An Age of Understanding

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Chapter 1 Brooding Clouds

It was the perfect day for a funeral. Dark foreboding clouds hung menacingly across the sky. It wasn’t really cold, but it felt cold. Unusually so really, for the south of Spain, especially considering that it was only actually the beginning of autumn. The bleak, dismal sky reflected the dark mood of the congregated people. The rolling clouds were murky and ominous, full of impending menace. It seemed like even the Gods were sad at Matt’s passing. Constance had cried all through the church service. It had been very hard on her, having to say goodbye to Matt. He had become very important to her, even though, in reality, they hadn’t known each other for that long. The funeral service, while it had been mercifully short, had been heavily laden with emotion. The small church the service had been held in was very unpretentious. It was just a plain, old, but not historically old, church. Matt would have liked that. He had always been a very modest, unassuming person. Even though he had been a man of great intellect, and very world-wise, he had always been a very grounded person. A very unpretentious person. He had been the sort of person who could hold his own in a conversation with the best of intellectuals, and writers, but was equally at his ease talking with the cleaner at his block of flats. He had always taken an interest in those he met, always remembering the names of their children, or pets. He was without a doubt the nicest person that Constance had ever met. Their friendship had grown over the preceding months. A friendship that had brought much solace into Constance’s troubled life. Had he sensed that she had been somewhat lost? Had he realised that she had needed someone to give her direction? Constance had warmed to him immediately, and in short order a strong bond had developed between them. Obviously she wasn’t the only person who had felt that way about him. Many people, of all ages, and walks of life, had turned out to say their final farewells. It was a fitting assembly for such an engaging person. After the completion of the service, Matt’s coffin was carried the short distance around to the back of the church to the cemetery. On one side there was the traditional Spanish style cemetery, with little chapels, where the coffins where placed into wall vaults. Matt’s coffin, however, was carried off to the right, where there where some graves, not really many, that had been dug into the ground, with only their headstones visible. Everyone had formed a circle around the hole that had been prepared for Matt’s coffin. It was unusual, thought Constance, normally in Spain people were buried in the walls of tombs, rather than in the ground. Probably Matt had preferred to be buried in the ways of his country of origin.

‘Hello, you wouldn’t be Constance, would you?’

Constance, shaken from her reflections, turned to see two men by her side. The one who had addressed her was tall, bald, and had spoken with a New Zealand accent, obviously a native of Matt’s original homeland.

‘Yes I am, hello. Have you come over from New Zealand for Matt’s funeral?’

‘No, I’ve been living here for ages, like Matt. I’m Peter, and this is Connor.’

‘Hello there Constance. Matt has told us all about you, and your terrible gin drinking sessions.’

Constance laughed out loud, and then instantly felt incredibly guilty about having laughed at a funeral. Connor smiled at her.

‘That’s what I like to hear,’ continued Connor, ‘a bit of laughter. Matt would have loved that.
He was never a one for the solemn occasions, you know?’

Connor spoke with a very strong Irish accent. He looked a bit younger than Peter, who, probably in his early 60’s, was roughly the same age as Matt had been. Connor was probably in his mid to late 50’s. He was shorter than Peter, stocky, with a full head of still very black hair. Constance looked back at the hole prepared for Matt’s coffin.

‘I was sort of expecting the tomb to be the usual Spanish sort, you know, one of those slots in a wall of vaults.’

Peter chuckled lightly.

‘Definitely not Matt’s style. He always said that he wanted to be buried in the ground. He wanted to feel the elements, to be a part of nature. He wanted to feel the hot sun beating down on him, be rained on, and have his tombstone grow old and faded with time. Me too, to be honest. The Spanish style is definitely not for me. No matter who long I have been living here.’

‘Well, you can just do whatever you like with my body,’ chipped in Connor. ‘When I’m gone it won’t be of any more concern to me. Burn me up, and throw me to the four winds. Do with me whatever you like, now. When you’re gone, you’re gone. I must say, Constance, you have a very lovely Aussie accent. With your mild accent, and your soft voice, you would make a fine reader of poetry.’

Constance warmed immediately to Matt’s friends. How nice that he had had such good people in his life. Although it wasn’t really that much of a surprise, a lovely person like him would have easily found the best of people to befriend. With his great kindness, and easy going nature, it was only natural that he would have found kindred spirits.

The light and easy banter between the two friends came to an abrupt stop, as they looked towards the grave. Constance turned just in time to see Matt’s coffin being slowly lowered into the ground. He was leaving them forever. He was entering his last resting place. As the tears welled up in her eyes again, she glanced to her side and saw Peter and Connor with their arms around each other’s shoulders. They gripped each other tightly. She could see the pain and sadness in their eyes. No amount of banter could hide the sorrow they felt at their friend’s passing. When the coffin was at the bottom of the grave, people started to grab handfuls of dirt to lightly throw onto it. An elderly women, weeping uncontrollably, made the sign of the cross, and dropped a bouquet of red roses onto the coffin. Constance wondered who she was, and what had been her relationship with Matt. Without a doubt, he had touched the lives of many people. You couldn’t have known him without having loved him. He had just been that sort of person. Peter went to the graveside, and took a letter out of his pocket. He mumbled something quietly, and then dropped the letter onto Matt’s coffin. Connor, following him, took a small book out of his pocket, and tossed it down, among the dirt and flowers accumulating on the coffin. Constance stepped forward, and took a handful of dirt which she let slip slowly through her fingers, lightly drifting down.

‘Goodbye, my dearest friend. Thank you for everything. Knowing you has changed my life. I really don’t know where I would be if I hadn’t had the great fortune to meet you, to have you enter into my life.’

With tears streaming down her face she returned to where Peter and Connor stood. Both of them embraced her. She sobbed uncontrollably as they held her tight.

‘Come on the pair of you. Let’s go and get a drink.’

Connor’s words came as a blessing. Constance had felt rooted to the spot, unable to move, not knowing where to go, or what to do, blocked by her grief. The three of them walked, in silence, out of the cemetery. Behind them lay Matt, physically lost to them forever, but firmly entrenched in their memories.
‘Did you come by car Constance?’ asked Peter.
‘Yes, that’s mine over there.’
She pointed to her small grey hatchback. Peter stopped beside a big green station wagon.
‘This is us here. Follow us, we’ll have a few drinks, and some lunch.’
Constance walked across to her car, and got in. In a sort of a daze she started her car, and followed the other two as they left the carpark, and drove even further out of the city. After just a short drive they turned into what looked like a slightly run down bar on the sea shore. She parked next to them, and got out.
‘I know it doesn’t look like much of a place,’ said Connor, ‘but the food is great, and there’s an absolutely fantastic view. Come on, lass, let’s get you inside.’
He put his arm around her shoulder, and guided her towards the entrance. In her sad state it was good to have someone giving her directions. A place to be. It was a day to be with someone, someone who had known Matt. It would have been terribly hard on her to have returned, by herself, to her flat, alone with her memories. She followed them through the old fashioned, rather drab, and run down looking restaurant, to an outside patio. Out there it was like entering into another world. Constance was hit by a visual explosion. As promised the view was nothing short of spectacular. Breathtaking. Probably even more so with the dark, sinister clouds adding more than a touch of the dramatic. The dark sky seemed to grow out of the ocean waves, almost as one with each other. The normally tranquil waves of the Mediterranean Sea were wildly crashing onto an outcrop of rocks, jutting out from the beach, seemingly showing their anger on that most sullen of days. Peter guided her to a table, and pulled out a chair for her. No sooner had they sat down, when a middle aged woman came over to their table. She had a very sad expression on her face. She obviously knew what the day had brought.
‘I so terribly sorrow with Matthew.’
Her English wasn’t very good, and she had a very strong Spanish accent, but her sadness was obviously sincere, and heartfelt.
‘What I can bring you? You want usual?’
Connor held up his hand.
‘No, not today, Bianca. Today we are all drinking gin, and grapefruit soda. Matt’s favourite.’
The waitress nodded, lowered her head, and left the three of them. Connor turned his attention to Constance, on his face a cheeky grin.
‘I hear Matt turned you on to the good gin, is that right?’
‘Yes, that’s right.’ Constance smiled. ‘I’d never even tried gin before, now it’s my favourite. But I didn’t know you could drink it with grapefruit soda. That was a new one for me.’
Peter laughed.
‘Yeah, he got me hooked on it as well. He invented the grapefruit part, as far as I know. He always had to be different. That was just his style. He was never one to follow the mainstream. He got a lot of people hooked on that. Not Connor, though, he’s still a beer man. No matter how hard Matt tried. The last of the holdouts. The only one who refused to relent.’
Connor shook his head.
‘Not today Pete. Today is a gin day. We’ll drink to the good man’s health, with his favourite beverage, we will.’
Constance smiled at Connor, and then turned to Peter.
‘Peter, I imagine you knew Matt from New Zealand?’
‘Actually no. Both of our brothers were good friends. When Matt was about to head over to London, for work, his brother asked my brother if I would help him settle in. I was already living
there by then. I had a pull out couch, so he crashed with me for a while, and… well the rest is
history.’

Peter looked to the sky, and smiled as he thought of those days.

‘Actually we might have played rugby against each other when we were a lot younger. We
went to rival schools, and even though he was a couple of years younger than me, we may well
have come into contact on a rugby field somewhere. We both remember an occasion when that
might have been, but both of us were sure that we had been on the winning team that day, so, hey,
go figure.’

All three of them laughed. It felt so good to Constance to be able to laugh. It was time to let go
of the sadness about Matt’s death, and hold onto the memories of his life. She was in the right
company for that.

At that moment Bianca reappeared with the most beautiful looking cocktails Constance had
ever seen. They were in big wine glasses, full of ice, with a lower layer of reddish liquid, the upper
part being more of a pink colour, and green slices of fruit topping it all off. Constance was
absolutely astonished.

‘My goodness, what of earth are these?’

Both Peter and Connor laughed.

‘Sure, but he had them well trained here.’ said Connor.

Peter went into a longer explanation.

‘Over the years Matt developed the fine art of the gin. The bottom layer is of freshly squeezed
Sicilian red grapefruit juice. Then the gin is poured in delicately across the top onto the back of a
spoon lowered into the glass, so as to not mix completely with the bottom layer. That’s what causes
the different coloured layers, and then a couple of slices of lime are added. Give it a stir up with the
straw, and it’s ready to go. They look good don’t they?’

‘I’ve never seen anything like it.’

Constance stirred the drink, and took a sip.

‘My goodness, this is fantastic. This is nothing like the gins I used to drink with him. He must
have really felt like he was slumming it when he was drinking with me.’

Connor put down his drink, and leaned over the table towards Constance.

‘Now don’t you go thinking like that, young lass, Matt really enjoyed your chats. You were like
a breath of fresh air for him. In any case, the only place they make them like this is out here, and
that took a lot of coaxing on his part.’

‘How long have you… did you know Matt, Connor?’

‘I met the two of these disreputable Kiwis in a pub watching the rugby. Must be about eight
years ago now. That was the ruin of me, it was.’

Peter slapped Connor on the back.

‘Can you remember who was playing that day?’

He laughed out loud. Connor pretended to go into a deep thinking mode.

‘I think it was England versus Scotland, or maybe against Wales. The memory isn’t what it
used to be, you know.’

The two of them roared with laughter.

‘What’s so funny?’ asked Constance, smiling at their contagious humour.

Connor just shrugged his shoulders, and shook his head. It was Peter who replied to her.

‘Actually it was New Zealand playing against Ireland. And we thrashed the buggers. Connor
has never quite managed to forgive us for that.’

‘I’ve never liked the rugby, anyway.’ returned Connor.
The two of them laughed heartily. Constance was interested in finding out as much information about Matt and his friends as she could.

‘Peter, did you move over here at the same time as Matt? I know he had been here around ten years.’

‘Yeah, I did. We both wanted a change from the cold. The English weather wears you down after a while. The coldness just seeps into your bones. When summer finally does arrive, it sometimes lasts just a few weeks. After a while neither of us could take it any longer. Both of us wanted to stay in Europe though, so we decided to give it a go over here. By initially sharing a house it kept the costs down, until we could see if things were going to work out for us. Then when we were both pretty well established, we each got our own places. In the end it was the best move I ever made. I work in IT, so most of my work is over the internet. I can base myself wherever I like, really. To be honest, I’ve cut down a lot on how much work I do these days. I decided that I wanted to spend more time enjoying the years I have left. As we have seen…’

His voice trailed off, and a solemn mood descended on the three of them. Constance took advantage of the change in subject to fill in a few of the blanks she had about Matthew’s death.

‘I don’t want to be rude, but what exactly happened to Matt?’

Peter remained immobile, with his face looking out to sea. Connor replied to her.

‘It seems like his heart just gave out. No warning signs. Only 60 years old. He’d always kept in good shape, with the swimming, and walking, and stuff. Really unexpected, right out of the blue. To be honest though, if you have to go, that’s the way to do it. He died peacefully in his sleep. He just went to bed, and never woke up. His cleaning woman found him the next morning. He just looked like he was sleeping. He obviously didn’t suffer at all, thank the good Lord.’

‘Was that the woman who put roses on his coffin?’

‘Sorry, love, I’m not sure.’

Peter rejoined the conversation.

‘Yes, it was, Constance. That was her. She absolutely adored Matt. Like everyone, really.’

Constance was a bit hesitant, but she knew that this would be her best moment for finding out all she could about her dear friend.

‘I don’t want to be nosy, but Matt never really spoke about what he did here. Was he on a retirement fund, or something?’

‘That was Matt, alright,’ replied Connor, ‘never one to blow his own trumpet. Let me tell you about Matt, now. He was a bit of an investment genius, he was. He invested a lot in the money markets, and occasionally in stocks, when he felt there was a sure fire winner. He gave me some good advice. In fact, he made me a lot of money over the years. My family cleaned up big time back in the 80’s building boom in Ireland. We sold the family farm, just 30 kilometres outside Dublin, for a fortune. They built one of those so-called dormitory towns on the land. New housing just a stone’s throw from the centre of Dublin. It was funny really, when we were kids growing up, playing out in those fields, we used to think that Dublin was a long way away. Next thing you know, we were virtually an outer suburb of the place. Anyway, I hadn’t really invested my share very well, and I was really just frittering it away until I met Matt. He got me back on track, and helped me invest it with good returns. And would he take a penny from me for it? He would barely let me shout a round in return. That was the person that Matt was. The salt of the earth. Bianca!’ he yelled, ‘for God’s sake keep these drinks coming!’

Peter placed a hand on Connor’s shoulder. He spoke quietly.

‘Hey, keep your head on, mate. Don’t yell at poor old Bianca. She’s feeling sad too, you know?’
Connor calmed down a bit.

‘Yeah, I know. It’s just that the sooner I’m pissed off my face the better I will feel, that’s all.’

Constance was dying to ask the two of them what they had placed on Matt’s coffin, but she knew it must have been some pretty personal things, so she bided her time. She asked some general questions about the things Matt and Peter had gotten up to in their time in London together, and then after they moved to Spain. She let the gins flow, and the small talk continue until she thought it was an appropriate moment. While they were on their third gins, she delicately broached the subject. She knew she would be on firmer ground with Connor, he was more of a chatterbox than Peter, who seemed rather reserved, especially about the more private aspects of his life, so she started with him.

‘Connor, what was that book you put into Matt’s grave?’

‘Oh, he’ll love that. That’s a fine collection of Irish poetry. Something for him to read while he’s waiting for the bus to take him upstairs.’

‘I see, you like poetry? Have you written any yourself?’

‘I have indeed. But you know what they say, Ireland is full of poets. Drunks, and poets. The two seem to go hand in hand. The more you drink, the more poetic you become.’

Constance smiled. She really felt at ease with Matt’s friends. Delicately she broached the subject with Peter.

‘What about you, Peter, what was that you placed on his coffin?’

Peter’s answer was curt, and left no room for further questions.

‘It was a letter saying all the things New Zealand men can’t say to each other.’

The reply was short, but Constance had no further need of explanation. She understood perfectly the mentality of Kiwi, and Aussie men. Whereas Spanish men would kiss, and hug openly, the more restrained men from the antipodes would limit themselves to a slap on the back, or a punch on the shoulder. Intimacy was a thing they felt inside, but would never publicly display. In any case, she had no doubt that Matt had felt the same way about his friend Peter.

‘And what was it yourself and Matt always found to chat about?’ Connor asked her.

Constance was somewhat surprised.

‘Oh, didn’t he tell you? He used to tell me stories about his adventures in Australia, back in the late 70’s, in his hippy period.’

Both Peter and Connor perked up at that news. Connor was the first to get a reply in.

‘You’re kidding me? The bugger was a bloody hippy back in the day? What a laugh!’

Peter was surprised by the news as well.

‘Really? I knew that he had spent some time over is Aus, like a lot of Kiwis have, but I had no idea he had been a hippy over there. Mind you, I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised really. We definitely had plenty of interesting times in London, that’s for sure. What sort of tales did he tell you?’

‘Oh, lots really. In the late 70’s he was over there for a few years. He would just sort of chat about the people he met, the times they lived in. I was born in 1984, so my memories really begin from the 90’s. By the time that I was growing up, the hippy period he had lived through had long gone, so it was really interesting to hear about how things had been before. In Australia it had been almost an historic era. My father grew up in that period, too. For me it was all really interesting.’

‘You know,’ said Peter, ‘I would love to hear some of those stories. If you have time can we meet up, and have a chat about those days?’

Constance could hear in Peter’s voice a sense of longing, a desire to keep alive his friend’s memory. Something she, too, wanted to do.
‘Of course. I would love that too.’
‘I have a bit of a feeling,’ interjected Connor, ‘that they are going to have to be accompanied by the consumption of much gin.’

All three of them laughed. It felt so good to Constance that they could laugh, on that, the saddest of all days. She shrugged her shoulders.
‘Well, they always were. So I guess we should maintain the custom.’
Connor threw up his hands, as if in a sign of surrender.
‘It looks like I better get used to this gin stuff, then. No more beer for me. Mind you, I must admit, it certainly has a nice kick to it, it does.’

Peter smiled across the table at Connor.
‘All those years that Matt tried to convert you have finally paid off.’
Connor roared with laughter.
‘Well, the good man would certainly get a good laugh at that. He finally broke me!’

Peter looked at his watch.
‘I think it’s time to get Bianca to bring us something to eat. I hope you like Paella, Constance. I’ve organised with Bianca to cook us up a bit of a cracker. We better get some food into us, it’s going to be a long day.’

‘Of course, I love it. Paella and gin sounds like something that would have been close to Matt’s heart.’

Peter laughed.
‘Actually he pretty much drank gin with everything. Listen none of us will be driving home today, so don’t worry. Bianca will get someone to run us all home in your car, if you like, and I’ll shoot out and pick up mine tomorrow.’
‘Great, actually I was a bit worried about that. I don’t really like drinking and driving.’
‘Well if you like drinking and eating, with a great view of the sea, you’re definitely in the right place.’ Connor added.

‘There you go, Constance,’ said Peter, ‘the Irish poet has arrived.’

The laughter grew more contagious. Constance felt really happy about that. The funeral had been a place for tears, and sadness. The bar they were in was a place for laughter, and the sharing of fond memories. It felt good to be in Matt’s favourite bar, and to be able to remember him with happiness, and to hear the flow of laughter. Constance felt that she had known Matt for such a long time, because he had become a big part of her life, but on reflection, she had only met him about six or seven months previously. In such a short time he had had such a great influence on her. She felt that the changes she had been going through were in a large part all because of having met him. Meeting, and getting to know Matthew had changed her life. Or maybe, better still, knowing him had helped her to change her outlook on life. As she looked out at the sea’s waves, she could remember precisely the first time that she had seen him.
Chapter 2 Swimming With Dogs

The day dawned slowly for Constance. She lay there in bed with a terrible headache, knowing that she had drank far too much wine the evening before, as usual. Cheap wine. The sort that gives you a bad hangover the day after. With a sigh, she dragged herself out of her bed, and shuffled into the bathroom. The first order of the day was to splash her face with cold water, hoping that that would bring some form of life back to her. That was the hope. The reality, as usual, was somewhat different. As she dried her face with a hand towel she looked at her reflection in the mirror. Her chubby face stared back at her, almost accusingly. She hated what she saw. Her short brown hair did nothing to hide her puffed up cheeks. Looking at her reflection further down, her nightgown did nothing to hide the swell of her overweight body. Who was she kidding? Overweight? She was fat. A big fat whale. How was it possible that she had let herself get to that point? How could she look so terrible at only 34 years old? God only knew what she would look like when she was actually old. In that moment there was nothing she liked about herself. Even her name. Constance. Constant. A name that means normal, invariable, nothing out of the usual. You will find nothing of interest here. Who would give their child a name like that? It was the equivalent of labeling your child as someone who will never amount to anything other than the ordinary. Well, they had been right. She had been labeled correctly. She was a nobody, living a nothing life, trapped in an ugly, fat body. She let her nightgown slip to the floor, so that she could see in the mirror just how disgusting she was in her totality. The full, unhidden reality. No wonder Jeff would sneak off in the middle of the night, after having had sex with her. Who would want to wake up next to a fat, ugly woman like her? She turned on the shower, and let the warm water flow over her body. She closed her eyes and let the stream of the water wash over her head. Hopefully it would wash away her hangover, and maybe some of her fat as well. Theoretically living in Spain was supposed to be good for you. The famous Mediterranean diet, and all that. Well, it hadn’t worked for her. Mind you, copious amounts of chocolate bars never got a mention in that diet. As the hot water tried desperately, but in vain, to wash the feeling of disgust from her, she vowed to trade in her chocolate for lovely Spanish salads, with just a light sprinkling of olive oil. She had to make a change. She would make a change. The day had come to turn her life around. She laughed out loud at the thought of that, but straight away her laughter turned to sorrow, as she thought of all the times she had promised herself that. A New Year’s Resolution, made, and broken, every other week. Many promises had been made, always with what had seemed to be the best of intentions, yet there she was, still fat, still hating herself, and still deluding herself with empty promises of change. She dried herself off, making a point of not looking in the mirror. She had had enough self disgust for one day. In fact, she was probably all set for whole of the following week. Constance dressed in her usual style of billowing clothes, maybe some people would be fooled by them. She fixed herself her usual breakfast of a cup of tea, and a couple of slices of wholemeal bread toasted, with a lot of butter and marmalade spread on. She refused to read how much sugar was in the marmalade, although she knew full well from having previously read the small print that there was 60mg per 100mg. 60% sugar. Anyway, it didn’t matter that much because she always finished off her breakfast with a nice big piece of chocolate, just to give her some energy to face the day. What was she supposed to eat for breakfast? Salad? At
least being Sunday she didn’t have to work, so she could pack her self loathing away in a box, put it in the cupboard for the day, and go for a walk down on the beach. She would take a day off from being herself. She would have a holiday from being the constant, nothing out of the ordinary, person who she was. Constance put on her light summer shoes, and headed towards the door. She almost made it out, almost. Her phone which she had put in her pocket started ringing, and as soon as she looked at it she could see from the prefix that it was a call from Australia. The number was unfamiliar, but she knew who it would be. Her mother. Her mother always phoned her with pre-paid phone cards, so the numbers were always different, but the prefix was a dead giveaway. She declined the call, turned her phone off, and then dropped it on the shelf by the door. She had had her fair share of self loathing for the day, she certainly didn’t need her mother to put the boot in by telling her, again, how disappointed she was in her. She would save that misery for another day. Constance would pretend all was well in her life, and go for a walk along the beach. It was early spring, and the Spanish sun was already starting to get warm. As she walked down towards the beach she almost felt optimistic. Well, almost. If she had been someone else she would have been feeling really well, but unfortunately, she couldn’t shake off the feeling of being who she was. The sight of the beach, as always, filled Constance with delight. It was beautiful. The magical rays of the sun reflected off the deep blue colour of the water, creating a breathtaking sight. If nothing else, she had really made a good decision to move to the south of Spain. Especially after the cold, damp years she had spent in Dublin. Somehow, she had managed to get something right. No doubt probably by mistake, rather than by design. Nonetheless, it was something that had worked out for her. One of the few things that ever had.

As it was still early spring there weren’t many people around, which was just how Constance liked it. As soon as she stepped onto the beach she took her shoes off. The soothing feel of the sand massaged her feet, bringing her a sense of ease. She loved walking barefoot along the beach. It was the only place where she could let go of the anxiety that constantly gripped her, and just feel the beauty around her. Become one with it. It was therapeutic. It was her form of lying on a psychiatrist’s couch, and letting out all her inner worries. The warm sun, the soft sand, and the rolling waves coming up onto the beach brought her a feeling of peacefulness. Constance enjoyed watching the people there, imagining stories behind their lives. She could see two children playing with their dog. Why didn’t she have a dog? The children were laughing, happily, as they ran around with their dog. She would get a dog. Something that would love her unconditionally, something that would be a constant in her life. She burst out laughing. She would name her dog Constance. She would send a photo of her dog to her mother, with the name Constance written on the back, with the phrase: ‘What a good name for a dog’. Maybe that had been what her mother had wanted? A dog? A plaything to run around obediently following her every command.

Ahead of her, sitting on a blanket spread out on the sand, she saw an older man, probably around his late 50’s, or early 60’s. There was something about his posture that caught Constance’s attention. He was sitting erect, with his back straight, instead of the usual hunched over way people sat. For his age he was still very good looking, with a face reflecting his years, but showing character. His hair, although greying, still had a strong black hue to it. He had a lean physique, the body of a man who kept himself in shape. How could anyone get to that age and still look good? How was that possible, with all of life’s temptations laid at your feet. It occurred to her to stop, and ask him for some advice. Advice on how to lose her fat, how to sit up straight, how to live well. She would like to ask him if she could be someone else. Someone not named Constance. As she passed in front of him, the man looked up from the book he was reading, and smiled at her. Constance tried to smile back, but she was sure that it had ended up coming out more as a scowl, than anything else.
Why couldn’t she smile anymore? Constance walked, and walked, along the beach, inventing stories about all the people she saw, stories that had happy endings. The warming effect of the sun made her forget herself. She was someone else. Someone good. Someone happy.

With a start she remembered that she was supposed to meet Jeff for lunch. She reached into her pocket for her phone, to see what time it was. In a panic she remembered that she had left it at home. A sense of fear came over her. If she was late she knew that Jeff would be very angry with her. She hurried towards the first person she saw.

‘Excuse me, do you have the time?’
‘Sure, it’s just gone 20 minutes after 12.’
‘Thanks very much.’

Constance started running back along the beach. She only had barely 20 minutes to get to the Tapas bar where she had arranged to meet Jeff for lunch, and a drink. Her heart was racing because she knew that she couldn’t make it in time. Normally Jeff would always be late, but Constance just knew that on this of all days he would not only be on time, he would no doubt be early. Tears welled up in her eyes. The tranquil feeling the beach had given her was now no more than a distant memory. She left the beach, and after hurriedly putting on her shoes, she ran along the street. Sweat started to form on her fat body, and her breath quickened with all the exertion. As the outdoors tables of the Tapas bar came into view she could see him there, fidgeting in his seat. She slowed down, to try and catch her breath.

‘I’m sorry I’m late, Jeff, I left my phone at…’
‘Just look at you! You’re all sweaty. My God Connie, what sort of way is this to present yourself? Will you please go to the bathroom, and clean yourself up.’
‘I’m sorry, I…’
‘Connie, go!’

Constance hurried into the bathroom, and quickly tried to clean herself. She dried the sweat off her face, and under her armpits with the small paper towels. She refused to look at herself in the mirror. She could do without further self hatred. Why did she always do these things? Why did she always mess things up? What was wrong with her? She was lucky to have found a boyfriend like Jeff, but for some reason she could never treat him as she should. She knew that she didn’t deserve him, and that eventually he would dump her, which was just what she deserved, given how she would always let him down. Feeling like a total failure, she walked back out to the table where Jeff was waiting. His biting tongue was not long in coming.

‘Well, thanks for ruining lunch Connie. That was so nice of you.’
Constance held back the tears she could feel coming.
‘I’m so sorry Jeff, it’s just that my mother phoned this morning, and I have been in a bit of a spin ever since.’
‘Go and order a couple of plates of mixed Tapas, and a couple of beers, and then you can tell me all about what the old bag wanted.’
‘Well, actually… yes, of course.’

Constance hurried into the bar and ordered their lunch. Somehow she had managed to ruin their lovely Sunday lunch date. Could she never get anything right? With a baneful feeling she returned to the table.

‘So, what was the problem this time? What was she moaning about?’
‘Actually I didn’t actually answer her call. I…’
‘What? What the hell?’
Jeff’s voice was raised. He was obviously very irritated.
‘Here you are, all hot and sweaty, and you didn’t even speak to her. Only you could ruin lunch for so little. I can’t imagine what would have happened if you had actually spoken with her. I guess I would have had a whole ruined month on my hands.’

‘I’m sorry Jeff, it won’t happen again. It just upset me so much I left home without my phone.’

In that moment Constance remembered another thing she had left at home.

‘Oh my goodness, actually I left my purse at home as well.’

Jeff threw up his hands.

‘So I guess that means that I will be paying for lunch?’

Jeff’s tone was full of blatant sarcasm.

‘Well, actually I did pay for dinner yesterday evening.’

‘Connie, that’s not the point! You can’t come out expecting me to pay just like that.’

‘But I didn’t! I was so upset I just left it at home by mistake.’

The waiter placed the plates of Tapas on their table, along with two glasses of beer.

‘Well, dig in, Connie. Don’t worry, I’ve got it covered.’

The obvious sarcasm in Jeff’s voice cut her to the bone. They both ate their lunch in silence. By the time Jeff had downed a second beer he seemed to have forgotten Constance’s failings, and he got onto his favourite subject. Work.

‘You just wouldn’t believe the week I’ve had. That bastard Henderson thinks he’s the top dog in the bank. I’ve traded more shares than him all month, but somehow he always seems to get the glory. I tell you, one of these days I’m going to sort that prick out. He really thinks he’s God’s gift.’

‘Oh, Jeff, I don’t know how you can put up with all that. They really don’t seem to appreciate you there, at all.’

Constance was relieved that Jeff was back onto his favourite subject. Himself. Even though she had heard it all before, it meant that her failings were off the menu, at least temporarily. She started to feel the tension leave her body as Jeff rambled on, moaning about all his colleagues in the investment bank where he worked. She knew where to interject with the appropriate phrases, and the serious face she would always wear while he was criticising the people he worked with. Constance was back on familiar terrain. She wouldn’t let Jeff down on this, the most important of all aspects of his life. She would support him, and be the devoted girlfriend that he deserved.

‘Well, I’ll tell you, one of these days I’ll move to another investment house, and then we’ll see how much they like it.’

‘You don’t owe them anything, they just don’t appreciate how good you are.’

As the beer continued to flow into the afternoon, Jeff seemed to have forgotten how angry he had been with Constance, and continued with his many grievances about where he worked. Constance knew that at a certain point he would start fuming about his father. She prepared herself with all the suitable comments she would say, the same ones she always used when he got onto that, the biggest of all his grievances. As she looked at Jeff, she realised how lucky she had been to find him. Even though she would always let him down, and make silly mistakes, he always seemed to forgive her. She knew she didn’t deserve someone as nice as him. Constance vowed to herself that she would never let him down again.

The new week passed slowly for Constance, she really liked her job, especially considering the jobs she had done when she had first arrived in Spain, four years previously, but she always seemed to get on the wrong side of Grace, her immediate superior. As much as she could she would stay out of her way, trying to avoid her wrath. She could never understand why Grace was always so annoyed with her, but by keeping her head down, she tried to minimise the amount of
confrontations. Luckily she was free on Wednesday afternoons, so to clear her head, and to find some peace, she headed down for a walk along the beach. That was her favourite place. Somewhere she could go to to escape from all the problems in her life. The problems that were without a doubt partly of her own making, but for a great part almost inexplicable. For some reason life always seemed to rain on her. She could never understand why, and usually just tried to keep her head down, and wait for the various storms to pass. As usual, walking barefoot on the sand of the beach had a calming effect on her. This was her place of comfort. A place of comfort with no side effects. Unfortunately her other place of comfort, that of continuously eating chocolate, while it did bring her a temporary sense of ease, it certainly did nothing for her figure. In fact, it really just added to her discomfort, and self loathing, as she watched herself grow, and grow. When the time was right, when she felt strong enough, she would try and tackle that problem, but probably that time was far off in the future. She had so many difficulties in her life that there was no way she could give up on the calmness that chocolate afforded her. She needed it too much. That would have to wait for another day, when she felt stronger. Constance wondered to herself if that day would ever come. It certainly didn’t seem to be anywhere near at hand.

Ahead of her she saw the elderly man, who had so nicely smiled at her on Sunday. In the same way as the other day he was sitting on a spread out blanket, in a pair of swimming shorts. No doubt he was taking advantage of the pleasant spring sun. This time she was determined to not only smile, rather than grimace, at him. She would also politely say hello. Unfortunately, as she approached him he seemed to be absorbed by something happening further along the beach, where a small group of people had gathered. She really hoped he would turn his attention to her, otherwise her plan of the friendly salutation might well fall on deaf ears. Could she really fail even in something so simple? Would it be so hard for her to just pull off a friendly greeting? Just as she was almost alongside him, the man jumped up, and went running down the beach towards the group that had formed. Constance watched in astonishment as the man ran into the water, and started swimming out to sea. She had been taken totally by surprise, and couldn’t understand what on earth had gotten into him. With a start she then noticed that he was swimming out towards a dog, which seemed to be having difficulty swimming back towards the shore. She was transfixed, glued to the spot. Her heart raced as she watched the man swim out to the dog, and start swimming backwards towards the shore, holding the dog’s head out of the water. She quickly started walking down towards the gathered group, only to realise that the man had left all his things just lying on the blanket he had spread out. She returned to his things, and neatly folded up the blanket, and put it, along with his book, and water bottle, in his bag. Constance knew that after getting out of the cold, spring water, he would need to get home for a hot shower, so if he didn’t have to waste time having to pack up his things he would be able to do that much quicker. By the time she got down to the assembled group the man was carrying the animal, a small brown dog, out of the water, and up towards its owner. The owner, a young girl, who seemed to be on her own, was crying, and yelling in Spanish. The other people there were trying to calm her down, telling her that the dog was alright, just very tired. Out of nowhere a man, probably around Constance’s age, came running down the beach. The young girl screamed out to him.

‘Papi, papi, ven rápido!’

The man, obviously the young girl’s father quickly took control of the situation. He took the dog in his arms, and after thanking the man profusely for having saved its life, ran off towards the road, with his daughter in tow. No doubt they would be going to the nearest vet. The onlookers dispersed, and Constance found herself alone with the man, who had saved the dog.
‘That was very brave of you.’
‘Oh, an Aussie girl! Hello Aussie!’

The man had such a warm smile, and pleasant demeanour. Constance was so worried that he would catch a cold after having been out in the cold water.

‘Hello. I collected your things for you. I’m sure you will be dying to get under a hot shower, to warm up.’

‘How very nice of you.’
He took the blanket out of the bag, and used it to dry himself off.

‘Actually it’s not that cold. I’m from down under, just like you. I’m originally from New Zealand, and down there the water is always cold, so this is pretty good, in comparison. So, a Kiwi meets an Aussie in the south of Spain…, that sounds like the start of a good book, or a bad joke.’

Constance laughed with delight. How pleasant to meet such a friendly person. With a more serious expression she thought of the dog.
‘Do you think that dog will be alright?’

‘Yes, sure. He may have swallowed a bit of sea water, but mostly he was just worn out. With such small legs he had trouble swimming back in. They are taking him to see a vet. He’ll be right as rain.’

Constance smiled as she heard that typical expression from the antipodes. Right as rain. Really it didn’t make any sense when you thought about it, but everyone from Australasia knew exactly what it meant. All would be fine.

‘My name is Constance, but normally they call me Connie.’
‘Well, I certainly won’t. Constance is such a beautiful name. For me, you will always be Constance. I’m Matt, actually short for Matthew, but you really can call me Matt.’

‘Somehow that doesn’t seem to be fair.’
Matt laughed at her reply.
‘Why? Did someone tell you that life is fair?’

The two of them laughed. Constance was so pleased to have met such a nice person.

‘Well, Constance, I think the day’s events call for a little celebration. What do you say to having a drink, and a bit of a chat? You can tell me all about how you ended up living over here, far from the sunburnt country. What do you say?’

‘That would be lovely.’
Matt pointed back along the beach.
‘See that bar along there? From the deck there is a lovely view of the sea. I’ll pop off home, which is just a stone’s throw away, have a quick shower, and I will see you there in, say, ten minutes?’

‘Great, I will see you there.’

Matt hurried off for his shower, and Constance walked along the beach, lost in her thoughts. She had felt really at ease in the company of Matt. Something almost unheard of for her. She had difficult relationships with almost everyone in her life. She always seemed to be walking on eggshells, with Jeff, her boss at work, and not to mention her mother. How nice it was to talk to someone without all that pressure. Partly it was probably also because she always felt more relaxed by the sea. It had been like that since she was a little girl, growing up near the beach in Australia. The beach had always been her special place, a place to go to, to think things through, or just to think about nothing, and to clear her head of the constant chatter. She raised her face to the warm sun, closed her eyes, and felt the warmth of the sun’s rays on her face. She had been doing that since she was a little kid, it had always brought her a sense of tranquility. It was almost as if it
transported her to a place outside of her own skin. A place where everything was easy, and she didn’t have to worry about anything. She could escape from herself merely by closing her eyes, and letting the sun flow into her.

Roused from her meditative state, Constance heard a distant voice calling her name, and with a start she turned to see Matt calling her from the deck of the bar where they were to meet. With a sense of anxiety she hurried to their meeting place. Somehow she had even managed to let Matt down, before they had even become friends. She had lost track of the time. She felt so annoyed at herself. She just couldn’t ever do anything right. Constance hurried up the stairs, and rushed over to where Matt was sitting.

‘I’m so sorry, Matt. Time just got away from me. Please forgive me! It’s just that…’

‘Hey, don’t worry! There’s nothing to apologise for. Anyway, I got here early, so you’re bang on time.’

Matt had the most friendly smile on his face. Constance had expected him to be angry, and to be told off, or at least to get a cold reception, but Matt was not at all annoyed with her.

‘Well Constance, what do you say to a gin, and grapefruit soda? Sound good?’

‘Actually I’ve never tried gin, but I’m game for a try.’

Matt looked at her with a big grin on his face.

‘I warn you! Once you try good gin, there is no going back! You are in front of a life changing experience. Think very carefully about this.’

Matt’s humour was contagious. Constance laughed along with him.

‘Well then, today is the day that my life will change!’

Matt caught the eye of the barman, and held up two fingers. The barman nodded in reply. Constance would never had had the confidence to do something like that. She realised that Matt was a man very sure of himself, and his place in the world, something that Constance had never felt in all her life. How she would love to do something like that. Just give a nod, or a wave, and have someone understand you. She knew that if she tried something like that she would either be ignored, or be met with a look of total indifference. After a very short time, the barman approached the table with their drinks on a tray.

‘Thanks, Pablo. Pablo this is Constance, a young lady who has come all the way from Australia. Constance this is Pablo.’

‘Hello Pablo.’

‘A very big hello to you Constant.’

‘Pablo this is the first time Constance has tried gin. That’s always a big event in someone’s life.’

‘Oh, very good. We have very good gin here. Only best for Matt, and his friend. I hope you will enjoy!’

Pablo smiled at Constance with a look of great sincerity. Obviously being with Matt in that bar put you in a privileged position.

‘Thank you very much, Pablo. I’m sure I will,’

As the barman retreated from the table Matt held up his glass.

‘To the lives of dogs, may they live long, and be happy, and to the making of new friends!’

Constance held up her glass, and replied with her own toast.

‘To the saviour of the day. A true Kiwi hero!’

They both sipped their drinks.

‘OK, come on, out with it! You love it don’t you?’

His happy demeanour was contagious.
‘Actually Matt, I do. It really is nice. What a great discovery.’
‘So, tell me, where are you from in Aussie?’
‘A little place on the coast called Evans Head. You’ve probably never heard of it, but it’s just 30 kilometres south of Byron Bay.’
‘Oh my God! What a lovely place to grow up. I know the area well.’
‘You lived in Australia for a while, Matt?’
‘Many, many moons ago. When I was a very young lad I spent a few years over there.’
Matt looked out to sea, with a smile on his face.
‘Fond memories, Matt?’
‘Well, they were different times, indeed. You wouldn’t have even been born then, but in the late 70’s I got caught up in the hippy scene over there. Good times indeed!’
Constance’s face lit up with joy. She instantly had so many questions she wanted to ask Matt.
‘My father was a hippy back then, too! I would love to know about the things you all got up to.’
‘I bet he’s a bit reluctant to tell you the details of those days, true? That I can understand. You really did have to be there. A lot of it probably comes over badly being recounted to another generation.’ He laughed. ‘It sounds worse than what it really was.’
‘Actually I never had the chance to ask him. He died when I was only six years old. In a car accident.’
‘Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that. What about your mother? Was she a flower child, too?’
Constance grimaced at the mere mention of her mother.
‘No, she definitely was not. She hated all that stuff. In fact I have never even understood how they even got together. They seem to have come from different worlds.’
‘Well, sometimes that can be good. If we are all the same, and hang out with similar people, that could really get boring fast. Maybe their differences complemented each other?’
Constance knew that Matt was just trying to be nice to her, trying to put a positive spin on her mother.
‘I don’t know about that. Mum hated that whole hippy side of dad. She has never really told me anything about what he got up to. I remember when I was around 12 years old she mentioned that dad used to smoke. At the time I assumed she meant cigarettes, but then years later I wondered if she didn’t really mean something else.’
Matt roared with laughter.
‘Well, young lady, if he was a hippy he would have been smoking weed, for sure. Actually, back then in Aus they grew some pretty strong stuff, too. Did your mum ever let anything else slip, about him?’
‘No, not really. I remember when we would be driving, and we would pass hitchhikers she would always make some derogatory comment like… I can’t believe your father would do that… so I guess he did some hitchhiking.’
‘Well, that was the way we got around back then. When we had cars, they would be old bombs, and when we didn’t we would hitchhike.’
‘Weren’t there a lot of serial killers around in those days? I thought it was really dangerous to hitchhike back then.’
‘That’s true, there always were plenty of stories around of people getting killed, and whatnot, but when you are young you feel bulletproof. Besides, pretty much that was the only option a lot of times.’ He shrugged his shoulders. ‘We were usually pretty broke, back in those days.’
He laughed at the memories.
‘Matt, do you think you could tell me about some of your adventures from those days?’
Matt looked forlornly out to sea, and rubbed his chin in thought. He sighed.
‘Hey, you know, it was all a long time ago. I haven’t really thought about those days for a long
time. It’s probably for the best to let sleeping dogs lie.’
‘What about a story about when you were hitchhiking? You would be around the same age as
dad would have been if he was still alive. I would love to hear about the things he was doing back
then. I’m sure he would have been doing the same things as you.’
Matt didn’t look totally convinced.
‘You know, you sort of had to be there. In the telling, things may come across a bit iffy. They
were different times.’
Constance had never met anyone who had been through the lifestyle that her father had, and
now that she was living in Spain she knew that she never would again. She wasn’t about to give up
without a fight.
‘I promise that I won’t be judgemental, like my mum, and I really would love to hear about the
way my dad lived back then. He never had the chance to tell me.’
Matt still looked unconvinced, but he was slowly warming to the subject.
‘Well…, I suppose we could give it a try. We will definitely be needing more booze, though.’
Matt raised his hand, caught Pablo’s eye, and drew his finger around in a circle. Another round.
‘Let me see… hitchhiking, eh?’
Chapter 3 Heading North

When I first laid eyes on Michael I thought he looked like a bit of an idiot, then, after getting to know him better, my suspicions were confirmed. I had been on the road, hitchhiking, for a few days already, heading from Melbourne up to Cairns. By that stage I was somewhere a bit north of Newcastle. As usual the relentless Australian sun spared nothing and no one. It was scorching everything in its path. Nothing escaped its fiery spears, shooting down from the clear blue sky. I was hot and sweaty, and badly needed a swim in the vast ocean that lay, out of my view, along the east coast of the sunburnt continent.

