

LEAVES OF THE FIG TREE

By Albert Van Leeuwen



**An awesome vision
of the near future and a
spiritual journey to find Truth**

To all my brothers and sisters in Christ
- those who are, and those who are to become:

The first symptom of real love is an inexplicable desire to be together. Unrequited love cannot survive and often is only a recognition of what might be, were it returned.

By its very nature, love is mutual. It thrives or shrivels according to the measure of its expression, the way in which it is received and the encouragement it is given. Love lives, and therefore must flow to exist.

Love sets no limits on itself. It gives according to the need of its object and gratefully receives all love given in return.

Only God's love has stood the test of time and only it will last into eternity.

Albert Van Leeuwen

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“Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”

LUKE 21 : 29-31

“The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.”

ROMANS 8 : 19

PART ONE

Blank spaces. Vacant links in a chain of memories. Gentle prodding by the desire to remember, pushing the conscious mind to the edge of the subconscious, spurred on by a nagging doubt, the need to know, to put it all together. But what? An unaccomplished ambition? Some long-forgotten dream, waiting to be fulfilled?

It seemed ridiculous. He had everything he could possibly ask for - a beautiful wife, a fine, four year old son, another on the way. An excellent job as structural design draftsman with Department 459, offering the opportunity to work the maximum twenty hours a week. (He'd like to work longer hours of course, but the available load simply *had* to be shared). Today's world was the product of intense automation. Massive factories churned out accommodation modules by the thousands each day. Sophisticated robots put together mobiles, furniture, food stuffs and anything else a computer might tell them to produce. Even the robots were built by other robots, so besides menial maintenance tasks and labouring, most of the available work was limited to design and software development, (unless of course you happened to possess the rare qualifications to be involved in health care or scientific research). Only those driving the massive earth-moving machines seemed to have the satisfaction of full-time occupation. And of course the military tough guys, keeping everyone in line. The energy crisis was well and truly a thing of the past. In terms of material comfort their circumstances hardly left room for complaint - their house module was a class three, as was the solar-harmonic powered mobile parked on its roof, both standard Government issue to higher-graded officers. (There was a time not so long ago when the term 'mobile' had meant a phone, but that was no longer the case.) And both he and Eve were especially proud of the small patch of grass they'd managed to get to grow outside - the fruit of endless hours of stubborn caring, finally rewarding them for the refusal to give up.

So why that weird feeling there was something missing? Why couldn't he find the vital pieces of the puzzle that made up his past? There was more to it, 'the other side of the coin' so to speak, (although coins were now obsolete, as was cash of any sort). At the odd times, when the blanks loomed bigger than the actual memories themselves, threatening like thunderclouds moving in on a bright sunny day, suddenly there was a lump in his throat. And if he let it (whatever 'it' was) take hold, his stomach started churning and he wanted to be sick to the point of almost tasting the reflux travelling up his oesophagus .

His computer monitor started flashing as he was working on an improvement in the waste disposal unit to be used in a new module design, indicating working time was over in five minutes. Module homes were virtually self-contained, harvesting their own water, purifying and recycling it, turning their own waste into harmless, odour free, fertiliser powder, the latest ones even generating their own solar electricity to power their own appliances. (Theirs was still on the mains grid for the time being, but not for long). All communication employed wireless technology. He completed data input and almost reluctantly switched off the screen. He sure was fortunate to be able to work twenty hours. So many were only permitted fifteen, others were lucky to get ten.

He stood up, stretched his long lean frame and strolled over to the window. As far as the eye could see the view was the same. Thousands of identical three-legged module homes dotting the landscape, like perfect specimens in a huge mushroom patch. (Sometimes he thought of them as thick slices of sausage, mounted on three toothpicks each). Boring, but practical. Delivered by air and installed in a matter of hours. How else could you re-house millions of homeless in such a short time span? A feeble sun created bleak shadows within the clinical and monotonous landscape. There were no air-conditioned shopping centres, no high rise buildings, no more bitumen surfaces. Only

fused-silicon walkways. And after a year or so of exposure, you hardly noticed the ubiquitous odour of dusty staleness in the air, tainted by a faint smell of decay. *Something* must be rotting away somewhere underneath the recently bulldozed surface of the new city of Sydney. There were no more trees or other greenery. Getting *anything* to grow in nuclear-sterilised ground was near-nigh to impossible. Somewhere beyond the horizon, where the bulldozers hadn't reached, a few old homes dating back to the twentieth century miraculously survived. Made of brick and mortar, concrete and timber, you literally *felt* like you were going back centuries as you stepped inside. Real character they had, but they were mostly condemned as unsafe for human occupation.

He remembered his parent's old home where he had spent so many years growing up. The tall trees, the grass, the flowers, the purple stains on the driveway when the mulberry tree was bearing fruit. And what about those lovely rectangular bedrooms and their double-decker bed. And the slow-combustion heater where Dad used to burn real timber. They'd tried to ban them, years ago, when they were all worried about global warming and its inseparable roommate 'climate change', asserting the burning of timber had an unacceptably high adverse impact. They wanted cleaner energy, smaller carbon footprints. Smaller cars pumping out fewer harmful emissions. More efficient electricity generators, wind power, solar energy, hydrogen, 'clean' coal, geo-thermal heat, lots of options. But in the end, with the world population at that time nudging well over six billion (a three-fold increase in less than a hundred years), all of them increasingly hungry for the power facilitating western living standards, the only practical solution had seemed to be nuclear. But with cold fusion still an elusive concept, waste disposal had remained the central debate. Billions of dollars had been thrown at the problem and no self-respecting scientist had dared apply for research funding without the words 'climate change' somewhere in their submission.

And then a single bushfire added more carbon to the air than a whole year's worth of emissions. And no one had seemed to realise, (at least they weren't saying so in public), that carbon made up much less than one twentieth of a percentage point of the atmosphere, whilst the greatest global warming factor, water vapour, (commonly known as *clouds* and making up more than seventy percent!), was blatantly ignored as having any impact whatsoever. It made you scratch your scalp, even when it didn't itch.

He'd be allowed to help start the fire, crumpling up lots of newspaper (paper mind you, the stuff you could only find in archives nowadays, waiting to be scanned and digitised) then some small kindling and a couple of logs on top. What did Dad used to say about that? (Logs were like Christians - you needed at least two or three and they kept each other burning). *That* brought a lump to his throat.

Then they'd sing songs, Dad with the guitar, all huddled around the heater for warmth - Mum, Dad, John and himself. Mum would be cooking dinner on that old gas stove. And they'd all sit at the table to tell what the day had been like or what they'd learnt at school. That must have been fifteen years ago or more, when he was about ten. Even before the earthquakes started....

Michael's long face, a hand-me-down of European origins, sporting high cheek bones and slightly receding chin covered with at least twelve hours worth of stubble, revealed a deep sadness. His high forehead wrinkled with uncharacteristic lines, as his brilliant blue eyes seemed to focus somewhere far beyond the view.

Empty spaces. Straining to touch answers lying just beyond the brink of awareness. Then fear. Fear of the unknown. Fear of the pain remembrance might bring. Had he known at that point what the rest of the day had on offer, there wouldn't have been enough room in his brain to even contemplate these things. But he didn't know.

He forcefully shook himself out of the reverie, ran broad hands through his unkempt crop of straight brown hair, and adjusted his focus on the scene outside again. Some kids were screaming and running wildly down the walkway. Life in 2023. They really ought to find something useful for them to do; ten hours of video instruction per week wasn't enough to keep them occupied and well adjusted. That was one of the biggest social problems of the day – thousands of bored teenagers roaming the neighbourhood. Those interested could of course spend as much time as they liked receiving video instruction, but most kids didn't possess either the self discipline or motivation to bother with any more than the compulsory minimum. Built-in cameras monitored their every move and keystroke while they were in front of the computer, and face-recognition software made sure there was no cheating the system. But when the remote tutoring sessions were over, what then? They either got hooked on cyberspace virtual-life games, or they took to the walkways.

He turned abruptly. Just a few long strides took him from his office into the living room where Eve was sitting on the air lounge, with a computer terminal display, in purchasing mode, mounted on the coffee table in front of her. She was twenty-four, small and slim, old enough to have been there when the millennium-bug turned out to be a furphy, when the human genome project was completed and the full implications covered up, and when the towers of the World Trade Centre came down and had started the war on terrorism in earnest. But she was hardly old enough to have understood any of the import of those events. (He had a year on her, and didn't get it either.) Her wavy shoulder-length blonde hair fell over her right eye and she flicked it back with an impatient little gesture of annoyance. She was dressed in smooth white tights and a loose red tunic, setting off her feminine curves beautifully. She didn't notice him come in, fully occupied studying the shopping display and trying hard to decide if it really was cheaper to buy the economy-size cereal. Silently he admired her slender hands and elegant fingers, covered in smooth olive skin, as she deftly manipulated the touch-screen. He'd never met her parents, but Eve said she had her mother's looks. She must have been very beautiful, her mother.

A smile touched his lips as he watched her sitting there, totally absorbed, and a surge of desire and affection warmed his heart. 'I love that girl' flashed through his mind as he furtively sneaked around the back of the lounge, and a silent prayer of thanks went up to whatever unfathomable higher being might have magnanimously decided to bless him with her love. No one would ever have guessed that she was two months pregnant. He placed his hands gently on her slender shoulders and bent down to playfully nibble her ear.

"Mike Canning, behave yourself!" she reacted, mockingly scornful. "I'm trying to do the weekly shopping".

"O.K. then, but just wait and see what happens when you're through!"

He grinned to himself. Yes, he sure was lucky to have a wife like Eve. Oh, lately she had become a little irritable, impatient with David and sometimes stuck for knowing what to do with herself, but that was only natural when you were expecting a baby. Pregnancy played havoc with a woman's hormones and from what he'd read, some men had to put up with a lot worse in the same circumstances.

"Where's David?" he asked, while she opted for three economy-size packets of cereal, after mentally redoing the unit-pricing calculation shown in the column on the left. Just because it said 'economy', didn't mean it really *was* cheaper! The screen switched over promptly to display the available range of sweeteners.

“In the T.V. room, darling,” and she added, “I’ll take you up on that invitation when I’m finished!” raising her eyebrows suggestively and with a twinkle in her big brown eyes. (No sign of irritability there now).

He crossed the living area to the television room door, which slid aside silently when he touched it. David, his unmanageably curly brown hair badly in need of a brush, (obviously a genetic hand-me-down from some long-forgotten ancestor), was watching channel thirty-nine which ran continuous children’s’ programs twenty-four seven. Funny, how you could already recognise Eve’s skin and his own eyes and nose, even some of Eve’s gestures, in the boy. But where on earth did he get that curly hair? They said it was all in the genes and could jump numerous generations.

The two-and-a-half by one metre screen, ‘wide-screen plus’ they called it, used light-emitting-diode technology (LED). Whilst the equipment was capable of producing three-dimensional images, few programs were as yet available in that format. In fact, most of the programs were old repeats in the 4 by 3 format, re-run for the thousandth time, or the later 16 by 9 format, re-run for the hundredth. The entertainment industry was still in grave disarray, Hollywood practically non-existent.

“How’s Daddy’s boy then?”

David ran over to him and tossed two small arms around his neck as Mike squatted down.

“Will you buy me one of those, Daddy?” the boy pleaded, pointing at the image showing an advertisement for a replica mobile that actually hovered a metre above the ground, controlled by a hand-held monitor. Almost like the real thing, only in miniature.

Maybe for your next birthday, Davy my boy. I’m sure they must be very expensive.”

“Will I be big then, Daddy?”

Mike smiled. “You’re big *now*, my son. You must be all of a *hundred* centimetres!”

“How big are you, Daddy?”

“Oh, a hundred and ninety centimetres, I guess, but I’m willing to bet that when you grow up you’ll be even taller than that.”

“I like to be just as big as you , Daddy, but not bigger.”

The words stirred another memory in Michael. Again he experienced the disappointment and shock he had felt one day when, at the age of ripening manhood, eighteen, during a romp in the garden after their exercises, he suddenly and dreadfully realised that he was stronger than his father. A hard slap in the face would have been preferable. Worst had been that squeamish sense of unease deep down in his gut, like a security blanket forcefully taken away. He had always looked up to his father as an invincible tower of strength, someone with an answer to every problem, a way of dealing with every situation. His dependence on his father had remained through all the years of growing up and he had always been reluctant to leave his father out of anything. They had been best friends, *close* best friends. Dad had always been the leader, but unexpectedly he was facing a role reversal here. Letting Dad win the wrestling match had done nothing to ease the feeling. And that seemed to be the last really clear memory he had of his Dad.

“You’ll be exactly my size one day, Davy.” He lifted him up on his arm. “See? You’re the same size now!” Laughing, they flopped down together on some loose air cushions to watch the end of an old Sesame Street rerun.

Half an hour later Eve came in. “Darling, could you do me a favour, please? The main delivery mobile is fully booked today and my order won’t get here until tomorrow. We’ve run out of quite a few things. Would you...? While I make lunch?” she added.

“At you’re service, Madam!” he joked. “Want to come along for the ride, Davy?”

David jumped with excitement. “Can I sit in the front with you Daddy?”

“Sure son, just make sure you sit quietly and have your seat belt on.”

David was already running to the stairway leading to the roof. Michael chased after him, barely managing a peck on the cheek for Eve. “Hold on there, son. Wait for me!”

“Have you got your identity card with you?” Eve called after them.

“Oops, wouldn’t get far without it, would we? It’s in my jacket in the office.” Mike was halfway up the stairs.

“I’ll get it, darling.” Eve hurried to the office and returned with the jacket.

“I saw on the news last night someone’s developed a way to electronically inscribe identity numbers on your hand. That way you could never forget to bring it with you,” Michael commented.

“Oh, but that would look awful, wouldn’t it?”

“You wouldn’t *see* anything. It would be some sort of bar-code hidden in the skin. You’d simply put your hand on a scanner which would read the number and possibly your fingerprints at the same time, using some new technology they have only just developed. For all intents and purposes it’ll work the same way as the cards. Only difference is: you can *steal* an identity card. Worse, you can steal an *identity*. And it’s apparently a vast improvement on the idea of implanting microchips into everyone, like they originally wanted to do, as if we were cattle or pets, and having your life’s history available to anyone with the right long-range scanner.”

Mike retrieved his card from one of the pockets, tossed the jacket back to Eve and continued up the stairs. “Bye, won’t be long ...”

The mobile was electromagnetically anchored to the roof. The doors lifted as Mike waved his card in front of the sensor on the driver’s side. No more keys in *this* age of technology. He dropped into the seat behind the controls and hit the start button, as David scrambled in next to him. They fastened their seat belts, Mike double-checking David’s. The doors closed automatically and a slight bee-hum became audible simultaneously. When Michael shifted the level control upwards, the mobile slowly rose vertically by about fifty metres to the domestic transport level.

Mike selected manual drive. There were a number of automatic drive programs he could have selected, one of which set the route to the warehouse. You’d drive the route once while on ‘record’. After that you could simply ‘replay’ the route while the computer made automatic over-ride adjustments for wind disturbances and to avoid collisions. Eve liked to use the programs, while

Mike preferred manual operation, which still featured mandatory over-ride software to make vehicle accidents a thing of the past.

The energy indicator showed eighty-five percent battery charge, giving a range of at least three hundred kilometres. He accelerated to maximum speed while David squealed with delight. He executed some fancy curves and didn't slow up until some other mobiles approached. One coming from the north was on a collision course, but Michael's mobile gently dropped ten metres to avoid it, then automatically came back up to the preset level.

David pointed excitedly. "Look Daddy, is that a delivery mobile?"

A large shape loomed a hundred metres overhead at the commercial transport level, comfortably idling along at no more than forty k's, like some enormous complacent beast, superior and only too aware of its whereabouts and purpose. A module home was suspended underneath, ready for installation on the outskirts of their suburban development.

"It's big, isn't it Daddy?"

"Sure it is. Daddy knows someone who operates one of those. How would you like to have a drive in one soon?"

"Wow, that'd be great!" David sat fascinated, with a big grin from ear to ear.

A few minutes later they arrived at the single-level warehouse, setting down in the customer parking area outside the rooftop delivery office. Hand in hand they ambled over to the enquiry counter to request personal pick-up of their shopping order.

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Eve walked towards the kitchen with a soft smile on her pretty face. David sure loved excursions, no matter how short-lived. They must make a point of taking him out more often. She hung Michael's jacket on the back of a chair and determined to make something really nice for lunch. She sure had been impatient lately, snapping at David for no good reason.

The morning sickness had passed again and suddenly she felt a lot better. Yes, she must prepare something really special for lunch to make it up to him. Pancakes were David's favourite. Another smile. Mike wouldn't turn up his nose at them either!

She first checked that she had the necessary ingredients for the pancakes. Satisfied, she decided to water the grass before cooking. She returned to the hall and pressed the stair release on the wall. The retractable staircase slowly and silently unfolded itself in front of her.

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A boy of about six years of age was running down the walkway, chasing a vinyl ball which bounced against the fence on the right and continued down the intersecting path on the left. The blue, yellow, green and black swirls of the ball stood out like livid bruises on a miniature earth, like injuries from the pounding it had received from naive and uninformed caretakers. The boy bounded around the corner but slipped and fell, badly grazing his knee. Tears welled up in his eyes but he bravely fought to hold them back, desperately searching for his lost earth look-a-like. Vision still blurred, he spotted it no more than a metre away. Relieved to recover his prized possession and ignoring the

pain in his leg, he crawled over and reached out to take hold of it, only to find a large boot unexpectedly blocking the way.

“What’s ya think ya’re doin’ then, eh?” demanded a fairly high-pitched, coarse voice.

He looked up in surprise. Rubbing the tears away with his muddied hands, thereby leaving big streaks resembling war-paint on his cheeks, he took in a tall youth aged seventeen or eighteen, dressed in tight trousers and a black fake-leather jacket. A big sly grin decorated his face as he towered over the boy. Cold shivers ran up the boy’s spine and fresh tears forced their way up, though this time motivated by fear instead of pain. Television-inspired evil incarnate confronted him and he struggled hard to decide between running and making an attempt to get his ball back. The war-paint did nothing to raise his courage, but pride of ownership gave him just that tiny bit.

“Please let me have my ball” he pleaded, trying unsuccessfully to keep his voice from shaking.

“Sure, sonny, come and get it then” the youth taunted, faking as kind a tone as he could.

Warily the boy reached out, but, as he was about to pick up the ball, the youth tapped it lightly, making it roll slowly down the path, where its progress was again interrupted by another boot. The boy’s eyes froze on a new adolescent and he was vaguely aware of a third person a little further back. He got to his feet with panic rising in his throat. He tried desperately to swallow it down, but couldn’t. It was stuck, threatening to cut off his air supply. His young mind was unable to cope with the situation and his thoughts were screaming, though no sound would come from his mouth.

“Now ya’re not bein’ very nice to the kid, Jim,” admonished the second youth, picking up the ball and holding it on the palm of his hand, arm outstretched as if to offer it back. The youth slowly moved towards the boy, smiling artificially.

“Here kid, ya can ‘ave it back now. We was only kiddin’ matey.”

The boy stood paralysed, heat throbbing just behind his eyes. The youth came to within arm’s length and bent down to present the earth-like ball. Then the smile vanished, wiped away by an angry scowl and a mean look in the light blue eyes. The knife appeared from nowhere and then the ball was nothing more than plastic ribbons draped over the youth’s fingers, like an unintended but pitiful metaphor for the damage mankind had selfishly inflicted on this blue planet.

The boy screamed and finally his small muscles obeyed his brain’s instructions. He turned and ran as fast as his little legs would carry him, tears streaming down his cheeks, the way the greenies of the last century might have wept for what the rest of humanity had done to the environment.

Behind him the air was filled with the youths’ derisive, but empty laughter.

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The three youths, the amusement of the ball episode quickly wearing off, loitered around not knowing what to do with themselves. The day promised no clear further opportunities for amusement.

“I’m bored stiff with this set-up. Let’s do somethin’. Anythin’. Let’s find some place to turn upside down. There must be *some* place in this damn city to turn us on,” Blue murmured to his mates, deftly toying with the razor-sharp flick knife. To an informed listener, it would have been obvious both their nick-names and choice of vernacular were preferential selections inspired by old movie

repeats. He retracted the blade and stowed the weapon back into his pocket. He turned and started strolling up the path. The other two followed like sheep.

And in the darkness of the unseen world, sinister forces were stirring ...

Five minutes later he stopped. The walkway was empty, except for the three of them. A staircase was slowly coming down beneath one of the module homes and a young woman descended with a spray bottle in her hand. Blue nudged Jim in the ribs.

“Get a load of that, man! Look at those legs! Bet we could have some fun with her, eh? ... Get down!”

Crouched on their haunches, the three youths ogled the attractive female form spraying coloured liquid on a small green patch.

“Dig that, they got some grass growin’!”

“Forget the grass, man. Look at the shape on that babe! How’d ya like ta git yer hands on her?”

“That’s Mrs. Canning, man,” Herb finally spoke. We’d better lay off. Me old lady knows her.”

“So what? Does she know *you*?”

“Don’t think so, but it don’t pay to mess around this close to home.”

“Ya’re yella, Herby. Get outta here if ya don’t want no part in a bit o’ fun.”

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Eve came down the stairs with an atomiser already one third full with decontaminant. She topped it up with dissolved fertiliser from a water container they stored underneath their module. (Processed human-waste fertiliser came in powder form down a flexible hose tied to one of the module legs, as did the water supply). She walked over to the metre-square patch of buffalo, carefully bounded off by a silicon surround ten centimetres high, and pumped the compressor a good twenty times before proceeding to spray the area thoroughly. The sight of the rest of the yard filled her with dismay - it was all still barren. They had tried almost every spot at one time or another, but this was the only place where the grass had taken, where the radio-active contamination had somehow either dissipated or not poisoned the soil quite as much and had allowed this humble form of vegetation to grow. It was a good sign though. If the grass would grow here, maybe it wouldn’t be long before it would spread. At this time though it was necessary to keep it isolated. They had found out the hard way that any runners venturing beyond the edging not only died, but conveyed certain death back to the entire patch. But she liked to think positive. Who knows, maybe they could try some native bushes in a few years. Oh, how she would love to live inland or up the coast, where trees still stood tall and flowers blossomed in spring and the ground was green and the air free of dust. What a pity Mike’s work kept him here. But the restoration of Sydney was a huge project and would keep him, them, here for many years to come.

She gazed over the barren landscape, devoid of all vegetation - only module homes and fenced pathways and sterile dust. How she longed to see trees decorating every allotment, bushes enhancing those pathways, how she missed the perfume of flowers. Yes, this little patch of buffalo grass was more precious to her than even her home - it symbolised the beginning of a return to a beautiful world.

As she looked around, the rear view of a youth disappeared quickly down the path. His shape seemed vaguely familiar but she couldn't quite place him. Funny that she hadn't seen him coming - she had been facing the direction from which he must have come. Daydreamer! She admonished herself, shrugged her pretty shoulders and dismissed the thought as irrelevant. She bent down to give the patch a final light spray all over.

Eve returned to the house and climbed the stairs, not conscious of the alluring natural sway of her hips. She hurried to the kitchen to prepare the pancakes, hoping to have them ready by the time Michael and David got back. Raising the staircase slipped her mind.

Evil forces were rubbing their hands together in sweet anticipation, though warily cognisant of the limitations placed upon them. Nevertheless, also knowing their rights and the extent of their power, they proceeded relentlessly.

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A little more flour and the batter reached the right consistency with the whipping action of her beater. She stopped a moment, sensing somehow that she was no longer alone. A strange sensation. Waiting, listening for identifying sounds, staring at the sink in front of her. Then realising Mike and David must have arrived, she turned around cheerfully.

"I didn't hear you come ba"

The sentence cut off halfway out of her mouth. Two extraneous youths leaned back brazenly against the wall either side of the door. Their teeth were bared in semblance of a grin, but closer to an insulting sneer, contorting their ugly faces. Eve was too stunned to say anything and just stared, incredulously, yet deep inside a stirring disquiet began to well up.

"Afternoon lady, makin' us some lunch?" Blue was the first to speak, after what seemed like an interminable silence. "Keep goin', ya were doin' just fine."

Eve snapped out of her state of disbelief and accepted the fact that there were intruders in her home. "What do you want?" she demanded, hoping to keep the tremor out of her voice.

"We jus' came to watch ya, lady. We like the way ya look, don't we mate?" His head turned to Jim.

"Yeah, an' we like the way ya move - 'specially the way ya move!"

"Well, you just get yourselves right out of here, right now, both of you! Before I notify the authorities!" Eve retorted, angry now, having got over the initial shock and ignoring her precarious position.

"Now there's no reason to get upset, lady. We don't mean no harm, do we Blue?" Jim assured her soothingly, then added with a smirk, "Besides, we wouldn't like for ya to call the cops."

"You nong!" Blue interrupted angrily, "No names!!" and thumped Jim hard on the shoulder.

"My husband will be back any minute, so I suggest you go before he does," she ventured, knowing that, whilst it was true, she didn't sound terribly convincing.

"Sure lady, everybody's husband is always comin' back any minute when they sees us. But they're so bloody unreliable, these husbands, ain't they Jim?" commented Blue, deliberately making the

identical mistake he'd just criticised. If they ever got caught, there was no way he was going down for it alone. Then again, they'd done this *so* many times, it was almost routine. And so far they hadn't even had as much as an *enquiry* from a cop. Their modus operandi had proven to be rather successful. Either that, or the cops just couldn't be bothered, too busy with other things.

Jim didn't reply. He stood there, just chuckling to himself.

"What's so funny? Come on, share the joke with the little lady. Don't ya know it's *rude* to snigger in company? Ain't ya got no manners?" The 'rude' was emphasised with a sarcastic 'w'- 'wooed'-effectively, yet subtly, communicating threat to Eve.

"Oh, sorry. Ah was jus' thinkin', the lady's got far too much clothes on for us to fully appreciate her," Jim explained casually.

Blood drained from her face, leaving a chill on her cheeks. Confused thoughts raced through her brain. Surely this couldn't really be happening to her? She'd have to stall them. Mike should be home soon. He'd know how to handle them. Let them think they've got plenty of time. On the other hand, they weren't kidding around, even though they were, if that made sense. Maybe she could make a run for it. Maybe she could get past them and outside. She had obviously forgotten to raise the stairs; maybe they were still down.

She forced herself to remain calm on the surface by gritting her teeth and tightly shutting down her emotions. Yet an icy feeling of horror was slowly permeating her being. A child's voice inside her mind advised her to sit on the ground and cry. An adult voice told her to pull herself together and not be so stupid.

"Well, let's go into the living room and talk this over sensibly." She stepped forward, straining to appear confident and in control.

"Sure lady, make yerself at home!" Blue agreed obligingly, taking an exaggerated bow and stepping back to let her through.

When she was halfway through the doorway, with the foul stench of at least a week's worth of body odour assaulting her nasal passages, a merciless hand grabbed hold of her hair and pulled her head back viciously. She gasped with the pain. Then with unexpected change in approach, Blue eased off his grip and stroked her hair. He grinned at her broadly, a repulsive display of yellow, uneven teeth; a grin that made him look insane.

"Nice," he said and let her go.

Eve warily edged forward just a few steps. Then something broke loose in her heart and she responded in flight. She dashed off towards the staircase. Thought played little part. She was only instinctively and desperately trying to evade danger. She expected the stairs to be down and finding them up threw her into confusion. Frantically she tried to remember where the release switch was located, but it was already too late. Blue caught up and seized hold of both her arms. He had an amazingly strong grip, bruising her flesh with his fingers.

"That wasn't real smart, lady," he hissed, painfully twisting her arm behind her back with sadistic pleasure. He shoved her hard, sending her stumbling backwards into the living room. Jim had already settled himself comfortably into one of the lounge chairs. Blue hit the switch making the windows opaque, a recent innovation using nano-technology, doing away with in-built blinds.

“Well, let’s start all over again, shall we?”

Eve understood the cruel gleam in his eyes as he said it. She clung to the hope of Mike returning. Nevertheless, intermittent nervous tremors ran through her arms and she was unable to control them. Blue marched her to the middle of the room and placed his hands lightly on her shoulders.

“I do believe the little lady’s upset, Jim,” he commented, patting her cheek in mock consolation. They seemed to be making no effort at all to hide their names now, and she would have no trouble picking them out of a line-up, evoking even more warnings about their eventual intentions. Speaking softly near her ear, almost conspiratorially, he told her, “Don’t be upset, love, ya’ll enjoy this as much as us, if ya’ll just let yerself go.”

The stench of his breath and body awoke gorge in her belly. Vaguely she recalled attending self-defence lessons as a teenager, but the details wouldn’t form in her mind at first. About the only useless bit of advice that rose to the surface was, “Never cry ‘rape!’ Always cry ‘fire!’” Bystanders would avoid getting involved if you cried “rape!” A lot of good that would do here. She could barely talk, let alone cry out loud enough for the neighbours to hear. More bits came back, like ‘throw up your breakfast’, or ‘stick your finger up your nose and then suck that finger in your mouth’. Both were supposed to be real turn-offs for potential rapists and could at the very least buy time. But trying to make the vomit in her throat materialise seemed to demand vast amounts of physical energy, energy that had vanished by draining through an invisible grate in the floor. And she was unable to find enough strength to even raise her arm to her nose. A good kick to the scrotum was supposed to be next, but her legs were buckling and barely holding her up. Rape was about power, not sex. These guys were here to humiliate. And they were winning. They wanted to get a thrill by watching her squirm, and then rub it in by committing the ultimate insult and violation.

Blue’s dirty hands caressed her shoulders, her neck, while a solitary tear traced a path down the side of her nose. His left hand moved down and stroked her breast.

Anger returned in a flash from the most primal part of her brain, roughly pushing aside the fear. These louts, beasts, animals, or whatever poor excuse for a human being they represented, couldn’t just walk in here and subject her to this degradation! Wild sparks ran through her nervous system, suddenly supplying energy galore and she lashed out with both hands, aiming at his face. Finding her mark, she drew her nails down leaving long, bleeding weals. She was not prepared for the fury of his reaction, however, and took a massive punch full in the face, sending her reeling backwards, twisting, tripping over her own feet and falling headlong onto the coffee table, which dug into her stomach with frightening force.

She rolled off the table to sit on the floor, clutching her middle protectively. Her thoughts were no longer for herself, but for the tiny, delicate life she was carrying. Warm wetness told her she was bleeding from underneath and a great pain contracted her belly. The two month old life that had been growing within her would grow no more

Jim grabbed her arms and jerked her to her feet. She cared no longer. Tears were flowing freely now and her shoulders were hunched in grief for the baby she would never know. Whatever they did to her now, it couldn’t be worse than what they had already done.

Blue came over and slapped her face hard three times. They were vicious slaps, backhand, forehand, backhand, the ‘let there be no doubt who’s in charge here’ type hand. Then he took a firm hold of her tunic with both paws and ripped out the left sleeve and shoulder. The material gave way easily, as her mind slipped a cog into an unreal observer’s position. He might have ripped off her arm with as much effect.

His instructions were carried on a waft of stinking breath that somehow reminded her of the rotting carcasses that had lain around for some time after the nuclear sabotage. “You bloody bitch! You’ll pay for that! Strip!”

She stared at him uncomprehendingly. His face was out of focus, registering only through a watery haze. The room spun around her. The floor rose and fell, as if she were aboard ship.

He repeated slowly, hissing through his ugly teeth: “We - want - to - see - you - strip!”

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Mike passed his identity card across the counter and waited for the girl to feed it through a reader for verification. Two boxes were deposited on the adjacent counter by a conveyor belt. David begged to help, so Mike gave him two of the large economy packets of cereal, tucked a box under each arm and together they strolled back to the mobile. A few moments later they were off again.

He took his time, taking a round-about way back for David’s benefit. The young boy was bubbling with excitement, asking a hundred questions about the things below. A gnawing sensation irritated the pit of Mike’s stomach, as if something was dreadfully wrong, but he shrugged it off. What could possibly be wrong?

Who is to know what goes on in that other world that exists side by side with what we can see and touch? That spiritual realm, filled with entities hardly understood by anyone. Where light and dark forces wage a continual war for supremacy. How does it influence our lives, the happenings around us, possibly even the thoughts we think, the things we end up doing and the words we speak? Often against our will or better judgement. In that world, unbeknown to Michael, a conflict had already started for ownership of his soul.

“Look at that funny house, Daddy.” David looked at him, obviously expecting a full explanation as to why the house was funny.

“Your Dad used to live in one like that when he was your age, Davy. They’re lots of fun to live in, but they don’t stand up very well in an earthquake - it’s a wonder there are any left at all.”

“An earthquake, Daddy, is that when the floor shakes and all the things fall off the table?”

“That’s right. But our house stands on three spring-loaded legs and if the ground shakes, the house is OK. And if the ground sags, we only have to make some of the legs a little longer or shorter to make the house straight again. That funny house would fall to pieces if the ground moved under it.”

That gave David quite something to think about and he was quiet for a little while. Mike switched on the television, selecting channel 3 for continuous news broadcasts. The screen was only visible when the mobile was in program drive, but he was content with just listening.

There had been another devastating earthquake in South America. Intensity 9.2 on the Richter scale. Even module homes couldn’t survive a shaking that strong. Simulation destruction tests had shown the legs to fracture at 8.5 and it was not practical to reinforce them further.

News continued with a report from Israel, currently in the grips of a severe drought. Two self-proclaimed prophets, who had been doing the rounds of the streets of Jerusalem for a couple of years now, were openly denouncing the Universal Church, and predicting general doom. They went about

dressed in old rags, presumably to prove their sincerity. It had Michael stumped how on earth they had got away with it for so long. So many had been arrested for a lot less. It was illegal, in fact regarded as treason, to criticise either the Government or the Church. Deep down, Michael had to admit to some empathy with any breakaway, anyone who had the guts to buck the system. But you would never confess such empathy to anyone else.

Something from long ago slipped across the border of his subconscious. His own father had often spoken out against the established church, but it hadn't been illegal then. 'If you come out of church not knowing you have met with God, you might as well not have gone,' he would say. People had rebuked his father, saying he was unrealistic and expected too much, but somehow he understood a little of what his father had meant. Sure, you went to church because it was the done thing and non-attendance was frowned upon by the authorities. But most of the sermons seemed nothing more than blatant propaganda for the Government, (whoever *they* were). *Never* had he come out knowing he had met with a divine entity, face to face. Sometimes it was enough to make you doubt the existence of a God. Yet, planted in the innermost depths of his being, that place where hiding under heavy shadows of taught tradition a different value system operates, remained an ever so small hope that somehow, somewhere, there must be a God who cares.

Empty spaces, coming dangerously close to touching the truth. Just thinking this way evoked an extreme uneasiness, followed by that familiar nausea. The prospect of random ambling through his own mind involved the very real risk of stumbling across something he couldn't cope with. The unknown. Who knows, maybe it wasn't all that bad, but it was best not to find out.

Of course the church today was an entirely different concern from the way it was when he was a boy. Then, there were untold numbers of denominations and sects, all divided over some silly questions of interpretation or tradition and all that had been taken care of. One Universal Church was now in operation, organised by Government delegates in consultation with representatives from all the various religions. All conflicting and offensive parts of both the Bible and the Koran had simply been removed and a few miscellaneous sayings added to satisfy Hindus and Buddhists, arriving at a merged document called 'SCRIPTURE', a suitable compromise for a united church. Matter of fact, an entire *book* had been removed from the end of the New Testament, when the consultative committee concluded that the author at the time of writing must have been under the influence of drugs. And Genesis had been completely re-written to allow no doubt that life on earth had evolved four and a half million years ago. In Michael's opinion, it was a bit like the Catholics changing the Ten Commandments to allow for the worship of statues, only much more drastic. It was claimed that those who stuck to the 'old ways' were actually suffering from a genetic disorder, causing an illogical and psychopathic perception of reality.

Maybe Dad would have been happy with this unification - he had often said there was in effect only one Church and we should all behave that way. But somehow Michael doubted it. Dad would have screamed at the top of his lungs at the idea of tampering with God's Word.

There were of course breakaway groups sticking to the 'old ways' which had gone into hiding. ('You can never please everyone' had been the subject of last Sunday's sermon). People generally refused to associate with anyone suspected of being a member or even being sympathetic to their cause. You had to, for your own protection. Just once he had spoken briefly with a couple of adherents of such a group. There had been something about those fellows, something in their eyes, (as if they were more *alive* than the average person). But there had been something else, something very difficult to put your finger on. Maybe he could best describe it as a unity, a oneness, but in a strange, different sort of way. Even though they both had shown their own individual personalities, underneath it all they conveyed this weird sense he was talking to only one person.

He had been tempted to investigate further, he couldn't deny that. But you had to think of your family, couldn't risk becoming a social outcast for the sake of a momentary curiosity. He might even lose his job. Worst of all would be the way it would reflect on Eve and David. Breakaway religion was made illegal when the constitution of the Universal Church was enacted in 2021. The terms 'Christian', 'Muslim', 'Jew', 'Hindu' and 'Buddhist' had been reserved for exclusive application within the Church and its use outside these bounds was made a punishable offence. Yet anyone *attending* could label themselves by whatever category they fancied.

"There's our house, Daddy!" David pointed. He had already learned to recognise the colour-coded surface and numbers on their roof. Mike manoeuvred sideways until the roof was centred onto the landing screen and the mobile descended gently, homing in on the four landing signals marking out their parking spot.

"You go on ahead and open the door, Davy," Mike instructed, holding his card out to David and removing the boxes of groceries from the back of the mobile. With a box under each arm, he approached the roof entrance door, now silently opening, and was the first to descend. As he arrived in the hallway, he turned to peek into the living room as he came past, jovially starting a greeting to let Eve know they were back. And promptly dropped both boxes on the floor.

His first sensation was of stark, dreamlike unreality, followed by nightmarish horror, then of boiling, raging anger. Eve stood completely naked. A pimply, dirty youth had hold of her wrist. Another was standing nearby.

They all looked at him, frozen like a paused DVD. Eve's face was covered with bruises. Her eyes were red, defeated, pleading for help, yet barely showing recognition. There was fresh blood on the floor and on her thighs. The youth holding her was filthy, both his clothes and skin. His hair was knotted and greasy. His mouth hung open in surprise. Eve's nakedness left little doubt as to what had been happening. The other youth's face was covered with long scratches and fresh blood, and he was even dirtier than the first.

Mike grew cold inside. His usually deep blue eyes appeared to fade into an icy pale shade. He said nothing. No words would express what he felt. He wanted to explode, blasting the youths into nothingness. He wanted to take Eve into his arms, to comfort her, soothe away the hurt, defeat, despair from her face. He wanted to restore the vision of loveliness he had left behind less than an hour ago.

All he could hear was the sound of his own racing heart beating loudly on his eardrums and he felt the blood speeding through his veins. Torrents of salty perspiration poured off his forehead, almost blinding him. But he hardly noticed it. Without any thought as to the consequences, he marched directly at the youth holding Eve, who, in his surprise, let her go. Mike's fist shot out and landed on the youth's jaw. He felt bone cracking and giving way as he made contact and the youth went sprawling on the floor. That was Jim taken care of. Blue took cover behind the lounge, fear in his eyes now.

Mike turned to find Eve, to tell her to hide, but his tongue didn't work. He turned again to face Blue, but by now Blue was somehow holding David and backing into the hall. David's eyes were dilated with terror. Mike hesitated no more than an instant. He had to do something. There was no time for thinking, no time for reason. He mustn't give the animal a chance. So he rushed straight at them. Scared out of his wits by this man gone berserk, Blue pushed David into Mike's path and ran for the staircase. Wild-eyed, Mike side-stepped David, pounced and managed to grab hold of Blue's shirt. He spun him around, slamming him against the wall.

He was about to strike him down, when the gleam in the youth's eyes changed subtly from watery fear to evil triumph. Blue bared his yellow teeth in a snarl. From the corner of his eye, Mike caught a glimpse of flickering light, then the sensation of pricking in his chest. Something had penetrated below his ribs. There was no real pain, only a feeling of squeamish discomfort and his brain first going foggy, then fading to black. The last thing he was aware of before he collapsed was Eve screaming ...

And in the unseen darkness, evil retreated with a triumphant sniggering not heard in the material world.

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When he came to, he found himself in a hospital ward - apparently a private room, because there were no other beds. Eve was sitting next to him, holding his hand tightly in her own, determined not to let go, no matter how much perspiration came between them. Her left eye was blackened, her face a mass of bruises and bandaids. She looked terribly worried and he knew he loved her more than anything. He tried to reassure her everything would be alright by squeezing her hand, but his fingers wouldn't respond. He tried to speak, to tell her not to worry so, but his lips and tongue wouldn't obey either. Was he paralysed or what? Why was he here anyway? What had happened?

Then horror slipped back into his mind, like a card into a magician's pack. The youths! Eve, naked, bleeding, bruised, humiliated. What had they done with the bastards? He relived the agony of conflicting emotions; the love of his life violated; fury; David in danger; then the unbelieving realisation that he had actually been stabbed. How strange that he didn't hurt.

The door opened slightly and David poked his head through. "Has Daddy woken up yet, Mummy?"

"Not yet sweetheart. I'll call you when he does. You go and play in the children's waiting room now."

What did she mean he hadn't woken up yet? He was awake wasn't he? Had been for at least five minutes. He looked back at Eve, smiled, but she didn't seem to notice. Her eyes moved away and sudden alarm showed on her face. He followed her gaze to the cardiograph monitor keeping track of his heartbeat. By the look of that, his heart was barely ticking over, and rather irregularly at that. It seemed serious, so why did he feel so normal? The machine *must* be playing up.

Eve frantically pushed the emergency button and in no time the room was bustling with attendants, doctors and nurses. Eve was gently ushered out, while equipment was brought in. She glanced back over her shoulder with despair on her face. He found he could talk again that instant and called out to her: "Eve, darling, I'm alright, I'm O.K., don't worry!" But she didn't seem to hear. No one heard. What was the matter with everyone? Had they all gone *deaf*?

He was starting to feel very strange now, extremely light, weightless, almost as if he would float away if he didn't hold onto the bed. He spoke to the nurses busy near his head. "Please tell my wife not to worry. Tell her I'm going to be alright." But they ignored his pleas. No one took any notice. Well, if they weren't going to tell her, he was just going to have to do it himself, he thought angrily, spurred on by the aggravation of being ignored. He sat up. Stood up next to the bed. It took no effort at all. A number of nurses blocked the way, so he barged right through the middle of them, as easily as if he had been coated in butter. But when he looked back he received the shock of his life.

He was still lying on the bed!

For an instant panic took hold of him. Somehow he had transgressed some vital law of physics and parted from his body. He felt the way a child might, after breaking mother's favourite vase in her absence, wanting to wind back the clock just a few minutes, to when everything was still intact. Maybe he could still put things right and not be found out, so he rushed back to his bed, dodging medicos and nurses as they got in the way. But they never impeded his progress, and with no trouble at all he was back where he started, sitting on the bed.

Somehow, finding he could move at will, wherever he liked, put his mind at ease. Nothing here was irreversible. And it really was quite pleasant this weightlessness, effortless moving about, experiencing amazing manoeuvrability and complete physical comfort (if you could *call* it physical). He decided to defer reuniting with his body. He rose above the bed and watched the proceedings from near the ceiling. It was a bit like watching an opera from high up in one of the privileged dress-circle boxes, as he had seen in an old black and white movie recently. Observing the cardiograph, he noticed his heart had stopped altogether. Did that mean ...? Was he ... was he dead? Was this death?

They were connecting a machine, one that straddled the bed. Tentacles with needles and suction cups were pulled out and connected to various parts of his body. Then the machine was rolled forward over his chest. Other retractable wires were attached to his skull. A needle into one arm, transfusion equipment into the other. Oxygen mask over his face. They switched it on and what seemed to be a mechanical heart massager began to pound the inanimate torso with a dull, regular thud. His back arched up as a strong electrical pulse tried to restart his heart. Apparently no need for those greased paddles you saw on the medical dramas. A life support system of some sort? An external pacemaker? A few minutes later he was once more showing a heart beat and the pounding part of the machine switched off automatically. They pushed the machine down over his legs so his bandages could be exposed and a doctor removed them and proceeded to work on his stomach wound.

A new machine rolled in, a weird looking contraption, a large arch on four wheels with enough room to insert a hospital bed at right angles, allowing someone lying on it to pass fully through the opening. The advertising stickers, proclaiming it to be a 'Genetic Modification Interpolator', were still fixed to its side – indicating its newness: the very latest in genetic engineering equipment. Radiation warning labels instructed operators and medical staff to exit the room and only operate the equipment using a wireless keyboard and monitor from a shielded observation room. He vaguely wondered how it was possible for the wireless keyboard to get its signals through *into* the room, while the shielding stopped the radiation from getting *out*. But then the thought was gone again. They rolled the first machine back over his chest and interconnected the second contraption to the first with some sort of heavy cable. Then they moved it into position, switched it on ready for remote control, and all exited stage left.

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The gamma ray entered the alien landscape like a gust of wind driven by logic. It had pierced the outer protective cholesterol membrane of the human cell with no more trouble than the sun's ultra-violet rays might have passing through the hole in the ozone layer. It had a mission - to search, find and activate. Millions of its brothers in arms were performing identical missions at that very moment, each alone and totally focussed on their assignment.

It was swimming towards the centre through the watery cytoplasm, ignoring the organelles and mitochondria which were sharing its bath and watching its progress with interest. Reaching the nucleus, it penetrated carefully, making sure no irreparable damage would occur, and moved inward without invitation to where jellified proteins and ribonucleic acids provided a hospitable environment

for weird looking aliens. There were forty-six of them, grey, worm-like creatures, each joined to a partner at its waist, like Siamese twins hoping for an operation that would give each a life of its own, yet inextricably tied to each other.

The gamma ray was totally source dependent, its very nature determined by a computer program and external power, making it all the more aware of the extreme vulnerability of these aliens, chromosomes, now completely at its mercy. But its mission was not to destroy, rather to trigger duplication beyond programmed capacity, speeding up the healing of damaged tissue. If successful, the Siamese aliens would have their wish for independence fulfilled momentarily, but not in the way expected, only to find themselves back in an identical predicament shortly after. But it had another programmed task at hand – that of identifying genetic mistakes that had either been inherited or mutated through toxic exposure. At this point, however, that *might* have to wait till another day.

The gamma ray was fully briefed. It knew exactly which alien to invade and where in its innards to perform its task. But, on a ‘need-to-know’ basis, it had no idea of the repercussions of its actions. It homed in on the designated alien worm creature and entered via what might have been described as a tail end, to find itself in the strangest surroundings it had yet encountered. Like a spiral staircase, the creature’s intestines were arranged in a double helical ladder pattern, joined by millions of rungs. The rungs, while there were only two different types, identifiable by their texture, occurred in what appeared to be random order and it was just as well it knew exactly which of these millions it had to seek out. It had no need to climb the ladder but shot up the centre of the spiral, looking for a group of rungs that were arranged exactly in the order specified in its brief. Speed-reading in groups of three, it realised that what *appeared* to be random order was not random at all. The mystery of biological life itself could well be contained in this seemingly haphazard concoction.

There! Its target was dead ahead, the group of rungs checked out. Its approach was not tentative, but neither was it violent; it could best be described as predetermined. It had been instructed only to brush the third and the eighty-seventh rung in the group, merely to stimulate, not damage, and letting the appropriate enzymes do the rest. It followed its orders to the letter, not aware of the consequences that might ensue. So it was unprepared for the upheaval that followed. The rungs of the ladder snapped. Like rows of dominos falling, there seemed to be a cumulative effect as the entire ladder tore apart down the millions of rungs, with volumes of various acids rushing in from outside the alien in a great turmoil of apparent confusion and destruction. The Siamese twins were not separating at the waist, but instead torn asunder down each of their entire lengths!

It seemed as if something dreadful had gone wrong, all the care the gamma ray had taken appeared wasted. Then something switched at the ray’s source. And the ray died.

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A pity he didn’t know more about what they were doing - this really could be very interesting. Crazy that he didn’t feel upset. Here he was, watching himself dying and he wasn’t even anxious. Come to think of it, he couldn’t possibly be dead yet - they wouldn’t be going to all this trouble over a dead man! In that case he might as well enjoy himself. This sure was a remarkable experience.

A surgeon had removed an incredible amount of blood and goo from his insides, done some internal repairs with something that looked like a laser gun out of Star Wars, sprayed something into and on the cut, then left the final closure to someone else. Nearly everyone cleared out, leaving only a doctor and a nurse exchanging knowing glances. The doctor made slight adjustments to the knobs on both of the machines. The nurse cleaned up. The first machine resumed drumming his chest as soon as the monitor showed a flat line and started emitting that ominous continuous beep you heard

so often in medical shows. Shortly though, Mike was pleasantly encouraged to see he was once again registering a heartbeat, artificially stimulated though it might have been.

He felt the urge to explore, maybe try to find Eve, try to communicate with her, but the door was closed. And the window was fixed, as was usual in module design. He wasn't sure if the door would open for him and for some crazy reason the non-opening window seemed more attractive. It seemed to be calling him, beckoning, almost as if he'd be able to *fly* if only he could get past it. He moved right up to it and the urge to touch seemed irresistible. He felt the pane gingerly, but his hand moved right *through* the transparent silicon! He withdrew his hand and examined it closely, but there wasn't a mark on it. Nothing could hold him back now. One last look back around the room. A little red light flashed balefully on the monitor panel of the machine. An alarm went off. The doctor frowned with concern. He cared no longer and stepped through the window.

Instead of finding himself outside, he appeared to be in a long dark tunnel, moving at some speed. The walls of the tunnel were curved and smooth like perfectly machined and polished metal and ... My goodness, was he moving! There seemed to be a light at the end of the tunnel in the distance, but the end didn't seem to be getting any closer. His speed was dizzying, yet he didn't get dizzy. The walls flashed by, his speed increasing every second. And he looked ahead again. The light was still there. A super bright light, yet not blinding. At the same time he did not feel worthy to look directly at the light and averted his eyes slightly. For the first time he noticed that he was naked and he felt ashamed, tried to cover up with his hands. Still the Light was no closer, though it seemed to reach out to him with love and understanding. He felt the Light knew him, knew everything about him to the most minute detail. And still loved him.

The Light knew everything he had ever done or said or thought or felt. Every confusion, every grudge and hatred and show of anger, each tender moment of love. Every intention, good or bad, was already out in the open. And the Light still cared for him. He longed desperately for the Light to come closer, but he also knew that wouldn't happen until he could answer 'yes' to the question. The question wasn't spoken, yet he heard it and understood it perfectly.

"Are you ready?"

Was he ready? That question was the only possible variable in everything that was happening to him. Yet even that was no uncertainty - he knew the answer, just didn't want to admit it. Because it was negative. "No".

There was no hiding anything from the Light, for it already knew the answer. The Light knew everything. The alpha and the omega. The beginning and the end.

Suddenly he saw himself, with amazing clarity and detail, in a hospital. No, it wasn't the ward he had just left. This was a building from the early nineteen hundreds. Painted walls and plaster ceilings. Ancient uniforms on over-worked nurses. He could see his own arms and legs and that they were covered in blood. A man in a white coat and a cotton mask covering the lower half of his face slapped his bottom and he started to cry.

He had just been born.

They say that at the moment of truth, a few seconds before death, your whole life flashes before your eyes.

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“Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?”

But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.”

Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the centre of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God, sent out into all the earth. He came and took the scroll from the right hand of Him who sat on the throne.”

REVELATION 5 : 1-7

“I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword.

