

Suddenly, people were advancing. They were laughing, calling my name, still. Arms reached out. Fingers were stretching, pawing. My heart was thudding, my breath a

constricted wheeze. Sweat broke on my forehead and a chill dampness seeped over my entire body, setting the hairs tingling. How could this be? It was a nightmare, yet I was awake, wasn't I? I shuffled backwards.

Two steps were all I achieved. The door frame rapped against the back of my skull and the rubber buffer of a crutch thumped the skirting board. The faces were closer, mouths wide, teeth gnashing, eyes glittering with anticipation. A hand touched me, then another. There was nowhere left to go. I opened my mouth to scream and simultaneously watched the room spin before my eyes....