‘Hi there, is the beach much further along?’ I asked him.
‘No, man, it’s just around that corner. I’m heading there myself, I’ll show you.’
‘Cool. I’m Matt.
‘Hey man, my name’s Michael.’

He had long ginger hair, tied up in a sort of loose pony tail, an extremely thin, emaciated body, and a face that had a permanent grimace planted on it. He didn’t really seem to be a very happy sort of person, nor particularly healthy. He wore a loose fitting sarong, and a collarless, white, short sleeved shirt. His voice was so laid back, he almost seemed to be on the point of falling asleep. It was the late 70’s, and Michael was the epitome of an Australian hippy. He looked to be straight out of central casting. He was a hippy’s hippy. After a very short walk, we came into sight of the mighty Pacific Ocean. Power, and majesty, all rolled into one. As was always the case, I was absolutely blown away by its spectacular allure.

‘Shit, that’s nice! The coast is really beautiful around here.’

The sea was a deep blue colour, with grass and trees growing right down to where the golden sand started. It was a sight as beautiful as you could ever hope to find. The heat of the day only made it more attractive.

‘Yeah, I’m camping over there, under that tree. It’s a really cool spot. There are people staying all over the place, man.’

‘I’m on my way up north, so I really only want a place for tonight. I’ll find a nice spot to set up my tent somewhere around here.’

‘If you are only staying one night, make sure you catch the sunrise, man. When the sun comes up over the sea, you get all sorts of colours. It’s really far out. But you gotta get up early, around 5.’

‘OK, sure. Thanks for the tip. Hey, listen, I’ll catch you later.’

Before anything else I wanted to have a swim. I knew that further north you had to be careful swimming because of the constant danger of the Bluebottles, so I wanted to swim as much as possible while I could. I found a suitable spot to pitch my tent, in a little hollow just below a shaggy looking coastal tree. I dropped my backpack, took off my shirt and shorts, and raced down naked into the soothing waters of the great Pacific. The relief was instant. The coolness of the water washed away the constant sweltering feeling the blazing Australian sun always gave you. It felt timeless playing in the rolling waves that were crashing over me. I think I would have stayed in the water forever, if it wasn’t for the pangs of hunger that came over me. I had eaten little that day, and was paying the price for it. I walked out of the cool water, up to my new temporary shelter by the
sea, and was about to tuck into a tin of pink salmon when Michael waved me over. Tin of salmon in 
hand I wandered over to his campsite. He had a lit joint in his hand.

‘You want some blow, man?’

‘Sure.’

‘This stuff is killer, they grow it up around Byron Bay.’

He passed his joint to me.

‘Hey, thanks, man.’

He wasn’t kidding about the strength, I got incredibly stoned. I could barely remember where I 
was. Where I was? I could barely remember who I was. It looked like he was pretty out of it too. 
We both pretty much crashed back on the ground for a while, enjoying the moment. After a while, 
as I started to return to my senses, my hunger pangs grew into full blown munchies. I opened my tin 
of salmon, and, with a knife that Michael had with his stuff, I started eating.

‘Hey Michael, you want some salmon?’

‘No, man, I’m vegetarian, I’ve got some… hey, don’t use that knife! It’s never touched meat!’

His dramatic touch seemed rather overplayed to me.

‘Oh, OK, I’ll wash it for you, man.’

‘It’s ruined now! It’s touched meat. It’s the only knife I’ve got. Now I can’t use it anymore.’

Man, was that guy a fanatic.

‘Sorry, Michael, I didn’t realise.’

It looked like he was almost going to cry, so I decided that my presence was no longer desired. 
I left him with his eternally ruined knife, and headed back to my campsite. It was starting to get 
dark, and there was quite a bit of activity on the beach. Further up the beach a group of people were 
stacking up tree trunks, ready for a monster bonfire. I could hear the strains of music, and laughter, 
coming from them. I thought about going over to see what was going on, but, with the stone 
wearing off, I was incredibly tired, so I thought I would just get some sleep. In any case I wanted to 
be up in time for the famous sunrise, over the ocean’s waves. I set up my tent, rolled out my trusty 
sleeping bag, and crawled into it. I dropped into a heavy sleep almost immediately.

The next morning I woke up incredibly early, too early. I had time to kill, luckily as it would 
turn out later, so while waiting for the sunrise, I packed up my small tent, and prepared my 
backpack. Slowly the sky started to lighten up, with streaks of a reddish glow colouring the distant 
clouds. As the sunrise approached the colours deepened, and then the sun made its appearance, just 
lazily rising out of the sea with great elegance. With the red hues seemingly painted on the clouds, 
and the sunshine reflecting across the water it was, indeed, a sight to behold.

The sun had barely exited the water when the raid started. Police cars came flying along the 
road just behind me. I ducked down until they passed, and then grabbed my stuff and took off. They 
stopped over by where the bonfire had been, and police officers began swarming out all around the 
area. Looking back I could see them gathering together the group that had been around the fire, and 
anyone else they could find. I doubted they would have put together such an operation just for an 
illegal fire, so I assumed it was a drug bust. Nothing particularly unusual in those days. Smoking 
pot seemed to be considered the worst crime you could commit. Busting million dollar white collar 
crime just didn’t seem to have the same sort of appeal as rounding up a bunch of social outcasts. 
Back then being a hippy was a dangerous occupation. Luckily I had crashed out asleep early, and I 
had already packed up my stuff, so I was ready to go. As I scurried back along the road, every now 
and then another cop car would come speeding along. The cop cars back then only seemed to have 
one gear. Flat stick. As soon as I saw one coming, I would dive into the bushes until they passed, 
and then jump back out onto the road, and keep on going. I didn’t have any weed on me, but that
wouldn’t have made any difference. The cops in those days would hassle you just out of spite. They
didn’t really need any reason. You were a hippy, an enemy of society, Public Enemy Number 1, so
you must be doing something wrong. I wondered if poor hapless Michael had made it out, or, if not,
whether they had vegetarian food, and untainted cutlery, in jail?

By the time I got back out onto the main highway, I didn’t really have too far that I wanted to
go for my next adventure, probably just a few hundred kilometres. By Australian standards, that
was just down the road. A stone’s throw away. In any other country, like my native New Zealand,
that would be considered quite a long way. With the vastness of Australia, however, that was
nothing. I had heard about Mount Warning, which was the first spot to get the sunrise in Australia,
and had decided that I would like to climb up it, and camp there for a night. It hadn’t taken me long
to walk back to the Pacific highway, and find a suitable spot for hitching, so I was getting an early
start. The rides came pretty easily, it was a really busy road with a lot of traffic, and there were
always plenty of kind souls around. Not everyone had the same opinion of us misfits from society
as the cops. A lot of people who would stop for you had also travelled around by hitchhiking
themselves, so they had plenty of good advice, and interesting stories to recount.

By mid morning the next day, I found myself at the base of the imposing mountain. Looking
up, it appeared to be a bit of a climb, rather daunting, but I was brimming over with youthful
enthusiasm. Nothing was going to stop me. The walk up was pretty steep, but afforded incredible
views all along the way. There were benches placed strategically along the pathway, both to give
you much needed rest, and to let you take in the spectacular view back over the ocean as it was
getting ever further below. The lower part of the mountain was thick with lush, green bush, but as I
got higher that growth started to thin out. The temperature was also dropping noticeably, the further
up I got. Mount Warning is an extinct volcano with a very conical shape to it. Even though at times
it was hard going, I think it only took a few hours for me to get up, including plenty of stops to
admire the view, of course. The last part of the climb was the hardest. It was incredibly steep, but
fortunately, there was a sort of thick wire handrail to grab on to. You almost had to pull yourself up.
From the top the view was nothing short of breathtaking. On the eastern side you could see all up
and down the coast, and far out to sea. Across the back you could see endless mountain ranges that
went as far as the eye could see.

A friendly looking guy with long hair, and the shabby clothes that were the standard uniform of
hippies, came wandering over. I could see that he also had a backpack.

‘I see you’ve got your backpack. Are you staying the night too?’

‘Yeah, I was just looking around for a good spot to pitch my tent.’ He replied.

‘Why don’t we put them up over the side here.’

I pointed to a nice spot I had already picked out.

‘Sure. Actually the top is smaller than what I was expecting. Just this small flat part, and then it
really drops off.’

I waved my arm around in a circular motion.

‘Yeah, but that certainly makes it better for looking around! Look, 360 degrees of fantastic
views.’

‘Man, that’s for sure. I’ve never seen anything like it.’

While chatting away, we pitched our tents on the agreed upon spot.

Right then a helicopter appeared, and landed just a short distance from us, almost blowing us
over the edge with the wind it blew around.

‘Bloody hell, these are some lazy bastards,’ said my new mate, whose name I had found out
was Kevin.

A few guys, dressed in suits, got out of the helicopter, and started pointing in various directions. It was almost surreal.

‘What the hell are they up to?’ I wondered aloud.

Meanwhile, a photographer, who was in their group, took photos of them, while they were pointing! It felt like a scene out of a Monty Python film. The whole episode lasted less than five minutes, and then they were back in the helicopter and gone. I was slightly stunned by the whole experience.

‘What the hell was that all about?’

‘No doubt some politicians looking for a nice photo opportunity, to put in the papers.’

‘Right, with the taxpayer paying for the helicopter.’ I answered sarcastically, not that I had been much in the business of paying taxes. But still…

By then most of the daytrippers were well on their way down, after having dutifully taken their photos, and admired sufficiently the view. Their day’s work was over. They could happily head off to other magnificent places that were on their must do/must be able to talk about list. It seemed like we would have the mountain top to ourselves for the night. Unfortunately that was not to be the case. A group of scouts with their scoutmaster arrived, complete with loads of camping equipment. The kids, all boys, looked to be around ten years old. It was starting to get dark as they set up their camp, not far from us, as there wasn’t a lot of room up there. Kevin and I already had a little fire going, because it was getting quite cold, and we were having something to eat. As darkness fell, the view became even more spectacular. Up and down the coast you could see lights from the many towns, and roads. The whole coast was lit up in an array of different colours, and different patterns of light. Conversely, looking inland you could still just make out the shapes of the mountain tops, with barely a light to be seen every few hundred kilometres, it seemed. It looked like something out of the Hobbit’s Middle Earth. Both sides were equally stunning, and formed an incredible contrast.

Our silent admiration of the view was interrupted by the excited voice of one of the scouts.

‘Dad, dad, look, it’s a UFO!’

We both turned to look. You could see the lights of a plane, high above us, heading down the coast. It was probably out of Brisbane airport, heading down to Sydney, or possibly across to New Zealand. The other scouts were snickering, as the scoutmaster patiently said to his son:

‘No, Peter, it’s a plane.’

The snickering, and chuckles, had barely died down when Peter decided to have another go.

‘Dad, dad!’

Everyone fell silent. We were all waiting expectantly, we knew it would be a good one.

‘It’s flying upside down!’

The whole mountain top erupted with laughter, quite possibly even with that of the boy’s father himself.

The next morning everyone was up early for the sunrise, and no one was disappointed. That day we were the first people in all Australia to see the sun rise, and it was nothing short of spectacular. There were layers of cloud in the sky, reflecting the sun’s rays in different shades of red and yellow, and every mixture in between. As the sun rose out of the sea, we could see it all happening far below us. We felt like Gods, witnessing the dawn of creation from high above in our lofty temple. There could be no better way to greet the arrival of a new day.

I had been dropped off in some town centre, somewhere in southern Queensland. I can’t
remember its name. After a long while on the road each town starts to look the same. The rides, mainly short ones, had been coming easily. After having had something light, and cheap, to eat, I walked out to the edge of the town, looking for a suitable spot to start hitching again. Ahead of me I could see a guy already waiting for a lift. By following the hitchhikers etiquette, the unwritten rules of good form, I would have to let him get the first ride. I would have to move further along the road. That wasn’t going to be a problem for me, I was enjoying the trip, and was in no hurry to reach my destination. I was just enjoying the journey itself. Every day was a new adventure for me, meeting new people, and seeing new places. I almost felt like I didn’t want the journey to end.

In all honesty, as I approached him, I wasn’t particularly impressed with where he had chosen to take up his stand. There wasn’t really a good area for a car to stop, without partially blocking the road. I had become somewhat of an expert on those things by that time, and felt that it was my duty, as a fellow traveller, to inform him of the matter.

‘Hey, this isn’t really a good spot for hitching, you know. It’s a bit of an awkward spot for a car to stop.’ I told him.

‘Hi there. Maybe, but it’ll do for me.’

He wasn’t really overly impressed with my abundance of hitchhiking knowledge.

‘Where are you off to?’

‘I’m heading up to Cairns. What about you?’ I asked.

‘Yeah, me too. I’ve been on the road a while, I started out from Adelaide.’

‘No shit? I left from Melbourne. Yeah, it’s a bloody long way, I’ve been at it for a while myself.’

He was slim, with longish, dark hair and a stubble. He had a friendly looking face, and a ready smile.

‘OK, man, I’ll leave you to it. No one is going to pick up two guys together, so I’ll head further up the road, and get out of you way. Good luck, maybe I’ll see you somewhere along the way.’

‘Thanks, good travels to you too.’

I wandered further up the road, looking for a good spot for a car to stop. After about half an hour, the other guy got a lift. I stuck my finger out as well, knowing full well how hard it was for two males to get picked up by the same ride. Anyway, there was no harm in trying. You had to be optimistic about your possibilities. Unbelievably, the car stopped for me as well! That was almost unheard of. The driver was a friendly looking man of early middle age. He wound down his window to address me.

‘Hi there, I’m only going about 40 k’s up the road, but you are welcome to a lift.’

‘Hey, thanks, man.’

I jumped in the back, with my fellow hitchhiker.

‘Hello there, again, fellow traveller.’

The kind stranger dropped us off at a crossroads, in the middle of nowhere, and turned off. That might not seem like a good thing, but actually the middle of nowhere was a pretty good spot for hitchhiking. I was an expert at those things, remember?

‘My name’s Matt, my good fellow.’

‘Hi there, I’m Paul.’

‘We should flip a coin to see who gets the first shot at a lift, and who has to head up the road. What do ya reckon?’

‘No, that’s OK, you go first. I had the first spot before, so it’s only fair.’

‘You, kind sir, are a gentleman.’

I rolled up and smoked a cigarette while we had a chat about where we were from, and various
generalities. Paul was softly spoken, and obviously very intelligent. He had a constant cheeky smile playing around the sides of his lips, which made me feel really at ease with him. After a while duty called. It was time to get back to work. He threw his backpack over his shoulder.

‘It’s been nice to meet you Matt. Hopefully we will meet up again, further along the road.’

‘Yeah, same to you, man. Take care.’

Sometimes when you meet someone, things just click. I had that feeling with Paul, so I was a little sad as he walked off along the road.

I got back to the business of seeking a lift. As usual, along that highway, there was a perpetual stream of traffic. It didn’t take long before an elderly couple stopped for me. Both wore friendly, welcoming smiles, and were dressed in unpretentious clothing. Exactly the sort of people who would cheerfully give a lift to a young social outcast like myself.

‘Hello there, young man. Hop in. We’re not going far, but there’s plenty of room for one more.’

‘Thanks very much. Any distance would be most appreciated.’

I threw in my pack, and jumped in the back. As the car headed off towards where Paul was hitching, I thought I would give it my best shot.

‘Would there be any chance of giving a lift to my friend, as well?’

‘No problems, at all.’

They happily stopped, and let Paul in as well. We had defied the general rule of hitchhiking, which stated that two males could never get a lift together. What’s more, we had done it twice. We were breaking new ground, and forging new guidelines. The rule book of hitchhiking would have to be rewritten, or, at the very least, amended.

At the next drop off point, we decided that we may as well continue our journey together. Some force was working in our favour. Besides, a friendship was starting to grow between us. A friendship which would continue for many years to come, and which would see us in and out of each other’s lives frequently. Over the years we would share a lot of adventures, both in Australia, and in New Zealand. That, to me, was the beauty of travel. Out of such a chance meeting, the direction of your life, and those with whom you share it, could change forever. Unexpected people could enter your life, enriching it, and changing who you were.

‘Shit, man, slow down a bit.’

His reply to my request was just to laugh, even more hysterically. The situation was getting out of hand.

‘Don’t freak out, man, it’s cool. No fucking worries!’

The two of us had been hitching together for a couple of days by that time, mainly getting a series of just short rides. Then, as luck would have it, the maniac had picked us up. Apparently, he had heard on the radio that they wanted someone to drive a rental car back to Cairns, from Brisbane. All expenses paid. As he was on the dole, and looking for some fun, he jumped at the opportunity. A bag of dope to keep him stoned, and someone else’s car to try and destroy, all seemed pretty irresistible to him. He was going just about as fast as that car could manage, taking all the corners at excessive speed. Around every corner we risked skidding off the road. I was absolutely terrified. I’d never been very trusting as a back seat driver anyway, but that was killing me. On most corners he would end up at least partially on the gravel at the side of the carriageway, where the traction was far worse. I was just about shitting my pants. Paul and myself were exchanging distressed glances. There was no way we would be able to handle that all the way to Cairns, even though he was in fact going directly to our final destination. That was if he was going to actually make it to Cairns, which
seemed dubious, to say the least. A stopover at a hospital along the way seemed far more likely. To make matters worse, he had shared a joint with us, so being totally stoned just magnified the precariousness of the situation, and made it all seem even more wildly dangerous. We had to get out of that car, fast. Luckily, Paul came up with the perfect solution.

‘Hey, stop here! Look! See those dying trees? I would love to get some photos of them.’

Reluctantly the mad man pulled over, he was a guy in a hurry.

‘I don’t want to stop for long. Get some shots, and let’s hit the road again.’

There was no way we were ever getting back into that car. Now it was my turn.

‘While we are here, we can light a fire, and cook up some lunch. I’ve got some sausages.’

That was too much for the speedster. He had already lost enough time. Time that could have been spent racing. His blood was pulsating in his veins.

‘Sorry guys, I’ve got to get going. You’ll have to get another lift.’

The two of us pretended to be surprised, and slightly disappointed by his decision.

‘OK, man, that’s alright, I understand. Anyway, we are not in a hurry. Bye.’ said Paul.

As he screeched off, we both burst out in a relieved laughter.

‘Bloody hell, Paul, well done. Brilliant move. I was shitting my pants.’

‘I have serious doubts whether he will make it to Cairns alive, that guy. Anyway, apart from the fact that I wanted to get out of that car, I really would like to get some photos of these trees.’

I turned my attention to what I had merely thought of as having been only a pretext for escaping the almost certain death awaiting us at the hands of the maniacal driver.

It was an eerie scene. A scene of the gradual approach of an unequivocal death. All the trees of the forest had been ringbarked, a process where a circle of bark is completely cut away, resulting in them slowly dying off. It was a slow, unhurried death, which required little effort on the behalf of the executioner. Little effort, but a lot of patience. The death of the trees took time, a lot of time. I guessed that the land had been destined for cattle use in the future. At that stage the trees were totally dead, but still firmly standing. They were completely devoid of their once flourishing foliage, but still showing the strength of their former glory. Their bare branches were stark, and strange looking, ghostly, as they twisted around in the sunlight. Paul was silently wandering through the trees, taking some photos. Those photos would have been a great reminder of our time together, and of the slow carnage we had been witnessing. That is, if the camera hadn’t been stolen somewhere further along the way. Still, the memory lives. Walking among those monumental testaments to former glory, I felt a sadness that such beauty could be so heartlessly destroyed. Was that the price we had to pay to have our meat available, neatly packaged, in our supermarkets? Was it a price worth paying? The two of us were awed into silence. It felt as if we were walking through a cemetery, surrounded by magnificent Gods of days long past.

After a while, I reluctantly returned to the mundane acts of daily life. Lunch. I got a fire going, and put on some sausages.

‘You know, Paul, I feel a bit guilty eating these sausages. For me to be able to buy these sausages in the supermarket, these trees, and many others like them had to die.’

‘Yeah, I know what you mean. People usually don’t see what happens behind the scenes. They just see the end product. Neatly packaged, showing no signs of the devastation left in its wake. Probably life is all just one big compromise. Maybe we should consider becoming vegetarians? The whole process of killing off the forests, to raise animals, and then killing off the animals, all just to feed us, is pretty horrendous.’

Normally, the two us had plenty to say, but, in that moment, we both just sat staring into the fire, in deep reflection about life’s unforeseen complications.
‘I really like the fact that you are a Kiwi.’ he said eventually.
‘Why’s that, man?’
‘Most Kiwis I have met are nice people, generally nicer than Australians. Over here we have a real redneck culture. One day I would like to head over there. Maybe live there for a while.’
‘I’m sure you’d love it. We have plenty of still untamed forests. Make sure you look me up. You know what would be fun? Doing a tour together of the South Island. It’s incredibly beautiful, and actually fairly devoid of people. It’s like a big national park. There are plenty of wide open spaces, lots of bush walks. It’s all really green, a shade of green you can only find there. Plenty of good scenery for you to practice your photography on. We should really do that. Anyway, I hate to break the mood, but it’s time to get back on the road.’

‘Yeah, I know a good hostel for you. I will take you all the way.’
‘I can’t believe this epic trip is actually coming to an end. I’ve been on the road so long.’ I said to Paul.
‘Shit, me too. It’s been endless.’
We were close to Cairns, and this young hippy guy, would take us all the way in. The journey was ending. Our host smiled at us.
‘I better get you there in style. Here, roll us up a joint.’
He passed me over his tobacco pouch, which had a little bag of dope inside. I dutifully rolled up a joint, which the three of us passed around.
‘Pretty good shit, eh?’ He said.
‘Man, this is strong. I’m so out of it.’ Paul was grinning from ear to ear. All I could do in reply was to laugh.

As our long odyssey came towards its inexorable end, it was getting late, and night had already set in when he pulled over in front of the hostel.
‘Hey, thanks man, thanks for everything.’ I told him.
‘Alright, guys, have a good one. See ya.’
The last driver on our long odyssey gave us a wave, and pulled away in his car.
So, there we were. At our destination. The end of the road. The journey was over, and we were stoned off our heads. We both looked at each other, and cracked up laughing.
‘Hey, Matt, what say we just sit out here for a bit. I’m too stoned to handle going in.’
‘Shit, man, me too.’
We sat on the curb in a moment of silence. I had been so concentrated on the actual journey for so long that I wasn’t really sure what the next step was. What had I wanted to do in Cairns? Just exactly what had been the reason for going there?
‘Now that we are here, I’m not even sure what it was I wanted to do here. I’ve been in hitching mode so long, I haven’t given much thought to actually getting here. What about you, Paul? What are your plans?’
In reply, he just burst out laughing.
‘I’ve got absolutely no idea!’
We sat there laughing, and chatting, for some time. Eventually, we realised we would have to go in, stoned or not. We walked up the wooden stairs, and opened the door. There was no reception area, just rooms with beds, on both sides of a corridor. A beautiful young hippy looking girl was walking through, carrying what looked like her bathroom gear.
‘Hi there, we are looking to book in. Who can we see about that?’
Luckily, I had Paul to do the talking for me, I was still too stoned to be able to articulate
anything with any great precision.

‘Hi, guys! You have to go back down the stairs to Mrs. Bellows’ flat below. She’s the owner.’

‘OK, thanks, catch you later.’

We went back down, and found our way to the door of the flat below the hostel. We knocked on the door quietly. The response was anything but quiet.

‘You realise what time it is, I hope? What sort of time do you call this to be bothering someone?’

The door opened, and there stood a fierce looking elderly woman, dressed in a very old fashioned nightgown. Upstairs there was a hostel full of young modern travellers, downstairs the scene was right out of a previous century. The script had been written by Jane Austen. It wouldn’t have seemed out of place if she had been carrying a lighted candle. With the light shining on her face I could see that she looked anything but happy. Paul went into apologetic mode.

‘I’m terribly sorry, Mrs. Bellows, but we just got in now. Sorry to disturb you so late.’

Paul was definitely better than me in these situations. I was totally lacking in the tact required. Plus she was so overbearing, and unfriendly. ‘Sense and Sensibility’ was required, and Paul was obviously much better versed in Jane Austen.

‘I don’t usually accept check-ins this late.’ She somewhat grunted. ‘Oh well, now that you are here anyway, I suppose. Come on, I’ll show you your beds. Don’t be waking everyone up! Keep your chatter down.’

Actually it wasn’t really that late, and it looked like the only person already in bed, was her. She took us back upstairs, angrily showed us to a pair of beds, and pointed out where the shared bathroom and kitchen were. When she finally left us, still muttering and moaning, and went back down to the comings and goings of her antecedent century, we stashed our gear on the beds, and headed back out to the safety of the curb, where we stayed for quite some time. It just all seemed so much easier out there. Arriving at our destination totally stoned had proven to be somewhat of a trial by fire.

Neither of us was particularly impressed with Cairns. Probably, after such a long journey, we had built up such high expectations of our final destination, our mecca, that we felt slightly let down by the reality. Cairns was the centre of a very big fishing industry, so the downtown area was dominated by fish packing warehouses, and where you would normally hope to find nice beaches, there were only fishing boats, of all shapes, big and small. The heat was extreme, the humidity annihilating. The sun felt like it was piercing into your skin. Any small effort resulted in waves of sweat, and a feeling of great fatigue. Doing nothing was quite often the best option.

The most interesting thing about the place was the presence of large colonies of fruit bats, known as Flying Foxes. During the day they would sleep out in the mangrove swamps, but at sunset they would swarm in, in their thousands, across the town, looking for fruit trees to raid. In that precise moment, with incredible coordination, the sky would be covered with them. It was quite something to see, and it happened every evening. In their formations they were absolutely stunning. Up close, however, they could be quite scary. One evening, as we were walking into town, one swooped down out of a tree at me, opened his wings fully, and then flew off. He missed my head by mere inches. I was totally freaked out. I swear the total wingspan was nothing short of a couple of metres. Well, that’s what it had seemed like to me, anyway. Quite possibly the years have enhanced that memory.

One very positive aspect of Cairns was that it was a bit of a hub for travellers, hippies, coming and going from all the various places the far north had to offer. There was plenty of advice for the
confused.

‘You guys should head up to Kuranda. It’s an amazing place. It’s right in the middle of a rainforest, so it’s a real bush setting. Plus there’s a nice river that runs through nearby. Good for swimming, not like this place.’

We were sitting in a bar downtown, talking to some fellow travellers. The barmaids had on see through tops, with, generally, large breasts bouncing around. Sitting on barstools, to catch all the action on display, were a bunch of the usual rednecks you always found in the smaller Australian centres. The hippies, most of whom were used to swimming, and sunbathing naked, were sitting at the tables.

‘Plus, it’s a lot cooler up there. You don’t get this extreme humidity.’

‘What do you reckon, Paul? Shall we blow this town off? It’s pretty shit really, full of bloody rednecks. Also, this heat is killing me. Coming from Kiwiland I can’t really handle it at all.’

‘Hey, me too. It gets hot in Adelaide, but there is nothing like this sultriness. It’s almost like breathing water. Let’s do it. I would love to swim in a fresh water river.’

So with untold sorrow, to the background orchestration of lamenting violins, we broke the sad news to Mrs. Bellows. She, too, was heartbroken to see us go.

‘Make sure you leave your beds clean and tidy.’ She screamed. ‘I hope you haven’t damaged anything. With what you lot pay, I can’t afford to be fixing things. You know the overheads I have here?’

In all honesty, Paul actually was slightly sorry to leave the hostel. One morning when he had awoken, through the mosquito net draped over his bed, he had seen the apparition of a beautiful young woman, totally naked. A surprising vision of unexpected beauty. I think he had been expecting it to be a daily occurrence, but, unfortunately in life, these events are rationed out, sparingly.

Instead of our usual form of travel, hitching, we went up to Kuranda as we had been advised to by those with more experience than us, taking the tourist train. It was an absolutely amazing experience. The train wound up the side of the lush green hills, affording the passengers fantastic views of the coast behind, and of the rainforest ahead. Nature at its best. Definitely one of the best railway trips in the world. The final destination was in keeping with the beauty of the journey itself.

‘My God, Matt, will you take a look at this place. This has to be the nicest railway station I have ever seen. Look at all these plants!’

I, too, was amazed.

‘Man, it’s unbelievable. I really love all the wood work.’

Kuranda railway station was absolutely magnificent. It was an old wooden structure, dating back to colonial times, built with the most delicate of craftsmanship. The doorways were covered by beautiful cornices, and all the supporting posts had lattice work gracefully connecting them to the main structure. The whole station was covered in hanging plants, with greenery in abundance. The style of the building was that of old England, adapted to the colonies.

‘I could almost expect to see Somerset Maugham wander through, on one of his many journeys through colonial days.’ said Paul.

‘Yeah, it really is incredibly timeless.’

We both fell in love with the place from the start. The whole town was immersed in the most rich, vibrant rainforest imaginable. We sauntered around town, admiring everything. All the streets were full of the most wonderful houses.

‘I’ve never seen so many different styles, all in the same place, Matt. Usually towns are built
with all the houses in more or less the same style. This place is insane. There are no two houses which look even remotely similar.’

They were old wooden structures, dated, but absolutely beautiful. And that was when we stumbled across it. A mirage of charm. It was a massive house, with twin frontal gables, rather like a mirror image, pushing out towards the street. It was built up high on stilts, as was the custom, to allow cool air to pass beneath. Right in the middle was a high, wooden, open stairway, rising up to the front entrance. The house was obviously abandoned, in fact it didn’t even have a front door. Someone, with a playful sense of humour, had previously painted it pink. The colour suited it. It highlighted its uniqueness.

‘Come on, Matt, we’ve just got to have a look inside. It’s obviously empty, or inhabited by people who don’t believe in doors.’

I followed him up the front steps. We were drawn to its allure, plus, on a practical side we also needed a place to crash.

‘Well, Matt, I think we have found our home. What do you think?’

‘I think you are right. How could we not stay here.’

It was totally empty, with also some windows missing. For us, that just meant there would be a good air flow. After choosing our respective bedrooms, we stashed our gear and headed off to see the sights. Some of the people were almost as interesting as the buildings, as we soon found out.

‘Namaste, my friends. Welcome to our fair town.’

He joined his hands together for the traditional Indian greeting, as he said it, with a slight bow. Paul later told me that ‘namaste’ is a common Indian greeting.

‘Hi mate, how ya doing?’ I replied, with a common Kiwi greeting.

‘I haven’t seen you two around before, so I presume you are new here? My name is Jayesh. It’s nice to meet you.’

Jayesh, I had a sneaking suspicion that he hadn’t been born with that name, was the most hippy looking dude I had ever seen. He was obviously heavily influenced by indian ways, with beads around his neck and wrists, and an orange coloured sarong. His bare torso, while being quite thin, looked healthy and very tanned. He was a lot older than us, probably in his mid 30’s. I was only 19, and Paul just a few years older.

‘Hello Jayesh, I’m Paul, and this is Matt. Yes, we just got in from Cairns. We absolutely love it here, it’s all so natural, and relaxing.’

‘Come over to my place, I have a zen garden, it’s just perfect for releasing negative energy.’

I was pretty intrigued, and rather amused, about being able to discover how to release negative energy. I flashed a smile at Paul, who smiled back. I think he thought the guy was crazy as well. We followed him along the road to what looked like a rather humble abode. Outside his house was quite small, but, upon entering the garden at the back, I was absolutely taken aback by its beauty. It was landscaped with a combination of small trees, shrubs, big rocks placed on sandy areas, and it even had a small creek flowing through it. It really did look like the perfect place for releasing negative energy. Jayesh took off his sarong, and sat down naked. He gestured to our clothes.

‘I would prefer you to be naked in the zen garden, please.’

In those days we were pretty much used to swimming, and sunbathing naked, so we both readily complied. Admittedly, I was more used to nudity in mixed company. Just us three guys sitting around naked together left me feeling slightly uneasy. But still, it did feel good to be naked in his zen garden, releasing all our pent-up negative energy. Jayesh pulled out a cake tin, which he opened, and offered to us.
‘Eat some nuts. They are full of vegetable protein. Weight for weight nuts have the same amount of protein as red meat, but without any fat.’

‘Is that right? I’ve always loved nuts, but I didn’t realise they were so good for you.’ I told him, as I grabbed a handful.

‘These are raw, unsalted nuts.’

‘Uh-huh, there’s my mistake right there. I’m more used to the cooked, salted ones. The ones they sell in the pub. Those ones are probably not so good for you.’

I noticed that Paul was quiet, and fidgeting around, something unusual for him, so I shot him an inquisitive look. In reply, he nodded towards Jayesh’s groin. Shit! The guy was getting a serious hard on! It was starting to look like peanuts weren’t the only thing on the menu. I decided that the negative energy releasing process had come to its inexorable conclusion.

‘Hey, Paul, we gotta get moving, man. We’re supposed to meet that guy at the pub shortly. Hey, Jayesh, thanks for showing us your garden man, it’s absolutely fantastic.’

In a flash we were on our feet, dressed, and getting the hell out of there. Jayesh called after us.

‘Come back whenever you like, I always enjoy having people around.’

Back out on the road we both cracked up laughing.

‘Yeah, nice nuts, man!’

‘Shit, you could have told me sooner, Paul.’

‘I’m surprised you didn’t notice it. It was big enough.’

‘I was looking at the other nuts!’

We laughed and joked about poor old Jayesh all the way home. We got back to our house, by now suitably baptised ‘Big Pink’, to find that all our belongings had been thrown out of the windows. A couple of little things were missing, but not much. We collected all our things together, and returned inside. We weren’t really sure what that was all about, although I did have some words of wisdom for Paul.

‘Probably a house really does need a door.’

‘I don’t know about you, but I don’t really have much worth stealing anyway.’ he replied.

‘Yeah, me either. Who cares?’

We quickly put the whole incident behind us. Probably a bit too quickly, as future events would later indicate.

That evening, at the pub, I met a couple of friendly botanists, Dave and Warren. They were on a university grant, searching out fauna, mainly of the insect variety. They were definitely in the right area. The surrounding rainforest was absolutely full of all sorts of wildlife. Paul was off somewhere taking photos of the rainforest, with the spectacular colours of dusk as his backdrop.

‘Where are you guys crashing?’ I asked them.

Dave wiped the beer foam from his lips.

‘Tonight we are just going to sleep in the wagon, then tomorrow I guess we will book into the hostel.’

‘Listen guys, if you want to crash at our place, there’s plenty of room. It’s all a bit rough, but at least it’s free.’

Dave was a tall, lanky guy, with small, round, metal frame glasses. It looked like his medium length hair hadn’t seen a comb, or a brush, in many years. The archetypal explorer.

‘Yeah, we will, if that’s OK. We have a pretty tight budget. The less we spend on accommodation, the more we have for our research. We’ve got some good smoke, so we will contribute that to the kitty.’
Warren was shorter, but with an equally unkempt appearance. He was enthusiastic about the idea. ‘I can knock us all up a vegetable stew. We’ve got all the necessary ingredients in the van.’ Veggie stew and weed? They were two offers I just couldn’t refuse. ‘Hey, that’s a done deal, guys. I’ll pick up a few beers, and let’s head back home for a bit of a party, and something to eat.’

As I had expected, Paul was more than happy to share ‘Big Pink’ with whoever needed a place to crash. It wasn’t as if it was really our place anyway. During the course of the following days, Dave and Warren were out and about during the day, so we only really met up with them in the evenings. Usually to share some weed, drink some beers, and break bread, as the expression goes.

It didn’t take long until the house filled up even further. A couple of days later, in the afternoon, as we were walking back from having a swim down at the river, we came across a couple of young hippy girls, coming out of the railway station. They were both dressed in colourful attire, with long, unbrushed hair. The taller of the two had blonde hair, while her friend had brown, more wavy hair. Both had the cutest of faces. In short order Paul, always a bit of a ladies man, had introduced us all.

‘Hi girls, I’m Paul, and this is Matt. Have you just gotten into town?’

The blonde girl, smiling readily, responded amicably. ‘Hi there, I’m Debby, Debs, and this is Karen. Yes, we just arrived. They told us there’s a hostel here somewhere. Do you know where it is?’

‘Yeah,’ replied Paul, ‘it’s just down the road, but if you like you can come and stay at our place. We are squatting in a massive place just through town. It’s not much, but it’s free. There are us two, and another couple of guys, but the place is massive, so there’s room for everyone.’

The two of them readily agreed. Free was good. That was the way of those days. You would meet new people, and share all you had with each other. Not that any of us had that much to offer anyway, but they were simple, carefree days. In any case the house was so big, it was easy to accommodate everyone. In fact, even thought we were by then six of us, everyone had their own room to sleep in. Every evening became a party, with plenty of booze, and weed, which was easily purchased in the only pub in town. ‘Big Pink’, after many years of abandonment, was flourishing. We had brought life back to the place, and in return it provided us with welcome shelter.

All of us loved Kuranda, the dense rainforest, with its vibrant colours, and the cool refreshing water of the river. I loved just walking around, and admiring the shapes of the old wooden houses. Each one had its own design, and they were really majestic, with their old colonial charm. As the days passed in great enjoyment, we had nonchalantly put the ‘belongings-thrown-out-of-the-window’ incident behind us, but maybe we should have given it a bit more thought. One morning, early, I was awakened by a girl’s scream. I went running into the room the scream came from, to find Debby holding her bloody head, as she lay in her sleeping bag.

‘Shit Debs, are you OK? What the fuck happened?’

‘I woke up and there was an Aborigine guy standing over me. I tried to sit up, but then he hit me with a rock. How bad is is? My head is killing me! I’m bleeding!’

She had been absolutely terrified by the incident. In no time at all everyone in the house was crowded into Debby’s room. Warren pushed himself forward, and took charge. ‘I’m a doctor, let me see. Dave, get the first aid kit from the van!’

Luckily, Warren had some medical experience, and their expedition was well equipped. After a quick inspection of her head, Warren tried to calm Debby down. ‘You’ll be fine, Debs, it’s just a small cut. It doesn’t even require stitches. I’ll disinfect it, and
give you something for the pain. Don’t worry, I know it probably hurts, but it’s going to be alright.’

Initially it had seemed to be pretty severe, but in the end, luckily, it wasn’t as bad as had been first thought.

At that point, however, no one was too keen on sleeping in a house without a front door anymore. None of us could understand the reasons behind such strange behaviour, but, with little pondering, it was generally decided that moving out day had arrived. We all packed up our gear, exchanged addresses, and promised to meet up again somewhere. Standing together in front of ‘Big Pink’, Paul and I watched everyone leave. Dave and Warren, with a toot and a wave, headed off to forests unknown, and, undoubtedly, many more strange looking insects and creepy crawly things. Debs, and Karen, in a slightly subdued frame of mind, walked off to find the hostel. I felt a strange feeling of both happiness, and sadness. I turned to look at what had been our temporary home.

‘Shit, what a fantastic house! What a great time it’s been here. It’s been a real buzz being here in Kuranda with you, Paul. I know we probably won’t see any of the others again, but us two definitely have to stay in contact.’

Paul placed a hand on my shoulder, and lightly shook me. I will never forget the friendly, warm smile on his face at that moment.

‘Count on it, Matt. This is just the beginning. Come on, let’s head down to the station.’ He held us his hands in homage. ‘Bye Big Pink! Thanks for your hospitality.’

We waved our final farewells to the illustrious house that had served us so well as our temporary home, and with no plans, no fixed abode, but without a care in the world, we wandered off in the direction of the train station, chatting and laughing. Undoubtedly, many more interesting places were out there, just waiting for us to find them.
Chapter 4 Climbing Mountains

That Friday had been a terrible day for Constance, no matter how hard she had tried, trouble had just seemed to dog her every step. As usual she had tried to avoid Grace as much as possible at work, but somehow Grace always managed to get onto her scent like a bloodhound seeking out its prey, and when she did find her she would always have something to complain about. Quite often a long list of things. Constance loved her job, teaching children English as a second language, and she was sure that she was good at it. Unfortunately not everyone shared that view, and Grace was at the top of that list. She could still hear Grace’s voice ringing in her ears from her latest barrage.