When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, “A quart of wheat for a day’s wages, and three quarts of barley for a day’s wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!”

When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth, to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until You judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.”

REVELATION 6 : 1-11

PART TWO

1998

My name is Michael Canning, born on the seventh day of January, 1998, in a hospital in Auburn, New South Wales, Australia. My first recollections comprise hazy faces on giant creatures. Looking back, that can probably be ascribed to the fact that new-born babies don't see very well and that size is only relative. The amazing thing is that I remember it at all.

The truth is, I never remembered it until this very moment. Somehow I am aware it is a memory, as opposed to a real-time experience, but don't ask me to explain how I know this, because what's going here truly is as close as you could possibly get to actually reliving an event. Some of the input signals distinguishing real life from memory must be missing, but I can't tell you which ones. It's a little like the way you can tell when you're dreaming, yet you can't help being emotionally involved in the dream. All I can tell you with any certainty is that I know the pictures in my mind come from the archives of my brain and are not actually happening right at this second.

Most of my time in hospital was spent lying in some sort of see-through plastic basket on a wheeled trolley. I slept most of the time. Now and then I would try to make as loud a noise as I could, partly because I was hungry and partly because it was interesting to hear my own voice.

Five times a day a lady would give me cuddles and milk from her breast and make cooing sounds at me. She grew closer to me than any of the nurses who would sometimes pick me up, or tuck back the blankets I had finally managed to kick off because it was stinking hot. It wasn't just that she filled the emptiness in my stomach - she filled me with a feeling of security, as if home was wherever she was, so I invariably cried when it was time to go back into my cot.

One day a man with a beard, who was even more gigantic than any of the others, smiled at me and picked me up. He carried me outside the hospital. That was a weirdly new experience, feeling a breeze on my face. He took me to a car where the lady I had become so fond of was waiting. She touched my cheek gently with the back of her fingers, radiantly happy. She constituted the most important aspect of my limited environment and I told her so with gurgling sounds. She smiled.

Though I couldn't recall having been in a car before, the sound and movement were strangely familiar and soothing. At a large block of units, I experienced an eerie revelation of causes to sounds I'd heard before. The bearded man carried me up at least three flights of echoey stairs and my mother was puffing heavily by the time we reached the top. He smiled and said it was just as well they had managed to sell the unit and buy a house. And they'd been very lucky with the finance. I recognised his voice.

It couldn't have been more than a week later, after numerous trips up and down that staircase, when a stranger helped my father carry out all the furniture. The journey must have rocked me to sleep, because when I woke I was in a new room, its walls freshly painted in light blue and decorated with a flowered wallpaper strip along the cornices of the ceiling. The other rooms of this new place were in a turmoil for weeks and I can still see my father bending over me with a big grin on his face and paint all through his beard.

In the dark of night, feeling a little peckish, I would cry long and loud to get someone to pay attention. Mum would come in and want to pick me up, but my father would refuse, saying that the

sooner I learned to sleep through the night, the sooner they would too. And they would be better parents if they weren't so tired. I didn't understand any of that at the time, of course, but accepting that the crying wasn't going to get me an extra feed, it hardly seemed worth all the trouble and soon I slept through the night.

There was one occasion when my father *did* pick me up out of bed one night, making me realise he did have his soft spot. It was pitch black when I woke with my bassinet shaking. Little plastic ducks strung overhead rattled by themselves in fright. Moments later my father had me in his arms and that night I slept between them in their big queen size bed. Before dozing off I heard them discussing whether it might have been an earth tremor.

At about six months, I began to appreciate my Dad more. He'd sing me soft songs when I was unhappy. My favourite was "Moon River". How much I longed to sing that with him! Other times he'd take me out into the yard and we'd romp on the lawn and have a marvellous time.

There were trips to the shops with Mum. Trips to church on Sundays where everyone would sing songs or listen to a man talking endlessly. When I was about a year old, Mum seemed to be putting on weight around her tummy. She became less patient with me and occasionally she would burst into tears for no apparent reason. She'd explain she wasn't feeling well, yet suddenly she'd be alright again, smiling and singing. Her tummy grew bigger and bigger and when I touched it one time she said there was a baby inside and that soon I would be having a little brother or sister.

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1999

We visited Mum in hospital and that's when I first laid eyes on this puny addition to the family, occupying a plastic box on wheels. Dad informed me that the occupant's name was John and that he was to be my new little playmate. He sure looked funny, all wrinkled and red; I wasn't at all sure I *wanted* him for a playmate.

Mum came home some days later and I was relieved to find she had returned to her normal size. John took over my old bassinet. I had been sleeping in a cot for around three months, but somehow it still seemed like an intrusion - that bassinet was *mine*. Mum and Dad's attention was now divided and I resented having to share with some brat who had decided to force his way into our happy lives, uninvited. I felt insecure, let down, and cried easily and often. How could they put up with this trespasser? Who asked him to come anyway? I clung to Dad at every opportunity, though Mum often made a special effort to comfort me.

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2000

John and I slept in the same room now, he in my cot and I in the lower part of a double bunk Dad had made. I didn't really resent this move because, as Dad said, I was too *big* for a cot. Besides, John had turned out to be quite a cute little fellow. Sharing with him was more acceptable now.

There had been a whole lot of hullabaloo towards the turn of the century, when all the computers in the world were expected to crash. Apparently, the software programs run on most of them had been designed with a year-date of only two digits. It was feared the computers would not be able to tell whether it was the year 2000 or the year 1900. They gave it a name - the millennium bug, or the

Y2K bug. Planes were going to fall out of the sky; elevators were going to stop between floors; trains would stop in tunnels and the tunnels would run out of air. Computer programs were going to fail; bank accounts would lose track of balances and be unable to calculate interest; share market price movements were expected to go haywire and crash as a result. The economy was going to go to the dogs; and believers thought the 'Lord' was going to return in the midst of all this chaos. Trillions of dollars were spent worldwide trying to rectify the problem. Millions were made by scaremongers publishing books about it. Newspaper headlines sold many more issues than normal circulation.

(At the time, none of this made sense to me of course, making me wonder now how on earth it can constitute a memory. But there you have it.)

I'd heard Dad say to someone that all they had to do to assess the situation was to put the future date, 31/12/99, into some computers and observe what happened as the new millennium ticked in. You could leave a plane on the ground while its computer entered the new millennium early and see if it still worked. And you could copy a banking program onto a desktop and see if it still calculated interest when it advanced to 1/1/2000. Maybe that was too simple a solution. The fact that so many people believed the hype, he found to be the scariest thing. He talked about things like 'mass delusion' and the predisposition of most people to be vulnerable to deceit.

Of course nothing happened. No planes fell out of the sky. No trains or elevators stopped. The stock market didn't crash. The millions of experts working on the problem claimed a resounding victory. And those who had made money out of the scaremongering left their money in bank accounts earning good interest. And the newspaper headlines on that first day of 2000 were ominously quiet about the very suggestion of a possible hoax.

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In June, 2000, an announcement was made that the Human Genome Project had virtually been completed. The project had been a cooperative venture by geneticists from a number of countries, including the United States, China, France, Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom. Its goal was to chart the entire DNA of human beings, in order to advance understanding of how the body works and to facilitate development of new treatments of disease. A most commendable goal, if ever there was one. James Watson, one of the discoverers of the shape of the DNA molecule fifty years earlier, was one of the people in charge.

The human body is made up of around a 100,000 proteins, manufactured by genes stored in the chromosomes contained in each and every tiny cell. The expectation, based on the scientific understanding of the time, was that therefore the project would identify around 100,000 genes, one for each protein. Made sense. For years every student of biology, zoology, palaeontology, medicine, genetics, and what-have-you, had been told 90% to 95% of the human DNA was 'evolutionary junk' and only those sequences that coded for proteins were of any use. So the *shock* of finding only around 25,000 genes was as puzzling as it was disturbing.

The most obvious implication was that the 'evolutionary junk' wasn't junk at all, but instead facilitated making 100,000 proteins out of only 25,000 genes. It called for a complete rethink of the entire paradigm of genetic science.

The true implications were never made clear to the public. If 'evolutionary junk' wasn't junk, it threw a spanner into the works as far as theory of evolution was concerned, and free thinking on *that* possibility was just not to be tolerated by the 'scientific' community. (Science can't allow a 'divine foot in the door', as a renowned evolutionist once said). If Man is genetically 99% the same as a

chimp, as the scientists had assured the riff-raff for decades, how *much* of their genomes had been compared? To take that even one step further, if we had only just now finished charting the genome of Man, and not even *started* on the genome of chimps, on what basis had the comparison been made? But it appeared no one thought of asking these questions. Certainly not in public. Or they weren't game. Or they were deliberately maintaining a deception.

I'm still trying very hard to come to terms with what's happening here. These are not like any recollections I've ever experienced. Restored memories are playing out before me with the most minute detail, including sounds and observations you wouldn't have thought would have even been noticed at the time of their taking place, let alone stored, especially by someone so young that none of it had any meaning. And that brings me to the most baffling part of this mystery. They are like reflections perceived by a mind far more mature than the mind that first received them, and as if their content is being processed anew within a framework of reference of far greater knowledge and understanding.

How many of us have said to ourselves at one time or another, "If I knew then, what I know now ..., I would have handled things differently." Yet I am aware, again without knowing the source of that awareness, that changing the past here is not an option. Nor is it the purpose.

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2001

On the 11th of September, 2001, the world changed irrevocably. Mum and Dad had been up, Dad working on the internet to avoid the frustration of constantly having his dial-up connection disrupted in daylight hours. Mum was watching TV. She called out, waking me, and Dad came running. She said there had been a terrible accident in New York: a plane had crashed into one of the towers of the World Trade Centre. While they were discussing how such an accident could possibly take place, a second plane plunged into the other tower. It was obvious then that this was no accident. They both wept and stared in disbelief as people jumped to their death out of windows many storeys high and the towers crumpled into a huge pile of dust and rubble, killing thousands of unfortunates who couldn't get out in time.

America immediately declared war on terrorism and identified Osama Bin Laden, an Islamic extremist billionaire with a sworn hatred of westerners, as the culprit behind the atrocity. Before the shock wore off, the world invaded Afghanistan, at war with the Taliban and Al Qaeda, which was Bin Laden's terrorist organisation, protected by the Taliban. I heard Dad say that the struggle between Jacob and Esau in the womb from now on would have the whole world as its battleground. I had no idea at the time what that meant, of course.

Right now, and not quite sure why and what's happening to me, with growing apprehension, it is almost as if my life is playing on DVD with the remote control hidden in another room. I get an adult appreciation of the things that happened when I was little. Chills repeatedly run down my spine as I realise the inferences now.

George Bush had been elected president of the United States, even though he scored fewer votes than Al Gore. Michael Moore published a book called "Stupid White Men", alleging fraud and corruption in the US election system. As usual, Australia felt obliged to participate in Bush's war, big brother America being its main source of national security. At this stage, public sentiment was all for the war on terror. Everyone was still *reeling* with the shock of the atrocious attack by Muslim extremists on our professed democratic rights and freedom; stunned by the callousness with which

they minimised the value of human life. Westerners were overwhelmed by the fanaticism making the extremists willing, if not eager, to die for their cause. If Christians demonstrated *half* that dedication to their beliefs, world hunger would be a thing of the past.

I am becoming conscious of another strange feature of this experience. Not only am I reliving the past, but from a corner of my eye, I can see vaguely where each event is leading. I am semi-consciously cognisant of the future impact of what's going on. I'll try to keep to the chronological timeline, however, and not get ahead of myself. I want to miss nothing, especially critically decisive moments. I truly, now, am filled with the urgent desire to understand. A hazy theory is beginning to form in my mind, giving me some idea as to why I'm going through this.

As John grew older, our age difference became quite insignificant. I was bigger and faster, stronger and more skilled at most things, yet it was good to have him around because he never seemed perturbed or scared of anything. When we had to meet people, I would hang back, not knowing what to say, hiding behind a stony expression or looking around for Mum or Dad to come to the rescue. John on the other hand would boldly walk up and deal out hugs and kisses to so-called aunts and uncles without the slightest hesitation.

Mum and Dad were always meticulously careful to ensure equal distribution of love and material things. They also believed in discipline. Minor misbehaviour was punished by withdrawal of privileges; extreme misbehaviour by a smack on the leg. There were new-age schools of thought declaring that the smack constituted child abuse, but Dad insisted the Bible said otherwise. He said the disempowerment of parents' discipline had led to kids going wild, losing respect for their elders and knowing no boundaries. Dad, especially, expected obedience. When we were slow to respond, he would count to three, slowly and out loud, before taking disciplinary action - and most of the time it worked. But we were always secure in both their love and concern in all circumstances. My happiest memories are of carefree early years - flying kite in the park, riding the billycart Dad had made us, (Dad pushing until he was red in the face!), mock wrestling matches on the lawn (which John and I would invariably win), stories Mum used to read us, and camping holidays. Or sitting around the slow combustion heater with the door open, singing the simple songs we knew. Or going to our grandparents' place and being allowed to stay overnight.

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2002

When I turned four, pre-school started two days a week. I was reserved, keeping much to myself. I had a crush on one little girl, but never so much as spoke to her the whole two terms I attended. Fees doubled and I had to stop going. Dad talked about how fortunate they had been to buy the house before prices went too high. Electricity prices were about to rise again, burglaries were on the rise, bread was in short supply. He'd talk to the neighbour about inflation, unemployment, increasing taxes, the drought, industrial unrest, globalisation, petrol prices, pollution, the hole in the ozone layer, preservation of the environment, and the decline in morality.

Terrorism. Famine in Africa. The spread of AIDS. Home invasions. The Palestinian conflict with Israel. The green house effect. Controversy over uranium mining and nuclear waste disposal. Greenpeace. North Korea developing nuclear bombs. Strikes. Aboriginal rights. The list of conflicts was endless.

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September gave us a lovely holiday in the Blue Mountains National Park. There was a new camping clearing just twenty kilometres from the Glenbrook entrance. Water tanks, barbecues and chopped timber were provided. The drought had had a severe impact, however, and there was a total fire ban until three days of rain eased the situation somewhat, and the Ranger came round to tell us small fires in the designated places would be OK. There were walking trails to the Nepean River and other scenic spots. Or we'd drive or walk to one of the swimming holes. Dad managed to squeeze three of us into a one-man blow-up boat and, paddling with our hands, we'd go exploring down the creek, while Mum stayed behind reading a book. At night we'd sit around the fireplace, a small pile of logs smouldering away. We would read from the Bible and sing. Often the possums would come and investigate within touching distance. Once John was bitten on the finger when he tried to pet one.

John and I both believed in God, simply because Mum and Dad said He exists. They never told us anything that wasn't true and if it was necessary to explain something imaginary, they made sure we understood that it was 'just pretend'. One day we came across some beautiful flowers and Mum asked if we knew who had made them. I answered 'Jesus' and Dad smiled and patted me on the head. "If only we could all believe like little children," he said. When I protested that I wasn't little, he gave me a hug and lifted me onto his neck.

Dad told us that years ago you could watch kangaroos come hopping down the hill to a watering hole. If they sensed your presence, he said, they'd freeze like statues, heads turned in your direction. Then they'd suddenly take off with great bounding leaps. But they were long gone now, shot by vandals on a murder spree.

Those holidays etched forever into my character an appreciation of natural beauty. My mind couldn't conceive the news, three weeks after we returned, that an immense bush fire was raging out of control in the park, threatening many dwellings in the mountains. Water restrictions came into force coast to coast, as reduced average rainfall, blamed on climate change, had dams down to 60% of capacity. They said even the water tables under the major cities were falling, making bore water hard to reach. There were experts who blamed it all on carbon emissions, leading to changes in warm ocean currents, heralding in unprecedented storms and droughts. Dad said that if there *was* such a thing as climate change, it was more likely to be caused by a natural cycle than man-made carbon pollution. And that 'droughts and flooding rains' were immortalised in our national anthem.

Then a year and a month and a day after the shock of 9/11, hundreds were killed in an Islam-sponsored terrorist attack in Bali. The death toll included 88 Australians.

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2003

Epping Primary was only a few blocks from home. My first day was a disaster. Bigger boys, noticing my inability to adapt quickly, would pick on me, driving me near to tears. Dad decided to teach me a few judo throws and some boxing. He stressed it was for self-defence only, never to *start* fights. Isometric exercises were part of the program. It was hard work, but I loved doing things together with my Dad.

Towards the end of that year I had become quite strong for my age. Knowing that improved my confidence. One day during lunch, one of the school bullies picked on me again. Familiar tears forced their way up but I bit them back, tight-lipped, swallowing the excess moisture in my mouth. He jeered at me, called me a sook, while lots of others looked on. He slapped my face hoping to make me cry, but I could take it no longer and lashed out, remembering to make a proper fist, the

way Dad had taught me. The bully went flying and sprawled on the ground. Then *he* was in tears and stumbled off, lip bleeding, ego deflated, the way a dog will retreat with his tail between his legs.

The other kids were dumbfounded. I too was stunned, as a new revelation dawned within me. I gained insight into a peculiar feature of my own nature. I wasn't scared of the kids at all, but scared of hurting them; not afraid of having pain, but afraid of *inflicting* pain on others.

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Powers that be claimed they had *proof* that Iraq owned weapons of mass destruction and were getting ready to use them. So they persuaded a multi-national coalition to join the United States in an invasion of Iraq in March. Some other countries were strongly opposed. A tyrant called Saddam Hussein ran the place and was claimed to be guilty of outrageous human rights abuses and in cahoots with Al-Qaeda, (that terrorist organisation again, which was alleged to support Palestinian suicide bombers). For years, Hussein had been *matey* with US governments and many of the weapons he possessed had been supplied by them. Unfortunately for President Bush, United Nations weapons inspectors never found any trace of weapons of mass destruction, leading to allegations of poor and false intelligence. (If they *did* have them, this war surely would have been a good time to *use* them!)

Saddam was placed second on a 'most wanted' list. He was captured in December, hiding in a hole under a village dwelling. He got away with billions of American dollars in his pockets, but the money was never recovered. Bin Laden was first on the list, but remained elusive. No WMD's, nuclear, biological or chemical, were ever located. And the controversy over the *real* reasons for the war on terror started. Many claimed it was more about oil than terrorism. Comparisons were made to the futile war in Vietnam in the sixties and seventies.

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Space exploration advanced. More satellites were put into orbit and there was concern over millions of pieces of 'space junk' becoming a hazard to the space program, and about some of these things re-entering the atmosphere. Microwave technology was employed to get messages back and forth. Mobile phones were blamed for a marked increase in brain tumours. There was talk of applying the same technology to harvesting solar energy more efficiently than on earth, by launching geostationary satellite panels in space. Credit cards left the average wallet bulging with plastic. And there always seemed to be never ending elections. Federal, state or local, some politician always managed to say something nasty about another. It was hoped to ban cigarette smoking in all public places. Meanwhile, tobacco sales and prices were up, and tobacco companies were targeting the young in their advertising.

Air pollution readings showed that emission control and unleaded petrol wasn't working and we were all still breathing poison, while the relevant authorities assured us it was still within 'safe' levels. There were plans to tow icebergs to desert areas for irrigation. The contraceptive pill was not carcinogenic after all, but could grow hair on bald heads. New possible sources of cancer included microwaves, canola oil, mobile phones, electricity lines, viruses, artificial sweeteners and certain vitamin supplements. Conventional TV's became cheaper and cheaper, as widescreen LCD and plasma televisions were introduced and a glut of old picture tubes had to be used up.

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I did well at school, getting good marks in most subjects and I was taller and stronger than most kids in my class. I made a few friends, but basically I was a loner. It seemed to me most kids shared some sort of herd mentality. I liked to be myself. Sundays we went to church. Sunday school didn't

mean all that much to me and I preferred Bible stories the way Mum told them. She managed to make them sound believable, whilst coming from the Sunday school teacher they seemed like fairy tales. Mum said I could believe everything the Bible said, *literally*. The teacher said we had evolved from apes and the Bible account of Creation was just a metaphor.

The kids at school came from a subtly different background to those at church, and the lot of them would have made their parents blush, had they known how they behaved in their absence. At school they used slang and swear words as their basic playground vernacular. They told jokes I couldn't understand. Year six kids would prowl the school grounds in gangs to urinate on kindergarten pupils. I steered clear of those involved. At least they didn't pick on *me* anymore.

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Movies became increasingly daring and explicit. Films shown in theatres less than a year ago were now available for rental and screened on television, sad symbols of an inexorable transience. Fewer and fewer cuts were made to the TV versions, in an attempt to compete with the DVD industry.

Observers of the 'global crisis' estimated a doubling of the world's population in fifty to sixty years. The astounding implications of such a people explosion, in a world already incapable of adequately catering for the present six billion, posed almost inconceivable and unsolvable problems for those in government. Problems relating to housing, feeding and occupying so many people in such a short time were bad enough, but the looming prospect of total destruction of the environment, already stretched past the limit by the present crowd, was worse. There was an international conference on the subject of world population. Religious, cultural and practical arguments were presented. There were the optimistic exemptionalists saying that *science* would provide the answers, while the environmentalists preached conservation and zero population growth. There were protests against globalisation by those objecting to the foreign takeover of iconic Aussie businesses and the exploitation of cheap labour in Asian countries.

The price of petrol continued to rise, suspected to be orchestrated by the oil companies. We traded our station-wagon for a tiny hatchback that made six litres last a hundred kilometres, just big enough for the four of us, with any luggage tied to the roof.

The population of Sydney hovered on the six million mark. Sometimes school class sizes relied on absences for sufficient seats, while Heads of school juggled their 'global budgets' to try to supplement the teaching staff. Teachers called a strike for more pay. Terrorist organisations threatened to carry out attacks within Australia, in reprisal for our involvement in the war on Iraq. Overseas travel declined, as people became scared to venture out to more exotic places, and airlines suffered. A new virus called SARS added to the problem. Still, in many ways Australia continued to be 'the lucky country', with a mere twenty million to share its green shoreline.

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2004

Then it was John's turn to go to school. He showed no apprehension, only excitement at being big enough. Mum walked us there and I was asked to wait for him afterwards so we could walk home together. I felt proud to be trusted in that way. John was a good friend and brother; being at least a head taller than him, I felt rather protective towards him.

One day he was more than ten minutes late and I began to get worried. I went back into the playground to look for him and was horrified to find him in the midst of a noisy gathering of third class pupils. His left eye was bruised and tears were running down his cheeks. Two boys were pushing him and the others were urging them on. Hard as he tried to stand his ground, John didn't have a hope.

My first impulse was to run for help, fear, then a sick feeling in my stomach. I was big for my age, but some of these guys were bigger and there were at least ten of them. Yet to run from this was out of the question - my own brother was in there. I had to look after him, not so much because of the responsibility entrusted to me, but because I loved him and he had always stood by me when I'd been scared. (If only Dad were here). It went against my nature to inflict pain, but sometimes it is necessary in order to redeem the right to exist in peace. Fight fire with fire - what crazy logic, yet often effective.

Where is that fine line between justified force and bullying? How do grown-ups decide when violence is the way to go? Can you defend your property when a burglar tries to take it? Or can he take you to court and sue your pants off? At what point does reasonable force become unreasonable? Are you justified in killing a murderer before he kills your family, or only after? What about the assailant of a complete stranger? How do Heads of State decide when the protection of human rights justifies war? Dad said the Bible was pretty clear on these issues, but in many circumstances 'loving your enemy' just didn't seem like a practical solution to mankind. And even Dad admitted that he would shoot someone trying to shoot me. (But he would aim for the arm holding the gun, not the chest). He said, the problem lay with men trying to make up their own rules, ignoring what God had to say on the subject. And men were renowned for getting it wrong. So there were no hard and fast rules in Man's court, only loopholes in ever-changing legislation.

New anti-bullying laws had been passed, but there was no one to police it. I pushed my way through the crowd and stepped right in between John and the kids pushing him. Fists clenched. The relief on John's face was all I needed to give me courage and I told them to get lost. A moment of hesitation, then a punch aimed at my face by the ringleader. I ducked and countered with a hard blow to the stomach. He doubled over, totally winded, and it only took that one hit. He turned to get away and I didn't bother to stop him, but grabbed John's hand to lead him out of the circle. The onlookers parted like the Red Sea as we approached and, with an unreal sense of control, I even barged back in, to rescue John's schoolbag.

Together we walked home, arms around each other's shoulders. My mind was filled with elation and relief. I must also admit to a degree of pride and power. Gratitude to Dad for teaching me to punch. It had sure helped us today. John explained how he had got himself into the predicament: the boys had been throwing rocks at some kittens living under the school building and he had moved in to help the kittens to safety. So they had turned to vent their frustrations on *him*. That was John alright, animal lover that he was! Good on him!

Mum was upset at first, seeing John's black eye, but as the story unfolded, she started glowing with pride and hugged and kissed both of us. She was so happy, she rang Dad at work and he had a chocolate bar for each of us when he got home. I confided how scared I had been at first, but he said he was all the more proud of me because of it.

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We attended a large charismatic church half an hour's drive away. Mum liked the music, but Dad said it was too loud and gave him an earache. He was forced to wear ear plugs during the worship sessions. He'd joke that church was supposed to make the deaf hear, not turn the hearing deaf. The

unshaven pastor jumped around the stage like a rock star and encouraged the congregation to do the same. There were twenty minutes of this, followed by a sermon.

The subject of the week's lesson was 'prosperity'. (To be honest, it seemed to be the lesson *every* week). God never intended us to be poor. How could we *help* the poor if we had no money? He asked all those who didn't own their own home to put up their hands, then got that half of the congregation to stand up, a thousand ostensibly homeless people, desperate for the 'Australian dream'. He prayed that all those standing would be enabled to acquire their own place by the end of the year, (and that for those still seated, the purchase of a holiday home would be an enormous blessing). The fulfilment of those prayers was apparently dependent on the generosity of the donation placed in the collection bucket that Sunday. I could sense Dad cringing beside me.

At the end of the service there was an 'altar call', and hundreds of young people, many of which had already answered that same call last week, (as well as the week before), milled forward with huge smiles on their faces, singing and dancing along with the renewed clamour of deafening modern gospel music. They were all *so* happy, and ready to party with Jesus. I was holding Dad's hand, which had stiffened noticeably.

Then those who needed specific prayer closed their eyes and stood waiting for one of the pastors to come to them. Burly members out of the congregation (audience?) stood behind them, ready to catch them as they invariably fell down backwards, 'slain' by the power of God. And from the corner of my eye, I saw a single tear rolling down Dad's cheek.

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On the 25th of December the second largest earthquake ever recorded on a seismograph, measuring 9.3 on the Richter scale, occurred deep in the Indian Ocean off the west coast of Sumatra. It caused the entire planet to vibrate by as much as a centimetre and triggered other earthquakes, as far away as Alaska. It resulted in a tidal wave up to 30 metres high, killing well over 200,000 people in eleven countries.

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2005

There were breakthroughs in microbiology and understanding of DNA, providing links needed to find cures for a multitude of diseases: cancer, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, AIDS. The last, or at least the latest, word in medicine: cure by regeneration of ailing tissue, working together with new cancer seeking drugs which could differentiate between healthy and cancerous cells. The Human Genome project had all the researchers busy. And then the companies they worked for started to apply for *patents* on the genes they charted. (How on earth can you patent something that already exists in nature? They didn't *invent* them, did they? Was this another case of man's rules gone mad?) At the same time, practical and lifelike bionic limbs, vital organs and other body parts, science fiction twenty years ago, were now available. They started breeding pigs to be used for organ transplants in humans. Some claimed the 'last frontier' was not outer space, but Man himself. And the debate raged over the use of foetal stem cells in research, while at the same time some real promise was shown by research into the use of adult stem cells in transplants.

Already, the identification of the gene responsible for the manufacture of human insulin had made the treatment of diabetes much more effective. Finding the genes that caused cystic fibrosis, muscular dystrophy, sickle-cell trait, the rare Huntington's disease, and just recently breast cancer, had shown what benefits could ensue from this research in terms of curing genetically inherited disorders. Much

more difficult would be the isolation of genes which render you *susceptible* to environmentally induced diseases like lung cancer, high cholesterol, alcoholism, the types of genetic predispositions which don't cause disease directly, but make a person more *likely* to develop a particular illness when exposed to certain external triggers.

Only the moral and ethical issues involved were standing in the way of this new technology. There were many who argued that gene therapy was 'playing God.' There were those who feared that this new knowledge would lead to compulsory testing, that before long a genetic profile would become a necessary component of a job application and a prerequisite of health insurance. This in turn would lead to discrimination against those with genetic weaknesses, creating genetic upper and lower classes. The premise that 'everyone is created equal' would disappear. 'Privacy' rights would take on a whole new meaning.

There were others who feared that selective breeding would become the norm, with prospective parents given the right to abort foetuses tested to show genetic shortcomings, or even perfectly normal and healthy ones lacking in a preferred talent. Or worse, that men would become 'redundant', in-vitro fertilisation producing numerous artificially germinated eggs, only a few of which would be implanted after extensive genetic evaluation. It brought back thoughts of Hitler's 'master race' delusion, and ethnic cleansing, based on the theory that some men are more 'evolved' than others.

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2006

I turned eight and progressed to year three. I had a very nice teacher who paid special attention to me because, (as she told Mum one parent's day), I responded well. I liked to have Mum come to school to show her off. Most other kids seemed to be ashamed of their parents and almost disowned them when they came. The teacher I responded to was transferred to another school halfway through third term.

I first learned about sex through overheard smutty talk between the kids, then through clinical health classes where use of condoms was strongly recommended. Fortunately, I was close enough to Dad to talk about it without embarrassment. His frank enlightenment changed my initial impression that sex was something 'dirty', and my second impression it was something fearsome, 'best to be avoided', to a 'much to be treasured but not to be abused' appreciation of God's wonders of creation. He told me everything, giving me both the technical and common words. He explained both the secular and the Christian view. He said sexual intercourse was symbolic of the eventual union of Jesus and His bride, the church. He told me sex was not only for procreation, but also to be enjoyed. And he related every aspect to love between husband and wife. "Perhaps you are too young to understand this Mike, but one day you will remember - making love without love is like going to church without God. Both actions will leave a spiritual need unfulfilled."

That talk answered a lot of questions for me. But the part about Jesus and His bride went over my head.

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Al Gore, (the man who *used to be* the next president of the US), made a mint by churning out a movie called "An Inconvenient Truth", about the impact of man-induced climate change, blaming the largest impact on the increase in air traffic. Then he travelled the world in his jet plane to promote it. And the naysayers claimed, *if* there was such a thing as global warming, it was a natural cycle, not caused by man.

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Dad had something that was deeply troubling him. He tried not to show it, but being so close to him, he couldn't hide it from me. Often in the evenings Mum and Dad could be heard having lengthy discussions, ending with Mum being upset as well. I longed to take the burden from his heart, but was lost for knowing what to do. Then Dad stopped coming to church.

We still did our exercises as a team and watched television together, but all the time I could feel the tension in him and that something was making him terribly unhappy.

One night, one of the pastors from our church came to have a long talk with him. We were supposed to be asleep and, although my conscience bothered me for eavesdropping, there *was* such a thing as extenuating circumstances. If I could find out what was the matter, maybe I could do something about it.

They are talking about the church and Christianity, using difficult terms and arguments that make it all very hard to follow. I didn't really grasp any of the discussion at the time, but weirdly, I do now. I seem to be in a time warp, where past, present and future are all inextricably intertwined. Somehow, I've been given a second chance at interpreting the significance of past events.

Dad said it was wrong for there to be divisions in the church and to become a member of a particular denomination was like saying he was one of 'Paul's men'. Dad said he became a member of the one and only true Church, the moment he was born again.

'Who on earth is Paul?' is my 'past' thought. 'No one I know goes by that name'. Immediately, 'Paul the apostle' echoes in the foreground as the 'present' thought. And already, in the background, looms the answer to where this is leading. Born again? I have heard that expression many times at church, but never really understood what it meant. A few years later, Dad will explain it to me, and already that knowledge is stored somewhere in my mind.

He felt the church today had lost the plot. The Bible stated that others will know that we are His disciples because of the *love* we have for each other. Yet people outside the church thought we're just after their money. "And maybe they're *right* in thinking that. All the reality and life of the Spirit has been organised out of the church. We are operating 'church' on the same principles as the world runs a business. We select our target audience, work out what they want to hear, and then promise to give it to them, provided they open their wallets. We measure our efficiency and effectiveness by the number of bums on seats and the dollars in the collection." Dad's voice sounded funny, croaky, as if he wanted to cry but forced control. He took a deep breath, then sounded a little better.

"We never give the Lord a chance to genuinely move in our midst. We prepare the songs we are to sing, the sermon we are to hear, the prayers we are to pray. We utter all the right words, but they are all pre-determined. If the Holy Spirit wanted us to sing or speak or hear something else, we're not open to Him. God is a gentleman. He won't force Himself on us. We have to allow Him to use us through our free-will submission. He must feel as if He can't get a word in edgewise. I'm not criticising you personally mind you, but the whole stupid system and structure." The pastor listened patiently, as if he had heard this type of talk many times.

"People come to church looking for answers we claim to have," Dad continued, "But they never receive those answers. We don't deliver the true Gospel. And we're not sufficiently in touch with God to introduce them to Him. We deliver a 'feel-good' message in order to be popular, so they're not deeply convicted of their own sin when they come forward. There is no real repentance. Heck,

I'm not against bringing people to church. I'd just like for us to be ready for them. If a stranger walked into a congregation truly in touch with God, he would either run for his life, or fall to his knees in tears.

"But what do we have instead? A religion divided into countless denominations and sects. Half the ordained ministers of our Gospel openly confess they don't believe in the traditional concept of God, or a genuine virgin birth, or a literal resurrection! Seventy percent don't literally believe the first chapter of Genesis. I shudder to think how many in the pews don't really believe. And what of the stranger who comes into our midst? What is he to think? He comes looking for God, for meaning to life, for purpose to fill his emptiness, for reality. But instead he hears confusing words and sees a collection plate. He discerns the hypocrisy of our convictions. He finds out we don't personally *believe* the scriptures that are supposed to be guiding us, which we still promote as 'God's Word'. It's done him more harm than good. He is further from finding God than he ever was. He thinks: 'I've tried that, but it wasn't the answer. I'll have to try something else.'

"We've compromised the essence of our faith. The scientists say the world is twelve billion years old. God says it is six thousand years old. And we believe the scientists. Jesus says don't desire earthly wealth, but instead build up eternal riches. Those among us who lust after earthly wealth, (and let's face it, that's most of us), then come along and say Jesus didn't really mean what He said. They've found a loophole in the scriptures and can now read it any way they like it. They can have their earthly wealth and Jesus too.

"It's no wonder so many are turning to the occult for spiritual answers. Demonology, Satanism, witchcraft, the New Age movement, alternative religions, it's the dark side of the spiritual world that's thriving, because at least it delivers what it promises. Meanwhile we are lulled into a false sense of security through apathy. Now is the time for us to seek the Lord. We need spiritual weapons to face the future and to communicate the Gospel effectively. And the responsibility for that lies with *all* of us, each and every one of us. Instead we are so busy living our own lives, we have employed you and your colleagues to do it *for* us. And the system has allowed it to happen, in fact encourages it."

"If you're looking for the perfect church," the minister interjected with just a little chagrin creeping into his expression, "you're wasting your time." (At least he didn't continue with that trite aphorism, 'when *you* join, it won't be perfect anymore!'). "I too believe the real church comprises all the true believers. The 'Invisible Church' if you like. In God's eyes we *are* one. If you're looking for visible perfection before the Lord returns, you'll be gravely disappointed. You can't build a perfect church from imperfect building blocks. And for what it's worth, yes, I believe in evolution. The evidence is right there, in front of our eyes."

Dad jumped in. "But if *we* don't have the faith to believe a perfect church is possible, how are we ever going to get one? And if we don't believe God created us in six days, the entire gospel message loses its foundation – the *reason* we need salvation. And I strongly disagree about the evidence for evolution. We can't make it happen in the lab. And the visible evidence around us shows that *everything* breaks down and deteriorates. It's natural entropy at work. There *is* no upward trend, allowing chimps to turn into charlatans. It's just a *theory*, made up by people who don't want to be answerable to God. That's what the system has done to you. It has destroyed that youthful exuberance and unshakable faith of the new convert. I believe the Lord won't come back until we *have* been perfected - it is our perfect state that will *bring* Him back! Do you honestly believe the Lord would tell us to be perfect and not give us the capacity to achieve it? Truth is, I think we have misunderstood the meaning of 'perfect'. We think of perfection as being sinless. I think God views 'perfection' as total heart surrender, thereby giving us complete covering of our sin with Jesus'

blood. I really believe that if we defined 'perfection' in terms of absence of judgment of others, rather than righteousness, we would probably be much closer to the mark."

Mum entered with coffee and biscuits and discreetly withdrew again.

"Ever since the fall," Dad continued, his voice raspy and hot, "we've used our mind and reason to attain knowledge. We have division, because we feel *we* are right and *they* are wrong. Will we never learn? Our 'knowledge' must come first by revelation, not through study and reasoning. And anything we come up that way with *must* line up with the Bible."

"So what's the answer then?" the pastor enquired, an unmistakable hint of impatience now colouring his tone.

"Don't you see? I don't *know* the answer! I'm just tired of treading a path which has already *proven* to be wrong. Surely we should try something different. I can't continue to listen to testimonies about healing of ailments that were never diagnosed. Of course God heals, many times miraculously. So why do we feel the need to boost the numbers with fake ones? I can no longer be satisfied with love that doesn't come from the Spirit, or with false prophecies that don't come to pass, or with temporary conversions. I'm after the kind of love that would make us willing to *die* for each other. Or willingly sell our possessions to get each other out of trouble. The kind that would make us listen and get deeply involved. A new born baby will live and grow though it has no knowledge, yet we are up to our ears in knowledge, but we have no Life. Jesus said unless we become like little children we will find it very difficult to enter the Kingdom. He said we must *lose* our life in order to preserve it. Still we hang onto self. We have changed the Gospel to be about *us*, not about Jesus! Christ can only be expressed to the extent that we give up self. It's the curse of Eden, yet the Bible tells us we have been set free!"

Dad's voice was becoming clearer now, and taking on a certain excitement. Maybe he felt he was getting closer to putting into words what he was feeling inside.

"If we claim our interpretation of the Bible is the only one that's right, we are virtually telling God that our intelligence matches His. What an ego trip! He created knowledge. But He also said His thoughts are not our thoughts. I have no pretences that I'm any better than the next guy. I have as much trouble as any one else in giving up self. But I am objective and honest enough to acknowledge my shortcomings. God didn't create division, Man did, (with lots of encouragement from Satan). God must be deeply grieved at the mess we've made. We are all members of the same divine family. Surely there must be a way for us to live accordingly? And it ought to be the main agenda of every Christian organisation!"

"After the Father and the Son, the world is waiting for a third expression of God. It's supposed to come through the Holy Spirit, manifesting in a many-membered body - the Church, the Bride He's coming back for. He is in all the believers and therefore *all* must give up self to allow Him to live and be expressed for the world to see. It's something you just can't do by yourself. Maybe the present denominations are beyond salvage. Maybe the only way is for all the born-again believers to be brought out of the churches to start again elsewhere. Maybe it will take persecution to sort the sheep from the goats. By not going to church, I'm making a stand for Jesus that the time has come for change."

The pastor was suddenly harshly critical, a bit of anger creeping into his voice. "You're a cynic! Paul told us to prophesy, speaking edification, exhortation and comfort. Life and death are in the tongue! James had lots to say about the troubles caused by an unbridled tongue. So stop being so negative and start speaking positive messages into other people's lives!"

There was a long and uncomfortable silence. I was beginning to think they had gone away, when Dad spoke again, despondent. "Then maybe I am wrong," he sighed, "and maybe that *doubt* is the reason I'm confused. I know what you're saying. But was Luther being negative, when he nailed his ninety-five complaints to a church door? Was John Calvin wrong when he started the Protestant Reformation? Was Mandella out of line when he opposed apartheid? Was Martin Luther King wrong when he stood up for human rights? Was Jesus Himself being negative, when He threw the dealers out of the Temple in righteous anger and called the Pharisees 'vipers and hypocrites'? Am I just causing division? Should I turn a blind eye, when something is obviously wrong? Am I making the same mistake as everyone else by making a stand? I just don't know."

The pastor had no further answer either. And if he had understood as little of what Dad had been saying as I had, that was no wonder. About the only thing I had got out of it was that I should become a Christian. Because Dad was one. I made a resolution to ask him how, as soon as he was feeling happier. And on the issue of his unhappiness, I was still little the wiser.

As I am listening to Dad unburdening himself, a heavy darkness is enveloping me. The ultimate conclusion of the meaning of all of this is still eluding me. I urgently need to see more. It's slowly coming closer, ominously hovering in the background, but taking its time ...

While they prayed, I silently closed the door and climbed back up into the top bunk. John was sound asleep below, grinding his teeth. I drowsed off quickly into a restless dream, full of unhappy characters ...

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Dad purchased a large canoe, big enough to carry the four of us. A few trial runs were necessary to teach us the basics, the 'bow' stroke at the front, the 'j' stroke at the rear. One Sunday afternoon when John was at a friend's place and Mum was feeling tired, Dad and I decided to take on the Lane Cove River. We pushed the craft along, soon learning to co-ordinate our strokes. The boat just sliced through the water, demanding little effort to keep up the pace. We increased our exertion, tacitly agreeing we'd see how fast we could make her go. Our muscles pounded like pistons in perfect unison and the river bank flashed by. Neither spoke, both relishing the marvellous exhilaration. The air grabbed at our hair and caressed our faces.

Softly first, both of us chuckled, then laughed out loud, until finally in a spasm of uncontrolled hysterics we could paddle no longer and had to let her drift until we calmed down.

"Beautiful team work, my boy!" Dad praised the attempt, an irregular hiccup of laughter still shaking his throat, "Give me a canoe over a rowboat anytime. Rowing puts blisters on your hands!" It was great to see him happy like this, pure enjoyment beaming from his eyes. "And we're not contributing to the pollution either!"

"Dad?" I ventured, "Um, how do you become a Christian?"

He didn't come back with 'Why do you ask?' the way some people always seemed to answer a question with another question. He took the attitude that if we were old enough to ask, we were old enough to know the answer.

"Being a Christian is not a matter of going to church, or being a good person. To become a Christian you have to experience a spiritual birth. You have to be 'born' into God's family, just as you were born into our human family. We've all done things that God is displeased with and that deserve punishment. But God is perfect, so the only *just* punishment is eternal separation from Him.

But because He made us and loves us, He allowed Jesus to bear the punishment on our behalf so we could still be with Him for eternity. So, to answer your question in a more practical way, to become a Christian, all you really have to do is tell God you're genuinely sorry for the wrong you have done, accept that Jesus bore the punishment for you, and ask Him to allow you to join His family."

"But Dad, what *are* all these things I've done wrong?"

"That's something God Himself will have to show you. It is more about being born with a sinful nature, than the specific sins. The Bible says that we do not choose God, but He chooses us, Mike. One day He will call you, you can count on that. And there will be no doubt in your mind that He is calling. All you will have to say is: 'Here I am, Lord, take me.'"

"But when, Dad, when?"

"I can't answer that. When *you* are ready. If you make that decision before you're ready to give Him your whole heart, in all likelihood you'll fall away when the going gets tough. But seek and you *will* find. Read your Bible - all of it is His message to us. But when you are reading, make sure you have both an open mind and an open heart. Listen for His voice. And if there is anything that you do not understand, don't try too hard to figure it out - wait for Him to reveal it to you. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying don't use your brain! God gave us a brain and *expects* us to use it. But our ability to work out the things of God is limited, and so we keep getting it wrong. We rely too much on our intellect and too little on spiritual enlightenment. And when revelation comes, you'll be surprised just how closely it lines up with common sense!

"He knows when He will call you. It might be soon, or it might be when you are older. But call He will." He paused, looking straight at me. "Did you understand all that, Mike?"

"I guess so. But I hope it will be soon, 'cause I want to be like you Dad."

He ruffled my hair and smiled. When we returned home that afternoon, there was a traffic queue practically the whole way and it took over an hour to cover five or so kilometres, despite the fact that the new rail tunnel had been completed.

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Travelling to the mountains for our vacation was equally arduous. Never ending traffic queues slowed progress everywhere and tested the most patient driver to breaking point. Occasionally Dad would try a short cut, but then we only had no end of trouble trying to get back into the main stream further on. After a while even the short cuts started to queue up and we had to be content with just sitting in the great procession of vehicles, many horns blowing and moving at snail's pace. Lots of cars were pulled over by the side of the road, clutches burnt out and radiators boiling, frustrated commuters wondering in exasperation how to get back in the line once the engine cooled.

It took over four hours to reach Glenbrook and upon arrival at the camping ground literally hundreds of tents were already set up. People were everywhere. Food scraps littered the few remaining vacant grass spots. Shouting and blaring radios saturated the air with the sound of the city. Without a word, Dad turned the car around, drove back up the dirt track and proceeded deeper into the park towards Woodford. Somewhere off the road we found a beautifully grassed area where we set up camp and later discovered we were less than half a kilometre from a clean water creek, suitable for exploration by canoe. We had plenty of food and fortunately had brought our own axe and barbecue plate. John and I helped gather some dead wood and Dad chopped it up. Dad always insisted on dead wood, but also stressed we should be very careful, in case we disturbed the nest of some native

fauna. He said *here* was a real dilemma – do we leave the dead wood for the fauna, or do we remove it to reduce the fire danger? Do we optimise their breeding capacity, only to have more animals burn to death? He never gave us the answer, other than to say it was our *duty* to preserve the environment, to enjoy nature without changing it. But we came across several examples where people had blatantly chopped down live trees, only to find it useless for firewood.

We went on a bush walk to the Erskine Creek, along a narrow trail only wide enough for one person. John and I argued about who would be in front. Then Dad explained the Bible stated the first would be last and the last would be first. So we let Mum and Dad pass, and we argued about who would be at the end.

It turned out to be a wonderful holiday, great to get away from all the people. Mum read from the Bible every day and once John asked what God was like. Mum said God had made the trees and the flowers, the birds and the animals; that by appreciating the things He had made, we could get some idea of what He was like. John asked if God had made the people and she replied that people were the most important part of all the things God had made.

I remember wondering why on earth He had made so many of them.

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Getting home again was a nightmare. The traffic jam seemed even thicker than on the way up. The atmosphere boiled around us and the air conditioning couldn't cope. We were faced with the dilemma of either being pressure-cooked with the windows closed, or having them down, only to be assaulted by exhaust fumes and flies. As we crawled along, at one stage there were trees overhanging the road, reminding Dad of two nuns driving a rental car in Transylvania at dusk. Trees formed a thick canopy over the road and a vampire suddenly dropped down onto their bonnet. It sat there growling hungrily, copious saliva dripping down from its long fangs. The nun behind the wheel said to her companion in the passenger seat, "Quick, show him your cross!" She wound down her window, stuck out her head and shouted, "Get off the bloody car, you mongrel!" For at least five minutes we were in stitches, and the heat seemed almost bearable.

There were horns hooting and gears grinding. The air was putrid with the smell of unleaded petrol and burning clutches, overheating engines and sweating bodies. Many a driver stuck his head out the window to shout abuse or call down damnation on anyone within hearing distance. The side of the road boasted almost as many cars as the bitumen supported ones still struggling on. Mum started to sing a song to relieve the tension. We all joined in and it helped for a while. But then there were drivers trying to overtake, forcing their way back into the line a few hundred metres further on. Traffic in the other direction was only marginally lighter. Dad told us about the Aussie driving on a freeway in Germany, talking to a friend on his mobile. The friend said, "Be careful, I heard on the radio some nutcase is driving on the wrong side of the motorway, about to cause a pile-up!" The Aussie replied, "One? You're saying *one*? There's absolutely *hundreds* of them!"

The joke was almost prophetic. Minutes later, the loud rumbling roar of several big, accelerating engines bore in on us from behind. I turned to spot two large 4-wheel drives speeding up the wrong side of the road, doing what had to be more than a hundred, while we were barely edging along at no more than twenty, but at least we were *moving* at that point. Their drivers seemed oblivious of anything but their own inexorable advance. A huge truck, holding back a great procession, was tiredly pushing towards us. The 4x4's showed no sign of slowing down. Mum stifled a gasp. My face grew cold. Dad instantly accelerated, squeezed between two cars broken down at the side of the road and ran us halfway down the grass embankment, before skidding to a halt.

There were no brake squeals, just the heart-rending, deafening clamour of tearing metal and splintering glass; a scream of terror, followed by several explosions and flames shooting up from the place where we had been only a few moments earlier. Dad gagged, his face red and wet. He sidled out of the driver's seat and stumbled up the embankment to see what he could do to help, leaving strict instructions for us to stay put. Men were running towards an emergency phone up ahead. Mum was crying noiselessly and I tried to comfort her by gently stroking her back, which felt hard as stone to the touch.

An hour or more went by before an ambulance siren could be heard. Horns continued relentlessly in the distance, drivers unaware of the nearby horror scene. Only eyewitnesses seemed to have been sobered by the destruction. A fresh supply of vehicles callously tried to force their way past, occupants curiously eyeing the bedlam, like vampires eager for the sight of blood. Dad came back, eyes red, skin white as a sheet, except for the black smudges on his cheeks and forehead where he must have wiped away the sweat. His hands were shaking as they keyed life into the engine. Normally he didn't smoke, but I understand there was a time he did. He stopped at a supermarket and bought a small packet of cigarettes. He had two in succession. He didn't say anything and none of us asked any questions.

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2007

Peter was shy and reserved and, like me, reluctant to get involved with the groups. We had been friends since the beginning of the year. Although he was never aggressive, often his face was bruised. If I asked whether he had been in a fight he wouldn't talk to me for the rest of the day, so I tried to ignore it, difficult though that was.

One day Peter was absent, so Mum gave me permission to visit him after school. I could walk to where he lived in ten minutes. On the way, the sky, while clear, had a grey-green tinge. The sun was bright but without heat. Peter's red brick house stood cold, despite its colour, and looked distinctly unfriendly, curtains drawn and uninviting. The place seemed deserted. I was tempted to turn back, telling myself that no one would be home anyway. After all, the car wasn't in the driveway. I forced myself up the path, realising how silly it would be to come this far and not even knock on the door.

I reached for the knocker and rapped twice. There was no answer, so I knocked again. There were vague rustles of movement inside, but after waiting several minutes to no avail, I decided to leave, was already halfway down the steps, when the door opened slightly and Peter's mother appeared.

"Oh, it's you Michael."

She looked terrible, still in her dressing gown, hair frizzy and all over the place, face pale with deep dark rings under her eyes.

"Is Peter home, Mrs Dawson?" I asked, almost hoping she'd say no, so I wouldn't have to come in.

"Peter's in hospital - he's had an accident," she croaked in a smoker's cough. She hesitated, then told me which hospital.

"Is he badly hurt?" I asked with some concern, at the same time pleased that the prospect of going inside had passed.

“I think they’ll let you see him. He’s broken his arm.”

“But what happened?” I ventured, as she was about to close the door.

“He’s had an accident, I told you!” she snapped and shut the door in my face.

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That evening, Dad drove me to the hospital and I was allowed to see Peter for a few minutes. He didn’t say much, but this time you really couldn’t blame him. His mouth was swollen, his eyes bloodshot. Livid bruises covered the rest of his face and his left arm was in plaster.