‘After each lesson you must put the grammar books back in the right place, in the right order. Otherwise how will the next teacher who needs them find them? How many times do I have to tell you the same things? What on earth is wrong with you?’

It hadn’t been fair at all, because she had actually just been getting ready to put the books away, when a couple of her lovely students’ mothers asked her for an update of how their little girls were getting along in English. Even though Constance struggled a bit explaining it all in Spanish, she had felt it important to answer the anxious mothers’ questions. Important not only for the well being of the kids, but also as a sort of public relations exercise for the school. She was, after all, its representative with those mothers. For those mothers she was the human face of the school. She had thought that she had been doing the correct thing, but when she tried to explain it all to Grace, a particularly sharp-tongued woman from the north of England, all she got in return was a lot of tut-tutting.

‘What a lot of bunkum. They will see their children’s results after the regular tests they sit. Besides, couldn’t you have explained it all to them while you are putting everything in order? Is that too much to ask of you? You always just look for any excuse to have a break. You need to leave your laziness at the door, young lady. Here we have a lot of work to do. This is not the place for idle hands, or idle chatter.’

Grace was a stern looking woman of around 65 years old. She was heavy set, with short grey hair, and a no nonsense air about her. Constance had never seen her smile, and was sure that all her students, Grace taught mainly adults, really disliked her. Grace was an old-school style of teacher, who beat things into her students, rather than encouraging them to learn, and to enjoy the experience. Her favourite teaching tool was the raised voice, and the threatening glare. God only knew who had been foolish enough to put a hard-bitten battle axe like her in charge of a school. Constance loved teaching her little ones, and firmly believed, even though she had never had any formal training as a teacher, that the best approach was one of inclusion, getting the children involved in the lesson, rather than just robotically making them repeat phrases over and over again, until they were memorised. A language needed to be understood, not just memorised.

‘You must leave the classroom as you found it, everything in order for the next class. I would have thought that that was clear by now. Goodness knows how many times I have had to tell you the same things, over and over again.’

‘Yes, I will. I’m sorry, it won’t happen again.’

After every run in with Grace, Constance felt really depressed. She sometimes wondered if she
hadn’t been better off in her earlier years in Spain, when she had found work in restaurants, washing dishes, then eventually waiting on tables. It had been hard work, with long hours, and not much money, but at least the people she had worked with had been nice to her, and had treated her with respect. Almost every day Constance thought about quitting, and going back to that sort of work. The only drawback was that she absolutely loved teaching her kids. She loved her students, and they loved her. She would really hate to leave them, which meant that she was stuck with the constant rantings of the tyrannical Queen of the school of hard knocks.

Finally, somehow, the never ending day had passed, and she had found herself, thankfully, with Grace off her back. She had hoped to have a pleasant relaxing evening, free of the constant castigation she had endured all day. Unfortunately Grace’s continual rantings were only then to be replaced by those of Jeff, with the new bone that he had found to chew on. He had slipped effortlessly into a constant jealous tirade about her having spent so much time in the company of another man, Matt, on Wednesday evening. Constance had explained the situation to him, time and again, but Jeff just didn’t seem to listen to, or believe her. His tone of voice was bitter and sardonic.

‘Did he ask you out on another date?’
‘Jeff, it wasn’t a date, we were just chatting about his old experiences back in Australia.’
‘You’re very naive, you know. Every guy who chats up a bird is just looking for one thing. You’re so gullible.’

Jeff was fairly spewing with rage.
‘But I told you, he is old enough to be my father, in fact that was really the point of what we were talking…’

Jeff would have none of it.
‘Yeah, well you listen to me. The old ones are the worst ones. If he asks you out again that will be a sure sign that I am right. Are you even listening to me? Is any of this even getting through that thick skull of yours?’

Constance fell into silence as Jeff continued with his ranting. Their evening out for a meal, and some nice wine, had turned into yet another argument about how Constance had got it all wrong, again. As usual Constance fell quickly into her habitual apologetic mode, although really, she didn’t feel that she had done anything wrong. Matt had been most gentlemanly, and had never shown any indication that he wanted anything other than a good chat. In fact it had all been her idea, she had asked him to tell her about his old days, the days her father had also lived. As Jeff’s voice continued to resound in her ears, Constance drifted back with her mind to the story Matt had told her. She wondered if her father had ever climbed up Mount Warning? Of course he would have. That was something that everyone from around that part of Australia did, hippies or not. From where they had lived in Evans Head, it was only about a fifty kilometre drive to Mount Warning. She herself had made the climb when she was about 14 years old, with a group organised through her school. Why had she never thought of that? As she had been admiring the fantastic view from the top of the mount, she had probably been standing on the same spot that her father had once stood. They had both marvelled at the same spectacular panorama. In her mind’s eye she could almost see him up there, with her. Without a doubt her father would have slept the night up there, waiting for the unique experience of being the first person to see the dawn in Australia. She wondered if he might have woken up early, and smoked a joint before the sun came up. The thought of that made her smile.

‘Do you think this is funny? Some old guy is trying to get you into his bed, and you find that funny.’

Constance returned with a jolt to the jealous ramblings of Jeff. She knew that she could never
explain what she had been thinking about. Jeff had never shown any interest in her past, and didn’t understand the effect it had had on her to have lost her father at such a young age. So she tried to placate his anger in the usual way, the well trodden path, that of talking about him.

‘No Jeff, I was just trying to enjoy our evening out together. You must be worn out after the long week you had at work. Did you manage to outtrade Henderson again this week?’

Jeff threw up his hands, and pointed a finger at Constance.

‘Huh! That bloody idiot! Let me tell you just how ridiculous his trades were this week. I just can’t believe I’m the only one to see what he’s up to.’

While Jeff jumped onto his favourite of all topics, Constance could once again relax, and she returned to her thoughts about Matt’s adventures. She had never been up to Kuranda, although she had been told it was a really lovely place. She had no idea if it was still a hangout for hippies, or whether, more probably, it had become a bit of a tourist town. No doubt the latter, she thought, being such a beautiful spot. She just couldn’t believe that Matt, and his friend, had just wandered around the town until they had found that lovely big empty house, which they had then made their own, temporarily. Imagine that, she thought, just entering a house that you liked the look of, and deciding to sleep there. Things must have been much more casual back in the 70’s, with no neighbours coming to enquire about what was going on, or even calling the police. When they couldn’t find a place to stay they would just pitch their tents somewhere, in someone’s field, or on the beachfront, and they were at home. Probably that was what her father had done as well. Maybe through his wanderings he had come across Evans Head, just a short distance from Byron Bay, which even in the modern age was still a bit of a centre for alternative lifestylers. Back in the 70’s it had been the Australian centre of hippydom. Constance knew that her father had been born in Melbourne, and her mother in Sydney, but she had never asked her mother how it was that they had ended up living in Evans Head. Would she tell her even if she asked? Her mother never told her anything about her father’s past. Was she embarrassed that he had been a hippy? Maybe she had been a hippy too? No, that wasn’t very likely. Hippies were supposed to be free, and easy going, not tightly strung moaners. She had so many questions for her mother, but she knew that, as usual, her mother would just give her the brush off, and return to her favourite discussion point about how Constance was wasting her time in Spain. As was her custom, her mother would push the subject back to how it was time for her to settle down, back home in Australia, get married, and have children. Before it was all too late. Which wasn’t that far off, she was regularly told. Her biological clock was counting down rapidly to the point of no return. Talking to her mother was more about being lectured to, rather than actually discussing things. She should introduce her mother to Grace! She was sure that the two of them would get on like a house on fire. They would have a lovely time with the two of them criticising her. They had a common bond. Her. She was sure that they would soon become the best of friends, nattering on about their constant dispirited view on how she was totally useless, and was just wasting her, and everybody else’s, time. Constance made sure she suppressed the smile that was building in her. She didn’t want to set Jeff off again.

‘They certainly don’t deserve you there. They just don’t realise how lucky they are to have you working for them.’

‘That’s for bloody sure, Connie. Sometimes I’ve half a mind to go back to Blighty, and work for one of the competition. That would serve them right. Then they would come crawling on their hands and knees to beg me to come back. The bloody tossers!’

‘Shall we go back to my place, Jeff. I’ve got some nice wine.’

‘No, not tonight, Connie. I’ve arranged to meet some of the guys from work at a club further down along the coast. In fact, what time is it?’
Jeff looked at his watch.
‘Half past ten. I better get off home, and get changed. Come on. let’s pay the bill, and get out of here.’

‘No, you go Jeff. I’ll just stay here for a while. It’s a lovely evening. I really enjoy spring here, the nice warm days, with the wonderful cool evenings. You get off, I’ll pay the bill when I leave.’

‘OK, I’ll catch you tomorrow.’

Jeff stood up, kissed Constance on the head, as she sat there, and without a further word headed off down the road.

That rather unexpected show of affection set off alarm bells with Constance. That definitely wasn’t Jeff’s normal behaviour, especially in public. A feeling of betrayal seeped through Constance. She had no real proof, but she was almost certain that when Jeff went out clubbing, he would always find a girl to take home. To sleep with. Probably she should be grateful that he even wanted to be her boyfriend, he was such a good looking man, but the thought of him sleeping with another woman brought tears to her eyes. She looked at the empty wine bottle. The thought crossed her mind to order another bottle, and try and wash away her feelings of sadness with wine. The only problem was that she knew that she would pay a heavy price the morning after, and would end up feeling even worse. Her sadness would only then be compounded by a terrible hangover. Constance resisted the temptation, paid the bill, and went for a walk along the harbour quay.

In the dark of night, under the street lighting, the moored boats looked delightfully graceful. On one side of the harbour there were the smaller fishing boats, waiting for the early morning tide to be taken out in search of the day’s catch. On the other side were moored the larger tourist boats, sparkling in their cleanliness, ready to dispatch another group of day trippers along the coast. She found an empty bench, and sat looking at the beauty of the place that she now called home. She loved everything about Spain, the weather, the food, the lovely warm winters, and especially the fact that she was a long way away from her mother, and her incessant nagging. She had been avoiding her mother’s calls all week, but knew that eventually she would have to answer one of them. Constance always had a good excuse for not answering those calls. She would just say that she had been giving a lesson. Her mother didn’t know what her timetable was, so that side of it was covered, but, at the end of the day, at some stage she would have to talk to her. Or to put it more realistically, she would have to listen to her. Maybe it was time to turn the tables? As she looked at the captivating scene all around her, Constance decided that in her next call with her mother she would try and find out some more information about her father. Surely her mother would know of his many adventures? From the sound of the stories that Matt had told her, back in those free times of the late 70’s every day seemed to have been an adventure. Constance smiled as she thought of Matt, and his friend Paul, sitting stoned, on the curb of the street, unsure of why they had even gone to Cairns, or what was the next step. The journey itself had been so much of an adventure, that they hadn’t ever considered what they would do when they arrived. A life without plans. A journey without maps. Enjoying the moment, and meeting great people along the way. What a fantastic way to live. In her mind’s eye, she could imagine her father sitting out there with them on that curb, talking and laughing without a care in the world. Constance looked at her watch. With a sigh she realised that it was time to get to bed, so as to be ready for another day of it all. She made her way home, carefully avoiding thinking about what Jeff was up to, and trying to focus on how her father had spent his youth. How on earth had he met up with her mother? They seemed to have come from two worlds that had no intersecting points. On her next phone call she was determined to press the issue. She wanted to find out more about her father.
Saturday morning was the best time of all for Constance at the school. She only had one class, a group of three little girls who were so cute, and wide eyed, that they made her forget all about her problems, and focus on preparing her students for the big world that awaited them. Being able to speak English well would be a big help for them in the life that was ahead of them. Constance always prepared her lessons well, and gave all she could to her students. The other good thing about Saturday morning, definitely the best part, was that there was no Grace. Grace had the weekends off, so Constance didn’t need to hide, or sneakily look around corners, trying to avoid her nemesis. The language school was only open in the morning on Saturdays. Without the presence of Grace, Constance would have gladly worked all the day, but instead by shortly after eleven in the morning she had found herself at home. She knew that she wouldn’t see Jeff that day, he would be sleeping off his late night out, so she thought about what she would do in the afternoon. Before she had time to prepare her lunch, her phone started ringing. She could see by the prefix that it was her mother. Instinctively Constance thought about avoiding the call, she really wasn’t in the mood for more of her mother’s preaching, but a sense of firmness came over her. She decided that it was time to find out more about her father. She would take the bull by the horns. She would press her mother for information. She answered the call.

‘Hello mum, how are you?’

‘Well, about time. I’ve been ringing all week. Your brother always answers my calls, or if he can’t he calls me back straight away. And you know how busy he is. I don’t know what’s wrong with you, Constance.’

‘Mum, with the time difference, and my lessons, I… ’

‘Oh, don’t give me all that rubbish! English lessons! After all the studying you did you just throw your life away giving English lessons. You know your brother has got another promotion? He’s now head of his department. He’s really moving up in the world, I’m so proud of him. I hope you are, too. You should send him your congratulations. How’s that fellow of yours? Jeff, isn’t it? He seems like a good catch. Working in investment banking, you should be so lucky.’

‘Yes, he really is a bit of a high flyer. We get on…’

‘How’s your diet coming along? If you want Jeff to stay with you, you really need to lose some weight. Did you take my advice on cutting out bread from your diet? I’ve read that that can help you slim down no end. You remember Julie from along the street? Well, she cut out bread altogether, and within six months she looked like a new person. Do you ever listen to the advice I give you, or am I just talking to the four walls?’

‘Of course I do, mum. In fact there’s something I would like to ask you.’

‘Anything dear, what can I help you with?’

Constance concentrated herself, she wanted to be as clear and concise as possible.

‘Actually, mum, I was wondering about the life dad lived, and how the two of you met.’

‘Oh my goodness, why on earth would you care about that? That’s ancient history. Why on earth does that matter? Are you growing your hair longer? You know, short hair just makes you look fatter, especially in the face. Longer hair would give you something to hide the plumpness of your face behind. If you would ever listen to me, God forgive, you would grow your hair out, and try and slim down. You were so lovely when you were young. Why on earth you can’t control your eating is beyond me. You would look better, and I’m sure that you would feel better, too. If you want to hang onto that Jeff chap you should really think seriously about how you are living your life.’

Constance was not in a mood to be thwarted from her objective.

‘Mum, did dad ever climb up Mount Warning?’
'Mount Warning? What sort of nonsense have you got in your head? How on earth would I know that. Constance, you really need to focus on where you are in your life, instead of daydreaming your life away. You realise that at your age your biological clock is fast getting to the point when you will be too old to have children. What about Jeff? Does he want children? Have you even discussed the matter with him? You really need to think about that, Constance, or you will find yourself over the hill, childless, and with no prospects. Stuck in Spain. Do you ever think about these things? You really need to get your head out of the clouds, and start to focus on what’s important.’

Constance couldn’t take anymore. She had tried, and failed. As usual.

‘Sorry, mum, but I have to go, I’ve got a private lesson in half an hour. We’ll catch up later in the week. Bye, mum.’

Constance, without giving her mother time to reply, hung up the phone. Why was it she could never get a word in edgewise with her mother? She had tried, but her mother just never listened to her. She wished that she hadn’t bothered to answer the call. Her mother hadn’t replied to any of her questions about her father. Really, she had totally dismissed even the very idea of them. Frustrated, Constance decided to skip lunch, and just ate a bar of chocolate. She would walk along the beach, looking for all the answers to the questions she wasn’t even able to ask.

Constance put on her usual beachwear, a very large, and loose, white cotton dress which reached down well below her knees. When she reached the beach, she took off her shoes, and let the soft sand massage her feet. The warm midday spring sun made her feel instantly more positive. She was in her element. Her place of easy contemplation. She walked along the beach, letting her mind drift where it wanted. Would she like to have a child with Jeff? Would he want a child with her? Constance knew that she was lucky to have found someone as good as Jeff, but she also knew, almost certainly, that he wasn’t faithful to her. Could that be the basis of a lifelong relationship? Should she stay with someone who treated her the way he did, just because he was handsome, and successful? Did she really love him, or was it just nice to be with someone? Constance was fairly sure that Jeff didn’t really love her. In fact, he never even said that he did. What was she to him? She had so many questions, with answers that seemed elusive. She closed her eyes, raised her head, and let the warm sun wash over her face. The sun on her face felt so reviving. The sun’s rays filled the void in her. She would enjoy the afternoon, and leave all those difficult questions for another day. Not that she thought that she was ever going to find answers to them, anyway.

‘It looks like you are paying homage to Apollo, the Greek God of the sun.’

Startled, Constance opened her eyes to find Matt standing in front of her, with a broad grin on his face. She felt instantly embarrassed to have been caught in such a ridiculous pose. She felt her face blush.

‘Hi Matt, I’m sorry, I was just letting the sun warm my face a bit.’

‘Why on earth would you apologise for that? On such a lovely spring day who wouldn’t want to feel Apollo’s rays bringing comfort. You know, I’m glad I bumped into you. I wanted to thank you. After our chat the other evening you got me thinking about those old days. I haven’t really thought about those times in decades. For an old bloke like me that was a life time ago. It was nice to remember those times. I suppose that over the years I’ve never really had the opportunity to chat about those days, so I had more or less forgotten about them. Probably they are only really relevant to people from Kiwi or Aus who experienced them, that was really a bit of a period of our history. I couldn’t really imagine people from another country being interested in that stuff.’

‘Oh, I really loved it. I’ve been thinking about how my father probably did things like that. I wish I’d had a chance to talk to him about those days.’
‘Can’t you find out from your mum? She must have been through it all as well.’
Constance’s face took on a gloomy expression.
‘You don’t know my mum. She never talks about him, or those days. Frankly I can’t even understand how they met.’
‘I see! That’s a shame. Listen, I’m sorry to rush off, but I’m power walking up to a restaurant further along the beach, for a late lunch with friends. Anyway, I’m sure that I will see you around, Constance. Bye for now.’
Matt turned to go. Constance quickly seized the moment. Her only link to her father was through Matt. He was her lifeline to a former age, an age in which her father had walked the planet.
‘Matt, would you mind meeting up again, and telling me some more stories of those days? I really enjoyed it, and it sort of brings my father to life for me. If it’s not too much bother.’
Matt laughed.
‘You know, I would quite like that too. It’s funny all the details that you can conjure up out of the hidden corners of your memory banks. You said you are free on Wednesday afternoons, right? What about the same time, same place, on Wednesday? Let’s say around 5.30-6 pm. Suit you?’
‘That would be lovely Matt. Thanks so much. I will see you there. The drinks will be on me!’
With a wave Matt stormed off, striding away at a fast pace along the beach. Constance felt a wave of elation pass through her. If her mother refused to answer her questions about her father, at least she would be able to understand the times he lived in, and the experiences he had gone through. A beacon of light was shinning through the dark clouds that rolled through her mind, and cast long shadows on her days. It was even possible that Matt and her father had crossed paths, back in those days. She couldn’t wait until Wednesday.

Monday morning had reared its ugly head, bringing with it the trepidation of having to deal with the constant wrath of Grace, the keeper of the fires of hell. It was always a great source of irony for Constance that the evil Queen was actually named Grace, a name that conjured up feelings of elegance, and courteous behaviour. Dignity, mixed with poise. If ever anyone had ever been named with the most inappropriate name possible for them, it had been her boss Grace. Without a doubt her parents hadn’t realised the monster that they had spawned, or perhaps they had had the most wonderful sense of irony? Constance hadn’t seen Jeff at all on Saturday, no doubt he had been really hungover. Then on Sunday mornings he usually met at a pub for brunch, with some of his colleagues. He had come over to her place on Sunday evening with a takeaway dinner, for a quick romp in bed. The sort of wham bam sex that had seemed to have become their usual, and only, sort of sexual encounter. Without a doubt it was obviously more than acceptable for Jeff, but was that really all that Constance should expect from her boyfriend? Where was the satisfaction for her in that? With a sigh she knew that she would add those questions to the long list of questions, filed away, where they would never see the light of day. That almost seemed to sum up her life. Unanswerable questions, that remained unanswered because they would never even be asked. She felt abandoned in the grey areas of life. She was blundering around in the darkness, and the batteries in her torch were dead. She could see no light. Her life seemed to be spent in the dark areas of life where knowledge, and understanding, was only noticeable by its absence.

With a shock she realised that the Queen of Evil had sneaked up on her unannounced. She had let her guard down.
‘Constance, how many times do I need to tell you that you need to prepare your lessons better? This just isn’t good enough. Wasting time out here in the corridor making photocopies while your class is sitting idle. Couldn’t you do that before starting the class? Your preparation is absolutely
atrocious. Will you ever listen to me? How many times do I have to tell you the same things? This really is just not good enough.’

‘Actually, what happened was that…’

Grace was in no mood for listening to her reasons for making those photocopies. She snapped back at her.

‘Oh, just get on with it, and get back to your class. I have no interest in hearing your flimsy excuses. Some of us don’t have time to waste. Some of us have work to do.’

‘But Grace, one of the kids…’

By then it was too late, Grace had dashed off, leaving Constance with no possibility to explain that one of the children had left his text book at home, and while he could share another child’s book for the general lesson, he needed his own copies to fill in the answers to the grammar questions. Grace felt so dejected. She always prepared her lessons well, but how could she have predicted that one of her students would have forgotten his book? Through no fault of her own, the week had started on a bad note. Much like every other week, under the stalwart reign of the demon Queen. Even though Constance managed to stay out of Grace’s way for the rest of the day, the damage had been done. She had shown herself to be, or rather, had appeared to be, totally useless at her job. That really annoyed her, but she just couldn’t ever get her version of events across to Grace. Sometimes she even wondered why she bothered to prepare herself so well for her lessons. Was it all just a waste of time? No! She did it not only for herself, but also for her lovely little students. She adored them all, and she knew that they loved her. Their parents always told her so. The only person who didn’t understand that was the guardian of the fires of the netherworld, who, unfortunately, was her superior.

The following days passed in the same despondent mood. Her continuous game of cat and mouse with Grace, who, rather than being the cat, was more to be found in the role of a vicious, savage, insatiable beast, thriving on the fear she struck into the hearts of her prey. Jeff had come over to her place on Tuesday evening, armed with a bottle of cheap wine, ready for sex. As had become his habit, he would turn up, looking for his own gratification, whenever it suited him. Constance felt like a cross between a modern day slave, and a jezebel, waiting to service her one true master. And she was supposed to feel lucky that she had him in her life? Why? What did he really add to her life? She sometimes wondered if she put up with it all just because she was scared of having no one. Or was she just conditioned to accept everything that people laid in her path, with no questions asked? If that were the case she would have no one to blame but herself. So, in that case, everyone else was right. It really was all her fault. The thought of that made her feel even more depressed.

After what seemed like an eternity, but had really only been a few days, she found herself waiting for Matt, in their arranged meeting spot. She had arrived early, and let herself fall into a relaxed state of mind as she admired the beautiful waves lazily lapping onto the golden sand. The bar itself was nothing special. It was built out of wood, with a sort of pub feel about it. Inside there was a horseshoe shaped bar running around most of the interior. It was the classic sort of seaside bar that you would find in the south of Spain, mainly catering to tourists. What was special about the place was the outside terrace, built out over the beach, overlooking the sea. It was still warm in the late afternoon sun, but Constance had brought a jacket with her, as she knew that it would cool down later in the evening. She knew that even when it cooled down the two of them would remain seated outside. The view, even when seen only by the evening’s fading lights, was just so stunning.

‘I always seem to catch you lost in your thoughts.’
It was true, she hadn’t seem him arrive.
‘Hello, Matt, how lovely to see you.’ Constance laughed.
‘I’ve already ordered a couple of drinks, the usual, of course.’
‘Lovely, I’m really getting a taste for that gin of yours. I’ve been thinking a lot about the stories you told me the other time. I can almost imagine my father doing the same things. I wonder if the two of you ever crossed paths? Do you think that would have been possible?’
‘Well, I think it’s more than possible. Every day, every place, brought new meetings, new friendships. Everyone was so relaxed, and open back in those days. It didn’t take much to make new friends.’
‘Were you a hippy before you left New Zealand?’
Matt laughed.
‘No, not at all. Well, I already smoked a bit of weed, I suppose I was a bit of a surfie. The real transformation really happened in Aus, that was where the hippy movement was really flourishing back in those days. If nothing else, I already had long hair, the surfie transforms into a hippy. Hey, it was almost a natural progression.’
Constance smiled.
‘You know something, Matt? I can really sense the presence of my father in your tales. I feel like I’m sort of discovering who he was. Would you mind making this a regular thing, and telling all about those days? I really love hearing about it all. I’ll pay for the drinks.’
‘Well, for starters you will not be paying for all the drinks, young lady. We’ll split the bill. But sure, I would love to recount some of the old adventures. Actually, I’ve been thinking about those days all week. So much has happened since then that I had really wiped them from the memory banks. Ancient history, and all that. It really was all a very long time ago.’
Constance felt elated. She was on the verge of delving into the life that her father had lived, in its entirety. She wanted to savour every moment of it. Like she did when she read a book that she really loved. She would read it just a bit at a time, to make the whole magical experience last longer.
‘Fantastic! Thanks, Matt, I really appreciate this. Why don’t you start at the beginning, when you first got to Australia, and take it from there?’
Matt smiled at her.
‘Sounds good. So, let me see, it all really started when I had just turned 19. I was bursting with a desire to see the world, and leave behind the boring job I had gotten into after finishing high school, so, together with a mate I decided to head over to Aus. He ended up procrastinating, there was always some reason or other for him to delay our departure, so in the end I got sick of waiting for him, I really was keen to get away. After a while of his delaying tactics, I decided to just head off on my own. I hoped that that would give him the push to follow me over. I didn’t really have any specific plan in mind, so the easiest starting point was to just follow the well-worn trail left by many of my compatriots. I headed over to Sydney. As good a place as any for a kicking off point for an adventure in Aus.’
Chapter 5 The Art of the Sale

‘Nice place, Matt. Just the ticket. Pretty handy, too. I saw all sorts of food places just down the road, around the corner. I think there’s a pub down there as well.’

Alex was a good old mate from school. With his long, scruffy, light brown hair, his ready smile, and his always friendly demeanour he was always fun to be with. We were both as pleased as punch to have found a nice cheap flat in a handy position. The flat was a bit spartan, to say the least, and pretty rough, but, then again, so were we, so it was just perfect for us. St. Kilda, in those days, was a bit of a run down area, ideal for a couple of Kiwis on a tight budget. Also, it was well serviced, and not far from the centre. In fact there was a tram that took you straight into the city. Melbourne was ours to discover.

‘Yeah, the pub part sounds pretty inviting. As soon as we’ve sorted ourselves out, why don’t we head down for a couple of beers? First I want to try out the shower, it actually looks a bit dodgy. The boiler looks like it’s on the point of exploding at any minute.’

‘OK, if you survive, you’re on. I’ve definitely built up a good thirst. Then we can have a look for something to eat.’

Alex had a big smile on his face. He nearly always did, he was just that sort of guy. It was never going to be hard to convince Alex to have a drink. Or myself, for that matter. I smiled back at him, and was just on the point of saying who-knows-what when the door suddenly burst open. Actually kicked in. To say we were taken by surprise would be an understatement. We had been sorting out our belongings which wasn’t a big job. We had pretty much a backpack each filled with a few clothes, a sleeping bag, and few other bare essentials. We didn’t require a lot of material goods. Capitalists we were not. We weren’t quite full blown hippies, we were more like surfies in the transition stage. Surfies looking for a new home. Then, in the middle of all that, suddenly the door burst open, and the welcome-to-Melbourne mat was rolled out for us in the form of the two most obnoxious looking cops I had ever seen in my life. In strutted the two arseholes, cowboys in cop uniforms, licensed to kill. Unfortunately for me, I just happened to be the one closest to the door as it was kicked in. Yes, that’s right. Knocking was definitely not an option for Starsky and Hutch.

‘What brings you here, fella?’, the mean sounding pockmarked face said to me.

‘Good morning officer’, I managed to stutter through my shock and fear, ‘we’ve just arrived in town. We want to look for work, and get to know the place. It’s our first time in Melbourne’.

The other cop was poking around in our belongings, looking for who knows what. Well, really, we all knew what. That most evil of all crimes. The dreaded plague that would bring an end to civilisation as we knew it. Weed. The crime of the century, back in those days. His method of inspection was as simple as it was effective. He was spreading out our belongings all about the place with his size ten boots. And what’s more, he wasn’t bothering to be too delicate about the process. Alex, took the discreet path of politeness, and silence. Thanks for that, mate. It appeared to be up to me to endure the questioning, seemingly just because I had been the one nearest the door. I had been nominated the one in charge, merely by virtue of where we had both been standing, when the music had stopped. Musical Chairs, the police thug version. Definitely more interesting than the
original kids’ game. He moved even closer to me.

‘This is a rough part of town, and we don’t need any more shitbags coming in, and thinking they own the fuckin’ place.’

While saying this, he made a point of caressing the handle of his holstered pistol. I got the idea. Boy did I get the idea.

‘No sir, we won’t be getting into any trouble.’
‘You see that pub around the corner, there?’
‘No sir, I haven’t been…. oh yes, I did see it. Yes.’
‘Bit of a smartarse are you son?’

By this stage his pockmarked face was just inches from mine. I could smell his tobacco stinking breath, and count the hairs flaring out of his nostrils.

‘No sir, I was just a bit confused. We only just arrived in town today.’

‘Listen here fellow, if I ever see you in that pub I will kick your fucking head off, and piss down the hole! Is that understood?’

‘Yes sir, we aren’t very big drinkers anyway,’ I managed to reply, lying as convincingly as I could.

Of course we were big drinkers. Young Kiwis, what? After he was sure he had intimidated us enough, and his mate had checked out our stuff to his satisfaction, they finally left. The overwhelming tension in the room left with them.

‘Shit, what a couple of arseholes! What the fuck did they want? Was the door open, or did they just kick it in?’ Alex asked, still in a state of shock.

‘It was definitely closed. Although it looks like a pretty shit lock. I guess a bit of a push, and you are in.’ I replied. ‘We might want to look at fixing that.’

Alex was never one to be intimidated by a couple of thug cops. At least, not when they had left, anyway.

‘Where was that pub?’

We both cracked up laughing.

‘Yeah, lets shoot down there, and have a couple of beers. Fuck those arseholes.’

Now that they were gone, suddenly we both found our voices again. Admittedly, I was still a bit shaken from the experience. That was definitely policing of a type that I was not used to. Policing 70’s Australian style.

The flat that we had found was just one street back from the main street of St. Kilda. At that time it was a low cost area, catering to immigrants, sex workers, and Kiwis on a low budget. Anyway, it was fairly central, and pretty cheap, so it suited us just fine. The block of flats we were in was finished in white stucco, showing its age, but with more than a hint of its former glamour. Sort of like something you would find in Spain, near the beach. Not that either of us had ever been to Spain, but that was the impression we had. We liked the price, and the look of the place. When we met some of the other tenants we would like it even more. They were, indeed a mixed bag of interesting people. Although really our adventure together had started a bit earlier than that, across in Sydney

‘Matt, there’s someone at the door for you!’

I had been living in Sydney for a few months, sharing a house with a couple of girls, Karen and Sophie. I couldn’t imagine who Karen was talking about, as I didn’t really know anyone in Sydney by then, just my work colleagues, and I doubted they would even know where I lived. I headed curiously to the door.
‘Well, are you gonna let me in, or what?’
‘Well, well, well, what have we here?’

We both laughed and slapped each other on the back. Kiwi blokes have never been in the habit of hugging each other.

‘Good to see you, man, come in.’

Alex was travelling light, just a relatively small backpack. He had the quintessential surfie look. Because, actually, he was one. In fact I had learnt to surf with him, going out to Piha beach, out of Auckland, in his old bomb of a car. He had long brown slightly curly hair, always wore board shorts, a T-shirt, and the ubiquitous jandles, also known as flip flops, or thongs, depending on where you came from. I was as happy as Larry. In a way, my plan had worked. We had both been talking about heading over to Aus for quite a few months, but he had always found some reason or other to keep putting it off. In the end I had gone to Sydney alone, anyway, hoping that that would push him to make a decision. Either way, I had wanted to do some travelling around, with, or without him. We went into the lounge room, where I had been listening to some music. I grabbed us a couple of beers from the kitchen.

‘So, what’s it like over here?’

‘Pretty good, although now that you are here I would really like to hit the road. Sydney is just another big city, not really that different to Auckland, in many ways. Good for work though.’

‘I’m with you there, brother, I really want to look around. I’ve got a mate over in Adelaide, so I want to head over there at some stage, too.’

‘We do have one small problem, but, actually it may be right up your alley.’
He looked at me slightly sceptically. He could smell trouble. He wasn’t wrong.

‘OK,’ he said hesitantly, ‘what’s up?’

The timing of his arrival was absolutely perfect. I had not long since bought an old Toyoto Corolla from a sales yard out on Paramatta Rd. Yes, I know what you’re thinking, another kiwi sucker buying a dud car from a seasoned rip off salesman, used to cannon fodder arriving from over the Tasman. Well, let me set you straight on that one… yeah, it was exactly that. In fact, the first time it had broken down was while I was driving home, just around the corner from the used car lot. From then on it would break down on average every second time I would take it out. In the end I had been just another sucker, one born every minute. By the time Alex turned up, I was fed up with fixing it, and it was abandoned outside the house I was flatting in. I had given up on it, and couldn’t be bothered trying to get it going again. I had left it there as a reminder of one of life’s harsh lessons. It was like a certificate of stupidity hanging on my wall. A constant warning sign. But, as luck would have it, Alex was pretty good as a back yard mechanic. Maybe the disaster could be salvaged.

‘Actually, it’s something that should be a piece of cake for you. Did you notice the dark blue Corolla parked outside?’

‘Yeah, nice wheels. Is that yours?’

‘Yup, exceptionally nice wheels. Unfortunately, a bit of a shit motor. Although, I’m pretty sure you should be able to get it going. Let’s put it this way, you get the Toyota going, and we head off in style, otherwise, we’ll be hitchhiking. What do you say?’

He opened his arms, accepting the challenge.

‘I will definitely give it my best shot.’

I sealed the deal with him.

‘You get it going, and we will head off wherever you like in it.’

‘What about having a look at Canberra? And then maybe off to Adelaide?’
‘Sure, man, sounds good to me. Tonight we celebrate then. We’ll hit the town, have some beers, and see the sights. Tomorrow you can get working on the car, and I will put my notice in at work. One way or another, we are on our way.’

The next day I was only too happy to go into work, and quit. The job hadn’t been bad, fixing up the lines for the railway, but I was already sick of Sydney, with its flashy american style culture, and wanted to get out into the heartland of Australia. Also I was only too happy to stay out of Alex’s way while he was working on the car, I had already had my fair share of working on that piece of junk. I never wanted to look under its bonnet again. On the positive side though, it really was a pretty good looking car, with its dark blue colour, and, being the De Luxe version, it was very spacious, and comfortable inside. I had bought it for all the right reasons, well, except for the fact that it was a heap of shit. By the time I got home Alex was sitting in it, revving up the engine, with a big smile on his greased-up face. I didn’t even want to know the details.

The next day we took it for a run out to the Blue mountains, outside Sydney, sort of as a test run, to see if it really was working. I always felt slightly dubious behind the wheel of that car, but it seemed like Alex had worked some magic on it. Anyway, with him along as my full time mechanic, I felt a bit more relaxed, plus, it actually was a pretty pleasurable ride. We were ready to go.

Two days later, after bidding farewell to my flatmates, we headed out of Sydney. We didn’t really have too much off a plan, but we had agreed on Canberra as the first port of call. After all, I had sort of promised Alex that in return for fixing up my piece of junk, I mean, my luxury sedan.

‘Hey, look at the back quarter window, it’s got a little winder to open it.’ Alex was starting to like the Corolla.

‘Yeah, it’s pretty hard case alright. This model must have been top of the range when it came out.’ I was enjoying driving out on the open road. We were about half way to Canberra, and we were both in a good mood. I should have realised that the sedan had lulled me into a false sense of security. After all, I had bought it on Parramatta Rd.

Out of the blue there was a massive explosion. In my initial state of shock I lost control of the steering for a moment, but quickly regained it. I slowly started braking, and eased the shattered luxury sedan onto the shoulder of the road.

‘What the fuck is going on?’ I fairly screamed.

‘There’s a trail of oil and shit on the road behind us,’ said the world’s top class mechanic, looking out the back window, ‘looks like the motor has blown.’

With the car stopped we got out for a better inspection. On the road we had left a trail of oil, with what looked like bits of metal in it, for about the last fifty metres. The length of road it had taken me to stop.

‘I’d say there is not coming back from this one.’ mused Alex.

Now I wasn’t anywhere near as good a mechanic as him, but I had pretty much realised that as well.

‘Shit, those bastards really sold me a dud. What a bunch of fucking arseholes.’

‘You and everyone else stupid enough to buy a car out on Paramatta road.’

‘Yeah, OK OK, I get it.’

He was definitely right. The car was done. Even a top mechanic couldn’t fix the unfixable.

‘I think I’ll leave a note on it saying "Return to Paramatta road".’

We both started laughing. Hey, it was over.

‘What about,’ said Alex, ‘For Sale, as is where is?’

‘Yeah, and I will leave an honesty box next to it.’
Oddly enough, I was almost relieved that the whole Toyota Corolla experience was over. It had been so stressful from the start, literally from day one, that I was actually glad that we had a definitive damage. One that couldn’t be fixed. I just couldn’t take another round of fixing it up, and then waiting anxiously until the inevitable happened again. It had been too hard on the nerves, just constantly waiting for the next problem. A problem which would never be long in coming. I gave the luxury sedan a good farewell kick.

‘Well Alex, grab your stuff, we’re hitching off from here.’

By the time we had split up, for hitchhiking purposes, and headed off down the road, I was feeling incredibly free. A weight had been lifted from my shoulders. The weight of a luxury sedan.

There was a lot of traffic, and the hitching was pretty good, so it didn’t take us long to meet up, as arranged, in the very centre of Canberra. My car had gotten us about half way so we only really had about 150 km to go. By the time each of us had got to the centre we had already seen a fair bit of the city, then we went for a bit of a walk around town, and stopped off for something to eat. Burgers and chips.

‘I thought it would have been a bit more interesting this place.’

Alex was a bit disappointed in his choice of destination.

‘Yeah, there’s not much to see. It all looks so planned and new, it’s pretty boring really.’ I readily agreed with him.

We both decided pretty much straight away that there wasn’t much of interest there for us. We wouldn’t be staying long.

‘Let’s crash the night in a park, or somewhere, and head off tomorrow,’ said Alex.

‘You still pretty keen on going straight to Adelaide?’ I asked him. ‘It’s a long run to Adelaide from here, it would make more sense to go to Melbourne first.’

‘That’s what I was thinking too.’ he replied.

Plans were easily made, and just as easily changed. Everything was fluid. Neither of us were very bothered about sticking, rigidly, to any particular plan. So, after a quick feed, we found a suitable park in which we rolled out our sleeping bags, to get some sleep.

‘Who’s your mate in Adelaide?’ I asked him.

‘Actually, he’s more a mate of my brother’s. He used to live near us. He lives over there now, and said that he could set me up with a good job, if I was ever in the neighbourhood. He loves it there. He reckons it’s a good sized place, not too big, and not too small. He’s in building, something I’ve always wanted to try my hand at.’

‘Well, you are good with your hands, it should be good for you.’

‘Anyway, there’s no hurry. I wouldn’t mind having a look around Melbourne first. He’s not going anywhere.’

The next morning we got up early, had a quick breakfast in a cafe, and got out on the road. From there to Melbourne, hitchhiking, it was all pretty uneventful. The road was busy, but the rides were mainly short ones. We had split up to make it easier to get rides, and agreed to meet in front of the central post office, at lunchtime the next day. It was quite a long run, so we had allowed ourselves plenty of time. Thus began our Melbourne adventures.

The other inhabitants of our Spanish Delight were a mixed bunch, to say the least. One was a pleasant enough old bloke, seemingly an alcoholic, who was always out the front to great everyone, when they entered and exited. He was, also, always there waiting for the mailman, to bring him his government sponsored slush fund. He was of the opinion that booze tasted a lot better when it was the state paying for it. A fairly undeniable fact. In the bottom flat there was a retired couple, who
had either fallen on hard times, or who had never known any other type of times. They were battle-
hardened, and a bit standoffish, not really trusting anyone. Probably life had taught them that that
was the best way. Trust no one, and you won’t be let down, again. They definitely wouldn’t have
bought a car down along Parramatta Rd. Probably I could have learnt a lot from them, but I was still
young, optimistic, and far too trusting. The others were a mix of prostitutes, and transsexuals, who
were also on the game, it appeared. Even they were all a lot older that us, probably in their mid
30’s. I had just turned nineteen, the same age as Alex. Everyone was very nice with us. Being the
fresh faced babies of the complex, we soon become the mascots of the other inhabitants. Except, of
course, for the couple downstairs. They always eyed us with great suspicion, as they did everyone
else. Some of the trannies were also Kiwis, so we got on very well with them. Up until that point of
my life I had never met a transexual, or transvestite, or whatever the appropriate name for them
was, and found the experience somewhat fascinating, and rather exotic. In all honesty, they didn’t
really appear to be convincingly feminine, and I did often wonder what sort of client was attracted
to them, although far be it for me to judge. Anyway, they were incredibly friendly with us, so we
accepted them as they were, they accepted us as we were, and we became good friends with them.

One day the door burst open, yet again.

‘Can I go down the fire escape? The cops are after me!’

One of the trannies had pushed in the door, we really needed to look at getting that lock fixed,
and was running through the flat to the back window, which opened onto the emergency stairs.

‘Sure,’ called Alex. Not that his, or anyone else’s, approval really mattered. By the time she
had finished her request, she was already on her way down the stairs. We quickly shut the door, and
waited expectantly for the police to knock, well, really, to kick the door in. It was becoming a habit.

‘I hope it’s not those two arseholes again,’ I ventured.