I didn’t like hospitals - they smelled funny. Odours of disinfectant and drugs mingled with the smell of disease. The ascetic and impersonal decor seemed devoid of the love I was so used to at home, as if the people employed here would have to be without caring, just to fit in. I didn’t know what to say to Peter and was glad to get out of the ward. Dad was waiting for me in the corridor and put his arm around my shoulder as we walked back to the car.

“What happened to him, Dad?”

From the frown on his forehead it was obvious the answer would be very hard to understand.

“His father beat him up.”

I see Peter lying in that hospital bed and it dawns on me that, at least to some extent, we are all products of our environment. What became of Peter, I don’t know. His parents took him out of school and they moved interstate shortly after. But the episode fills me with gratitude that my environment is saturated in love and people who genuinely care. And it fills me with sadness that, at the time, I was too immature to fully appreciate it.

Products of our environment, for sure. And some of us get a much better start than others. But do we all commence our journey with a blank slate? Or is there something to the nature / nurture argument? At this stage I can’t answer that.

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2008

The world seemed to be a crazy mixed-up place of contradictions, misplaced loyalties, unevaluated priorities and fanatical extremes.

The message was the same from all over the globe. People didn’t like the cities, but the work was in the cities. So they stayed. Thousands of the rural population moved to cities each year, life on the land promising few rewards and farm labour paying under-award wages. Agriculture was fast passing into the hands of large corporations which had the finance to mechanise. Drought, and soil deterioration through salination, meant that the small man on the land had to sell out his inheritance for next to nothing.

I guess people get used to a certain style of living. Shopping from home via computer terminals was catching on. Today’s home computer had more power than the one that took up an entire floor of an office building twenty years ago. And there were a thousand other gadgets which nobody needed,

everybody wanted sooner or later, and served to provide employment for a large percentage of the population. Hybrid cars were starting to become popular as petrol prices edged towards two dollars a litre. These cars boasted *two* engines, one electric, one petrol. The hydrogen engine, running on water, was still not a practical alternative. But everybody wanted a smaller car.

Minority groups screamed out against the establishment, not realising how much a part of it they were. Only occasionally did a few work up the courage to pack up and move out. But they only moved to smaller cities, because that's where the 'necessities' were available.

New mental asylums and prisons had to be built to house those who could no longer cope with that bewildering system known as 'society'. Governments had an impossible job trying to keep things rolling. Sewerage systems couldn't cope with the ever increasing volumes of effluent. Pumping it three kilometres out to sea only saw it wash back in. Roads couldn't cope with the traffic. Power stations had trouble meeting the demand for electricity. Water use had to be restricted during the long dry seasons. The work force was in enough strife without having to absorb school leavers. More companies chose to exploit much cheaper labour off-shore. Call centres were mostly located in India. Mail was fast being replaced with email. Even paper bills were being phased out. Oldies who couldn't come to grips with internet banking, were being charged *extra* for the hard-copy advice they owed money. Traditional telephone services were straining to cope on old copper lines. Cable and satellite broadband was taking its place. New mobile phones could handle almost anything, from internet access and email, to taking photos, playing music, games, even movies, all the way to satellite navigation. And, last but not least, making telephone calls.

Terrorist attacks were an almost weekly occurrence. Dad showed us the history of the Islamic conflict in Genesis. Abraham's wife, Sarah, was barren and Hagar, her maid, had been given to have babies on Sarah's behalf, as was the custom in those days. Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, making Sarah extremely jealous. God promised Sarah a baby of her own. She laughed at the suggestion, but eventually had Isaac. Then the conflict between Sarah and Hagar grew *so* intense, Abraham was left with no choice but to banish both Hagar and Ishmael from their midst. They were cast into the scorching desert, where they would have died if God had not rescued them. Arabs were descended from Ishmael.

Isaac fathered twins Jacob and Esau. These two had struggled with each other in the womb from the time they were conceived. Esau was born first, but Jacob was holding onto his heel. Somewhere along the line, Esau *sold* his birthright to his brother for a bowl of soup. This birthright basically gave his descendants everlasting title to the land God had given to Abraham. But Jacob had to *deceive* his own father on his deathbed to actually receive the blessing, pretending to be Esau. After a dream, in which Jacob wrestled overnight with what was possibly an angel, he was renamed Israel. All Israelites descended from him.

Esau ended up marrying back into Ishmael's line, to a cousin called Basemath, thereby maintaining a conflict that started more than four thousand years ago. The struggle between Jacob and Esau had continued over the centuries and was now manifested as a contest for supremacy between the Muslims and the Jews.

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2009

In February, bushfires ravaged large sections of the State of Victoria. The death toll exceeded two hundred. Australians opened their wallets wide, to assist those who had lost everything, and even

overseas there were many fund-raising efforts. The queen of England sent her condolences, and sympathy was widespread.

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Many of the boys in year six had girlfriends and some boasted of the things they got up to in the bushes behind the toilet block. If you didn't have a girlfriend you were regarded a sissy. I wasn't really interested, but contemplated getting a girlfriend just to earn the respect of the others. Luckily I was good at sports, so they left me alone. Some of the weaker boys bore the brunt of derision by the 'experienced' group.

There was a tense period halfway during the year, when a man had come past the playground furtively offering lollies to isolated children. No connection was made at first, but some of those kids started acting most peculiar after that. He was there again the next day, noticeably taking great care to stay out of sight of the teachers. This continued for more than a week. Twice he came close enough to offer me one. I took one both times, but put them in my pocket.

He didn't turn up after that, but a couple of classmates came to school a few days later with supplies of the same lollies, boasting they knew where to get more, but weren't allowed to tell. They were as secretive as the strange man had been, only he had *given* them away; the boys were selling them at two dollars each.

Curious to find out why a lolly would be worth two bucks, I remembered the two I still had, having transferred them to my schoolbag and forgotten about them. I took one out during geography and popped it in my mouth. It tasted no different from any ordinary lolly ...

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"Michael, pay attention, please !" the teacher called out.

I was roused from a daydream, flying through the air like a bird. The sky had been blue, more blue than any sky I'd ever seen, more like the colour of the water in some people's toilets, nothing like the perpetual blue-grey we were used to. The wind oozed past me, warm, pleasant, comfortable; then I was no longer like a bird but like a kite. Instead of gliding through the atmosphere, master of self, the wind was pushing me higher and higher, tugging at my arms and legs and hair. Something else was pulling me back, a long rope, trying to drag me back to the ground. External forces, testing their strength on me. I had no control, felt like they would tear me apart, but the rope won, fortunately leaving my arms and legs still attached.

Suddenly mathematics made sense, and physics and chemistry became obvious. Comprehending English literature was a cinch and I knew how to spell any word in the dictionary. Instinctively I knew where any place you could name was located on the globe. Genetics became simple and I could identify any part of the human body just by looking at it. Vivid colours enhanced the world around me and suddenly I understood the meaning of the universe. Or so it seemed.

Experiencing a drug-induced high a second time from an observer's perspective is a whole different ball-game. How can I possibly describe the meaning of the universe as I saw it then, when all I ever saw was a mass of colours intertwined in such a way as to give the appearance of meaning. My belief in understanding was no more than a chemical deception.

Of course it is only now that I can make out the subtle difference between belief and impression. Impression could be described as 'seeing is believing', but without the conviction. And without showing the whole picture. Impressionism as an art form came into vogue in the latter part of

the nineteenth century. I have always regarded modern art as an excuse for people who can't paint to call themselves artists, the way a grossly overweight golfer has the nerve to call himself an athlete. Much of what I've seen that is called 'Impressionism' seems to fall into that category. Yet there are a few exceptions, impressionist paintings I've seen that really do tell a story, extracting the essence from chaos, or delivering a message...

And that's what I'm getting now. And it's giving me some insight into the way beliefs, whether true or false, are formed in the human mind. We never get the whole story, all the facts, the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God. Invariably, we base our convictions on an impression that only looks like the whole picture from a distance.

"Sorry Miss Jenkins," I apologised.

All the kids were staring at me, grinning, exchanging knowing looks. They were out of focus and the map of Australia out the front was barely distinguishable. The children nearest to me seemed out of proportion, their ears way too big, eyes nearly popping out of their sockets. Then they distorted further, the way you can stretch a computer image. I wanted to laugh but managed to reduce it to a snigger.

"Michael, go and stand out in the corridor!" the teacher ordered. "I'm sick and tired of the crazy way you kids have been behaving lately," she complained, "It will have to stop or I will report the matter to the headmaster." I stumbled out of the classroom. The corridor had ceased spinning by the time she called me back in.

I wasn't feeling crash hot, walking home with John that afternoon and I had a strange urge to eat the remaining lolly, almost convinced that somehow it would make me feel better. With difficulty I resisted the temptation and resolved to show the lolly to Dad when he got home.

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Many of the kids hated me after the police had been to the school - they had soon found out it was *my* father who had called them in. As soon as he heard my story he wanted to see the lolly, wanted to know if I had anymore. He explained there were drugs impregnated in the sugar. First pushers gave them away, until children became addicted and would do almost anything to get hold of some more. A ready market, a salesman's dream, the more you buy, the more you need. And the price of the merchandise would increase...

Sure enough, some of the boys who had been selling the things had to go to hospital for what they called 'withdrawal'. All the details were in the local paper, except for their names. The man responsible was never apprehended. There were rumours of police corruption, but none that could be substantiated.

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That was the year when the entire world financial system went into meltdown. In the US, something they called the 'sub-prime lending market' had been causing headaches for some time. Essentially, banks had been lending money for real estate investment to people who could not afford to make the repayments. The banks made far more money out of these loans, than out of the ones to people who *could* afford it. For a start, they charged a higher interest rate, which *doubled* after the first default. When, as a result, the borrowers faced totally untenable repayments, they sold the house in a mortgagee auction. Provided inflation had increased the value, the bank got its pound of flesh and the only ones to suffer were the poor people who should never have been lent the money in the first place. Bank executives were rubbing their hands in glee as they raked in the huge profits, justifying

seven-figure salaries and bonuses on top, through a scheme that was tantamount to theft and should have been made illegal years ago. The big trouble started when too many of these loans defaulted at the same time, dropping house values below what was owed.

Even while the crisis was happening in the US, the Reserve Bank down-under had been merrily *increasing* interest rates, trying to 'slow the economy'. Had they been in tune with the goings-on in the rest of the world, the impact of the meltdown would have been nowhere *near* as drastic, with fewer people in mortgage stress losing their homes, jobs and marriages. House prices were falling, more businesses were moving manufacturing plants overseas, and job numbers were evaporating. Recession had officially started. Worse was to come. It made you wonder whether the people at the Reserve Bank, many with three university degrees to their name, had any idea what they were doing, and by the same token, any clue on how to fix it.

Dad, as usual, had an opinion on everything. He said Western economies were intrinsically flawed. They encouraged everyone to try to get rich, without actually *producing* anything. Their viability depended on consumer spending. If we stopped spending, the economy went into recession. If we spent too much, inflation soared out of control. So the Reserve Bank had this blinkered approach to controlling spending – raise or lower interest rates. They didn't seem to have any other practical strategies in their bag of tricks, nor the imagination to think up an alternative. Consumer spending was totally reliant on that most basic characteristic of the fallen human nature - *greed*. If people stopped being greedy, the economy would collapse. Dad admitted though, he was glad *he* wasn't responsible for solving the financial crisis, but, in the absence of a degree in economics, he excused himself. And he did have *some* tricks up his sleeve. We should stop using the stock market as a giant gambling casino. Abolish day-trading, as well as futures and other derivatives. Stop rewarding executives of banks and large companies for *gambling* with our money. Managers of large companies voted themselves millions in remuneration, while the Prime Minister, manager of the entire country, got just over three hundred thousand. Let the share holders decide the amount they should be paid.

Meanwhile, the US elected its first black President, Barrack Obama, fulfilling the dream of Martin Luther King and quashing the women's movement's dream of another first, by *not* electing Hillary Clinton. (Whenever I heard that name 'Obama', I couldn't help think of that other newsworthy character, 'Osama', who was still as elusive as ever. Fortunately, the two had nothing in common). Barrack's answer to the global financial crisis (GFC they called it) was a three trillion dollar stimulus package to try to revive spending. Australia responded in kind, by announcing first a ten billion dollar package, followed by a forty billion dollar one. Cheques were in the mail, hoping to open wallets everywhere. (Oh, if only the Reserve Bank had not closed them so tightly). Much of the first ten billion was used to purchase wide-screen TVs and white goods, unfortunately sending the profits overseas. By the time the forty billion arrived, people were more cautious, and much of it went to pay off credit cards.

The question as to where the stimulus money was coming from went largely unanswered. Vague claims that we were mortgaging our kids' future were probably true, but few people had the wherewithal to know what that meant. Dad said there was a time when the Government could only print as much money as the value of gold held in reserve. (In the US that was Fort Knox, but Dad wasn't sure of the Aussie equivalent, maybe the Perth Mint). In the US, three trillion dollars equated to roughly twenty percent of their annual Gross Domestic Product. Printing that much money without some sort of collateral would eventually *reduce* the purchasing power of every dollar by twenty percent. In Australia, fifty billion represented only six percent, but would undoubtedly *have* to result in inflation of that same magnitude, in due course.

But the immediate effect was the *opposite*. Banks went broke. The stock markets halved in value. Millions lost their jobs. Interest rates were cut dramatically. Even petrol prices came down. The

world economy went into recession. And the word 'depression' started doing the rounds. And when push came to shove, the stimulus packages were only delaying the inevitable. In some locations in the US, where all local employment had vanished into thin air, you could buy an entire *suburb* for what you would have paid for a single dwelling there two years earlier.

And it could only happen in America! A guy called Madoff was found guilty of defrauding investors of fifty billion dollars while he held the position of Chairman of the NASDAQ Stock Market. A joke went around that Madoff had 'made off' with the goods. It was possibly the worst example of abused trust in living history.

It is becoming clear that the world is full of trickery. What Man will do to get hold of other people's hard-earned money has no bounds. I am wondering just who is exempt from this temptation; who on this fragile planet still values honesty and honour above self-gain. Is it only a question of degree? Or a matter of opportunity?

Who can you trust? The people running the country? The teachers? Your doctor? The media? The pastors of the church? Am I now becoming a cynic, or just a realist? Are some men born evil, or merely born selfish? Why am I presented with all these major issues, issues that seem to have so little relevance to my mediocre existence?

And then clarification comes. It is to help me come to grips my own fallen human nature. I am no better or worse than any of these untrustworthy men. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And we are all born selfish. But do I really believe that? Or is it only an intellectual recognition that has no heart acceptance? Truth is, I do feel I am a better person than those comen; and as a human being, I feel greatly superior to the terrorists who kill innocents. I have never deliberately stolen anything, and I have never wanted to take someone's life.

I am at a crossroads. I didn't know it at the time, but realise now, this was the point where I began to question my own beliefs. Up until now, God was a given. He is not a given anymore. It's not that that I have stopped believing altogether, but I need more than the words of others. I am nearly twelve years old, and I have moved from simple acceptance, to having to find out for myself.

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It was also the anniversary of Charles Darwin's birthday. The man who gave the world an excuse to stop believing in God would have been two hundred, had he survived this long. Celebrations were in order, at school, universities and in scientific circles. I asked the teacher whether evolution could be demonstrated in a scientific laboratory. She said it was such a *slow* process, it needed millions of years to see any appreciable difference, and so could never be demonstrated.

Darwin's theory of evolution was formulated at a time when scientists believed a single cell of human flesh was no more than a piece of jelly. A hundred years after he published his 'Origin of Species', James Watson and Francis Crick discovered the helixical shape of DNA. It was Dad's opinion, that at *that* point the whole theory should have been consigned to the scrap heap.

He said the laws of thermodynamics dictated that everything in nature *devolves*, a scientific principle known as entropy. Nothing improves spontaneously. Things only improve when an intelligent creative force makes them better. All the evidence pointed to deterioration, not evolution. And whilst DNA *does* mutate when exposed to toxic substances and radiation, such mutation is always bad, never beneficial. In his (*humble!*) opinion, the only reason the theory held any credibility, was that it gave people an 'out' from being accountable to God.

He said the theory of evolution was responsible for the most atrocious crimes against humanity. Genocide, ethnic cleansing, the Holocaust, racism, you name it. It planted a seed in people's brains that some are better and therefore more 'evolved' than others. Indirectly, it made people question six-day Creation as recorded in Genesis, thereby putting the validity of all the rest of the Bible in doubt. He saw it as an assault on the Gospel message of salvation, rather than science.

Creationists responded to all the publicity and celebrations, by releasing a film called 'The Voyage that Shook the World', presenting the Biblical view on how we got to be here.

This has a direct bearing on how our beliefs are formed! The very definition of 'science' we are taught at school is: 'the study of man and the environment, based on deductions and inferences made from reproducible observations and measurements'. Dad is right. Things that cannot be demonstrated repeatedly in experiments can't possibly qualify as 'science'.

So how do you make the whole world believe a lie? Can you do it by dressing up mutton to look like lamb? Or is it homing in on that most depraved element of Man's nature, something we have all shared from the time of Eden, the desire to not be accountable to a higher order. If you could make that option look viable, you'd have a fair few takers! I'd say it has most to do with what people would like to be true. And that old motivational cliché for donkeys no doubt applies: the 'carrot and the stick'. For the Christian, the carrot is eternal life, the stick self-sacrifice, (although the new-age version of Christianity has tried to do its darndest to get rid of that one!) For the atheist, the carrot is self-indulgence, the stick eternal oblivion.

And that brings me to that inevitable and confronting personal issue: What would I like to be true?

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The Lake Eyre project raised its head in the news again. The lake had largely been forgotten until recent rainfall reminded government bodies it was still there. The proposal involved blasting a channel from Spencer Gulf to a vast area lying below sea level. The inland sea created would be a maximum of eleven metres deep and would skirt on the Lake Frome and Mount Painter uranium mines. It was expected the resultant precipitation would transform the surrounding districts into vast arable tracts, boasting climatic conditions comparable with Brisbane. And the in-flowing water eventually could be used to generate electricity, but that would have to wait until the balance of payments was back on track.

Britain released a new report providing *proof* the Antarctic icecap was actually *growing* substantially, despite the fears of global warming. There seemed to be an unprecedented number of reports of UFO sightings. Flying saucers were a fascinating subject, though I had never seen one myself. More money was allocated to the SETI program, possibly because, even to the die-hard evolutionists, extra-terrestrial intelligent life was starting to look like a more plausible God-less explanation for life on earth than evolution. Italy was hit by an earthquake measuring 6.3 on the Richter scale, killing hundreds. And Melbourne was hit by a small earthquake, scoring just over 4.

More and more redundancies occurred as the pressure on businesses to remain competitive took its toll, especially with products flooding the market from underdeveloped nations, where labour was dirt cheap. Executives were back in the news for paying themselves more millions for making Aussie jobs redundant. Governments were using taxpayer-funded billions to bail out the banks that had *caused* the financial crisis, by guaranteeing bank deposits and buying out their 'toxic' investments. (In other words, the mortgages to people who couldn't afford them). And the banks *thanked* the

taxpayers profusely, by putting up their banking fees. The crime of the century was stealing credit card details and pin numbers while people were using Automatic Teller Machines.

Computers were taking over more manual jobs, removing the chance of human error. Further advancements in voice-recognition software threatened to make word-processor operators obsolete. Teachers, doctors, engineers, scientists, all were virtually forced to go back to school in order to keep up with new developments. Knowledge was increasing at such a fantastic rate that only continual study could keep them up to date, even in the most specialised professions. It was as if God was saying: 'So, you want knowledge, rather than rely on Me? Alright then, here it is: choke on it!' Yet, there still was no solution to the energy crisis. Or to pollution. Or to global warming. And reports on acts of terrorism continued to roll in. Man was hurtling into an age of uncertainty, an age where the world would change overnight. Every night. You would be able to study for a profession, only to find it didn't exist anymore before you even finished your course. Buy the latest outfit of 'in' gear, and you could find it dated the first time you wore it. You could firmly believe in certain facts or figures, only to find them changed or disproven the next day.

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2010

I had passed my final examinations and commenced high school. John was two years behind me, so we had to make our separate ways to school.

A gang of year-eight bullies tried the new starters one by one, sometimes ambushing them on the way home, or cornering them in a secluded part of the school grounds during lunch. My turn came during lunchtime. Hadn't I been through this before? Anti-bullying laws were *still* not being policed. If anything, teachers had grown more frightened of intervention and confrontation as the years passed. Finally they had successfully argued it was not their job to keep pupils in line, only to teach them. Students were more and more aware of what they could get away with. Some schools employed private security guards to police school grounds, but it depended on the state of the budget.

I wished I hadn't eaten my sandwiches, as they felt lodged halfway down my oesophagus and were more than willing to retrace the path they'd taken. A crowd of schoolkids was gathering like vultures waiting for a kill. Fail now, and the bullying would never stop. I waited for the biggest menace to make the first move. It was only an open-handed slap, but that was how they always started. Dad had continued teaching me basic self defence. And we persisted with daily exercises. I knew I had to be reasonably strong for my age, but confidence eludes until *after* the test. I threw my right fist as hard as I could at an opening between his arms, only vaguely aware where it might land, if it landed at all. But it was a lucky punch and he hadn't been expecting it. Blood poured from his nose and straight away I felt sorry for him, even tried to apologise, to tell him I hadn't meant to hit him so hard. But he ran away and his mates with him.

It is interesting that the more we do something that repulses us, the less repulsive it becomes. Dad said that there was a time when he couldn't kill a fish, but when you've done it a few times there's nothing to it. Is it the same with killing people? Do mass-murderers harden their hearts until they feel no more empathy? Or do they start off as psychopaths, who never knew the meaning of the word? Do soldiers have misgivings when a rocket they fired kills the enemy? What about when it kills innocent bystanders? Or babies?

I never wanted to hurt anyone, but having been forced into it a number of times, through circumstances beyond my control, I have to admit it is getting easier.

The whole class tried to make me out a hero; suddenly I was the most popular student around. They tried to elect me as class-captain, but I declined. I didn't like all the attention. And I didn't let on how much my hand ached.

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2011

Mum faithfully continued to take us to church every Sunday. We had changed churches to get away from the constant focus on money. We were trying out one of the more traditional denominations, but after years of charismatic exposure, it was pretty dead. They didn't promise us a fortune if we gave them our money, but, on the other hand, they were constantly strapped for cash and attendance was dropping off. John and I would sit through half the service and then attend Sunday School. Dad would come some of the time, but always looked miserable afterwards and refused to come for months in a row.

Even during the first part of the service, some of the older members of the congregation dropped off to sleep. The hymns' tunes were impossible and the lyrics made no sense. It was hard to imagine how anyone could enjoy that sort of thing. Once I tried to get out of going on the grounds that Dad didn't go either, but Mum insisted.

It was puzzling why people went to church at all and I sympathised with Dad. Oh, Sunday School was alright sometimes - at least the songs were singable. And I loved the story of Moses, the way he had been rescued as a baby by Pharaoh's daughter, who then instructed his own mother to raise him. Moses had been chosen by God to set His people free from slavery in Egypt. I particularly liked the way God had spoken to him from a burning bush. God had identified Himself by the name 'I AM', which apparently was the literal translation of the Hebrew word 'Yahweh'. And I imagined myself as the hero in Moses' shoes, stretching out my hand and making the Red Sea part to let the Israelites escape,

The teacher would tell us about Jesus and the miracles He performed. Jesus had *also* called Himself 'I AM', greatly upsetting the religious leaders of the day. Jesus wanted us to be good to others, to help our parents and to try hard at school. But after the lessons, while waiting for the main hall to empty, some of the kids would show off the toys and sweets they had lifted at the local supermarket. Somehow the whole church business seemed rather pointless.

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We attended a weekly Bible study and the current topic was the book of Revelation. John, the author of the Gospel by that name, had been imprisoned on the island of Patmos when he had his vision, which had been the source of more debate, disagreement, interpretation and speculation than any other book of the Bible. The first night, the pastor leading the study gave us a brief run down of the book: -

"It is a magnificent vision, explicitly revealing the eternal purpose – a bride for Jesus for eternity. It is filled with imagery and figurative language, making it difficult to be certain where the allegory stops and reality starts.

“John saw Jesus returning in the clouds on the ‘Lord’s Day’, with every eye able to see Him. First Jesus told him to record a specific message to each of seven different churches, named after churches in existence at that time. Many schools-of-thought believe these to be not only the straightforward meaning, but representative of church-phases over the course of history, or church *types* in action close to end-times. The vision then reveals in vividly metaphorical pictures what challenges the end-times will bring and what the eternal purpose has been all about.

“He saw a book sealed with seven seals which only Jesus, the Lamb, could break. The sixth seal identified a total of 144,000 men, 12,000 from each of the tribes of Israel, sealed as God’s bond-servants and first-fruits, followed by an innumerable multitude, dressed in white robes and seen in heaven, who had come out of ‘the great Tribulation’.

“The seventh seal opens the way for the sounding of seven trumpets, (which make way for three ‘woes’, representing various calamities to be poured out upon the earth). The *seventh* trumpet ushers in the Kingdom of Christ and appears to have very strong links to the *trumpet of God* in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, (describing the ‘Rapture’ or ‘reaping’ of all Christians when Jesus returns in the clouds), and the ‘*last trumpet*’ of 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, describing the same event. The consecutive numbering of these seals, trumpets and woes, indicate to me they will take place chronologically, in the same order as they are recorded. One of the things we will be considering in this study is when *you* think the Rapture will take place. There are *numerous* different opinions. Some believe all Christians will be removed from the earth *before* the Tribulation. Others believe after. In my opinion, it happens in the middle.”

He then made reference to other Biblical prophecies, which he felt were related. “The ‘seventh week’ of the prophecy by Daniel is believed to commence around this time. That ‘week’ is predominantly believed to represent a seven year period of rule by the Anti-Christ, divided into two terms of three and a half years each. I think that rule is synonymous with the ‘Tribulation’. During the first term, there will be severe persecution of Christians who refuse to bow down and worship the ‘Beast’ and receive his mark. This Beast, it is generally believed, will be a world leader possessed by Satan himself. Whilst the mark facilitates buying and selling in this future scenario, it also incurs God’s wrath and eternal damnation. The second term finds its support mostly in Daniel’s prophecy, one, that it lasts a ‘week’ and, two, that it talks about the ‘*middle of the week*’ bringing an ‘end to sacrifice’.

“It seems obvious to me, therefore,” declared the pastor, “that Christians *must* be present on earth during the first term, otherwise it would not be possible for the multitude of white-robed saints in chapter 7 to have come out of the ‘great Tribulation’. Nor would there be anyone left to spread the Gospel and stand up for Jesus, or even to be persecuted.

“The true nature of ‘Babylon’ will be revealed during that time. Babylon is frequently interpreted as being an extremely corrupt, world-wide, end-time church, sponsored by the new world ruler. The strongest support for that view is the call to ‘Come out of her, My people’, and to come *out* of her, most of us must be *in* her! True Christians will flee persecution for three and a half years by going underground. And it is sometime *during* the rule of the Anti-Christ that the ‘Rapture’ happens.

“After this reaping, a further seven angels, with seven plagues and seven bowls of wrath, show up. That, in my opinion, will be during the *second* three-and-a-half year rule of the Anti-Christ. True Christians will have departed and it’s possible those left behind may be given one more chance to repent.

“In chapter 19, the glorious wedding of Jesus and His Bride finally takes place, after the longest and most eventful courtship in history. Satan will be bound in an ‘abyss’ for a thousand years, while

Christ reigns on the earth, after which apparently there needs to be *another* confrontation. But that, hopefully, will be the absolute end of it, after the final judgment has taken place.”

We spent six months debating the subject, and the views were as wide and varied as there were people present. Most of the time, our pastor was patient and receptive to our queries, opinions and objections. Occasionally, though, it was obvious he needed to exercise substantial self-discipline to control his frustration.

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Dad turned thirty-seven in November. It was difficult to think of him as ever having been a boy; he was so big and powerful. There had been cash-flow problems at Dad’s place of employment and, though he had never been out of work, there was talk of redundancies which worried him. There were factions of Government advocating abolishment of the retirement age of sixty-five so that skilled people could stay in the work force longer, now that everyone was *living* longer. Other factions wanted to bring in compulsory *early* retirement at age fifty-five to make room in the work force for the unemployed younger generation. Dad commented that he must be getting old, with retirement only eighteen years away. I could never think of Dad as ‘old’, he was just big and always the same. He explained it was only a joke when I voiced my protest. Suddenly it seemed terribly funny and I had to laugh.

We went on holidays early that year, straight after pupil assessments, in an attempt to avoid the great vacation exodus. We planned to drive the car to the Nepean River and travel from there by canoe, finding camping spots along the river bank. We left home before sunrise and enjoyed a reasonable run, although numerous people appeared to have had the same bright idea. Road widening in numerous places still held us up every so often and it seemed by the time the work was completed it was already inadequate for the traffic it was intended to carry.

The announcer on our car radio reported another massive earthquake in South America, number of fatalities unknown at this stage. A milder earthquake in Siberia, near the location of several large, recently constructed dams. Milder or not, it had been enough to crack the enormous retaining walls, sheer force of force of water doing the rest. Devastating flooding ensued, carving out a medium-size canyon in a matter of hours. There was speculation that the quake could be the result of earth crust adjustments owing to the immense weight of the water in the dams, but Russian authorities denied any such possibility.

We parked the car at Regentville and put the canoe to water. Mum and I sat at the front, Dad and John in the rear, luggage in the centre. The river bed oozed brown clouds and an acrid smell assaulted our noses. Some of the river was covered in blue algae. We decided to get moving as quickly as possible to get away from the stench and after a while it didn’t seem quite so nauseating. A dead fish floated by, then another. A grey scum marred the river bank. Normally you couldn’t see or smell pollution, but now it was so blatantly obvious, it was depressing.

Never being one to give up, Dad pressed on. The first night we had to make do when we made camp, covering up green slime on the embankment with hand-shovelled sand. The second night we were far enough up the Grose River for conditions to improve. Apart from the occasional oil slick, there was very little evidence of pollution. We threw back the few little fish we caught, praying they would have a chance to grow up. The weather was mild for that time of the year and a cloudless sky hung overhead, light grey near the horizon.

We stayed a full two weeks - until the food ran out. It was to be the last decent holiday we had together ...

We returned to the car and loaded the canoe onto the roof rack. Already great lines of vehicles were squashed onto the freeway. We tried to pass underneath to reach the Great Western Highway, to avoid the insane motorway chaos. The lights were out of order there and half a dozen drivers in front of us were waiting for the precarious chance to make a right-hand turn. An endless procession pushed across the intersection, blocking our path, oblivious of everything except the pressing need to move on. And we waited.

A quarter of an hour later, the driver at the head of the line – (who knows how long *he* had been there) - lost his patience at the same time as his reason. He didn't blow his horn or slowly edge forward. He simply flattened his accelerator, rear wheels spinning, the rubber protesting with squeals and smoke, and smashed straight into two sedans blocking his way. He must have been convinced they should have let him in. Dad turned the car around and found his way to Kingswood via the back streets and fortunately the lights were in working order there.

Finally on the highway, traffic still moving at snail's pace, with intermittent bursts allowing second, sometimes third gear some exercise, we took another four hours to reach Parramatta, having witnessed at least five 'accidents' along the way. Once there, traffic stopped altogether. Nothing moved. Car horns filled the air with impotent protest and finally I noticed Dad getting visibly uptight. Drivers were getting out and simply abandoning their vehicles, making the situation entirely impossible. Twenty or so cars up ahead, a youth grabbed a handbag out of an open side window, the female driver screaming for help. He was out of sight in seconds. On the other side of the road, traffic in the opposite direction also suffered total immobilisation. Two drivers had left their seats and were engaged in a heated argument, coming close to blows. Dad drummed his fingers on the dashboard. Then his drumming ceased and instead he absentmindedly rubbed the vinyl surface, as if looking for a secret message in Braille to tell him what to do.

By the time the driver in front started *ramming* the boot of the next car, screaming obscenities out of the window, Dad could take it no longer. He ran our little car up the footpath, across someone's front lawn, and took the first turn left. The huge canoe on top must have looked like a battering ram. That street too was full of foul exhaust fumes and irate horns. Luckily our car was small and once Dad made up his mind there wasn't much that could stop him. Taking numerous liberties, making illegal turns, going the wrong way up one-way streets and driving on the footpath, he managed to force his way into Parramatta Park.

Once there, he relaxed again, smiled conspiratorially at Mum and scribbled a little note on a scrap of paper from the glove box.

"The day of the motorcar has ended", he sighed in resignation, "as far as I'm concerned anyway. If you all agree, we'll leave the car here with this note saying that whoever wants it can have it, and that I'll sign the papers over, free of charge, on presentation of this note."

We were stunned and it took a while to sink in. Both Mum and Dad were obviously happy with the decision, almost as if they would have liked to have done it long ago. Looking back at the madness on the road, it suddenly seemed to make sense and before long we were all laughing uncontrollably, feeling as if a great burden had been lifted off our backs. All our luggage went in the canoe and we merrily paddled our way down the Parramatta river, moving faster than we had any time that day. At Meadowbank we pulled the canoe out of the water, and caught a train home.

No one ever turned up with the note. Several weeks later Dad went to check what had happened to the car and brought it home, minus the MP3 player. Someone mustn't have realised it was useless without the security code. He had hoped to pick up the canoe on the way, but it had disappeared. He put the car in the garage and rarely used it after that.

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2012

Another strange thing happened. Our neighbour, a single Messianic Jew, simply vanished one day. He left behind a house full of furniture, a mortgage, a car and a cat. He was never heard of again.

Police investigations showed his bank accounts, whilst not prosperous, had not been touched. Mum did think she had heard some commotion early in the morning, but she couldn't be sure. There were no signs of a struggle or break-in. Strangest of all was the way his pyjamas were spread out underneath the blankets, almost as if he had been asleep and then his body simply vanished into thin air. There was speculation that he had rejected the way of life dictated by western society and joined a cult or reverted to some primitive lifestyle. This was not unheard of. A recent documentary on the ABC had actually caught up with a couple that had done just that, living quite happily like Aborigines in the bush of the Northern Territory.

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2013

“The day of the motorcar has ended.”

That statement proved to have been not terribly premature. A year and a half after the Parramatta park incident, the Government announced that petrol had just about run out.

Millions of cars became virtually obsolete overnight. There were screams of protest and outrage from the public and unions, as well as motoring organisations and car manufacturers. The big question went begging: why hadn't more forewarning been given? What about the poor suckers who had just bought new vehicles? The whole country was in a turmoil and there were threats of nation-wide strikes and violence. Initially, existing private cars were permitted alternate weeks on the roads, on an odds and evens numberplate basis. This, in combination with severe petrol rationing and huge price rises, cut petrol consumption to less than a quarter. Huge fines were imposed on drivers who breached the new regulations. Motor Registries were inundated with applications for new number plates from two-car families, and that was quickly nipped in the bud.

The new car market suffered temporary collapse until an amazing range of electric and alternative energy vehicles came on the market, so fast it made your head spin, and made you wonder just when the planning and development had taken place. Oil companies pleaded innocent, stating they had been hopeful of new discoveries, which hadn't paid off. They hadn't wanted to create panic. The share prices for coal, uranium and hydrogen skyrocketed. Leftist movements claimed there wasn't a petrol shortage at all and the whole thing was a political manoeuvre to get cars off the road. The Government had a beautifully worded reply, which, when analysed, said absolutely nothing.

Thousands of petrol vehicles, simply abandoned, were towed away and recycled. Thousands of mechanical workshops converted to alternative-energy engine replacement. Electric buses were put into use by the thousands, serving new routes to railway stations. Masses of workers were offered retraining schemes. Bicycles hit the road by the thousands and sales boomed. Not until now could it be fully appreciated what an impact the internal combustion engine had made on western society.

That was June, 2013, and the canal to fill Lake Eyre was rapidly nearing completion. A similar project was being undertaken in Northern Russia. In South America nuclear blasting had already been completed, blocking off the Amazon in an attempt to create a huge fresh water inland sea.

So far, only about ten percent of the earth's land mass was suitable for human habitation. At last someone was doing something towards increasing that percentage. At school we were taught all about the projects. Government brochures pointed out the advantages - better climates, vast additional areas of arable, and more importantly, *habitable* land, great prospects for new tourist industries, and so forth. Of course, there were those who cried doom ...

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“I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sack cloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to the earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich and mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’”

REVELATION 6 : 12-17

“After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: ‘Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.’ “

REVELATION 7 : 1-3

2014

It started with a low rumbling sound which, in combination with the creaking of timbers and light rattling of windows, reminded you of being in an old railway carriage. Then it stopped. It was Saturday and Dad was home. First we thought it must have been an explosion of some kind or a burst water main, but it had really lasted too long for anything like that.

It started again, more violent this time. The walls seemed to be shaking, the floor was vibrating under our feet, the beams in the roof were creaking and groaning arthritically. The dishes danced in the cupboard and one of the pictures fell off the wall. Dad made us stand under one of the wall arches. Then it stopped again. Silence hung around like a physical, touchable entity.

We went outside, all four of us, to see if we could find out what was going on. There too, the eerie absence of sound was most noticeable. No birds, no wind, no rustling of leaves. No voices, no radios, no motors, nothing. We wondered if our hearing had failed, but then ever so slowly the volume was turned up, as if by remote control. Doors opened, people came out, mouths uttered questions, footsteps clattered. We talked to the neighbours and decided it must have been an earth tremor, but it was difficult to believe.

The radio stations were already broadcasting the news. Sydney had definitely been hit by an earthquake, estimated at about 3.5 on the Richter scale, though that was subject to confirmation. Preliminary reports had no information on the amount of damage that might have been done, if any, nor did anyone at this stage have any idea what might have brought it on. Stand by for more news as it comes to hand.

It took a long time to get to sleep that night; tossing and turning and nightmares filled the times I was asleep. I kept dreaming that the bed was shaking and the ceiling would cave in on top of me. Then I'd wake in a cold sweat. There it was again, that awful dream, the bed shaking, almost rocking, plaster dust choking my lungs, Dad dragging me out of bed. It was too frightening to be real, too violent to be a dream. The curtains swayed, letting in spasms of feeble daylight, cruelly announcing onset of early morning. John was awake too and Dad pushed us into the bedroom doorway, into Mum's arms.

Roof tiles crashed onto the ceiling above and windows cracked, some panes shattering completely, shards of glass splintering into a thousand pieces as they met with the floor or the ground outside. We crouched in the doorway, hands folded over our heads to protect us from falling debris. Things were toppling over and crockery fell out of self-opening cupboard doors to smash on the kitchen floor. Light fittings lost their grip on the ceiling and ended up hanging by their wiring. Screams tore in from outside, while the earth groaned with a monstrous bellyache. The sound reminded me of the tyrannosaurus-rex chasing the heroes in Jurassic Park.

My stomach churned with a dry retching. I didn't know whether the shaking of my body was in symphony with the earthquake, or due to my nerves going to pieces. To find the ground you walked on unfaithful and unreliable was an unimaginable concept, like someone telling you that grass wasn't green or water wasn't wet. Certain things you take for granted, fire is hot, one plus one makes two, the earth is there to serve mankind. If you couldn't trust the ground you lived on ...

But now the earth seemed to be rebelling against an eternity of servitude, grumbling out its protest, or trying to shake off its captors like a wild steed trying to buck its rider. A massive shock seemed to send the whole house sideways, as if a huge mallet had been bashed into the foundations. Mum cried out as we fell over heavily onto the creaking floor boards. Dad tried desperately to cover all of

us with his large frame, but I could still see the far wall of our bedroom, where the double bunk stood, sinking into the ground. Then the whole ceiling was coming down on top of us. The noise was indescribable. Giant hands seemed to be ripping the house apart. Timber and fibro snapped, tiles and glass cracked, carpet in the hallway was tearing loose, clouds of dust surged back and forth through the cavities of the house.

It stopped abruptly, as if saying, 'that's enough for now, but I'll be back!' I don't know how long it lasted; it seemed like hours. Later reports stated thirty-seven seconds. I still don't believe that. As soon as it stopped, Dad lifted the sheets of plaster off our backs and cleared the way to the front door. It wouldn't open, but there was a large hole in a wall nearby. We ran outside to an unbelievable sight. Uprooted trees, huge crevices dividing the front yard, a maze of bitumen jigsaw pieces made up what used to be the sealed road. Water was pouring down the hill from an artificial geyser near the corner. The acrid smell of gas was competing for supremacy with the sick odour of electrical burnout. A power pole, snapped at the base, stretched across the road, loose wires snaking in the flow of water and sparking wildly when they came close to something solid.

The sky was still semi-dark. Dawn was at least half an hour away. I thought I saw several falling stars, but they were gone in an instant and it could well have been my imagination. People, haggard and dusty, were emerging from the ruins like long kept prisoners released from a concentration camp, eyes both empty and haunted at the same time, totally lacking comprehension. A battlefield surrounded us, smoke and dust clouds settling ever so slowly to reveal large piles of rubble where full-brick dwellings had once stood. Our place was made of fibro and although many of the walls had disintegrated, miraculously the main timber frame was still standing. A section of the foundation had sunk into the ground and the roof had partly caved in. The chimney had been reduced to a heap of bricks. The water tank in the backyard had fallen over and smashed to pieces.

Pictures I'd seen at school flashed before my eyes, of Darwin after a cyclone had levelled it many years ago. If only this were a nightmare, something to wake up from, or to find all restored after a quick phone call to the insurance company.

More people filled the street, dressed in torn night wear, ragged, dirty, bleeding. We went down the street to see what we could do to help. Sirens sounded in the distance, but there was no reason to believe they were coming this way. Groans of agony issued from convoluted mounds of destruction. We managed to drag free several victims. Mum attended to their wounds and broken limbs with make-shift bandages. But there were lots that hadn't made it.

It was the first time in my life that I looked death in the face. Wide open, dull, lifeless eyes haunted my dreams for months afterwards. It was also the first time I saw Dad cry.

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Telephone lines were down and there was no electricity. Until the main was fixed, taps would be dry. Mobile phones didn't work at all anymore; probably the relay towers were now little more than scrap metal. Even the radio stations were off the air. Our home was one of the few still standing and was converted into a temporary hospital, as there was little hope of assistance from official sources for a long time. By the afternoon, Dad had organised the able-bodied people into working parties. Most were initially divided into rescue units to designated street numbers, armed with picks and spades and shovels, and bare hands. Others were assigned the task of trying to stem the flow from the broken water main and filling as many containers as possible, as it was certain we would be needing plenty of this precious resource. Several women had nursing experience, including Mum, and attended those rescued as best possible in the circumstances.

John and I were helping Dad search through the chaos, ears pricked for the slightest cry or moan to home in on. Strong blustery gusts of wind had been hampering progress. Dust surged through the many cavities in the vestiges of occupation. We looked up and could only stop and stare in awe as a huge brown cloud swelled over the horizon. It approached at amazing speed, high in the sky, chewing up great areas of grey expanse. It moved *so* fast, it almost seemed the sky was a roller blind and someone had pulled the string. There were a few minutes of false twilight before we were enveloped in utter darkness and further rescue operations became impossible.

We edged our way back to where we thought our place was located, stumbling and tripping over what was now foreign topography. We held onto each other tightly and called out into the impenetrable darkness for Mum. She answered immediately, giving us a bearing to aim for.

Once inside, Dad managed to find a candle and, with its help, our LED camping light. He also located an old gas lamp and a nearly full cylinder, its use-by-date expired. Both the glass and the mantle had broken, but the rest was intact and a spare mantle soon provided enough light to continue caring for the patients.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon by now. We hadn't eaten all day, yet still weren't hungry. Just the *thought* of food turned my stomach. By five, small trickles of light started filtering through the black expanse overhead. Whatever it was, at least it seemed to be thinning out. The wind died. And all became totally black again when the sun drowned in the murk. We had acquired walking sticks by then, to feel our path like blind men. The few torches we had managed to locate were assigned to more urgent priorities.

I didn't know whether I was tired or not. Anyway, all the mattresses and blankets were in use and I couldn't have gone to sleep if I had wanted to. Images of death and despair swam before my eyes as soon as I closed them. Even though I could barely see a thing with them open, for some strange reason it helped control these images.

There was little anyone could do for the time being, not until there was sufficient light to see by. For hours, John and I sat on the grass in the front yard, unable to think of anything to say. We just listened to sounds issuing from the all-consuming darkness. In the distance somewhere, a dog was wailing and another one replied. And occasionally there was the sound of falling debris. It wasn't cold, so we just sat there. Every so often, Mum or Dad would come out to check if we were alright, hug or kiss us and go back inside. Time seemed to have ceased to exist. We sat there the whole night. We didn't speak. We didn't even think. Thoughts darted on the outer edges of my brain, sometimes trying to nudge their way in, but some instinctive and unconscious mechanism kept pushing them back, leaving my mind blank and emotionless.

Much later, the darkness released some of the hold it had on the night and a deep red orb appeared in the sky, probably the moon, vaguely silhouetting unidentifiable shapes against a backdrop of mission brown. We were numb in both mind and body, and the alien display made no impression.

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Three days passed before we managed to find a crackly broadcast on one of the transistor radios. The earthquake, the announcer said, had not been restricted to Sydney.

How many shocks did we have to live through? Hard to believe though it was, present indications were that there was hardly a continent on the globe that had not been affected. All over the world, volcanoes, dormant for thousands of years, had erupted as if in a chain reaction, throwing huge volumes of dust into the atmosphere, resulting in a dust cloud of such immense proportions, it

virtually enveloped the earth. Tidal waves drowned thousands. I remembered learning at school that mass extinctions happened this way, a dust cloud resulting from the impact of a meteor with the earth, causing climate change on a scale we couldn't begin to imagine. 'Volcanic winter' was the term they used. Goodbye to the dinosaurs. Didn't they say that if it happened again, most life forms on earth would be wiped out? My shoulders shuddered involuntarily.

Damage was *so* extensive, no estimate was possible, nor would it serve any purpose. No insurance company would be in a position to pay up. Casualty rates were high, it was realised, however, nearly all lines of communication were down and people were advised to look after themselves as best they could. It was not known when assistance could be rendered. 'Bury your dead and care for the wounded', was the message from the powers that be in Australia; and above all, don't panic. A number of helicopters would commence making food drops and deliver medical supplies shortly and people should stay calm. Easy for them to say.

Speculations as to what set off a disaster of these proportions were wide and varied, ranging from meteor impact (though such event *should* have been predictable), to underground nuclear testing, to crust adjustments ascribable to new weight distributions resulting from water retention in the huge dams we'd learned about at school.

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Of the fifty-four houses in our street, some twenty or so were still standing in some sort of fashion. Repairs were commenced. The big clean up began. It was amazing to see how co-operative everyone was. Community spirit reached an all time high and everyone helped whoever was in need. Looting was practically unheard of. Instead it appeared understood, by unspoken agreement, that whatever material was salvageable could be used by whoever needed it. Those whose homes were still habitable shared accommodation with those who had been deprived. People previously without religious convictions now talked about God or prayed openly in public. Even the nation's leaders prayed over the radio.

But it didn't last long. Somehow, much of the dust cloud settled, creating deserts where there had been none, and burying entire communities indiscriminately. While many crops failed, alternative food sources saw the survivors through. As soon as the nation again assumed some workable state of order and primitive basic services were reinstated, the religious phase settled the way the dust cloud had.

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2015

It was not until the next year that school resumed. Most school records had been destroyed and assessments had to be made of all students to determine grade positions. I commenced year ten and John, who had repeated year six, progressed to high school. He was only a year and a half younger, and it didn't seem fair. Most classes were held in the open air, pending major repairs to school buildings. In the event of rain, we should stay home we were told, but much to the disappointment of the students, it *never* seemed to rain. By now we had become used to a very mild climate and a permanently beige sky. Even at night there appeared to be little change in temperature and on most days it was practically wind-still. Humidity was extremely high, continuously.

Teachers explained that the brown dust in the upper atmosphere was having a 'green-house' effect, gradually levelling out global temperature. All the old fears of global warming were coming home to roost, but car emissions were totally insignificant in *this* scenario. Unless urgent scientific intervention was successful, (no one explained what that entailed), the phenomena would cause the

polar icecaps to melt, resulting in unprecedented ocean surface levels, on a scale never *imagined* in the carbon debate, flooding every coastal city in the world. Mass evacuation and resettlement on higher ground would become imperative.

Political decisions had to be made, and made quickly. One of the first was to distribute huge quantities of fertiliser and a variety of seeds, free of charge, to encourage the growing of home produce to relieve the food shortage. Vegetable gardens and aqua-culture plantations sprouted up everywhere. Scientists were working on ideas to either consolidate and bring down, or alternatively scatter and break up the suspended dust layer. The canal at Lake Eyre was reconstructed as a kind of 'reverse' power station, using sea water in volumes equivalent to the evaporation rate of the lake to generate electricity. And a program commenced to construct nuclear power stations in Australia, coal-fired generation being out of the question, as it only aggravated the green-house effect. Another project commenced, tapping geo-thermal energy in South Australia, but getting the power to remote cities posed the greatest problem.

Huge grants were paid to finance solar power generation by satellites, sending the harnessed energy back to earth by way of microwaves, collected by huge discs sited in unpopulated areas. And financial rewards were offered for practical ideas on how to clean up the sky. A flat fifty percent income tax was introduced, but for the first time hardly a soul complained. It was obvious that, if the world was to survive, some drastic measures were called for.

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"Dad, how come you haven't been coming to church anymore?"

I always felt free to ask him anything, but for some reason that one had been very hard to get out. The hall our meetings were held in was still upright and functional. But more and more people seemed dissatisfied with the church and some Sundays the hall was less than half full. I *needed* an answer.

"It's rather involved, Mike, but I've been expecting you to ask. History has shown that *organising* Christianity doesn't work. Invariably it chokes the life out of the whole thing. There's too much resistance to change, too much tradition, too much regimentation, too much control. No one is free to do what the Lord tells him to do. In the past, revivals started *new* movements. They had to, because the existing establishment couldn't handle the move of the Spirit. At first, lots of good came from such renewal. Many people came to the Lord, simply because they could see God *radiating* out of the Christians involved. Life created new life. But sooner or later, people being what they are, they would fall back into the same trap as the one they'd come out of. When they sang a song of praise, or prayed, or read the Bible, they didn't do it because the Holy Spirit inside was motivating them to do so, but because they had done the same thing yesterday. And it had been good then.

"That's like planting a photo of a seed and expecting a plant to grow. We mean well, but human beings love ritual and don't like the unknown. So we do things because we did them like that last year, or last month, or last week, trying to recapture the feeling it had then. God might want to do something entirely different, but we don't let Him."

"But Dad, surely God could *make* us do what He wants?"

"Of course He could, Mike, but He doesn't *want* to make us. He wants the decision to be made by us, for us to submit to His will out of love for Him, and out of gratitude for what He's done for us. If there was a group of Christians really doing that, others meeting with them could not help but meet God face to face. They would have only two choices: either turn to God and be born again, or

run a mile to get away. Instead there are loads of people regularly going to church who don't even know what it *is* to be born again. They come year after year believing they are true Christians and don't know any better."

"Couldn't one sincere and willing Christian have that effect on all the others?"

"I'm afraid it doesn't work that way, Mike. God has already expressed Himself through one person. That was Jesus. Now God wants to express Himself through lots of people, who together make up what we call the 'body of Christ'. Even if there were sufficient Christians prepared to break away, in all likelihood, before long all we would have is another division. The Bible says *Jesus* will build His Church. I do believe that the time is near when God will open the eyes of all His children. It won't be any of my doing or the efforts of anyone else - Jesus will be doing it. And I do believe it *will* involve a break away from the traditional denominations.