‘Hey, just pretend we are reading and stuff. We don’t know anything.’ sound advice from Alex.

‘I wonder if they are after her for drugs or prostitution?’

‘Probably drugs,’ I replied, ‘mind you, there is always a steady flow of clients up and down the
stairs, so who knows?’

We waited anxiously, but luckily no cops turned up so, after a while, we relaxed a bit, and
thought about venturing out to score some dope ourselves. We went down to the local pub, for a
beer, and to pick up some weed, which was always readily available there. The cops had given us a
good tip about that pub. Thanks for that.

We were enjoying our time there, but our funds were slowly depleting. It was time to look for
gainful employment.

‘Hey, listen to this,’ Alex was reading the classifieds, ‘Outgoing independent young people
sought for sales in the art field. What do you reckon?’

He looked at me with a curious mix of enthusiasm, and curiosity.

‘It sounds a bit vague, but why not give it a shot.’ I replied.

‘Let’s go down and give them a call.’

It sounded worth having a go. We didn’t have a phone in the flat so we headed down to the
shops to have lunch, and to call for an appointment. Down on the main drag there were a lot of food
places from all over the world. We loved it. Cafes and bistrs, all really cheap, with really tasty,
home made food. Lots of Greek and Turkish places, with delights we had never eaten before. In
Auckland there had been restaurants like them, but they had been way out of our budget range, so
we had never tried any of that sort of food before. In Melbourne it was almost as cheap as eating
fish and chips. We loved discovering all the exotic delights, previously unknown to us. After having
lunch in what was fast becoming our favourite Greek place, Alex headed off to phone for an appointment. The news was good.

‘Tomorrow morning, 9 o’clock sharp’

‘Good one, did you ask for some more information about the job?’ I inquired.

‘I tried to, but she said that they would give us all the details tomorrow.’

‘It’s all looking good, bro! Let’s drink to our new found careers.’

To celebrate our good luck on the job hunting stakes, we had a few beers in the prohibited pub, as always with a wary eye on the door. I really didn’t want to get caught in there by my old friend, pockmark stinky breath. I was pretty sure that if he caught me in there, he would have been as good as his word, and it would have spelt trouble for me. As usual in there, it was pretty easy to score some weed, so with that in our pocket, and a few bottles of cold beer, we headed to the park for a bit of a chat. The sun was shining, and the day was going just great, as we sat on the grass, smoking and drinking. The Melbourne lifestyle really suited us, and we already had good job prospects.

All at once, without any warning, the skies opened, and a torrential rainstorm blasted down on us. Heavy rain, out of a grey ominous sky.

‘Head for those trees!’ yelled Alex.

He didn’t have to tell me twice, it was belting down.

‘Shit, last I looked the sun was shining. Where did all this come from?’ I yelled to him.

I couldn’t believe it. Then, no sooner had we got to the cover of the trees, when the rain stopped, and the sun came out again. It was like it had never even happened. It was the most bizarre thing. With the return of a beautiful sunny afternoon, we went back to our old spot, and just continued as before.

‘What insane weather here, straight from hot sun to pouring rain… then back to hot sun!’ laughed Alex.

‘Welcome to Melbourne.’ I replied, also laughing.

The next morning I wanted a bit of a lie in, but Alex was all keyed up, and feeling optimistic about our job interview, so he gently kicked me awake with his foot.

‘Come on, we don’t want to be late for our first day.’

‘Hey, you go, and tell me how it all went. Maybe I’ll pop in tomorrow.’

I was joking. He wasn’t.

‘Up, now!’

I jumped up, and got ready. I was feeling pretty good about the whole deal as well. Plus, we were getting through our money so we needed to find some work. We walked down to the main street, and hopped on a bus, heading off to our job interview. Well, what we thought was going to be a job interview. In reality, we had already passed the interview by having just turned up, and found ourselves seated with about half a dozen other applicants, while the job was explained to us all.

On a few tripods standing at the front of the room were some pictures, mostly landscapes. They looked cheap, and mass produced. The guy running the show looked like he would have been right at home selling used cars on Paramatta Rd. He explained the sales pitch.

‘The best way to sell these paintings is by saying you are an art student, working your way through art school, by selling some of your work.’

He was a sleazy looking guy, dressed in a flashy suit. We already didn’t like him.

‘You mean, door to door sales?’ asked one of the other guys there.

‘We don’t really call it that, but, well, that’s more or less what it is. More than anything, you have to sell yourself, as an eager artist, whose work will someday be worth money. Everyone loves
students, and if they think of it as also an investment, you’ve got them.’

We were looking at each other with some very dubious expressions. I didn’t like the part about having to lie about having painted them myself. I was just looking for a job. After some more dubious explanations, we broke up for a coffee break.

‘Hey, fuck this. I don’t like this bullshit at all.’ said Alex, echoing my thoughts.

With the excuse of going outside for a cigarette, we shot out of there.

‘There must be something better than this around,’ I said to him, ‘let’s get today’s classifieds.’

‘Hey, quick, this bus goes downtown, let’s jump on. We may as well make a day of it.’ A very good idea from Alex.

The idea of work was important, but we had really done enough looking for one day. Those things needed to be approached delicately. They shouldn’t be rushed into. We headed into the city centre, and had some lunch. Melbourne city centre was really bustling, and full of life. It was a great place just to walk around, and look at all the people and buildings. With the trams clanging down the middle of the streets it felt very European to us. Especially after having been in Sydney, which had more of an American feel to it. I’ve got no idea whose bright idea it was, hopefully not mine, not that I would count on that, but we ended up buying a bottle of Mexican tequila, the one with the famous worm in it. We found a nice park to sit in, to gather our thoughts, and started drinking the tequila.

‘I really love this city, Alex, I think I could stay here a while. Things are really starting to take shape for us.’

I passed the bottle over, and he took a swig.

‘Yeah, me too. Although, we’ve got to sort out some better work, otherwise I’m going to head off to Adelaide. Over there I know I can get into something good.’

‘Early days, man. Don’t sweat it, I’m sure we’ll find something. Oi, don’t bogart the bottle. We should have brought some weed with us.’

He laughed, and handed over the bottle.

‘To be honest this stuff is more like a drug than booze. It’s going down very well. Let’s have a bit of a look around the city.’

We got up and wandered around town, sharing shots of tequila, until we found ourselves on some formidable steps, leading up to a formidable building, in front of a big square. At this point Alex, always a bit of an anti-capitalist, well, back then anyway, decided that the good people of Melbourne needed an explanation of the failings of their decadent, degenerate, money obsessed society. He climbed up to a high point on the steps, and started ranting on in a loud drunken voice, condemning all and sundry. He was denouncing the failures of modern society, and putting the blame squarely on our governments, and, of course, America, the customary scapegoat for all the world’s problems. To say a crowd soon gathered would be a bit of an exaggeration. The only person vaguely interested in what he had to say was me, but to give me my credit, I played the role of a crowd, and drunkenly egged him on, clapping and cheering at the better bits. After about ten minutes of this he did get the attention of someone else, a cop. At first when the cop wandered over, he was slightly bemused by our antics.

‘OK boys, pack it in. That’s enough for today. Off you go.’

Of course, by that stage we were on a roll. The show must go on.

‘Actually my friend is just exercising his democratic right of free speech, and so… ‘

I started to explain our constitutional rights, that is, if we had a constitution, or any rights under it, for that matter. Then, quick as a flash the cop’s mood changed, and he started talking on his radio. I knew that wasn’t going to end well. That could only lead in one direction, trouble. Big
trouble. We needed to get out of there.

‘OK, OK, we’re off. Sorry officer. Come on Alex, let’s hit the road.’

Alex, in his drunken, haranguing state, hadn’t realised the gravity of the situation, and was still sprouting forth, only just really reaching his prime. He had plenty more to say, and no official of the local constabulary was going to deny him his right, nay, his obligation, to explain the hopeless situation the world found itself in, and to explain to them the perfect solution, according to a bottle of tequila. I grabbed him, and dragged him away with me, still expounding his undeniable truths. With no looking back I got the two of us the hell out of there, probably just in time. Now, some people would think that after an episode like that, the lesson to be learnt would be to avoid the fire water, commonly known as tequila, in the future. With us, on the other hand, we decided that we loved it, and it immediately became our favourite drink. To hell with the consequences.

‘Listen, this one sounds good. "Are you looking for a career in sales? Our products are of the highest standard. Only genuine salespeople need apply”. Hey, with a good product to sell, without having to say we made it, it could be fun. I think we would be good as salesmen. Shall I give them a call?’

‘Go for it Alex, I’m in.’ I replied. ‘It’s got to be worth a try, anyway.’

‘Why don’t we go down the road, I will make an appointment for us with the sales crowd, and we can pick up some lunch.’

Alex was a whizz at organising. He might be going to start out in sales, but I could see a future for him in management. He would definitely make a good boss. We wandered down to the centre of St. Kilda, Alex got on the phone, and then we went for a bit of lunch.

‘Hey, it actually sounds good, Matt. They are expecting us the day after tomorrow, to fill us in on the deal. They are going to explain everything about their products, and everything. They seem like nice people. They reckon the products virtually sell themselves.’

At that point the young Greek waitress placed our plates in front of us. The food in that place was incredibly nice. The meat was always grilled to perfection, and came served with all sorts of salads, and sauces. It was always a mixed array of lovely colours, and delightful tastes. Melbourne was the place to be.

‘Sounds good to me, man. Maybe some celebrations are in order?’

Alex laughed.

‘I think you might be right. This place is growing on me.’

After lunch we picked up a bottle of our favourite fire water, and headed home. That afternoon was spent in our lounge room, with no furniture, sitting on the dirty old carpet, passing around the bottle of Tequila, and trading war stories. Laughter rang around the bare walls of our dingy abode. When the bottle was finished, we staggered down the road for something to eat, and to have a few beers at the pub. To be honest, my recollections of the time spend that evening in the pub are pretty hazy. Which usually means that a good time was had by all. Somehow or other, the less you could remember about an evening, the better it was thought to have been. They were strange times.

The next day a couple of our tranny friends, from the flats, thought we might need a good night out, so they told us about a members only club they belonged to, not far from our flat.

‘We can get you in, sweet boys, they know us well. why don’t we all go tonight, around midnight?’ Lilla’s voice was husky, and emanated a very sexual charm, plus she was a very nice person. I had come to like her a lot. She had monstrous breasts, which seemed largely at odds with her slim figure. She would regularly show off the top half of them, but I quickly decided that I
didn’t need to see any more of them than that. I was fairly unsure of what lay in the hidden recesses of her attire, and opted to leave that as one of life’s unsolved mysteries. With all arrangements made, in the early evening Alex and I went down to the pub for a few quiet beers, we knew we were going to have a late night with the girls, so we paced ourselves. Something almost difficult for us to do, in those days. Sometime around midnight, back at the flats, we duly met up with Lilla and Tinker, probably not the name her parents had given her at birth, but that’s what we knew her as. Maybe it was short for Tinkerbell? We were quite excited about the prospect of going to a members only, after hours club. We followed them, and soon found ourselves in a sort of industrial wasteland. We looked at each other inquisitively. There couldn’t be a club anywhere around there, surely? That couldn’t be right. Before too long, we approached an abandoned looking warehouse, with a solid metal door which Tinker knocked on. A tiny slit opened, and a voice said, ‘Oh, it’s you.’ The door opened, and in we walked. The guy who had opened the door looked at tough as nails, fairly adorned with tattoos all over him. He looked the two of us up and down with great suspicion, and seemed on the point of saying something when Lilla said to him.

‘They’re cool. They live in our flats. They’re friends.’

That seemed to placate him, and he let us pass.

We walked down a long dark corridor to a second solid metal door. As soon as this door was opened I had a rush of excitement. Music was booming, and lights were flashing. We were in a clandestine discotech, hidden in an industrial wasteland. It was fantastic. The atmosphere was absolutely electric. I looked over at Alex, and he had a monster grin on his face. He was loving it too. People were openly passing around joints, so we felt safe from the possibility of cops coming in. Those doors would slow them down a bit! Even my old friend pock marked face, would have trouble kicking those doors in. We sat at a table with the girls, and duly started to smoke joints, and drink whiskey. Apparently the place didn’t sell beer. Hey, whiskey was good for us, although we would have preferred tequila, but they didn’t have that either. It was a sort of take it as it was place. Most of the clientele seemed to be people in, or associated with, the sex industry. People were dancing, and singing. Everyone was obviously having a great time of it all.

The music was so loud talking was difficult. Possibly the weed didn’t help much in that department either. In short order, with the mixture of joints and whiskey, I was pretty out of it. Anyway, the girls were chatting away to us about something, I wasn’t sure what, because the music was so loud. I couldn’t hear anything. I just kept nodding where I thought it appropriate, and laughing when they did. I was sitting to the left of Alex, and Tinker was to his right, with Lilla sitting to the right of her. Tinker was leaning over to Alex, chatting away, when her hand suddenly slid along his thigh, and onto his crotch. Oops! Now that was a surprise. Unexpected, to say the least. Right out of the blue. Alex looked at me in desperation, and I initially laughed. We hadn’t really thought about any sexual side to the situation, we had just considered the girls to be friends. Plus, honestly, while they were very nice people, they weren’t at all our cup of tea, so to speak. Besides, what exactly was the situation down there, in the lady garden? Had operations been done? Would we end up comparing who had the bigger penis? We didn’t know, and we didn’t want to find out. It was time to get out of there. We both went into time-to-go mode.

‘You know, we gotta get up early in the morning, so we better hit the road.’ I yelled to all and sundry.

Alex was already on his feet, yelling out something similar as well. We started heading to the door. The girls were calling after us, but I couldn’t hear what they were saying, over the music, and the blood pumping in my head. I just waved back at them.

It was with some relief that we found ourselves back out in the industrial wasteland.
'Fuck, what a surprise!' Alex said as we ran off in the darkness. ‘I didn’t see that coming. I hope they won’t be upset with us. I thought they had sex for money, anyway.’

‘Maybe on their night off they like a bit of young cock? Fucked if I know. You should have seen the look on your face, man!’

‘Shit, I don’t want to think about it.’

‘Don’t worry, I won’t be letting you forget this one.’

We were pretty relieved, and happy to be out of that situation, and pretty much laughed about it all the way home. I would be pulling Alex’s leg over that one for a long time to come. Mind you, probably Lilla hadn’t been far away from making a move on me, if it had all gone successfully with Tinker and Alex. Sometimes it all comes down to who is the person closest to the door, or, as in that case, who is in the closest seat. Musical chairs, again. All in all, we entered a bit of a cooling off phase with our tranny friends. They were nice people, but we definitely didn’t want anything more than friendship. Well, I didn’t anyway, I was never completely convinced about Alex. I wasn’t entirely sure where he used to sneak off to on his late night excursions. He always said that he sometimes had trouble getting to sleep, and would go for a bit of a walk. I didn’t push it too much. Sometimes the less you know, the better.

‘Theses aren’t pots and pans, this is a cooking experience, which will change your life for the better. Better prepared food, cooked in a far more healthy way. This is a lifestyle change.’

I was definitely impressed with the presentation on how to become a successful salesperson. It almost seemed easy when the product was of such a high standard. We had gone to our appointment for the sales job, to find ourselves, again, in a group watching a presentation, but this time it felt a lot more professional. We didn’t have to say we were students paying our way through school by making the pots and pans, and the product really did seem to be of high quality.

‘To guarantee the food is cooked slowly, and thoroughly, you wait until the water is steaming and then… there you go!’ with a great flourish, he set the lid of the pot spinning around by twirling its handle.

‘When the lid stops spinning it will have created a seal which will guarantee the water left in the pot doesn’t evaporate, the food doesn’t dry out, and the contents will be cooked slowly, to perfection. You only need a little water in the bottom, so the food is steamed, not boiled. With the right explanation, this top grade product sells itself.’

‘Hey, I think we can do this,’ Alex whispered, ‘the set looks pretty good. People will be lining up for these.’

‘Yeah, definitely worth a shot. The price is pretty steep though. You have to sell it as a whole set. It would be better if you could just sell the pieces separately, I reckon.’

‘True, but they have the finance arranged. It’s lay by! Have it now, pay later! What more could you want?’

‘Well, it can’t do any harm to try, anyway.’

After the presentation was over we told the personnel of the sales team that we were interested in having a go, so they set us up with a couple of sales kits, catalogues, and the paper work for putting it all on the never-never. There were about 20 different pots, pans, frying pans, and casserole dishes in the set. The total price for it all was just over $800, which could then be paid for with monthly payments. In the late 70’s that was a lot of money, and I had some misgivings about that side of it, but the product really did seem to be of good quality. Plus, the system of sealing in the water, so the food would steam, rather than boil, did seem rather ingenious.

We took it all home, and decided to head off to the pub, and work out our strategy. As the beers
started to kick in, we definitely got more confident at our abilities, as door to door salesmen. “Hey, I like this one, Matt, the pots should fly out the door. What we have to decide is where are we going to sell them?”

“I think we may as well just start selling around here, then when we are a bit more practised, we can head off to other suburbs.” I suggested. “That way we can get a bit of experience without going too far from home. Then we pick a different suburb each day, and basically work our way around the city. What do you think?”

Alex shrugged his shoulders.

“Sure, everyone needs to eat, so it probably doesn’t matter where we start.” He gave me a slap on the back. “Tomorrow morning we are out there, dude. Salesmen to the people!”

With the arrival of the new day, I would soon learn that there was a very serious flaw in our strategy. The choice of suburb was actually crucial, if not, indeed, critical. We were in a low-end area, with relatively poor people. Definitely not the place to sell expensive pots and pans. But we would realise that mistake later. Hindsight makes everything clearer. The hangover from the night before had the opposite effect. We split up, each with his sales kit, and started knocking on doors. It was a pretty tiring process, most people either weren’t at home, or weren’t even interested enough to let you in for a free demonstration. Still, we marched on, our great optimism tested, but still intact. Then, I finally got in the door! I set up my kit for the spectacular demonstration of the spinning lid. I really loved that part. It was the icing on the cake.

“And so by spinning around the top, you seal in the remaining water, so the food steams slowly, and the food is cooked perfectly, steamed, not boiled.”

Man, I was born to do this! My demonstration had gone well and they loved me. I would soon be selling ice to the Eskimos. My career in sales was just about to take off to a flying start.

“Well you are such a lovely, honest looking young man, we would definitely love to buy some of them.” said the wife.

They both appeared to be pensioners, living in a small flat, in a block not far from where we lived.

“Actually, you have to buy the whole set,” I explained, getting all the paper work ready, “but you can sign up to our monthly payment scheme, so it’s all very affordable.”

The wife was a bit hesitant.

“Oh dear, we don’t really need that much kitchenware, but we would love to help you out. You remind me a lot of our son, when he was your age. So full of hopes and dreams. I hope we can afford those payments. How long will it take us to pay it all off? We should help him out, don’t you think dear?” she asked of her husband.

He nodded in agreement. I had won them over with my youth and enthusiasm. The sale was made, and the commission was in the bag. I was off to a brilliant start in my new career. The only thing that didn’t really sit right was the fact that the wife sounded a bit worried about the economic aspect of it all. With a bit of a reality check, I returned back to planet earth, coming off my buzz as a successful salesman. I looked around their place, really for the first time. They were two pensioners living in a small flat, probably on limited money. The furniture, while clean and tidy, was old, and of a pretty cheap type. The general impression was of not much money available. I realised that a debt of the amount necessary for all the kit could wipe them out economically for years to come. And they probably didn’t really have that many years left, anyway. Essentially it could destroy the happiness of their final years. What was I doing? Plus, what the hell would they need all those pots and pans for? I doubted they would be giving many dinner parties in their little flat. I just couldn’t bring myself to do that to them. I wanted to make some money, but not at the
cost of ruining people’s lives.

‘You know, you guys could really do with just a couple of pots. Unfortunately we can’t sell these separately, you have to buy the whole set. But really, this set is far more than what you would ever need.’ I said, while packing up my kit, ‘You could probably pick up a couple of similar pots down at the shops. This complete set is far too expensive, really. Anyway, thanks for letting me do my demonstration.’

The wife didn’t want to let me down.

‘Are you sure, dear? I think we could manage it.’

‘No, you don’t need all this stuff. It was nice meeting you. Thanks so much for your hospitality.’

I left their flat as broke as when I entered, but with my dignity still intact. I realised that I didn’t have the cut throat mentality needed to be a great salesman, well, not to the poor, anyway. Economically they would have been stuffed for years, their twilight years, all for some bloody pots and pans. I saw Alex walking along further up the same street, and called out to him. He walked back towards me.

‘Hey, man, who’s it going for you?’ I asked him.

‘Slowly. I’ve done a couple of demos, but haven’t managed to make any sales. What about you?’

I explained to him the situation I had just come from. He was in full agreement with me.

‘Yeah, good on you, Matt. Hey, it’s cooking equipment. You don’t want to dig yourself into a deep hole for it.’

‘It looks like we really blew it on our choice of suburb. We should have started in a well-to-do neighbourhood, where they could afford an outlay like this. Around here, they are all pretty poor people, just scraping by. No one around here could afford to fork out $800 bucks on some bloody pots.’

Alex laughed in agreement.

‘Yup, we fucked that one up alright. We need to rethink our strategy.’

We decided that we had had enough for one day, and headed back home. We both felt slightly dejected, and it looked like we were on a steep learning curve. However, with a bit more experience, and definitely with a better strategy, we were both still convinced that we could make it work.

‘Let’s try this stuff out, anyway.’ Alex said. It was later on in the afternoon, and we were thinking about heading off for a few beers.

‘Let’s put some spuds on, get that spinning seal going, and then eat them when we get back.’

‘Good thinking, Alex. We may as well get some use out of the pots ourselves. Plus it will give us some more sales jargon, for our demos. There’s nothing like experience to convince people of the benefits of the product.’

We peeled some spuds, cut them up, and threw them into the biggest pot. With just the small amount of water required in the bottom of the pot, we waited until it started steaming, and then ripped in with the astounding spinning lid trick. My favourite part. Alex viewed the steaming pot with approval.

‘OK, that will seal it all in, and they should be right when we get back.’

I was in total agreement with Alex on that one, so we headed off to the pub. As usual, our planned couple of beers turned into three or four, but it didn’t matter. With the seal we had put on the lid of the pot, it would cook slowly for hours, without drying out. Steamed, not boiled,
remember? Well, that was according to the sales pitch anyway. The reality, as we found out, was slightly different. When we got back, the flat was full of smoke, the pot had not only dried out, but the inside bottom was completely burnt black, with the scant remains of burnt potato stuck to it.

‘So much for that shit,’ I said, ‘I’m not selling anymore of this crap. It’s all bullshit about that famous seal.’

‘Yeah, I’m about done as well.’

Our careers in sales seemed to have been burnt up, along with those potatoes. It didn’t really occur to us that maybe we had left it cooking for a couple of hours too many. We aired out the flat, and soaked the pot in water, before even trying to clean off the burnt spuds.

The next day, even after countless efforts at cleaning the pot, it was still totally black inside.

‘Hey, fuck it, we’re taking it back like this.’ I said. ‘Obviously it was all bullshit about the great quality of this stuff, so to hell with them.’

We got the bus out to the offices where we had signed up so enthusiastically as salesmen, a career now laying in tatters in a gutter somewhere, and unceremoniously dumped all our gear on the reception counter. The secretary looked at us a bit dumbfounded, but seeing the expressions on our faces she decided to not push things too much. Probably we weren’t the first disgruntled salespeople she had seen return their kits. We left without saying a word. Our futures in sales were over, before they had really begun.

That marked a bit of a turning point for the both of us in our proposed life in Melbourne. Actually, an ending point. We liked the place, but things just weren’t working out on the job front. A few days later we both decided that we had other places we wanted to be. I wanted to head out on a bit of an adventure, I had decided that I would like to hitchhike up to Cairns, Queensland, in the far north. Alex still had his back-up plan of heading over to work with his brother’s mate in Adelaide. We made our final decisions in the pub. Where else?

‘This sort of cements my decision, bro.’ he said. ‘I know I’ve got a good job waiting for me over there, so I pretty much can’t turn my back on it.’

After our botched attempts at work in Melbourne, I agreed that he was probably right.

‘Anyway, Alex, we gave it our best shot. I guess it just wasn’t to be. One thing, my man, we aren’t going to split up without having a good last session on the fire water.’

He laughed.

‘No, that sounds pretty compulsory. Along with a last symbolic meal down at the greek restaurant, too.’

‘Hey, what a way to close down our Melbourne adventure. The best of the best.’

We handed in our notice on the flat. They were flats where you just paid week by week, so that wasn’t a problem. After one final session together on Tequila, interspersed with a good meal at our favourite dinner, we packed up our gear, said our goodbyes, and hit the road. It wasn’t a sad farewell, we knew we would have more good times together in the future, plus we were young and exuberant. We had lots of things we both wanted to do. Our lives were only just starting. We were still both just 19. Lots of things were out there, just waiting for us. Life was waiting to be lived. Alex took the train out to the end of the line, where he would start hitching across to Adelaide, while I was at the start of an epic journey, hitchhiking all the way up to Northern Queensland. That marked the end of my first period in Melbourne. I would be back, however, on more than one occasion. The city had grown to be one of my favourite places in Australasia. I would just, however, need to get that work situation sorted out a bit better.
Chapter 6 The Love of Man

Constance lay in bed, thinking about the tales that Matt had told her the evening before. He had lived more by the time he was 20 years old than she had in all her 34 years. Truth be told, she also didn’t get up straight away because she was a bit hungover from all the gin of the previous evening. Matt’s stories had been interesting and compelling, so the early evening had dragged on late into the night. All in all they had consumed quite a lot of gin. Probably well over her limit. Nonetheless it had been well worth it. Constance was learning more and more about the life and times her father had lived in, and the sort of things he, too, had probably got up to. She wished that she could have had some interesting adventures in her life. It was true that on paper she had done things that could appear to be interesting. She was, after all, living in Spain, and she had also lived in Dublin, but in her actual life, the living part of it, she felt like she hadn’t really experienced anything of great interest. Her life just seemed to revolve around the mundane. Or better put, sometimes her life seemed to revolve around her hiding from life. Keeping her head down, trying to minimize the damage she seemed to create wherever she passed. As she tiredly rubbed her eyes, she knew that all that was waiting for her outside her comfy bed was the cold reality of her flawed life, with its damaged relationships.

She glanced with anguish at her phone. At the bar, with Matt, she had put it on silent mode, and on her way home she had seen a lot of missed calls, and messages, from Jeff. She had been too tired to deal with all his anger and spite, so she had left the phone on silent mode. At some stage she would have to deal with him, and his latest bout of stupid jealousy about her friendship with Matt. Maybe she could just leave the phone on silent mode forever? A life free of all the colossal problems that seemed to come out of such a little object. That would also solve the headache of her mother’s incoming calls. No phone, no calls. With a sigh, she dragged herself out of bed, and into the bathroom, carefully avoiding looking at herself in the mirror. Why did bathrooms always have mirrors anyway? What was it about cleaning yourself, being naked, being in your most vulnerable state, that would make you want to look at yourself in a mirror? Wouldn’t it be better to have mirrors only by the front door, so that you could view the polished article after you had had time to prepare yourself before going out? Wouldn’t that make more sense? When you got yourself out of bed in the morning, that was always going to be the worst you would look all day. Did they really have to rub it in by placing a mirror there to capture you in your semi-coherent, disheveled state of early morning? Why weren’t there mirrors in kitchens? You could watch yourself artfully preparing some exotic dish, capturing flourishes as you added alluring colourful spices. Was that asking too much? No, they were just in bathrooms, so you could see yourself in all your early morning glory. She needed coffee. After all the alcohol from the night before Constance didn’t feel that she could face eating anything, probably just a few pieces of soothing white chocolate, but she definitely needed caffeine before facing the day, and all the wrath that would inevitably come with it. She made herself a strong cup of coffee, chewed on some delightful chocolate, and sat down, in her dressing gown, to plan her strategy with Jeff. Reluctantly she looked at her phone, deciding that she had better at least read all the messages, just to see exactly what kind of mood Jeff was in, as it she didn’t know already. Before she could even get to the first of what looked like a long list of
messages, the phone lit up with an incoming call. With a startle, she saw that it was from Jeff. Her plan of strategy building lay by the wayside. She had been outfoxed. She had been caught on the hop, without having had time to work out a plan of attack. Or, more realistically, of defense. Constance didn’t feel that she had any other choice than that of answering what she knew would be a strenuous call.

‘Hi Jeff, I…’

She was immediately interrupted by his angry voice.

‘Just where the fuck have you been? I imagine that you spent the night at his place. That’s why you’ve been avoiding my calls. You slut! After everything I’ve done for you. You really are some kind of…’

‘No, Jeff, it wasn’t like…’

‘Don’t interrupt me, you bloody slag, and I don’t want to hear any excuses from you. I warned you about that bastard, and you fell right into his trap, didn’t you? You bloody slut! I told you that he was up to no good, but would you listen to me? Oh no, missy smartarse pants has all the answers. You’re a bloody idiot. I hope you feel ashamed of yourself, you stupid whore!’

The line went dead.

Constance started crying. Why could she never be able to explain herself to anyone? If people would just give her the time to explain what she was doing, and why, she was sure that they would understand. For some reason she just wasn’t able to adequately explain her actions. Why was that? What was wrong with her? They just never gave her enough of a chance to explain herself fully. Then the perfect solution came to her. She would write Jeff an email, explaining everything. She would tell him that she loved him, and that she only wanted to find out from Matt what life had been like for her father back in the old days. To find out the sort of life he had lived, no matter how briefly, before he had been taken from her. If she had a medium where she had time to express herself calmly, without the possibility of being interrupted, she was sure that she could convince him that nothing untowards was going on, and that their relationship was only an innocent friendship. At that point there didn’t seem to be any need to read all his messages. Constance canceled them without reading them. She had fairly well understood the situation, without the need to batter her head relentlessly against the wall. After such an unpleasant start to the day she was almost looking forward to seeing Grace. The lesser of two evils. In fact she would seek her out. She would poke her tongue out at her, and tell her that she was a mean old witch, who scared children merely by her presence. In great sadness Constance prepared herself for work. She knew that it was going to be a long, difficult day.

Tears were never far from her eyes. Even the little children of her first class could tell that something was wrong with her. She bravely assured them that everything was fine, and that she just had a bit of an allergy, causing her eyes to water. Luckily Grace was nowhere to be seen. Constance’s proposed bravado towards Grace had rapidly gone down the drain by the time she had reached the school. It had been replaced by her usual fear of making stupid mistakes, just when Grace was there to see her in all her foolish majesty. The last thing she needed was for Grace to put in the boot as well. She felt that she had already been punished enough for one day. In the half hour break she had between her first two lessons she wrote a long email to Jeff, explaining everything clearly, and with great precision. She told him how much she loved him, and that she hoped their relationship would last forever. A strange feeling came over her as she wrote that. Did she really love him? Or did she just really need him? With all his moods, and his fairly obvious infidelities, did she really want to spend forever with him? Shrugging off her doubts, she finished her email. If nothing else she really did want to explain her friendship with Matt, and that there was nothing
going on between them. That was important to her, that Jeff understood that she had always been faithful to him. The ball was in his court now, she would wait to see what kind of response her email provoked.

The long days passed with only a deafening silence from Jeff, which left Constance terribly worried that maybe it was too late to mend fences with him, and that he didn’t want to see her again. She felt scared of having to face life on her own. Then, unexpectedly, the doorbell rang on Friday evening. With a mixture of excitement and trepidation, Constance ran to open the door. Jeff wandered in, a scowl on his face, and a half empty bottle of cheap wine in his hand. He was obviously drunk. Constance tried to be as nice as she could.

‘Jeff, it’s so nice to see you. Thanks for coming over.’
Without answering Jeff put the wine bottle down on the kitchen top, and turned to Constance.
‘Come on then, get over here.’
He grabbed her roughly, and bent her over, face down, on the dining table. He pulled her loose fitting dress up, and yanked down her panties. Before Constance could understand what was going on, Jeff was violently fucking her.
‘Is this how the old guy did it? Fucking you from behind, the senile old bastard.’
Jeff’s voice was full of hatred. With every violent thrust of his penis, his anger just seemed to grow.
‘Did you enjoy it, you slut? Being fucked by an old man? Did he have a big cock? I bet you sucked him off, as well, didn’t you, you slut! Well, did you?’
Constance was crying. Through her tears she answered him.
‘No, it’s not true, he’s just a friend. It’s not like that, Jeff, I love you. I would never do anything like that to you.’
Finally, after thrusting intensely, Jeff climaxed. Some of his anger seemed to abate.
He zipped up his pants, grabbed the bottle of wine, and poured out a glass for himself. If Constance wanted some wine she would have to get it for herself. Constance, meanwhile, pulled up her panties, and tried to stop crying. She desperately wanted to explain the situation with Matt to Jeff.
‘Like I said in my email…’
‘Listen, Connie, I haven’t come here to listen to your bullshit. Just tell me. Did you fuck him?’
‘No! No! We just talked about his experiences in Australia when he was young. I promise you!’
‘Well, first off, you will never see him again. Is that understood?’
‘But, Jeff, it’s a way for me to find out how my father…’
Jeff started shouting wildly.
‘If you want to see me again, you will never see him again, is that understood?’
Constance knew that she would have to give in to Jeff’s demands, or it would really all be over.
‘OK, I won’t see him again. If that’s what you want.’
Constance instantly decided that she had to play it by ear. If she agreed with him, if she gave in to his demands, maybe later on, at some future date, she could talk him around.
‘This wine is shit. Do you have anything decent to drink?’
‘I’ve got a lovely bottle of Rioja, I’ll get us a couple of glasses.’
While Constance opened the wine, and poured out two glasses, Jeff sat down on the couch, and put his feet up. He rubbed his forehead.
‘Is everything alright, Jeff?’
‘You just wouldn’t believe the shit I have to face every day at work. I’ve just about had it there, I’ll tell you. Anymore of their shit, and I will be out of there.’

Constance, relieved, went into automatic mode. Even though she was still fighting back the tears, and terribly worried about the promise she had made concerning Matt, she felt pleased to be back on more stable ground. She knew what Jeff wanted from her.

‘They really don’t deserve you there. They should realise how lucky they are.’

Constance sat down and pretended to listen to Jeff, as he rolled out his usual list of things that aggrieved him. She was desperately trying to fight back the tears. She didn’t want to anger Jeff again. She didn’t know if she would be able to really give up her friendship with Matt. Not only was she discovering the sort of life her father had lived, and the kind of person he must have been to have done those things, she was really becoming good friends with Matt. He was such a nice, kind person. And there weren’t many of them in her life. She had come to think of him as a great friend of her father’s from the old days, and she was discovering her father through him. She knew that that was slightly silly, after all, they probably had never met, but for Constance that was the closest she had ever been to knowing her father. In her thoughts she imagined that her father had been sitting around with Matt and his friend when the police had burst into their flat. From what Matt had said all hippies seem to have been hated by the police, so no doubt that was true of her dad as well. Her mother had always been so prim and proper, it was strange to think of her dad as having been a social outcast. Just how did they meet? How had it been possible for two such different people from two such different backgrounds to have got married, and to have had a little baby together? Had she been responsible for their marriage? Was it because her mother had gotten pregnant after a drunken one night stand? As the ludricrous thought of that came to her she almost spluttered out the wine she was drinking. Her mother having a drunken one night stand. Jeff looked at her with a flash of anger in his eyes.

‘What the fuck, Connie?’

Constance knew that she had to cover her back, and she knew just how to go about that.

‘I was just thinking about what a total bastard that Henderson is.’

She had no idea what Jeff had been saying, she had been miles away, but criticising Henderson was always going to go down well.

‘You’ve got no bloody idea how much, I’ll tell you.’

Jeff got up, and headed towards the door.

‘I’m sick of all this shit wine. I’m going into town with the boys to drink something stronger.’

Without a further word he left. Constance sat where she was, and let the tears flow. Her body ached all over, especially in her private parts, after the aggressive way Jeff had made love with her. Had they really made love? Had that been love making, or had she been raped? She hadn’t said no, so technically it can’t have been rape, but it also would be hard to describe it as having made love with your partner. Constance hated her life, but most of all she hated herself. She just couldn’t seem to get anything right. No matter what the situation, it always seemed to end up badly for her. Now she had even promised not to see Matt ever again, and her evenings with him had started to become the best thing in her life. The only flickering candle of enjoyment in her otherwise miserable life was being blown out by having a bucket of cold water thrown on it. She went to the fridge and took out a full bar of chocolate. That would be her dinner, chocolate washed down with wine. Chocolate garnished with tears.

Constance had obeyed Jeff for over a month, and had not gone back to see Matt. It really made her feel sad, but she didn’t want to upset Jeff again, or risk losing him. Their relationship had settled
back into its normal routine. It was a high price for her to pay, but she was scared of being alone, and having to face the world without the support of someone in her life. Although, really it wasn’t as if Jeff ever really cared much about what she was going through, but still, having someone seemed to make things easier. She often wondered if her father would have put such high demands on a woman in his life. She was sure that he would have treated women well, after all, the hippy movement was born out of love for humanity, equality, and all those noble things. Jeff just seemed to be so selfish, doing whatever he wanted to, with no regard at all for her. Initially he had kept a watchful eye on her, especially on Wednesday evenings, when she had usually had her chats with Matt, but as time had passed he seemed to have believed that she was obeying him, and he appeared to have relaxed his guard a bit. Obviously he believed that he was entitled to his private life, going off with his friends, drinking, and probably womanising, but she was to be kept on a tight leash. Constance realised how unfair it all was, but she just couldn’t stand the idea of losing him, and having to face Grace, and her mother’s constant disapproval without someone giving her support. Someone on her side. She had tried, minimally, to ask her mother about her father, and how they had met, but, as usual, she had never been able to get a word in sideways before her mother would shut her down, and return to her favourite subject. Marriage. To Jeff. Constance wasn’t even sure if she could cope with a lifetime of Jeff and his anger, and infidelities. Not that Jeff had ever broached the subject anyway. To both of them it just seemed to be something they were doing, without looking too far ahead. What Constance really wanted was to hear more stories about how her father had lived, all those years ago. The more time passed, the more she realised that she needed to find out more about her father, and his lifestyle. Who he had been. In some way she felt that by knowing more about the times he lived in, the better she would be able to understand him, and perhaps even understand more about how she should live her life.

With Jeff having relaxed his guard, Constance decided to sneak down to the bar on Wednesday evening, at their usual meeting time, to see if Matt was there. If he wasn’t there she could always leave a message with the barman, and arrange to meet another time. Maybe on a different evening? Just to throw Jeff further off the scent. She mustered all the courage she could find in her, and on late Wednesday afternoon she went to the bar where she usually met with Matt. Part of her was worried, terrified really, about Jeff catching her out, but another part of her was desperate for answers. Through discovering her father, she was sure she would discover herself. Who she was, where she came from. A set of rules she could use in her life. The bar was quite full, spring had turned into early summer, and the tourist season was kicking off. Constance couldn’t see Matt in the bar, but if he was there he would be out on the deck, for sure. She went straight through the bar, to the outside deck, overlooking the sea. There was no sign of Matt. Maybe it was too early for him? Possibly, since she hadn’t been there for about five weeks he had stopped coming at that time. She went to the bar, to ask the barman, Pablo, if Matt was still coming to the bar, and when.

‘Hello, Pablo, I don’t know if you remember…’
‘Hello! You are Matt friend. How you doing?’
Pablo was all smiles, at seeing her. Something that didn’t happen to her very often.
‘Pablo, I was wondering if Matt still comes in on Wednesdays, or maybe some other time?’
Constance felt like she had been slapped in the face. She knew what that meant. She did need a drink.
‘Yes, please. I will just sit here at the bar.’
While Pablo made her drink, Constance thought about the devastating news he had given her.
When you go on holiday from Spain, or any European country, back home to New Zealand, or Australia, you would always go for at least a month, the trip was such a long one, not to mention the cost as well. Maybe even longer in Matt’s case, he didn’t seem to work. Constance had always assumed that he was on a private pension fund. He could be in New Zealand for months. Possibly he had gone to avoid the tourist throngs, but, whatever the reason, she knew he wouldn’t be back for a long time. She smiled at Pablo as he served her her gin, and gulped down almost half the glass in one go. She had a feeling of desperation that had taken hold of her. The one small candle of hope that had been lit in her dismal life had been blown out. Worst of all, it was her fault. As usual. By trying to placate Jeff she had lost out on the one good thing that had come into her life.

“You alright, Miss Constant?”

Pablo looked at her with concern. Constance wiped the tears from her eyes, and forced out a smile for Pablo.

“Yes, thanks, just a bit of allergy. I’ll have another one of these, please Pablo.’

She felt like there wouldn’t be enough drink in the world to drown out her sorrows. And worst of all, as usual, there was only one person to blame. Herself. She just couldn’t get anything right. Whatever mess her life was in, she would just go and make it worse. If nothing else, she would at least try and throw herself a lifeline. She wrote out a short message explaining to Matt that she hadn’t been able to come to the bar, but that when he got back she would love to meet up, and continue their conversations. She wrote her phone number on the note.

‘Pablo, could you please give this note to Matt, when he gets back?’

‘Sure thing, no worries.’

Constance sat on her second gin for a while, hating herself, and wondering if all she had to look forward to in her life was the same misery, over and over again. After a long period of self loathing, she paid for her drinks, and walked home. Dusk had arrived, and the streets were getting dark by the time she arrived home. She put her key in the door, and sadly entered her empty life. Suddenly she was pushed into her flat from behind, and fell to the floor.

“You just couldn’t resist, could you, you fucking slut! I knew it! Do you think I trusted you? Well, did you?’

Jeff was standing over her, his face a mask of hate.

‘Jeff, he wasn’t even there, I just… ‘


As Constance was trying to get back to her feet, Jeff punched her on the side of her face. She fell back to the floor.

‘What did I tell you? What did I fucking tell you, you slut!’