"It won't be easy for those who break away when that happens. Others will resent them and even persecute them. They'll make life *so* hard for them, it will be very tempting to try to convince yourself it is *wrong* to break away, just to avoid the persecution. But it will be right, no matter how difficult. Mike, I'm not going to church for two reasons: First, it makes me sad and angry to see it the way it is now - a bit like Jesus getting upset at the money lenders and dealers in the temple. Especially knowing there is *nothing* I can do about it. Second, I feel I have to make a stand for Jesus - to say: 'Hey guys, this just isn't good enough anymore! Jesus deserves better.'"

I could see where he was coming from. It was a bit like a stop-work meeting, to tell employers to pick up their game. Or going on a hunger strike, to protest against Government policy on a matter of ethics. And now that we were on a roll, I might as well bring up that other nagging issue that had been bothering me for ages.

"One more thing, Dad, explain this 'born-again' bit to me, because I still don't know whether I understand it."

He searched my eyes deeply, as if trying to work out where the question was coming from. Then he smiled strangely, as if satisfied it was coming from the right place, or I was old enough to understand. "OK. First of all, the Bible says the Kingdom of God is within us. So to find God, you don't need to search amongst the stars. The place to find Him is right wherever you are, inside yourself.

"You are not *just* flesh and blood. The Bible tells us we consist of three parts - body, soul and spirit. The soul is our personality, our character - it's what makes you, Michael, different from any other being on this planet. That's the part of us God wants to save. The spirit is the life-source, the energy that drives us to do things and to think in certain ways. Without the soul the body cannot stay alive, without the spirit the soul is dead. Because God is Spirit, *that* is the place to make contact with Him. When we decide, and I stress that it is *our* decision, when *we* decide to allow God to take over our lives, when we give ourselves to Him, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in us and He is ready to live through us. *That* is what is called being 'born again'. From that point on, one actual life source within us is God - we become true children of God.

"God says that He wants us to give up our life, so that He can live through us. But our own human spirit is still there, making us want to go our own way. In order for God to live through us and people to recognise Him in us, we must give up all rights to use our soul for our own purposes. And it's hard. It shouldn't *be* an effort, only a matter of voluntary surrender. But in practice, it *is* hard. Even Jesus didn't want to die, but He submitted to the Father's will.

“God doesn’t *have* to do it that way, but He has *chosen* to do it that way, because it is the only way we can truly show our love for Him. All the time, it remains a matter of choice on our part: are we going to let God have his way or will *we* live today? Jesus said we must take up our cross *daily* and He meant it - we must actually crucify ourselves each day to allow God to live through us. God does not use force. He wants us to submit of our own free will. It’s the only way that makes it meaningful. In practice, it is actually far more often than a daily decision. Moment by moment, it is a question of: ‘Which is the life-source of what I am doing now - God’s Spirit or my own spirit?’”

So now I understood. And something bothered me even more than Dad’s unhappiness - I was pretty certain I had not been born again ...

There is a new revelation dawning. The information, (data input if you like), forming our beliefs comes in from all directions. The great bulk comes through sensory perception, seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling. Of those five, I guess seeing is the most important. ‘Seeing is believing’, they say. We don’t truly believe until we see for ourselves. Hearing has to be next. It says somewhere, ‘How shall they hear without a preacher?’

But is that whole story? What about that blank slate? Is it really completely empty when we set out on our individual pilgrimage? Right now, and I’m not quite sure how to explain it, my life is playing on a massive screen, far bigger than the largest IMAX theatre. The screen extends all the way to the outer perimeter of my vision, yet I am aware of an aura even beyond that, a massive light source behind the screen, glowing around the pictures of my life like an eclipse of the sun. I am not alone in this theatre. It has to be the Light source that started me on this journey of self discovery.

I get this weird feeling that, if the screen were taken away, nothing would be blank ...

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“When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets.

Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel’s hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.

Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them.

The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up.”

REVELATION 8 : 1-7

As Marilyn bent over to arrange the pillows, she showed a lot of thigh and I found myself furtively hoping for a glimpse of her panties.

Years of seeing girls bend over at school had left me unaffected. Now, suddenly, it seemed strangely attractive. Maybe I was late developing that way, but I could finally see what the other boys got so excited about. Hair, eyes and lips, breasts, bottoms and legs, suddenly all took on new meaning. Dad had told me the facts of life, and sex education had been a compulsory subject from the time I started High School. I first heard the word 'condom' in health classes in Primary School. The classes had conveyed a clinical aspect, while Dad had related an allegory of the eventual union of Christ and His bride. Yet it had never seemed terribly interesting. Now my eyes were drawn like magnets to follow girls in short school tunics, watching for that sway of the hip, the way they tossed their hair back, and the growing shape of their breasts.

My first 'date' was a disaster. There were no real places to go out to. Nearly all picture theatres had been demolished and public transport was hopeless anyway. There were few, if any, organised dances. Most other boys had been dating for several years, but I had no experience at all. I took Marilyn, a girl from school, to a party in somebody's backyard, picking her for physical proportions that made my heart beat faster. The parents of the boy giving the party had gone to visit some friends, leaving some twenty teenagers to their own resources.

Casks of wine somehow made their way onto the table and joints of hash were passed around freely. Heavy-metal rock screamed from the compact-disc player, making conversation almost impossible. Lights were turned low. Marilyn put herself down confidently on the scattered pillows and lit herself a cigarette. This was her scene. She had gone through the same motions many times before. She seemed unbothered by the way her skirt had ridden up and made no effort to cover up the pink lace showing. Warily, I lowered myself down next to her, feeling out of place and self-conscious.

The heavy-rock made way for the latest batch of protest songs, insightfully expressing today's youth's dissidence and confusion. Knowledge explosion and the ever changing world around us left a sense of futility in all of us. One of the songs touched something deep inside which I'd had difficulty putting into words: -

“There's a calm before each storm, and a storm is brewin' now,
It'll take an unknown form, no use askin' why or how.
Storm of change and revolution, of knowledge and progress,
take my meagre contribution, for each day it's gettin' less ...

Take my hand, take my arm, don't leave me in the calm,
for the storm will soon be ragin' all around.

So don't tell me you won't see me, you need me as I need you.
All the world's gone crazy, and I don't know what to do,
If you'd only understand, what confusion's all about,
what the yesterdays have given, but tomorrow's leavin' out.

Take my hand, take my arm, don't leave me in ...

Dance ? Oh, sure. The song had me mesmerised. So far it was one of the few things with which I identified. We danced ...

“If you don't like the way I'm talkin', please don't turn your back on me.
It's a crooked path I'm walkin' and the end I cannot see.

The uncertainty's tomorrow. It's comin' much too fast.
It can only bring me sorrow, 'cause it's nothin' like the past.

Take my hand, take my arm, don't leave me in the calm,
'cause the storm will soon be ragin' all around ..."

For a while we danced, but I felt uncomfortable, even guilty, being there. Somehow the whole scenario was in conflict with the principles Mum and Dad had taught me. Already very early in the evening, couples started sneaking off into rooms by themselves and everyone laughed when they came out again.

How do we form our belief system? It's only just now beginning to come clear. We are taught ideas and values from the time we are born, standards as to what's right and wrong. Then, as we grow older, we are exposed to new information, fresh ideas about values, some of which fit and some of which don't fit into the framework of reference already established. The ones we adopt and the ones we reject hinge on how emotionally attached we are to the existing framework, maybe unwilling to modify it so the new stuff will fit. But there's more to it. Personal preferences, largely determined by our character and personality, have a big say.

Our personality. What does that really mean? Dad said it is my soul. It certainly seems to point to the existence of a part of us that's either programmed into our genes from conception, or alternatively comprises something additional to the mass of cells making up the body. If the latter is true, I'd have to be talking about that thing the Bible calls a soul. The part of us Jesus says He wants to save for all eternity. But what if that's a delusion? What if it really is only chemical reactions in our brain and blood stream that make us who we are?

Marilyn eased her head onto my chest as we were dancing, her arms around me, stroking my back. I was much taller. I felt awkward and didn't know what to do with my hands. A ripple of excitement flushed my face as her ample bosom rubbed against my abdomen. When she started pushing up her hips into my pelvis, confused and conflicting thoughts began racing through my head. I had an erection, and she could feel it. The consuming urge for physical contact, mixed with half believed mental arguments for acceptance by the group and not being the odd one out, fought inwardly with years of moral background and upbringing.

She lightly pecked my cheek, the corner of my mouth; she nibbled my ear. I knew she wanted to be kissed and didn't want her to know I was unsure of myself and inexperienced. Finally I worked up the courage and kissed her lips, clumsily and hard.

It must have told her exactly what I didn't want her to find out. She excused herself to go to the bathroom and the next time I saw her she was dancing with somebody else, as close as she had been with me. She completely ignored me and I was lost for knowing what to do. There were heroic imaginings of me beating the living daylights out of the fellow she was dancing with, and me again, taking her aside to a quiet place, where I would kiss her and she would beg for more ... But nothing practical.

Ten minutes later she went with the other guy into one of the bedrooms. I watched them go in and close the door. That's when I left, almost relieved there was nothing to make me stay. I sneaked out furtively, too embarrassed to say goodbye, a little lightheaded after the couple of drinks I'd had. I strolled home, identifying with the few feeble stars and an amber moon struggling for significance through the heavy cloud formations. Shortly, a fine drizzling precipitation floated down, not cold, but nevertheless some temporary relief from the warm sticky weather. I think it was the first time it rained in about a year. By the time I got home, I was soaked to the skin.

As I entered the front door, the patio began to tremble. Ice cold fingers of doom gripped my heart. I expected the worst, but the tremor passed without causing damage. Next day's news reported more earthquakes overseas.

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The rain continued non-stop for months. Most of the time it was just a thick drizzle, emptying the atmosphere of immense quantities of built-up humidity, almost like a fridge on the defrost cycle. Its persistence and ultimate volume penetrated anything and everything. Gums hung their branches like weeping willows, straining under the constant weight. Carpets squelched under footsteps made by mud-draped shoes. Ceilings and walls turned green and black with mould and mildew. The whole house started to smell *so* bad that Mum threw open all the windows despite the wet weather, but there was little else anyone could do, until the rain let up.

The yard was transformed into a big soggy puddle, with thick streams of mud incessantly coursing down the driveway, like lava flowing from an active volcano, oozing down the crevices that had been so carefully filled after the earthquake. What drainage and storm water systems had survived *that* frenzy, now became hopelessly clogged with soil and plants which stood no chance against the unremitting onslaught. Vegetable gardens suffered meltdown, the free, compliments-of-the-Government fertilisers were either leached or washed away, to be deposited who knows where.

Later we were to find out ...

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One of the first manifestations was dead fish.

Fish washing up on beaches. Fish floating in the lakes; fish blocking off the shallow white waters of creeks and rivers. Mostly undersize specimens. Rotting carcasses fouled most waterways and while the stench of decay was appalling, the dismay of witnessing the destruction of the last traces of what had already been a dwindling ecology was heartbreaking.

Despite massive disruption to classes owing to the rain, most of us progressed to year eleven. Dad often helped me with my homework and although there were many fields he'd never had a chance to study, he was interested to see what it was all about and often managed to solve problems that had been troubling me. He was a whiz at the computer, website development his forté, as this was an everyday requirement of his occupation. I learned far more from Dad than from the teachers, as he had a real knack for reducing things to simple basics.

The world in general was barely recovering from the earthquakes and it seemed incredible that it was only a little over a year since Sydney had been struck. Problems of accommodation, transport and communication, electricity and food supplies, had been overcome in haphazard fashion. The rain had also dramatically reduced what was now commonly referred to as the 'hot-house layer', (I guess to distinguish it from the 'green-house effect'). Now, heads were reeling with new problems. The waterways had been poisoned with run-off carrying chemical fertilisers and insecticides. Good intentions had back fired and not even the most poker-faced politician could deny it.

Initial tests had shown that, thus far, domestic water supplies were safe for drinking. Daily monitoring would continue. Despite those assurances, Dad installed a large new water tank in our backyard, filled by catchment off the roof. It needed to be filtered and boiled, but tasted much better than what came out of the tap. A few years ago, there had been government subsidies on offer for the installation of rain tanks, so there were a lot of them around. Then again, many of those had self-destructed in the earthquake, as had ours. A few people adopted the filtering and boiling suggestion, particularly for tap water; but most laughed, saying he was overcautious and you could walk along

the street and have a roof tile put a hole in your head. However, it wasn't long before the precaution proved worthwhile.

Babies died from cot deaths. Investigations showed that most were bottle-fed. It wasn't until older people and young children started collapsing in the street that water distillation received Government support. Nitrates in drinking water were being converted to nitrites in the digestive system, which in turn destroyed the blood's ability to carry oxygen, leading to symptoms akin to asphyxia. Those that survived often suffered irreparable brain damage.

Clearly the 'safe' nitrate levels were *far* too optimistic. Local authorities issued pamphlets on the construction of a simple distillation unit from readily available appliances. This, in turn, put strain on the electricity supply and it was just as well that Australia's first nuclear power generator had recently been put into operation. Then there were other schools of thought protesting that distilled water wasn't suitable for human consumption. It was actually dangerous. Prolonged drinking of water that had all the impurities removed caused it to leach all the minerals from the human body, producing innumerable medical complications. 'Caught between a rock and a hard place', as they used to say.

Then there was the seaweed. The chemicals that killed fish were *feeding* marine vegetation. Boats had to make unscheduled stops to clear masses of kelp from their propellers. Swimming at the beach was impossible. Massive clean-up campaigns were organised, with no more effect than trying to level Mount Everest with a garden spade. Tap water came out green with algae. Creeks resembled swamp land. The ocean looked dirty.

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The air was crisp and seemed to have a bite to it. I increased my step, every breath coming easily, invigorating my muscles. I decided to try running, starting with an easy jog, gradually speeding up to finish with a sprint to the school gate. I was barely puffing after the five and a half kilometres, but did feel a little light-headed. A gentle breeze wafted into my face and I sniffed it with pleasure. It smelled fresh and tangy, as if a dash of menthol had been added. It had been a long time since motor transport had paid the price of fresh air. A deep breath filled my lungs to capacity, but it made me feel dizzy.

It was early still. John had slept in and I hadn't felt like waiting. A class mate sat on a school bench, lighting a cigarette. The result was baffling - the shaft quickly burned up most of its length, like a fuse on a fire cracker, then the filter exploded into flame. The comical look of astonishment on his face made me wish I'd brought a camera. Someone must have played a joke on him, giving him a novelty cigarette, like those exploding cigars in Abbot and Costello replays.

He dropped the thing with a scream and it was obvious he had burnt his lips and nose badly - instantly, the humour drained like water from a cracked plastic bucket. The dry weeds where the thing dropped burst alight, crackling with ferocious anticipation. I stamped on them, but orange heat was already spreading, refusing to die, stubbornly flaring up again as soon as I lifted my foot. The synthetic soles of my shoes were getting hot and started to melt. Lots of water would be needed to fight this.

A teacher, just arriving, had already taken in the situation, grabbed a hose and turned it full-blast on the burning grass, a stream of water taking turns with something that looked like green bile. The small patch of weeds went out, but already fire had found a new target. The flames raced to a large gum tree, one of a couple on the grounds, tearing along the ground as if a trail of petrol had been poured. Eager tongues of orange licked the base of the tree, then climbed the trunk at speed. For a

moment it looked as if yellow stripes were being painted by invisible brushes along the scribbled silver bark, but within seconds the tree turned into a massive torch, pouring smoke and cinders into the air. We were driven back by intense heat and burning leaves and branches tumbling down.

The garden hose was no match for *this* fury. Within minutes, all that was left was a smouldering charcoal stump and a pile of ashes. The grass was gone, several bushes had all but disappeared. Mr. Whitford continued hosing the stump because, incredible though it seemed, the slightest waft of movement in the air would cause the entire thing to explode into flame again. All that had saved the few remaining school buildings was the vast area of concrete isolating the burnt section.

When Mr. Whitford asked what had happened, I couldn't tell him. It just didn't make sense. Fire didn't behave that way - it wasn't natural. It had burned almost as if someone had soaked the entire tree in petrol or kerosine, but both were *so* hard to come by, no one in their right mind would waste them, especially not on a practical joke, if that was what it was meant to be.

Sirens wailed alarm towards the west, but seemed to be headed in another direction, to where columns of smoke were billowing up to join the morning cumulus. I decided this was no day to be at school. The crisp air was fresh no longer, smoke and vapours and chemical odours usurping its place. Suddenly I was scared and started running, wanting urgently to be home, wishing it wasn't so far. A coughing fit shook my chest in the middle of a grey haze, forcing me to slow down.

Then there was a clear section and I was running again. The lawn in one front yard seemed to catch alight for no visible reason whatsoever, as if Mother Nature had decided that the point of spontaneous combustion no longer needed a trigger. Six or seven houses were engulfed in flames in one street alone. It was almost wind-still. Sweat poured off my brow as if to dampen me down as a safety precaution. The beige expanse overhead had been blotted out by a black and grey fog and it was difficult to see more than thirty metres ahead. My eyes were watering by natural reflex.

I turned the corner. Home was only a few blocks away now. I tried to go faster but another fit of coughing convulsed my lungs. A timber dwelling, still showing the scars of seismic disturbance and boasting makeshift repair work that looked like band-aids on a grazed knee, instantly ignited before my eyes, crackling and snapping as it succumbed to the ferocious heat. The roof caved in and huge flames shot up high, as the interior was incinerated with the sucking sound of an enormous draught. I turned in the direction of a scream of terror and pain, to witness a woman come running out of a place across the road, her clothes alight. She crashed on the lawn, rolling desperately to kill the flames. Instead the grass ignited. Fear tore at my insides. I wanted to run away from the horror, to reach the security of home and family, to ensure they were still there to *give* that security.

Nightmare images flashed through my brain, revived memories of death and destruction. I fought the internal agony of fear, pushed aside the wish to avoid seeing more soul-destroying affliction, and raced across the road to find a tap. There! But there was no water pressure, only a slow drip, but at least it fell into a bucket. Too many were using water all at the same time. Then there was no water at all. The aroma of grilled steak reached my nostrils and registered an indignant anger. Who on earth would be crazy enough to have a cooked breakfast at a time like this?

The woman was lying still by now. I saw her from the corner of my eye, afraid to turn my head. She was probably dead, better off dead. And if she wasn't, she soon would be. There was nothing I could do for her. I wouldn't know how to tell if she was dead and, if she was still alive, I wouldn't have the courage to touch her. I didn't even have the courage to *look* at her.

But what if she were *my* mother? Or anyone's mother? What if she could still be helped? Could I *live* with that wavering doubt on my conscience? I afforded myself one glimpse, because I knew I would never forgive myself if there was any chance that she wasn't beyond saving ...

But only a charred, steaming black form was left, barely recognisable as a human being. All the man-made fibres she had been wearing had melted into the torched flesh and suddenly it hit me where the barbecue smell was coming from. I was sick right that moment, gagging violently, as if my body was trying to physically eject what had entered the mind.

I was running again, choking on the scorching air, not able to tell whether there were streams of tears or sweat running down my face; probably both.

“Michael !”

Relief flooded through me on recognition of Dad's voice. He had left home before I did, but must have returned, as soon as he realised what was happening. What on earth *was* happening, anyway? I literally fell into his strong arms, not even trying to stop my body from shaking. Uncontrollable, almost hysterical sobs emerged from deep in my throat.

Dad believed words were often inadequate when the chips were down, even if he was usually very good at expressing himself. He said nothing, just held me tight until some of his control and confidence flowed over into me. Not until I had calmed down sufficiently did we hurry home.

Mum was almost in a state of panic when we arrived, but Dad succeeded in calming her down as well. Luckily, hard-to-phase John was home, saving the anguish of trying to locate him. Whilst he was nervous, unlike me, he was still fully in control of his emotions. Dad immediately assigned tasks. Mum and I drew buckets of water from the tank, while John blocked the downpipes of the guttering with old rags. Dad turned off the electricity and gas and proceeded to chop down any plant growth near the house. I passed the buckets to John to fill the gutters.

When there was no more we could do, we went inside. We prayed for protection and gave thanks that there was no wind to fan the flames. Outside roared the awesome and terrifying sound produced by incendiary rage. Two hours later, our garden was a black desert. Every plant, every bush, every blade of grass had burned to the ground, yet, miraculously, our home stood unscathed.

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Again, a state of emergency was declared and a total fire ban notified. Use of heaters, toasters, ovens, stoves and barbecues, in fact anything with an exposed flame or filament, was prohibited for the time being, until the cause of the incredible fires could be determined. Smoking was outlawed. The sky resembled an impressionist's painting, greys, browns and blues all mingled together with none boasting a real dominance over the others, lending a strange, alien atmosphere to life, after the light brown firmament that had been around so long.

The environment was the most depressing. Everywhere, black skeletal frames bore testimony to the earlier existence of places where people actually used to live. There wasn't a blade of grass left to be seen anywhere, yet amazingly, quite a few trees had been spared. Some even showed signs of having caught fire, but having fizzled out. Many electricity lines were down, but most poles were still standing. Fire had ravaged the country as if guided by an invisible brain, picking and choosing, burning down some things with ferocious appetite, ignoring others altogether, the way a tornado often can also be remarkably choosy.

The day after, it rained. A torrent of water poured from the heavens, dousing the smouldering aftermath, washing away ashes and earth, as if eager to cleanse away memories of sorrow and pain. (Or maybe to destroy the evidence of an act of either vandalism or arson). The downpour dissolved the coagulated blood of helpless victims, lying dead or dying under heaps of charcoal and bricks, the remnants of their gutted homes. It seemed the heavens were sobbing in regret for the anguish they had caused. Hail stones followed, knocking on roofs as if begging to be let in, anxious to cool the searing heat of yesterday.

Our home was again opened up to the hurt and the homeless, this time however, they came in a different spirit. They acted as if the hospitality was their right. Some tried to take over. They enviously eyed the few possessions we had, simple things like beds and blankets, furniture and household goods. Things we owned, but they had lost. Some dropped crude hints that we really ought to give a good part of it away. Mum and Dad were very generous, but it was impossible to provide even the basics for more than a few.

Authorities were reticent about revealing the true reasons for the fires, but when similar catastrophes occurred in other parts of the world, the truth *had* to come out.

Algae.

Miniscule plant life in the oceans, technically known as phytoplankton or diatoms, had thrived on fertilisers washed down the stormwater pipes. This plant life comprised the diet of many fish species, but with far fewer fish and a great upset in the ecocycle, the balance of nature had been drastically altered.

Phytoplankton was responsible for production of roughly seventy percent of the earth's atmospheric oxygen. Right now, oxygen production appeared out of control. Heavy concentrations of oxygen were drifting in from the oceans and few people realised how *critical* the correct percentage of atmospheric oxygen, (usually around 21 %), was to the survival of the world. A small rise in the percentage increased flammability of ordinary materials on a logarithmic scale. In some ways, the current hot-house effect was fortunate in the short term. The smoothing out of the earth's temperature had taken the bite out of low and high pressure zones, taming the wind. So the oxygen concentrations moved slowly, making their arrival somewhat predictable, now that they knew what they were looking for. A bit like monitoring a snails race. At least all possible precautions could be taken. If strong winds were common now, it was unlikely the world would pull through. A massive and uncontrollable inferno would reduce the globe to a smouldering heap of ashes at very short notice. Approaching oxygen drifts resulted in immediate fire bans. Electricity and gas supplies were promptly shut down. People would hide in the dark, shivering in fear, waiting for the all-clear.

Governments spoke of large scale solutions. Herbicides could kill the plankton, but what would be the side effects? It was more than obvious by now that large scale solutions could create even larger scale problems. Nature was too complex and too vulnerable, even in this age of artificial intelligence, to anticipate all possible permutations. Man knew enough to get himself into dire straits, but not enough to get himself out. No agreement could be reached at world conferences. There were too many unknowns, there was too much at stake. Too many hesitated; too many were uncertain; too many conflicting ideas were tossed around. Nothing was done.

At least all combat had switched into cease-fire mode. Armies were too busy to have time for war. Churches began predicting the end of the world. All this had been foretold in the Bible. And worse was yet to come. Worse? How could it possibly get *worse*? Prophets of doom were right in their element, audiences more than willing to listen.

Bushfires cleared millions of acres, burdening the atmosphere with carbon and soot. Hundreds of thousands head of stock were lost whenever the tiniest spark in an oxygen drift took its fierce toll. Chaos and panic ruled the globe. The uncertainty of when the next strike would come had gloom and mourning hanging over the world like a veil of despair and drove many to suicide.

And for the first time in my life, I found out what real hunger was.

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The human race is certainly a stickler for survival. While half the world was burning to the ground, the other half was already busy rebuilding and reorganising. Brick upon brick, plank upon beam, somehow ways and means were found. Anything useable found among the ruins was carefully put aside, cleaned and used in the reconstruction. Building materials were in extremely short supply, but however makeshift, repairs were made.

Food was the worst. Feeding millions of people when most agriculture had been disabled was an impossible burden. Theft and looting was common. Any food obtained, by whatever means, had to be well hidden to prevent its disappearance. Most went hungry. Many starved.

But the human race carried on, while revealing much of its darker side, showing also a much more positive refusal to be trampled under by adversity. The grass grew back, trees sprouted new foliage, people began to smile again. The fires abated. The problem seemed to be solving itself. In the marvellously designed wonders of the ecocycle, even phytoplankton had to feed on something and after the residual fertilisers were consumed, much of it died off.

But the sky was still grey. And the tides were still rising.

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“You don’t believe that garbage, do you?” Victor, a mate from school, looked at me incredulously.

The Christian religion was in turmoil at the moment, fighting an ecumenical battle over whether this really was the end of the world or not. Church members demanded answers from their paid representatives, after all, that’s what they were being paid for. Some church leaders said it was, losing members who thought it wasn’t. Others said it wasn’t, losing members who thought it was. Those lost often joined those who believed the same as they did, but, oddly enough, the majority joined groups sitting on the fence, having a bet each way.

The Government tried to suppress the notion, sometimes jailing fanatical soap-box preachers for disturbing the peace or being a public nuisance. But the idea had fallen on fertile ground, causing division in the churches and earning derision from those outside. Many new sects sprung up, leaders often claiming special enlightenment, or even to be Jesus returned in the flesh.

I wasn’t sure *what* to believe. Dad had said that the ‘end’ would come like ‘a thief in the night’, unexpected, without warning. No one could predict when the time was ripe. But we should live, he said, as if Jesus could return any minute. That way we would recognise the truth when it confronted us. And we could dismiss anything else as a lie.

Did I believe this was the beginning of the end?

“You really *do* believe it, don’t you?” Victor prompted again.

“Yes I do,” I told him, even though I wasn’t sure.

“Well, then you’re a bloody idiot!” he scoffed and marched off as if he didn’t want to be associated with me anymore.

I’m still on this same quest: how do we form our beliefs? We get told so many things, a flood of information that never lets up, an assault to the senses. And much of it has a hidden agenda. How do we tell when we’re being had? How do you separate the hype from reality, the propaganda from the facts, the genuine concern from the sales spiel, the truth from the lies? Faced with this barrage of info, how do we know that the conclusions we come to are Truth? Tomorrow, revelation of previously unknown facts may throw the whole thing out of kilter. If there are a million bits of data currently registered in my brain to which I can make reference, there’d have to be a hundred billion bits that are not. And still we think we are right in our conclusions, based on the particular configuration of facts that makes sense to us.

How can I know that God exists? Persons who, no doubt, genuinely care about me told me He does. But how do I know they haven’t been fooled by tricksters? I’d truly like an answer. And a better answer than the Pastor was prepared to give: “You just take a step of faith”. In other words, deliberately deceive yourself. That’d have to be the ultimate con - believe in Him because you’ve fooled yourself!

I’d like to believe in God, though. I like the idea of God. I like the concept of eternal life. And it’s true that this is a very common wish. There is something in Man that craves the existence of a higher being. The most primitive tribes, never having been exposed to other cultures, believe in gods. The most ancient empires worshiped gods. It is only in this modern age that atheism has turned into a religion.

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Before the year was out, local government was abolished. Shire and municipal councils became decentralised agencies of the federal government, with no statutory powers of their own. State governments were no longer effective in any practical sense and, whilst still claiming legal authority in some scant areas of administration, its functions were largely dictated by Canberra. There simply weren’t the resources to support a large Public Service. What funds were available were poured into the food industry, energy production and distribution, housing, scientific research and law enforcement.

Next year, 2016, was to be my final year at school, having repeated year eleven with everyone else. Like Dad, I had always enjoyed working with my hands, so I decided to stick with design drawing and computer programming among my subjects, hoping for a career in the building industry. And biology was among them too, mostly because it fascinated me no end and it promised the greatest breakthroughs the world had ever seen.

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During the holidays, I called on a number of girls I knew from school or church, being more selective than I had been with Marilyn, deliberately choosing those pleasant to talk to, rather than the ones to which I was physically attracted. (This seemed to work reasonably well, as being in the presence of one of the latter category seemed to glue my tongue to my palate, preventing intelligent conversation). We would go on long walks during the day, discussing subjects ranging from politics, the genetics revolution, to religion and down to frivolous ideas like flying saucers. It was fascinating

to see how many different view points could be held on a particular subject, each view having substantial merit in itself, while still incompatible with the next.

“What’s your opinion on what Mr. Cavanagh said about genetic testing?” Tracy asked, as we strolled along a polluted creek that had once been a storm water drain.

“Do you mean that proposal to introduce compulsory prenatal tests for genetic precursors to cancer and heart disease?”

“Yeah, that,” she confirmed. “But more importantly, the long-term proposal to genotype *everyone*. Seems to me they could actually eliminate those diseases altogether.”

“Only if every baby showing those genetic tendencies were aborted! Hitler tried that one, and he was *insane!*” Abortion seemed like murder to me. They promoted it as ‘choice’, as if a woman was dealing only with her own body if she opted for termination. But who was to say at what point, on or after conception, a foetus became a person? I had a tendency to see red on the issue.

But Tracy had a mind of her own. She formed opinions based on what she considered to be the facts and, once convinced, she was hard to sway. “The babies that would be aborted would die premature deaths anyway,” she stated categorically and without any emotion. “Think of all the lives that would be *saved*. Once all the defective genes have been eradicated, no one will ever die of cancer or heart disease again! In my opinion, they should do it for *every* sickness.”

“That’s jumpin’ the gun a bit!” I countered, “They haven’t proven that genetic inheritance is solely responsible for these illnesses. In fact, the opposite. Environmental factors are just as much to blame. If someone smokes and gets lung cancer, or eats fat and has his arteries block up, how can you fault his genes?” I knew there was a flaw in my argument and felt sure she would pick it.

And so she did. “Haven’t you been listening in class? Cavanagh said, and I’m sure he’s right, that if someone inherits normal cancer suppressing genes from both parents they can’t *get* cancer. If they inherit one mutated gene and one good one, they need a second hit, like smoking, to bring it on. And if two bad genes are passed on, they’ll get cancer no matter how careful they are!” She was adamant.

She was right, of course, but not entirely I felt. “Hang on now, there are environmental factors that can cause cancer, like radiation. They mutate genes which were *normal* at birth.”

“That’s debatable.” She was obviously reluctant to concede a point. Then she softened, “No, you’re right.”

My heart glowed a little, whether from pride or passion, I don’t know. But here we were, talking as if we were both qualified geneticists, or molecular biologists, when really all we had to argue with was simple textbook stuff. But I did have some strong feelings on privacy-of-information issues, and was interested to see how she felt.

“Look,” I posed, with what I hoped would sound like informed conviction, “I think there are enormous benefits that could come from genetic profiles for everyone. Not just of unborn babies. Not just the genes controlling cancer and heart disease, but all of the twenty-five thousand odd genes controlling every function of the human body. But that’s still a long step from knowing *how* they operate, or fail to operate. And we’re still a long way from finding *cures* for the diseases the failing ones cause. Eventually, it *has* to lead to incredible breakthroughs in medicine, but in the meantime, having even a limited genetic profile for everyone can have terrible social consequences.” I was still

talking textbook, but it was an aspect that had registered deeper than just my brain. “It’s bad enough that they have access to your credit rating, your criminal record, your financial transactions, your medical history, your academic records, you name it. When you and I go for a job when we leave school, if we’re lucky enough to come across such a thing, they’ll already know *so* much about us, it’s not funny. Just imagine if you wanted to become a nurse, but your genetic profile showed you were likely to develop arteriosclerosis leading to heart trouble. Do you think they’d employ you? Do you think an insurance company would insure you? Maybe they’ll even *tax* you higher than people with good genes.”

“They shouldn’t have access to that information. There’s such a thing as confidentiality, you know. There are privacy laws.”

“You don’t honestly believe you could keep it under wraps, do you? Besides, you have to look at it from both sides. The employer who spends time and money training you; the life insurance company that might issue a large policy to someone who secretly knows they are going to die early in life. And what will happen to your self esteem, if you knew now that you were definitely going to get sick later. Would you try as hard? “

Briefly, a painful grimace moved over Tracy’s face like a shadow cast by a passing cloud. Then her academic disposition resumed, as the purely theoretical nature of the argument prevailed. “I think the rights of society as a whole have to take precedence over the rights of the individual. We’ve seen enough destruction. The survival of the human race is in the balance here. We’ve made a big enough mess already. It’s time we stopped thinking about ourselves. If an employer can get better service from someone genetically sound, then so be it. And if an insurance company won’t insure me, I’ll have to live with it.”

It was obvious I’d won my only concession earlier on. Yet I found the discussion stimulating. And although she wouldn’t admit it, that momentary painful look had told me I had made an impression.

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Debra invited me along to a religious revival meeting, an eye opener that was quite fun at first, but deteriorated rapidly. They sang happy songs, hymns I’d never heard before and passages of scripture set to music. Hands clapped in time to the music and praise was sung with great enthusiasm. Then there was a collection, preceded by a ten-minute spiel on how God would bless you financially, a hundredfold what you gave today. At least I knew about this one. Then a man stood up and spoke in a foreign language, which Debra explained was a message in ‘tongues’, the Holy Spirit speaking through him. (I really *had* been living a sheltered life!) Another man stood up and gave the translation in King James vintage English, again the Holy Spirit supposedly telling him what to say. I confess to some scepticism. The ‘tongues’ message had been short and repetitive, the translation long and varied. Besides, why would God insist on using old English? About the only reason I gave it any credence was that I’d read about tongues in the Bible.

Then everyone began to chant, each doing their own thing, lifting hands high as if reaching for something elusive near the hall ceiling. The various voices merged into a powerful harmony, words consisting mainly of ‘hallelujahs’ and ‘praise-You-Lords’, the overwhelming volume – (I must admit it sounded good) - almost tempting me to join in. What worried me was that most of the people there seemed oblivious of anyone else’s presence, working themselves up into some kind of spiritual ecstasy that didn’t seem quite right.

The chanting died gradually, making way for a bustle of mumbled prayers. Debra began uttering strange guttural noises and for a moment I wondered if she was of European origin, praying in her

own language. But more and more people started calling out or whispering in foreign languages, some sounding reasonably genuine. Others could have been no more than ramblings made up on the spot.

I thought they had all gone mad.

I left, pushing past entranced worshippers, doubting if Debra would even realise I had gone or miss me. She seemed lost within herself, swimming in a sea of self-induced euphoria, glorying in the unintelligible ravings issuing from her mouth.

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John seemed to have health problems. He was constantly tired. He bruised easily. Our diets were poor, to say the least, but that was beyond our control. Many people were suffering from mal-nutrition, so it was not surprising *one* in the family should be the first to succumb. Medical services were scarce, many surgeries lying in rubble, chemists unable to get drug supplies, hospitals restricted to the critically ill. Specialist services were even harder to come by. Dad finally managed to get him an appointment with our regular General Practitioner, who now operated from his own home, or what was left of it. Rather predictably, he diagnosed mal-nutrition and advised a better diet and vitamins, if we could get them. It was frustrating and futile advice.

Gradually John deteriorated, becoming more and more exhausted. Mum and Dad took him for prayer. I tried to talk him into doing exercise with me, but he didn't have the energy.

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“The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water - the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter.”

REVELATION 8 : 8-11

2016

Monitoring of the environment continued world-wide. Oxygen drifts were reducing. Fish were still dying, from virtual asphyxiation this time, in oxygen-starved waters caused by decaying masses of algae. Distillation of drinking water was still advocated, if not for safety reasons, at least to improve the taste by ridding it of dead algae. Even earth tremors showed a downward trend, though most volcanoes, awakened or newly-formed in the earthquakes of 2014, were still active. It was thought they were acting as seismic-pressure safety valves.

The most worrying phenomenon was the continued melting of the icecaps. Ocean levels had risen by five centimetres in less than three years. If the present trend continued, it was estimated that by the year 2030 all major coastal cities would be flooded at high tide. Already some low-lying communities had been forced to evacuate. Huge icebergs were reportedly breaking away from the icecaps and making their way with the currents towards the equator, slowly shedding their skin as they cooled the ocean around them. Tasmania reported a marked drop in ambient temperature.

One pleasant side effect was the reversal of the hot-house symptoms. Cooling air masses were starting to move. The movement generated differential air pressures and brought back the wind. Windless conditions had been regarded as a blessing while the oxygen drifts posed a danger, but now it was marvellous to feel cool, refreshing breezes blowing through your hair. It was as if an in-built self-healing mechanism of nature had been triggered and the Earth was beginning to correct the damage inflicted upon it by Man's interference. As the air turbulence reached higher, it disturbed the dust and soot deposits in the upper atmosphere, and every so often people would stop and stare up in wonder, as large patches of blue broke through the mottled expanse.

Governments faced a new dilemma. Should they try to devise some means of stopping the icecaps from melting, something lacking a viable technological solution at present, or sit back and let things take their course, incurring inevitable flooding of coastlines. From the taskmaster of experience, *anything* they tried could have massive unforeseen side effects. Never in history had mankind been confronted with problems of such magnitude. With all its claims to scientific progress, it was shown to be powerless and insignificant. Meanwhile nature took things into its own hands, seemingly working towards a metamorphosis, from which it would emerge new and vibrant and beautiful, but with little thought for the repercussions such transformation would have on what was before. This *could* spell the way of the dinosaurs for mankind. The air turbulence, some said, was the one redeeming factor they'd been looking for. If the insulating effect of the dust layer could be broken, further melting might just stop of its own accord.

The Earth was not the only unstable component in our galaxy. Astronomers announced unprecedented numbers of meteorites were on a collision course with our planet. Fortunately, most were no bigger than a football, invariably burning up before they reached the mesosphere. But many astronomical observatories were still in a state of disrepair, therefore much galactic activity was left unobserved. It was suspected some larger meteorites had reached ocean level without burning up, as monitoring of algae masses had also detected unusually high levels of metallic elements, specifically cobalt, copper and iron. Sceptics claimed this was just an excuse for the industrial waste Man himself had been pouring into the oceans. And if meteorites had reached ocean level, the odds were some would inevitably hit solid ground, with catastrophic seismic consequences.

There were important advances in the building industry. New homes could be put up in a matter of days, using prefabricated modules that simply bolted together and sat on a foundation of self-levelling industrial foam, injected through the floor after assembly. Unfortunately, few could afford such luxury.

More and more nuclear-fission power stations were being constructed. They had stood up remarkably well in recent seismic upheaval, their enormously thick reinforced concrete shell protecting them from breaking up. Liquid wastes had been disposed of in sealed drums dumped in disused coal mines, many now buried beyond inspection after the shafts caved in. There was no practical way of finding out what had happened to them, however no increases in radioactivity could be detected in the vicinity. New radioactive waste was disposed of in solid form. Nuclear cold fusion still eluded scientific application, but they were working on it.

Geneticists, by sheer chance during research undertaken on chromosome 21, holding the regulator gene responsible for most of the autoimmune diseases, had stumbled upon a way of removing radioactive contamination from the human body. They couldn't, of course, correct the damage already caused by the radiation and there would still be such a thing as a lethal dose, but at least they could *remove* the perpetrator and stop it from doing more harm. The human body apparently has no way of distinguishing between calcium and strontium 90, so the latter could be mistakenly built into bone cells. Injections of a sodium alginate derivative, extracted from seaweed, could remove this dangerous intruder. The next step, however, would provide the greatest benefit - the breakthrough could lead to the development of a serum to *immunise* people against radiation poisoning.

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“Repent, repent now! Before it is too late!” cried out the preacher. Judging by the redness of his face, there was no doubting his sincerity. “Repent! Be ready for Jesus when He comes again!”

I had gone to another gospel meeting in the neighbourhood, John tagging along, despite the constant lethargy that had been plaguing him during the last six months which the doctor had put it down to our inadequate diet. The sermon centred on the second coming of Christ and preached fire and brimstone and eternal damnation. He read from Revelation, chapter 8, saying the earthquakes had already come. And the fires. Next, the oceans would turn to blood! Now *that* seemed a bit very far-fetched, even in the context of the incredible things that had been happening. At least earthquakes and fires had a logical explanation, but there wasn't enough blood in all of humanity to fill the ocean. It was something to think about all the same.

“Repent! Turn to the Lord before it is too late!” his raucous voice echoed off the walls of the temporary church hall, the remnant of an old community centre. “The days are numbered. There is not much ti ...”

A window shattered and some women screamed as they were showered with glass splinters. A rock hit a man on the head, knocking him unconscious. Only seconds later a window broke on the opposite side, sending a surging wave of fright rippling through the entire congregation. “Please remain calm,” the preacher was saying. “Stay in your seats, except for those sitting near the windows. Would *those* people move to the centre, please.”

I wondered if this kind of thing had happened before, because nobody seemed surprised and no one went outside to see what was going on. Many of the windows were already broken, but then, broken windows were no novelty anywhere.

The preacher continued, praying for divine protection over the congregation. Whoever was throwing rocks out there was deliberately trying to wear down our nerves. Sometimes rocks came one after the other, sometimes with long intervals. The tension of waiting for the next one made it impossible to concentrate on the sermon. John was sitting next to me, his eyelids tightly crunched shut, his hands trembling, sweat gathering on his forehead. The preacher raised his hands in supplication. I

closed my eyes too, but wasn't listening to what he was saying. A crash too close for comfort made me jump in my seat, an angry heart thumping inside my chest, *so* loud, John surely must have been able to hear it.

Why didn't they do something? Call the police, go out there and confront them. Why did they just sit here meekly and take it all? I'd help, if someone else made the first move. But I was the visitor here. I looked up at the sound of the 'amen'. The preacher had a large graze on his forehead where a stone must have hit him while we had our eyes closed. I'll say this for him - he was a brave man. There had been no exclamation, cry of pain, or even a noticeable break in his prayer to indicate when he'd been hit.

He made a call for people to come forward, to dedicate their lives to Jesus. Dozens stood up, queuing to the makeshift pulpit, while the preacher's penetrating eyes scanned the assembly. I looked down to avoid his gaze. I didn't *want* to go forward. I wasn't ready. Besides, I didn't *want* to become like them, docile, humbly taking abuse from outsiders. If it were up to me, I'd teach those vandals a bit of respect!

John stood up, tears streaming down his face. Yet he was smiling. He looked at me for a pleading moment. 'Come with me' he seemed to be saying, without actually speaking. I shook my head, while reaching out to touch his arm in encouragement and he went up to join the others.

When he came back, he was beaming. An inner joy radiated from his eyes. He seemed a different person, yet the same. Maybe 'more of a person' was a better way of describing him. I felt a momentary pang of regret that I hadn't gone with him, but pushed it aside quickly, reminding myself I could never let people walk all over me. Turning the other cheek just wasn't my scene. I certainly hoped it wouldn't be John's. Maybe John would be different. But one thing was for sure - he had something now, that he didn't have before tonight. I knew him well enough to tell that much.

The meeting ended and the congregation filed out of the hall in orderly fashion. There was no sign of the vandals. Just as I thought - they were cowards, spineless pests who only dared to offend anonymously.

John couldn't stop grinning. He seemed to be bubbling over with an inner peace. After all his health worries, it was great to see. He said he couldn't put it into words, but suddenly everything made sense. Questions that still had no answers didn't matter anymore. Life had become meaningful. Somehow, he felt, he had become part of a great eternal purpose.

I was happy for him and couldn't help smiling at his broad grin. I put my arm around his shoulder and he his around mine, and so we walked home. Mum and Dad rejoiced when John told them what had happened. Dad gave him his own Bible and John buried himself in it.

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School resumed after I turned eighteen. A federal election was long overdue, but resources didn't permit it. The caretaker Government continued, the opposition being loath to take on the current problems anyway.

John was given a hard time at school. He told everyone who would listen about what had happened to him; how Jesus had come to live in his heart and the inner peace it had given him. If he had peace, it certainly was inner only. They laughed, picked on him. A number of times I had to intervene to prevent him getting beaten up. I advised him to stop 'witnessing', to keep it to himself. But, he said, if I knew of a place where there was enough food for everyone, would I keep it to myself?

I was thoroughly confused. Surely if God really *did* live inside John, He could do something to protect him? Why did He allow His followers to be degraded like this? It really was no encouragement for anyone wanting to become a Christian, to know that spite and derision was all they could look forward to.

I stepped into John's characteristically chaotic bedroom one afternoon, to find him lying prostrate on the floor. His eyes were closed. I nudged him with my foot. "Come on, lazy bones! No time for sleeping!" He opened his eyes with painful difficulty, deep dark rings under, and I felt sure he must be sick. But he sat up, grinding his hands all over his red mottled face, dispersing slight beads of perspiration into wet streaks on his forehead. "Oh hi, Mick," he sighed, endeavouring rather unsuccessfully to sound cheerful. (Only John called me Mick. Everyone else stuck with the 'Mike' diminutive. Somehow it made our relationship special). "I must have dozed off."

"Are you alright?" I asked, concerned at the way he wobbled, trying to sit up.

"I'm fine. That is, I'll be fine in a moment. I was just feeling rather tired. Nothing a bit of prayer won't fix!" But his speech was slurred.

I straightened blankets and pillows and helped him onto the bed, then plonked down next to him.

"You know, Mick, God loves me and I can really feel it. I'm so pleased I went with you to the community hall that time. My life has taken on such meaning. Can't you feel it? Don't you ache for something that makes sense out of all of this? You know, He loves you, too. Jesus died for you, so that *you* could come back into the Father's presence. He died for everyone, you know. That's why I have to tell them. So that they, too, can be with Him." He suddenly seemed to regain some of his strength. His voice was proud, making me feel I could share my reservations with him, without putting him down.

"Ah John, you *know* I'm searching for the Truth. I just have trouble with some of these very basic issues. How can a loving God allow all this misery, this suffering all around us? And how can He send all the people who died without ever hearing about Jesus, and for that matter, all the people who died before He was even born, to hell? Can you call that fair? Can you call that loving?"

"I don't know the answer to that, Mick. I've often wondered about it myself. But despite my lack of understanding, I'm sure that God is both fair *and* loving. Actually, 'fair' is a rather worldly concept, based on human values. God is *just*. First of all, we can't blame God for the human condition - we've brought that upon ourselves. Maybe the answer lies in the statement Jesus made when He said, 'If they had not heard, they would not have had sin'".

"But John, then you are doing an *injustice* to all the people you tell, because if they could continue in blissful ignorance, they ought to get off scot-free!"

"No, Mick, that's not right either. Jesus *instructed* us to go and share the good news. Look, I really can't give you an answer, only a conviction in my heart that God knows what He's doing. Maybe all the people who died without hearing the Gospel will be raised from the dead when the Lord returns and given another chance. I know there is no scriptural basis for reincarnation, but have you ever wondered, when world population is doubling every fifty years, where all these souls come from? Is God continually creating *new* souls, despite the fact that the Earth has reached a point where it can't support them all? Maybe, when the Lord returns, all the people who have ever lived will be alive then!"

“Oh John, you are incorrigible.” I hugged him, tightly against my chest. His face still felt clammy and his thin frame skeletal and fragile. But then, so many were suffering from health problems, mostly brought on by malnutrition. I never told him I loved him, but I am sure he knew. Yet, I wish I had.

John died of acute leukemia two weeks later.

My mind is numb, as I see this once more. I miss him dearly. It just doesn't seem right to snatch someone so young and full of promise off this planet, before he even had a chance to make his mark.

How did we find out about the leukemia? Our GP managed to arrange a post-mortem blood test. Should we have sued him for negligence? Probably, but in the present state of the legal infra-structure, that could take several lifetimes. He could have arranged a blood test when John first came to see him. But it may not have made any difference. The drugs aren't available. And bone marrow transplants are akin to fairy tales.

But, if there is a God, I am very angry with Him.

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Parliament legislated for amalgamation of unions. It was easier to deal with the demands of a few large organisations. The fifty percent of wages tax rate was maintained, but the willing spirit in which it had initially been accepted had long since faded. Union membership was made compulsory. Dad, who refused to join out of principle, had a hard time at work. He used to say everyone should have the freedom of choice to decide whether to join. Pay increases only caused price rises. And how could he look us in the eye and tell us to stand up for what we believed in, if he wasn't prepared to do it himself? How could we call this a democracy, if personal rights and freedom of choice were denied?

But now he seemed to stand up for the principle more out of habit than conviction. Not that he didn't believe it anymore, just that, in the overall scheme of things, it was no longer important. His colleagues didn't agree with his stand and ostracised him. The case went before a tribunal, presumably because of Dad's long service and retrospective rights. Dad lost his job.

I don't know how I took all this in. The grief and personal devastation we all shared over John's death, *numbed* us from outside goings on. The fight seemed to have gone out of Dad's indomitable demeanour. His eyes often blanked out, as he stared into space, as if looking for a place where John might have gone. Mum often stood in the kitchen, absentmindedly wiping a plate for the tenth time, softly humming an out-of-tune 'Amazing Grace', while unchecked tears flowed down her cheeks.

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I'm sure I would never have passed my final exams if it had happened earlier. As it was, the examinations were over and I thought I had scraped through. Holidays had not yet started for anyone except school leavers. When the news came, I didn't believe until I saw for myself.

An electric bus took me to the beach at Mona Vale. Thousands were already standing in silent awe, looking out to sea. I had to push my way through the crowd to get a clear view, but even before I got there, my face felt flushed and icy tingles crawled from the base of my spine to the nape of my neck, almost making the hair stand on end. The stark, overwhelming reality of it was difficult to assimilate. But there it was, a blood-red sea, from the sparing bit of beach covered in seaweed and

fish remains, all the way to the distant horizon. Even the usually phosphorescent white caps of the waves had turned pink. The horrible stink it exuded made me gag. But I stayed.

Despite the smell, I stood there for hours, hypnotised with the rest of the crowd by the amazing spectacle, the unexplained phenomenon that had transformed the ocean to blood as far as the eye could see. Indefinite and half-formed thoughts and arguments popped in and out of my brain. I think I was talking to myself, but I couldn't be sure. Occasionally, it occurred to me to go to the surf's edge, to find out if it really was blood or not, but the nauseating stench put me off.

After a long time, I managed to shake myself out of the trance-like state and turned away to find a bus to take me home. Even in the bus, my mind was still foggy, full of confusion and uncoordinated ideas. Was *this* what the preacher had been talking about? Give me a logical explanation, please. Or even an illogical one. Any explanation would do, except the one stating the ocean had turned to an unimaginable volume of blood.