Constance couldn’t reply. She could barely breathe. She had never been so scared in her life. She tried to crawl to the couch when Jeff kicked her viciously on her thigh. She lay there on the floor, incapable of moving, or speaking. Jeff grabbed her by her blouse, and pulled her head up. With his free hand he slapped her across her face.

‘Fucking slut!’

he slapped her again.

‘You’re nothing but a fat whore!’

Another slap. Jeff threw her back onto the floor.

‘You’re lucky I don’t really sort you out. You deserve much more than this, you slut. But make no mistake, this is just a lesson. The next time you see him, you will get the works, believe me.’

Jeff left the flat, slamming the door behind him. Constance lay there, in the semi darkness, too sore to move, too drained to even cry. She reached up, and took a cushion from the couch, which
she placed under her head, and just lay there on the floor, battered and broken.

Constance looked at her face in the mirror, something she usually didn’t like doing, but this time she needed to analyse the remaining visible damage she bore. It was Monday morning, and she had no choice but to go back to work. After the brutal beating Jeff had given her on Wednesday evening, she had called in sick with the flu, and had been able to take the rest of the week off. But for how long could you drag out the flu? With the arrival of the new week, she had no choice but to go back in. Luckily she only had two lessons in the morning, and one later in the afternoon. With a bit of luck she would be able to avoid Grace, with a bit of luck maybe even for the rest of her life. Wouldn’t that be something, she thought. A life without ever seeing Grace. She turned her face from side to side, checking out the damage. She definitely looked a lot better than she had days before. You could still see bruising around the left eye, but she should be able to make up a story to cover that. She had walked into a door? It almost made her laugh. Should she go with something straight out of the Marx Brothers? Something so ridiculous it might well be believed? Or should she get a bit more inventive? She decided that definitely the latter would be more believable. She still had trouble walking, her right thigh was still very painful, after the vicious kick she had taken to it. Her thigh was still so bruised it was a deep purple colour, but she could cover that up with her dress. The real problem was that she couldn’t walk without limping. She needed an excuse that would cover both the problems. Maybe she would say that she had seen a dog drowning in the sea, and had heroically swum out to save it, sustaining a bit of damage in the process. She was sure that Matt wouldn’t mind her stealing his thunder, after all, it was all in a good cause. Can fat women swim out and save dogs? Probably not. Constance finally settled on something a bit more credible, something people would believe from a clutz like her. She had been taking down a curtain to wash, and had fallen off the stool she had been standing on. That would work wonders, especially considering the general opinion that most people had of her. At least Jeff had remained in silence since the brutal attack. Probably even he had realised the enormity of his actions. Although, she knew that she couldn’t expect an apology, and that if she went back to see Matt, who wasn’t there anyway, Jeff would be true to his word, and would give her an even bigger beating. Constance would have to put all thoughts of that aside, and just try to get through the day, without letting anything slip.

Even though it was just a short walk to the school it took ages for Constance to arrive. She had to walk with her right foot sort of bent sideways, to ease the pain. After painfully arriving at the school, she hobbled up the short flight of steps, and walked into the main corridor of the school. And straight into the lion’s lair.

‘Just what sort of a state is that to present yourself here? Obviously you were lying about having the flu, as I thought. You better have a good explanation for this young lady, or you will be out the door this time.’

Could nothing ever go her way? Not even once? The one day when she really needed to avoid Grace, and there she was, right in front of her. It just wasn’t fair. None of it. No matter how hard she tried, her whole life was just doomed to failure.

‘I was changing… I …then I fell off the stool…’

Constance burst into tears. She just couldn’t take any of it anymore. It was all just too much for her. She covered her face with her hands, and cried her eyes out.

‘Oh, dear God! Come here, my sweet little girl!’

Grace put her arms around her, and hugged her tight.

‘I know that look. Some scumbag of a man has beaten you, hasn’t he? Don’t you worry, my
sweet little angel, I will look after you.’

Constance stood there, crying in Grace’s embrace. She could feel droplets of water dripping onto her shoulder, and sliding down her back. Grace was crying!

‘Come with me, Constance. Come into my office.’

Grace’s tone of voice was incredibly soft, and caring. Constance had never heard her speak like that. Grace led her to a chair, and helped her sit down. As Grace pulled another chair up close, and sat down. Constance saw her wiping the tears from her eyes. Grace put one hand around her shoulders, and with her other hand she gripped tight Constance’s hand.

‘I want to tell you something, Constance. You’re not alone. You’ve no idea how many of us have had the same treatment. Yes, that’s right. I’ve been through it, too. I married a bastard of a man! A real thug. I put up with it for years. And when he had been drinking? You’ve no idea. I would have left him years earlier, but I stayed for the sake of my son. He worshipped the bastard, God only knows why. I stayed to try and be a positive influence on him, so he wouldn’t turn out like his father. As soon as Michael left home, he had found a job down in London, I was out of there like a shot. That’s why I came over here. The only happy memories I ever had were from when I was young, coming over here on holidays with my friends. I got out. I got away from his abuse, his drinking, his foul temper.’

Gently with her hand, Grace gently turned Constance’s face towards her. She looked her in the eye, with firmness and compassion.

‘He will never beat you again, do you hear me? If he wants to get to you he will have to climb over my dead body. Believe me, Constance, you are out. I will be with you every step of the way.’

Constance hugged Grace, and let the tears flow. She couldn’t speak. She felt overwhelmed with joy, and hope. Words couldn’t describe how she felt in that moment. She had someone in her corner. Someone who cared about her. After losing Matt she had felt so alone.

‘Now, you tell me his name, where he works, and show me his photo on your phone.’

Panic struck Constance.

‘No! Please, Grace, that will just make him even more angry. Then he will be even worse! No, don’t… you mustn’t…!’

‘Look at me, Constance, and listen to me. That’s where you’re wrong. These bullies beat us, because we let them. We keep quiet, and hide our pain, as if it’s our fault. They beat us, because we don’t say anything, and accept it, as if we deserve it. I’ve had a lot of time to think about all of this, and I’m part of a few chat groups for abused women. It’s precisely our submission that empowers them. Plus, if he realises that a tough old bird from Blackpool is on his case, he will be too scared to come anywhere near you. I’ll tell him everything in front of all the people he works with. I’ll threaten him! You’ll see how much he’ll like that, when the boot is on the other foot. He will be so ashamed, and so scared that he will never even send you another message. I guarantee you. In the meantime, just so you feel safe, you can come and stay at my place. If I achieve nothing else in this God-forsaken miserable life, it will be to spare you going through what I had to put up with. Now, write it all down!’

Constance wasn’t very convinced about the whole plan, but Grace was adamant, and didn’t really give her any choice. She did as she was told.

‘Now, dear child, do you want to go home, or do you feel up to giving your lessons? Don’t worry if you’re not up to it. We’ll get by just fine.’

‘Actually, I would like to get back to work. I feel a lot better now. Plus it would be good for me to have something to do, something to occupy my mind. Thank you so much, Grace.’

Constance hugged Grace, who warmly hugged her back.
Constance stood up, and hobbled off towards her classroom, while Grace, with a look of grim determination about her, headed towards the door. Fire burned in her eyes. The battle-axe was heading off to war, and woe betide the unfortunate person who lay in her path. Heads would roll. No one would be safe. Constance wasn’t sure exactly what destructive forces she had unleashed, but in any case, things could hardly get any worse than they already were. She tried not to think about it all, and all the possible consequences, so she just put it out of her mind, and got on with her lessons. It felt good to be back with her little pupils. That was where she belonged. That was her place in the world. Her little ones brought her so much joy. The children were all worried about her injuries, but she easily sold them the falling-off-the-stool version of events, with a touch a humour, and they soon got down to business. Halfway through her second class, the door opened slightly, and Grace looked in, winked, and gave her the thumbs up. Mission accomplished. Constance paused for a moment, and thought about how Jeff would have taken it. Strangely, instead of fear, a feeling of relief washed over her. Without a doubt Grace had been right. Hiding everything wasn’t the way to handle it. She still wasn’t totally convinced that sending Grace out on a Holy Crusade had been the correct action to take, but anything would be better than simply staying quiet, and waiting for the next beating. She almost felt good. Although she quickly decided that staying at Grace’s place might be pushing it all a bit too far. She would stay at her own place, and be a lot more careful. She would avoid coming and going in the dark, and would keep her eyes open. She felt a strange sense of tranquility, and something almost bordering on optimism.

The day was hot, and Constance was already sweaty from the short walk to the school. As usual she kept a look out for who was around her. It had become somewhat of a habit. Not really in a paranoid form, but more as a means of safeguarding herself. A couple of weeks had passed since her beating, and the Holy Crusade of the Queen of Darkness. As Grace had correctly predicted, she hadn’t heard anything from Jeff. Not even a message. On the one hand she felt good about that, but on the other she was constantly a bit worried about what he might be plotting. Constance realised that sending into battle the Saviour of Womenkind had had its risky side, but what had been the alternative? More beatings, and misery galore. On her own she would never have had the courage to get out of the relationship, in fact she had even been doing all that she could have to keep her relationship with Jeff going, so all in all, she was happy about the way everything had gone. There hadn’t really been much alternative. Even if that meant a life of looking over her shoulder, it was a price worth paying. As she entered the school there was the usual scene of little kids running around here and there, with laughter ringing out. A sure sign that Grace was not in. She would never tolerate having children act as, well, children. With everyone else Grace was still Grace, however between the two of them a friendship, born out of their common bond of suffering, had grown. Grace almost mothered her. It was nice. The school felt almost like her second home. She loved being there, and everything about it. Just as she was about to call to order the children, she noticed a man, probably not much older than herself, sitting in the waiting area of the office.

‘Hello, I’m afraid there’s no one in the office at present. Can I help you with something?’

The man stood up. He was very good looking, and well dressed. He had the air of a nice person, and when he spoke his voice was soft.

‘Hello. Actually I’m looking for a woman called Constance. Will she be in today, do you know?’

Constance was slightly taken aback with surprise.

‘I’m Constance. What can I do for you?’

The man extended his hand warmly to shake hers.
Oh hello, it’s nice to meet you. My name is Ben, Ben Henderson. I was a colleague of Jeff’s.’
Henderson? Henderson the bastard? That was Henderson the bastard? He seemed so nice.
‘Hello, yes, Jeff mentioned your name a few times.’
Constance decided to play it all coyly, until she knew just what was going on.
‘I thought I would drop by, and give you an update about Jeff’s whereabouts. We were all terribly shocked to hear about how he had treated you. To be be honest, I never liked him, but I hadn’t expected anything like that from him. I’m so very sorry for what happened to you. What he did to you.’
‘Thank you, thank you so much. You said that you were a colleague of Jeff’s? Is that no longer the case?’
‘Yes, that’s right. He’s long gone. You can rest easy. He’s back in London now.’
A surge of all sorts of emotions flooded through Constance. Relief, excitement, hope.
‘Really? He’s not in Spain anymore?’
‘No, he is definitely in London. The day after your boss came into the trading office, and let loose on him he resigned. Actually, the thinking is that he was forced to resign. Anyway, one way or another he will not be a problem for you anymore.’
Constance collapsed into a chair. All the tension she had been carrying left her body. It was over. She was free. Henderson sat down next to her.
‘You really had a excellent idea, sending your boss over to embarrass him like that in front of everyone.’
Henderson laughed at the recollection. He had Constance’s total attention.
‘Normally in the trading room everyone is so concentrated on their trades that there isn’t any time even for a chat. Your boss stormed in, yelling at the top of her voice. She got everyone’s attention, I can tell you. It was a fantastic performance! Oh, I’m sorry, I don’t mean to diminish what she was yelling at him about, it was a terrible thing you went through, but her show was nothing short of spectacular. At one point I thought she was going to start punching him. By the time she was finished, Jeff seemed to have shrunk into a little ball. You are very lucky to have a friend like her on your side. She was absolutely amazing.’
The news was almost overwhelming for Constance.
‘I can’t believe it. It’s all over. He’s gone.’
‘That’s for sure Constance, believe me, he’s out of your life. All of us were totally disgusted with him. Plus, let me tell you, the British trading community is really quite small. We all know each other, or know of each other. Just about all of us have contacts right throughout the investment banking industry, especially in London. We have all told everyone we know about what he did to you. He will never get away from this, not if he stays in investment banking, anyway.’
That worried Constance slightly. Would Jeff always blame her for his state of disregard?
‘Thank you so much for letting me know. It’s such a relief to know that he’s gone. It really was nice of you.’
Henderson stood up, ready to leave.
‘I thought you would like to know. Listen, Constance, get on with your life. Leave all of that behind you. You won’t be having any trouble from that prick again. Look to your future.’
Constance stood up, and shook his hand.
‘Thank you, thank you ever so much.’
‘Bye, Constance, good luck with everything.’
Henderson smiled at her, and walked towards the door. Constance sat down again, and put her head in her hands. She remained there, thinking about it all, and shed a few tears. Tears of
happiness. It really was all over. She was free. After a few minutes she heard the front door open.

‘Get to your classrooms, and stop this infernal racket!’

Grace’s voiced boomed out with her normal angry tone, then she saw Constance sitting there with tears flowing down her cheeks. Immediately she ran to her like a protective mother running to her child who had just fallen from his bike. Her voice turned soft, and caring.

‘Constance what’s happened? Is everything alright?’

Constance jumped up, and hugged her warmly.

‘He’s gone, he’s gone! It’s all over.’

She could hardly talk with all the emotions running through her.

‘Gone? Gone where?’

‘He’s gone back to London. I’ve just heard. It was you Grace, it worked. You scared him off.’

Constance smiled at Grace. Her smile said more than a thousand words ever could.

The rest of the morning passed for Constance as if she was in a dream. She felt so happy, so safe. The nightmare was over. While she was walking home her phone started ringing. Even a call from her mother couldn’t ruin such a beautiful day. She rummaged around in her bag for her phone, ready to do battle with her mother. She felt invincible. It was time for Constance to sort out her as well. Then she saw that the number was a local number. Who on earth?

‘Hello?’

‘Hello there, Aussie, how are you?’

‘Matt! Hi there! You’re back! I thought you would be in New Zealand for months.’

‘No, I just had to sort out a few things. Besides, it’s winter over there now, I prefer the Spanish summer. How are you?’

‘I’m really well, plus I’m so happy to hear from you. Hey, when can we meet up for a chat?’

‘Well, it is Wednesday afternoon… What about today? Same place same time? Are you in?’

‘You’re on! I’ll see you there later on then. Bye Matt.’

‘Bye Constance.’

Things were just getting better and better. She arrived home, and prepared a late lunch. She would have loved to have gone for a walk along the beach, but it was too hot for her in the summer sun. She spent the afternoon lying on the couch thinking about all the latest developments in her life. She laughed when she thought about Jeff going on about Henderson the bastard. A nicer man you could never hope to meet. Just how had she come to have been with such a lying, cheating, violent arsehole like Jeff? How had she fallen for someone like him? Never again, she promised herself. She would learn from her mistake. She would come out of it all stronger, and better off for having had the experience, bad as it had been.

When late afternoon arrived she began preparing herself for the drinking session with Matt. She was really in the mood for a few drinks. It was time to celebrate. She walked down to the bar feeling light, and free. As expected, she found Matt out on the back deck, sitting in the shade of an umbrella.

‘Constance, you look very pleased with yourself. It’s nice to see you looking so happy. Have you managed to sort things out with your mother?’

‘Hello there, you look good, too. No, still at sixes and sevens with her, I’m afraid.’

Constance didn’t want to go into the whole Jeff story. She valued her friendship with Matt, but it was just all too personal, and, truth be told, pretty embarrassing. Matt poked his head into the bar through the open window, and caught Pablo’s attention. Drinks were coming.

‘I’m just enjoying the summer, and my job is going well. I really love it. I really do enjoy
teaching little kids."

‘Better you than me, I don’t know how you can stand all that confusion. Kids just never seem
to shut up these days. Were we like that? I don’t really remember. Probably I suppose. Poor old
mum had four of us. I don’t know how she coped. These days I prefer peace and quiet. I’ll leave the
teaching to you.’

Constance laughed.

‘Yes, it does get a bit noisy at times, but I guess that doesn’t bother me. I guess I’ve become
used to it. I really love my little students, and I find that if you can manage to interest them, and
grab their attention, they hang on your every word in silence. Actually, sometimes it’s their parents
who make more of a nuisance of themselves.’

Matt smiled at her.

‘Yes, I bet the modern day helicopter parents can be a real nightmare. Nothing is ever good
enough for their little brats.’

‘Matt! Don’t be so rude!’

They both laughed.

‘I don’t think there would be enough gin in the world to convince me to ever be a teacher.
What about your constant battles with the wicked old witch who runs the place? Still a tough gig?’

‘No, we have sort of started to be friends. It’s going well.’

Constance kept it vague, she was going to keep the Jeff story a secret from everyone.

‘So you’ve turned into a lion tamer as well? You really do have a bag full of tricks.’

‘Please, Matt, tell me another story of the old days. Were you ever in love back then?’

In love?’

Constance really wanted to hear a story about a successful relationship. After her dismal
relationship she felt the need to hear, if it was even possible, about someone who had actually
managed to pull it off. If anyone could have managed that, it would have been Matt. Plus she was
still determined to find out how on earth her father and mother had gotten together. She wanted to
find out how those things worked back in her father’s day.

‘Yes, did you ever fall head over heels for anyone?’

Pablo placed their first drinks on the table. The first of many to come.

‘Thanks, Pablo. In love, eh? Well, actually I did have my first serious girlfriend back in those
days.’

‘Really? Well, let’s hear it. When did you meet her?’

‘Actually it was not long after splitting up from Paul after we had been in Kuranda. After we
had left ‘Big Pink’.’

‘Tell me about a happy period, not about when it all ended. I’m in the mood for a successful
story of love. Let’s keep the mood good.’

Matt eyed Constance with a bit of a sparkle in his eye.

‘Something’s changed in you. You seem much more confident, more self assured. I like it. I
like seeing you like this.’

‘Well, it’s true, I am feeling good. I think I’m entering a positive period of my life.’

Matt raised his glass.

‘I’ll drink to that. Cheers! Keep following your instincts. They are obviously leading you in the
right direction.’

Constance giggled in delight.

‘You know, I think they are. Cheers to you, too, kind sir. So, tell me. What was her name?’
Chapter 7 Country Living

‘Let’s just head further up the road. The further up into the hills we get, the easier it will be to find someplace.’

‘Sure, Vicks, it certainly looks just the ticket up here. Really isolated. No bloody neighbours to poke their noses into our business.’

In reply she just looked at me, smiled and nodded. A smile was never far from her face in those days. Happy days. Just the both of us against all comers. A world of two. Vicky and myself had been staying with friends in the Casino area, of northern New South Wales, but by then we wanted our own place. I continued driving up the narrow unsealed road, heading to God-only-knew where.

‘If we can find a nice cheap place, we should be able to live just on our dole payments. I can’t be bothered working.’ I mused.

She laughed.

‘Not that you have done a lot of that lately, anyway.’

I laughed along with her. They were days of laughter. A time of wonder. We had successfully signed up on the dole, something not particularly hard to do in Australia in the late ‘70’s. Being a Kiwi, I was acutely aware that I was somewhat reinforcing the image of the New Zealander in Australia; a bit of a dole bludger. But on the other hand, Vicky was Australian, so I guessed it all sort of balanced itself out. Frankly, the moral dilemma didn’t really keep me awake at night. It was free money, so I took it. As we had a steady money flow coming in, we wanted to get a place of our own, but we needed a cheap place to live. Obviously we didn’t want to waste all that easy income on anything as banal as rent. We had a fairly heavy drinking lifestyle to maintain, and the odd bit of weed as well, so we preferred to keep those activities as our priority expenses. Neither of us wanted to live in a city, or town, so it was going to be out in the country for us. Simple, healthy living was what we both wanted. Clean air, quality food - vegetarian, and lots of booze and dope. The quintessential hippy lifestyle. We had been looking around at old empty country houses to possibly stay in, when we came across the find of the century. It was more a vision than a house. Utopia. We had been driving up in the hills to the west of Casino, when I spotted it. I pulled over the trusty Hillman Hunter.

‘Shit, Vicky, look at that place! What a beauty! That would be fantastic.’

She was even more ecstatic than me.

‘My God, it’s just so beautiful. I wonder who owns it? That would be perfect for us. It looks pretty run down, it’s definitely been empty for a long time.’

‘Yeah, just waiting for someone like us. We’ve got to look into this place. No neighbours to bother us.’

It was a spectacular colonial-style wooden house, up on a hill. Behind it were bigger hills, some bushclad, others with grasslands for the cattle to graze. It was built in the old Australian country style, up on high stilts, to create an air flow underneath, to help cool it down in summer. It had a fabulous verandah around all three sides facing the road, far below. Access from the road, down in the valley, was across a wooden bridge over a small river, then up along the ridge lines of the hills, snaking up to the house. From down in the valley it looked truly magnificent, It dominated the
valley. From the house itself the view would be nothing short of breathtaking. With no other houses in sight, you could only see rolling hills, with a pine forest further up the road.

‘The only problem might be finding out who owns the place.’

‘Let’s go further up the road, and see if we can find someone to ask who the owner is.’ suggested Vicky.

Vicky was the definition of beauty itself. Blonde, suntanned, and with a fantastic body. Australian beauty at its best. We had been together just over six months by that stage, and I was madly in love with her. My first love, an intoxicating mixture of sexual attraction, similar lifestyle choices, and total insanity. I felt that I would love her forever. She was six years older than me, and very sexually experienced. Far more than me. When she looked at me with her cute brown eyes, and cheeky little smile, I could never resist her. Did I mention that she had a nice body? I put foot to peddle in the ubiquitous Hunter, and drove off, further up the isolated road. Just a few hundred metres from where we had spotted the house, we found ourselves driving through a pine tree forest.

‘Wow, it’s so nice around here,’ said Vicky, her face a vision of happiness, and beauty, ‘smell the pine trees! This would be the perfect place for me. I need some peace and quiet to perfect my yoga. I get too distracted with people always yapping, and constant traffic noise. Plus I need to get out of my clothes, they are just too restraining.’

Vicky liked doing her yoga naked. I could live with that.

About thirty minutes further up the road, It was a really isolated area, we came to what looked like a working farm, complete with house, a few sheds, and a couple of tractors. Dogs were barking, but, luckily, it appeared that they weren’t running free. As I pulled into the yard, a slim, fit looking guy of young middle age, dressed in the typical Aussie country style, came out of the house. Cowboy hat in place, of course. I think they were glued on. I got out of the car, and approached him.

‘Hi there, I wonder if I can ask you some information?’

He looked at me, not really suspiciously, but his interest was heightened.

‘Sure.’

He would prove to be a man of few words.

‘Do you know who the house, about half an hour’s drive back down the road, belongs to? We are looking for a place to live for a while, and that looks pretty good to us.’

While I was speaking Vicky had got out of the car too.

‘We could clean it up a bit. It looks like no one has lived there for a long time, it could use a bit of loving care.’ she said sweetly, a lot more diplomatically than me. I had the habit of getting straight to the point, probably too bluntly. Definitely too bluntly.

‘Well, that place is part of this farm.’

‘Are you the owner?’ I asked.

‘The owners are down in Melbourne, I’m the manager. Ron.’

Taking my cue from Vicky, I slowed it all down. We really wanted that house, and I didn’t want to ruin everything before we even got a foot in the door.

‘Hi Ron, I’m Matt, and this is Vicky. Basically we are a bit sick of the city lifestyle, so we’re looking for a nice quiet place to live out in the country. It’s just the two of us, so we wouldn’t cause any fuss, and we could clean the place up a bit. What are your thoughts on the subject?’

Ron instantly came up with an excellent proposal, one that could satisfy us all.

‘I could let you stay there in exchange for one day’s work a week. You look young and fit, what do you say? Just a bit of fencing, and stuff like that.’

‘Yeah, brilliant. I’m pretty good with my hands. We’d love that.’
Vicky loved the idea too, especially since she didn’t actually have to do any of the work. That would be all down to muggins.

‘Thanks a lot, that’s very nice of you. We’ll get the place all spruced up. It’ll be a good thing for all of us.’

Ron, without saying another word, that was his way, gave us the key to the back door, and we headed back down to the house. Our house. Our new home.

We were both elated as we drove up the long driveway, and took a closer look at our new abode. The outside was fantastic, with its magnificent prominence. Then we went inside. Not so good.

‘Vicks, it’s actually pretty rough, don’t you think?’

Inside it was pretty dirty. Bits and pieces of who-knew-what were scattered all over the place. She wasn’t deterred.

‘No, I love it. A few days of cleaning, and it will be looking good. I think it’s in pretty good shape, it just hasn’t had anyone living in it for a while. A long while, I would say.’

We checked out the rooms, one by one. It was a pretty big house. In one room, with a broken window, birds had made a lot of nests. They would fly in and out through a fairly small hole in one pane of glass. It was quite something to watch. They actually had to close their wings as they entered and exited through the small hole. It was a great display of skill to watch, but their excrement on the floor looked like it would make for a monster amount of work. We decided to leave that room to them for the time being, the clean up in there would be rather daunting, besides the place was incredibly big. There was room for us all. That would be our own private aviary. An aviary where the birds were free to come and go as they pleased. The house had no electricity, but there was a water tank, collecting rain water from the roof. The verandah was very wide, and with, as we had expected, an incredible view.

‘Look at this view! It’s incredible, Matt. I already love it here. This is definitely going to be my yoga space.’

‘I’m pretty sure this is where we will be spending most of our time, Vicks. It’s so peaceful, just absolutely surrounded by nature.’

From the verandah you could see the valley far below, rolling hills behind, grazing cattle, and pine forests further up the road. We couldn’t believe how lucky we had been. It was such an idyllic setting. We briefly cleaned up as much of the rubbish lying around as we could, and then headed back to our friends place, to load up all our stuff, and to pick up some cleaning materials. We would clean the place up while we were living there. We just couldn’t wait to move in.

First priority was to clean up our bedroom, which, as Vicky had predicted, wasn’t really that big a job. The wooden floors and walls were actually pretty easy to wipe down.

‘You were definitely right there, Vicks, it comes up pretty clean quite easily. Tomorrow I’m going to get to work on the kitchen. There’s a great looking iron stove, but it definitely hasn’t been used for a while, plus it seems to be full of all sorts of rubbish. Anyway, it’s all coming together well.’

‘Hey, I told you. I’ve cleaned up the toilet a bit, but It’s going to need a bit more work. I’ll get onto that tomorrow. That’s enough for today, let’s get to bed, and get an early start tomorrow. We need to make a run into town too, to pick up some food, and things.’

‘Sounds good to me.’

We hit the sack early, it had been a big day.

The bathroom amenities proved to be rather primitive. The toilet was outside, with just the old
country style long drop. I’ll leave that one to your imagination. We soon found out, well, Vicky did really, that the toilet proved to have a bit of a problem associated with it, at night anyway. During the day, the house was ours, and ours alone. At night, underneath the house, and around the toilet area, it belonged to the rats. Monster rats. Scary looking rats. Not long after we went to bed, that first night, Vicky went off to the toilet with our kerosene lantern. The next thing I knew, I heard her scream wildly. Then she absolutely flew back in the door. I went into high alert mode.

“What’s up, is someone out there?”
She was absolutely terrified.
“Those are bloody rats everywhere, dozens of them.”
Relief flowed through me. I had been expecting something dramatic.
“What?” I laughed, ‘They won’t hurt you. You just need to show them who’s boss.’
“Here,” she said, holding out the lantern with a smirk, ‘go and show them then. Boss.’

To prove my point I went confidently down the back stairs, and walked around to the toilet. Rats. Big rats. Big rats roaming everywhere. I freaked out completely. I fled back up the stairs as fast as my legs would carry me, and slammed the door shut behind me. Vicky was laughing.

“Now do you believe me? I’ve never seen rats so big.” Her expression turned worried. ‘What on earth can we do, Matt?’

‘Shit, that’s unbelievable. They’re monsters. And there are so many of them. Don’t worry, when we go into town, I’ll get some rat traps. That will eventually sort them out. In the meantime, we’ll just have to try and go to the bog before dark.’

In the morning, ostensibly rat free, we did some cursory cleaning, before we would head off for supplies. I tackled the kitchen. The house had the most marvelous wood burning stove, that served for both heating and cooking. For some unknown reason, the inside was jammed full of bits of paper, and all sorts of rubbish. While I was cleaning it, actually by putting my hand in to drag out all the rubbish, a rat came flying out of it, just inches from my face. Those rats were starting to ruin my life. But I hadn’t finished with them. I hadn’t even started.

‘OK, Vicks, let’s head into town, grab some lunch, and stock up on whatever we need.’

‘Yeah, that’s enough cleaning for today. A few more days like this and we’ll be right. That’s if we can sort out the rat problem, of course.
‘Hey, I’ve got it. Let it go.’
She looked at me slightly sceptically. I really loved that look, and all her other looks, too.

We cleaned ourselves up, and made the quite long run into Casino, our nearest town. By luck it was Friday. Every Friday the women of some charity group or other, had a stall in town selling home made goods. I had previously tried their Picallily chutney, and just loved it. Chutney and cheese, on a sandwich, that was all I needed. Done and dusted. A banquet fit for a king. That chutney was top on my shopping list, just above rat traps. Maybe first equal. Before anything else, I made a beeline for their stall. The women, as ever, were always full of smiles, and very welcoming.

‘Hello there, I really love your Picallily chutney. It’s not at all like the sort you get in the supermarket.’

The elderly women absolutely loved the positive acclaim.

‘Oh, thank you so much. It’s made with Phylis’s secret recipe. She won’t even tell us how she makes it, so don’t you even bother asking!’

We all laughed together. They were always surprisingly friendly, considering the two different planets we came from. Our styles of life couldn’t have been more different. It was nice, sometimes almost astonishing, to find such open minded people, especially in such a small town. I replied in the same jocular banter.
‘That’s a real shame, my girlfriend Victoria was looking forward to trying her hand at it. I guess we’ll just have to stick to buying yours, then.’

Vicky gave me an icy stare. She hated being called by that name, even though actually it was the name on her birth certificate. I think it sounded too much to her like long dead ruling monarchs, or, perhaps, railway stations. It never failed to get a rise out of her. Anyway, I just about cleaned that stall out of their chutney stock. I could have lived on that stuff. Actually, I just about did. We were both vegetarians, well, she was, so I was too. I was pretty easily influenced back in those days. I have never been a fussy eater, and simple, healthy foods have always been more than enough for me. We continued on with our shopping mission. As soon as we had distanced ourselves from the chutney ladies, Vicky elbowed me, hard, in the ribs.

‘Are you ever going to give up on the Victoria cracks? You know how much I hate that name.’

‘Probably not. I really like it. It makes you seem so regal.’ I said, with a straight face. ‘My Aussie Queen!’

‘You’re not funny, you know?’

She was not amused. She really did hate that name, but never fully explained why. Quite possibly it had something to do with her difficult family life when she was young. Maybe I should have been more sensitive? Then we stocked up on some basics, including half a dozen big rat traps, the biggest I could find, picked up some booze, and headed home. That country house was now our home, all I had to do was to get rid of some unwelcome intruders. Not a problem. That evening I put out the rat traps.

‘A few nights of these, and there won’t be any of the buggers left.’ I promised Vicky. ‘You’ll see.’

She didn’t reply, but I could tell she was a bit dubious about it all. Anyway, I would show her. Man stuff.

Even though it was our second night in the house, it almost seemed like the first. The essential rooms had been cleaned up, and I fired up the wood stove for the first time.

‘Hey, it works really well, Vicks, look.’

‘Brilliant. So you’re not just a pretty face, then? Let’s put some rice on to boil, and I’ll prepare some veggies to steam. Get the wine open, Matt.’

‘I have a selection of only the best house reds for you to choose from, Madame. I would heartily recommend the cheap-as-shit red.’

We laughed together, there in our brand new house. Things were looking good. Dinner cooked on the wood stove was a great success, helped along by a couple of bottles of wine.

‘Get your guitar out, Matt. Let’s sing some songs.’

My heart leapt into my mouth. Vicky had a fantastic singing voice, but strangely would only sing when the right mood struck her. I quickly went to the bedroom, and grabbed my guitar. Now, I was not at all good on that thing, but I could play some nice background rhythm while she broke into the sweetest, most alluring singing. I started strumming one of her favourites, and she gently joined in, taking my heart on an angelic journey. That was the moment when I knew that I was at home. When Vicky was singing. Never have I since participated in such a fantastic house-warming party, as that night. Just the two of us. That was all I needed. When Vicky had sang herself out, we called it a night. The next day we would relax on the verandah.

That night, at around 3 am, there was a loud bang, followed by a wild scream.

‘One down,’ I said, still half asleep, ‘plus that will scare the rest of them off.’

I rolled over, looking forward to getting back to sleep. However, the screaming continued, and continued, for another half an hour. It was nerve racking.
‘Go and see what’s going on.’ She fairly ordered me, as she pushed me out of the bed. I got dressed, lit the lamp, and headed off out the back door. As I was walking down the open wooden stairs in the darkness, I saw something jump up at me, and then fall back down. I quickly took a couple of steps back up, and held up the lantern to see better. A big rat, with it’s head in a trap, and it’s neck obviously broken, was trying to jump up at me! It was just the weight of the trap that had stopped him from reaching me. Fuck that, I thought. I quickly retreated to the safety indoors. Vicky was waiting for me just inside the door.

‘You’ve got no idea how tough those bastards are. One of them is caught in a trap, with its neck broken, but it just refuses to die. What fucking race of rats are these?’

She could see that I was a bit shaken. She took me by the arm.

‘Let’s leave it for now, and work it all out in the morning. C’mon, let’s go back to bed.’

No way was I ever going to go out there at night again. Just what sort of super rats were they? The screams that night continued for at least another half an hour, but neither of us was going back out there, and I was never going to put out any traps again. I knew when I had lost a fight. The rats had won. The night was theirs. We would lock ourselves in, with all necessary buckets. Strangely, but luckily, we never saw any of them during the day. We could never work out just where they would go during the day, but it didn’t really matter. That was enough for us. It was half a victory. A stalemate. A standoff, with both sides eyeing the other cautiously.

‘Windy enough for ya?’

Ron was at the back door, ready for the day’s work. He was a man of few words. When I would open the door for him he would always say that type of curt expression. Depending on the current weather situation.

‘Cold enough for ya?’

‘Wet enough for ya?’

‘Hot enough for ya?’

We would generally work in silence, but not an uncomfortable silence. The silence of two blokes getting on with the job. Even though he was a cowboy, and I was a hippy, we actually had fairly similar personalities. We were both fairly reserved, and left the bulk of the talking to others. With the two of us working together, we just didn’t need to do a lot of talking. There was a good understanding between us, and I would follow Ron’s lead to learn how to do the work. He was always very patient about showing me how to do all the jobs, and I would throw myself into it full steam. The one day a week of work usually entailed putting up new fences, fixing old ones, or repairing gates. Physical work, but actually quite enjoyable, and in such a peaceful, quiet place. Ron, with his lithe body, was actually incredibly strong. He was a hard worker. I made sure that I gave it my all, so as to not look like a wimp. I found I had a knack for manual labour, and especially loved fixing up the hinged wooden gates. It felt good to hold a hammer in my hand. I felt that I could easily become a carpenter, or maybe a serial killer, if things went the other way. Ron, although he never said it, he wasn’t that sort of bloke, seemed satisfied with my contribution. Without speaking much, a mutual respect grew, and we became very good friends.

‘Let me find my hat, and we’ll be off.’

Vicky liked wearing a black beret when we would head into town for our weekly shopping. It made her look very French, and even more sexy than usual, which was already an extremely high level.

‘OK, I’ll get the Hunter fired up.’
‘Can I drive a bit?’

My heart sank. I had been trying to teach her how to drive, but it had all been going disastrously. She could never work out the clutch-to-accelerator change, and ended up stalling the car, or just staying forever in first gear. My main strategy was to just keep on putting her off when she wanted a lesson. The stress level was too high, and I found myself behaving like my father had, when he had taught me. A scary proposition. I was becoming my father. As she jumped in beside me, I tried to think of a good excuse.

‘We’ve got a big day ahead of us today. Let’s go further up the road another day, and do that.’

She was so trusting, that she actually believed me.

‘OK, you’re probably right.’

Usually once a week we would head into town for supplies, pick up our dole cheques, and stock up on booze and weed, if we could find any. Quite often, I must confess, when there wasn’t enough money to go around, we resorted to stealing the odd bottle of liqueur. It was wrong, I know, but hey, we had developed expensive tastes.

‘Shall we pick up a bottle of the good stuff, Vicks?’

‘Shit yeah, that stuff is fantastic.’

We had developed a taste for the highest quality liqueurs, the sort that we could never have afforded to buy anyway. I reasoned that if you are going to steal, you may as well steal the best quality. I know, I know, but that was the way it was back then. Anyway, the strategy was relatively easily, and basically foolproof. We would pick a booze shop with a male running the counter, enter separately, as if we didn’t know each other, although, admittedly, having two hippies in your country town shop at the same time should have been a dead giveaway, but we always chose a shop with a male running the show, remember? While I would cruise the aisles pretending to look for whatever, Vicky, looking as beautiful as ever, in her very french beret, would ask some question or other to the shop assistant. While he was totally absorbed with her charm, as any man should have been, I would stuff a bottle of the best quality liquor down my pants and casually wander out, while the shop assistant was madly falling in love with Vicky. Foolproof, but only with a male shop assistant. And only with Vicky as bait.

I stashed the bottle in the ever-present Hunter, and waited for Vicky.

‘He wants to meet up for drinks tonight at a bar, over where I live, near the coast.’

‘Oh yeah, you’re living on the coast these days? Nice one. Did you ask him if your boyfriend can come along as well?’

We both laughed.

‘You can be my driver.’

I waved my arm in a great flourish.

‘Madame, your carriage awaits.’

‘Of course, you’ll need to cut your hair, and wear a suitable cap.’

That was going too far, even in jest.

‘Well, that’s that done, then. You can take the bus.’

She laughed as she put her hand through my arm, and we walked along the street. I loved my wavy, shoulder-length hair, and wasn’t going to cut it for anyone.

‘Last exercise, and I’m done for today,’ she said.

I didn’t answer, I knew it was more a statement than a conversation starter. It was just another day in paradise. As was the case most of the time, we were happy to stay out on our verandah. It was such a nice place, with the beautiful scenery, and the total quiet. Vicky was doing her yoga,
naked, and I was ploughing my way through the numerous books I had picked up in the second hand bookshops in town, also naked. The naked reader. Vicky usually finished off her yoga sessions with the rather odd exercise of being upside down, supporting herself on her hands, with her back and legs up against the side of the house. It always looked more like gymnastics to me, but then, what did I know about yoga? She gently folded herself back down to planet earth. She sat, relaxed, and smiled at me.

‘I really feel like I’m finally getting to where I’ve always wanted to be with my yoga. Thanks for not interrupting me while I’m doing it. It really takes complete concentration. I can really feel the benefits. I don’t understand why you don’t try it, too.’

‘You know, I think I reach the same level of relaxation through reading. That also takes a quiet environment, and total concentration. I don’t really think our hobbies are that different.’

Vicky laughed, even though I was actually being serious.

‘Really they have nothing in common, but if it keeps you happy, and quiet, that’ll do for me. I like reading, too. It’s not the same.’

I wasn’t going to argue the point, it was a discussion lost before starting, but I was sure that I was at least half right. She came and sat beside me, and gently ran her hand across my body. After doing her yoga she was usually feeling carefree, and in the mood for sex. While her hand was gently drawing ever nearer to my happy place, she coyly looked me straight in the eyes.

‘Why don’t you put that book down, mister. Too much reading will give you eye strain.’

I threw my book aside with scant regard.

‘I think you might be right, my Queen.’

Being young and horny, I was generally always in the mood for sex, and just in permanent waiting mode. Without further ado we got right down to business, out there on the verandah, in full view of the roaming cattle. They didn’t seem to mind it too much, and were barely distracted from their constant eating, although one of their number did sometimes seem to take far too much interest in our goings-on. It made me wonder about reincarnation, and all that. I just hoped he hadn’t been a family member, in his past life. One of the advantages of spending most of the day naked, being fully paid up hippies, was that when the urge arose, we were already more than ready. Our days revolved around our time spent out on that verandah. It was definitely the best part of the house. The view was exhilarating, and when it was too hot we would simply move around to the shade. With the verandah snaking around three sides of the house, you could always find the perfect spot, no matter what the weather.

‘Hey Matt, come and look at this. What’s going on, do you think?’

I looked out the kitchen window in the late afternoon sunshine, towards where Vicky was indicating, and saw a group of cows, in a perfect circle. Their heads were all lowered towards the centre of the circle. Most unusual.

‘Bloody hell. I’ve never seen anything like that before. I wonder what they are doing? I’m going down to have a look.’ I said.

‘Hey, me too, I’m coming. That’s so strange.’

We went down to where the cows were, just on the other side of a fence, standing around in their circle. That was where we found him. A small kangaroo was lying in the middle of the circle, with all the cows looking at him, their faces just inches from his body. It was such a weird scene. He was obviously injured, badly. It looked like he had hit the fence while running through. What was it with the cows? Did they understand that the poor little fellow was injured, and were trying to console him?
‘Bring him inside, he needs our help. Poor little thing.’ Vicky loved animals, all animals, as did I. I got a blanket from the house to wrap him in, and took him inside.

‘He looks in so much pain, and helpless. I’ll make up some milk for him,’ said Vicky.

We didn’t have a fridge, so our milk was of the powdered form, mixed with water. The little kangaroo seemed thirsty, and drank some milk. We tried to give him different food items, but he only seemed to like the milk. Vicky was visibly upset by the suffering of the pained creature. She had tears in her eyes, watching its ordeal. He needed our help, but I wasn’t really sure what to do. Luckily Vicky had a solution.

‘He looks pretty bad. Let’s keep him comfy, and see what he’s like in the morning. Then maybe we can get some advice from Ron, on what to do. What do you think?’

‘Yeah, sure.’