The technical reason I desperately needed came over the radio two days later. A type of dinoflagellate, a minute, one-cell organism, normally present in water at a rate of maybe a thousand or less per litre, had exploded in numbers to nearly a billion per litre. Dinoflagellates each had a red centre, giving the water its colour. The cause of the population explosion was thought to be the high content of cobalt in the water, though not enough was known about the behaviour and life process of the organism to be absolutely sure. The phenomenon had previously been experienced in other parts of the world, particularly the east coast of South America and the Red Sea, but never in these numbers or as far reaching. Satellite reports estimated at least a quarter of the world's ocean waters were affected, mostly in shallower waters. Trillions more fish had been poisoned and people were advised to refrain from eating seafood, or for that matter any other type of ocean produce, especially shellfish, which were known to concentrate a toxic nerve poison given off by dinoflagellates. The entire last harvest of aqua-culture protein crop had to be condemned.

Dozens of reports were flooding in of cases of complete paralysis, most of which could be directly attributed to the consumption of oysters. The victims almost invariably died. The few that survived told of terrible nausea coupled with the inability to vomit, paralysis of the torso right up to numbing of the facial muscles and tongue, affecting the ability to talk and swallow. The afflicted often choked to death on their own saliva.

I was relieved to find there was a natural explanation, somehow, psychologically justifying my delay in committal to the Christian cause. I knew it was illogical, but I reasoned that the occurrence of a genuine, unexplainable miracle would mark the time when I could put that decision off no longer. As long as events could be ascribed to natural causes, I allowed myself to drift in a void of indecision. Truth be told, I was furious with God for taking John away from us. And I was justifying my indecision by withdrawing into agnosticism.

Dad disagreed a few days later during exercise, about needing miraculous proof. It would have been two months after John left us, before we half-heartedly resumed this self-discipline. "Show a primitive native how to switch on a light and he'll think it's a miracle." His voice strained as he pressed up forty kilos, lying on his back in the yard. "Sure there are times when God by-passes nature to perform a miracle. But most 'miracles' are things we simply cannot understand. God made all knowledge. To Him nothing is a miracle, because He understands everything. So a miraculous sign shouldn't be our criteria for accepting Him. Anyway, if you want to see a genuine miracle, look at a human cell through an electron microscope." That made reasonable sense, I thought, too puffed to reply, as I collapsed on my stomach after fifty push-ups.

The uneducated native concluded light was a miracle, until he learned about electricity. Am I that much more sophisticated? Can I rely on my own intelligence, education, experience and power of reason, to rule with any certainty on the God issue? Real or not real, that is the question. Was the pastor right when he said we have to accept it by faith? John did. I guess many do. Why am I different?

If I am one of those people who has to have proof before he commits himself, does that permanently exclude me from finding Him? Who am I to demand that God prove Himself to me?

Then again, how much more proof do I need? God sent earthquakes, fire, tragedy, blood-red seas and disaster to convince me. Why do I feel God has a personal vendetta out against me? Am I just too stubborn? And where did I get that obstinacy? Is it genetic or learnt from example? Either way, I didn't get it from Mum – she is as placid and easy-going as any woman could be. It had to come from Dad. When he is on a crusade, he digs his heels in. It's got to be pretty important to him, like his stand on the church issue, but, when it is, down go the heels!

I thought for an instant John was next to me. He had never been keen on the physical fitness bit, but had joined in occasionally for the company. Dad had never pushed either of us, but I liked the feeling of hard muscle under taut skin and the sense of well-being that went with it. Though the food shortage was starting to take its toll on my body, too. I turned to look, but John wasn't there, of course. A couple of tears involuntarily rolled out of my eye sockets.

“Remember you once told me that God would call me when the time is right?” I asked when my breath came back. “What do you say to Him when that time comes?”

“Just follow your heart. Tell Him that you believe Jesus died for you personally. Tell Him you're sorry for the things you've done that weren't pleasing to Him. Ask His forgiveness. Ask Him to take over your life. That's usually a very emotional experience and many people cry. There's nothing wrong with that. It's good for the soul. Helps to clean out the system.”

It was my turn on the barbell. Lying on my back, I rested a moment while my brain worked feverishly to find a convenient niche into which to file Dad's words. A little corner, where they could be referred to later if necessary, but where they would cause little or no mental discomfort right now.

The sky overhead was a patchwork of blues, greys and browns fading into one another. And now, heavy rain cloud formations pushed across the patchwork, dark and ominous, indiscriminately stealing away the blues with the rest. Enviously, I followed the flight of a bird as it winged its way to escape the onset of rain. Normally I was a neat, orderly person, who liked a place for everything and everything in its place. But right now, my mind was a cluttered, untidy mess, ideas and emotions scattered around in a disorganised fashion. Much like the things in John's bedroom, before he left ...

My arms and shoulders strained against the weights as they lifted off the ground. My heart beat faster, while I raised and lowered the bar a few times. I nearly dropped it when glass smashed in the front yard.

“Bloody Christians!” someone shouted from the street. “Take your f...ing predictions elsewhere, you bastards!” came another voice.

Mum came running into the backyard. “They're throwing stones through the windows, honey!” she anxiously informed us. Dad made an impressive figure as he quickly moved to the front of the

house, clad only in his shorts. His broad shoulders raised, his muscles flexed, his hands curled into tight fists. Before he reached the front, several more panes shattered and even worse abuse and profanity reached our ears, making me wince.

I rolled the weights aside and raced after him, in time to watch at least half a dozen youths scurrying away, recognising Victor as one of them. He had probably put them up to it. My arms and shoulders shivered with anger. A furious impulse welled inside, urging me to lash out and punish. I'd find Victor and teach him a lesson. "I know one of them, Dad, I'll go after him!"

"No, Mike, let them go. They don't really know what they're doing. They're just confused, that's all, confused by all the strange things that have been happening, scared of what they don't understand. They're trying to find something or someone to blame it on."

"But that surely doesn't give them the right to harass innocent people?"

"No, not the right, but it is important to consider their motives, before condemning them altogether."

It was a queer sensation, disagreeing with Dad. I don't think it had ever happened before. For the first time in my life I was convinced Dad was wrong. Those hoodlums should be punished. They were guilty as hell. I'd seen them with my own eyes, hadn't I? A strong southerly tousled my hair and I stood for a long time next to Dad, staring at the damage, neither of us speaking. I didn't want to argue with him. Just knowing that I didn't agree with him was bad enough. He had always encouraged us to express and expand our own ideas, yet never had that process even remotely felt like discord.

"I think there's a storm coming, my boy," Dad finally broke the silence. "We'd better get these things cleaned up, and put something over the windows to keep the weather out." He smiled a sad smile, then gave me a big hug.

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It was only thanks to Dad's workmanship that our house lived through it. When he had reconstructed the earthquake damage, he had used screws and bolts wherever possible, and *wired* beams together when he ran out. He had put strength before aesthetics and it proved worthwhile.

I don't know whether the storm was classed as a cyclone or not, but never in my life had I experienced anything so violent and furious, lasting for such a long time. It may not have been quite as powerful as the earthquake, but it lasted so much longer, there was no comparison.

For at least a week, we spent most of our time in the bathroom, which was the only room where we kept the window closed. When Dad realised how strong the winds were going to be, he had insisted on opening all windows and doors, tying the door handles to wall frames where the plaster was still missing, saying it was better to let the storm in, than to lose the roof. He said roofs didn't *blow* off. Inside pressure greater than the vacuum created by the wind *lifted* them off.

We had prepared as best we could, moving our few possessions and edibles into the bathroom. We remembered to bring in an old cartridge-gas camping stove, the portable LED light, plastic water containers and a double mattress, just in case. We turned off the power and the utility gas. We brought in some tools, long screws, plywood and a cordless drill, to cover the window if necessary, and protect ourselves should the ceiling cave in. At the height of the storm, the rest of the house became an angry whirlpool of turbulence and the howl coming from all directions was deafening. We played cards in that bathroom, (the only sealed-off room in the house), to take our mind off the

raging fury outside and we regularly turned the knob on the transistor radio to try to get some feedback. Mostly crackles and hissing were all we received, but the occasional decipherable word told us at least someone was still transmitting a signal.

We had to chop a hole in the floor just outside the door, to let the water drain away that tried to flood in from the hallway. And rain coming in through the ceiling we channelled to the floor waste using towels. The gale tore, pushed and pulled on the walls and framework. Beams creaked and groaned under the onslaught, the double-hung windows rattled out their complaints. But the roof stayed on.

The house next door was not so lucky. *Its* roof came off, ceilings and all, as if it weighed nothing. Terracotta roof tiles flew everywhere, smashing holes into the side of our house. The two panes of the bathroom window disintegrated and for hours we were in the midst of the fury as the storm invaded our refuge, until it eased off long enough to fix the plywood in place. The plywood lasted no more than an hour, so we huddled under the double mattress for protection.

The major part of next door's roof landed on our old free-standing garage, demolishing it in one mighty sweep. Eager gusts of wind grabbed hold of loosened sheets of fibro, blowing them about like mere litter and sending asbestos filaments off to greener pastures.

As soon as the wind force abated slightly, Dad and I pulled wardrobe doors out of one of the bedrooms and screwed them into place over the window, banishing that source of light once more. The gas ran out, in the middle of trying to make a cup of tea. The LED camping light batteries gave up the ghost after several days and we had no replacements. We had some candles, but the wind, stealing in through cracks and gaps, kept blowing them out. Finally the disposable lighter gave up. All we could do now was pray. Soon the gale resumed with increased strength, confining us in howling darkness for days, sanity prevailing only because we had each other. Time crawled along until we felt like screaming for the noise to stop. Water dripped constantly from the ceiling. And while elements run amok battered our shelter in a ferocious attempt to consume all, pent-up emotions of futility and helplessness swelled inwardly to bursting point. We were there for the best part of seven days. It seemed like months.

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It stopped abruptly, as if somebody had put a lid on the world. It was unreal. The transition from overwhelming, ear-splitting noise to a vacuum of silence was too fast, too sudden to believe. We waited for a time of stunned inanimation, our minds as empty as the all embracing silence. Then, like zombies emerging from their graves, we pulled the doors off the window frame. Blinding daylight poured in and we were forced to sit down again, waiting for reality to filter through to our brains.

Mum recovered first and, mumbling thanks to God for our survival, she gingerly opened the bathroom door, peeking out through the slight gap as if she was half expecting some monster to be lurking in the hallway, ready to pounce on her. The house looked as if it had been through a giant washing machine filled with mud. Sheets of sodden plasterboard hung off the walls and ceilings. Everything was soaked and any furniture left was a write-off. The whole house was a write-off as far as I was concerned, until I saw the rest of the neighbourhood. With numbed brains we took in the aftermath of nature's battlefield. At least *we* still had shelter.

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On a small battery-operated transistor radio the first news reports came through. Tidal waves had wreaked devastation. Thousands of ships had perished. Many had collided with stray icebergs.

Others had smashed onto rocks and shorelines and wharfs, like little play things in the bathtub of the gods. Untold destruction, utter annihilation, the reporter couldn't find the words, his distraught voice tripping over held-back tears. The initial death toll ran into six, possibly seven, figures. It was too much for me. I couldn't listen any longer.

I felt utterly useless, one moment wanting to tear my hair out or bash my head against a wall stud, (rusty nails still protruding where the gyprock had once been), the next moment needing to curl up in a foetal position and let go of the inner sobs building up there. What could anyone do to alleviate grief, loss, and pain of these proportions?

Dad put on a mask. He tried to clean up, muttering under his breath. What was the use of repairing the house, when next year, next month, next week, who knows when, another disaster might strike and undo all the effort? Nevertheless, tenaciously he went about his business, pulling up the carpets and hanging them out to dry, ripping sodden plaster off the framework, re-hanging the front and backdoors when they had shrunk enough to fit. Mum, too, scrubbed and cleaned, rarely speaking, till some semblance of order was restored.

Dad even resumed exercising, mostly out of habit, but his heart wasn't in it. One day we finished with a wrestle in the backyard. For a while we were evenly matched, but he tired way before I did and suddenly I realised I was now physically stronger than he was.

It hit me hard, scared me in a way different from any fear I'd ever known. Dad was my crutch, the one to turn to if anything went wrong; for advice, help, moral support, strength, hope and comfort. Whatever my need, Dad had always been there, my back-stop, and there had never been an inkling of doubt that he would come through to fill that need, by whatever means. But now that crutch was crumbling. He was still going through the motions, but something vital had been crushed inside, a flame had been extinguished. The time had come for me to stand on my own two feet. (And perhaps have him lean on *me* for a change). Maybe the roles of follower and leader were about to reverse.

I didn't want it to be true, tried to deny it by letting Dad win the match. I didn't love him any less, or have less respect for him. It was just that I was scared of the dawning realisation that the source of my security was human, after all.

How do I describe it? It is like suddenly the responsibility for what happens to me has been shifted onto my own shoulders. And it's heavy! I was a kid, and I could do what I liked. Any mistakes made had an excuse – immaturity. (You can't charge me as an adult, officer, because I'm a month off turning eighteen! That was no excuse anymore, either. I turned eighteen nearly a year ago.) Dad will still be there to help me, advise me, defend me. But it's not the same. There are two feet on the end of my legs and, from now on, I have to stand on them.

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2017

As far as getting a job was concerned, you could present yourself for labouring work, doing clean-up and reconstruction, in exchange for free meals. Paid work was as rare as an undamaged dwelling. But what use was money if you couldn't spend it?

Most people lived in one-room hovels, constructed from the useable leftovers of ten-room mansions. Some built dug-outs, holes excavated in the ground and reinforced with whatever they could lay their

hands on. A sick joke went around that, in the event of another earthquake, no one would have to bury them. I couldn't understand how anyone was still able to joke about it, after all that had happened. We were among the few who still had a whole house to live in, but we were beginning to wonder whether that was lucky or not. Sure, we were blessed with more living space than most, but the jealousy unfairly directed at us made us feel like lepers. Criticism was snide and deliberate. What did they expect us to do? Move out? Knock the place down and put up a one-room dwelling, just to be the same? Mum and Dad offered to share our accommodation with a number of people, only to be turned down with a snub. I guess these people were afraid of having the unfair jealousy they were guilty of redirected at themselves.

I offered myself for voluntary labour, as did Dad. I really didn't feel like working in our own neighbourhood, full of jealous people, while Dad wanted to stay close to Mum. So we went our separate ways. I overheard many a whispered allegation that Christians were responsible for the many disasters over the last four years. Whatever irrational thought processes had led to that accusation was beyond me. I avoided being drawn into discussions and only grunted when asked for an opinion.

It took a long time to get home after a hard day's work. The few electric buses running were always packed, so most of the time I ended up walking. The only pleasant compensation was the almost entirely blue sky. They say there's some good in everything. I guess the storm had performed some service by cleaning up the heavens. Dad was usually home long before I was.

It was the year 2017. For me, a year of ultimate despair.

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I was on my way home one evening. Time was getting on. Dusk was about to impose its bleak version of visibility on the surroundings, when a funny gut feeling told me something was wrong. It was a sense of ill-defined urgency, setting loose butterflies in the stomach and starting a pulse throbbing at the temples. Demons seemed to be hiding in all the lengthening shadows of twilight.

Walking pace was too slow. I had at least two kilometres to go. I ran.

With our house in sight, the feeling worsened. I felt sick with apprehension as a sense of foreboding chilled my forehead and cheeks, while the rest of my body was sweating. An ominous air of doom hung over the house, as darkness invaded the last few corners of reflected daylight, leaving only shadows on shadows in a soundless night.

I reached the front door, while my eyes adjusted to barely make out the door frame. A black hole. It had been smashed in. More blood drained from my face.

"Mum? Dad? ..."

There was no answer and I cautiously moved inside.

"Mum? Dad? Where are you ...?"

My foot stumbled over something lying on the floor. I bent down to see what it was. A brick. Some awful, sticky substance transferred from its broken corners to my fingers and I dropped it in disgust. I reached what used to be the dining room, where part of the plaster ceiling still sheltered the floorboards from feeble rays of night sky, drifting down from missing and broken roof tiles. I tripped again. Unable to regain my balance, I landed in more sticky mess. As I realised the worst of

my unarticulated fears were being confirmed, a single loud sob involuntarily emerged from my mouth; another a few seconds later.

“Mum? ...”

Her black form lay in the darkness, a pool of blood surrounding the body. My sight was adjusting to the gloom and I could just make out what was there. I didn't need to feel for a pulse to make sure she was dead. I threw myself down to her, turned her over, shook her, begged her to wake from the eternal sleep her body had entered. I kissed and hugged that beautiful face, which would radiate love and care no more. There I lay, until her chill cheek was as wet with my tears as my own.

With tears still racing down my cheeks in a torrent, my upper teeth clamped over my trembling bottom lip, I staggered down the hallway, brain spinning inside my head. Uncontrollable spasms were shaking my arms and shoulders, fast, shallow, panicky breaths were passing through my throat. There wasn't enough room inside me to contain all the extremes of emotion, heating up, turning to liquid, then gas, till bursting point threatened to blow everything to pieces. My body stiffened and a raging anger took over, a consuming purpose to wreak revenge, hatred of circumstances and entities that had brought on this terrible end. Animal growls issued from deep in my throat.

A groan echoed through the dark hollows, which now seemed unrealistically large, a huge, cavernous castle, full of evil shadows hiding unspeakable things. I must have misheard. I surely must have made it myself.

“Dad? .. Where are you Dad ?”

My body would barely respond to my will. This *must* be a nightmare. *Please* let it be a nightmare. Yes! A nightmare, God, let it be a nightmare. My legs seemed to move in dream-like slow motion, my mind wanting to rush ahead, but finding itself inescapably tied to that sluggish anchor of flesh. This *can't* be real! A broken chair caused another fall. I hit the floor heavily, bruising my shoulder, skinning my shin. I felt no pain. Please let me wake up!

“Dad !!!” I almost screamed it.

Another groan came out of the dark, somewhere *thousands* of metres away, near the kitchen. Then I was next to him, holding him by the shoulders as he lay on his back. He was unconscious, but the fact that he was alive gave me a small slice of reality to hold onto. I ripped off my shirt, found the tap and wet it, to clean his fevered brow. The outline of his face was silhouetted against the night sky visible through the window. He was a mess.

“Michael?” His indistinct whisper was barely audible.

“I'm here, Dad, take it easy, you're going to be alright!”

A barrage a questions suddenly welled up like lava from a crater. “What happened? Where are you hurt? Who did this to you? What can I do for you? ...”

“Don't worry ... about .. us, my .. boy. We're going to ... be .. with the Lord. His breath was coming in short gasps. “Remember to be ... ready when He calls you ...”

Boiling rage again pushed aside all other considerations. “'Twas those bastards who threw the rocks through the windows, wasn't it? Don't worry Dad, I'll get them for this! I'll find them! I'll get

them!” A never-ending stream of liquefied sorrow inundated my face. I wanted it to sound strong, but I knew as the words came out that it sounded hysterical.

“Don’t Mike the Lord will judge ... them. Don’t do this .. to .. your .. self.” He was running out of strength.

He lay still. I thought he was dead. Uncontrollable sobs again shook me from deep down inside. “Don’t leave me Dad! Don’t leave me! I hate them! I hate them! I hate them! I hate ...”

Suddenly his voice came again, controlled and stronger, though still a whisper rattling in his chest. “Don’t hate them, my boy. Hatred is a cancer of the soul. It will eat away at you until there’s nothing left. It will stop you from .. hearing Him, when ... He calls.” The last bit was a croaky gasp, forcing some blood from his mouth and sending it dribbling down his chin.

“Don’t leave me, please Dad. Don’t let me face this alone! I can’t, I ...”

“I love y..you ... my boy,” were his last words.

“I love you too, Dad. I don’t want to live without you, Dad! Please don’t”

But with a gurgling sigh his head rolled sideways. And I was alone.

I look at the agony in front of me, and for the first time things are so bad, I desperately want to change the past. This cannot be real. I can’t face the future without these most stable and empowering relationships in my life. ‘Don’t do this to me’, I pray furiously to whatever God I have learned about, but have never met. ‘How can You let this happen? You’re supposed to be a loving God! What have they done to deserve this horrible end?’ At this instant I am so caught up in the trauma, I have forgotten momentarily that this is a memory. I’m totally confused and absorbed in self-pity. It’s not happening right now, even though it seems to be. The pain I’m experiencing is as real and debilitating, if not worse, than when it actually took place. I can’t think. I can’t act. I can’t believe ...

“No! Noooooo ...,” is involuntarily issuing from my mouth in a pitiful moan. “No, no, no, noooo ...” Let me go back to that point in time where they were still alive, when their hearts were still beating. Let me come home early, so I can defend them from whatever evil creatures perpetrated this abomination. I should never have worked so far away from home. I could have been here an hour sooner, and things would have been OK! I know how to fight – Dad taught me! Please turn back the clock just one hour! Let me make it right! Please, please, please ...

A crippling pain cramped my stomach, inflated like a balloon, surged up to my larynx and culminated in a huge primeval howl that echoed in the gloomy shadows of skeletal walls like the cry of a wolf. The rest of the night I thought my brain would explode with accumulated grief, fear, rage, violence and helplessness.

I thought I’d go mad. Finally I passed out.

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The next morning woke me with gruesome reality. Daylight poured in from all directions to reveal the contemptible cruelty and callousness of humanity.

I buried them in the backyard, digging in mute silence. It was no use calling the police. There *were* no police. I could think of no words to say over the graves, but I made some crude wooden crosses and stuck them in the ground. I didn't think I had any tears left, yet they welled up again, flooding in torrents from my eyes. I went back inside, barricading the doors, locking myself inside with my thoughts. The unacceptable finality of death and the oppressing weight of being alone, with absolutely no one to turn to, left me with visions of a past destroyed and a future not worth living.

For a while time stopped. I couldn't guess for how long. The ensuing period only holds vague and miserable episodes, a mental state akin to manic depression, moods swinging from suicide to sorrow, from furious hatred to futile resignation, from desperate loneliness to feeling crowded by my own company. I didn't eat, I rarely drank. And continual shudders ran the length of my body.

Every excruciating moment is replayed with agonising slowness. There's no watch on my wrist. (In fact every so often, an unselfconscious inspection shows I'm still totally naked). Yet somehow I know I was there for a full nine days. I feel like the eyewitness from beyond, whom the team from CIS would have loved to interview if this had been a TV show. But it's not. It is very, very real. I now know I had a complete nervous breakdown. And I'm about to find out how I coped to survive....

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Only a base animal instinct finally stirred me from my hiding place. It is amazing how strong the human drive for survival can be. Consciously I wanted to die, yet the flesh craved to prolong its existence. In a stupor, my emaciated frame roamed the streets, scrounging food wherever I could. The neighbourhood was barely recognisable. Starving dogs competed for food scraps, attacked people if they looked vulnerable, and occasionally were spotted carrying away rotting human body parts they had found in the debris. Every second day, when hunger pains cramped my midsection, I joined a voluntary work group for a free meal. But most of the time I just wandered around in a daze. How *far* I wandered, only God knows. In the end, *nothing* looked remotely familiar and had I wanted to return home, (the thought had not crossed my mind), it would have been quite impossible.

At the work groups, I heard rumours of poisoned water supplies that tasted like alcohol and even had a slightly intoxicating effect. If I'd been able to get my hands on some, I'm sure I would have drunk it until all body functions ceased. Yet whenever my thoughts turned suicidal, Dad's voice would echo in the background: 'Be ready, be ready, be ready, be ready

When did he say that? Where was he? Where were Mum, Dad and John? All I knew was that there was no point in going home, even if I knew where home was. Because they wouldn't be there. I moved on, slept in whatever makeshift shelter I could find or put together. Physical comfort was no longer important. I just didn't care anymore.

I can see it now, but couldn't see it then. We enter this life helplessly dependent. We spend twenty years, learning to stand on our own two feet, to be able to look after ourselves, to be independent. Then God comes along and asks us to become dependent again. It's a big ask.

Some of us need to be brought to our knees, to our very lowest point, before we surrender our independence, and learn to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit. Is this my lowest? Could I be so unbelievably obstinate, that more disciplinary measures are called for? What more can possibly be taken from me? Job lost his health. However, he was a totally different kettle of fish. He continued to honour God, in his own feeble way, throughout all of his adversity. I'm hardly in that category, so maybe I deserve worse. But there is nothing else left ...

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“The fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night.

As I watched, I heard an eagle that was flying in midair, call out in a loud voice: “Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels!” “

REVELATION 8: 12-13

I had bedded down in some scrub near what was possibly Narrabeen Lagoon, close to the beach. The smell from the lake was stifling, but it failed to concern me. I was past caring and convinced that if the ocean would rise up to swallow me, I would not resist. It could have me. This was no life. There was nothing worth living for. No hope. No future. No purpose. ‘Be ready when He calls’, Dad’s voice reminded me again, but I pushed him away. A wave of irrational hatred for humanity flushed through me. My fists clenched, my teeth bit together, grinding. I had the urge to hit someone, anyone, stewing in a state of frustration in the absence of a subject to take it out on. So I sought escape in dreamless sleep.

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The ground that made my bed shook with seismic convulsions and I woke in a cold sweat. With clammy hands I tried to steady myself, but the earth continued to vibrate. Losing balance, I rolled over onto my back. Stars danced in what was now an almost clear sky. And the earth produced an awe inspiring sound, as if suffering a devastating wounding, like a gargantuan pre-historic monster in its death throes. The noise drilled into my brain, and I *knew* I had heard that same sound before. The movement increased in intensity and violence, the sandy soil rippling in waves, the waters of the lagoon splashing around like tea in a teacup held in the hands of a geriatric. A small building on the other side slid off the bank and into the shallows. Another slid into deeper waters, where it disappeared in a whirlpool, like the flush of a giant toilet. With dilated pupils, I watched as the earth split wide open only metres away, heard the gushing rattle as the lake proceeded to empty itself into the huge crevice, stretching a good kilometre in either direction by now. I observed in helpless horror the massive fountain of water being spewed out again as the crack closed. The ejected volume grabbed hold of me like a tsunami and washed me fifty metres towards the ocean over the rough terrain, tearing skin off my legs and arms.

There was nowhere to run, no place to find shelter, no refuge immune to the indiscriminate forces of rebellious earth. Still the flesh screamed for survival, yearned like a baby for the safety of a parent’s arms, longed for the presence of *someone* in control of this uncontrollable thing.

“Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!” my own raucous voice cried out, but the sound was lost in a wilderness of noise, of tearing rock foundations, protesting scrub and agitated waters. The sky rotated dizzily as I tried to stand up. Then the ground rose up on my right and tossed me back down again, as if to prove its prowess. My left temple met with something solid and hard, knocking my senses into submission. And I passed out.

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When I came to, it seemed to be still night. Or for that matter, maybe it was night again. For all I knew, I might have been there for days. My stomach felt raw and empty, my limbs weak, my head sore. Blood was congealing on my limbs. My clothes were soaked. There were no emotions, no feelings of gratitude for being alive.

At least all was quiet and stable. The ground once more rendered predictable support to my feet, though it was hard to see where I was going. Not a star was visible, only a bleak full moon shed light on the surroundings. I watched it for a moment, trying to determine what was odd about it, when an instantaneous, sharp and powerful beam of light hit my retinas, like the shot of a gun. It made me blink and shake my head to shed the effect. Then the truth dawned. It wasn't the moon at all, but the sun. The sky had once more been blotted from view by heavy dust layers.

Who cares? What *if* the sky had just about returned to normal? Who gave a damn whether the sky was blue, grey, brown or black?

The road, or what was left of it, was nearby, and in a daze I found it and stumbled along aimlessly, tripping over humps and cracks in the bitumen. Where was the lagoon? It had been to the left, if my sense of direction was still in working order. There, a hill was silhouetted against a sky trying hard to match its darkness. And no water glistened. There was a vague awareness of others, similarly stumbling about in the dark like zombies and with no particular destination in mind. I ignored their presence with apathetic indifference; they took no notice of me either. There was no desire for contact or communication, only the wish to lose myself, to be absorbed into the dense air. I felt no empathy for their condition or welfare. They might be fatally wounded or starving to death - there was no compassion left in my heart. I simply couldn't care less what happened to them, anymore than I cared what happened to me. My heart had turned to stone.

It's obvious what's going on. Our flesh has been equipped with a safety switch that shuts the system down when the level of pain becomes unbearable. When we suffer excruciating pain, we can think of nothing else, no other person, no other anguish; no diversion can take our minds off it. When it escalates beyond that, to some predetermined threshold, we simply pass out. It stands to reason that a similar mechanism operates to protect us from emotional pain. And at the point where it becomes overwhelming, we switch off.

I suffer this pain all over again. Smell the acrid and foul smells, taste the putrid water, touch the rough texture of compromised civilisation, all over again. Who needs weapons of mass destruction when nature can do it for you? Again, my emotions are almost at breaking point. The loneliness, the sense of loss and despair. The retreat into psychological numbness. But this time I experience it more objectively, in place of the subjective essence of the first time, enabling me to learn from it and take something useful away from it.

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The dust levels mustn't have been as bad this time, or maybe not suspended as high. Strong air currents carried them off to darken other parts of the country, or maybe dump them on unsuspecting

victims, to bury them alive, gratefully inhaling their last breath as granulated death pours into their lungs. Several days later, the heavens were blue again. The sociological effect was not so easily wiped clean. The law of the jungle had taken over - survival of the fittest. In the absence of law enforcement, personal prolongation became the primary objective. Cries for help were ignored and they could just as easily signal an ambush. Needs of others were answered by heads turned in the opposite direction. Like animals we scavenged for nourishment.

Leaves, grass, anything to relieve the hunger pains. Raw onions, roots, even flower bulbs were a delicacy. Live, squirming witchety grubs tasted just fine, but you had to be mighty quick to beat the birds to them. Nothing was stored. Tomorrow it would be in someone else's belly. Nothing was cooked. The scent of cooking would bring hordes homing in like wolves, and you'd have to fight for your meal *and* your life.

Occasionally, army trucks passed through, maybe to survey what relief measures were called for, or maybe to find food for themselves. All hid like frightened rabbits whenever a patrol passed. I'm not really sure of the reason. Reason no longer entered into it. Everyone was scared.

The patrols shot feral dogs and cats, previously pets, but now strong competition for what little food there was. Groups fought over the carcasses. Dogs and cats were food. Food meant strength. Strength meant survival. But these ex-pets *did* have to be cooked if you wanted to survive the ordeal, so only the few stragglers that managed to band together could afford to partake. Strength in numbers, but I was in no mood to communicate with anyone. It was not unusual to wake at night to find a rat chewing on your limbs. And to imagine the depth to which humanity could sink to ensure self-preservation was beyond comprehension. They preyed on each other, watching without scruple for the chance to steal whatever few possessions another might have. And if they had to kill in the process, than so be it.

A packet of pulverised biscuits I unearthed from some ruins seemed like a treasure beyond belief, despite the fact that ants were scurrying in and out of it. My mouth watered in anticipation of a feast, but the chance never came. A heavy boot slammed into the side of my face as I reached down. Searing pain tore through my skull and I rolled several times, bruising my flesh on broken timbers and bricks. Whoever it was had vanished before I recovered. I mourned the loss of the biscuits, but the ethics or morality of the event never crossed my mind. There was no longer any awareness of my own misery and degradation.

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“The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only to those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes a man. During those days men will seek death, but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them.

The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces. Their hair was like women’s hair, and their teeth were like lions’ teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. They had tails and stings like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months. They had as king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek, Apollyon.”

REVELATION 9 - 1-11

2018

I was sitting on a large rock, nursing a blank mind, just staring into space. What I thought was a large locust drew my attention, because of its size and unusual features. I understood you can eat locusts raw. At first glance it looked quite ordinary, but a second inspection showed up minute differences from any species of grasshopper I’d ever seen. The most remarkable thing was its head. As it looked in my direction, I could have sworn it had a tiny human face. Something glittered on top of its head, but I wasn’t close enough to see what, then it jumped away, deftly caught a small bug and voraciously devoured it.

I had always thought grasshoppers were strict herbivores, though it is possible I was mistaken. The idea of a carnivorous one was fascinating and occupied all of my conscious mind. Whilst *my* major interest was that of a *human* carnivore, for the first time in ages I actually noticed something peculiar and *thought* about it. For months, there had been little to interest me beside plain food and shelter. Thought processes had come to a virtual stand-still. All my reactions were dictated by some sort of instinct. At last here was something that stirred the stagnant cells of my brain.

The hopper seemed to have no appetite for the vegetation. It jumped again, opened its wings and flew past me, the sound of its wings more like that of a bird, it was so loud. It landed a little further on and suddenly I was determined to catch it, to get a closer look at it, (and maybe it really *would* make a tasty morsel). Ever so quietly, I raised myself to a standing position, stealthily moved forward, careful not to step on any twigs. It waited until I was no more than a metre away, then jumped forward and waited again. It seemed to be taunting me. Go on, catch me if you can.

Over and over it repeated the process. Jumping, waiting, challenging, further and further through the field of weeds. Silent footsteps made no difference. The hopper sensed my approach each time and jumped forward through the clover, leading me away, hypnotising me with the glitter on its head, playing a game the rules of which were not recorded. I had to know, became *obsessed* with the need to find out what it was.

It disappeared in tall grass and frantically I searched to find it again. There it was, behind me on the right! No, there were two now, three. Another on the left!

Dozens of the strangely tinselled locusts were all around. Over near the road, a swarm of them rose off the ground, sounding like a stampede of horses. Possibly someone screamed in the distance, but the racket of fluttering wings drowned out all else. I just *had* to have a closer inspection of one of the creatures. A relatively large one arrogantly observed me from a clover patch. The human likeness of its face was incredible. I abandoned the careful approach and lunged headlong at it. The disturbance as I ran agitated the other hoppers and, as one, thousands of them appeared from no where and simultaneously took flight. Only the one I was aiming for calmly stayed where it was, as if waiting to be caught, and with all my attention riveted on it, I ignored the ear shattering clamour of flapping wings enveloping me. I pounced, grabbed, had hold of it.

Excruciating pain shot into my hand and impairingly rushed up my arm. My hand opened involuntarily and the hopper flew into my face. Protectively I braced my other arm in front of my eyes, trying to shoo it away. The bitten limb wouldn't move anymore. The hand was swelling up, turning blue, feeling like a blunt knife was being twisted through it.

Pain shot up my leg. More locusts! Hundreds of them at my feet, thousands of them in the air. I tried to run, but my left leg crumpled under me and I collapsed into the midst of the crawling, fluttering, biting things. My vision blurred. Another vicious sting maimed my right leg. I rolled over, trying to crush them, kill them, but they were hard as rocks. It felt like rolling over large, moving pebbles. Acute stabbing pains now inflicted themselves all over my body. I tried to call for help, but only an incoherent wail of agony came forth.

Swarms of the things crawled all over me, stinging, exploring, jabbing. With each sting, more muscles ceased to respond. Pain ousted all other awareness. Every part of me hurt intolerably. Paralysis reduced me to whimpering helplessness. Smarting limbs lay uselessly beside me, unable to defend against the merciless attack. The horrible things invaded my torn trousers, crept under my ragged shirt, over my belly. I couldn't turn over anymore to protect my privacy. They crawled over my hair, my face, stung my ears, my eyes, my lips. *Now* would be a really good time for that pain threshold switch to activate!

All functional control left me. I urinated into my raggedy trousers, only barely conscious of it happening. There was only awareness of unbearable agony, and the wish to quickly expire into non-existence. Faint! Please let me faint! Let me escape into unconsciousness! Let me depart from this tormented body! Oh Death, welcome luxury beyond reach, where are you? "I want to die!!" My brain screeched out the message for no one to hear. My jaws and mouth were jammed shut. I couldn't swallow. I thought I'd choke on the gathering saliva in my mouth, but the source dried up.

My brain seemed to be the only part of me still working. My body was a broken-down shell which, all its functions having failed, only retained the capacity to transmit amplified messages of unrelenting torture. And I raced around within that shell, desperately trying to evade those signals, seeking me out with sadistic determination. But there was no escape. Even that vital pain-threshold switch had let me down, leaving me in utter bewilderment, craving exile but not finding it, seeking death, but death, too, eluded me.

I was in a hell of my own. There was no exit gate.

As I recall this hell, I can now recognise my brain was not working at all. It was something else dealing with this, something located much, much deeper. I come in with the advantage of hindsight. I'm too familiar with my own personality, which my human reasoning now equates with my 'soul', to ascribe my reaction to that part of me. It wasn't my soul. Is the mind part of the soul or part of the brain? Can't answer that one. Can I call it my spirit? Do I even believe in a spirit? If part of a man is not made of flesh, how does the whole thing work? Are there more parts to every man that have no physical substance? Are the soul and the spirit really two different things, like Dad once told me?

All I know is that, whatever bit is screaming to die lies so far down in my being, it doesn't reason, it doesn't think, it doesn't process the circumstances. Instead it drives and motivates, like electricity in a dynamo or petrol in a piston. And right this moment, it has had enough. It wants out. It can't take anymore.

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Cool wetness on my face.

Dim images of movement. Shuffling sounds. Something touching my legs!

“No more! Go away! Leave me alone! I can't take anymore! Please, please, no more!! ...” Only panicky, gurgling, inarticulate noises emerged from my lips.

More cool water drained some of the burning heat from my forehead, slight relief from extreme discomfort. Gentle hands manipulated my limbs, easing my terror into mild shivers of fear. I was emerging from an eternity of agonising, sleepless suffering.

Soft sounds penetrated. They might have been words, but I didn't recognise them as such. My ears only picked up indistinct rumblings and I was unable to differentiate. I was a mass of aching tissue. Most bodily functions were still switched off and I could only lie there, waiting for reality to take a firmer hold.

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Days turned into weeks. Gradually, the senses returned with some semblance of normality. The surroundings instilled an air of peace. In quiet surrender, I accepted treatment from firm but caring hands, speeding recovery.

They were an older couple, subsisting in a ramshackle structure of broken branches and corrugated iron. Their only mattress was occupied by me. They slept on the ground, which was covered by some old, torn carpet over a sheet of plastic. They looked after me as if I was their own son. Their eyes radiated love as they tended to my needs, dressed my sores, spoon-fed some sort of porridge into me and cleaned up vile smelling urine and excrement, which I helplessly deposited on a plastic bag protecting the mattress.

Slowly hearing improved to the point where I could understand their conversation, listen to their prayers and Bible reading, enjoy the bustle of everyday life. It was hard to believe this was real. Had the nightmare truly ended, or was this only a luxurious dream, soon to fade out and return me to darkest misery?

There were discussions, groups of people meeting outside the little shack, songs sung with great enthusiasm. A deep voice, speaking, almost pleadingly, the words tugging at something familiar at the back of my mind, something I didn't want to admit to, but made me want to block my ears so I wouldn't hear. But my arms still wouldn't obey.

“A new commandment I give to you: *Love* one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.’

“Christ said a *new* commandment, not an old one. Not a repeat of ‘love your neighbour as yourself’, but a brand spanking new one. How should we love each other? *As Christ loved us!* He loved us so much that He died for us! He loved us *more* than Himself. And now He’s asking the same from us. For us to love each other *more* than ourselves. Christ said: ‘Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me will find it’. We can’t love each other more than ourself, unless we give up *living* for self. The verse before it says: ‘Deny yourself, take up your cross daily and follow me.’ Let’s *do* it. Let’s sacrifice ourselves in a daily, spiritual crucifixion, so that Christ can live through us! Then He can be the Love that goes round.

“Paul wrote to the Galatians: ‘I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.’ I don’t want to put it off any longer. For Christ to live, a literal trade-off has to take place: - our lives for His. Goodness knows, our lives have been miserable enough in recent times for it not to be *such* a big ask!

“Christ prayed that we might all be one, as He and the Father are One, so that the world might know that we are His disciples. Let’s stop pussy-footing around, half-heartedly acknowledging Him. It’s not enough. He asked us to behave in such a way that the whole world would know we are His. The world is not exactly renowned for its spiritual insight. It must be a *visible* love and unity. And it must be shown here on earth, because there is little chance of the world seeing it once we get to heaven!

“There is even deeper meaning in what Christ prayed - if we truly love each other as He loved us, the world will recognise His divine nature! They will actually come to believe in God through observation! Have you ever had trouble convincing people that God is real? Do away with the intellectual arguments. We don’t have to say a word!”

He hit the nail on the head, there! Boy, the mental arguments I have put myself through over the years. And the hard time I must have given Mum and Dad. They, both Christians, desperately wanted their eldest son to find what they had, knowing he had to get there on his own. I’m getting there, Mum. I’m getting there, Dad. Don’t you worry ...

“Brothers and sisters, I don’t give a hoot what teachings or doctrines you believe - I love you. By the same Spirit we were born again and by that same Spirit we are able to love one another.

“Even in this dreadful time of great deprivation, when we have no material possessions to speak of, we still find ourselves divided. We talk about Christ living in us, but we show the world an expression of ourselves, after His teaching. We are only *imitating* the Christian life. Do we really believe Jesus can literally express Himself through us? Only Christ can live the Christian life.

“We say we believe in the hereafter, but weep over the death of a loved one. We should rejoice! We say we have peace, but struggle with the loss of meaningless material things. We say we have joy, but show long faces when things get tough. We say we have spiritual power, yet waste time in intellectual debate. We talk about giving, but look after number one. We say we have been set free,

but we have enslaved ourselves with selfishness and greed, compromising with secular ways, standards and values. No wonder the world calls us hypocrites!”

“Tell us,” a woman’s voice rang out. Funny, how you can tell an enormous amount about a person from their tone. She hadn’t even asked her question, yet I could tell from those first two words it was going to be sarcastic. “Tell us what on earth God is doing now, with all this destruction and death. I thought He was the Creator, not the Destroyer!”

“He *is* the Creator,” the deep, resonant, male voice replied kindly. “He created the world and all that is in it. He created *us*. But His purpose goes far deeper than that. He didn’t just create Adam and Eve as cute little additions to his hobby garden. His purpose was to express Himself through His creation, the way an artist expresses himself through a painting. You can see God the Father when you look at the miracle of life and nature. He is the ultimate impressionist. The strokes of His brush tell us He is real, because there is *no way* they could have got there by themselves, no matter what the arrogance of man has told us. And those strokes only give us an abstract *impression* of Him, because He is infinite, and we could never hope to fully comprehend infinity.

“He wanted to show His own creation what divine love is all about, so He expressed Himself through God the Son, Jesus, who loved us so much He gave His life for us. Even that is not the full picture. His purpose now is to express Himself and His love through what seems to us an impossible medium – *through all His children collectively*. He wants His love to shine out from all the born-again believers. And He wants to be the prime object of that love, knowing that, if He is, that love will automatically overflow, ‘good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over’, as it says in Luke. The ultimate Truth is that He wants to *marry* us. He wants us as His Bride for eternity.

“This is His purpose. Don’t ever think it was a mere accident that Adam sinned. Or that, if he hadn’t, everything would have continued nice and smoothly in the garden. Not that God *forced* Adam to sin, but He used it to achieve His purpose and knew beforehand it was going to happen. Our names were written in the Book of Life even *before* the foundations of the world were laid.

“It’s not His purpose to turn us into little Jesus replicas. He has already expressed Himself perfectly as the Son of Man. Now He wants to do it through the multi-membered body we refer to as the Body of Christ. God the Holy Spirit has come to make that possible. Individually, we will each only express a small part of Him. But *together* we can be perfect!”

“But how?” another anxious voice called out, “How can it happen now, when for two thousand years it has only gone down-hill?”

“Now, as it has always been, it is still a matter of submission of our will. Adam was disobedient to the Father’s will. And although Jesus and the Father are One, even Jesus’ will was different from the Father’s will. He admitted as much at Gethsemane. But Jesus *submitted*. He surrendered, saying, ‘Not My will, but Thine be done.’

“We use this ridiculous excuse, that sinless lives and agape love and true unity are enigmatic features of something called the ‘Invisible Church’, when the whole purpose is for it to be *visible*! We claim we will be perfected after Christ returns, yet Christ will come back for a perfect bride, without spot or wrinkle, holy and blameless. *This* is the meaning of Creation – God is looking for an eternal life partner! A bride, a spouse, a wife, call it what you like, but *that* is the essence of the Gospel message!! We’ve made the Gospel to be about ‘us’, *our* salvation, *our* prosperity, what *we* get out of it, when really it is about *Jesus*!” His voice croaked with the depth of his feelings.

“I’m not telling you this because I want to make you feel rotten and go away, hating yourself. I’m telling you because the time has come for us to prepare for His return!” A wave of murmuring issued from the group. Someone called out agreement. Others joined in. Soon there was a chorus of ‘Amen’s.

The speaker continued, his resonance broken with obvious emotion. I couldn’t tell whether he was reading or reciting, but recognised the scriptures he quoted. “‘The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.’ ‘Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, not self-seeking, not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes and always perseveres. Love never fails’. Paul told us what to expect. But, in my own strength, I cannot meet those standards even in loving my own flesh and blood, let alone in loving my *spiritual* family. Sometimes we need to reach our very lowest point, before we are broken enough to surrender.

“But I’m tired of not seeing the fruit of the Spirit. Christ prayed that we might *all* be one. Surely *His* prayer will be answered? Brothers and sisters, let’s all agree to participate in this great experiment of applied faith. Let’s give up the things that bind us. Let’s deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him. Let us submit our will and let the Holy Spirit have His way with us. We have nothing to lose!”

The preacher’s words resonate with whatever passes for feelings in my shattered being, both then and now. Is this my lowest point? Have I asked that before? Some of us have to reach that place of out-and-out desperation, our lives annihilated and in utter turmoil, before we can give ourselves to Him. But it is very important to me to be hale and healthy when I make my decision. I don’t want to come to Him broken, like a lover on the re-bound. It would make my commitment seem less honourable, one made out of neediness rather than true affection, and therefore less wholesome. Or is that just another excuse for delay?

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“Can you hear me?”

She looked close to sixty or seventy. Her hair was silvery white, her spotted brown face wrinkled. She might have been a lot younger - many seemed to be aging prematurely nowadays. Yet her grey eyes were ageless and wise and held a sparkle, sign of a keen mind and a zest for life missing in so many. Her hands were smooth, though her figure was skin over bones like everyone else.

“Do you hear me?” she asked again.

I was almost certain I could talk if I tried, but only nodded, for fear of shattering a fragile dream with the sound of my own voice.

“There’s no need to talk, dear. Just nod or shake your head. Are you in any pain?”

I shook my head. My body had reached a stage where, from one perspective, every part was simply numb and stiff and anaesthetised. Yet, paradoxically, I could *feel* wherever she touched me.

“You certainly had us concerned for a while, dear. But there’s no need to worry. The things that attacked you - they’re all gone now. Did you know you’ve been with us for over five months?”

Five months. A meaningless quantification of timelessness. It could have been five days or five years. Time, for me, had not existed, only pain, and even the memory of that was receding rapidly

into the realm of impossibilities and bad dreams. Already it seemed as if it couldn't have actually happened.

"You're showing much improvement. See if you can move your fingers," she asked in a concerned and kindly tone, massaging my hand. I hardly recognised the mangy, skeletal limb she was manipulating, but with concentrated effort I managed to make the left-hand index finger move.

"You know, you were one of the first to be stung. We've seen cases much worse than yours, but no one has died from the poison and it looks like you're not going to change that statistic." Her husband, silver-haired too, but balding, hollow cheeks highlighting his crevassed face, was sitting on the other side of the mattress. Physically he looked a wreck, but, above the deeply carved folds under his brown eyes, he shared that indefinable sparkle his wife had. Once you looked into those eyes, you forgot the old man and felt you were in the presence of a thirty year old. "My name is Vaughn, and this is my wife, Martha. Can you tell us your name?"

That wasn't really a question answerable with a nod; not under the circumstances. My gratitude for their loving care made me feel obligation, yet I was still scared to break my own silence, somehow convinced my voice-box would prove to be defective. The hoarse and crackly 'Michael' that finally came out sounded strange and unfamiliar, but mentally it flushed me back into the land of the living.

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The sun shone high and hot. The sand of the beach had absorbed so much energy, it scorched the soles of our feet.

The use of my legs had returned after months of slow recuperation and the ability to control my plumbing again saved a lot of embarrassment on my part and much work on the part of my benefactors. I don't know how they escaped being bitten by the locusts. Apparently Vaughn had found me, still covered by the vicious insects. He had simply stepped in and dragged me clear, brushed the things off my body and for some inexplicable reason remained unmolested.

We were sitting together, Vaughn and I, looking out to sea, gratefully allowing the cleansing rays of the sun to bathe our skin. Obviously Vaughn was an outright and totally committed Christian - it was practically all he talked about. One way or another he managed to bring the 'Lord' into everything. It was the way he thought, it was the way he lived. To him, to leave God out of anything was just unthinkable. Martha was the same.

It made it difficult to relate to them - their whole outlook was so different from mine. Not that my pessimistic and defeatist attitude was anything to be proud of. I had confided to them what little I could remember of my tragic circumstances, which really wasn't much. But, although they were full of sympathy, they regarded everything that had happened as the Lord's will. If we could see neither rhyme nor reason to the chain of disasters, they were convinced that God had some ultimate purpose for it and therefore it was good.

"We should simply and gratefully accept whatever comes," said Vaughn, readjusting his scrawny frame into a more comfortable position. "The Lord is using this era to sort those that love Him, from those that are in it for what they can get out of it. Sorting the sheep from the goats, so to speak. I believe He is testing His people to see which ones will stand by Him no matter what; who will acclaim Him and who will deny him, in the face of disaster or death."

His radiant eyes glowed with a light of their own as he spoke and I found myself envious of his burning enthusiasm. It would be nice to be able to feel so strongly about something that gave your

life purpose and direction. But it was missing from my life. Whatever flame had flickered for a while, long ago, inside my being, seemed to have burned out and I could only feel sorry for myself, now, for the miserable accident of my birth.

I can hardly believe my own thought patterns, as I re-think them now. There is no doubt I have an obstinate streak in my personality, one that is very much entrenched and difficult to shift. There was a point there, when I just came out of that hell on earth, five months' worth of waking agony, that I almost looked like surrendering. But here I am, making more excuses!

“Where’d they come from?” I asked him, making polite conversation, “The locusts, I mean.”

“Who knows? From the south somewhere. It was a previously unknown species, capable of withstanding permafrost. Some people figure they may have been frozen from the time the dinosaurs became extinct. There have been conjectures that they came from as far away as Antarctica; that one of the nuclear-powered satellites suffered a deteriorating orbit and crashed at the pole, melting them out. Or perhaps global warming created an escape hatch. Last report I heard, they were headed south, back to where they came from. Maybe they missed the chilly weather. Only the Lord knows the truth.

My stomach churned with the imagined notion of an annual migration. “Let’s just hope they don’t come back!”

Suddenly he looked at me, moisture glistening in the corners of his eyes. “You know, Michael, I once had an experience with God which left me forever changed. It was a revelation almost greater than I could bear. I was alone, struggling with my mere mortal lack of understanding, over issues which to Him must seem less than trivial. Then the Lord spoke to me. It was a voice bypassing the eardrums, going straight into my brain. He put to me the question He put to Peter: ‘Do you Love me, Vaughn?’ and, like Peter, I answered that, of course I loved Him. By then, my mind seemed to be floating in space. I was totally awed by hearing Him speak, ‘Then feed my lambs!’ Three times He asked me the same question. Three times I answered, again like Peter, totally ignorant of the difference between the Love *He* was talking about and the love *I* was familiar with.

“From that moment, I seemed to be transported into a different realm. I was constantly aware of Jesus walking by my side, on a different plane. I couldn’t see Him with my physical eyes, but seen through my spiritual eyes He was as real as you are now. Because He was there, I talked to Him constantly, but it was more like casual conversation than prayer. Somehow, I could discern when others received Him and to what extent. I was in tune with His emotions, and I could feel His grief when He was rejected and His joy when He was received. Unfortunately, He was rejected most of the time, even by Christians I had most looked up to and considered totally dedicated.”

I couldn’t say anything, but saw and heard his sincerity.

He continued, his voice turning gravelly. “I was totally changed. Instead of needing eight hours sleep, I needed no more than two. I went to sleep praying and woke up praying. My body was bursting with energy. I had never jogged or exercised much, but now I needed to run for hours to burn off the excess. I’d run around the neighbourhood, hoping to come across someone who was experiencing the same thing, but never did. I shared with Martha, but she didn’t understand and withdrew. I had been a TV-holic, but television held no more interest. I devoured the Bible. I was filled with love for others, but they couldn’t handle my enthusiasm and put up walls.

“It was a bit like I could see a treasure chest filled with jewels and riches, mine to hand out for free, but no one wanted any. Of course, the treasure consisted of Love and Life and spiritual gifts, earned

by Jesus on the cross. He was distraught at the lack of acceptance, and I shared His grief. It was more than any one person could handle. I would have ended up in the loony bin, had it continued any longer. It lasted a month. Then I asked the Lord to finish it, and being the gentleman He is, He did. Suddenly I was my old self again, needing my eight hours, tired after going to work, back to watching television, more concerned about my own feelings than the welfare of others.

“But it *did* change me. I now regard that month as a *foretaste* of things to come. I don’t know why the Lord chose me, but I regard it as a great privilege. And I know that when many start experiencing what I did, the love will flow and the power of the Spirit will be released.”

What he was saying made a huge impact on me. At the time, it made me want to run. But not with Vaughn. Run away more likely. As the words hit me a second time, they make me envious. This sounds like the kind of Christian walk the apostle Paul described. This is how it ought to be for all Christians. So why hadn’t Vaughn been able to persist in it?

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I was on my own again.

Vaughn and Martha were genuinely sorry to see me go. They had offered to share their humble shack with me permanently, to make it my home, but their constant references to God and Christianity made me feel uncomfortable. Especially when they met with other Christians, to sing songs of praise, join in testimony of how good the Lord had been to them, and all their ‘blessings’. How anyone could feel even remotely blessed was beyond my comprehension. The others came to this little shack, because, being isolated, they could carry on their worship with relatively little harassment from non-believers. But the word was out where they were, so it couldn’t possibly last. There was talk of everyone moving to the mountains to avoid persecution.

Anyway, I left. Besides, the cramped accommodation was barely big enough for the two of *them* and I couldn’t impose on their generosity any longer.

Sometimes, one of a number of emergency hostels, set up after the last earthquake, provided me with reasonable food and lodging. Other times, depressing moods took hold of me and I moved on, sleeping in the open, crying myself to sleep with tears of self-pity and exasperation. Many days were spent on the beach, looking out over the ocean, wondering what the next catastrophe would be to come drifting in over the horizon. My yesterdays were lost in another age. Tomorrow held no promises. Here I was, twenty years old, having achieved exactly nothing, not knowing where I was going, alone in a world gone mad, every effort frustrated at the start.

Surf pounded the beach, which was temporarily clear of offensive smells and seaweed. Salty foam rushed up the sand, like white fingers, desperately clinging, trying to hold on, but always being dragged back, in an endless unsuccessful battle to conquer the land. I identified with the intriguing ritual and watched for hours each day, seeing my feelings acted out before me, like a nostalgic play put on entirely for my benefit.

The sun slowly settled behind me, leaving me astride on a sand dune, observing the beach and ocean shimmering through the warm misty air. Lights shining in the distance had their rays dissipated by the haze, which shrouded the night in a mysterious and bewitching veil. Temporarily, it made me forget my self-pity and soothed my uneasy mind. I took it all in, in wonderment, incredulously realising there were still things of beauty left.

Then *she* was there.

She was skinny, naturally, but somehow she carried her slight figure in a way that was *so* feminine and graceful, it swept me off my feet. Her hair was long, blond and, despite circumstances, thick and healthy. Stray beams of light picked out wisps of hair surrounding her silhouette, clinging to them, as a slight breeze tossed them playfully around her head. I could only see her from behind, but already I was convinced her face would be a work of art.

She was standing maybe ten metres away, gazing out over the ocean as I had been. The waves had ceased battling with the shore and now played frivolous games of tag with each other. But I only had eyes for the vision of loveliness before me and I was afraid to blink, in case she would vanish in that fleeting moment, afraid to move, in case the dream would end.

I didn't think she was aware of my presence and, in breathless fascination, continued to feast my eyes on her. Just looking at her was good medicine for my bruised and beaten ego. Already my heart reached out for her with affection. I felt that when she would turn to face me, we would know each other; old friends, meeting again after a long, unavoidable and regretted separation. A bond was growing, stronger and stronger, morally rebuilding me, encouraging, strengthening the will to live. She was small, would probably just reach my shoulder. She couldn't be more than seventeen, yet an indefinable something told me she had seen more sorrow than I. She needed me, even more than I needed her. I longed for her to turn around, to reach out to me for protection. A soft breeze tugged at the torn dress hanging flimsily around her, hugging her hips, her thin thighs. I rubbed my eyes and she was still there, drawing me to her with strange attraction - a combination of physical and emotional need. I ventured several steps towards her, sensing imminent fulfilment, my heart beating with excitement and expectation.

She turned. And big, crystal clear brown eyes met mine, affirming all that I felt.

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Evelyn. Eighteen years old. Mother and father and two brothers, all dead. A past better forgotten. I didn't ask for her family name. What difference would it make? There were more important things to be considered. Like the healing of each other's broken spirit. Like the savouring of new found happiness. She confessed our meeting had been no accident. She had been observing *me* for a week or more and had finally decided we would be good for each other. So she had placed herself where I couldn't *help* but notice her! In a way I couldn't put into words, it made me feel even better.

We found comfort in each other's arms, sharing and alleviating burdens when we could, gently nursing and tending the other's wounded mind. We confided innermost feelings, shared our most private thoughts, found strength in each other's presence.

For weeks we were content with the closeness, the gentle touching, the holding hands, simply knowing we were no longer alone, two virgins, born in a generation growing up in utter chaos and confusion. Then one night our bodies yearned for more. Eager lips found passionate response. Searching hands explored without shame and relished the joy of giving. Joined spirits consummated their union by the joining of the flesh in unrestrained abandon, granting release to further pent-up emotions, and climaxing in the fulfilment of simultaneous ecstasy.

Joy fills me all over again, as this completely unexpected change plays out. How is it possible to re-acquire the will to live in a matter of days, if not minutes?

We are not designed to live alone. Being on your own calls for no adjustment in life style, no sense of tolerance, no sacrifice of personal preferences to accommodate the idiosyncrasies of

another. On your own, you can be as selfish as you like. Being in relationship calls for a spirit of giving to make it work. But if both parties give to each other, the rewards can be limitless.

Suddenly I get a very small insight into what God must be after in a Bride. If all of His Creation is an impressionist's painting, revealing His heart, surely the relationship between man and woman must hold a telling message for all mankind.

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Eve had a twinkle in her eye. A soft smile curved her full lips, as we asked for directions from a soldier as to where one could possibly get married. He grinned and gave elaborate instructions on how to distinguish the Northern Beaches registry office from the army barracks at the hostel. The entire complex reminded us of a concentration camp, with thousands of temporary dwellings providing emergency accommodation. Hand in hand, practically skipping with joy, we made our way towards it. It was a beautiful, warm day. Not a cloud marred the perfect blue sky. It was great to be alive, wonderful to be in love. The sight and feel of Eve beside me lifted my soul and sent energy surging through my limbs.

We stopped at a Salvation Army hut, to see if we could pick up anything to enhance the festivity of the occasion. Piles of junk scrounged from wrecked and deserted houses were on display, to be browsed through and handed out for free, at the discretion of the bloke in charge. A full length mirror, one that had miraculously come through the last earthquake unscathed, stood in the corner, possibly waiting for some appearance-conscious woman to claim. As I walked past it, the smile faded off my face.

A bearded, dirty, skeletal stranger stared back at me from the mirror. Hollow cheeks, dark rings under the eyes, skin over bony shoulders, the only redeeming feature was the deep tan. I actually looked around, to see whose reflection it was, but the filthy, torn shirt was mine, so were the rags that had once been trousers. Was that really all that was left of my once strong, firmly muscled body? How could anyone love that ugly, dirty creature? For the first time I noticed the smell. I *stank*. I couldn't recall the last time I'd had a decent wash or cleaned my teeth. Suddenly I wanted to hide, bury myself, so Eve wouldn't smell me, so she wouldn't have to look at the monstrosity that was me.

"What is it, honey?" Eve was beside me, linking her arm through mine. Self-consciously I shrank back. She observed me in the mirror, realised my thoughts and started laughing. "Oh, darling, didn't you know you looked like that?"

"You ... don't mind?"

"To me, you are the most handsome man alive. But I must admit we can probably both do with a good bath!" She wrapped her arms about my meagre waist and snuggled her head on my skinny, smelly chest. "I love you, Mike, truly," she whispered, guessing my fears. "Let's find some reasonable clothing in this lot, and get thoroughly cleaned up before we do anything else!"

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Like proud peacocks, we stood in the long line of couples waiting to sign their names in a register, following a two-minute wedding ceremony. Ill-fitting, but clean, clothes hung loosely off our shoulders and a piece of rope held up my baggy pants. Our skin was vibrant after a thorough scrubbing and Eve, with an endearing giggle, had *assured* me I didn't smell anymore. It had been

impossible to get hold of a razor, but she had managed to borrow a pair of scissors and skilfully trimmed both my beard and hair.

It was great to feel clean and presentable. With not a cent to our names, we felt like a million dollars and impatiently waited our turn. I pondered why the queue, but then, why were *we* getting married? Perhaps it represented a small foothold of traditional sanity in a totally unpredictable world. Our turn came eventually and a moment of surprise hit me when the celebrant spoke Eve's name.

"Evelyn Keene, do you take this man, Michael Canning, to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

Keene. It was the first time I'd heard the name. Eve looked up at me with her warm, affectionate smile and her big understanding eyes. I sighed gratefully, thankful to whatever god or fate had arranged for our paths to cross. The 'I do's' were almost superfluous, as our eyes said it all.

We signed our names and we were told to apply for a marriage certificate in six to twelve months time. He did give us a small pamphlet which was supposed to contain information on some recent legislative changes. "Be sure to read it!" he called after us, as he saw me indifferently slide it into my pocket.

"We will", I retorted, but we would have much rather had a marriage certificate to drool over. It's funny. The only proof of our being married were two signatures in a register somewhere, yet as soon as we walked out of that registry office, I *felt* married. There was an, as yet ill-defined, need to plan a future, to provide home and livelihood for Eve.

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We were sitting in our favourite little alcove, down on the beach, arms tightly wrapped around each other. I retrieved the Government notice from my pocket with my free hand, wondering what it would be like to read again. The font was fairly small, probably to make it all fit on the single A4 page:

ANNOUNCEMENT

A state of emergency has been declared this day, covering the whole of the Commonwealth of Australia. Owing to a series of natural catastrophes, there is a great shortage of both food and shelter. The greatest effort is being made to alleviate the situation and for this reason your complete co-operation will be required. It will be appreciated, therefore, if you could comply with the following requests: -

A) Apply for lodging at your local emergency Government hostel. Do this, even if the hostel is already overcrowded. Additional accommodation needs can only be assessed on the basis of formal applications.

B) Apply, through your local hostel, to join a voluntary work force, stating any special qualifications or experience you may have. The more able-bodied persons join the restoration project, the faster essential services will be restored. Food will be provided for those working.

C) After you have read it, pass on this pamphlet to someone who has not.

ELECTIONS

Circumstances have made it impossible to comply with the requirements of the Constitution. Accordingly, the following amendments have been approved in Parliament (in abbreviated form): -

1) The present Government will continue in power, in Caretaker capacity, until such time when it is reasonably practicable, in the opinion of Parliament, to hold a general federal election.

- 2) The Senate has been abolished.
- 3) To facilitate the operation of Government in the present crisis situation, the functions and authorities of all State and Territory Governments are henceforth incorporated under the control of the Commonwealth Government.
- 4) Voting at the next federal election, when held, will be by way of non-compulsory vote.
- 5) The list of residents and applicants for residency at each Government hostel, or other Government approved accommodation, will be deemed to be the electoral roll for that district.
- 6) The preferential system of voting is abolished and the first-past-the-post system has been adopted.

LAND OWNERSHIP

Widespread land movements and disturbance of survey marks, in combination with the loss of most land title records, have made redefinition of cadastral land boundaries impossible. Accordingly, it is the intention of Government to pass legislation for all land, whether freehold or leasehold, to revert to the Crown. Any claim of land ownership, together with whatever documented proof you may possess supporting such claim, should be lodged with the Manager of your local Government hostel, on or before 31 December, 2018, and will be taken into consideration in the allocation of land rights at some future date.

GENERAL ADVICE

The Government is doing all in its power to provide relief and facilitate self-help to the people of Australia. No assistance can be expected from outside sources, as the crisis situation is world-wide.

Further assistance, advice and information may be obtained from your local district hostel, which is the official Government agency in your area. It is once again stressed that it is of utmost importance and in your own interest that you apply, as soon as possible, for residency at your local hostel and volunteer your services to assist in the rebuilding of our country.

A facsimile of the Prime Minister's signature appeared at the bottom of the notice, together with the date of 1st July, 2017, showing it to have been printed some nine months earlier.

"What's all that mean, darling?" Eve asked, running her fingers through my hair.

"I think they're trying to tell us that, unless you register, you don't exist and have no rights. They've already decided what to do, and want our muscle to carry it out. Could be the end of democracy as we know it."

"Sounds a bit rough to me. What about that bit about land ownership? Didn't your parents own land?"

"Yes, at Epping, last time I was there" How long ago was that? A year? Two years? Ten? I tried to remember, but the images were all mixed up. Happy smiles incoherently blended with anguished eyes. Reluctantly, my brain allowed more data input, trying to form a clear, acceptable picture, but only a blurred, bloodied face, with lifeless eyes, swam into my mind. I shuddered.

Eve gently wiped away a heavy tear drop, trickling down my cheek. "I'm sorry, darling. I shouldn't have mentioned it.

"No, no, it's alright. I've just had the most *amazing* idea. Let's *go* there, see if we can find the place. Last time I was there, the house was still standing. You never know, maybe we could *live* there, make it home. I'd like to find the photo albums. We had dozens of them." Oh, to be able to

see pictures of my family the way they were. Just their faces, before the heartbreak. Maybe they would be there, waiting for me to come back.

We left straight away. There was nothing to keep us and we had no luggage.

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Everywhere, bulldozers and work crews, men and women alike, were busy covering over the devastation, filling in the cracks. The slate was being wiped clean to start all over again. An occasional stray accusing glance was thrown our way. Why weren't we working, like the others?

Now and then we passed some lone dwellings, standing out starkly from the rest of the landscape, silent relics of an age gone by. In some mysterious way, they had withstood the forces that had annihilated all else. We never found my parental home. I couldn't even find the suburb, let alone the street. Everything had changed so much. There were hills where no hills had been before, watercourses where no water had flowed before. Roads had disappeared and ruins had been bulldozed into oblivion, with scarcely the smallest vestige to remind of what had been before.

We gave up the search, and returned to the coast, to take up residence at the hostel where we'd been married.

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It was hard work after that, but I enjoyed the strenuous exertion. The food wasn't all that good, but there seemed to be plenty of it. Gradually some meat grew back on our spare frames. Eve worked by my side, digging with the best of them, until she was four months pregnant and the medical officer recommended light duties. An ever stronger bond was growing, binding us together, dreading any separation. We were lucky to have a single room to ourselves, providing essential privacy for the expression of our mutual love.

The restoration project concentrated on efforts towards the establishment of adequate hostel accommodation for all the remaining population. Agriculture was being developed to cater locally for the food quota. Food processing plants were set-up. Electricity lines were re-erected.

There was some irony in the way the nuclear reactors, which the environmentalists had made so much fuss about, appeared quite indestructible. Sure, there had been minor leakages of radiation, but compared to the destruction incurred from other sources, this was negligible. Besides, a vaccine derived from seaweed, providing immunity to radiation poisoning, though still in short supply, was now available. The reactors had stood firm and still functioned well. For the one in the south, a new canal had to be dug to provide an adequate water supply, but, other than that, they were given the thumbs up.

Nuclear power played a major role in speeding the rehabilitation of civilisation. Sydney harbour, unrecognisable without the Opera House and Harbour Bridge, was blasted back into shape with the skilled use of explosives. New unions were formed, membership made compulsory. Non-members were not permitted to work and received no food in remuneration. Communication lines were reinstated, concentrating on interactive television as the most versatile medium, geo-stationary satellite transmission eliminating the need for long cables of optical fibre.

The Government stuck to its intention regarding the resumption of land, advertising the passing of new legislation on large TV screens in the recreation halls of every hostel. From this point forward,

private land ownership was a thing of the past. Claims for compensation lodged were held in abeyance, and I suspected this facility was only a ruse to stop an outcry.

Money no longer had any value, and rich and poor were suddenly in the same boat.

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David was born on the twentieth of November, 2018, in our own little room at the hostel. The medical officer in attendance permitted me to be present at the birth. Eve squeezed my hand unbelievably hard each time a contraction tightened her abdomen and I did my best to comfort her in what seemed to me to be quite an ordeal. Little beads of perspiration formed on her forehead, and I kept wiping them away with a cool, wet cloth. Her stoic nature allowed no complaint, even at the height of each contraction, painful though they must have been, clenching her teeth tightly together. I don't know if I was any support or not. She kept telling me not to look so worried. But I couldn't help it, living each moment of pain and stress on her behalf, yet unable to take it away and bear it for her.

Natural delivery was the only option at the moment. None of the drugs that allowed quick and painless childbirth were available. There were no hospitals doing caesareans and any woman finding herself with a baby in breach position was in real trouble. But in our case, that was no problem – the head was in place. Contractions were coming at very short intervals now. The medic told Eve to take short, gasping breaths and keep pushing. I found myself breathing in tandem and pressing down on the seat in sympathy. Only right at the end did a restrained groan slip past Eve's lips, followed by a huge sigh of relief. (It's very possible that sigh came from me, not Eve).

When Adam and Eve sinned, God placed a curse on them. From that time on, their life span was limited and to dust they would return. Adam had to till the ground if he wanted to eat. Eve would give birth in pain and be ruled over by her husband. These things had not meant much to me, until now.

My Eve is an exceptionally brave woman and I am ever so proud of her. Watching her deal with the pain of childbirth, I am sure no man could match her courage. I don't feel like an Adam and I don't want to rule over her. She is the most wonderful blessing in my life, and all I want to do is take care of her and keep her safe.

Triumphantly, almost like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat, the medic produced a bloodied, purplish and wrinkled little creature and held him up by the legs. The little guy was already letting us know, in no uncertain manner, his protest at having his security and comfort disturbed. Tears of joy and relief sprang into the corners of my eyes at the sight of the miracle of birth. The awareness of immediate affection for the pro-creation of self made me warm inside.

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Hostels turned out to be a very short-term measure. Towards the end of that year, the first new suburbs of what they called 'module homes' sprung up. Module homes were fully constructed in a factory and transported to site by helicopters, where a land-crew installed them in less than a day. I had only seen them from a distance, but the *speed* with which they went up was absolutely stunning.

And things were finally taking a positive turn in other ways as well. I attended a skills assessment exam and did rather well. Next thing I knew there was a job offer on the table, 'Structural Design Draftsman', meaning not just drawing, but an opportunity to contribute my own ideas. We were

both terribly excited. Suddenly life seemed full of promise. In the space of less than a year, everything had turned around, from almost suicidal apathy to thrilling expectation.

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“The first woe is past; two other woes are yet to come.

The sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice coming from the horns of the golden altar that is before God. It said to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, “Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.” And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind. The number of the mounted troops was two hundred million. I heard their number.

The horses and riders I saw in my vision looked like this: Their breastplates were fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur. The heads of the horses resembled the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke and sulfur. A third of mankind was killed by the three plagues of fire, smoke, and sulfur that came out of their mouths. The power of the horses was in their mouths, and in their tails; for their tails were like snakes, having heads with which they inflict injury.

The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; They did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood - idols that cannot see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality, or their thefts.”

REVELATION 9 : 12-21

2019

I never ceased to be amazed at the rapid way the module homes shot up. My drafting job was most gratifying. I had always been mechanically inclined and liked to see ideas take shape during design stage. When my suggestions for minor alterations to structure and layout were accepted, with a feeling of pride and satisfaction I would incorporate them into the design diagrams. But it was still one thing planning the units using screen graphics, and another seeing the material end-product erected.

All the homes were cylindrical in shape, with moveable room dividers arranged either radially out from the central hallway or in what they called ‘chip’ formation, giving more parallel walls. The hall came with a permanent staircase up to the roof and retractable staircase down to the ground. The main structural material was silicon, one of the most common elements on earth, extracted from plain sand. Plumbing and electrical circuits were built into the perimeter. Windows were fixed, ventilation being provided by intake and exhaust fans, easily adaptable to air conditioning. Roofs were flat with a walled and guttered perimeter, and each unit stood on three tubular steel legs, based on the tripod principle. These legs were the most important feature of the whole design, the idea having been imported from the European United Nations. Frequent earth tremors had plagued the world since the last major quake and no doubt there were more to come. The legs swivelled on hinges mounted

underneath the module and were fixed to the ground by means of ball joints, one end set in concrete. Each leg consisted of two telescopic spring-loaded pipes, enabling the legs to be lengthened or shortened, then locked into place. In the event of another quake, the lock mechanism would automatically release and the heavy springs would serve as shock absorbers. Theory was that following an earthquake the module would only need to be re-levelled by way of leg adjustment to restore it to its habitable state. The homes had stood up very well to rigorous simulation tests, but only time would tell how they would stand up to genuine seismic upheaval.

All modules were almost completely self-sufficient, with rain falling on the roof collected in a shallow built-in tank located between the ceiling and roof surface. Provision was made for the eventual installation of solar panels to generate power. At this juncture, however, connection to the power grid was necessary. Waste water and sewage was recycled, separating it very efficiently into sterilised potable water and odour-free garden fertiliser, the latter processed into powder form.

The units were all very similar on the outside, varying only in diameter, but internally a variety of layout combinations was possible, from a single community hall, to a residential unit, to a hospital ward with dozens of private rooms. Their greatest benefit, of course, was the way a factory could churn out hundreds in a day, with only minimal labour required to put them up.

It was astounding to see what could be achieved if people were organised into working together. Advances in the use of nuclear energy greatly assisted the restoration project, having applications in mining, processing of silicon and manufacturing, as well as the traditional power generation. In Sydney alone, clusters of module homes were sprouting up in strategic areas, like fields of mushrooms.

I'd been very lucky to be selected for the job of structural draftsman. It was challenging and rewarding. Most workers were involved in the menial, labour side. The central design office was located several kilometres from the hostel, giving my legs a good workout. The main task was to draw up specifications for office and warehouse modules, based on the same principles as the residential units. Three nights a week I had to attend a specialised training course at the hostel education centre.

Stirrings of trouble commenced when the first suburb of module homes was ready for occupation, complete with warehouse and hospital. The big question was: who should be chosen to move in? After, (for some), nearly three years of hostel living, sharing basic conveniences, *everyone* was desperate to move out. Eve and I had been there a little over a year, and were already eager to move on. Only the knowledge that leaving the hostel would nullify our chances of qualifying for a module home kept us there.

Labourers felt that *they* were entitled to be first, as they had put the physical effort into the construction work. Energy production workers claimed their high risk environment should give them priority. Longstanding hostel residents felt that they were the ones in greatest need. A decision was made that the local leaders, the politicians, the managers of hostels and warehouses, the high-ranking army officers, should be the first to qualify for independent residence.

Waves of dissension ran through the population. Talk of strikes and strength in numbers was prevalent. The days of small unions was long past. No one was quite sure just how the central control bodies were set up, but it appeared that the four existing unions were world-wide organisations, one each for security forces, construction labourers, energy production workers, and the smallest for administration and miscellaneous areas of employment. Each union was administered locally, but the potential muscle of the whole caused grave concern and moved the

Government to pass urgent legislation to outlaw industrial strikes and restrict the power of union leaders.

Religious movements also were being reorganised, mostly by church leaders of the past. The hunt for membership was on and the bickering started again. Nothing seemed to have changed the petty insistence on division based on doctrinal differences. The Government stepped in to arrange lengthy conferences between clergymen of all denominations to try, under chairmanship of a Government representative, to resolve the differences. Numerous religious interests claimed they were being discriminated against. The most substantial, numbers-backed claim came from the Muslim community. Islamic terrorism had been on hold for some years now. (Nature seemed to be far more adept at indiscriminate destruction than anything *they* could have dreamed up.) They asserted a change of heart on the part of the extremist element, professed purely altruistic motives for the rest, and hence claimed human rights entitlements equal to all other religious factions. They seemed willing to blend with the rest of the community, while maintaining their religious practices in private.

In an attempt to pacify early undercurrents of industrial unrest, the second suburb of module homes to be completed was allotted to labourers employed in a nearby factory. *Dozens* of module suburbs were under construction in the Sydney metropolitan area alone, many more up and down the coast, but while the speed of construction was almost in the realm of science fiction, it still seemed too slow to those poor people still stuck in hostels. Finally a ballot system was added to make allocation seem more equitable and less preferential. Still the unrest persisted. The loudest protest came from those who had owned land before the mass resumption and, to appease these claimants, the next suburb went to the best documented cases.

No transfer of title ever took place. All homes remained the property of the Government. This eliminated the need to keep title records and carry out boundary surveys. No rent was payable for the time being, as no one had or earned any money, however, one of the conditions of occupation covered the rent situation when some form of currency was re-introduced.

Eve and I were fortunate to be in one of the earlier allotments. Someone with a compassionate nature in Parliament had managed to sway others to the point of view that young families, those raising the generation of tomorrow, were most in need of decent accommodation, bypassing the ballot system. We were glad to get away from the constant and demoralising criticism of both living conditions and Government, though the prevalent feelings were easy to understand. Official assessment of progress being made had estimated it would take five years, even at the almost *miraculous* speed of construction, to provide module housing for all the population - not very encouraging and probably optimistic at that. It meant some unfortunates would still be living in hostels half a decade from now.

As a temporary measure, old homes that had survived the last earthquake were made available to those willing or game to live in them, though it meant forfeiting your chance at a module home until all others had been accommodated. Nevertheless, there was no shortage of takers. Australian culture had bred a race with preference for independence and privacy. Sometimes, existing but unregistered occupants of these old homes were evicted, to make room for the 'officially allocated' hostel dwellers.

Moving into our new module home was like stepping from the stone-age into the space-age. Kitchen with microwave/convection oven, a bathroom with our very own toilet, David in his own bedroom, the new-found luxury was breathtaking. A local warehouse supplied basic food rations. Eve had to learn to cook.

A program of systematic inoculation against radiation poisoning had been introduced, now a compulsory prerequisite to module suburb occupation. The vaccine stimulated production of an enzyme which, in turn, 'switched on' a gene responsible for recognising cells contaminated by radioactivity, triggering a normal immune response to get rid of these unwanted cells. It made you wonder whether the widespread use of nuclear energy was having harmful side effects we weren't aware of. Was vital information being suppressed? Or was it just a valid precaution?

Communications were still vague, the only TV's in community halls. Digital newspapers, radio and television entertainment were way down on the list of priorities, though every module came ready-wired for their introduction. Most news still came by word of mouth and you could never be sure of the factual basis or the degree of embellishment. No one was really sure what the Government was up to, or even *who* was making the decisions. The only evidence that someone at the top was overseeing the running of the country was the continued smooth operation of the restoration project and frequent improvement of processes. Identity theft was a major worry. With so many casualties unaccounted for, there were those passing themselves off as being some important deceased person whose papers they'd found. There was a proposal to implant identity microchips in the living, to overcome future repetition of the problems associated with this type of fraud.

Complete automation of module manufacture was one of the next major improvements. While it couldn't speed the production of individual units a great deal, it made it possible to increase the number of factories, creating the potential for doubling or tripling production, as soon as energy production could be boosted to match. However, the humble hostel dweller was still unimpressed. All he could see was a small number of fellow workers living in luxury, while doing the same work as he did. Discontent was rife. Talk of strikes, to force the Government's hand into doing the impossible, could be picked up in hushed undertones wherever you went. Authorities took a hard line. Protest marches were broken up, attempts to organise strike support severely dealt with. Evidence of a dissenting movement was reduced to a whisper. But it was there all the same.

What could they possibly hope to achieve by going on strike? Perhaps the loss of loved ones and other personal hardship had sent them over the edge. I knew from personal experience. I, myself, had hovered on the brink of insanity and suicide, before Eve came along and rescued me.

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2020

It was the summer of 2020. Sydney comprised over one hundred hostels and about two dozen completed module suburbs, with a further twenty odd, nearing completion. A network of fused-silicon roads, (a brand new process turning ordinary sand into a hard surface, using massive electrical current but still producing far less pollution than either cement or bitumen), carried a few buses and trucks, but mostly foot traffic. They connected the various settlements with factories, central Government offices (consisting of a number of inter-connecting single storey modules, all very similar to our own), and to each other. Three fast-breeder nuclear reactors stood in the vicinity of the areas once known as Gosford, Woronora and Warragamba.

Stark contrast existed between the luxurious living conditions of the suburbs and the cramped poverty of the hostels.

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It happened to be my rostered day off, finding me relaxing on the air-cushion sofa with an absorbing novel on my pocket digital reader. By this time, I did most of my work from home. A recent

initiative had installed remote work terminals in many module homes, creating a virtual office. I could communicate with my boss at the press of a key. Even simultaneous contact with a number of colleagues was possible in a conference call. The only time I needed to go in was for a mandatory full-day brain-storming session, once a fortnight. It was mostly designed to maintain human contact, as it was quite possible to do the same thing on-line. Distracted by an out-of-place colouring in the corner of the window, I looked up. A gigantic mushroom cloud stood like a huge alien presence in the north. Its awesome size dominated the sky and it took several moments before its fearsome reality registered in my brain.

“Eve! Eve, come quickly!” With great difficulty I managed to push the words from my lips.

She came running out of the kitchen, and her mouth fell open as she saw it. “What what *is* it?”

I don’t think I answered her, but our hands met as she dropped on the sofa beside me, unable to draw her eyes away from the spectacle framed in the window.

The rumble reached us a few minutes before the gale force wind swept over the suburb, straining the three concrete foundation blocks keeping our home attached to the ground. Flashes of scenes from ‘Terminator’ movies were revived. David had woken and started crying at the sound of the ominous thunder. He was huddled in Eve’s arms by the time the gale hit, appeased by the familiar security he found there. Little did he know of his Mum and Dad’s impotence to do anything about what was going on outside.

We watched in stunned silence, trying hard to reconcile our emotions with our conclusions. How many times was this, that we were faced with a force so great, so overwhelming, so devastating, that its main purpose seemed to be to rub in Man’s utter helplessness and vulnerability, despite his pretences and conceit? What had Man really achieved in this scientific age, except to prove he could destroy himself? Our home shook violently, then swayed sideways. At least it proved the automatic release mechanism on the supporting legs worked. Suddenly it seemed like we were on a small boat, bouncing on waves. Up and down we went for what seemed like an eternity, but was probably no more than a minute in reality. The view of the mushroom cloud was completely obliterated by a grey dust storm trying to tear our home from its foundations. A vague part of my mind imagined sheets of fibro and corrugated iron and roof tiles flying through the air, torrents of rain water pouring in through the ceiling. But there were no such things. My heart sank and my stomach churned. If it had lasted any longer, I’m sure that would have been the end of me.

When it was over, we raced outside, down the stairway, which now felt quite wobbly, giving way with every step. The grass and a few infant shrubs had been flattened, but otherwise little damage appeared to have been done. The module legs would have to be adjusted and relocked, that’s all. I tried furiously to remember what we should do in a situation like this. Surely I had been told at one time or another. Mass evacuation? As quickly as possible to avoid exposure to fallout? It seemed to me it was already *way* too late for that. Anyway, where could we go without transport? With some relief, I remembered our immunisation against radiation poisoning. Only time would tell how effective it was.

Eve stared wide-eyed to the south, squeezing my forearm with tensed fingers. Another mushroom cloud was rising, barely visible through the dissipating dust, its orange colour tinting the surrounding sky with a sickening hue. What was this? World War III? Were we under attack? Being bombarded by nuclear missiles? My stomach wanted to empty itself and I closed my eyes and prayed this wasn’t real.

But it was real alright. I ushered Eve back inside, up the bouncing stairs, to wait out the consequences of this second explosion with powerless resignation. She was still holding tightly onto David, her usually olive and vibrant skin now ashen and beaded with little droplets of perspiration. We rocked in our refuge, curled up in foetal position around each other, like unborn triplets protecting each other.

No matter how devastating and overwhelming anything Man can dish out, the forces at work in the pages of my life seem far greater still. This can't be written down to random coincidence any longer, being in the wrong place, at the wrong time. All of a sudden I am certain I am in the right place, at the right time, to receive a message from another place, a heavenly place. Calling me ...

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“Are you OK, lady?” I asked the woman, as she seemed to be struggling to remain upright. She was middle aged, thin and small, her hair cut very short and going grey. She had a perplexed look on her face, as if she couldn't understand what was happening to her. She clawed the leg of the office module she was leaning against for some grip or support, but it was smooth and there was nothing to hold onto. She started to slide. I managed to catch her and picked up her slight weight in both arms and looked around for a place to put her down comfortably.

It was the lunchtime break of my fortnightly day at Head Office. Most of my colleagues were getting stuck into the amber liquid. I had gone to stretch my legs and made my way to Government Central, the place where the Big Boys were supposed to hang out. People were everywhere. Several times I asked kind-looking faces for assistance, only to watch eyes turn blank or heads avert. One guy actually told me he didn't want to get involved and hurried on. What do you do when you are in the middle of a thousand people with a sick woman in your arms, begging for help, but nobody takes any notice?

‘Pitiless bastards!’ I thought to myself angrily, and resolved to take her to the park, where at least she could lie down in reasonable comfort until I could drum up some medical aid. She seemed passed out, yet her eyes were still open and watery. Her face had turned almost to the colour of her hair and her lips were turning blue. At least she didn't smell like a human barbeque. (Where *that* thought came from, I have no idea).

“Don't die on me, lady, please,” I pleaded, mumbling under my breath, sweat breaking out on my forehead, as I moved as fast as possible towards the park. An old man, his skin going as white as the diminishing hair on his head, was standing in the way, his look expressionless. I made to go around him, but his legs simply gave way under him and he collapsed on the ground, like a bag of sand. The sightless, unfocussed eyes told me he was dead.

‘So we meet again’, I think bitterly, ‘familiar face of Death. Was it really necessary to come again so soon? Is your greedy appetite never satisfied? How many more will it be this time round?’ Yet I see death in a different light now. And the same applies to all the suffering I've witnessed. How can a loving God allow all this hardship? I am convinced through everything that has happened that this earthly existence is by no means the end of us. God must see it that way too. So what we perceive as ultimate cause for bereavement, to Him is just another step in our journey.

Is it the final step? I guess that depends on where we end up...

A couple of stretchers were being rushed into a nearby module, one of several retractable staircases slowly elevating the carriers into its bowels. Was that a hospital? I carried the woman to the

entrance, reaching it just as a man in white descended the central stairway. He looked at me with cold, pale-green eyes for a few long seconds, then he reluctantly granted a fleeting inspection of the woman. "Sorry, we're full up," he declared, his voice matching his deadpan face, and turned around to re-enter without further comment.

The woman gagged and went limp. She was gone. I gently laid her down in the shade of the module, propped up slightly against one of its concrete foundations, carefully closing her eyelids to lessen the distorted agony carved on her face. Some pedestrians passed, sparing us no more than a hasty glance of curiosity. No one cared. No one had enough compassion left to spend a few minutes with someone in need. Or were they afraid the minutes would stretch to hours, or that the undiagnosed ailment was contagious? I stifled the urge to shout abuse.

What now? Just leave her here, to await cold, impersonal disposal? Or should I go through her pockets, try to find out her name, try to advise her next of kin? To take her with me was too distressing a thought to even consider. Two people keeled over together near the adjoining module. That was too much. I abandoned her corpse and ran frantically. Eve, darling, I need you!

The radiation level was high, I knew that. Radio-active fallout had been more intense than expected, despite offshore winds at the time of the explosions. Two of Sydney's three nuclear reactors had blown up with the combined explosive power of maybe a quarter of the bomb that ended World War II. *Puny* explosions compared to that of a thermonuclear hydrogen bomb, but still enough to do a lot of damage. Just as well the reactors were all located a good fifteen kilometres from the nearest settlements. They had always said it was *impossible* for a reactor to explode like a bomb, but look what happened. They had claimed the worst-case scenario was a total melt down, 'China syndrome' or whatever they called it. But metre-thick quartz floors, on top of three-metre thick concrete, were supposed to prevent that.

Another corpse over there. Two, no three, further along. Oh God, why?

Sabotage, that's what it must have been. Lax internal security measures, either that, or even the security staff had been in on the plot. Crazy, desperate fanatics, blind to everything except their own idealistic goals. It *couldn't* be anything else. Reactors had withstood the ravages of *earthquakes*. This *had* to be the inside work of madmen, possibly dissident factions in the Energy Production Union. The Twin Towers flashed through my brain. *One* aeroplane flying into a building can be an accident. Two is definitely *no* accident. *One* reactor blowing sky-high could possibly be an accident. But two?

Oh no! How long had *that* body been there? Male or female, it was impossible to tell. It was covered in ants and other crawlies.

The EPU was said to comprise hundreds of millions of unionists world-wide, sharing the common ground of being involved in the production of electricity. There were power seeking factions in every union, but what on earth were the idiots after? What could they possibly stand to gain by blowing up the world's vital energy sources? The *one* hope for a return to sanity? Demented mercenaries, that's all they were! A sudden, sickening thought crossed a part of my brain that probably hadn't had much use for quite some time. Was it possible this was an act of Islamic terrorism? Were they *still* on an anti-Semitic and anti-Christian crusade? On a quest to conquer and rule the world in the name of Allah?

I ran on and on, until my legs felt like they'd fall off. Aching muscles and blistered feet made me long for the physical fitness that had once been mine. How much further? How much longer? How much more?

How the heck had they managed it, anyway? Meddling with the latest techniques for separating isotopes? Marrying of pure hydrogen and oxygen in the exhaust stacks? That might cause overheating, possibly an explosion, but not a nuclear reaction. Only someone with in-depth understanding of nuclear science could have rigged *that*. All three reactors were fast breeders, using Plutonium 239 as the fuel core. Technically, if my recall of school days served me well, I guess it was possible for a supercritical mass of Pu239 to result in a nuclear explosion, provided the control rods weren't functioning. But *that* would have required the collaboration of *so* many personnel, it was inconceivable. It didn't matter, anyway, did it? The damage had been done.

If it was an act of Islamic terrorism, they certainly knew how to kick a man when he was down.

Yellow weeds, slowly dying in sterilised ground on either side of the silicon roads, were no longer able to consolidate the dust. Soon there would be only barren wastelands, infertile desert, to remind us of the futile irony of Man's achievements. Death was in the atmosphere. Decaying animal carcasses tainted the air with their own sickening smell. Should I weep for Man's stupidity or curse him for his selfishness? Incompetent bloody imbeciles! They ought to *shoot* the useless, miserable bastards! Hate-inspired obscenities were welling up inside and I could no longer stem their flow, any more than I could stop the tears gushing from my eye-sockets. What on earth made them think they had the right to impose their will or fancy on the rest of mankind?

Criminal investigation was on-going and all members of the EPU were under suspicion. But it is rather difficult to sift for evidence through the ashes of a nuclear explosion, especially when the entire site has been flooded in metres of concrete. Surely, after the history of the last two decades, Islamic extremists would be under suspicion?

I panted with exhaustion, stumbled along with a cramp in my calf. Emotions overruled the logic of my thoughts. Eve! Come and straighten me out! Soothe my burdened mind, the way you so often have before ... Anxiously she was waiting for me, sensibly at home, clutching David to her breast. She was eager to be my refuge, to wipe more tears away, and to appease the throbbing anger in my troubled heart.

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Mass inoculation was the order of the day. Queues of thousands lined up at the hostels to receive what could well be a life-saving injection. It couldn't save those who had received a lethal dose, but it certainly could prevent further tissue damage caused by progressive exposure to fallout, and by radiation poisoning already assimilated into the system. Those who had received their injections earlier, were advised to go again for a booster shot. So we lined up with everybody else. Midday was approaching. So far, we had stood in line for more than three hours, under a scorching sun, with nothing but an umbrella to protect us. The queue was shortening painfully slowly.

How could they possibly have enough serum to meet this enormous quota? Someone must have produced the stuff. Someone must have anticipated all this ...

I was glad David was too young to understand. People were dropping right there in the line-up, unseeing gazes of horror permanently imprinted on their emaciated heads. Were they dead, or had they only fainted from exhaustion? Efficient men-in-white carried them off on stretchers. I tried to block David's view. You never know what effect these things can have on such little ones. Eve buried her head in my chest, trembling all over.

"Hey, what do you think you're doin'?"

Someone trying to jump the queue was tossed out again, but he was a big bloke and not about to give up. Fists were flying. Grown men were rolling in the dust to secure a position in the line. Army personnel took them away at gun point.

The man in front of us nervously tapped his foot on the ground. The air was electrified with the growing tension. The line was too long. There couldn't possibly be enough serum to give the coveted injection to everyone here. We were expecting an announcement any moment, saying that, unfortunately, they'd run out. And please come back tomorrow. What had been a whispering bustle dwindled to a deathly silence. Sweat was breaking out.

"Let's go home, honey. Something horrible is going to happen any minute, I can feel it." Eve looked up at me, and I could read the fear in her beautiful deep-brown eyes. They were glazed over a little with half-formed tears, the colour seemingly fading to hazel with her concern.

The crowd was a hair trigger away from mass panic. Anyone could touch it off. Any sudden move could be misinterpreted. A dozen people in front of us, another woman collapsed, frothing at the mouth. The man three places behind us plonked down on the ground. His yellow skin was marred with small white ulcers, clumps of hair were missing from his scalp. Further back, a family of four cautiously edged out of the line, deliberately making it obvious they were definitely going backwards, not forward. We decided to follow suit. We had received one injection not that long ago, and at least it had been well before the radiation, giving our bodies the chance to develop immunity. It would *have* to be enough.

A woman holding a baby moved out simultaneously. But she circled around some of the barracks in an attempt to sneak back into the queue near the front. Abuse reached our ears, mixed with her high-pitched voice, pleading her baby's case. It was too much. A man raced forward, two followed. Then the dust rose off the ground to blur a human stampede, a melee of individuals overcome by self interest.

We were barely clear of it. A warning shot rang out ineffectively, another to no avail. Bodies were trampled underfoot. Those weakened by advanced stages of radiation sickness stood no chance. They stumbled and fell, kicked indiscriminately by those whose path they blocked. A third shot rang out without effect. There were screams, shouting, panic, hysteria.

The last thing we heard, as we hurried away, was the chatter of a machine gun.

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Three million dead.

The explosions had not been limited to power stations in Sydney. Reactors in other parts of the country had also suffered explosions, and there was no reason to believe the sabotage was confined to Australia, either. Three million. An inconceivable number. The first estimate of the Australian death toll. It covered those killed directly, those who died from the effects of radiation poisoning, as well as those killed in the aftermath of panic.

No figures were available for overseas. But it was said there had been a world-wide rebellion in the EPU. The whole suggestion seemed utterly ridiculous, though. If *we* were not able to receive more than *rumours* as to what was going on overseas, how could anyone organise an attack on that scale? They'd have to have access to some very sophisticated communication channels, both to transmit messages and keep them secure at the same time. I'd heard it was possible to encrypt messages into photographs. And photos could be emailed. But all email was monitored, as far as I knew. Surely,

they would have worked out a way to detect compromised photography? Besides, I couldn't see union interests going this far. For a start, where was the motive? Where was the pay off? Conversely, they were actually biting the hand that fed them. They had so much to lose. No! This had to be an attack on Western culture, on a scale from which only idealistic Jihad interests could possibly benefit, where the pay-off was not measured in material terms.

There were lots of rumours along *those* lines, of course, but which ones do you believe? The most plausible one was that extremist Muslim elements had infiltrated every nuclear power station on the planet, simply by gaining employment there. They'd volunteered for the jobs no one else wanted – waste disposal. They had all been trained in the construction of simple nuclear bombs, small ones, but effective. They put these explosive devices together on-site, so that the essential radioactive waste material required didn't even have to be smuggled off the premises. Then all that was called for was the *coordination* to have them all go off at once, thereby giving no authority or organisation the chance to take preventive action. Sydney was fortunate indeed that one reactor had been spared. Perhaps it had been detected and defused in time, but the word was that the bomb placed there simply didn't work.

We hadn't made all that many friends so far, mixing mostly with neighbours who had also been inoculated when they moved in. They all appeared free of symptoms. However, lots of faces were missing from my virtual office, people I communicated with on a daily basis, both one on one, as well as in group conference sessions, sometimes having as many as nine talking heads on screen at the same time. Some I had never met in real life. Many still lived in the hostel. But I missed them regardless. When I went for my fortnightly lunch-time stroll along the walkways in the centre of town, the crowd didn't seem a crowd anymore, as if it was holiday season. But these vacationers weren't coming home. Red, bloated eyes, that had wept until the tear ducts dried up, were everywhere, and avoided contact.

Many species of animal control their own numbers by not breeding during famine or drought. Flies would cover the world two metres thick in one season, if it wasn't for the massive casualty rate. Lemmings are supposed to commit suicide when their numbers get out of hand. Was this nature's way of ridding itself of a population it couldn't support? Was nature retaliating for the pollution, the abuse, the interference in its ecocycles, the extinction of so many of its life-forms? Or was retribution being dealt out by a God offended by the degeneracy of His creation?

Three million dead in Australia alone, to be buried in mass graves, because individual interment would take way too long. The risk of cholera, dysentery and other diseases would be far too great. But what about the tail end of this disaster? The aftermath, more frightening than anything preceding? How many more would die slowly? Even worse, how many were unknowingly affected and how many mutant offspring would they bring into the world? What would the next generation look like? How many warped and twisted genes lay waiting in men's loins for embodiment in some ghastly and unimaginable form? And then there were the barren wastelands, where withered vegetation waited until it was ready to be blown away with the next wind, joining the dusty soil that could no longer give it life.

'What happened to the good ol' days, when, in all our affluence, the stock market was all we had to worry about?' Those were the nostalgic reflections of some who had known adulthood in the eighties and nineties. It was before I was born. And any attempt to recall parts of my life before Eve came along brought tears instead of memories.

Do I believe now? I think so. In fact, there's no doubt in my mind now that God is real. Is He all-powerful? Ha! Little doubt about that. Does He mean well and have my best interests at heart? About that I'm not really sure. Nevertheless, there's little point in being on the losing

side. But it is becoming clear that believing on its own is not enough. What was that Bible quote, that even demons believe and tremble? Somewhere else it says 'Believe and be baptised, and you will be saved.' Baptism, whatever that involves, appears to be a separate step. Believing in God and entering His Kingdom are obviously two very different items on the agenda.

Is He calling me? Surely He has to be. So what am I waiting for? Can I answer that question yet? "Are you ready?"

Am I ready? I feel like there is a spiritual awakening happening deep within my being. It is possible this entire experience has to be complete before I can answer. Maybe it is a question that can only be answered when we are fully integrated, body, soul and spirit, living in the natural world. Or maybe I need to be convinced He really does mean well and truly loves me, like the Gospel claims.

Whatever the reason, I am still unable to say 'yes' .

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"And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed the beast. Men worshipped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast and asked, "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?"

The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty two months. He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. He was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast - all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.

He who has an ear, let him hear.

If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed.

This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints."

REVELATION 13 : 1-10

The orders kept coming, their source unknown. Progress would tolerate no delay. The future could afford no procrastination. Whether there would *be* a future, was in the balance.

The remaining power station west of Sydney was made to run at peak production, and additional power was brought in from up and down the coast, on hastily laid copper cables, strung together from remnants of old transmission lines. Production of module homes was stepped up. Besides, not as many were required now. Travelling immunisation clinics moved around to administer periodical booster shots, in the safer environment of home or hostel room. The sterilised ground was sprayed with a seaweed derivative similar to the vaccine, (but obviously far more diluted), in an attempt to neutralise the fallout. But with little success.

At least in the country and further up the coast there were still substantial tracts of land unaffected, which meant vital food supplies were still available. Sydney itself was a depressing sight. Dead tree trunks bore silent tribute to the past virility of the land and the wind playfully turned the dust of the earth, reminiscent of outback conditions. Unfortunately, relocating Sydney up the coast was not practicable, not after all the restoration work that had already been implemented.

Ultrasound imaging of a developing foetus was made compulsory at several critical stages of pregnancy. Many deformed conceptions, too horrible for description, were reported. They were *so* bad in most cases that the developing foetuses were not considered viable and deliberately aborted. Many others miscarried spontaneously. The female body seems to intuit when something's badly amiss. Legislation was passed to permit euthanasia of severely handicapped births within two weeks *following* delivery.

Technology, though, never stood still it seemed. The night sky boasted several new stars - photovoltaic satellites assembled up there by the EUN, huge things, measuring some ten square kilometres, each capable of generating some fifteen thousand megawatts of solar energy. Direct current was converted to microwaves and transmitted to elliptical collector dishes on earth. Soon Australia might be using the same source of electricity. It emphasised the inexorable persistence of progress. The world was moving relentlessly into an unpredictable future. Not even the elimination of a third of its population could stop it.

And the verdict was finally out. I had been on the right track. It was estimated a quarter of the world's population was Muslim, over one billion followers of Allah. And if a believed fifth of those were militant, a staggering two hundred million were out to get us. Small groups of Muslim extremists had infiltrated the work force of each and every power station, taking on key positions that allowed the covert assembly of the materials necessary to construct an on-site nuclear device. Nuclear waste was normally disposed of somewhere in the desert or in abandoned mine shafts. But waste disposal had taken a back seat to the more urgent demands of energy production. In the end it had been easy. Much easier than learning to fly an aeroplane into a high-rise building.

So how do Muslim terrorists form their beliefs? What 'blank' slate do they start with? I've heard of extremist schools in the Middle East, where kids no older than three or four are brain-washed into a murderous mind-set towards Christians and Jews. Their carrot is supposed to be numerous virgins in the after-life, a reward for giving your life to benefit Allah's cause. (Although, what appeal that would have for a three-year-old kid, beats me). Their stick is severe discipline in this earthly existence and a compulsion to Jihad.

Can they be blamed for the beliefs they hold to be true? In some ways their all-out dedication and fanaticism is admirable. They are prepared to die for what they believe in. Isn't that what Jesus asks of His followers?

2021

A simplistic work-for-pay principle was introduced in 2021 - not paper currency, but a computerised accounting system. Everyone on the electoral roll was issued with a plastic identity card and matching account number. Each account was opened with a nice round ten thousand dollars, compliments of the Government. Wages and purchases were no more than digital adjustments of your account balance, but it was not possible to make purchases *exceeding* your balance. No tax was imposed. Either the Government had access to an undisclosed source of revenue, or, more likely, it simply made up a figure when it needed one and entered it into an account. My neighbour, Adrian, was of the opinion that tax had *never* been about money. Even in the days of paper currency, when the Government wanted some, they just *printed* it. He reckoned it was about control – they just wanted to know everything about you; knowledge is power. Your income, your spending habits, your place of residence, your banking records, your health history, your genetic profile, your relationships, your travelling plans, your current location, there was no *end* to the things they wanted to know. And tax returns gave them that. Well, under the system in place now, they certainly knew *everything* about us. Smacked of conspiracy theory, but if Adrian was right, there really was no point in collecting tax.