Vicky’s suggestion was about all we could do, given our limited experience in these things. Anyway, we looked after the poor little thing the best we could, but, during the night he died. Vicky couldn’t stop crying. She really did have a heart of gold.

‘He probably had internal bleeding.’ I said, trying to console her. ‘There was nothing more we could have done.’

In the morning I dug a grave up on a ridgeline, overlooking the valley below, and we gave him a nice burial. If nothing else, he had a nice spot to spend eternity, overlooking the beautiful hills he had once roamed through, and called home.

With the house being right out in the country, the area was absolutely full of wildlife, including a dingo, which regularly walked past the house. We would try an entice him over to us, but he was very wary of us, and would keep his distance. Obviously the house was on part of his roving territory, and as it had been empty for many years he was no doubt used to passing through undisturbed. We loved watching him walk past. He was a beauty to watch. A sleek muscular wonder. He was our dingo.

‘Has the curtain moved yet,’ I asked.

‘Yeah, she’s watching. Pull in, we may as well say hello.’

‘Sure. She’s a real gossip, but she’s a nice person.’

‘I think it’s pretty lonely for her out here, just her and her father.’

I inwardly grimaced at the thought of him.

‘I doubt he’s much company for her either. Typical redneck farmer.’ I replied.

Doreen was only a few years older than me, but already her life was seemingly over. Her only real form of entertainment was keeping an eye on the sparse traffic up and down that lonely road. I don’t remember whether her mother had died, or, perhaps, escaped to freedom. She lived with her father on a cattle farm, just a few kilometres down the road from us. She was always happy to see us. She was probably happy to see anyone. We would quite often stop in on our way back from town. Vicky felt sorry for her, and had sort of taken her under her wing. Doreen was short, and slightly plump. Her short, curly hair only seemed to accentuate her chubby cheeks. She came out to greet us.

‘Hi, have you guys been into town? Was it very busy today?’

She always wanted to know everything about everything. Even though nothing ever really happened there. What was I to tell her? The chutney stall had been cleaned out, again. And I was the culprit, again.

‘Hi there, Doreen. Nah, same as usual. What’s going on?’

‘Not much. Dad’s out working, and I’m just getting things ready for lunch.’
Their two little dogs were yapping around our feet. Well, I suppose I should clarify that. Their two little house dogs. Both very friendly, well loved, and well looked after. They also had half a dozen farm working dogs. Strangely, while he loved the household pet dogs, the working dogs were treated like shit by Doreen’s father. They were always caged up, and he would constantly yell at them. If he was in a real shitty mood he would even belt them. Then he would come inside, and talk and play with the pet dogs. I could never understand that. Weren’t they all dogs? Shouldn’t they be all treated the same? The guy was a real arsehole. The classic redneck farmer. I really felt sorry for Doreen. Her life looked like shit. On paper, we all had similar lives, living just a few kilometres away from each other in the isolated country of northern New South Wales. In reality, the way we lived couldn’t have been more different. Probably, where you live is less important than how you live. Your mentality, and approach to things, is definitely a big part of how your life feels. I couldn’t really see much of a way out of there for Doreen. I think her life’s story was written even before she was born. And it didn’t have a happy ending. She always filled us in with the latest gossip about people we didn’t know, or care about. I was pretty sure that we would then be the main topic, when she was talking with them. That didn’t bother us. If we could bring her at least that little pleasure in her desolate life, then why not?

‘Thanks for the cuppa. We better get off, and leave you to prepare lunch. Your dad will be back soon.’ I said.

‘OK, drop in anytime. I’m always here.’

I was always happy if we could avoid her father. I couldn’t stand him, and I was pretty sure the feeling was mutual.

‘Bye, see ya soon!’

A soon as we got into the car, and off up the road, Vicky let out an audible sigh.

‘I just wish there was something we could do for her. Her life there, with her father, is just so mundane.’

‘Maybe we should invite her over for some nude sunbathing on our verandah?’

‘Idiot.’ she said, as she slapped my shoulder.

‘If nothing else it would keep the gossipmongers busy for years to come.’

‘She would end up being ostracized by all her friends, if something like that got out.’

I glanced at her fleetingly.

‘Actually, Vicky, she already is.’

That brought a sense of quiet reflection down on the both of us. Seeing people like Doreen, and her father, really made me appreciate the company of interesting people. People who read books, played music, and did interesting things. People with interesting stories to tell. People with humour in their lives. There was so much more to life than just looking out your window, to see who was passing by out on the road.

One morning I woke up with an incredible pain across my lower back. I felt weak, and lethargic. I sought solace.

‘Man. I feel crook. Plus, I had a piss, and the urine was really dark. Something’s not right here. I think I better go and see a doctor.’

Vicky would have none of that. She didn’t trust them. Bloody charlatans.

‘There’s a homeopath is Lismore. We’ll go down to see him.’

‘Are you sure a doctor wouldn’t be better? I feel really bad.’

‘No, doctors are all fakes. Homeopathy is better. It’s based on ancient medicine, using natural remedies with herbs and flowers, and stuff. Modern medicine is just all chemicals. They do you
more harm than good.’

‘OK.’

She seemed to know what she was talking about, and I was easily led. Too easily. We headed down to Lismore, to her physician of choice. Even though she sang his praises, I wasn’t totally convinced. He was a full bearded old bloke, with thick glasses, Mr. Magoo style. He didn’t really inspire much confidence in me, but Vicky seemed pretty sure about it all, so I went with the flow. As soon as I described the situation to him, he told us that it was without a doubt the kidneys. Probably an infection. He seemed to know what he was talking about.

‘At this point I need to know whether it is concentrated in the left kidney, or the right. Tell me how much this hurts.’

He poked me in the back, on my left kidney. The pain was intense.

‘Ahh, a lot!’ I cried out.

Then he poked my right kidney. Again a searing pain tore through my body.

‘Shit! That really hurts.’

‘Which one hurt the most?’

‘I don’t know. They both... Ahh, fuck! Stop!’ he had poked my left kidney again.

‘Stop doing that. I don’t know which one is worse. They both hurt a lot. Don’t do that anymore.’

The guy was killing me.

‘Alright, I think I’ve got the picture. I’ll prepare the right treatment for you, don’t worry. You need lots of bedrest, and as much water as you can drink. That will help flush out your kidneys.’

He prepared, and gave me, various herbal teas to drink, and some sort of pills. All natural of course. The following ten days, or so, were spent in a lethargic state, drinking those herbal teas, and sleeping a lot. Vicky was my attentive nurse, bringing me all my various concoctions. I had absolutely no energy. Somehow I managed to survive, but, looking back, I can’t help wondering if a course of antibiotics wouldn’t have done the job better, and faster. I wasn’t just a hippy in word, but actually followed the script to the letter. Now, that’s dedication. Quite probably without Vicky’s input, I would have gone to a regular doctor. For better, or for worse. Probably better. I was easily lead.

The road past the property was unsealed, and quite narrow. There was barely room for two cars to pass, let alone a car and one of the truck-trailers that would bring logs down from the pine forests, further up the road. One time, as we were returning from a trip to town in the steadfast Hunter, a truck-trailer came around a corner in front of us us. He was going at such a high speed that the trailer was swaying wildly from one side to the other.

‘Pull over, quick!’ yelled Vicky.

I quickly braked and pulled over as much as possible. It was too late to try and get out of the car. We sat there, as time slowed to a standstill, and watched as the truck approached us, with the trailer lurching from side to side. If we were caught in one of those lurches, we would have been swatted like a fly. The Hillman was no match for a trailer loaded up with logs. Vicky was screaming outwardly, and I was screaming inwardly. Just before it reached us it managed to return to a straight line, with no help from the driver. He hadn’t even slowed down slightly. I guess human life was nowhere as important as the schedule he had to maintain. Or, possibly, braking might have just made a bad situation worse. We had watched death approaching us, just to be spared at the last second. Isolation did not mean safety. In that case, almost the opposite. We sat there for a few minutes, trying to fathom what had just happened, and all of the possible associated scenarios. You
know, if we had left ten seconds earlier, or later. We really felt that we had seriously risked dying. Then, I put the faithful Hunter into first gear, and we headed home, as if nothing had happened. Oddly enough, in the end, nothing had happened. Easily enough, everything could have happened. Weird.

In fact that road had been equally as dangerous for me just a few weeks prior to that episode, as well. I had been out walking along the road when a stock, standard ute, the classic farm vehicle of the area, came down the road towards me, so I jumped up onto the bank to let him pass. As I returned onto the road, and continued walking towards home, I heard a rustling in the leaves on the road in front of me. There, just about a few feet in front of me, was a black snake, hissing, and trying to jump at me. I quickly jumped back, and ran off along the road. When I saw that he wasn’t following me I became courageous enough to check him out a bit better. On closer inspection, I saw that the ute had run him over! The snake couldn’t move much, probably because the ute had broken his backbone. My God, I thought, if that ute hadn’t come along I would have just walked straight into him. He was probably sitting on the road, as they did, to get warm. I took off home, and told Vicky all about my good luck. She, being Australian, was far more used to snakes than me.

‘What sort of snake was it?’
‘A very scary one.’
‘Idiot, what colour was it?’
‘It was black. I’ll go and have a better look tomorrow. I reckon he will be well and truly dead by then.’

‘Don’t bring it back here, whatever you do. Alive or dead, I don’t want to see it.’

Vicky loved animals, but everyone has his limits. Snakes were most people’s limits.

The next day I duly went looking for him. There he was, still in the same spot, dead. I still didn’t want to risk touching him, so I grabbed a small branch, which I used to pick him up. It turned out that he was a red-bellied black snake, about two metres long. While not generally considered deadly, being bitten out on that lonely road, far from possible treatment, would not have ended well for me. The thin red line down along his belly, the reason behind the snake’s name, was of such a vibrant red colour, it looked as if it had been painted on. So beautiful, yet also so dangerous. A lot of the Australian wildlife was deadly, or at least very poisonous, but the colours of birds and animals were absolutely spectacular. I remember, also, a bird species in that area. It had bright yellow wings, of just unbelievable beauty. A country of great beauty, but also great peril. You always had to be careful, out in that countryside. Wandering along a road daydreaming was not to be advised. It almost seemed as if the powers that be were trying to kill me. So what did I do? I gave them a helping hand. Maybe I better explain that.

I really should have died that night. It wasn’t so much that I cheated Death, it was almost as if Death cheated me. It was me trying my hardest to die. All my actions, on that absurd, fateful night, moved me in the direction of certain death. Only by a mixture of coincidences did I survive. One could wonder if there was a guiding hand behind it all, or just pure luck. One way or another my life should have ended, and it nearly did, at the ridiculously young age of twenty years old. But I am getting ahead of myself, this is how it all unfolded…

‘Let’s take a drive, Matt. Explore the area a bit. There are some roads we pass which we have never been up. Why don’t we go out for a bit of an excursion this afternoon?’

‘Yeah, good idea. Hopefully there will be a river around somewhere, where we can have a swim. Shall we take our togs?’

She looked at me, and laughed.
‘I prefer the freedom of swimming naked. You take your togs.’

I laughed too. I didn’t even have any togs. I brought to life the indomitable Hillman Hunter, and we took off, in search of new roads to take, just exploring the area, looking for any places of interest. We never did find that theoretical river, but we did come across something rather new, and unusual. The quintessential country entertainment. Sort of like Woodstock for rednecks.

‘Hey, it looks like a rodeo!’

I was quite excited by the prospect, never having seen one before.

‘Yeah, I don’t really like that shit, they are all rednecks, and they are very cruel to the animals.’ replied Vicky.

‘Come on, let’s have a look for a while anyway. We can get a few beers from the pub, while we are at it.’

‘Are you kidding me?’

‘Listen, I’ve never seen one before. Let’s just check it out for a while, eh?’

‘How did I ever get mixed up with a Kiwi?’

She grimaced, but I knew that I had convinced her, with my inexorable charm. Even though it also wasn’t really my type of thing either, I was curious to check out something new. The town we had pulled into was little more than a pub, some stockyards, with a couple of old houses around. It was hot, there was a rodeo on, and there was a pub just over the road, serving cold beers. Worth a look.

‘OK, well, if we really have to be stuck in redneck town at least go and get some beers, and I will wait for you over there, in the shade.’

‘Good one, I’ve never seen an Aussie rodeo before. It’ll be a laugh if nothing else.’

Vicky looked at me with great perplexity, and just shook her head. I headed across the road to the pub. The pub was an incredibly rundown affair. The building itself was interesting, reflecting its former glory. It was a two story, wooden structure with a balcony running all along the first floor. Probably in its heyday they would have rented out rooms on the first floor. Those days were long gone, and it had fallen somewhat into disrepair. The inside reflected strongly that state of decay. There were just some old beaten up tables and chairs, and the stink of stale beer. I got some cold cans, and headed back to Vicky. The rodeo was seemingly an all male event with the only female presence being Vicky, and maybe a couple of wives here and there. Our presence hadn’t gone unnoticed. A couple of hippies turning up caused quite some consternation. I suspect that some of those country redneck cowboys had never even seen a real live hippy before. We were all on new territory. Forging new boundaries. There were more than a few hateful glares in my direction. I got the idea that most of the guys would have taken great pleasure in beating me up, and then trying to screw Vicky. To make matters worse, she was dressed in her usual skimpy style, showing off plenty of hot flesh. Normally that was how I liked her, but in that setting it was drawing a bit too much attention. Luckily, the cowboys seemed to have a full plate with their rodeo business, so they generally left us alone. Anyway, it was interesting to watch the daring riders, and the remarkable footwork of the horses. Although, admittedly, I wasn’t too impressed with the treatment of the bulls. As Vicky had said, there definitely was a fair amount of cruelty to animals involved. For the most part the rodeo entailed riding bulls, and unbroken horses. I guessed that the winner was the one who could stay in the saddle the longest. Many of them were thrown wildly through the air. Luckily, no one seemed to get seriously hurt, even though it looked pretty dangerous. I decided that I would definitely stick to the unfailing Hunter. That was the only ride I needed.

The day was hot, with the usual blazing Australian sun beating down relentlessly. To be honest, I used to laugh at the rednecks with their cowboy hats, but really the wide brims did a good job of
blocking out that intense sunshine. I, myself, didn’t have any head gear, and the constant sun on the face was tiring. Luckily the beers were nice and cold. The hotter I felt, the more beer I drank. I ended up making quite a few runs across to the pub. A few beers turned into a few more beers, and then more beers, and then some more beers … and then… I don’t remember anymore.

When I awoke I felt completely bewildered. It was pitch black, and I had no idea what was going on, or where I was. I was in my car, but Vicky was nowhere to be seen. I was still half drunk, and totally confused about where I was, and what was happening. Where the hell was Vicky? Where was I? Still not yet totally panicked, I turned on the engine, and the headlights. In front of me I could see green grass, but no road. I had to get home, wherever that was from there. I put the faithful Hunter into first gear, and tried to drive off. Tried to, because actually the wheels just started spinning, but the car wasn’t moving. I crashed the gear stick into reverse. Same thing, it just wasn’t going anywhere. I put the gear stick in neutral, and jumped out to see if I could push the car ahead a bit. It just wouldn’t move, not even a little bit. It was so dark that I couldn’t see what the problem was. I tried first gear again. Nothing. Then I started to panic a bit. I got out and looked around. It was a black, moonless night. All I could see were the silhouettes of the hills around me. I was in a sort of valley surrounded by those hills. Try as I might I just couldn’t make out any detail in the blackness to get my bearings.

And then I saw it. Up in the hills, a few hundred metres from where I was, I could see a small flickering light. A beacon. A sign. I had no idea what it was, but, instinctively, I started to head up in that direction. As I climbed closer to the light I started to make out the contour of our house. With great relief I climbed towards home. When I got closer I realised what the light was. My God! Vicky had put a lighted candle in the window for me! A strong wave of emotion flooded through me. I had never loved her as much as I did in that moment of total desperation. When I so frantically needed her, she had been there for me. Her beacon in the window had brought me back home to her. Her guiding light had watched over me, and brought me home to safety. I went inside to the bedroom, where she was sound asleep. With great love in my heart, and a massive sense of relief, I watched her sleeping for a couple of minutes. She had really saved me that night. Without waking her, I lay down to sleep as well, incredibly happy to be back home, with her. Sleep came easy.

‘Where did you go?’
I was still half asleep, and didn’t really know what she was talking about.
‘What?’
‘Last night. Where did you go?’
‘When?’
Then it all came back to me. Stuck somewhere down in the valley.
‘Hey, I don’t know what happened. I woke up in the car, and had no idea where I was. Thanks for putting the candle in the window, Vicks. Without that I would still be out there somewhere. I don’t even remember coming home from the rodeo.’
‘Well, you wouldn’t. You were so drunk, I had to put you in the car, and I drove home.’
I couldn’t believe that.
‘You can’t drive! You’re kidding me, right?’
The stern look on her face said that she wasn’t.
‘There weren’t too many other drivers available.’
‘I bet you drove all the way in first gear.’
‘I got us home didn’t I?’
Previously I had given her some driving lessons, but had thrown in the towel because they had gone so badly. And she had driven us home? It was over 30 kilometres from the rodeo to the house. My poor car. What damage had she done to my ardent Hunter?

‘Anyway, when we got here you were so crashed out, I couldn’t get you out of the car. So I just left you sleeping there, and put that candle in the window for when you woke up. Later on, I heard the car start up, and you took off. Where did you go?’

‘I’ve got no idea. Maybe I woke up confused or something, and wanted to get home.’

She knew me too well.

‘Or maybe you wanted to go and get some more beer!’

She accused me sternly, and quite possibly, correctly. When I started drinking, I never wanted to stop. A bad habit that would dog me for many years to come.

‘Come on,’ she said, ‘let’s have something to eat.’

She had already forgiven me. Luckily, it had all ended well. We got up, and had breakfast. A new day had dawned.

After a refreshing breakfast I thought I should go and see where the hell the car was, and why I hadn’t been able to get it moving. As soon as I walked out of the house, and looked down the valley, I instantly had a pretty good idea of what had happened. The car was down in the valleys below the house, a long way from the ridgeline, which is where the dirt driveway went down to the road. I guessed that no sooner had I turned the car around, and driven off, that I had fallen asleep at the wheel. The car would then have left the ridgeline road, and gone down the steep descent through the valley, following the flow of the hills. Fuck, what an idiot! I went down to see what, if any, damage there was, and why I hadn’t been able to get the car moving the previous night. As I got closer to the car, a sinking feeling in my gut kept growing. The car had stopped about three metres from a roughly two metre drop into a part of the river, where it opened into a small lake. The water there was deep enough to completely cover the car, and then some. If the car had continued another three metres, it would have fallen in, and I would have drowned in my drunken stupor. I still couldn’t understand why the car had stopped so miraculously, so close to my probable final resting place. It must have been going quite fast by the time it got down that far, after careering down the hills. On closer inspection, I realised what had happened. Lodged in the rear wheel arch was an old metal pump shaft. It was obviously there from the days when they would have pumped up water from the river to the house. With all the open space around, by the Grace of God, or sheer good luck, the car had gone straight towards it. The only obstacle anywhere around, and the driverless car had found it. The car must have crashed into it, jumped up over it, and fallen back down with the pump shaft lodged in the rear wheel arch. It must have been going a fair speed to have done that. Incredibly, when I had got out and pushed the car, I had been trying to push it into the lake! Stupidity, matched only by more stupidity. Looking back up at the route the car must have taken to get down there, I just couldn’t believe my luck. Half a metre to either side of the pump, or if the rusty old pump hadn’t still been there, I would have been dead. I wasn’t sure if I should laugh, or cry. A new day had come, and life was going on, but it really could have been so different. My life could have ended the night before. Maybe should have. In situations like those, I can understand how people believe in a higher being. Nobody’s luck could be that good. Or is life just one throw of the dice after another? That would be something I would dwell on for some years to come. It was definitely with sheepish embarrassment that I had to ask for help to get the car off that pump. It took a very big tractor, and quite some effort, to be able to pull it back up the hill, away from its probable watery resting place. Incredibly, the steadfast Hunter was still in perfect working order, and, for some unknown reason, so was I.
A couple of years after leaving that idyllic setting, I heard that the place had been turned into a sort of hippy commune. I have to give it to Ron, even though he was a country cowboy, he was a really open person. He was able to accept all people for what they were. Not at all like most of his neighbours. That’s the danger of using stereotypes on certain groups of society. There are always surprising, welcome, exceptions to the rule. Like Ron, and the good women of the town with their delicious chutney. Without a doubt Ron would have got the new residents involved in the work-for-rent scheme. He would definitely have had a good sized work force. The more the merrier. Those fences would have ended up being gold plated. Unfortunately, I was pretty sure the acrobatic birds in our private aviary would have been evicted from their room, to make way for the many new residents.

During the six months I was in that area, my life had been put seriously at risk by wayward trucks, snakes, dubious homeopaths, and my own errant behaviour. Still, on balance, it remains one of the most pleasant periods of my life. It was simple, tranquil living, and I shared it with the most beautiful, loving person I have ever met. I don’t have any photos of that house, nor do I need them. In my mind’s eye I can picture the house, and the surrounding area, perfectly. In the mental picture I have of the house, I can see Vicky, naked, on the verandah doing her yoga. I would give everything to be back there with her, and make love with her one more time on that verandah, in the warm sunshine, with the cows grazing idly below in the fields. I don’t remember why we left, probably we should never have. Probably we should have stayed there forever. I guess we just wanted to continue our life of exploration, finding new places, and having new adventures. Hopefully less risky ones.
Chapter 8 The Face in the Mirror

‘Mum, this time I want the truth. I want to know all about how you met dad, and what he was like. Why is it so hard for you to tell me? You’ve always refused to talk about him. Now I want to know everything.’

For some reason talking down the phone line gave Constance a strange form of courage. It made it all seem a lot easier, less confrontational. She felt less intimidated by her mother than she usually did. She had surprised even herself, let alone her mother.

‘Well, OK then, if you’re sure that’s what you want, I’ll tell you everything. But remember, you asked for it. If you don’t like what you hear, you’ve only got yourself to blame.’

Her mother seemed unusually accommodating. It was slightly odd. Somehow Constance felt like she was talking her way into a trap. A trap of her own making. Something didn’t seem quite right, but she couldn’t really put her finger on it.

‘Were you both hippies when you met?’

Her mother burst out laughing, in a high pitched shrieking sort of voice. It was a cackle more than a laugh.

‘Hippies? Do you still believe all that nonsense I used to tell you as a child?’ Her voice turned cold, derogatory. ‘You’re such a fool!’

Her mother’s face hardened, and turned a dark red colour, as she glared at Constance. Her bright eyes radiated hatred. A state of anxiety came over Constance as she saw the ghastly expression on her mother’s face. She tried to understand what was going on, to think of something to say, but she couldn’t open her mouth. The door blew open, and a lean man in his mid twenties walked in, wearing a cowboy hat.

‘Well, is it hot enough for ya?’

Constance couldn’t understand what was going on. Who was he? Where had she heard that phrase before? The man threw his cowboy hat onto the table, and ran his hand slowly through his long hair.

‘Is my dinner ready, woman?’ he said.

Constance’s mother just stood there shrieking with laughter.

‘Say hello to daddy, Constance.’

The man walked across the room, and slapped her mother on the face.

‘I told you to have my dinner ready, woman! Where’s my dinner?’

Her mother didn’t seem to feel the blow. She couldn’t stop laughing.

‘Your daddy was a redneck! And violent, just like Jeff. Are you happy now? Well, are you?’

Constance tried to run away, but she couldn’t move. She was glued to her seat. The man turned to look at her.

‘Is it hot enough for ya? Well, is it hot enough for ya?’

Constance woke up, with a start. Her body was clammy with sweat. She tried not to focus on the unpleasant dream she had had. She turned on her nightlight, and looked at the clock. 5.37. She reached for the water bottle that she always kept by her bed, and took a drink. It wasn’t true, she
knew that her father had been a hippy. Hadn’t she seen a photo once? She was sure of it, but couldn’t remember when, or where the photo had been. Maybe she should ask her mother? She flopped back down onto the pillow, with her head. She knew that she would never have the strength to ask her mother anything. She would have these doubts, and holes, in her life forever. She lay there, trying to get back to sleep. Flashes of the dream came to her mind. She tried to block them out, but her mind kept returning to them. Had her father been violent like Jeff? At 6 o’clock she finally gave up trying to get back to sleep, and got up. Maybe after a shower she would be able to concentrate better. She went to the fridge, and took out a bar of chocolate. Just as she was about to start eating it, a wave of disgust came over her. Not disgust for the chocolate, the chocolate held no blame, but disgust for herself. She realised how weak and pathetic her chocolate dependency had made her become. She had managed to get Jeff out of her life, could she really be beaten by a bar of chocolate? Things needed to change. Many things. She lifted the lid from the rubbish bin, and threw the chocolate in. The change had started, well, really, it was continuing more than starting. The change had started with Jeff.

After her shower she would make a breakfast of tea and toast. She felt angry at herself, but didn’t really understand exactly why. Well, the list was long enough, maybe it was for any one of those reasons? Maybe it was for all of those reasons? She went to the bathroom, and had a shower, studiously avoiding looking at herself in the bathroom mirror. Not that that changed anything. She knew how fat she was. She didn’t require a visual reminder. In her bathrobe she went to the kitchen, and prepared her breakfast. Two slices of toast, with marmalade, no butter, and a lovely cup of strong black tea. She was slightly surprised at how nice it tasted. Maybe eating well, wasn’t that difficult after all? Maybe it was all about making the change mentally, rather than physically? Constance knew that she also needed to start doing exercise. She wasn’t really sure just what form that would take, but at least she could start thinking about it. What about doing yoga naked? That sounded like fun. She laughed out loud, and shook her head. Maybe she could sign up at a gym for lessons? Could she do that? Or would she feel too embarrassed to show off her fat body in front of all the fit muscular people she knew she would find there. She tried to imagine herself with a slim, shapely body. Walking along the beach in a bikini, with everyone looking at her in admiration. Could that ever be possible? Probably not, but at least losing a few kilos would be a good start.

The sharp blare of her phone’s ringer bought her back down to earth. Australian prefix. Her mother. Instinctively she reached over to turn the volume down, but then, on the spur of the moment, she decided to answer the phone.

‘Hello?’

‘Finally, I can never get through to you. Either you are off doing lessons, or out with Jeff, or doing whatever it is is you do. Would it be that difficult for you to phone me every now and then? Am I asking too much? It’s not as if I am anywhere other than here at home.’

‘Hello, mum. Yes, I know, it’s just that lately… ‘

‘And what about Jeff? You’ll never find another good catch like him. Are the two of you any closer to getting married?’

Constance burst out laughing. Yes, Jeff was a real catch alright.

‘What on earth have you got to laugh about? I just don’t understand you. If you let him go you will regret it, you know? It’s hard to find someone who earns so much money. You’ve got no idea how hard it is to scrape by on a modest income.’

That comment immediately struck a chord with Constance. Her mother had never remarried after losing her husband. It must have been difficult for her, bringing up two children on her own. Maybe that was why she was so obsessed with her marrying Jeff? Purely for the financial aspect of
‘Actually I broke it off with Jeff. He just wasn’t my…’

‘Oh, Constance! Why on earth do you always go and do silly things like that? You’ll never find another one like him around. You mark my words!’

‘Mum, I want to know where you and dad met?’

‘Your head is really in the clouds, Constance. You’ve got to focus on your future, instead of daydreaming about all that stuff from years ago. Now, explain to me what on earth made you break up with Jeff? I just can’t understand you, you know?’

Frustrated, Constance tried to think of a way to get back on track with her mother. She certainly had no intention of getting sidetracked with the whole Jeff drama. Besides, her mother would probably just blame her for it all, anyway.

‘Did you ever do yoga, mum?’

‘Yoga? Why on earth would I ever want to do yoga?’

‘Well, I just thought that maybe when you and dad were together you might have…’

An image of her mother doing yoga naked came to Constance, and she burst out laughing.

‘What the devil is wrong with you today, Constance? You won’t think it’s so funny when you find yourself on your own. You’ve got to start thinking about your future. Get your head out of the clouds, and start seriously planning where you want to be in ten years time. You’re not getting any younger. Time has a way of catching up on you, and you will find yourself on your own, and struggling.’

An understanding dawned on Constance. For the first time in her life she realised that her mother’s advice to her might well be more about how her life had gone. It was a startling revelation. It certainly carried a great deal of poignancy. Her mother had found herself alone, with two small children, and little money to get by on. That actually explained lot about her mother’s attitude towards her. It was almost as if she didn’t want Constance to have to go through what she went through.

‘Why did you never remarry, mum? You were still young enough when dad died. Didn’t you ever meet anyone that you liked?’

‘Oh, what nonsense! There’s just no talking to you today. Anyway, I’ve got to get off to the shops. Remember to phone me when you’ve got time. Bye for now.’

The line went dead.

Constance wasn’t sure what had surprised her the most. The fact that it was her mother who had ended the conversation, abruptly, instead of her, or that she had finally found the courage to ask some of the questions that she had always wanted to. Also, for the first time she had started to think of things from her mother’s point of view. Why hadn’t she remarried? Had she been so in love with her father that no one else could fill the void? It was strange to think of her mother having been in love. She had always been such a cold, distant person. Well, with Constance anyway. Maybe she hadn’t always been like that. Maybe her husband’s death had changed her? Being left on her own with two young children couldn’t have been easy for her. Was that when her coldness had set in? Maybe the difficult life she had found herself in had turned her cold and bitter. Constance had a lot to think about, not least of all where she had found the courage to even ask her mother those things.

Constance went into the bathroom, and looked at herself squarely in the mirror. She felt stronger. Something was changing. She could see it in the person staring back at her. The person looking at her in the mirror seemed bolder, less afraid. Things, about the present, and the past, were starting to come into focus. It seemed like her pathway through life was starting to become a little clearer. As far as her mother was concerned, a strategy was starting to form in her mind. She would chip away
at her at the edges, relentlessly, bit by bit, until she finally got all the answers she was looking for. And she would think seriously about joining a gym.

To a certain extent Constance felt herself to be on the cusp of a new beginning. Sure, she still had issues to resolve with her mother, but she felt that things were moving in the right direction even there. She smiled to herself as she thought of how she had made her mother hang up on her. That had never happened before. Like a prize boxer who had his opponent on the ropes, she would drive home her advantage. She would let her mother stew it all over for a while, and then she would phone her. When had that ever happened? She would push for more answers. She would throw punches from the right, and then from the left, and finally she would come in with a massive uppercut which would completely floor her mother. She would win their battle of wits. It was strange for her to feel so optimistic, so in control. Even her aching muscles felt good. She was sore all over. Although, surprisingly, it was an enjoyable pain. It was the pain of effort well spent. The pain of gain. Her first lesson in the gym had gone well, if not with a bit of difficulty, especially the day after. She had barely been able to walk. Probably, in her enthusiasm, she had overdone it all somewhat. Not that her personal trainer had given her much option. He had really pushed her hard. The really surprising thing about it all was that after all her worrying about walking into a gym full of Californian style muscular gods and goddesses, she had actually found the place to be full of ordinary people. People just like her. There had been a lot of overweight people, especially women, and lots of elderly people. She wasn’t alone. Most people were like her. In real life people weren’t actually like the beautiful few you constantly see on the TV. Thinking about it, there was a sort of logic to it all. You go to the gym to get in shape. If you are already in shape you probably have less need to go there. The world as seen on TV was not the same as the real world. Otherwise chocolate sales would have plummeted when she had given it up. Standing there, at the photocopy machine in the school, she realised that instead of running, and hiding from her problems, she had to face them head on. That wasn’t easy, but what was the alternative? There wasn’t one. She was doing the only thing she could. She was confronting her problems, and at the same time confronting herself. Maybe that was how you do it? You needed to accept your own responsibility for the situation you found yourself in, and make the necessary changes to correct that situation. If she didn’t do it, nobody else was going to.

Constance heard the front door of the school open, and turned around. Grace. Again she had been caught during class making photocopies. This time she would make herself heard, she would stand up for herself. Before being browbeaten, she would explain her actions, clearly, and precisely. She spoke in a firm voice that left no room for interruption.

‘Hello Grace, before you start in on me, let me explain, please. One of the kids left his text book at home, and while he can share someone else’s book for the lesson, he needs to have his own copies to do the associated exercises. That’s why I’m… ‘

Grace waved her explanation off with her hand.

‘Oh, those stupid mothers. I don’t know how many times I’ve told them to check that their children have all their books, and pencils, and whatnot. It’s like talking to a brick wall. Honestly, I don’t know why I bother sometimes. No wonder children these days are all so hopeless, with parents like them. It’s not our job to be their mothers. Well, we do what we can, the rest is up to them.’

Grace’s grim expression, the only expression she really had, basically her face, softened slightly.

‘How are you, dear? You look well. Have you put that nonsense with that damned nincompoop
behind you? There’s no point in dwelling on that stuff, you know? You’ve just got to move on. Onwards and upwards.’

Constance felt a rush of love go through her for the ex-bane of her life. From what Grace had told her, she had put up with her husband’s abuse for many years. Probably that was what had made her so hard, and embittered towards life. Who could blame her? In the end what she, herself, had gone through, had been pretty mild, compared to the road Grace had travelled. She reached out, put her hand on Grace’s shoulder, and smiled at her.

‘I’m doing just fine, thanks to you Grace. I’ve put ‘that nincompoop’ in my past, and I’m forging ahead. Breaking new ground, so to speak. I can never thank you enough, for what you did for me.’

Grace attempted a smile, something she wasn’t very well practised at.

‘Well, good for you dear. That’s good to hear.’ Her soft voice hardened. ‘Now, you make sure you give that child’s mother a good talking to. I don’t know what’s wrong with mothers these days. They just can’t seem to manage anything. It certainly wasn’t like that in my day.’

In a flash Grace was off into her office. Constance knew that she wouldn’t be giving that child’s mother a talking to. She knew exactly what was wrong with modern day mothers. Kids had so many things to do, so many places to be. Their mothers just couldn’t keep up with it all. If their only problem was forgetting to check that their kid had a text book every now and then, they were probably doing a pretty good job of it all.

That evening, after cleaning the dinner dishes, Constance threw herself on the couch. She had missed not seeing Matt that week. His message had only said that he had to shoot over to London for a few days. Just what was it that he did? She didn’t like to pry, and Matt was a very reserved person, so he never went into much detail about what he was always up to. Anyway, she had quite enough to think about without poking her nose into other people’s affairs. The next evening she would hit the gym. How good that sounded! She was a gym person. She had changed from being a chocolate eating person into being a gym person. What was happening to her? And how? Where were all those changes coming from? A big gaping hole in her life had always been the fact that she didn’t have a father. She had always been slightly aware that that had caused her to be less confident in life. A girl needed her dad, especially when she was growing up. She wondered whether Matt’s stories of his old hippy days were maybe filling in some of the missing facts about her father? How he had lived. The type of person he had been. It was almost as if Matt’s tales were bringing to life her father. Well, that would have been generally how he had been living back in those days. That would have been generally the sort of person he had been. Specifically there was only one person who could really fill in those gaps, only one person who could really answer her questions. Constance looked at her phone. It was time. She knew that if she dwelt on it for too long she would end up not doing it, so she picked up the phone, and dialed the number. After only a few rings her mother picked up.

‘Hello?’

‘Hi, mum, it’s me.’

‘Constance? Do you realise what time it is here? It’s just after 6 in the morning.’

‘Sorry, mum, I forgot to check the time difference. Are you still in bed?’

‘No, I always get up well before 6. I’ve just finished my breakfast.’

Constance had never been able to understand her mother. If she was already up, why complain about the hour? It just didn’t make any sense. They were like two people living in different dimensions. Parallel universes that had no common intersecting point.
‘Listen, mum, I’ve been thinking a lot about dad lately, and I would really like to know more about him.’

‘Oh, what’s the point in dwelling on…’

‘Mum! It’s important to me!’

Constance had interrupted her mother with a raised voice. Both of them were stunned into silence. That wasn’t the way their phone calls, or their relationship in general, usually went. After a brief pause, in which she had regained her composure, Constance continued, in a quieter, but absolutely determined voice.

‘Mum, I really want to know more about him. I never knew him growing up, and you hardly ever spoke about him. Why is it so difficult for you to tell me about him? He was my dad.’

Silence was her only reply.

‘Mum? Are you still there?’

There was another pause.

‘Yes, alright, what is it you want to know?’

‘Well, let’s start at the beginning. Where did the two of you meet?’

‘Well now, let me think. Actually I’m not really sure where…’

Constance was sick of her mother’s evasive tactics.

‘Please, mum! I know you remember. Can you please be honest with me? It’s important to me.’

The insistence in Constance’s voice seemed to have an effect on her mother. She answered without further prompting.

‘It was at a music festival in the hills just outside Byron Bay.’

Constance had to put her hand over her mouth to stop herself from bursting out laughing. It was true then, her mother had been a hippy! The music festivals around Byron Bay back in those days were for hippies. She had to play a clever game, or her mother would hang up on her again.

‘What a nice way to meet someone. Did you have friends in common, or did you just bump into each other?’

‘We just sort of met.’

Her mother seemed to be warming to the whole idea.

‘Actually we were both trying some vegetarian food from one of the food stalls.’ she laughed at the memory. ‘It was so horrible, the two of us just looked at each other, and burst out laughing.’

Constance was thrilled to bits.

‘Really? That’s so nice. Then what happened?’

‘Well, we just got to talking. He was a very intelligent man, your father. He knew a lot of things about all sorts of subjects. He was such an avid reader. He would just talk and talk, about all sorts of things. For hours.’

‘Were you a hippy, too, then mum?’

Constance could hear her mother sigh.

‘No, not really. Although, I suppose that was what I looked like to the outside world. We all dressed like that back in those days. I never felt like I was a hippy. It was just the way things were. All my friends dressed like that, so I did too.’

‘When I was little you didn’t dress like that.’

‘Well, it was the 80’s then. Things had changed. We were older, and, well, I don’t know. By then things had changed.’

‘Why is it you never liked speaking about him to me?’

A tone of annoyance crept into her mother’s voice.

‘Do you have any idea how difficult it was bringing up two children on your own? He left me
with a pocketful of dreams, and little else. Sometimes I don’t know how I managed to make it through. You never went wanting, I always gave you everything you needed. Nobody can ever say otherwise.’

‘I know, mum, I know. You did everything you could. But I still don’t understand why you never spoke to me about him?’

‘It was nice of you to call, Constance, but now I have to get ready for work.’

‘Work? What work? You’re on the pension.’

‘I do some volunteer work at the local clothes bank. I really have to be off now. Bye Constance.’

‘OK, bye mum.’

Constance rang off. She was pretty sure that the clothes bank didn’t open at 7 in the morning, but she had plenty to think about, anyway. Why did her mother get annoyed talking about her father? Was it because his death had left her on her own with two young children? To fend for herself? Then it dawned on her. Actually in the end it was relatively easy to understand. Her mother felt betrayed by her father’s death. She was angry at him because he had left her, all alone. And with two kids. Looking back, it was true that they had never had much when she was growing up. Not that that had bothered her at the time. They were simpler times, and no one really had had a lot of anything. All her friends were just like her, so it had never been something that had bothered her, or made her feel different. Constance had never thought about how difficult it must have been for her mother. But still, to blame your husband because he died? And then to be cold to your daughter. To blame your daughter, your little girl, because she was a burden to you. How should she react to that? Probably it should make her feel angry, but she refused to place any blame on her mother’s shoulders. It can’t have been easy for her, and she had done the best she could. If nothing else it all brought some understanding, some clarity. Constance was starting to put all the missing pieces of the puzzle together. Years of struggling on her own had turned her mother into the cold, distant person she had become. All those years that Constance had spent being daunted by her mother had really been wasted. She would try her best to be the strong one in the relationship, like her father obviously had been. She wouldn’t hold onto any blame, or recriminations. Maybe it was time for the two of them to let go of the past. Maybe it wasn’t too late for them to get close? To start again. The missing years would always be there, a hole in both of their lives, but the future was yet to be written. Constance decided that she would phone her mother once a week, and try to jump-start their relationship. Starting from scratch. But on an even footing. No longer would she let her mother browbeat her. They would meet as equals. Actually, no, it would be her who would set the agenda. And she would do it for the both of them.

Constance was really happy that Matt was back. She hadn’t seen him for a couple of weeks. A couple of weeks in which big changes had happened. Changes that she wanted to discuss with Matt, unlike the situation with Jeff. That had been just too personal, too difficult to share with anyone. Except Grace. Grace had really come through for her. It was funny to realise that under that ironclad exterior there was a person who had suffered, a lot. She seemed more like the person who caused suffering, for others. Lately Constance had been learning a lot about the part which lies hidden beneath the surface of people she had known for a long time. Probably she had been so busy internalising everything, blaming herself for everything that had gone wrong in her life, that she hadn’t really thought about what was happening on the inside of people in her life. Jeff, Grace, her mother. She felt like she had finally opened her eyes to the world, or more precisely, to the people in her world. And what she saw changed everything. She was beginning to understand the inside
mechanisms of the people in her life.

“That’s a pretty intense look on your face. Shall I come back later?”

Constance looked up to see Matt smiling down at her.

“Matt! Hello, it’s nice to see you. Sorry, I was just thinking about some things. Actually some big changes in my life. I’ve got a lot to tell you. Let’s order some drinks.”

“I already have. So what’s going on with you?”

“Everything.”

They both laughed. The late afternoon sun was still hot, but not unpleasantly so. The height of summer was passing, and there was the beginning of some welcome relief to the intense heat. In any conditions it was always pleasant sitting out on the deck of their usual meeting place. The sea was calm, with slow, lazy waves quietly flowing in and out. The last of the day’s beachgoers were packing up their things, and dutifully heading off to organise their evenings. There was always plenty to do when you were on holiday in the south of Spain. Their evenings would be as full as their days had been.

“I like the sound of everything. Everything is good. I have a sneaking suspicion that everything will involve your mother, true?”

Matt had a cheeky grin on his face. Constance was so happy to see him.

“That’s for sure. I’m finally getting some answers out of her about dad, and, well, a bit of everything really. How things were back then. It’s slow work, but, bit by bit I’m starting to get some information out of her.”

“I’m so pleased for you. I know your mother situation has been hard for you for a long time. And you’re not alone there. The mother-daughter relationship is a bit of a classic as being a difficult one.”

“Actually I’ve got you to thank for that, really. Hearing your stories about those days started to fill in the gaps about my father’s life, and sort of gave me the courage to finally push for answers. Probably something I should have done a long time ago.”

“Well, don’t think like that, Constance. You’re doing it now, that’s the main thing. We can’t change the past, but we can learn from it, and change the present, and where we are going.”

Pablo, in a bit of a wild rush as the bar was fairly full, placed their drinks on the table, and rushed off.

“Cheers, Constance. Here’s to mothers everywhere.”

Matt raised his glass.

“I’ll drink to that. Cheers, Matt.”

They both took a sip of their gins.

“What else is on your list of everything?”

“Well, work is going really well. As you know I really love teaching my little kids, and my relationship with the boss is going really well. We have really become good friends.”

“I’ve got no idea how you managed that. From what you always said she was not one for changing. I wonder if the changes in you haven’t been responsible for this new situation with her?”

Constance felt a bit guilty about not telling the truth, but she just didn’t want to open that box anymore. Jeff was gone. History. She didn’t want to relive any of that pain. Ever.

“Well, I guess that’s right, to a certain extent. I finally somehow found the courage to stand up to her, and she seems to have respected that. Somehow I finally got her to listen to my point of view on things. Now I really like her. We get on really well now.”

Matt looked at her with a skeptical expression on his face.

“Is the Queen of the fires of hell capable of friendship?”
Constance smiled in return.

‘I’m learning about not judging books by their covers. Underneath that tough exterior it would appear that a heart is beating.’

They both laughed. The mood was good. As it usually was between the two of them.

‘I’m happy for you, Constance. And you are so right. People never stop surprising me. Just when you think you know someone, you can see another side to them. People are very complex beings. Hey, welcome to life! Anyway, it’s so very good to see you this happy. You know, you really have changed a lot lately. It’s good to see.’

‘I know! Plus, I haven’t told you the biggest one yet. You won’t believe this, but… I’m going to the gym, now. I’m a gym person. Can you believe that? I’ve got my own personal instructor, and everything. Fat Constance is leaving town!’

‘Constance, you’re not fat. You’re slightly overweight, like most people, but you aren’t fat. Although, in any case exercise is good. The gym is good. You should start swimming, too. That’s a really good exercise.’

‘Thanks, Matt. You’re so nice. I guess I just felt… feel… fat. Either way, the new me is just around the corner.’

‘I would say the new you is already here. And the difference is very apparent. I think I will rename you ‘Constance 2.1-The Resurgence’.’

‘Well, I don’t know about that, but I do like the sound of it. Hey, guess what? I looked up Kuranda on the net. It’s now a real tourist town. Although they seem to have kept rampant commercialisation out of there, for now anyway. Did you ever go back? Was it was still a hippy mecca?’

Matt smiled at the memory.

‘Well, yes, actually I did. I’d always wanted to spend a bit more time there. Which meant turning up with some extra cash in my pocket. So when I finally had some money, actually thanks to a good mate Stevie, I went back. Then I stayed for, well… I’m not sure. Definitely a month, or more. To this day it still remains one of the nicest places I have ever been.’

‘Stevie? Who’s he? Where did you meet him? I want to hear it all. Listen, let me get another round in, and then you can tell me all about it.’

Constance poked her head in through one of the open windows of the bar, and put her hand up, trying to catch Pablo’s eye. When he saw her she waved her hand around in a circle. Pablo gave her the thumbs up. It felt good. Finally people could see her. People took her seriously.
Chapter 9 Freedom

One of the best things about getting to Kuranda, is the spectacular ride up by the tourist train from Cairns. It is definitely an experience not to be missed. That time, unfortunately, I did miss it. I was arriving from the other direction, the Atherton tablelands, so the pleasure of that great ride of unbelievably fantastic panoramic views was denied me. My arrival was far more mundane. I arrived after being bussed through clouds of dust, and sand, kicked up by the wind sweeping over the desolate landscape of the interior of Queensland. Hot and dry. I had been picking tobacco on a farm just out of Mareeba, so I was flush with funds, and looking to enjoy some work-free time. There could be no better place for such an indulgence as Kuranda. The town is absolutely submerged in a tropical rainforest, with a river running through nearby. As it is situated well above sea level it doesn’t have the sticky humidity of Cairns, although it still gets really hot. A dry heat. That’s where the river comes into play. The water is delightfully cold, and crystal clear. All in all, a lovely playground when your pockets are stuffed full of cash.

After getting off the bus, I made my way past the ever present Australian pub, always situated in the very centre of every town, like a modern day place of worship. The Australian version of a church. Albeit of a religion followed much more vigorously. Drinking has always been a very serious occupation in Australia. I headed around the corner, and up the road to find the hostel. It was a big, two storied, wooden building, with lots of windows, and what appeared to be a very large garden. The garden was full of trees, and overgrown with lovely tropical plants and flowers. Vibrant colours were everywhere. What a fantastic looking place! And that was to be my temporary home, for as long as I desired. All that strenuous labour had paid off. Kuranda is one of the nicest places you will find in Australia. An oasis, hidden in the depths of a tropical forest. Along my path, almost like a mirage, I came across a beautiful blonde hippy girl. She had a friendly looking face and a welcoming smile. Her short white dress wafting around as she walked. Kuranda was looking even better.

‘Hi,’ she said, ‘are you just getting in?’
‘Yeah, I’ve been working over around Mareeba.’
‘I hear that’s pretty hard work?’
‘Oh, not bad. It’s more the stifling heat that gets to you. Not to mention the moronic locals. It’s a bloody redneck town.’
‘By your accent it sounds like you’re a Kiwi, too. Yes, the locals can definitely be a health hazard. Especially in those small country towns. It’s pretty good around here though. There are lots of open minded people. I’m Felicity, by the way.’
‘Hi Felicity, I’m Matt. So, what’s the story about checking in? Is there an office or something?’
He smile almost turned into laughter.
‘You are really going to love Mrs. Spencer! You know those open minded people I spoke about around here? Well, she’s not one of them. Be on your best behaviour with her. She’s a bit unpredictable.’
That heads up was good to know. I didn’t have a backup plan. I needed to get things right.
‘Thanks for that. Where can I find the intransigent Mrs. Spencer?’
She directed me to the office, where I was put through the third degree by the heinous scoundrel in charge of the hostel. The interrogation was long and thorough. She wanted to know everything about what I had been up to, where I had been, and what I had eaten for breakfast. I was on my best behaviour because, really, my plan relied on my staying there, the only hostel in town. I needed to pass the test. Luckily she didn’t have a lie detector, although she was probably thinking about buying one.

‘Certainly, Mrs. Spencer, I will follow all the rules. You won’t have any trouble out of me.’

I was rather proud of how diplomatic I could be, only in an emergency, of course. Had that been lying? Of course not. Let’s just call it bending the truth, almost to, but not quite at, breaking point. Still slightly suspicious of me, she directed me to my bed. It was the bottom bunk in a long narrow room along one side of the large building, up on the first floor. In the room there were a total of around ten bunk beds, and I could see another similar room through a doorway. The bunk was pretty spartan, but compared to what I had been used to, it was looking good. All around the room everything was very clean. The view out the large windows was absolutely fantastic. Green, lush growth, as far as the eye could see. I stashed my few belongings under the bunk, and headed off for a swim. I needed to wash that Mareeba dust off me. I knew my way around the town. I had been there for a short time, a couple of years earlier. Just why it had taken me so long to get back to such a wondrous place I will never know. That, however, was my first time in the hostel. That time I had money, so I could live the life of luxury, while still maintaining my usual simple lifestyle.

The best spot for swimming was further down, along the train tracks, to where the river opened up into more or less a small lake. The lake was surrounded by large boulders, some flattened out, which were good for sunbathing on. I could see a few people already down there, no doubt mostly from the hostel as well. I took my clothes off and jumped in. The cool water was refreshingly welcome. Instant relief, and an immediate sense of well-being. I was where I wanted to be. Everyone else was also swimming, and sunbathing, naked. It was 1979, the hippy era was still in full swing, and clothes were out. The water was a bit cold, but it was incredibly revitalizing after having been baked by the burning constant Australian sun beating down relentlessly.

That was when I met Jesus.

He had a long beard, long black hair, actually really long hair, parted in the middle. He had very pronounced, rosy cheeks, and a permanent smile on his face. Like the rest of us he was naked, but I was fairly sure that he had a loincloth stashed somewhere handy, just to complete his divine image.

‘Hi there, you new here? You staying at the hostel?’

Jesus was American.

‘Yeah, just checked in. Shit, it’s brilliant down here, the water is so clean.’

‘It’s the rocky bottom, filters out all the dirt. Most Aussie rivers have mud bottoms, that’s why their water is so dirty looking.’

His face emanated friendliness, and kindness. Jesus, whose name was really Carl, had a stocky, muscular body, and actually used a long staff as a walking aid. I guess he loved playing up to the role of the saviour of mankind. He certainly did it well. It was so pleasant down there by the river. Good swimming, good people. Everything was falling into place, I was loving it all. Especially considering the place I had just come from. I had money in my pocket, but I had earned it. Every last penny. I couldn’t help but reflect on where I had just recently been.

Mareeba could best be described as a part of Australia that no tourist should ever go to. Actually, probably no one should ever go there. It’s a hot, dry area, populated by hard people, living
in an unfriendly environment, not designed for them, and doing it with a form of permanent anger burning inside of them. That anger seemed pretty apparent, especially whenever they saw someone a bit different from them. Like me. Maybe among themselves there was just a more subdued form of hostility. A less friendly populace, I have never met. If anyone fit the bill as being completely different to them, it was Stevie and myself. Two long haired, pot smoking, music playing hippies. But I am getting ahead of myself, let me tell you about Stevie.

The instant I had met Stevie I realised that he was intelligent and funny. I had been in some town, somewhere along the coast of Queensland, bumming around, fairly aimlessly, and completely out of money. Broke. No food. Nothing. Any money I could scrape together, I spent on roll-up tobacco, both to feed my habit, and to stave off hunger pangs. I had gone looking for the nearest St. Vincent De Paul’s, looking for a free hand out. Maybe I could get some food, or a bit of cash, anything they could spare me. They were good people, always ready to help out those in need. Anyway, that particular branch, I soon discovered, would make you do a bit of work to earn your food. Really a rather fair trade off, all in all. As I walked up to their place, I saw a long haired lout outside, hammer in hand, fixing up a wooden frame of some sort. He looked up at me and said;

‘Hi there, I’m Joseph.’

No further explanation was given, or needed.

‘Jesus would, indeed, be happy to have had you as his father. He was, as is well known, a carpenter by trade.’

I laughed. He laughed.

There began a friendship that has never ended, and never will. His opening line assured me of his intelligence, and wit. I would soon discover his many other talents. He had long frizzy hair, and an unshaven face. Together with his round metal framed glasses, he looked like a cross between a hippy, and a college professor. A college professor on sabbatical. Stevie was tall, and lean, but quite muscular looking. Soon I had also been put to the task of some such similar work, after which we had our well earned lunch. Then we found some shade, to rest from the hot afternoon sun. Stevie had a plan.

‘I’m heading up to Mareeba, to do the tobacco season. You want to come along? I’ve got an old Holden, which might just get us there, if we are lucky.’

‘I’d love to, but I can’t help out with gas money. I’m totally broke.’

‘That’s OK, I’m going up anyway, a bit of company would be nice.’

‘If we get some work I will pay you back.’ I promised.

He pointed to the guitar I had with me.

‘You any good on that?’

‘Not really, I just play a bit of rhythm. What about you? You play a bit?’

Quick as a flash he whipped out his harmonica, and blew a few blues notes. I was starting to really like that guy.

‘Good one, man, I can play a bit of background guitar to your harp. I know the basic blues chords. Sorry, but I can’t sing for shit.’

I started playing some pretty simple blues chords, and Stevie broke into a fierce solo on the harp. He was incredibly good. A real bluesman, with an endless multitude of fantastic riffs. We jammed, nonstop for at least half an hour. Then he finished on a high note, and looked at me smiling.

‘This partnership is going to work out well, Matt. Come on, let’s get this show on the road.’

We got into the most beat up old Holden I had ever seen, said our prayers, and headed off on the long drive towards the tobbaco fields of Mareeba.
The only good thing about Mareeba was the ease with which we found work. The tobacco harvesting season was in full swing, and labour was needed everywhere. These days, there is absolutely no tobacco grown at all in the area. But back then, in the late 70’s, it was the main crop. We found a farm, run by Italian immigrants, which also had accommodation for us. To say the housing was basic would be overstating it. It was rough, rough as guts. One part of the fibro cladded structure had a bedroom with two bunks, and an adjacent sitting room. The furniture was old and broken. The kitchen was next door, but you had to go outside, and then back in the kitchen door, to get to it. The shower was in the kitchen part, and the toilet was of the long-drop style, situated out the back of the house, or, probably for a better term, the shack. To the constant annoyance of the owners, we would walk out from one door, and into the other, usually in a state of partial, or total, undress. How else would you go to have a shower? Our reasoning was that If they didn’t like it they could always put in an internal door. Conditions were rough.

‘There was a fucking rat in the kitchen this morning.’
‘Did you leave the door open?’ Stevie asked me.
‘No, I think there must be a hole somewhere, where they can get in.’
‘Yeah, probably up around the drain from the bathroom, it hasn’t been made very well.’
‘Maybe it’s best to bang on the door a bit before entering, to scare them off.’
‘At least there’s none on this side, anyway. I don’t want to sleep with those bastards crawling all over me.’

I certainly agreed with him there. Australian country rats can be pretty frightening. They are big, and afraid of nothing.

Aside from the basic housing facilities, and occasional rat for company, the work itself was pretty easy. We would be sitting on seats dangling down from a tall structure, that drove along the lines of tobacco. The position of the seats, and the wheels on both sides of the enormous beast, were in exact proportion to the pathways in between the rows of tobacco. The motor was placed right up the top. As we would slowly drive through the rows you would pick off the ripe leaves, and put them in a basket down in front of you. At the end of the day the owners would hang bundles of those leaves, bound together, to dry out in one of the drying barns. Each day new leaves would be ripe for picking. Endlessly we would drive through the rows of tobacco plants. Up one row, and down the next. It was monotonous, with long hours, but not particularly physically demanding. Our free time was spent mainly reading, and playing music.

‘Matt, have you ever heard of Robert Johnson? The King of the Delta Blues, man.’
Stevie lived for his blues, it was in his blood. I loved the blues as well, but didn’t know all the artist’s names, like Stevie did. For him it was a passion.

‘No, and I doubt I would be able to play any of his stuff to your harp.’
‘Let me show you. If you pick up his basic three chord changes, you will be halfway there.’
Stevie picked up my guitar, and showed me the chords to play.

‘It’s really more about the timing of the switch. You see? Like this.’

He showed me how to do the necessary chord changes. The chords themselves weren’t difficult, it was really all in the timing. He was right, almost. After much of his patient tutelage, I became fairly apt, if not competent, at providing him with some reasonable background guitar, while he could wail off with the most fantastic blues harp I had ever heard.

‘Hey, that’s good, Matt. We will be giving concerts before you know it.’
I laughed, but wasn’t completely convinced.

‘Thanks for the words of encouragement, but I think I have scared off even the rats.’
‘Here, let me show you how to bring in another chord riff.’

Stevie was a patient teacher, but, unfortunately, I wasn’t a particularly gifted student. I never really broached more than a basic level. Mind you, with Stevie’s harp wailing along over my guitar, that was probably good enough. I gave him a platform to play on. He could play for hours, he had such a passion for it. Stevie had a cassette player, and lots of tapes of old bluesmen. Stuff from the Mississippi delta, the home of the blues. He turned me on to a lot of classic old time blues legends. The musicians I discovered there, in that shanty, through Stevie, would also become my favourites for years to come. He knew them all, and he could play their music just as well as them. He was really incredible. Unfortunately, even under the guidance of such a gifted master, my guitar skills never really blossomed.

‘Hey, look,’ I said, ‘there’s a pool table in the back bar.’
‘I’m in. I’m gonna thrash you, my old son. Matt, you are a goner.’
‘Good luck with that. Saturday arvo we would always hit the pool halls in Auckland. I, dear sir, am what is know in the business as a pool shark.’

I was kidding, of course, although I could play a mean game, if my eye was in, and I had consumed enough beer.
‘You set them up Stevie, and I’ll get some beers in.’
‘Make sure they are cold.’

I went over to the small bar area of the back bar. It was so small it was almost like an open cupboard door.
‘Hi, can I get a couple of schooners, please.’
‘You won’t get served in this room.’ replied snottily the obnoxious looking barmaid.
‘What? Why not?’
‘This room is just for the abbos. If you want some beer you have to go around to the front bar.’ It was only then that I noticed that all the customers in that back room were Aborigines.
‘Jesus, I just want a couple of beers, man.’
‘Well you won’t be getting them here!’

Now she was really pissed.

Stevie had followed the interchange with a disgusted expression on his face.
‘Now I am so proud to be Australian.’ he quipped derisively.

Dutifully I went around to the front bar, and ordered a couple of beers, from the same arsehole who wouldn’t serve me in the back bar, just two metres away. In fact she only had to move across barely a metre from where I had been, to where I then was. On the other hand, I had to exit the back bar, and return into the front bar. What a rigmarole just to get a couple of beers. In Mareeba back in those days, they really took their segregation seriously. In the front bar, seated a little further along, were a couple of cowboys, dressed in typical redneck attire, complete with their cowboy hats on. As usual. I think they even showered with their hats on. They were glaring at me, just waiting for any excuse to beat the living crap out of me. I avoided eye contact with them, and scurried back to the pool table with the beers.

‘Fuck this place man, there are some dudes in the other bar just waiting to smack the shit out of us.’

‘Some fun in this town.’ replied Stevie. ‘Although with their great stupidity they have actually placed the only pool table of the pub in the bar for the Aborigines.’

We both laughed at the irony.
‘Yeah, what a laugh. Anyway, fuck them rednecks, let’s drink some beer, and I will show you
how to play pool, my friend.’

The beers flowed, we took turns at going to the front bar to buy them, and face everybodies seething wrath. The pool balls clattered, and rolled around the table. Truth be told, neither of us was particularly good at playing pool, but we certainly gave it our best shot, and enjoyed losing ourselves in the relaxing afternoon. We were just happy to have some time off work to unwind, and have a few laughs. With our bellies full of beer, and laughter on our lips, we soon forgot about the hostile menace giving us the dirty eye from the ‘Whites only’ bar. That slight touch of forgetfulness proved to be somewhat of a mistake. We had forgotten about them, but they hadn’t forgotten about us, and our reprehensible break from the unwritten racial guidelines laid down in redneck town. Out of the blue, two cowboys came into the back bar. They were the two who had been giving me the evil eye from the front bar, and they were looking for us. Something about their demeanour screamed to us that they weren’t there to challenge us to a game of pool, or to chat about football. Without a word spoken both Stevie and myself ran into the toilet, and locked the door behind us. Both of us pushed on the door to keep it shut, while the two rednecks tried to push, and kick it in. Now, something very odd happened at that stage. There we were, in serious danger of being beaten senseless, but neither of us could stop laughing, as we thought of the total absurdity of the whole situation. We were both pushed up against the door, trying to keep it closed, under the fearsome attack the innocent door suffered, laughing our heads off. It was an absolutely surreal experience. After a while the hammering on the door ceased, but we were afraid that maybe that was just a ploy to get us to go out.

‘What do you reckon, Matt? Is it safe to head out?’

‘I think it might be best to give it a while. Those two pricks might be still waiting for us. They looked pretty angry. Mind you, simmering anger seems to be the norm around here.’

We stayed in that bathroom for quite some time, until we were relatively sure that things had quietened down. And then we got the hell out of there. That was called having a few beers, and playing pool, in Mareeba in the 70’s. You couldn’t have asked for more fun.

‘Hey Matt, get out here, man. You’ve gotta see this.’

I had been lying on my bed reading when Stevie had called out. I rushed outside. From outside our hut, we witnessed the most amazing lightning storm I have ever experienced. There was no rain, just a web of lightning strikes going all over the place. It wasn’t the normal lightning that I was used to, where it generally comes from the sky down to the ground. It was like a meshwork of interlacing lightning, going in all directions. Even though the sun had long set and it was dark, when the strikes occurred, for a brief moment, it was as clear as daytime.

‘Did you see that, Stevie? For a second I could see the tobacco fields as clear as day.’

‘I’ve never seen anything like it.’

We were both so amazed we didn’t even think to be scared, and just stood outside watching, and marveling at it all. The power of nature. The unharnessed forces. Then the funniest thing happened.

‘Look, Stevie. It must be someone’s mum.’

The bosses were in the packing sheds sorting out the tobacco, having left someone’s elderly mother up in their house, about two hundred metres away. She was obviously terrified of the fierce lightning strikes, and ran screaming from the house down to the packing shed, waving her hands in the air.

‘And the winner of the two hundred metre sprint is….’ said Stevie.

We tried, and failed, to not laugh. In fact her obvious terror cracked us up totally. Probably, if
we had had any sense we would have been terrified as well, but we were young, brave, and bullet proof. Then, incredibly, just as she reached the packing shed, it got struck by lightning! There was the sound of a monster explosion, and the power blew out on the whole farm. By then Stevie and I were just doubled up laughing at the whole scene. The thought of the surrounding danger just flew right over our heads. Along with the lightening.

There was one aspect that terrified us both, probably me more so. The farm was absolutely full of snakes. I mean, I had already seen plenty of snakes in Australia, but that place was the mother lode. One time, as we were driving through the rows, picking tobacco, I came across a small black and white coloured snake, curled up on a leaf having a sleep! I called out in fright to the others. The driver immediately stopped our metal monster, and everyone came to look at my source of such chagrin. All they did was to just laugh at me.

“That fella won’t do you any harm.’

‘Are you just gonna leave him there?’

‘Why not? He’s harmless. What should we do with him? He’s just a baby.’

Of course harmless by Aussie standards meant that he wouldn’t kill you. Anything less than a three week stay in hospital was considered innocuous. Even Stevie, a city boy from Sydney, who I doubt had ever even seen a snake prior to then, got in on the act. He laughed at my state of fear.

‘Hey Matt, you are in Aussie now son, get with the program.’

‘Yeah, yeah, the big expert. Alright.’ I was not amused.

However, no one was laughing at my next encounter with a snake while we were on our picking runs. One day, around the middle of the afternoon, as the picking machine was slowly turning around, and getting lined up to head along another series of rows of tobacco, I was, purely by chance, on the seat furthest to the left. Suddenly the guy seated right at the other end came running across and… Boom! He had fired a shotgun blast at something to the left of me. I was taken completely by surprise, roused from my endless daydreaming, the only escape from the tedium of the relentless rows of tobacco. It turned out to have been a King Brown snake, very poisonous, which had been charging towards me! He killed it with that blast, and we all went over to have a look at it. It was only about eight metres from where I had been sitting. My legs were shaking. My voice, too.

‘I thought snakes were scared off by loud noise. This one looks like he was attacking me, or, I suppose, us.’

One of the more experienced people of the land had an explanation.

‘This time of year they have their babies to protect. Quite often they get very aggressive, and attack anyone who comes near them.’

This time Stevie didn’t have any of his amusing quips on hand. He was looking on in quiet contemplation. The city boy, like me, was a bit shaken. He, too, was out of his comfort zone. I turned to the guy with the shotgun.

‘I hadn’t even seen him coming at me. Shit man, thanks!’

His response was brief, but illuminating.

‘Best to keep your eyes open around here.’

Even better still to get the hell out of there, I thought to myself.

I don’t remember if we actually saw out the season, or had just had enough of snakes, rednecks, and shit. Anyway, not long after that episode, after promising to meet up again soon, a promise that would be kept, we packed up our meagre belongings. Stevie headed off towards Darwin in his trusty Holden, on a wing and a prayer, and I got the bus to Kuranda. It was with great relief that I left behind the burnt dryness of the Atherton Tablelands, and headed towards the lush, tropical
growth nearer the coast. Kuranda.

‘You’ll never guess what I heard!’

Bilbo sounded pretty excited. We were sitting at our usual table, near the door, in the restaurant below the hostel. I don’t remember his real name, everyone always called him Bilbo, Bilbo Baggins. He was short, with long blonde hair, and a slightly lopsided smile. For that reason it had been decided that he looked like a Hobbit.

‘What’s up, man?’

‘Jesus is screwing Wendy!’

‘Tom’s wife, Wendy?’

‘Yeah. I just heard from that American guy.’

‘From Wayne?’

‘Yeah, he saw them sneaking off into the bushes, down by the river. He thought they were going for a secret joint, without sharing it around, so he followed them. He came across them screwing!’

I laughed.

‘Bloody hell, I wonder if Tom has any suspicions?’

‘Best not to say anything I reckon.’

‘So much for the Jesus act. Looks like he’s just another arsehole.’

At that moment Felicity appeared by our table, with a plate in her hand.

‘Hey, guys, here are some nibbles for you.’

Felicity put the plate full of veggie snacks on our table, and headed back to the kitchen.

‘Dude! Thanks.’

She turned, and smiled at me. Felicity and I were sort of together, at that stage. But it was really just a casual thing. Neither of us wanted a serious commitment. Besides, along with her sister, she was running a vegetarian restaurant below the hostel, and she was pretty concentrated on that. She had always loved cooking, and wanted to make a career out of it, so the opportunity to run that restaurant was very important to her. Plus, it didn’t help things that her sister, June, didn’t really like me. Anyway, we were both pretty happy to keep it all pretty low key, and not to have any great commitments. The girls kept a table free for us near the entrance door, unbeknown to Mrs. Spencer, of course. She would never have had any of that, but luckily for us she was an early to bed, early to rise, sort of person. By that time of the evening she would be already curled up in her bed, plotting whose life she could make a misery of the following day.

‘Hey Bilbo, you coming looking for magic mushrooms tomorrow? I heard they grow well in those fields just outta town, heading west.’

He perked up with interest.

‘Sure, I’m in.’

‘I’m gonna try them with Felicity and June tomorrow afternoon. If you want to join us feel free.’

‘No, I’ll keep them for another time, I’ve gotta go down to the dole office in Cairns in the afternoon. There’s some problem with my payment.’

I had heard about the wonderful, esoteric effects of magic mushrooms, and had been eagerly awaiting the right time to try them. In the company of Felicity I thought I had found just that right occasion. How wrong that would turn out to be. How terribly wrong. That undertaking proved to be more of a trial by fire, rather than the mystical experience I had been promised, and had been anticipating. Sometimes in life reality is less than the expectation. Sometimes in life reality can be
The next morning out in the fields it all went well. Probably it would have been better if it hadn’t.

‘Hey look, Matt, there are plenty of them! These are the ones, right?’

‘Yeah, from the way they have been described to me those are the fellas alright.’

Bilbo looked as pleased as punch. Mind you, he always looked like that. I guess it was a hobbit thing. He looked at me excitedly.

‘Man, in the morning dew they are everywhere.’

Wandering out in the fields together we found quite a few of the mushrooms I had been told to look for, by those more experienced than me. The easy part was over. The difficult part came later.

‘Well, mate, I think that should be enough. They reckon they are pretty strong, plus it looks like they are pretty easy to find, anyway.’

‘Sure thing, Matt. They’re probably better fresh anyway.’

We divided up our bounty, and I headed back to the hostel, for my date with destiny. Felicity and June were waiting for me.

‘Have you had any lunch yet, Matt. We’ve already had something.’

‘No, I think I’ll skip lunch. Let’s get this mushroom trip going.’

June, as usual, was slightly sceptical. She was a pretty negative person.

‘Are you sure about all this? Do you know how to prepare them?’

‘Yeah, I’ve been instructed well. Don’t worry.’

Felicity was keen, but didn’t want to get too stoned.

‘This evening we have to work, so I don’t want to get too out of it. Let’s make it a bit of a trial run, what do you say?’

‘Sure, we’ll just have one cup of mushroom tea each, and see how it goes. The next time we can have some more. There seem to be plenty of them growing in the fields around here.’

We put the mushrooms in a pot to boil, as per the instructions handed down. Then we waited.

‘How long are you supposed to boil them for, Matt?’

‘I’m not really sure, Felicity. I think about half an hour. They should be ready by now. Anyone for a cup of tea?’ I quipped.

Oh yes, I was in a jocular mood. A real comedian. That wouldn’t last long. Believe me. I poured out three cups of the dark liquid, and pushed forward a jar of honey.

‘Put in plenty of honey, I’ve heard it tastes pretty foul.’

‘This is disgusting!’ moaned June, always ready to put a downer on everything.

‘Felicity, as ever, was more flexible.

‘Hey, come on. Let’s all just throw it down.’

Without further lamentations, we all drank down the horrible tasting brew. Then we waited, and waited, and still we waited. Nothing was happening.

‘I’m gonna have another cup.’ I said.

‘Not me, let’s wait some more.’ said Felicity, erring on the side of caution.

Being a very impatient person, I drank a second cup of the brackish tea. Boy, was that a mistake! Shortly thereafter it hit me, and I was tripping off my face. By then the girls were out of it too, but because they had taken less, it seemed like they were enjoying it. Not me. For me it was fast becoming a nightmare. Everything was spinning, and faces and objects were merging into other shapes. Reality became a very elastic concept. I couldn’t speak, my mouth seemed to be controlled by unknown forces, and words were impossible to form. My mind was spinning out of control. The walls seemed to be closing in on me. I had to get out of there, and get to somewhere on my own.
Somewhere safe. I ran out the door, and headed down towards the river, looking for somewhere secluded to hide. The path I was on, through the bush, was moving up and down, and tipping from side to side. I had to concentrate to place each step carefully, otherwise I would miss the ground, as it was constantly changing position. I found a hidden spot to sit in the middle of some bushes, while everything swirled around me. I tried shutting my eyes, but that just made it all spin even more. Things in my mind where getting bigger, and overpowering me. At least with my eyes open everything was happening around me, not actually inside me. The clouds above me formed strange shapes, and seemed to be trying to communicate with me, but I wasn’t in any sort of a mood for a conversation with clouds. The trees and brush around me kept changing shape, and would, without warning, loom menacingly over me. I just sat there immobile for what was probably hours, while all those strange happenings went on. The concept of time changed totally, it no longer had meaning. I’ve no idea how long I sat there. By the time it was getting dark, I felt that I could handle it a bit better, and thought I would go and look for Felicity. I slowly made my way back to the hostel, but couldn’t face the thought of going in. I really wasn’t in a suitable state for talking to anyone. After looking around a while, I saw the lights on in the restaurant kitchen. I raised myself up to look through the window. Inside I saw the sisters preparing food! I couldn’t believe it. How could they even think about working in that state? I tapped on the window. I got Felicity’s attention, and she opened the window.

‘Hey, Felicity, let’s get out of here. Come on. Come with me somewhere.’

‘I’ve got to work this evening, I can’t.’

I was devastated, that was not an experience I wanted to go through on your own. June came across, laughing heartily.

‘Ha ha, you took too much.’ June was loving it. ‘You shouldn’t have had that second cup.’

At least someone was enjoying my dreadful situation. I retreated into the darkness.

I could see people I knew in the garden chatting, but I had to get away somewhere on my own. I wandered around, trying to stay out of everyone’s way. But that stage I was a bit more in control, but everything was still just so weird. There were arcs of light across the sky. The trees were swaying sideways, and up and down. Their leaves were changing shape, and colour. Reality was conspicuous only by its absence. I wandered around, preferring to keep moving. I’m pretty sure I was wandering around for hours. Later on, when I saw that all the lights had been turned off, I sneaked back inside, into my bunk room, and got into my sleeping bag, fully dressed. I knew I wouldn’t be sleeping, but I just needed to lie low, without having to talk to anyone. No sooner had I slipped into my sleeping bag, when a snake slithered across my feet. In a blind panic, I kicked him off, hoping like hell that he hadn’t really existed. The night passed slowly, but at least it was quiet, I felt relatively safe in my bed, and no more snakes distracted me. In the early hours of the morning the quiet was broken by a voice yelling through the dormitory.

‘No, don’t let them! Go back!’

This was then followed by a scream. Man, was I freaked out. It sounded like it had been the voice of Wayne screaming out. Probably, hopefully, I was just imagining that as well. I looked around, furtively. No one else, asleep in their bunk beds, seemed to have noticed. No one was stirring, so I filed it away with the unlikely snake episode.

‘Go back, go back!’

Again. More screams. They sounded so real. My mind was racing. I had another look around, but no one had been awoken by the sound of Wayne’s screams, so I hoped like hell that it was just part of the mushroom trip. Wayne kept on screaming out for a bit longer, or at least, in my head he did. Man, was I never taking magic mushrooms again! No matter what the right dosage was, that
was not for me. There was just so much loss of control. A loss of a grip on reality. Booze and dope
got you out of it, but you still knew at least which planet you were on. That was me done with the
psychedelia experiments.

In the morning dawn I was just so happy to be back to a semblance of normality. I hadn’t slept
a wink, but balance had returned to my mind. I was back in control. From then on I promised
myself that I would just stick to smoking weed, and drinking beer. That stuff was just far too strong
for me. I would leave that for the professionals. I headed over to the communal kitchen, and had
some cereal, and a cup of tea, normal tea. Felicity came in.

‘Where did you disappear to all evening?’

‘Man, I was so out of it, I just found somewhere to basically hide, until I came back down. It
was a total nightmare.’

‘Me and June really enjoyed it. We were really buzzing. Everything seemed incredibly
enjoyable, but we didn’t have any hallucinations, or anything like that. I thought it would have been
stronger.’

That made me laugh. One cup of tea wasn’t enough, but two were far too much. I realised that
finding the right dose would be far too much of a precise mathematical equation for me. I was done.
Luckily, I didn’t see June, and have to face her biting sarcasm.

‘We’re heading down to Cairns to buy some stuff for the restaurant. Do you want to come
along?’

‘No, I’m still pretty worn out from the mushrooms experience. I’m just gonna hang around
here, and relax a bit.’

‘OK, well I’ll see you later then, bye.’

‘See you, Felicity.’

I got my book from my bag, and sat in the pleasant morning sunshine to read a bit. Reality had
never felt so good.

That afternoon I joined Wayne, and his good mate Trevor, throwing a frisbee around the back
garden.

‘Hey, didn’t you hear Wayne yelling out last night, man?’

What? I couldn’t believe it. So it had been real! I hadn’t imagined it! What about the snake,
then? Had that also been real? A sense of fear gripped my stomach. I had no idea of what had been
real, and what had been imagined. As far as having heard Wayne’s cries went, I played it cool. I
lied.

‘Naw, sorry Trev, I was really crashed out. I didn’t hear anything. What was it all about? Was he
having a nightmare, or something?’

‘Yeah, he did a tour in Vietnam, and ever since he has had some pretty bad nightmares about it
all. Hey, if you ever hear him screaming man, go and wake him up. He had it pretty rough over
there.’

‘Yeah, for sure.’ I turned my attention to Wayne, ‘You want to talk about that shit? I’d love to
hear some stories about it all.’ I asked. ‘How was it, over there?’

Wayne was having none of it. It was a closed subject.

‘No man, I don’t even want to think about it. Let’s just get back to the frisbee, and forget that
shit.’

I inwardly shuddered. In comparison, my mushroom experience may not have been that
devastating after all.

‘How’s it going with you and Felicity?’ asked Bilbo.
‘Good, man, but we are keeping it all pretty low key. Neither of us is in the right place for anything serious.’

A group of us from the hostel were down by the river, swimming and sunbathing. It was just another brilliantly hot, sunny day, with us cooling off, at our favourite swimming spot. The relentless Queensland sun was raining fire down on us, but the cool, refreshing water of the river brought relief. Felicity and June were sitting on one of the big rocks surrounding the pool, talking, I think, about what food they could introduce into the menu of their restaurant. They both liked to mix things up, and offer up new and exciting dishes. We all loved eating there. Most of us were either vegetarians, or at the very least, not big meat eaters. Word of the good dishes on offer had spread around the area, and the place was pretty full most evenings. Jesus, incredibly, was chatting with Wendy, while Tom looked on in total ignorance of what was happening before his eyes. By that stage, he was the only one at the hostel who didn’t know about the steamy affair between his wife and Jesus.

‘Look at how bloody arrogant Carl is. Right in front of her husband.’ said Bilbo.

‘To be honest, I think that Tom is a bit of an idiot. How could he not know?’

Initially I had felt sorry for him, but by then, with it all being so obvious, I just thought of him as being a bit dim witted. I guessed that sometimes we just refused to accept that which we didn’t want to believe? I was feeling philosophical. I was sitting in the water with Bilbo, chatting and just enjoying the day.

‘Do you wanna come over to Johnson’s farm tonight? They are having a party.’

‘No, man, I replied, ‘those guys are arseholes. They’re far too aggressive for my liking. At the pub they are always looking for a hassle. They think they own the pool table. If anyone goes anywhere near it, they start to give you shit.’

‘They’ve always got good dope, though. I get on pretty well with them.’

‘You get on well with everyone, it must be the hobbit in you. I doubt that any of the rest of us are invited anyway. I see them a lot down at the pub. Whenever I score some dope from someone else they always have to butt in, they think they run the town.’

‘It should be a good party, though.’

In the distance the blast of a train’s horn sounded across the water.

‘The tourist train is coming!’ yelled Jesus. ‘Everyone in position!’

Most of us rushed up the stony track, back towards the railway line. Right at that point the train passed over a little bridge just ahead of us. There we were, five naked hippies, Felicity and June had declined the offer, waving and shouting out to the good folks on the Kuranda bound tourist train. As usual, the tourists looked out the window with a mixture of amusement and shock. The quicker witted of them tried to snap a photo of us. As usual, we were all laughing our heads off, as we waved out to them. That never got old. The tourists seemed to generally enjoy it, it definitely added to the stories they would recount of their holidays, and it cracked us up every time. The lighter side of being a hippy. Not that the rest of it was particularly serious.

Towards evening, Bilbo set off on foot to Johnson’s farm, a walk of about a couple of kilometres. Wayne, Trevor, and myself had a couple of joints out in the garden, had a chat, and then headed off to our table in the restaurant. It was a Friday evening, so the place was packed. As usual we were just sitting and chatting at the table the girls kept free for us. If Felicity had time she would bring us over some snacks, her sister didn’t usually bother. June put up with us, for her sister’s sake, but there wasn’t really any love lost from her side. I think she slightly begrudged the fact that we ‘wasted’ a table that could have been used for clients. I had already learnt that in life there was no pleasing everyone, a lesson I was sure that June would be teaching many other people through the
course of her life. On the table in front of me I had a packet of roll-up tobacco, that being back in the days when you could still smoke in public places.

‘Does anyone want to hit the pub later on?’ I asked. ‘With the Johnsons and all their friends at their party, the place might be a bit nicer. If nothing else we should be able to get in a game of pool, without those pricks hogging the table.’

Wayne looked interested.

‘Actually my informants have told me that Jesus and Wendy are getting together down there. Apparently Wendy told Tom that she is having an evening out with the girls, so he is going to have an early night. Could be a laugh to watch them at it.’

Trevor and I couldn’t stop laughing.

‘I can’t believe any of this. Man, Tom is just sleepwalking,’ I said.

‘I thought Jesus was supposed to save us from sin, not lead us into it.’ quipped Trevor.

We all had a good laugh at that. I had the perfect answer for him.

‘Actually, technically, he gave us free choice. What the bible doesn’t say is that he also has that free choice. I guess he is just exercising his free choice to be an arsehole like the rest of civilisation.’

With a broad smile on his face Wayne retorted.

‘Although you must admit, the Jesus act works pretty well for him. The birds are flocking to him like… well.. a congregation.’

None of us could stop laughing. Being stoned helped with that, as it usually did.

Just then the strangest of things happened. Out of the blue, while we were immersed in our biblical studies, a well dressed man, a client of the restaurant, came up to our table, and asked me if he could have a cigarette paper. Without waiting for a reply, he picked up my pouch of tobacco, and thrust his fingers in, obviously feeling around. Then he took a roll up paper from the cartridge inside the tobacco pouch, thanked me, and headed back to his table. We were all incredulous, and shaken immediately back into the present moment.

‘Fuck, did you see that? He was checking to see if I had some weed in there!’

‘Look, he’s sitting with that woman over there.’ said Wayne.

‘They gotta be undercover cops, man. He’s got a packet of normal cigs on his table. He doesn’t even smoke roll ups.’ said Trevor.

A wave of relief at my constant cautious behaviour flooded over me.

‘Man, thank God I keep my stash hidden in the toilet. I would be right in the shit now. Bloody hell, most people just keep their weed inside their tobacco pouch. The cops all know that. My God, what a close call!’

‘Yeah, you’re not kidding,’ said Wayne, ‘my dope is right there in my tobacco pouch sitting pretty much next to yours. Lucky for me he went for yours. I gotta get that out of here, without raising any suspicion.’

Trevor had a strangely pensive look on his face.

‘You know the really odd thing,’ he said, ‘you score for all of us. Technically that would make you our supplier. They could do you for dealing. How come he went straight for you? How did he know to go for you?’

‘Hey, I’m not a dealer! I just score enough to share around with you guys. It works out cheaper for us all, if we buy a bigger amount. We all pay the same price, I don’t make a profit. That’s not dealing. It’s just more convenient.’

‘Yeah, I understand that, but actually, for the cops that is dealing. You buy it, and then give some to us, and we pay you. I think they know that, which explains why he went for your pouch.'
They must have an informant here in the hostel, or maybe the guy who sells it to you is snitching. Possibly someone from the pub who sees you buying it. They definitely know something.’ said Trevor.

His logic couldn’t be denied. Something was going on. Something not good. For the rest of the evening we were all a bit subdued. We kept our eyes on the two cops, and the more we watched them, the more certain we were that they were undercover cops. What the fuck was going on?