The only place to ‘buy’ anything was your in-home computer. Even hostel dwellers now had one in their room. The system would check if you could afford your intended purchase and that the order had been placed from your own home. If everything was in order, you could either collect from the local district warehouse, where your identity would be verified, or wait for delivery.

The basic wage was set at one thousand dollars per week, with allowances paid for dependants and level of responsibility. It was a nominal figure, really - it might just as easily have been ten thousand or a hundred thousand dollars, a mere shift of the decimal point - but it revived the spirit of endeavour. People tried harder, just to earn that little bit more. It also rationalised the fairness of the accommodation issue. *We* paid five hundred dollars a week in rent; those living in hostels paid only twenty. It went a long way in pacifying the grievances associated with hostel living, though we gladly paid the extra for our home.

I had been fortunate in getting a promotion to section supervisor, unhappily at the expense of my predecessor, a nice enough guy who hadn’t lived through the radiation crisis. My weekly salary amounted to two thousand dollars, the extra comprising a four hundred dollar allowance for supervisor status, four hundred for a dependent wife and two hundred for David. After paying rent and electricity, a clear fourteen hundred and thirty-five dollars was left over for everyday expenses like food and furnishings.

One of the first purchases we made was a television. It was a large LED screen, designed to be mounted on almost any wall. It even had the capability of displaying in 3-D, but few programs had yet been produced in that format. (And of course you had to wear special polaroid glasses, one side a horizontal filter, the other vertical, to separate the ‘stereo’ images). The Government had been quick to recognise the need for entertainment of the masses and had put the televisions on the market very cheaply. There was no choice of models. It was possible to watch a tiny picture on my work station and also the one in the living room, as all the terminals in the house were networked. But if you wanted a large screen TV, this was it. At present, only twenty channels were transmitting, but the remote control showed provision for at least a thousand.

We spent much time with our eyes glued to the moving images on the wall. I devoured the news, keen to find out what was happening in the rest of the world. Pictures of political leaders stood out

by their absence. And we spent many tender hours cuddling in each other's arms, while old movies set the atmosphere.

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The seven o'clock news had finished reporting on progress being made at the global conference between representatives of religion; on the dismal results of the experimental ocean-thermal-energy conversion buoy off the coast at Perth; and showing selected clips of conditions overseas. I was about to turn off the set when I became engrossed in a Candid Camera rerun. David was asleep in his room and Eve was tidying up in the kitchen.

Eve called out for me to come urgently and I had trouble tearing myself away from the scene where a taxi driver was asked to wait for an unattractive lady in the midst of New York traffic chaos. At ten minute intervals she would return and ask him to wait longer and the driver was in a dilemma as to whether to refuse or comply with her requests. He was about to toss her bags on the sidewalk and leave. It was a social experiment, with the audience in on the game and only the taxi driver left in the dark. The next scene would involve the same scenario, but with a very *attractive* woman. I had never learned to drive and wondered if private transport would ever come back into vogue. Probably not in our lifetime.

Eve called again and I ran out to see what was the matter. A strange light was visible through the panoramic kitchen window. The blue-black backdrop of night displayed a solid outline of what appeared to be an aircraft of sorts. Except it seemed to be floating in mid-air with no visible means of propulsion. A soft glow surrounded the object, but it was too far away to see any detail.

"What on earth is it?" asked Eve, her voice slightly uneven.

"I don't know, but I know what it *looks* like!"

The object moved a little to one side, ever so slowly, and stopped again, just hovering in space. It was shaped like a short cigar, no wings or other protrusion marred its smooth perfection.

"It's a flying saucer, do you think?"

"Well, it's not a saucer *shape*, but it certainly is behaving like one of those things on 'Believe it or not'. It's one of the most remarkable things I've ever seen. It's just hanging there, with nothing to hold it up! Let's go out and have a closer look!"

"Honey, I'm scared. What about David?" Eve grabbed hold of my arm, reluctantly following me to the hall, where I pushed the stair release button. "David will be fine for a few minutes. He's sound asleep." We hurried down, Eve dragging her feet a little. I clicked my remote control, causing the stairway to retract. Adrian and Jane from next door came rushing out at the same time, Jane being towed along by her over-eager husband, wailing lament as her huge eight month pregnant tummy shuddered with the movement. The humour of the sight struck Eve's funny bone and she laughingly admonished Adrian, warning him that he might have a birth on his hands right there and then, if he didn't take it easy.

There's courage in numbers, so Eve relaxed. Curious, but wary, we made our way towards the object, temporarily blocked from view by the forest of modules. A crowd was gathering at the nearby, now barren, park. Here the glowing craft was suspended less than thirty metres up. Yes, it was a craft of some sort alright. Narrow strips running around the perimeter appeared to be windows from this distance. The soft white aura increased in intensity there. It had appeared soundless when we were inside, but now a soft whine was audible, without doubt emanating from

the UFO. The whine modified to a hum and the craft moved sideways, slowly rotating about a vertical axis at the same time. It was a windless night and the craft's movement seemed to create not the slightest draught.

“What the heck is keeping it up there?” Adrian was the first to find his voice and ventured to articulate the question probably foremost in everyone's mind, certainly in mine. The thing was defying all the laws of gravity without any effort or means of propulsion. There seemed to be no engines, as far as I could tell, although that whine must be coming from somewhere. Then the sound increased in volume marginally.

Totally unexpectedly, the craft took off vertically, *so* fast, it seemed almost as if no acceleration was required and it simply *started* at whatever speed it wanted to travel; physically impossible of course, I know, but that's what it looked like. Exclamations of surprise and amazement issued from the crowd. It passed from sight in seconds, making no more noise than before. The vacuum left by its sudden departure actually *did* seem to make our hair stand on end, though that *could* have been caused by the bizarre freakishness of the whole experience. It evoked a buzzing murmur of excited opinions from the crowd.

That night I dreamt of flying saucers and strange metallic creatures with huge black eyes, visitors from outer space. They allowed me to fly one of their spacecraft, but it got stuck in a traffic snarl-up of saucers. So I gave a ride to an unattractive lady stranded by the side of an office module. The leading alien became annoyed when some of the saucers tried to jump queue. He opened fire and I woke in a sweat to the chatter of a machine gun

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Eve felt we should report the sighting to the authorities. “Everyone who was there probably thinks one of the others will do it,” she proffered next morning at breakfast.

“Yeah, but who will believe me? They'll laugh me out of my job.”

“Adrian will back you up, I'm sure. He's always outspoken and looking for a chance to stick his neck out.”

“Well, then let *him* do the reporting, and I'll back *him* up!”

But once at work in my home office, I was unable to get the weird occurrence out of my mind. While trying hard to concentrate on the design drawing displayed on the Visual Display, each time I tried to modify the graphics, the module began to resemble a flying saucer. I was on first-name terms with Bob Healey, the Deputy Manager. A wide scope of delegations had been handed down and, among other things, I was authorised to implement internal structural alterations to module designs originating in my section. Demarcation of hierarchy was rigid and defined. It was *unthinkable* to discuss work matters with anyone higher up than your immediate supervisor. Bob was the one person I had to answer to, nevertheless I felt silly bringing him on-line, on the flimsy pretext of asking his advice on a petty design option.

“Mornin' Mike. What can I do for you?” He was a big man, gravelly voice, leathery face with an enormous walrus moustache, easy to talk to and likeable. For a while we video-chatted about minor design problems and gradually I brought the conversation around to the overall shape of the module.

“Don’t you think it looks a bit like a space ship, Bob? In fact, all the modules look like flying saucers. Couldn’t we do something to improve the aesthetics, without compromising the manufacturing criteria ...?”

He stared out at me from the monitor, perplexed and *so* intensely, I swallowed the last of the sentence. “What are you getting at, Mike? You don’t usually come on-line, beating around the bush like this. Come to the point will you?”

To tell Bob might make him laugh, maybe lose respect. On the other hand, he had always been good to me. I shouldn’t pre-judge him. He might just believe me. Seeing how much difficulty I was having speaking my mind, Bob suddenly laid the whole thing out in the open between us.

“You’ve seen it too, haven’t you? The UFO I mean!”

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As it turned out, it was nothing quite as exotic as extra-terrestrials from some distant galaxy, visiting our planet. Instead, it was probably by far the most exciting and important scientific breakthrough, *ever*. Several weeks after my discussion with Bob Healey, in which he had confided that he was as mystified and in the dark about the phenomenon as everyone else, details of this most closely guarded invention of all time were released on television.

It was claimed some guy, (a professor at a London university with five degrees to his undisclosed name), who had devoted his entire life to the study of the Egyptian pyramids, had stumbled onto the ancient secret of *levitation*. He, they said, had never believed the theories of thousands of slaves pulling huge blocks of stone on wooden rollers, mile after gruelling mile. How had they stacked one on the other? More wooden rollers? Ramps? Even modern technology couldn’t duplicate the magnificent Cheops pyramid. So, stubbornly, he pursued the idea that they knew something we didn’t. After years of fruitless investigation and excavation, he had finally stumbled upon hieroglyphics that had provided the vital clue in the development of ‘harmonic’ energy.

I didn’t pretend to understand how it worked. My knowledge of cosmic rays and etheric centres was unfortunately rather sketchy. Dad would have been *very* interested ... (My eyes turned watery and I quickly squashed the thought. One day my past would catch up with me and I would have to face whatever lay hidden there).

Although I couldn’t really comprehend the actual laws of nature governing this totally new source of energy, its effectiveness could not be denied. The simplest explanation, (though not *quite* true), was that the emission of special sound vibrations created a gravity-free state. A small synthetic box, sending virtually inaudible sound waves through whatever it was attached to, was the power source. The waves acted on the nucleus of every metallic atom, negating its mass. Of course it was much more complicated than that. The box contained an antenna, which captured the cosmic rays necessary to generate specific sonic vibrations, and then these sound waves had to be *harmonised* with the natural movement of electrons spinning around within the atoms making up the metallic elements. Hence they coined the term ‘harmonic energy’. Thirdly, a very small amount of electricity was needed to activate and enable the antenna, as well as to convert the cosmic rays harnessed into sound waves, so they could do their job.

More profound was the explanation, (closer to the truth, but harder to grasp), that the special vibrations created an ‘etheric’ centre in a select number of atoms of the affected body. The waves had no effect on living tissue, animal or vegetable, nor on plastics and many other man-made compounds. These were merely ‘carried’ by their host. It just happened to work most effectively on

metals, anything from iron to copper to aluminium. The etheric centre could be likened to the centre of the earth, giving the affected body a *neutral* position in relation to gravitation. This concept had been crucial in the development of practical applications. A strictly gravity-free state would render an object subject to the whim of every little breeze and a hopelessly complicated dynamic positioning system would have to be devised to *stabilise* such an object. To apply it to a vehicle under such circumstances would be completely impracticable. The property of ‘gravitational relationship’ meant that an affected body would assume a definite position relative to the centre of the earth. Not the strongest gale could deflect the object’s elevation by more than half a metre and, in the case of a vehicle, only the position in the horizontal plane needed to be controlled. Variation in wave frequency varied the assigned elevation. It was said the same force controlled the relative positions of the planets in the galaxy, though slow deterioration meant the planets were gradually moving away from the sun. In addition to the previously known three kinds of energy, electro-magnetic, strong nuclear and weak nuclear force, here was a magnificent fourth, giving scientists an opportunity to develop an entirely *new* cosmology to explain the origins of the universe.

The craft we had seen had been on one of the last test flights. Experiments had been conducted over an extensive but unspecified period. The prototype had passed all tests successfully and production of the first vehicles was ready to begin, dubbed ‘mobiles’ (pronounced ‘mobeels’ by the elite, as in ‘automobile’) because the word ‘car’ was still associated with ground traffic. No one had owned a functioning mobile phone for years and all the transmission towers were well and truly dead and buried, as were the companies that had owned them. So it was not expected to create any confusion. (In fact, the common man preferred to pronounce the word ‘mobile’ the conventional way. Just why, in this technologically advanced era, mobile phones had not been reintroduced almost as a first priority, beat me. Adrian, the eternal conspiracy theorist, reckoned it had to do with monitoring conversations, much easier to do with computer based calls.)

Each mobile required the basic harmonic energy unit, together with a turbine propulsion system. A computerised laser measured distance from other objects, moving or stationary, and height above ground level. Four electrically driven jet-turbines were spaced equally around the perimeter. The rear turbine propelled the vehicle forward, the front one slowed it down. The right and left units were used for steering and made automatic adjustments to output to keep the vehicle on course in even the toughest wind conditions. The computer could even be programmed to travel a preset route by driving it once, the laser activating automatic adjustments to turbine output and elevation to avoid collisions with other mobiles. If two mobiles *were* on a collision course, the one travelling *closest* to north would drop by ten metres and come up again as soon as they had passed each other.

Because power was used only for propulsion and stabilisation, not to overcome friction or gravity, energy requirements had been cut to five percent of the normal amount needed to move the same mass under gravitational conditions - hard to believe, but confirmed by official tests. The electrical energy was provided by multiple batteries, a whole new type, which could be recharged overnight by plugging into the mains or during the day by a solar panel on the roof of the mobile. A full charge ensured a range of five hundred kilometres in windless conditions.

A baffling incidental discovery, which had scientists stumped for quite a while, was that the adjustments to vary flight level had to be made in the *opposite* direction to what had been expected - a fact which seemed to suggest that the centre of gravity of the earth was not a point in its inner core, but instead an imaginary sphere several thousand kilometres out in space from any place on the globe. The only explanation consistent with these findings was that the earth was not a solid spheroid with a liquid core, as had long been believed, but instead hollow ...

The item on the hollow earth theory was cut there and transmission was momentarily disrupted. News continued seconds later with an unrelated item.

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It wasn't long before the full implications of the breakthrough sank in. Right under our noses had lain a limitless pollution-free energy source that could have solved all the world's problems in that regard long ago. Nuclear power became obsolete overnight and the three photo-voltaic satellites remained active only during the short change-over. More than a thousand of the satellites would have been required to meet the earth's energy requirements at tremendous initial expense. The ocean-wave and geo-thermal energy conversion projects were abandoned.

Pollution free energy was now produced by lifting *enormous* weights by way of harmonic inducement, switching off the inducer and allowing gravitational pull to drive a generator - simple, cheap and undepletable. If only the discovery had come five years earlier, Sydney wouldn't look like this today. And how many lives would have been saved ...?

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A new church was formed, named the 'Universal Church', ostensibly because it preached a compromise religion and embraced – (maybe '*replaced*' is a better word) - all forms of worship previously in existence, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and so forth. A modified bible had been produced in digital format, with debatable passages deleted and useful parts of the Koran and scriptures of other faiths added. The book of Revelation had been taken out altogether. Genesis was rewritten. They abolished the name 'Bible' and called it 'SCRIPTURES' instead. Practice of religion outside of the approved guidelines was unequivocally banned. It was decreed that all earlier versions of the Bible, Koran and other sacred writings should be handed in to the local security authority, to be replaced by a free copy of the revised edition, down-loaded to a Government-issued hand-held reader. It was alleged that both the formation of the new church and the adoption of the new 'Scriptures' had the official endorsement of all leaders of the various denominations, sects and religions. Power to enforce the regulations under the Universal Church Act of 2021 was passed to the security forces.

It made me wonder once again who on *earth* was in charge of the country. Who had the *audacity* to ban freedom of worship? There had been no election since who knows when and there was no hint of one being in the pipeline. People generally seemed unconcerned - the country was being run and run well - but the announcement of a new church at the expense of all others did bring cries of protest from all directions.

Eve and I didn't attend any church, so to us it seemed like a rather good move, apart from the dictatorial aspect. I failed to see any sense in having Christianity divided into hundreds of different sects, simply because its followers couldn't agree on some doctrines. Surely if you believed in the same God, you should belong to the same church? Had this sort of sectarian trouble been common in the other religions as well? Anyway, it looked like division was a thing of the past now, though it might have been better brought about by a genuine desire for unity, rather than by imposition.

But many, especially Christians, *refused* to have their religion dictated to them. They continued their forms of worship and kept their Bibles, until a task force would raid their meetings and confiscate literature and other religious artefacts. Many gave up after such raids, frightened of the consequences of overt, vocal opposition to Government policy. Others dug in their heels and let it be known that this was *one* area not open to compromise. For the first time in Australian history there was a Christian movement that found it necessary to practice in secret.

As far as attendance at the Universal Church was concerned, although it wasn't compulsory, the carefully worded announcement by the security forces hinted that non-attendance *could* be interpreted as opposition and a good example was expected from all senior officers. I had recently been promoted to Deputy Manager, still responsible to Bob Healey, who in turn had been moved up to Division Manager level. Issue of a domestic mobile in the near future went with the larger salary. It seemed advisable to go to Sunday services, even if it was just to keep the Government happy.

My recall is pretty efficient now. Seems to me a series of Bible studies of the book of Revelation early in my youth had envisaged a scenario very similar to this. Establishment of a totally dictatorial and corrupt end-time church, 'Babylon' they called it then. What were the other characters we discussed? A 'beast', a 'dragon', a 'false prophet'? The Beast was to be a world ruler. If we now have a world church, a world government is hardly outside the realm of possibilities. (We haven't heard anything from the top for ages, no news items, no elections, no photos of leaders. The Dragon was supposed to be Satan himself. Well, if God is real, the existence of an opposing evil entity is almost a given. The False Prophet was to head the new church. Am I witnessing prophecy being fulfilled?

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2022

For us 2022 was a quiet, prosperous year. There was the challenge of my more responsible position with Department 459; the constant source of pleasure derived from watching David grow mentally, physically and emotionally; and Eve and I were still very much in love. We were very well off financially, with an above average income and blessed with a spacious module home and a mains-charged domestic mobile, both courtesy of the Government, thanks to the successive promotions I'd been lucky enough to score. In some ways it seemed unfair - there were guys I knew who had studied for years to get a degree, but weren't doing as well, still stuck in manual labouring jobs.

But then, it was true, pieces of paper were worthless. There was hardly a record series left in tact and too many undocumented deaths had taken place. Anyone could claim a degree or assume a false identity. There was no way of proving the claimant was telling the truth, other than making him sit his exams all over again. And that was impracticable at this stage. On top of that, much of the knowledge they would have acquired during their stint at Uni was now simply obsolete. Promotion was given, based on merit. Merit came from experience.

No doubt, someone was doing a fine job in government. The speed with which Sydney was being restored sometimes took your breath away. The technological advances evidenced in the process were akin to science fiction of just a decade ago. Only one thing bothered me - *who* was running the show? Was it still the same guy who signed that flyer five years back? Why was there never any mention of political personalities in the news? How come innovations were introduced simultaneously worldwide? It made you wonder whether the governments of the world had formed some sort of coalition. Surely others must be asking themselves these same questions? Why was no one being vocal about it? Absolutely *everything* was under Government control and ownership - were its tentacles of influence *so* lengthy, they could quell every inquisitive thought?

Limitless harmonic energy, synchronised with the introduction of immensely powerful nano-computers, (incorporating the latest DNA-simile technology), set new horizons for progress. Every possible manual task could be more efficiently and effectively carried out by automation. Self-correcting software meant computers were able to 'learn' to do things better every repetition. Even design work was becoming more automated, requiring less and less human input.

For the first time in history, available work time had to be rationed, while highly refined machinery carried out production. Module suburbs sprouted up like fields of mushrooms. Mobiles appeared on the scene in their thousands. Genetically modified fruit and vegetables were grown in huge humidity-controlled hydroponic green-houses, much faster than the earth ever could produce them, or in ocean aqua-culture plantations and fish hatcheries. They had the business of providing the basics down to a fine art. There was no longer such a thing as monetary 'inflation'.

As the age of computers truly took over, everything and everyone had to be numbered. Every Department, every area of responsibility, every individual task. Every module, every mobile, every purchasable item. Social security numbers kept track of the transactions and activities of every individual, including their income, purchases, education, qualifications, vital statistics, medical treatment, genotype and phenotype, fingerprints and iris scans. Not only was it possible to trace how many packets of sugar you bought in a year, but specifically *which* packets you bought and where. Theft became a thing of the past.

For entertainment and education, the television medium was put to work, catering for a wide range of interests. Hundreds of channels for amusement - documentaries, kids' programs, different genres of movies, quiz shows, situation-comedies, sports, all running continuously, most repeats from yesteryear. Twelve channels were devoted to various types of music videos, ranging from classical to hard rock. Another four-hundred-odd interactive channels were designated to primary, secondary and tertiary education. Four channels ran continuous local news. One channel ran news from all over the globe. It became apparent that the same channels were used overseas and English had been adopted as a universal language, sub-titles being super-imposed in non-English speaking countries. This again emphasised the amazing degree of cooperation between the nations.

But television wasn't enough. Sporting facilities, holiday resorts, on-line libraries, alcohol and drug venues, restaurants, fast-food outlets and discotheques were set up to keep the masses occupied during their unprecedented amount of leisure time. And a bill was passed to legalise all forms of human relationships, from the traditional family unit, to de-facto marriages, homosexual relations, communal living, to polygamy and even incest. 'Anything goes' seemed to be the norm, as long as you advised the Government what you were up to.

Eve and I spent lots of time trying to grow things in the small bit of ground containing our module, meticulously planting seeds and tending them like patients in a hospital. Regularly we sprayed the plot with seaweed derivative and fertiliser, trying to both decontaminate and enrich the soil. Three times a day, each seed was painstakingly watered with the gentlest of care. Sometimes we managed to purchase some seedlings, but invariably they shrivelled up in days. We persisted without success. Finally we managed to get a tiny shoot of buffalo grass to grow in one spot. At first it died whenever the runners spread. We tried again, keeping note of the spots where it became poisoned. We then installed a hardened silicon border to keep it confined.

In September we experienced a mild earthquake, not strong enough to release the safety mechanisms on the module legs, but nevertheless a frightening reminder that Mother Earth still had a free will. David was the only one not scared and just looked on in amazement as the crockery rattled in the cupboard and some fell off the kitchen sink to bounce on the floor.

On Sundays we went to church, sitting through sermons on obeying the authorities and 'giving unto Caesar that which belongs to Caesar'. As we weren't taxed, the inference was 'loyalty'. They were meaningless services as far as I was concerned, seemingly aimed at brainwashing people so they could reconcile their submission to authority with their faith. Christian rebels were persecuted by the security forces for not conforming with the new religious regulations. Leaders apprehended were

brought before the Universal Church congregation for trial and sentencing, in an effort to stamp out the non-conformist element. Mr. Average Citizen refused to associate with suspected rebels, for fear of coming under suspicion himself. Occasionally, someone would openly claim conversion to ‘true Christianity’, an act of heresy under section 28 of the Universal Church Act, and a hefty jail term would be imposed.

Rebels called themselves ‘Christians’ in defiance of the Act, which had reserved the term for exclusive use in respect of members of the church. They banded together for strength and moral support, refusing to acknowledge the Universal Church as a ‘Christian’ organisation. One news report from Jerusalem showed a couple of ragged, self-proclaimed prophets openly denouncing the Church, without reprisal from the authorities. But the way the item was presented made them look like half-wits. Officially, Eve and I were ‘Christians’ under the provisions of the Act, just as Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and Hindus could call themselves such under the Act, provided they subscribed to the teachings of the Universal Church and attended regularly. We weren’t really sure whether we even believed in God, wavering in a non-committal state of agnosticism.

Then came an official announcement one Sunday morning. The latest genetic research had identified and isolated three mutated genes, all three of which worked together to make people psychologically receptive to the outlawed Gospel message. The implication was that the rebel ‘Christians’ were actually suffering from a genetic disorder. The good news was that the disorder was curable with genetic manipulation techniques and the right medication, provided of course the ‘patient’ was willing to undergo treatment.

It did strike me as a bit strange that the Church didn’t celebrate Christmas or Easter. Jesus was represented as a good man, with a few good ideas. He definitely had no divine origin. A number of new public holidays were declared, celebrating major scientific breakthroughs, like ‘DNA Day’ and ‘Harmonic Day’. Another one celebrated establishment of the new church: ‘Universal Scripture Day’.

All these major changes have come at such a fast and furious pace, my mind is left reeling. I recognise the intellectual source behind the changes can only be supernatural. No human mind could possibly conjure up and successfully implement so much new technology, in such a short time span. I also discern that the mind behind it is not, by any definition, divine.

This new society is laden with bribes to buy men’s souls. The same spirit that tempted Jesus on the mountain to abandon His mission, in exchange for all the wealth and people in the world, has to be behind it. All Satan ever wanted was to usurp God’s throne. If he could get God Himself to worship him, all the human souls in Creation became superfluous and dispensable. So he offered Jesus the opportunity to save the world the easy way. When in doubt, (one Pastor used to preach), ask ‘What would Jesus do?’

What would Jesus do? He told Satan to go jump. I have this strong feeling that soon I’m going to have to tell him the same thing.

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“Have you been saved, brother?”

He was dressed in dirty rags and his hair and beard were an untidy, tangled mess. His companion didn’t impress much better. At first glance they were just tramps, but their eyes were too alive, too knowledgeable and penetrating, making you overlook their generally unkempt appearance. I felt like telling him to speak plain English, annoyed at his use of religious jargon, but restrained myself.

I scanned the surroundings to see if we were being observed, but the barren hills effectively hid us from view. Eve and David were down for an afternoon nap, so I'd decided to go for a long hike into the deserted wastelands skirting our suburb. I knew exactly what he meant, of course, but opted to play the fool.

"What're you talking about? Saved from what?"

His reply was as disturbing as were his eyes. "You are a man acquainted with the facts about Jesus - why pretend ignorance?" He seemed able to see right through me and although that worried me, I couldn't help being impressed by these ragged martyrs for Christ's cause.

"The time has come, my friend, for people to choose between life and death, between good and evil, between God and Satan. Don't think you have a lifetime to make up your mind, like previous generations have had. The end is near. Jesus will return shortly, and when He does, it will be too late. Make your decision now, my friend, before the day of judgement arrives."

He didn't bother to explain the details of what sort of decision I had to make, apparently convinced I already knew.

"People have thought the end was near for more than two thousand years. Even Paul told the earliest Christians to watch for the signs." It was a feeble attempt on my part to turn the confrontation into an intellectual argument. I couldn't even remember where in the 'Scriptures' the reference could be found.

His companion answered spontaneously. In a strange and inexplicable way the two seemed to function as one, drawing strength from each other. So much so, I found it difficult to tell the two apart and, in an eerie sense, it almost seemed I was facing a single person. "It has always been God's desire for us to be ready at all times, to be prepared for His return in the flesh at any moment." His voice was mellow, yet pronounced with a note of urgency. I was about to argue that therefore it was quite possible for him to be as mistaken about the end as millions had been before him, but he anticipated my thoughts.

"The Bible tells us to watch for the signs. The leaves of the fig tree clearly are sprouting. Jesus said we wouldn't know the day or the hour, but no doubt we will know the year. The sequence of disasters we have endured was accurately predicted in the book of Revelation, the book which the authorities have conveniently deleted from the Bible, just recently."

I looked around again. It didn't pay to be seen with these rebels. It could mean loss of your career and possessions. In fact, it was expected I would report this confrontation as soon as possible. But they had struck some sympathetic chord in me. Somehow it didn't seem right these people had to go underground to pursue what they obviously believed in so fervently. And there was something else that I couldn't quite put my finger on - he aroused an ill-defined nostalgia, as if they held the answer to something missing inside, a secret I longed to know, but was afraid to have revealed.

"Come with us now," they urged, "Let us show you the way to the truth, to repentance, to life. The way isn't easy and it'll get a lot harder. But it is the *only* way. Don't be afraid. The Lord is calling you"

The last words stabbed into my heart, causing actual physical pain. My face flushed. My brain spun dizzily. No! I don't want to know! Leave me alone! I don't know if the words came out or if I

only thought them. Either way, they were *loud!* I ran again, tears flowing for the thousandth time, running from that with which I couldn't cope. Running away ...

The last vestiges of unbelief and obstinacy are ebbing from my heart and mind. My established framework of reference has been completely compromised. It is literally falling apart. Lots of preconceptions have to be scrapped and tossed in the waste bin. Out they go! Just about everything I was hanging onto is suspect and the new data doesn't fit anywhere. I surrender all.

The Lord is calling me, calling me through His followers, using them to speak to me. I don't want to run anymore. I want to fly like an eagle instead, and the faith, assuring me I can, is growing steadily. He is the author of my faith! Faith is not something you conjure up through sheer will-power. It is a gift, the Gift of faith. There is no effort involved, receiving a gift, only the willingness to accept. Nothing I can do will earn me a place in His Kingdom! My place was bought and paid for when Jesus died on a cross for me! The title deeds were issued when He rose again. No government has the power to resume this bit of real estate!

Finally I have my answer! Religious beliefs are formed by worldly minds, using secular reasoning, processing limited and often incorrect information.

True spiritual beliefs are a Gift from God, and only He has all the facts!!

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Small green shoots of buffalo popped their heads out of the damp soil in one corner of the yard. Eve and I stood in silent admiration, watching the miracle of nature that had taken place with *our* persevering assistance. We hugged in grateful jubilation. Success at last!

Triumphantly we showed our achievement to Ted and Angela from across the path, with whom we played cards once a week. Then to Adrian and Jane and their healthy little baby girl. No deformities or mental impairment, thanks to timely inoculation. Angela was the most appreciative and soon hurried home, resolved to be more faithful in her own attempts to grow grass in their small plot. We rejoiced over the tiny area of vegetable prosperity and speculated on the day when the whole yard might be covered with a luscious, soft, springy carpet of green. Flowers, bushes, even trees, all might be possible following this first success.

Nothing makes one appreciate things more than attaining a goal that was thought to be unattainable.

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2023

Gradually, reflections of Mum, Dad and John in happy, peaceful times, nudged their way back into my conscious. Images of quiet contentment and moments of love and caring in my childhood passed before my mind without discomfort; other memories remained suppressed. There was the knowledge of the history of the past two decades, but the details of *how* that history affected my family and myself were still obscure. I looked up 'amnesia' on the internet, and discovered that even with *complete* amnesia, many basic skills are not forgotten, like language and etiquette and how to ride a bicycle. And many of your cultural norms remain indelibly imprinted. The basic tenets of the Christian faith, before it had been tampered with, were also clear to me, however a mental block blurred the teacher. I remembered Mum and Dad had been strong believers, so it seemed logical *they* had instilled those doctrines, but I was able to recall only a few of their thoughts and opinions

on the subject. While there were obviously many links still missing, I definitely remembered more than I did a year earlier.

How could I ever have forgotten those precious times, where Mum read the Bible to me and John? How could Dad's soul-searching have faded from recall; all those wonderful debates, prompted by a genuine desire for insight? All the Bible studies I attended, where deeply committed Christians gave their flawed but sincere opinions? I now know something about partial or hysterical amnesia, brought on by severe psychological trauma. In my case, I prefer to think of it as 'selective amnesia'. Everything inextricably linked to the central issue of my salvation was blocked from memory, when Mum and Dad were murdered in cold blood. All the bits of lesser significance somehow remained. What was left was like an abstract painting by an unskilled artist, giving a completely false impression of what is important in life and what isn't.

2023 came without any great hoo-ha and on the seventh we had Ted and Angela over for my twenty-fifth birthday. We had a quiet drink together and several games of five-hundred. Later that night after they had left, as we snuggled together on our double bed, Eve revealed with a joyful sparkle in her eyes, that her period was overdue.

We felt at peace. We were finally settling down in a serene, fulfilling way of life. We weren't plagued by outlandish ambitions and endured no upsetting conflicts. Bit by bit, we had filed away all the unhappiness of the past and found ourselves content with what the present had to offer. Suddenly I remembered something Dad once told me: 'The wisest man is the one satisfied with his lot.' He said success was a different measure for everyone. If you could be happy with a single cent and got it, as far as he was concerned, you were a success. Not that he didn't encourage us to aim high, but he tried to steer us away from measuring success in material terms. (It is most encouraging that this particular memory has returned! It promises further progress in the future. Somehow releasing it into my conscious mind has mollified my fear a little).

We felt we had all we wanted. The promise of another child was an unexpected bonus. If there was an underlying restlessness, we were resigned to it and only barely aware of it.

In the deep of the night, we made love ever so gently.

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I walked into the living room and the boxes of groceries fell from my arms, as I took in the shocking sight. Eve was completely naked. A dirty youth had hold of her by the wrist and another was standing nearby. All stared at me as if a phantom had materialised.

Eve's face was covered with bruises and her bloodshot eyes pleaded for help. Fresh ribbons of crimson blood ran down the insides of her thighs. Her shoulders hung in defeat and humiliation.

This was unreal. It couldn't be happening! Ice cold tingles ran up my spinal cord to hover like a bad smell around the back of my neck. My brain began to boil with raging anger. My heart beat so loudly, its pulse seemed to echo off the silicon room dividers. I could practically *feel* the adrenalin pumping through my tissues. I wanted to explode, taking the youths with me, to blast them out of existence. I wanted to wrap my arms protectively around Eve, wipe away the hurt, the despair, the humiliation, to restore the familiar picture of loveliness I had left behind less than an hour ago. She was part of me. Whatever they had done to her, they had done it to me.

My brain refused to function normally, obsessed only with a furious animal protective instinct. For some reason Eve separated from the youth holding her and my fist smashed into his jaw, which gave

way under the force and splintered on impact. I was only barely aware of the pain in my knuckles and shouted to Eve to get away. *Where's that other bastard?* Burning hatred was unleashed and swelling to bursting point, striving to find its mark, on realisation of further abuse of what was dearest to me. He had his grimy paws over David's mouth and was backing into the hallway.

There was only a flashing instant of hesitation, a fleeting moment of something resembling logical thought concerning David's safety, but it was gone again. I was a wild, feral creature, out of control. I rushed him, snarling throatily. He let go of David, yet I still wanted to tear him apart. I pounced, got hold and slammed him against the wall. There was clear terror in his evil eyes, which suddenly made way for a triumphant gleam. Something flickered in his hand, light reflecting off a shiny surface.

Warm, thick liquid oozed from my chest.

Everything in me urged consummation of revenge, but the strength was gone. My legs wobbled, folding under, and my mind started slipping away into a void of darkness. Desperately, I tried to grab onto the last vestiges of consciousness, somehow realising the importance of my continued intervention, but a purple blackness sucked me into itself, remorselessly. In that last moment of vague awareness, I could hear Eve screaming ...

Going through this again, my heart is tearing. I realise both Eve and David will survive this nightmare – that knowledge is stored away safely somewhere in the abyss of my being - and the awareness eases the agony somewhat. Yet my emotions are extreme, watching my loved ones suffer and having my entire world violated. What is happening has so many sides to it, it is almost more than I can process. Physically, emotionally and spiritually, there are aspects that have reached a climax. Truth is, like it or not, I wanted to take the life of another human being, and part of me still does! It makes me no better than any terrorist, or serial killer.

Then comes a mind-blowing and totally unrelated revelation! During this entire experience I have not returned to my physical body. How long has it been? For all I know, it may have been no longer than a micro-second in earth time. In eternity, time as we know it, does not exist. In the spiritual realm I have been privy to, I could have relived my life a thousand times in the space of an earth hour. I have been on an emotional roller-coaster ride to hell, to help me come to terms with heaven.

But the most astounding enlightenment concerns my perception. I have been able to intelligently absorb, analyse and interpret everything placed before me. I have experienced all sorts of extreme emotions. It means, without a shadow of a doubt, I can think and feel without the benefit of my physical brain cells! The implications are staggering. I do possess an incorporeal soul! There is a conscious part of me that can live on, beyond physical existence. If it is possible to get goose-bumps on disembodied arms, I'm getting them now. The Light that took me there and showed it to me is the same God as the one who revealed Himself in the Bible! How can I refrain from devoting myself to Him? I will meet up again with my parents, and see John again! Oh death, where is thy sting now?

And if God is real and all-powerful, it takes only a very small step of faith to believe absolutely everything written in His Word is the God-honest Truth. While men made decisions about what scriptures to include in the Bible, God remained in control of what He wanted us to know. Even now, (at five minutes to midnight in the overall scheme of Creation), when men have taken it upon themselves to desecrate His Word, God remains in charge. Jesus, God in human form, gave His life to save me from myself, from eternal separation from Him, from my sinful nature,

my rebellion and unbelief. Yes, I want His forgiveness and acceptance. Yes! I want Him in my life and Yes, I want to be part of His bride for all eternity!

PART THREE

Deep inside, all of us share a longing for something permanent, something totally uncompromising and completely reliable. Deep inside all of us, there is a place where a different value system operates, a place where the laws of nature don't necessarily hold true, a place where dreams are born. And in that place many of us harbour a hope, for some an unarticulated, even *secret* hope, that somewhere, somehow, there is a God, a God who truly loves us, a God who really cares.

The moment his eyes opened, Michael knew exactly what he had to do. Only, would Eve believe him? Would she be prepared to leave all they had behind, everything that had brought sanity and security back into their lives of turmoil? They *had* to get out of there. There was no time to lose. The sterile white ceiling was all he could see. He felt too weak to even lift his head. God, please give me strength!

"Well, well, well, Mr. Canning. It's good to see you picking up. You certainly had us worried there for a while." The nurse put on her passively cheerful voice, a tone that sounded as if she had rehearsed it in her coffee break and probably used with all the patients in her care.

"When can I leave?" Michael hadn't meant to blurt it out, but it had left his mouth before thinking.

"My, you *are* feeling better, aren't you? Now just take it easy and don't worry about a thing. Everything is under control. Your wife is waiting outside and she'll be very pleased to see you."

The nurse continued pottering around and minutes later a doctor came in to check him over. "You know, Mr. Canning," he said, "You really had a very close call. If it wasn't for the genetic stimulation equipment we were authorised to use to repair the damage, you wouldn't be here now. You really have a lot to be grateful for. I don't think ..."

"Could I see my wife, please, doctor?"

"Mr. Canning, I don't think you realise what you've been through. You owe your *life* to the Government. The machinery used to keep you alive and bring about healing was especially brought out at the direction of the Superintendent of Department 209, following a recommendation by the head of the Department you work for. You really ought to be more grateful."

What was the man waffling on about? Mike mightn't understand what they had done to keep him alive, but he knew to Whom he owed his life - he had been granted a reprieve by the only One who could, and no action by any Government or person could have made any difference to that decision.

It was incredible, the things he could remember! Everything made sense now. Oh Dad! Why did it take so long to sink in? The memories of his family's demise were clear, but there was no pain associated with them. They were safe. There was only the race against time, to prepare Eve, David and himself for the inevitable. They must be ready this time.

Should he talk to Eve here? No, too risky. Someone could well be listening. The room might be bugged. Eve would probably think he was nuts, anyway, and be totally justified in reaching that conclusion. She'd probably think he'd turned into a conspiracy theorist. Then again, maybe he was selling her short. They were *so* close, and she'd always trusted him explicitly. Still, better wait till they got home. Better pretend he was no wiser at this stage, so as not to arouse suspicion.

"I'm sorry, doctor, I didn't know. I certainly am grateful. How long has it been?"

“You were brought in four days ago, very close to death. You had sustained damage to your spleen and kidneys, perforation of the large intestine and a major tear in the wall of your stomach. Your heart stopped several times, and yesterday you were clinically dead for a period of about two and a half minutes. The heart massage machine brought you back and our genetic manipulation equipment pulled you through by speeding up the regeneration of damaged tissues. DNA tests conducted subsequently discovered you had a strong predisposition to developing chronic granulocytic leukemia, most likely within the next decade, and we have taken the opportunity to correct this susceptibility while we had the opportunity. You are still very weak and should rest now. Your wife may see you tomorrow.” He rattled it off like a pre-rehearsed speech.

“By the way,” he added coldly and without any empathy, “you will be pleased to hear the military have apprehended both persons responsible for your condition. They have been severely dealt with. You apparently arrived in the nick of time to prevent your wife from being raped. Unfortunately, a fall earlier in the incident caused her to miscarry.”

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Evelyn looked at him probingly. She knew him too well, had shared too many of his inner feelings, to be fooled. “What’s wrong, honey? What’s on your mind?”

“Oh, I’m fine, really darling. But how are *you*?”

She didn’t press him. He would tell her when he was ready. “They told you about the baby?”

Mike nodded, feeling a pang of regret. He inspected her bruised cheeks with concern, reaching out to touch them lightly with the tips of his fingers. Eve took his hand and pressed his palm to her lips. Her eyes searched his. They never needed to say much to understand each other, but she saw something now that she couldn’t comprehend.

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Three days later, Michael was allowed home. The minutes had crawled by, the hours dragged as if tied to huge boulders, while the urgency of what he had to do pressed on him. Yet, now that the moment had arrived, he found it difficult to find suitable words. Dad had been right, words alone weren’t an adequate form of communication. He would have to trust that her love for him would help her understand and believe. He went to the electricity fuse box and switched off all the power. If the computers didn’t work, surely the cameras and microphones couldn’t function? He knew enough about the manufacturing processes that all communication passed through *that* vital piece of equipment. He couldn’t imagine them planting other bugs, unless they had strong suspicions you were up to something.

“Darling, something, something has happened to me.”

“I know that, honey. Please tell me what it is. I’ve been yearning to find out. It can’t be so bad, even if you *are* worried about it. You seem to have had a great weight lifted off your mind and another put in its place.”

He sighed gratefully. She would get it alright. “What I am about to tell you may sound a little way out, but it happened as surely as we love each other.” He took her hand and she squeezed back.

“When I was in hospital, they tell me I actually died. For two and a half minutes or so, I was clinically dead. That means my heart had stopped and brain function ceased. During that time, and it really seemed like hours, if not *years*, I had the weirdest experience. At first I couldn’t make my body respond. I’d talk to you and the staff, but nobody heard me. Then, crazy as it may sound, I floated out of my body, around the room, and I could control where I went. I watched them operate on me from the ceiling. Even if my brain *had* stopped working, I could still *think*!

“Then I wanted to find you, to tell you not to worry about me. And I passed through the window, yet I didn’t end up outside. I was moving down a long, dark tunnel at tremendous speed, towards a bright light at the end. That is, it wasn’t an ordinary light, more an enlightenment - the ultimate in love, understanding and knowledge. It was immensely strong, yet not blinding, in fact, just the opposite - it made me *see*, it made me understand, it made me remember my past. All the things I’d been afraid of are back in the open. There have been some horrible episodes. All of my family are dead. And I also remembered some wonderful experiences, and things my father taught me.

“We were very close, my father and I. I admired him, in some ways idolised him. He was a good man, a strong believer in God. So was my Mum. I didn’t think I could live without them. But it doesn’t hurt anymore now. The most important thing is that I can remember so many of the things they told me.

“Darling,” he took both her hands and held them to his chest. He looked deeply into her tender eyes. “Darling, the Light I saw didn’t come any closer, because I wasn’t ready. If I had been, I wouldn’t be here now. Honey, I know that I was privileged with a glimpse of God. I know that we must give ourselves to Him. I know that there isn’t much time left and that we won’t find Him in the Universal Church.”

Eve studied his face for a long time, a soft curve touching her full lips, the brown of her eyes aglow with wonder. “My father was an elder in the church we went to,” she offered finally, “but I always wondered what it was all about. The actions of the people didn’t match the words. It seemed like sheer hypocrisy. They’d say Jesus was their whole reason for being, and then spent most of their time looking after number one. They’d pray for miracles, but nothing happened. They’d pray for healings, and then tell each other they’d been healed. But even Numb Nancy could see they were still sick. When I questioned it, they called me a perfectionist and idealist; they said it was impossible what I expected. Their attitude made me doubt whether God was real.”

“Do you believe He exists, now?”

“I can see in your eyes, something marvellous has happened to you. If you say God is real, I believe you, honey. But we’ve seen in the church what happens to those who start talking like you - they say ‘jail’ and throw away the key. I wouldn’t be surprised to find out they’ve all been executed. Where *are* these jails anyway? We would have to leave all this behind. Your job, our home. We would have to join the rebels, wherever *they* are hiding out. After what you’ve just told me, I don’t see we have much choice!” Her wavering tone was determined by a dilemma of simultaneous uncertainty and excitement. He knew then things would be fine and relief surged through his veins.

“You said it, darling! I’m so glad you understand!”

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The mobile was packed to the brim with essentials. All the possessions that didn’t fit would just have to stay behind. How long would it be before the authorities would work out what they had done? Normally you were required to give a minimum hour’s notice of any intended trip outside a

fifty kilometre radius from the centre of their suburb. They had never been that far and, before this, had never contemplated not complying with regulations. Michael had weighed the option of notifying a false destination, but had second thoughts, considering the possibility of arousing suspicion by leaving so soon after medical trauma.

So they were just going. Not telling anyone. Michael had switched the electricity back on, so their module would register on whatever central monitoring system kept track. And all the packing had been done in silence. He nervously dropped his card onto the console and the doors closed silently. He was very tense. It was a *huge* step they were taking, and he didn't just have himself to worry about. He was dragging Eve and David into this. Had he made the right decision? Soon there would be no going back, except possibly to face jail or worse.

Eve squeezed his fingers encouragingly and resolutely he selected manual drive. The mobile slowly ascended to the domestic transport level. It seemed to take an eternity and never had they felt so conspicuous. And where should they go? Where did the rebels hide out? Had they gone to the mountains, as he had heard Martha and Vaughn discussing? But that was *years* ago. And if they *could* be found, they wouldn't be there anymore. They'd be rotting in a jail cell or a grave plot. What made him think he could find them?

He remembered the rebels who had approached him in the outlying wastelands and sent the mobile surging into that general direction. It was a long shot, but he was lost for an alternative. Colour-coded roofs slid by below and they forced themselves not to look back, half expecting they would turn into pillars of salt if they did. The edge of the suburb was already in sight, just past the warehouse and public swimming pool on the left, then only bare hills stretched before them.

Mike tried to recall where he had walked. Everything looked the same. There were no distinguishing features to tell one hill from another. It was a wonder he hadn't got lost that last time on foot. He circled. He couldn't possibly have walked further than this. There! Was that the place? It was sheltered enough. Mike selected 'land' mode on the instruction panel and the mobile came to a stationary position and commenced its vertical descent.

The ground was muddy with the recent wet season. All around, the hills seemed populated by murky, rain-sodden shadows, where anyone could hide. Mike got out and slogged around, his feet sinking centimetres deep into the mire. This *could* have been the spot. They were effectively hidden from view from all directions, and the encircling rising ground level retained the precipitation almost like a farm dam. But why had he come here? Had he really expected those men to still be here? Had he really thought ...

"Praise the Lord, brother! We've been waiting for you!" Eve turned startled, Mike turned with relief.

There they were! Ragged and dirty, legs covered with mud. But they were here - their link with salvation, with illegal Christianity. Their guide to the Truth, they were, yet suddenly Mike knew that if these men hadn't been here, one way or another they would have been led to the right place. "Man, are we glad to see you! Quick, come with us in the mobile, we'll toss out a few of these things! Please take us to where you hide out. We desperately want to find God!"

"God can be reached anywhere, my friends, though I know He is sometimes hard to see, when you are living in the midst of evil. The reason is, we are looking in the wrong place. We must find Him in a different dimension, inside ourselves.

“As for the mobile, you’ll have to leave it here, I’m afraid. All mobiles are fitted with tracking devices. As soon as you exceed the fifty kilometre limit, alarms will go off and they’ll be onto us within half an hour. They have trace programs and satellite surveillance, you know. They can tell immediately *whose* mobile is overstepping the mark. We found out the hard way.” He spoke with authority. There was no question of argument.

“Only take what you can carry easily. We don’t want to leave behind tell-tale possessions along the way to mark our trail.”

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Benjamin Jones was the taller of the two, really an affable and jovial character, contrary to his initial seriously pious impression. Peter Martin was the other, powerfully built, disinclined to speak unless he had something meaningful to say. Despite the difference in personalities, again the strange and incomprehensible bond between the two was apparent.

They tried to make the journey as pleasant as possible for them, Benjamin joking, singing and making light conversation, Peter quietly carrying the bulk of the luggage. And it was needed. It had been hard to leave behind the last ties with civilisation. They thought they had left with only ‘essentials’, transport, clothes, food, water, cooking utensils, medical supplies, air mattresses, just the basics you might take camping. When they found out they would be walking the best part of three days, that was reduced to the clothes they were wearing, a mattress each, and enough food and water for the journey. They ditched the mobile under a rocky outcrop a kilometre away, and in a different direction to the one they were taking, hoping to keep this meeting place secret. Benjamin’s favourite expression was that anything was possible with ‘a little luck and a lot of blessing’.

Travelling was hard going. Eve was still feeling weak after the curette she’d undergone while Mike was in hospital and still recuperating from the battering dished out by the two louts. Mike was stiff in the mid-section, where regenerated tissues had to acclimatise to the physical exercise. David had to be carried most of the way, something to which Peter willingly donated his broad shoulders whenever Mike needed a break. They spent the night out in the open. The next day they were forced to hide under a rocky overhang for half an hour, while a military mobile searched the area. Were they after them already, or was this just routine? Either way, detection would have been disastrous.

Late the third day, following the hardest trek, the climb into the mountains, they arrived at the hideout of the underground Christian movement. These people had *literally* gone underground and, puffing and panting, Eve and Michael were amazed how Benjamin and Peter found their way in the dark to the entrance of the cave where they had taken refuge. A soft melodious hum was audible as they entered; no one was standing watch. Diffused light beams strayed into the narrow passage, giving barely enough illumination to find the way. Exhausted, they stumbled along towards the swelling sound of harmonious voices, aiming for the strengthening light.

Light is everywhere. It consumes every space, every corner, every recess, banishing shadows and darkness to the world outside. It reaches well beyond the confines of the cavern, ensuring a safety zone impenetrable by evil.

The singing was reaching out for them, drawing them closer, welcoming them. Then the passage widened out into a huge natural cavern, with running water in an underground creek on one side and soft electric lighting suspended off the high roof. A thousand voices sang praise to the one and only true God, in many different parts, blending into the most beautiful sound they had ever heard. If anything was a church, this was it.

Concerned looks came their way and without delay cushions, drinks and bread were provided, while the worship continued. The atmosphere was vibrant with love and dedication. Eve and Michael felt only a little uncomfortable - while their reasoning told them there were still things to work through, their inner being told them they were ready to accept.

A tall man stood up to pray and his voice echoed through the cathedral-like hollow of the mountain. The words spoke for all of them, expressing what was in the heart of every member. Never had they seen a group of people so unified, so much of one mind, one purpose. Some prayed kneeling, some standing, some with their eyes open, faces beaming. As one, they prayed: -

“Our Father in heaven, we praise Your name. Your kingdom will be here soon!
And whatever You want must be done here on earth, just as it is already being done in heaven.
Please provide us with the basic food requirements, and forgive us for the wrong we’ve done,
just as we forgive those that have done wrong things to us.
And Lord, don’t let us be tempted, but set us free from the evil one.
For the Kingdom is Yours, and so is the power and the glory, for all eternity. Amen.”

The singing started again, spontaneously, growing in volume with people clapping, rejoicing. Some had guitars or flutes, some cymbals. There was a clarinet in the middle somewhere. These people were happy! Happy in spite of their circumstances. Happy despite the persecution. No matter the poverty, the rags for clothing. Forget the lack of creature comforts. There are more important things at hand.