When I woke up the next morning, I headed straight to the toilet, but not only for the obvious reason. While in there I got my stash from its hiding place, and flushed it down the drain. After the previous night’s events I was a bit shaken. I didn’t want to be caught with any dope on me. Then I went for breakfast. The news doing the rounds was absolutely insane. No sooner had I got to the kitchen when I heard all about it. Everyone was talking about it. The cops had done a dawn raid on Johnson’s farm. Someone had pulled out a gun, and the cops had shot him dead. Some big shit was going down. Somehow I knew it was connected with what had happened in the restaurant the previous evening. It was too much of a coincidence. As soon as I heard the news I raced back to the bedrooms to see if Bilbo had made it home, or whether he had been caught up in the raid. Luckily, there he was, snoring away peacefully on his bunk bed, blissfully unaware of the events that had nearly cost him big time.

‘Bilbo, wake up, man.’ I shook him.
He shoved me away.
‘Let me sleep, you prick, I got back late.’
‘Dude, you are lucky you are even alive, or at the very least, not in a jail cell.’ I told him.
That woke him up more than my shaking him ever could. He sat up, instantly alert.
‘What are you on about man?’
I let him know the news. He almost went into a state of shock.
‘Shit, I drank and smoked so much I just crashed out on a couch. I woke up, I don’t know, maybe around 2 or 3. For some reason I decided to walk home then, instead of staying the rest of the night. To be honest I don’t really even know why.’
‘Dude, you must have left just a couple of hours before the raid. Plus, that’s not all, we had a couple of undercover cops in the restaurant last night too. One of them checked my tobacco pouch for weed. Luckily I had stashed it in the toilet. This morning, first thing, I flushed it all down the bog. I’m not smoking here anymore. Something big is going on, man.’
‘That’s what they did down on the Sunshine coast, too.’ he said. ‘They send in the undercover cops first, and then the busts start. Yeah, I agree, it’s time to go straight, and get the hell out of here.’

That afternoon I heard that Wayne and Trevor were going to head down to Sydney, the next morning, in Trevor’s car. They also had decided that it was time to move on. The cops were in town, and nobody was safe. I asked if I could get a lift with them, as far as Brisbane, sharing the costs. They were both more than happy to have me along. We all got along well, so a road trip together would be fun. Plus, with all the police activity, the fun had gone right out of being there. It was time to leave Kuranda. I decided to get a flight from Brisbane back to New Zealand, while I still had some money left from my tobacco picking. That evening I said my goodbyes. In those days of youthful enthusiasm you made deep friendships in a short period of time. Many addresses were swapped. The hardest goodbye was obviously with Felicity. Even though it had just been a casual thing between us, we had become really close, so it was a difficult parting. In any case I knew we would probably meet up again, maybe back in New Zealand. She, too, was really sad at our parting.

‘Here’s my parents’ address, in Tauranga. You can write to me care of them, and they will send
it along to wherever I am.’

‘Good one,’ I replied, ‘I’ll give you my folks’ address in Auckland, they’ll do the same. Hey, it’s not really goodbye, I’m sure we will meet up again. I’ve really enjoyed our time together. You are such a fantastic person.’

‘Me too, it’s been nice. My dream is to open my own vegetarian restaurant back in New Zealand. I hope you will come to the opening.’

‘For sure, girl, I will be your first customer! Keep a table ready for me.’

We hugged for what seemed like forever, then she had to get back to her work in the restaurant. I headed off to bed early. Me and the boys had decided to get a good start to the day, so we could clock up some miles before the heat of the day set in. The next morning we packed up our stuff, and headed off in Wayne’s VW beetle. The road trip was on! Even though it was a bit sad about leaving my new friends, I was always looking forward to new adventures, and finding new places. At that young age there seemed to be endless things still out there just waiting to be discovered. Life was ahead of me, life was all around me. Life was looming large.

Six months later, I found myself waiting for a bus to arrive in the centre of Nelson, back in New Zealand. It was with great pleasure that I saw the bus come around the corner, and pull into its destination. She was one of the first passengers to alight.

‘Hello!’

‘Hi there, Felicity. You are really looking good. How was the trip? How is everything?’

We hugged and kissed.

‘Let me grab my bag, then why don’t we get a coffee? I have a lot of news for you.’

‘Sure, which one is yours? I’ll get it for you.’

She pointed out her bag among the pile of bags that had been unloaded.

‘Let’s head over to that coffee shop over the road,’ I said, as I pointed to my new favourite coffee shop.

‘They’ve got nice muffins, and a great vegetarian selection. Although, not as nice as your cooking, obviously.’

‘Thank you, kind sir.’

We both laughed as we walked into the coffee shop. We ordered our drinks and snacks, and sat down at a table by the window.

‘How long can you stay for?’

‘Sorry, not long. Just a few days. I’m heading down to Dunedin to start work in a restaurant. It’s a great opportunity for me.’

‘So the dream is still alive?’

‘Oh for sure, and getting ever closer. Anyway… you won’t believe what happened just after you left.’

I was looking forward to hearing about the old crowd, but certainly wasn’t expecting the part about me.

‘Hey, I’m all ears.’

‘Well, the day after you left with the boys, the cops turned up looking for you, by name.’

I was absolutely dumbfounded

‘Shit, really! What a stroke of luck. I sort of just left that day because the others were leaving, so I asked for a lift. I could have easily been there for a few more days, otherwise. Man, I would have been in a shit load of trouble if I hadn’t got out of Dodge that day. You know what? My instincts were telling me to get out of there. That’s a good lesson, eh? Trust your instincts.’
‘I would stay out of Queensland for a while, if I were you.’
I laughed.
‘Don’t worry. I will let many a year pass, before I even think about going back there, if ever.’
‘On a lighter note. Tom and Wendy have separated.’
‘Finally! It took a while but I guess Tom finally worked out what was going on with Wendy and Jesus.’

‘Nope, not at all. He only found out when she told him that she was leaving him, because she had fallen in love with Carl.’

We both had a good laugh at the expense of the dim-witted Tom. We were feeling good. I went philosophical.

‘A match made in heaven had been ripped asunder by heaven’s disciple. God created man, and then his son stole man’s wife. Isn’t there a parable in the bible about that somewhere?’

We couldn’t stop laughing. They were days when laughter abounded.
Chapter 10 Seeing with Eyes Open

‘You’re working up a good sweat on that machine, girl? Are ya never gonna run out o’ energy?’

It was true, Constance had been on the treadmill for a long time. Running, and running, with no let up, as if the dogs of hell themselves were on her tail. Her fat body, her fat-ish body, was glistening with sweat. She had never felt so vibrant and alive. She could feel her aching muscles pulsating. Her sessions at the gym had in short order become like a drug to her. Not only was she losing weight, she was loving the feeling of getting in form. She could feel her physical strength growing. She could feel the power growing in her body. Her fat was turning into muscle. Equally as importantly, if not more so, she could feel her mental strength growing. A sense of surety in things was beginning to replace her previous, constant sense of doubt about everything. No longer did she question everything about herself. Finally she was taking control of her life. She was the one running her life, dictating its very essence, and the path it would follow. She would set the agenda, rather than following that which had been decided for her by others. She looked across at the guy who had spoken to her from the next machine along. He was good looking, and really in top shape. By his accent he was obviously Scottish. She smiled at him.

‘Yes, you’re right. Today I’m really giving it all I’ve got. I’ll no doubt pay for it tomorrow, but I just don’t want to stop. Crazy isn’t it?’

‘O’ no, not at all. I know the feeling. When you get into the zone it feels good. The body starts to release endorphins, and you get a natural high. I love it too.’

‘Endorphins, really?’

Constance liked the sound of that. Her body was producing endorphins, whatever they were.

‘Aye, it’s a scientific fact, not just some scottish gibberish.’

Constance laughed. She already liked him.

‘Where are you from in Scotland?’

‘A wee town called Glasgow. Have ya e’er been to Scotland?’

‘No, sorry, but I would definitely like to one day.’

‘Well, I’ve ne’er been to Aus either, so don’t worry. It’s definitely on my to do list, though. I’ve got a friend out in Brisbane. Is that far from where you’re from?’

‘No, it’s pretty close.’

‘Well, not that that means much. According to him, pretty close by Aussie standards means not more than a thousand kilometres. We would call that a long way away back in Scotland. My name’s Tim, by the way. What’s yours?’

‘Hi Tim, I’m Constance.’

‘I imagine they call you Connie?’

‘Actually, I prefer Constance, if you don’t mind.’

‘I’m sorry lass, it’s just that usually Aussies always abbreviate the hell out o’ everything. Constance it is, then.’

‘What brought you over here, Tim?’

‘Well, I’ve got a good job, the food and drink is good, but, to be honest with ya, it’s more ta get
away from the weather back home. The cold just seeps into ya bones. A ten month winter gets to ya after a few decades. It’s just relentless.’

Constance laughed. She liked the way he spoke.

‘Well, you certainly can’t complain about that over here. Here we just about have a ten month summer. I like that, too. Actually, it’s a heat which is nowhere near as hot as back home in the summer. In Aus it’s a really oppressive heat. What you might call relentless.’

They both laughed.

‘Aye, good for Scots and Aussies, then.’

Constance slowed the pace of the machine down, and then stopped it. She reached for her towel, and wiped the sweat from her face.

‘That’s enough for me. It was nice to meet you Tim.’

‘Hey, Constance, what say we get some fluids in later, purely as part of our fitness regime, ya know? There’s a nice wee bar just down the way.’

‘Thanks, but I’m pretty busy today. Anyway, I’m sure we’ll bump into each other here again. See you!’

Constance walked over to one of the arm press machines. She sat down, and started working on the program her instructor had given her. The gym was on the first floor of the building, and the arm press machine was right in front of a big window, looking out over the sea. The view was magnificent. Waves were rolling in onto the beach, and the water was full of lots of foreign tourists enjoying the last of the spectacular Spanish summer. It was a good place to be. Constance felt a power, and a sense of ease that she had never known. She was in control of her life. She was deciding the rules, and it felt good to her. She liked Tim, but she wasn’t in any hurry to get back out dating. Anyway, they would meet again in the gym. They could get to know each other slowly. Before starting to date someone she had decided that she wanted to get to know them quite well. That way she would be able to avoid surprises further down the line. She wasn’t desperate, and her ticking biological clock could tick away all it wanted. She wasn’t listening. Besides, she was finally getting to know herself, her mother, and her father. She smiled to herself. She was getting to know her family, really, for the first time. At 34 years old that could be considered a bit ridiculous, but Constance didn’t care. For her, by her standards, it was good. In her conversations with her mother she was slowly, gently, coercing out more and more information about her father, and about their relationship. Her difficult upbringing, and strained relationship with her mother was starting to make sense to her. It was all coming into context, the things you didn’t understand as a little girl. She held no grudges, and apportioned no blame. Their relationship, their lives could, would, start afresh. If anything, it seemed like her mother had suffered as much as her through the years with their relationship. Constance wanted to put that all right. Put it all on a better footing. What was that expression? ‘Child is father to the man’. To Constance that seemed to mean that at a certain point the child is no longer dependent on his parents, and then eventually has to take on the adult position in the relationship. In her case that would be ‘Daughter is mother to the woman’. Constance laughed out loud, and then quickly looked around in slight embarrassment, hoping no one had noticed. From the other side of the room she saw Tim, who smiled, and waved to her. She smiled back.

Constance had started to look forward to her chats with her mother. She would work out some questions to ask her beforehand, but would never get too pushy. She didn’t want to shut her mother down, so she would regulate the pace, like you would when you were driving a car. Nice and easy, without pushing it too far, too fast, without exceeding the speed limit.

‘I can vaguely remember a photo of dad, dressed as a hippy. Do you still have that, mum?’
'Yes, I think I do, somewhere. I’ll see if I can find it for you.’
Her mother sounded almost nostalgic as she spoke about the photo.
‘Where was it taken, mum?’
Her mother laughed lightly.
‘Up the top of Mount Warning.’
‘Mum! So you both went up there, together? Did you stay the night, or just do a day trip?’
‘We took a tent up, and some food, and stayed the night. It was just lovely up there. I’ll never
forget it.’

Constance almost burst out laughing. She could imagine the two of them smoking a joint, and
waiting for the sun to come out. Of course, she wouldn’t ask her mum if that was the case. That
would be a step too far. She was taking things easy. She was giving her mother breathing space. In
time it would all be able to be coaxed out. Eventually she would find out everything. The process
had begun, and there would be no stopping it.

‘What a lovely thing to have done together, mum. You must have some good memories of your
time with dad?’
Constance could hear her mother sigh down the phone line.
‘Yes, you’re right. Sometimes I forget about those days. After he died everything just changed
so much, and so instantly. It wasn’t easy you know.’
‘I know, mum. You did a good job. All by yourself. It must have been very hard on you.
Anyway, you did a great job with us, don’t ever forget that.’
‘You know, I couldn’t believe it when you asked me about Mount Warning.’
Constance’s interest was immediately piqued.
‘Why’s that, mum?’
‘Well, you were conceived around that time, and your father was convinced that it happened up
the top of the mount.’
Constance’s face lit up like a Christmas tree.
‘Mum, that’s fantastic! What a great story!’
‘Are you going to come home, dear? It would be lovely to have you here, back home.’
Constance could hear a sense of longing in her mother’s voice.
‘I’ll try and get some time off as soon as I can, and come over for a holiday, mum. I promise.’
‘I meant that maybe it’s time for you to move back home, permanently. Don’t you think it’s
time, dear?’

It felt good to Constance knowing that her mother wanted her back with her, but she had her
own life to live.
‘At the moment I’m really enjoying my job as a teacher. I’m not sure if I would be able to find
something like that back home. But, anyway, we’ll see what the future brings. Can you send me a
copy of that photo? The one of dad up Mount Warning? Just take it into any shop where they sell
cameras. They will be able to make a copy of it.’
‘I’ll do that for you tomorrow, and get it off to you.’
‘Thanks, mum, take care. I’ll call you again soon. Bye, mum.’

Constance threw herself back down on the couch, and lay with her hands behind her head.
Move back to Australia? She had really left home, partially because she had wanted to see the
world, but probably mostly to get away from her mother, and their difficult relationship. Now that
they were getting on well, that was no longer the case, and she could go back. But did she actually
want to? By some strange fluke of chance, and luck, she had ended up in a place that she really
liked. Plus, she loved her job teaching english to little children. She knew that she wouldn’t be able
to do that back home. Back home she would have to return to her boring old job doing clerical work, like she had done before leaving, and when she had been in Dublin. Not to mention the weather. Spanish summers were hot, but not oppressive like the almost unbearable heat back home. Her leaving home had been more about running away, escaping, but in doing so she had found a place where she fitted in. A place which she now called home. It was ironic really, she had let Australia mainly because of her difficult relationship with her mother, but by the time that that strained relationship had been resolved, she had found other reasons for staying away. Besides, who knew what the future held? She could change her mind, or even end up going somewhere else. Who knew? She had never felt so free before. Anyway, for the time being Constance wanted to stay exactly where she was. She felt that she was in her time, and in her place. She loved the things that she had in her life. Teaching her lovely little children at the school, the gym, chatting with Matt. And Tim? Where did he fit into the new equation? Could there be something there? Well, she would see how that one developed, slowly, and steadily. First she wanted to concentrate on herself. Mind you, she thought, having a couple of drinks at a bar after the gym wasn’t really too much to ask. Maybe that would be a good way to get to know what he was really like? She couldn’t help wondering how it was that she had gone so far, achieved so much change, in such a short period of time. She hadn’t done it alone, in fact she had been lucky to have had so much help. It was odd how people had intervened in her life, helping her through her transition. It had been absolutely fantastic her chance meeting with Matt, and all the understanding his stories had given her. And Grace? Who could have ever imagined that someone who had been the source of such difficulty in her life would end up being of such help? How was it that all of that had happened? Was it all just down to chance, and fate, or were there some other forces at work? That she would never know, but she was so grateful to find herself in the driving seat of her new life. Her second chance at life. On balance, thinking about everything that made up her new life, she realised that she had found her new home. She was were she wanted to be. She would try and get her mother hooked up with a smartphone, and an internet connection, so that they could video chat. That would be a good next step in their brand new relationship. In the modern age you could keep in touch from overseas almost as well as if you just lived across town. She would continue her mother’s evolution, from hippy, to struggling single mum, to digital age technophile. The thought of that made her smile. Even her mother’s life was in a state of progression.

The bar was full to overflowing. There was a constant overriding noise of chatter, and great outbursts of laughter. Glass could be heard continually clinking against glass. There was little room to move. Constance and Tim had luckily managed to find a free table near the bar, on the inside. All the tables outside had long since been taken. Tourist season was still in full swing, even though the summer was slowly winding its way to an end, and the town centre was pumping. Constance didn’t mind being stuck inside the bar. After her mega workout she was still feeling hot, and a bit sweaty, even though she had taken a shower, so the air conditioning inside the bar was really quite welcome for her. What she had already learnt about Tim, in the relatively short period that she had known him, was that he was a real talker, a bit of a chatterbox, well he was scottish after all, and he was in full swing. Nothing, or no one could hold him back. The bar setting seemed to be like a second home to him. He was in his element.

’Sow wi’ me mate we thought wee’ud gi’ it a go out here.’

‘Is he still here as well, then, your friend?’

‘Och noo, he missed his girlfriend t’ much. He went back after a few months, the bloody fool. I think he’s regretting that now, but it’s too late, she’s up the duff.’
Constance looked at him in confusion.  
‘What does that mean?’  
‘Up the duff? Don’t ya say say that down in Aus? It means pregnant.’  
Constance laughed.  
‘Up the duff? Pregnant? No, that’s a new one on me. But then, I did have a pretty sheltered upbringing.’  

Constance sneaked a look across at the bar. Ever since they had been in the bar Tim had been constantly glancing over in that direction. Then she saw why. The mystery was revealed. Sitting on a bar stool with a group of friends, there was a woman, probably in her early forties, with a very sexy dress on, sporting a plunging neckline. A great amount of her very ample breasts were on display. Obviously Constance didn’t have Tim’s full attention. His mind was divided between their conversation, and the eye candy sitting not far away. He was a multitasker. It struck Constance just how much you could notice about people, when you had your eyes open. If you weren’t looking, you just simply wouldn’t see. With Jeff she had always been so desperate to keep their relationship going that she hadn’t noticed things like that. Or had she? She had always been pretty sure that Jeff had been seeing other women, so probably that wasn’t the case. What had changed then? Then it came to her. She had changed. She wasn’t that desperate fat woman anymore, with her biological clock, in cahoots with her mother, screaming out her age, and what little chance she had left.  

‘Would ya like ta?’  
Tim’s questioning voice brought her out of her thoughts, and back to their conversation.  
‘Sorry, what? I was thinking about a lesson I have to prepare for tomorrow.’  

After having been jolted back to their conversation she realised that Tim wasn’t the only one who could multitask.  
‘I was saying that maybe…’  
Tim’s phone rang. He looked at the name of the caller, and lowered the volume.  
‘You can answer if you like, that doesn’t bother me.’ said Constance.  
‘A’ noo, it’s just a mate, nothin’ important. I was saying, what say we go out for dinner one evening? Down along the waterfront. There’s some great bars that do a fine nosh up.’  

Constance decided to play it slowly. So far she certainly did like Tim, but she wasn’t terribly impressed with his roving eye. She wanted to see how things developed with their low key approach, before taking things up a notch. Drinks after the gym was good as a first step. She decided to give a non-committal answer.  

‘Yeah, we could do. Let me see when I have a free evening. I often work late with my lessons.’  
Tim’s phone rang again, and after briefly glancing at the display, he quickly turned it onto silent mode. Oh yes, thought Constance, that’s just a mate calling, for sure. Constance wondered just how many women Tim had on the go. It had rather obviously become apparent that he was a bit of a ‘Jack the Lad’, a real ladies man. A young scotsman on foreign soil with a roving eye. She didn’t mind at all. That was just his way. And why not? The new Constance now had her eyes open. She wasn’t going to walk into anything without knowing exactly what she was getting into. And she wasn’t in a hurry. If the right person came along, so be it. If not, she would happily continue with her new, rather pleasant life. In any case, she liked Tim. As a friend. He was fun to be with, with his great sense of humour, and that classic lovely accent. At a later date, in the gym, she would tell him that she wasn’t looking for romance, but would still like to be friends. She had a sneaking suspicion that that news might ring in the death knell on their seeing each other. Quite possibly that would be the last she would see of Mr. Man-About-Town Tim, with his roving eye. But so be it. If that was the way he wanted to play it, she would have no objections. On the other hand if he wanted to have
drinks occasionally that would be good too. Why had she never been able to think like that before? It all seemed so simple, so logical. What had once seemed to be so incomprehensible for her, was actually rather straightforward. In the end, life, and people, weren’t that hard to figure out at all. You just had to pay attention.

‘Tell me all about Glasgow. It sounds like a wonderful place.’

‘Glasgow? Aye, it’s a great wee place.’

She let Tim build up a good head of steam talking away, obviously one of his favourite pastimes, while she thought about where her life was. The realisation came to her that the only real problem in her life had been her herself. All her misery, all her suffering had really only been a result of how she herself had approached things, and people. Running scared from her mother, terrified of Grace, putting up with all Jeff’s shit, it had all happened the way it had played out because she had let it be like that. She had accepted it as being the only possible way. To a certain extent she had actually caused it all, by her acquiescence. By default, it had been all her doing. By her innate action, she had given free rein to all and sundry, letting them treat her as they liked. Well, that was then. A new era had been born. What had Matt called her? ‘Constance 2.1-The Resurgence’. Maybe she should change her name from Constance to Resurgence? That which had been constant, had mutated into a state of renewal. She broke out in laughter.

‘What’s so funny?’

‘Oh, it just sounds like such a lovely place. I really would love to visit Scotland one day. Look, Tim, I really have to be off. It’s been lovely having a drink with you.’

‘What do ya say about dinner, sometime?’

Constance stood up, ready to leave.

‘Hey, I’ll see you in the gym. We’ll talk. Bye for now.’

She gave him a little wave, and disappeared through the throngs of merrymakers. It was nice to be among all the tourists enjoying themselves. They owned the place for summer. She owned it all year round. It really made her feel happy that she lived in such a wonderful place.

Sunday morning. Whoever had invented Sunday morning had certainly done a wonderful job. Constance was having a lazy lie in. And why not? The week had gone well, she had done all her work to the best of her capabilities, she had been out for drinks with her new ‘friend’, life was just fairly flowing through her veins. She was alive. More importantly, she felt alive. She hadn’t been able to meet up with Matt, because she had had to cover an absent colleague’s class on Wednesday evening, but they had chatted through messages, and would definitely meet up the following Wednesday. Her mind drifted back to the last time they had met. Matt had said that she wasn’t fat, just a little overweight. Then again, Matt was a very nice person. Maybe he was just sugar coating the situation. Surprising herself, Constance jumped out of bed and flew into the bathroom. She slipped off her nightgown, and studied herself in the mirror. She changed angles, and tried to examine her body in a detached manner, as if she was looking at someone else, with a critical detached eye. The bathroom mirror no longer frightened her. In fact, she poked her tongue out at it, in a sign of flagrant disregard. It was merely a mirror, not an insight into her soul. It merely reflected that which was in front of it. After conclusively studying her reflection, she accepted that she was overweight, without a doubt, but not really excessively so. Also she could feel her muscles developing. The fat on her was hardening, turning into muscle. Maybe she would call herself a ‘big girl’. Fatso had left town, and a ‘bigger’ girl had taken her place. She wanted even better than that, much better than that, but she had time. She was moving in the right direction. Nothing would ever stop her new fitness regime, or her chocolate-free diet. Nothing, and nobody, would ever hold her
back again. The ‘bigger girl’ would put up with no nonsense from anyone. She disdainfully threw her billowing, hide-everything dress into the washing basket, and put on some shorts, and a T-shirt. After a relaxing, healthy breakfast she would go for a walk along the beach. In the morning it would still be quiet. The last of the end of summer’s throngs of tourists would be still in their hotels, in bed, or nursing a hangover from the expected excesses of Saturday night. An always necessary, and inescapable part of being on holiday. She made herself a lovely cup of tea, and ate a slice of toast with peanut butter. She had read that peanut butter contained vegetable protein with no fat, and that it was a good food to start the day with. It tasted good, and was good for you. Just what Resurgence wanted. After sorting out her breakfast dishes, she casually wandered down to the beach, with the sound of church bells ringing out in the distance. As expected there were very few people on the beach. Just some walkers, and the occasional person having an early morning swim. As she watched the swimmers she decided that she, too, would become a swimmer. It looked good. It looked like both fun, and great exercise. Without a doubt she certainly lived in the right place for it. ‘Constance 2.1-The Swimmer’. The possibilities in front of her seemed to be almost endless. Now that she had stopped holding herself back, now that she had untied the ropes that she had bound herself with, the sky was the limit. Maybe she would even conquer the sky. Constance 2.1 would have no limits.

‘Hello, there. Lovely day for it.’

Constance turned around.

‘Matt! Hello, how are you? It’s lovely to see you.’

‘You’re looking good, decked out in your beachwear. Showing off that muscular gym physique. I like it.’

Constance blushed with delight.

‘Well, I’m not there yet, but I am definitely on my way. Are you off to lunch with one of your power walks?’

‘I am, indeed, doing one of my world famous power walks, but alas, there is no lunch at the end of it. The boys are busy with other matters, so I will be just power walking back to whatever I have in the fridge today. And what about you? How has your week been?’

‘Actually, I’ve got lots of things to tell you. I won’t hold you up with it all now, I don’t want to interrupt your exercise, but you’ll never guess what I found out.’

Constance’s tone was one of great excitement, Matt smiled in anticipation of what he was about to hear.

‘Well then, come on then, out with it. You can’t leave me hanging here.’

Constance couldn’t wait to tell Matt the latest news from her mother.

‘According to my mum, there’s a great possibility that I was conceived up the top of Mount Warning!’

They both laughed.

‘My God! That’s fantastic! You really must be making progress with your mother if you are able to get that sort of info out of her. Well done.’

‘Yes, true. It’s funny really, I used to be so scared of her. I think she’s the one who is more scared, now. She never knows what I’ll be asking her next. She’s even going to send me over a copy of a photo of dad, actually taken on that trip up Mount Warning.’

Matt looked at her with a delicate smile.

‘I’m really pleased for you, Constance. I know how much all of this means to you.’

‘Actually, I want to thank you, Matt, for your part in all this. It was through listening to your stories of those days that made dad come alive to me, and which gave me the courage to finally stand up to my mum. I sort of feel like so many gaps in my life, so much emptiness has finally been
Matt nodded.

‘Where we come from has a big influence on who we are, and where we end up going in our lives. From those roots our trees of life blossom. Whatever you do, don’t dwell on the fact that your mother didn’t tell you all of this sooner. That doesn’t matter at all. Just be happy that you now know it all, and use it to build a better relationship with her, and to forge ahead in your life. Use all of this to build your future.’

‘No, for sure. Don’t worry about that. The Resurgence doesn’t have time for dwelling on the past. The Resurgence is all about the future. Renewal.’

They both laughed together. Constance had never felt so fulfilled with her life. The missing links, those little pieces that had stopped her from being happy, really happy, had finally come into place. She had finally come to know her father, somebody who had been missing for all her life. She was where she wanted to be, and was living the life she wanted to live. Without a doubt a lot of that was because of the man standing right there in front of her. He, and his stories, had been the catalyst of her change, her renewal. She owed him so much.

‘Well, my dear Resurgence, I must be off. I need to crack out some more kilometres to work up a good appetite. It was really nice to bump into you on such a lovely day, and to see you in such a good mood. You really look good. I’ll see you on Wednesday, and we’ll delve deeper into your new found state of well-being. The raison d’être, as it were. Bye for now.’

‘Bye Matt, see you soon.’

Matt blasted off at a hearty pace, turning around after a short distance to give a final wave to Constance. She smiled and waved back. Little did Constance realise that that would be the last time she would ever see Matt. Two mornings later his cleaning lady would find him dead in bed.
Chapter 11 The Poetry of Trees

Even though only a month had passed, Constance couldn’t remember what the church even looked like, let alone where it was. Not that it had anything to do with the amount of time that had passed, she knew that it was undoubtedly because of the strong emotions that that day had fostered. When she had gone to the church that terrible day she had been feeling very disoriented. Lost, not physically, but mentally. And so, on her return there barely one month later she had at first gone past the church on the bus without realising it was the one she was supposed to get off at. Only as an afterthought had she asked one of the other passengers the name of the church they had just passed. She had then had to get off the bus at the next stop, and walk back to the church. On the walk back to the church she felt a wave of heartache come over her. The emotions of that day came flooding back over her. She could still feel the pain like a knot in her stomach. The feeling of loss that she had felt, knowing that she would never be able to chat with Matt again. A great friend had been ripped from her, after such a short time. A slight breeze whipped up the autumn leaves lying under the trees that lined the road. Constance reflected on the last conversation she had had with Matt. She was so glad that she had thanked him for all the help he had given her. Words like those that were left unsaid could easily come back to haunt you in future times. They could easily turn into lasting regrets. The things you felt, but never expressed. She decided that she would always speak her mind clearly with everyone, and leave nothing unsaid. If you put things off for another day, that could easily turn into another month, then another year, and then never. She realised that, in all probability, what you didn’t say to a person was as just important as what you did say, maybe even more so. It struck her that thoughts like that would have been foreign to her just a few short months ago. She was really learning a lot about life, and, well yes, about herself. Was that because of the influence that knowing Matt had had on her?

When she arrived back at the church, and came up to its entrance, she had absolutely no recollection of the place at all. It was like she had never seen the place before in her life. She knew that on the day of Matt’s funeral she had been so devastated with her sadness that she probably hadn’t been paying attention to all the little details. It had all just been background noise to the symphony of sadness that had been playing in her mind. She had arrived for the funeral service washed along in a flood of tears, and heartbreak. However, when she walked around the back of the church to the cemetery recognition of the place came flooding back. She remembered with great clarity the beauty, and tranquility, of Matt’s final resting place. It really was a wonderful place to spend eternity. Simple, but captivating with its exquisite grace, just how Matt would have wanted it. Behind the cemetery, almost acting as its picture frame, stood a stand of trees, their branches swaying gently in the autumn breeze. The early morning chill had passed, and the midday sun was warm, and welcome. As she approached Matt’s grave she could see Connor and Peter sitting on the ground on a laid-out blanket. Both of them had a glass in hand. Constance smiled to herself at the sight of them. She could guess with great certainty what would be in those glasses. Without a doubt it would be gin. What else could they drink in that place? As soon as they saw her they both waved.

‘Hi there, Constance,’ calledConnor, ‘Sorry, but we’ve already started without you.’

‘No, it’s my fault, I’m running a bit late. I’m terribly sorry, I…’
‘Let’s hear none of that, now. You just make sure you’re late for your own funeral.’

Constance smiled, even through her sadness Connor, with his ever present wit, had found a way to perk her up. Peter stood up to greet her.

‘It’s lovely to see you Constance. It’s so nice to meet up here, with our dear friend Matt. Remember, today isn’t a day for tears, and sadness, today is a celebration of his life, not of his death. Let’s try to avoid the tears, eh? What do you say?’

Constance wiped away the tears that were already forming in her eyes, and forced out a smile.

‘I’ll see what I can do, but I can’t promise anything. I miss him so much. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. I’d only known him a short while, the two of you had been…’

Connor interrupted her in a friendly, but firm, tone of voice.

‘Don’t be going and thinking like that, now.’ said Connor. ‘It’s not how long you knew someone, it’s all about how well you knew the person, and the effect that he had on your life. And he was the master at that, you know? Everyone who knew him was drawn in by him. He was just that sort of person.’

Constance smiled at his kindness, and laid down a blanket she had also brought. She sat down next to Matt’s friends. By then Matt’s permanent headstone had been put in place. It was a simple, rectangular shaped stone, with a rounded top, and just gave Matt’s name, and the dates of his birth, and death. At the top a small cross had been engraved into it. It was very simple, but elegant.

‘I really love Matt’s headstone. Who chose it?’

Peter smiled at her.

‘I did. I tried to keep it in line with Matt’s personality. Humble, but with a strong presence. I’m glad you like it. I think it suits him.’

‘It does,’ Constance agreed. ‘I’m sure he would be really happy with it. He would have hated something too ostentatious, that’s for sure.’

Constance opened the bag she had brought with her, and started to pull out the contents.

‘I’ve brought us some things to eat, and, of course, some of Matt’s favourite gin.’

Connor and Peter both laughed. Peter opened the cooler bag they had with them, to show her the contents.

‘That’s a good job. We forgot all about bringing something to eat. Rather forgetful of us, considering the whole picnic idea was ours. We do however have plenty of gin, grapefruit soda, and ice, so it wasn’t all bad.’

All three of them laughed. Constance lifted her arms, and shrugged her shoulders.

‘Well, you did remember the essentials, anyway.’

They all laughed again. Peter’s face turned slightly serious.

‘It’s good that we can all laugh here. You know, let’s make that the theme of the day. Remembering, and laughing.’

‘And drinking a shit load of gin. You forgot that part.’ added Connor. ‘Here you go, young lass, get this into you.’

Connor passed a gin to Constance, prepared in a large glass.

‘Thanks. Cheers everyone.’

Constance raised her glass, and took a sip. The first of many in what she was expecting to be a long session.

‘You know, usually for a picnic people drink out of plastic cups. I should have realised that that would never do for the two of you.’

Connor laughed heartily.

‘Now that would go against all of Matt’s principles, wouldn’t it now? Drinking gin out of a
plastic cup. For him that would be sacrilege. Especially in this, the holiest of places.’

Peter replied by raising his glass in salute.

‘Hear, hear. When only the best will do.’

Connor raised his glass as well.

‘Amen to that, my son.’

All three of them laughed. Constance realised, and understood perfectly, why the two friends wanted to keep the mood light, and happy. They, like her, wanted some respite from the deep sorrow that had fallen on them.

Constance had some lingering doubts about how Matt had died, so she thought that she should get those sort of questions out of the way as soon as possible, while a bit of seriousness was still possible. She knew that as the number of gins consumed mounted there would be little place for that.

‘Peter, did they ever work out precisely why someone so fit and healthy would have had a heart attack?’

Peter’s expression turned thoughtful, and he nodded.

‘Yeah, they did. It would seem that he was born with a congenital heart defect. Apparently it was a fairly minor one, that’s why he never had any symptoms previously.’ he sighed. ‘But in the end it was a time bomb just tickling away slowly inside him. In all likelihood if he hadn’t looked after himself as well as he did he would probably have died years earlier. So that’s something.’

The three of them looked morosely at their drinks. Each temporarily lost in his own thoughts.

The melancholic silence was broken by Connor.

‘Well, he certainly lived before he died, that’s for sure. He travelled the world, and brought happiness into many a soul. He lived many a story, enough to fill volumes of poetry books, without a doubt.’

Peter nodded in agreement.

‘That’s true, mate, he really did pack a lot into those years. He lived a full life, in the time he had. Talking of which,’ he said, looking at Constance, ‘you’re not going anywhere until you’ve told us some of his stories from his Aussie days. First, of course, we will need a few more gins, just to get us into the right frame of mind.’

Constance was excited at the prospect. She was looking forward to recounting Matt’s tales from his early years in Australia to his good friends. She knew that they would enjoy them as much as she had.

‘Not a problem at all. Connor, why don’t you fix us another round, and I will sort out something for us to eat?’

Connor was fully ready to oblige.

‘I can see what Matt saw in you, I can. Coming right up, dear girl.’

Constance spread out all the things she had brought to eat. Chicken, ham, cheese, tomatoes, and various snacks including olives, always a must in Spain. She had had a sneaking suspicion that the boys would have been a bit neglectful on the food side for Matt’s memorial picnic.

‘I see you are on the gin again today, Connor. Is this gin drinking just a Matt thing for you, in remembrance of him? I remember Bianca saying you were a beer man.’

Peter and Connor both roared with laughter. It was Peter who answered.

‘No, he’s been fully converted. After bloody years of scoffing at the rest of us for drinking gin, now you can’t stop the bastard.’

Connor, too, was already in fine form.

‘Well, in life I never listened to the man. I thought that in death I might just give it a go. It turns
out he was right all along.’

   Peter used the opening to put the boot in to his friend.
   ‘You see, you’ve really got to stop reading all that bloody Irish poetry. Kiwis will tell you
everything that you need to know about how to live your life.’

   Through all his laughter, Connor spilt the gin he was passing over to Constance.
   ‘Sorry, there, my girl. Don’t go listening to these bloody Kiwis, they will just fill your head
with all sorts of nonsense. They know how to play a fairly good game of rugby, but that’s about as
far as it goes. You’ve certainly laid on a good spread there, lass. Well done, us two buggers couldn’t
have managed anything like that, even if we had remembered to bring some food. It’s certainly a
good job you’re here.’

   Peter was on a roll with his friend. He wasn’t going to leave him in peace.
   ‘Did you hear that, Constance? An Irishman using the word ‘bugger’. Where do you think he
got that from? Not from an 18th century Irish poet, that’s for sure.’

   Constance burst out laughing, along with her two friends. Her sadness had passed, and her
heart was full of warmth. It was, as Peter had asked for it to be, a celebration, rather than a
mourning. She had spent the last month heartbroken about Matt’s death, moping around her flat
constantly thinking about him, and about how difficult it would be for her to go on without him. But
a new perspective was starting to dawn over her. She was starting to appreciate what he had given
her in life. And that had been a lot. She realised that even in death you could hold onto someone,
and never let their presence slip through your fingers. You could keep them alive, or, at least, the
memory of that person alive, in your thoughts. Being with Peter and Connor helped her with that.
She absolutely knew that she needed the two of them in her life, permanently. In their company she
would be able to keep her connection with Matt present in her life.
   ‘Can we make this a regular thing, guys? I don’t mean necessarily out here at the cemetery, but
I would really like to meet up, and just… well, chat about things. The two of you really help me to
keep Matt with me, I mean, the memory of him.’

   It was Peter who answered on behalf of the two of them.
   ‘And you do the same for us. Don’t worry, we were both hoping to make this a regular thing as
well.’ His face grew slightly contorted. ‘When I’m with Connor, and you, I feel good about Matt.
When I’m on my own the mind starts to wander, and I always end up feeling terribly sad. Grief
counseling isn’t really my thing. I’m not the sort of person to lie back down on a couch, and be told
by some idiot that it all comes from issues that I had with my mother, when I was a child, or some
such bollocks as that. Drinking with you guys, and chatting about Matt’s life, the good memories,
the person he was, that’s what works for me.’

   Connor, too, had turned reflective.
   ‘Have you ever thought about writing down some of those thoughts. You know, that’s where
the best poetry comes from. From deep within.’

   Peter looked at Connor, and gave a slight nod.
   ‘Actually I am doing that. I doubt that I will ever let anyone read any of it, but it does feel
good. It’s quite cathartic. It sort of brings me a bit of a feeling of release, to get those thoughts down
on paper. It helps me to sort out how I feel, and to come to grips with it all.’

   ‘Well, you keep on writing it down, and if, and when, you are ready, I would dearly love to
read some of it. I understand exactly what you mean about your reluctance to open those thoughts to
others. It’s hard to open up, and let people have a window into your inner soul, but, in reality, that’s
where the best writing comes from. Whether it’s poetry, or just a song, or whatever. It’s that real,
raw emotion that draws people in.’
Constance had followed the conversation closely. She was impressed with their obviously high degree on intellect. Both of them were fun loving, always with an eye to the humorous side of life, but also both had great depth of intelligence, and character in them. A sense of the profound. Could she, too, follow Connor’s advice? Maybe she should think about writing down the stories Matt had told her, while interjecting some of his personality into them. If nothing else, it would be a nice way to keep Matt alive, and also to immortalise a part of his life. Or, better still, she could write a novel about the adventures of Matt, and her father. The idea came to her like an illumination. She was finding out more, and more, about her father, from her mother, who she had slowly, gently, managed to convince to open up about him. She could write a novel based loosely on the two of them, as if they had been friends travelling around together. They had both been important people in her life, and she could also see if she could throw in a few of her own thoughts, as well. Before saying anything, she would try and jot down some lines, then, if it looked like it was going to work, she would ask Connor for some help. He was definitely well versed on the literature side of life. Peter interrupted her thoughts.

‘You look like you’re miles away, Constance.’

‘I’ve just had the most brilliant idea,’ she said, instantly forgetting her decision to hold her fire until she was more sure of the terrain underfoot. ‘I’m thinking about writing a novel, based on Matt’s adventures during his hippy days, back in the late 70’s, and put my father into it as well, as one of his friends. My father died when I was young, but he was a hippy back in those days too. What do you think?’

Connor was ecstatic.

‘That’s a great idea, there now. What a great way to remember both of them. That would be a fantastic tribute to their lives.’

Peter was equally impressed with the idea.

‘That’s one book that I would definitely love to read. Although, you’re not going to get off the hook that easily. We want to hear those stories now. We’re not going to wait until you’ve written a book.’

Constance laughed.

‘Of course, don’t worry. You will be my sounding board, before writing. You know, apart from everything else, that could be something good for me. I’m sort of in an in-between place, at the moment. A project like that would be good for me.’

Connor raised his hands, in a sort of opening embrace to the two of them.

‘A writer is born. You know, any form of writing is good for you. Call it meditation, call it spirituality, call it what you like. Getting your thoughts down on paper is a way of making them clearer, even to yourself. The pair of you might surprise yourselves.’

Peter finished his drink, and started preparing a round for all three of them.

‘Well, I’m in the mood for hearing chapter one of the new book. What do you say, Constance, time to drag one of those stories out into the light?’

Connor took his drink from Peter’s outstretched hand.

‘Well, lass, it looks like you are up. How about a story about the old days? Just what did that bugger get up to in Aus?’

Constance was delighted to be able to share with her friends something that they didn’t know about Matt. The gin she had drank made her feel relaxed, and almost in a dreamy state. The warm breeze wafted across her, taking her mind back to faraway places.

‘Well, let me tell you about a place called Kuranda…’