Smiling faces said ‘hello’ and introduced themselves. They couldn’t help feeling cared for, loved. David had succumbed to a deep peaceful sleep, right there in the middle of it all. There was nothing to fear. It was almost like coming home, like they belonged here. Mike sensed something familiar - the presence of Light and Understanding. They were being called.

Come, let the Light shine, let the Light flood your soul, let it brighten the darkest corners of your heart!

Eve took his hand and he stood with her. She was smiling, tears of crystal reflecting sparkles from her eyes and cheeks.

Take the blood of the Lamb and let it wash you clean of the sin, of the wrong of your past. Take the cleansing blood of the Lamb and allow it to purify, to prepare a place in your heart.

Mike’s eyes watered, and he swallowed several times before leading Eve forward a few steps. But there was no need to go anywhere. There was no platform, no pulpit, no preacher. There was no front and no rear. The place was right there.

A woman stood up and read chapter 15 of the Gospel according to John from an old torn Bible. Others joined in. There was no prompting. A third of the way through the chapter, everyone was reading with her, as one voice. Those without Bibles looked on with those who had them, or recited from memory.

I am the Vine, you are the branches. Abide in Me and bear much fruit, for without Me you can do nothing. Repent! Confess! Tell Me you’re sorry!

The last few words weren’t part of the reading, but they were there in their mind. Mike dropped to his knees, Eve too. Gentle hands rested on their shoulders, comforting. They were not alone.

You did not choose Me; I chose you ...

Lord, have You chosen us, worthless creatures that we are? Eve wept. Mike wept. They were coming together before the greatest Presence, yet as individuals, each needing to make the most vital decision of their lives.

They were singing, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life ..."

Do you believe Jesus died for you? That He came back from death, having secured for you the chance for forgiveness and acceptance by the God the Father? He has prepared the way. No one comes to the Father except through Him. Yes! Oh yes! I believe!

Lord come, take me! All of me! Take over my life, my soul, my being, my all! Tears, many, many tears. Tears of repentance, tears of acceptance, tears of redemption, tears of joy Lord, I'm not worthy of living. Only You are worthy ...

Tensions, fears, doubts, hatreds, grudges, confusion, preconceptions and dissatisfaction, all drained away as if their bodies were electrically earthed through their feet. Light, love, peace, security and rest flooded in to replace them and to consummate a brand new Spiritual union.

"And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes;
and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying,
neither shall there be anymore pain.
For the former things are passed away, behold I make all things new."

The words of the song were *alive* with meaning.

They didn't know whether to laugh or cry. They did both. They had been redeemed, born again. They had a new life source bubbling within to draw upon. Memories of the past had become purposeful events. All things work together for the good of those who love Him. No matter how uncomfortable the past, how uncertain the present, the future was secure.

They were One with the others.

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“Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon. He exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. And he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men. Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth. He ordered them to set up an image in honour of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name.

This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is a man’s number. His number is 666.”

REVELATION 13 : 11-18

“A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice, “If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There will be no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.” This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus.”

REVELATION 14 : 9-11

“I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, “Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, and count the worshipers there. But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the Holy City for 42 months. And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1260 days, clothed in sackcloth.” These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. These men have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want.

Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. For three and a half days men from every people, tribe, language and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial. The inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and will celebrate by sending each other gifts, because these two prophets had tormented those who live on the earth.

But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, “Come up here.” And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on. At that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

The second woe has passed; the third woe is coming soon.”

REVELATION 11 : 1-14

He was sitting alone, seeking, trying to find new answers, answers to his new purpose here on earth.

While the moon hid behind the mountains, high above a myriad of stars *blazed* in a crystal-clear sky, combining their individual strength into beautiful, powerful light. It seemed like a metaphor for Christian oneness, an impressionist's abstract depiction of working together in spiritual unity. He stared up for a long time, trying to come to terms with the *miracle* of infinity in a Creation where everything has dimensions, trying to understand the incredible cosmic mind that had construed all this. Momentarily his focus shifted, and suddenly the starlight no longer seemed to be coming from the stars themselves, but from some immense and magnificent single source *behind* a huge black dome, as if the stars weren't really stars at all, but merely pin-prick imperfections in the fabric of the universe. And while, technically, he knew that not to be true, the concept somehow gave him a greater appreciation of the supremacy of its Architect, the greatest Impressionist Painter of all time. And in that moment, everything seemed in perspective and everything made sense.

The voice that came bypassed the eardrums and went straight into his brain: "*Michael, do you Love Me?*" His shoulders shook involuntarily as he answered, "Yes Lord, You know that I love You". Tears welled as he heard, "*Then feed My lambs*". Again the question resounded: "*But do you Love Me?*" Again he answered, whispering meekly with awe, "Yes Lord. You *know* that I love You". And the instruction was more to his heart than to his mind, "*Then feed My sheep!*" A third time, the question rang out, audible by his natural ear this time, yet probing the spirit, breaking through the bounds of human understanding and reasoning, somehow filling him with revelation of what the words of the question actually meant: "*Michael, do you Love Me?*" Then he almost shouted it, as he understood, "Lord, You know all things; You *know* that I Love You with every ounce of my being, my soul, my spirit, my heart, my life, to the point of being willing to *die* for You!"

"*Then feed My sheep!*"

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Eve smiled through her tears, as he looked deep into her eyes, and he knew he didn't even have to explain what had happened. She'd had the same revelation. They were one, like never before.

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With half a dozen others, Michael and Eve were sitting outside under one of the sparse gum trees, reading from the few illegal Bibles they shared between them. Chapter 13 of the book of Revelation was the subject of discussion.

"What do you think these beasts represent, the ones John is talking about?" Mike enquired.

"I don't think there's much doubt about it, now," Troy replied. "The first beast is the leader of the World Government ..."

"World Government!" Eve exclaimed, "How long has this been going on?"

"We have it on excellent authority. Someone very high up repented and came to Jesus. He joined the believers in the mountains south from here. We've had a world government since 2021. It took over control maybe eighteen months after the terrorist sabotage of the nuclear power stations, but I have no doubt negotiations were going on for *years* before that. The culprits were agents for Satan himself, paving the way for a takeover by breaking the back of power production. Governments found they simply had no answers, not ones that worked; not to the energy crisis, not to the world economy, not to the seismic upheaval, not to protection of the environment. We knew so much, yet

we knew so little. The Beast *bought* his way into the leadership position by offering this new, pollution-free, inexhaustible energy source and with promises of solutions to all our problems. No one has yet actually put a name or a face to this dictator or worked out which country he has his headquarters in. But it says right here, the Beast is the Devil's delegate. Some say the old hollow-earth theorists were right after all. That there are creatures who inhabit the interior of the earth; that they've used harmonic energy for centuries, explaining the UFO phenomena that baffled the world for fifty years or more. Maybe a hell of fire and brimstone literally exists under the earth." Troy obviously had had extensive exposure to this stuff.

"I guess that would explain so many things!" Michael jumped in excitedly, "The sudden adoption of harmonic energy when the new guy took over, the almost instant provision of material comforts for anyone towing the line. Imagine, if, after all the disasters we've lived through, someone stepped forward with solutions to all our technological and energy problems. Like you say, first there would have to be a lengthy negotiation process. He probably softened them up with a taste of some of his scientific superiority. Probably gave them a little *preview*, by providing the genetic cure for AIDS, the way to immunise against radiation poisoning, maybe the means for churning out massive numbers of module homes to re-house the population. He would give them enough to *prove* he had access to science and technology we hadn't even dreamt about. He probably took world leaders on little joy rides in his flying saucers!"

"But it wouldn't have been easy," Eve commented. "He'd have had to secure the cooperation of all the world's leaders. Well, maybe not the rulers of *every* nation, I guess, but at least the ones with the biggest clout. The little countries could be *forced* to comply, if necessary. Then the final offer would be posed: - all this, in exchange for leadership of a world government!"

"You're pretty much on the right track," Troy confirmed. "The Universal Church was created shortly after, which we believe is the second Beast, the one with horns like a lamb, but the voice of the dragon, led by the False Prophet. The dragon is the Devil himself.

"Chapter thirteen gives the first beast forty-two months to rule. While we can't be sure of the *exact* date he came to power, assume it was, say, 1st of July, 2021, that would give him till the end of 2024 to fulfil his destiny. Little more than a year from now. His future business still involves a *huge* agenda: making himself known, putting his mark on everyone and finally being worshipped as God. He's well and truly started, but hey, time's tickin' away, and running out fast!

"Mind you, there are some brothers here who believe different. So I don't want to put my inferred deductions over as gospel. All of us see things in the light of our own experiences. The importance we used to attach to being 'right' actually led us away from the truth. I think we've finally learned our lesson: if I'm wrong about something, it really doesn't matter. The Lord knows what's going to happen and our trust is in Him."

For Troy, as for all of them, the concept of forgiveness had acquired a much broader meaning than simply absolving wrong-doing. In addition to dealing with personal grievances in the right way, forgiveness embraced tolerance of different view points, acceptance of individual character traits, and most of all the *grace* to see one another's human shortcomings through the eyes of Jesus. Humble recognition of their *own* failings and fallen human nature generated a whole new attitude to the imperfections in their brothers and sisters. And that paved the way to a unity of heart and mind the world had never seen before.

Wayne brought out his guitar and gently strummed a few chords to make sure it was in tune. Softly his sensitive baritone touched their hearts as he sang: -

“Lord when first we meet You, You make our hearts your home.
It costs us nothing, salvation is free, we are no longer alone.
But to experience Your life in our mortal flesh,
Your love and Your victory,
requires from us that we first pay the price.
Self is the cost - You want me.

Greater love has no man, than he lay down his life for his friend.
And if I wish to follow the Truth and the Life, the Way is for my life to end.
Your ways are not our ways, Your thoughts are not ours.
What makes sense to us is no reason to God.
To save our soul we must first give it up.
Hard though that may seem, really it's not.

Lord I come to Your throne, with this price in my hand.
I come for my brother's sake, trembling a little. Will ashes buy beauty from you?
Are my meagre possessions payment enough
to purchase that field with the treasure?
Is my life sufficient to purchase from You
gold refined by the fire?

You promise fulfilment to those who thirst for righteousness.
I come to You hungry and thirsting to buy Your white robe and water You bless.
Oh Jesus my Lord, I trust to You
my heart and my life and my soul.
I submit and surrender, to You and Your Spirit,
my will and my mind and my all.”

Together they continued to sing soft praises, and choruses taken straight from the scriptures. Hands reached out to join a circle, in a spontaneous expression of the bond between them. The future was not theirs to control. So, there was no need to worry about it.

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Benjamin came rushing into the cave.

He was only one of the *many* volunteers undertaking missions. Over a hundred regularly went out to bring the Lord's message to the world outside, invariably in groups of two, the way Jesus had instructed His disciples to go. Suddenly Michael remembered Vaughn's testimony of his spiritual experience with the Lord, and realised *this* was why he had not been able to persist in it. He had been alone! Jesus manifested in the midst of two or three, gathered in His Name.

Missions were dangerous, responsible assignments and only the most mature went. Many never returned, suspected jailed, or tortured, or murdered. It was great testimony to their endurance, that none had ever revealed the location of their hiding place. And the Lord blinded men's eyes from finding it in any other way. Even if they *had* managed to get the information through administration of drugs or torture, the believers lived in the unshakeable faith that God would still protect them, regardless.

By the time Benjamin had regained enough of his breath to speak, many had gathered around. “Brothers and sisters, the Lord's two witnesses in Israel have been assassinated, shot down in the

street by soldiers!” He wasn’t upset - he was *excited*. “God’s Word is being fulfilled before our very eyes! Those of you who have Bibles, please turn to Revelation, chapter 11, verse 7.”

Everyone there read out loud and in unison: - “Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them and overpower and kill them.”

“Read on, read on!” Benjamin urged.

“Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. For three and a half days, men from every people, tribe, language and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial.”

“Sodom stands for corruption, and Egypt for slavery! That’s *just* what Jerusalem has become! The Government has installed televisions in every Universal Church Hall and is showing direct telecasts of the corpses during their so-called church services! They are refusing to bury them!” An excited murmur went up from the believers, as Benjamin explained further. “The Government has been trying hard to find an appropriate festival or occasion to replace Christmas. They have just announced a public holiday to celebrate the death of our Lord’s witnesses. Worse, it is being put over as symbolic of the death of all of *us*, anyone who doesn’t acknowledge the new rule! Everyone is exchanging presents!”

The next lines of the prophecy practically seemed to lift off the page as Mike read them with the others: - “The inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and will celebrate by sending each other gifts!”

“They were shot two and a half days ago,” said Benjamin, “Tomorrow they will come back to life and seven thousand will be killed in an earthquake!”

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They had no television receivers at the hideout. All electronic equipment was traceable, so they were dependent on news reaching them by word of mouth. The stronger men could do the journey in two days, but most usually took three.

The news of a massive but localised earthquake at Jerusalem reached them four days later, delivered by messengers returning from missions after a three-day hike from Sydney. Any mention of the resurrection of the witnesses had been suppressed. Even the number of fatalities had been fiddled, with reports estimating less than a thousand dead.

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Everyone at the hide out had assigned tasks. They were not ‘assigned’ by a leader telling others what to do, rather, people *volunteered* to do what they were good at, and those with leadership skills monitored the overall situation to make sure all necessary tasks had *somebody’s* attention. Leaders were more encouragers than anything else. And it worked great! While no one had laid down stereotype roles for either of the genders, somehow the allocation of duties devolved naturally, those with talent putting up their hand for the tasks to which they were best suited. As a result, most of the carer roles were filled by women and most of the provider roles were filled by men. Juveniles pitched in willingly for a share of the work. And nobody questioned the political correctness of it.

Food had to be smuggled in from country areas. There were a couple of ‘emergency’ vegetable patches nearby, but they had to be restricted in size to avoid detection from above, whether that be

satellite photography or military scrutiny. The main cultivations had to be camouflaged, by making them irregular shapes, hiding them among large bush settings, or making them look like old farm land. (You'd almost think they were guilty of planting marijuana or cocaine!) Some hundred and twenty couriers took on shifts of travelling to these cultivations and carrying back supplies, some on horse back, most on man's back. Others spent a week at a time at those farms, to tend the fields, or plough and sow the next crop. Although the soil at the start of the Blue Mountains wasn't barren, the way Sydney plains had been affected, much of the earth was not what it might have been, mainly rocky clay. So it was preferable to plant in richer soil a little further out near Bilpin, apple-country, where the yield per acre was double or triple. Electricity was supplied by solar panels charging old lead batteries scrounged from country scrap yards. The panels were widely distributed and hidden amongst clusters of trees to reduce reflection. Not very efficient that way, but hard to spot by the regular mobile surveillance.

Life was primitive and rough, but the Spirit was real. Nobody grumbled, in fact, the opposite was true. The joy of the Lord reigned in their hearts, giving all the peace of mind to gladly accept their meagre provisions as plentiful supply. No one ever went hungry. Lack of privacy and bedding arrangements, (mostly consisting of leaves and old blankets, or air mattresses smuggled in), were tolerated without complaint.

Daily worship services and communal Bible reading strengthened them in Spirit and built their unity into perfect oneness, each member considering their brother or sister's welfare of greater importance than their own. Thus there was no wanting, only the edification of Spirit through giving, the reinforcement of spiritual bond through the expression of genuine love. Nothing was expected. When Eve and Michael gave up their air mattresses to benefit some elderly couples, it was totally spontaneous and in love, without the pressure of suggestion. It is difficult to define the subtle difference between giving as a selfish sacrifice and giving as a selfless inspiration, yet that difference was *vital*. Probably the critical element was that the latter expected nothing in return, not even the satisfaction of having done a good turn. The end result was satisfaction beyond imagination and a desire to do more, as the giving was *returned* in abundance.

In historical attempts to simulate this scenario, the fallen human spirit always got in the way. *Somebody* would try to take over and tell others what to do. Before long, personal agendas had taken precedence over the common good. It was only through the laying down of their lives for each other, that the Holy Spirit reigned. Whilst no one had any expectations of sacrifice from others, each and every one of them carried the revelation in their heart, that the giving *must be mutual* for the whole thing to work. 'Love is a two-way street'. The old adage carried more meaning than it ever had.

There was no ceremony and there were no rituals. They lived in the quiet conviction that the Lord's return was imminent and in peaceful surrender to the Holy Spirit. Sickness was dealt with by prayer and the laying on of hands. Many supernatural miracles of healing were witnessed and accepted as quite natural. Death, whether by old age or violence, was regarded as reason for rejoicing - the deceased's trials had ended by God's grace and he was on his way home.

With over a thousand people present, it was not possible for everyone to know each other intimately. To this end, the believers found themselves in small groups, ranging usually from six to twelve participants, who shared together a closer emotional relationship of inter-dependence, needing each other for Spiritual function, each group forming a building block of the total body. Families stayed together. Nobody was left out.

Finally they recognised it is possible to fully function the way the Lord intended; that whatever they did for each other, they did it for Him. By loving one another, they were loving the Lord. It was the

deep involvement with each other, without the motivation of personal gain, that enabled and brought about the release of the Spirit. They shared one another's burdens, honestly exposed innermost doubts, secrets, failings and weaknesses, negative as well as positive feelings. The unconditional acceptance of each other as equal joint inheritors of the Kingdom, each boasting no merit other than Christ's blood, led to a spiritual reality unprecedented in the history of mankind.

There just aren't any words to adequately describe the reality of God. Suffice it to say that the continuous and overwhelming *awareness* of His presence induces willing submission and self-denial. In this simple congregation of believers, as in thousands of similar gatherings scattered over the face of the earth, an eternal Truth had finally come to fruition.

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Troy and Barry brought news, on return from their latest mission, of the increasing barbarism in the Universal Church, bringing back with them two young couples and an older man, all of them ready to accept Jesus as their Lord.

The Universal Church was now transmitting footage of leaders of both Government and the Church, on massive TV screens, during their services. Anonymity was apparently no longer an issue. The fact that a world government had been inaugurated was now widely publicised. There was no longer a need to keep it a secret. Fear of the authorities and possible loss of creature comforts had done its work well in the hearts of the people. They meekly complied with directions, no matter how humiliating or degrading, afraid of the terrible consequences of non-compliance. They sold out their friends and relatives if *they* showed any signs of objection. Besides, those who obeyed were amply rewarded. There was module accommodation for everyone now and luxuries to spare. At last, the man at the top was also revealed, (though for some weird reason he still remained nameless), his *image* almost constantly on display. (It brought back memories of large images of Hitler, Chairman Mao, or Saddam Hussein, painted on the sides of buildings). The congregation was made to bow down to him and acknowledge him as representative of the highest order. They showed footage of his alleged assassination by 'militant Christians', followed by a dramatic resurrection some days later. The believers at the hide-out referred to him as the Anti-Christ.

There were rumours of ministers of the church making public examples of dissidents refusing to bow down to the televised images. A cosmic-ray amplifier mounted in the ceiling above the pulpit would be activated to produce a ray more powerful than the strongest laser beam. (Who would have guessed all the applications for these cosmic rays?) This ray, (with a little help from a black box of some sort), on contact with human flesh, produced a chain reaction in the nucleus of tissue cells akin to the fission of plutonium, resulting in *spontaneous human combustion!* It would reduce a person to a small heap of ashes in a matter of seconds. The stuff of horror movies! Still, they were only rumours, because no one witness to these things dared speak out openly.

There were even *worse* stories circulating, of churches where the minister-in-charge had decided that execution by cosmic ray was not impressive enough; that a better effect was achieved by the spilling of blood. It was said that people were being decapitated ...

There were those who had refused to bow down, conscientious objectors, most of whom mysteriously disappeared shortly afterwards. The five new converts were among them, probably lucky escapees from a torturous death. Troy and Barry had witnessed to them *before* their capture and kept a remote eye on them after they'd been arrested. That night, the door of the holding cell they were in had opened by itself, while the guards were snoring up a storm, reminiscent of an episode recorded in the book of Acts! And Troy and Barry had been waiting in the wings.

And the marking program had begun in earnest, a massive task expected to take some months. This was something that could not be hushed up, as everyone resident in 'civilisation' was required to participate. The right hand was the target for a laser 'tattoo' of each individual's social security number, readable only by electronic scanner. It would replace all plastic cards forever. They *could* have used face recognition software, or iris scans, or finger prints, all readily available technologies, but for some reason the physical marking was preferred.

Sundays were set aside for the official ceremony involved, the laser machine set up like an altar of sacrifice below the huge television screen suspended at the front. The congregation would come forward in long queues, as if approaching the pulpit to partake in communion, each having to swear loyalty to the image of the new potentate on the screen, renouncing all other allegiance. Each would place their hand in an opening in the machine and insert their social security card in a slot. At lightning speed, the computer would search remote data banks to verify identity and absence of irregularity. If all was in order, the mark was placed and the card swallowed. The mark encrypted was preceded by a *guarantee* of identity - the digits 666, representing the Department of Social Acceptance, Testing And Numbering. They were all amused at the less than subtle acronym.

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Bible study was a regular activity they all took part in with great relish. Without exception, they were all hungry to find out what the Lord had been trying to tell them for centuries. Preconceptions were thrown out the window, as each of them came to terms with the fact that nearly everything they had learnt in the past, decades of Christian indoctrination, had been tainted by hidden agendas. Finally hearts were turned, to receive Truth that had *not* been distorted by selfish interests.

How are our beliefs formed? Now there was a subject about which Michael was fairly conversant, and was more than willing to share. They discussed their upbringing and the influence of the people around them while they were young. Certain values become entrenched and normalised during our pre-teen years. All our expectations in life are governed by that framework of reference. New information is accepted or rejected, usually depending on how well it fits into that mould.

On a previous occasion, Michael had shared his near-death experience in hospital. "I found out that our individual nature also has a *huge* say in what gets accepted, what appeals and what doesn't. We never start with a blank slate, so identical upbringing can produce totally different outcomes in two different people. I found out the hard way, that I wanted God, but on *my* terms. In the end, the things we believe are determined far less by what *is* true, than by what we would *like* to be true. However, that was still the worldly way. My breakthrough came when, through God's grace, Truth came by revelation. He handed me the Gift of faith."

Then Troy explained something to them that Mike still hadn't got a real handle on.

"We are body, soul and spirit. The Bible is quite clear on that. That means there are *two* parts to every human being, not made of clay. Adam had a soul when God created him, but he didn't start to *live* until God breathed a spirit into him. Put very, very simply, our soul is our personality, the bit that makes you, you and me, me. The spirit is the life-force, the part that makes us go.

"When we invite Jesus into our heart, the Holy Spirit comes to live inside us. We are born again, because we receive a new life-source. But it is our human spirit that is still controlling our day-to-day business, until *we* hand over the reins. That's why Jesus told us we need to take up our cross on a daily basis. We need to make a daily choice, to let the Holy Spirit live through us. God will never force Himself on us. 'Taking up our cross' means making a deliberate choice to suppress our human spirit and favour the Holy Spirit.

“Over the years, quite a few Christians reached that conclusion at some stage of their spiritual journey, but few came to understand what is actually involved or how to make it real. We continued to spend our time looking after our own affairs, pursuing our own interests, seeking our own prosperity, hanging onto our own likes and dislikes. We adopted Christian values, partook in Christian activities, and basically acted out what we thought of as a Christian life. But when it came to actually letting Jesus live, we just couldn’t do it.”

Michael knew Troy was right. At least he had learnt something, living his life twice. How *hard* had it been to assimilate this lesson into *his* framework of reference?

“Think of your body as God’s temple.” Troy continued. “Think of your heart as a throne in that temple, designed to be occupied by a single spirit. It is His throne now, but *we* are still sitting there. He can’t reign unless *we* get off. Jesus said that if we weren’t prepared to go *that* far, we weren’t worthy of Him. You were spot on, Mike, when you said our beliefs are formed by what we would *like* to be true. Everything we believed was slanted by our unwillingness to get off the throne that is rightfully His. Subconsciously, we hoped we could be Christians without making that sacrifice.

“The full implications were disastrous, and we are only just now realising *how* bad. Probably the worst sin anyone can commit is transgression of the first commandment – to have no other gods before Him. The real upshot of all of this is mind-blowing: We *ourselves* had become that god before Him!”

There’s your answer! Receive the Truth My children; receive what to you must be a shocking revelation of the selfish fallen nature that has controlled each and every one of you! I love you all beyond anything you are able to comprehend, but My righteousness must prevail. I AM!

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It was six months later, when Benjamin and Peter failed to return. And it was only then that they found out Benjamin had been an evangelist all his life. At the hideout he had been just one of them, not less and not more important than any of the others. He had simply been appreciated for the brother he was, as was Peter. Mike learned there were a number of ex-ministers among them, from various denominations, including several priests. Some had been there since 2017 and had never even been registered as citizens.

It was good. It was right. This was the way it should be. Differing beliefs were not an excuse for division, as long as Jesus, (*for* whom and *by* whom all things were created), remained the centre of your faith and focus. If you served the same master, you should work on the same property; if you were members of the same family, you should live in the same household. And in *this* family, only the Father, first born Son and Comforter should be regarded above the others. If the heart’s treasure was His Kingdom, these Three would take care of the rest.

Had it really been *impossible* for this reality to be expressed earlier? Or had it only been Man’s selfish nature that had continually thrown a spanner in the works?

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Mike prayed as he struggled with the first signs of mental discomfort since his conversion. He knew he was being called to a special task, but he was unsure what. After only minutes, the uncertainty melted away like a snowfall in spring, and peace flooded back in. With a quiet assurance he

undertook to take on the job asked of him. There were still a lot of questions to be answered, but the answers would come when the time was right.

‘Go with Wayne to find Benjamin, he shouldn’t be alone.’

The implications of the inaudible message were disconcerting. If Benjamin was alone, Peter, in all likelihood must have perished. They all knew the risks and accepted them wholeheartedly, all more than willing to die for the cause. The earliest missions had been faced with less overt threat and therefore were possibly easier on the spouses and children left behind. Nevertheless, while everyone accepted the danger inherent in the missions, all also were hoping fervently for each mission to succeed and for the participants to return alive and well.

For some time, Michael had felt the desire to express his new found faith outside the fellowship, a calling to evangelism many might have said. The impulse to shout his love for Jesus from the highest mountain top, for all the world to hear, had been stifled only by the recognition of the human source of inspiration behind this exuberance. The Lord had given him new life and surely didn’t want him to throw it away to no avail on such an immature and fruitless gesture. Not that he was afraid for himself. Physical death was something to look forward to; only concern for Eve and David and a deep desire for spiritual growth had held him back from an immediate plunge into mission work. This interval had given his faith a chance to mature, mellow and stabilise. He realised now the extreme importance of being receptive to the Spirit’s guidance and direction.

His first move was to tell Eve of the Lord’s speaking, and he was ever so pleased with her reaction. Though thoroughly aware of the hazards, she was really happy for him and supportive. “I knew it was coming, honey.” she replied. “I have seen the Lord preparing you for this sort of work. As your wife, I want to keep you close by, but we must all be willing to do whatever He asks of us. He’ll look after you better than I *ever* could, and nothing can happen to you that is not His will. I love you.”

Next he shared the experience with Wayne, deliberately withholding the part that he was the one to join Michael on the mission, to allow the Holy Spirit to speak to Wayne individually and not influence him in any way. But it soon became clear that Wayne already knew, and *he* had waited patiently more than two weeks for the Spirit to speak to Michael!

Following prayer, the small fellowship sanctioned their mission. And, at the evening gathering, the whole congregation gave their blessing to the new team. New sets of clothing, haircuts and beard trims made them less conspicuous. The suburb where Michael and Eve used to live had been Benjamin and Peter’s prime target. At their last two missions, they had adopted a bolder approach, brazenly walking the pathways and ringing stair bells, proclaiming the gospel without restraint, sensing the urgency and throwing caution to the wind. ‘Whoever receives the mark of the Beast, or bows down and worships it, shall drink the wine of God’s wrath’. Time for repentance was running out. Everyone should be given a last chance, at *any* cost. If Benjamin and Peter were no longer active there, and seeing the instruction was to find Ben, it made sense at least to start at that suburb.

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They were on their way, physically two, but spiritually every believer went with them. Their prayers would strengthen them as they went. ‘The Lord be with you.’ Never had they heard those words spoken with more meaning.

The memory of Eve’s lips lingered, as they proceeded on the long hike. Michael and Eve had spent a last night together under the stars, man and wife, a few hours of privacy gratefully enjoyed. And he could still feel David’s arms around his neck as he received a last hug from his beautiful boy. What

was the matter with him? He was thinking as if he wasn't coming back. It had only been goodbye, not farewell. Then, you never know. 'If I don't see you here, I'll meet you in the clouds,' Eve had whispered in his ear, as he was reluctantly untangling from her last fervent hug.

Wayne beamed at him when he glanced across. A gentle stream of prayer flowed from Wayne's tongue. Wayne was single. Wayne had been a Christian much longer and knew the Lord more intimately. Michael respected his knowledge of the scriptures, his unassuming humility, and was edified by his presence. He pictured before him the faces of so many who in such a strange and wonderful way had become true brothers and sisters to him. He remembered their love and friendship, their warm hugs and kisses as they wished them well and assured them of their prayerful support.

The sun shone down on Michael's large frame, deepening the tan on his already browned face. His physical stature towered over Wayne, but spiritually Wayne stood taller. Yet any sense of competition was absent, each appreciating the other's contribution to the exciting mission they had undertaken.

A dry breeze blew in their faces, making them wet their lips to stop them cracking. Both were invigorated by the privilege of being chosen to be the Lord's instruments and spokesmen. They felt fit and strong. Their legs carried them tirelessly as they descended the mountain, small New Testaments tucked into their pockets and some light provisions being their only luggage. Michael's hard efforts, ploughing fields at the cultivations, had paid off well. His muscles were hard under tight skin. They felt they could take on the world. But the greatest reason for their sense of well-being was the fountain of Life, welling up inside. Lord, thank you for Yourself. Thank You for wanting to use us on this mission. Thank You for loving us.

They were crossing the plain, a spring in their step, Wayne's shorter legs managing to match Michael's stride step for step, a song rising in their hearts, and eventually bursting from their lips. Not a bit of vegetation was to be seen when they reached the Sydney basin. The wind eroded more of the land, picking sand off the arid ground and tossing it about in mid-air, leaving small, exposed rocks and dead tree stumps as the only features of the denuded landscape. Once, its sight had depressed Michael, the forlorn desolation, but now he was jubilant. Wayne said they would all receive new bodies when the Lord returned, and in the same way the earth would be renewed. The source of their joy was no longer the world and material things outside, but came from *inside*, where no one could touch it or take it away.

They didn't notice the military mobile until it was practically on top of them. It passed over, almost as if they hadn't been spotted. Quickly they scanned the area, taking in large tracts at a glance, but there was no place to hide, nothing to blend in with or even cast a shadow. They stood out like cherries in a bowl of vanilla ice cream and there was nothing they could do about it - the nearest *anything* big enough to give them shelter was at least a kilometre away.

Mike felt no fear, only grave disappointment. Was this as far as they were going to get? Was their mission over before it had even begun? Lord, Lord, don't You want us to tell *anyone*? Wayne passed him an encouraging smile. 'Let's kneel and pray' he suggested, and so they did. Wayne made no effort to make himself unobtrusive, raising his arms high and praying out loud. "Lord, You know best. May Your will be done. We ask nothing for ourselves ..." Michael closed his eyes tight.

The mobile turned and came back towards them. It stopped, hovering no more than ten metres above them, a soft whine coming from the stabilising jets countering the force of the wind. Long minutes passed. The sound of the turbine engines was still ringing in his ears when Michael opened his eyes. The mobile had landed and the doors were opening. This was it. Should they run and be

shot in the back, or let themselves be taken in, to face certain torture, as they tried to extract the location of the hiding place? Michael had never been fully aware of the extent of the persecution believers had had to bear over the last few years, until he became a believer himself. Some of the stories he had heard in the last six months ... my goodness! Lord, make me strong!

A stocky soldier, with massive shoulders and a laser gun resting lightly in his large hands, disembarked on their side. He looked around, squinting against the sun. Sand blowing, sun in his eyes, sure there were reasons the soldier may not have been able to see too well, yet to imagine he could miss seeing Mike and Wayne from no more than three metres away was just .. well, unimaginable. The man looked right through them, as if they didn't exist, and a wave of awe came over them. Their cheeks flushed and they were almost embarrassed. They had the privilege to be servants and children of the all-powerful God, to Whom nothing was impossible. Who could make blind eyes see and seeing eyes blind. There was no limit.

There was a purpose to this happening; a lesson to be learned. They were being taught to trust, to have faith, to simply put themselves into God's hands, in complete submission.

The soldier got back into the mobile and the driver took off, fast, as if annoyed they had been mistaken about seeing something and had wasted time.

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Things are definitely coming to a head, Michael thought, early next morning after a deep and restful sleep on a sandy river bank. This was August. If the Anti-Christ really did gain power mid-2021, then, according to the prophecies, he only had about four months of a free hand to do his stuff. Did *he* know that? Would he be aware of the way he was characterised as a Beast in the Bible? He must! Why else delete the entire book of Revelation, except to hide his true identity from the people? And that, in defiance of the threat of certain death to anyone who takes anything away from it, at the end of that very book. He *had* to prevent the masses from finding out the truth!

And if he knew *that*, he must know there were only four months to go! No wonder his henchmen were getting uptight. Their program of marking everyone was behind schedule. They had to mark as many as possible before their time was up. Mark of the Beast! Marking you for eternal damnation! Marking you as a follower of the Devil himself ...

The last of the sunlight was ebbing from the sky by the time they reached the fringe of development. Luxurious module homes, far more than Michael remembered, were standing high on the dead earth. It was incredible how they had managed to manufacture enough of them to house the entire population in such a short time span - expensive ransom to buy men's souls. They couldn't fathom where the resources had come from, but the evidence was here. Then again, all worldly riches were in Satan's custody – tempted on the desert mountain, not even Jesus had argued it wasn't his to give – so he could spend it in whatever way and as fast as he pleased. Over the last hundred years, he had used those riches to incapacitate the church. Manage to persuade believers to chase material possessions as ardently as their unbelieving counterparts, and Jesus ends up taking a back seat. Keeping up with the Joneses, tool of the Devil.

Look at all those mobiles! Gifts to blind men's eyes. Anything to stop them from seeing the Light.

They strolled down the deserted walking paths. Lights were coming on in the homes; obviously dinner time. They still had some meagre provisions left, but they weren't hungry. Where to find Benjamin? Lord, show us the place, send along ears that are willing to listen, give us the words to speak to them. We are nothing Lord, only instruments. Use us Lord, we are willing to be used.

Twenty minutes it took to reach the familiar path to where Michael used to live. They turned the corner and casually strolled past the home that had once been his. Michael felt no regret, no envy. The lights were on - it had been assigned to somebody else. The light from LED lanterns on the path reached in over the wall to illuminate the garden. The plastic border around their dear little grass patch was still in place, but the grass itself had died of neglect.

On the other side of the path stood the home Ted and Angela had occupied eight months ago. Were they still there? How would they receive Michael if he walked in right now? Would they listen and accept, maybe come back with them, or would they turn them in? It had been a short friendship and they hadn't said goodbye. He couldn't blame them if they were cheesed off, but he couldn't imagine their betrayal either.

Where to Lord? In here? No, to the park, that's where they had to go. There was no doubt. They turned on their heels and went back up the path, turned right and a two minute walk brought them into the recreational area, where once a weird spaceship had confounded Michael's thinking. A vacant hectare of uninviting dirt, boasting only a few monkey bars and seesaws. No one was in sight. A dozen or so solar-charged LED lights cast dreary shadows in all directions. This was the place alright, but where were the people? They sat down on the edge of a silicon retaining wall and worshipped God in silence. They could do nothing; only the Lord knew.

Some youths sauntered past, bored with their meaningless existence. There was no work for them. All their material needs were generously provided for, but they had few skills, no incentive, didn't know the meaning of the word 'endeavour'. The need to attain, to do your best, to strive for something better and worthwhile, had never been taught and was a concept as foreign as another language. They were growing up in an age where things were either forcefully taken from you by an unfightable force, or thrust upon you in abundance without the need to work for it. They were the children of confusion, conceived in a misunderstood moment of passion of a world gone haywire. Was there hope for them?

They saw Michael and Wayne praying and decided to *kick* them. What the heck? Why not? Why pass up the chance to have some fun? There were six of them and only two potential victims.

The first kick landed in Michael's side, followed by another in the groin as he tumbled over in the dirt. The pain was real, yet not part of him. He found to his amazement he could simply ignore it. He stood up, firmly on two legs. There was no desire to hit back, or even to defend himself; instead an overwhelming compassion filled him. He also knew he should not physically intervene to help Wayne.

"I understand why you did that." His voice sounded strange in his own ears. "May the Lord forgive you for it. *I* certainly won't hold it against you." The words were not his, though they came from his mouth. Somehow he knew what to say. And it worked. The kicking stopped.

"What's all this you're crowin' on about, mate?" the tallest of them insolently enquired. Funny, how in any combination of human beings, no matter how large or small, prominent or insignificant, *one* always emerges as the leader. "Who's this '*lord*' you're throwin' at us, then, eh? Come on man, spill it. We ain't got all night!"

"Jesus," Mike said simply.

"Bloody hell! There's no need to start swearin' at us! What we ever done to you, eh? Man, you're really askin' for it!"

Their eyes met and the youth blinked. Mike steadily observed all of them. Wayne stood to his left and slightly back, recognising the move of the Spirit. The teenagers stood awkwardly in a semi-circle, trying hard to look menacing, boys wanting to be men, empty creatures wishing to be filled. Mike and Wayne understood them alright.

“The One you’re looking for is very near. But you’re looking in the wrong place.” Michael stated, convinced the words were finding a mark somewhere.

“Hey, let’s quit this caper, man. This guy’s queer.” One of the youths was getting uncomfortable.

“No, no. I wanna hear this.” A gangling adolescent, touching for the first time a realm beyond his experience and comprehension. He was standing ungainly now. The defiance had sagged out of his stance, the put-on toughness had left his thin shoulders, and the others, like sheep, followed suit, nervously fiddling with their hands and clothing. These men, with their strange, unflinching, yet kindly eyes, were not impressed by their act. And they sensed that these men had something to offer that might just prove worth having.

“Sit down,” said Michael, “and I’ll tell you.”

There were others going for an evening stroll, restless minds no longer able to find solace in the wealth of entertainment provided by their television sets. Many hurried on, possibly to notify the authorities. Mainly the younger ones were careless or rebellious enough to sit with them and listen. If the security patrol arrived now, they’d all be in strife.

The message from Michael’s lips was simple. A testimony of his own experience, the imminence of the Lord’s return, and a warning to avoid the ‘mark of the Beast’ at all cost. Then the words stopped coming and they knew it was time to go. They didn’t arrange another meeting, knowing the Lord would make their paths cross, if He desired it. The message had been delivered. The Holy Spirit would make it real to those of His choosing.

They opted for the path they’d come from and the listeners dispersed. Several minutes later a security task force arrived at an empty park.

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“Psst! Hey, Mike!”

The whisper made them turn. Edward was hiding on his haunches behind a corner of the wall at the path intersection, furtively checking to make sure no one had followed. Satisfied they were not being watched, he stood up.

“How’ve you been, mate? Haven’t seen you for a long time. How’s Eve doing? And who’s your pal here?”

“I’m well, Ted, very well. This is Wayne. Wayne this is Ted, my neighbour a while back. And how are you, Ted?”

Ted ignored the enquiry after his health. He was edgy and kept looking around to ensure they weren’t being observed. Warily, he shook hands with Wayne, and then took the plunge. “Listen, I overheard you yappin’ to those young hoods out there, and I thought to myself, ‘That’s not ol’ Mike talking’. What’s going on, mate? You haven’t joined those religious fanatics have you?”

“You haven’t been informed by the authorities?”

“They told us you had moved. And I thought, ‘The crafty ol’ bugger’s got himself another promotion!’ Why didn’t you come and say goodbye?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “Listen, come to our place for a drink and a chat, you and your buddy. We can talk easier there, and Angie will be very pleased to see you.”

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The soft air lounge was kind to their flesh and for a few moments they relished the comfort they weren’t used to anymore.

“Just coffee for me please, Angela.” Mike called to the kitchen.

“Same here, thanks Angela, white with one, if you have it.” Wayne followed up.

“What? Given up the alcohol, have you?” Ted immediately came in. “Just have a quick one - it’ll help you relax.” He seemed artificially jovial.

“There’s a time and a place for everything, Ted. I don’t think this is the time.” Again his voice sounded odd. Lord, what should we tell these people? What words should we use?

Angela came in from the kitchen, with four coffees on a tray. She had a mind of her own. She was going to do the courteous thing and not drink if their visitors didn’t; and Ted better do the same. She dropped down on an armchair and stared piercingly at Michael as he stirred his coffee. She ignored Wayne.

Michael didn’t look up. “Still going to church?” he asked casually, still stirring the brown liquid around in his mug.

It took a long time before Angela broke the uncomfortable silence, cleared her throat and managed to croak out a ‘yes’.

“Tell me about it.”

“What’s there to tell? Aren’t you still going?” Ted’s voice squeaked.

Michael looked up then, meeting Ted’s gaze directly. “You know I’m not, Ted. Why are you pretending with me?”

A frown of discomfiture wrinkled Ted’s forehead. “O.K. then. Let’s be straight with each other. You’re the one who raced off and joined those religious crackpots. You’re the one who copped out. If the authorities knew you were here, we’d all get shot on sight, no questions asked. I’m crazy even having brought you here!”

“And you can *live* with that sort of tyranny?” Mike asked in amazement.

“Calm down, Ted.” Wayne offered. “If you want us to leave, we will go.”

“No. Alright, look, I brought you here. We might as well hear what you’ve got to say.”

Wayne sipped his coffee, slowly, to give things a chance to settle. Michael played with his spoon some more. Angela continued her penetrating stare, alternating between Michael and Wayne now. Ted sat lamely, evidently nervous and confused, waiting.

“When we were living here, going to church like everyone else, I really had no idea what was going on,” Michael finally explained. “I thought the Government was doing a marvellous job. I thought they were rather dictatorial in their approach, but when a society has been razed to the ground, it’s probably the only way to a quick recovery.

“But I had no idea what was going on behind the scenes. People were being *murdered* for what they believed in. And in some incredible cover-up, they managed to keep it from us. They even managed to keep us from finding out we have a World Government. They created a church without hope or meaning, its only purpose being to promote that Government.”

“Yes, and it’s a *good* Government,” Ted interrupted, small beads of sweat breaking out all over his face. “Look at the marvellous things they’ve achieved - I can call it nothing short of miraculous. In just a few short years they’ve rebuilt the world into a better place than it ever was. Everyone has decent accommodation. No one goes hungry. There *is* no poverty. They’ve given us pollution free electricity. The universe is at our feet. There is no limit to what Man can achieve. We’ve got a home, a mobile, a good income. We can see out the rest of our lives in undreamed-of comfort. Heck! All they’re asking in return is that we don’t make trouble; that we do as we’re told. That’s not a great price to pay.”

“Ted. Angela. How long do you think this great Government you’re talking about is going to last?” Wayne asked.

“It’ll be here long after we’ve gone. What can possibly stop it? There’s no more war. No international friction. Can you blame them for wanting to get rid of the few rebel-rousers trying to throw nails in the soup?”

“Let me read you something from the Bible. Not the Scriptures you know, but the paper version that existed before they changed it and digitised it.”

“You have one of those?”

Wayne nodded and turned to Revelation, chapter 13. He read all of it, slowly, to give it time to sink in. He also read half of chapter 14. “That gives them till about the end of this year. At that time Jesus will return to collect His followers. It’s possible this Government will last another three or so years after that, but they will no longer be the nice guys. After that, they’ll be thrown out or simply disappear. I don’t know how their rule will end, but end it will.”

Ted sat at the edge of his chair, fumbling with his empty cup. “Tell us more.”

“I’ll ... I’ll make some more coffee,” Angela said, hurrying to the kitchen for more hot water and the coffee jar.

“Make mine strong, please, Angie,” Ted requested when she came back in, flashing a quick, uneasy grin at Michael. Ted was finding it hard to look him in the eye.

“My parents and brother were Christians. They were murdered because of it, about six years ago. I was confused about Christianity before it happened and nearly went mad after. I guess I suffered some sort of selective amnesia. Maybe I just didn’t *want* to remember.

“The Lord gave me Eve to help heal my mind. Eve was attacked and I was stabbed. That was the turning point in our lives. All my memory returned and suddenly everything fell into place.”

Michael pulled out *his* New Testament. “Let me read to you from the Gospel of John: ‘I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, you must be born again.’ Jesus said that. When *we* joined those you call ‘crackpots’, we were born again.

“Jesus died, and was raised from the dead to make this possible. There *is* a way out. Jesus is the way, the only way. By accepting Him, we *can* be born again. When Wayne read from Revelation earlier, take note that only the ones who will *not* worship the beast have their names written in the book of Life. Those who receive the mark will drink the wine of God’s wrath. Don’t let them mark your hand. If you do, there’ll be no hope for you.”

Angela wiped away the single large tear rolling down her cheek and inelegantly blew her nose, before asking if anyone would like another cup. Ted seemed to be struggling internally, his face awry with the difficulty of his thoughts. Over their third cup, Ted said, “Let us think about what you guys have told us. Stay here tonight. You can sleep in the spare room. We’ll let you have our answer in the morning.”

Before going to sleep, Michael paced the room. He and Wayne prayed for Ted and Angela, but their prayer seemed lifeless, as if they were asking for something that couldn’t be.

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Michael slept soundly, a peaceful sleep in a luxurious air bed, until he was rudely awakened by the prodding of a hard instrument in his side. He was momentarily shocked by the sight of three soldiers. He shook his head to try to shed the sleep still gripping his brain, vaguely aware of the ruckus and commotion in the background.

“Get up you bastard! We haven’t got all day!”

He had slept in his underwear and wasn’t even given the chance to dress. As he reached for his trousers, the butt of a laser gun violently smashed into his jaw, knocking him back onto the bed. Blood flowed from his chin.

“Maybe that’ll teach you we mean business,” the soldier snarled. Michael stood again, dizzied by the blow. Was this Ted’s answer? He look across to Wayne’s bed, but it had already been vacated and Wayne was nowhere in sight. ‘Lord give me the strength to bear whatever it is you want me to go through. May I honour Your name through all adversity. Be also with Wayne as he faces similar circumstances and strengthen his spirit.’

He was roughly pushed through the doorway.

“Get that heretic’s Bible as evidence,” the sergeant ordered. One of the privates dug it out of the pocket of Michael’s coat which was still hanging over a chair in the bedroom, holding Mike’s New Testament by two fingers as if it was contaminated with human waste.

Ted and Angela were waiting in the hall way, next to the lowered staircase. Angela hung her head in shame, but for just a second Mike met Ted’s eyes.

“Sorry mate, but what else could we do?” Ted said lightly. “We already *have* the mark.”

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Then he was stumbling down the staircase, the end of a laser gun pressed hard into his spine. They shoved him into an army mobile waiting outside. Another was already lifting off. As Michael bent over to get in, one of the soldiers took the opportunity to pump a fist into his stomach, taking the wind right out of him. He collapsed into the rear seat, gasping for breath. Lord what’s happening to me? The symptoms were physical, but his mind was affected also. It was hard to think. But there was an underlying control, independent of body and mind, unswayed by pain or confusion.

They took him to the centralised army headquarters. Only the sergeant was authorised to take him through the security gates. He was brusquely ushered past the office modules housing army administration, and warehouse-size ones that were probably supply depots. Further on, they reached underground shelters, which looked as if they might have been the lower floors of former skyscrapers. The rubble had been cleared away and the subterranean leftovers had been converted, possibly into jails or interrogation chambers. Michael was only half aware of his surroundings. His brain was blurred and his body, covered with bruises, ached. The soldiers had taken pleasure in working off their frustrations on him during the journey. The cut on his chin had congealed partially, but an involuntary inspection every so often brought the blood back to the surface.

There was a complete absence of red tape. No admission procedure, unless everything had been pre-arranged. He was simply handed over at the second security point and heavy metal doors slammed shut. Different military personnel took him to a room, worked him over some more and laughed at him. The worst pain came from hearing his Lord’s name blasphemed. He couldn’t object. His mouth was bleeding and swollen and several of his teeth had been knocked out. The coppery taste of his own blood on his tongue made him want to puke.

“Easy on, don’t kill the son of a bitch! We gotta drag some information out of him yet.” Half-heard voices, filtering through the remains of his consciousness. “Put ‘im in with number three-twenty-seven. Let ‘im stew for a while.” were the last words he heard for some time.

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“Ben?”

With what little strength he had left, Benjamin was tending him. The stench was terrible. Thick odours of urine and excrement filled their nostrils. It was all they had to breathe - there was no window, no ventilation. Benjamin was dabbing Michael’s wounds with a wet cloth, one of the sleeves of Michael’s t-shirt he had managed to tear off.

“Ben! Oh my God! What have they done to you?” Michael stared in horror.

Benjamin was completely naked. His body was covered with filth. Part of his scalp had been torn away, exposing his skull. His right eye had been gauged out, leaving a gaping hollow. A flimsy layer of skin was all that was left to cover his ribs, several of which had clearly been broken. Knife slashes were all over his body, many having ulcerated, and in a final depraved deed of humiliation, he had been castrated.

“Don’t worry about me, my brother,” croaked Benjamin, looking down at his own body and attempting a smile. All his teeth were missing. “The food’s not terribly good here! But the Lord will give me a new body, when I’m due for one!” he lisped.

Michael sat up and embraced him, unable to force a smile at Benjamin's wry humour. *He* should be tending Benjamin, instead of the other way round. They hugged silently. They weren't part of this. It was only happening to the shells of flesh and bone they occupied.

Michael took the piece of cloth from Benjamin's hand and looked around. It was a cell about three metres square they were in. A harsh neon tube covered with wire mesh threw false light on their pitiful condition. It was empty, except for the two of them, a bowl of water near the door and the filth. There were no beds, no blankets. There was nothing to lie on other than the concrete floor, nothing soft to provide some measure of comfort. He took off the remnant of his t-shirt, rolled it into a tiny pillow and made Benjamin lie down and rest his head on it. He brought the bowl of water over from the door and rinsed the rag in the dirty water.

Systematically he washed Benjamin's body from head to foot, cleaning out the angry wounds, squeezing pus from the ulcers, dissolving the dried blood and excrement. He used the water liberally, to take some of the heat out of the fevered flesh. Water, he felt sure, was one thing they wouldn't let them go without. No water, and they'd be dead in a few days from dehydration. And they wanted him alive for questioning.

He poured the remaining water over the ground, flushing away the worst of the filth, and moved Benjamin onto the cleaner area. In whispered tones they exchanged information. Peter had been killed instantly by a laser shot. Praise the Lord for sparing him this. Michael banged on the door and shouted, to try to draw attention to the fact that the water was all used up.

For half an hour they prayed softly and sang familiar hymns together. Then a great tiredness overcame both of them, and Michael too lay down on the concrete and slept.

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They came to get him after three days without food. But he had guessed right about the water. It had been replaced daily, in accordance with instructions from higher up. To Michael's amazement, he was made to wash and given clothes to wear. Then they escorted him to an opulently furnished office in the central administration module, where he was made to sit in an enormous, soft, swivelling armchair, facing a small, kindly looking man behind a vast desk. His face was round like a full moon, his head bald.

"Well, Michael. I hope you don't mind if I call you Michael?" It was a rhetorical question. The man was gently spoken, polite, a slight, fake smile turning up the corners of his mouth. He was studying a computer screen on his desk. Michael assumed the display showed details of his life history, at least the period *after* the wedding.

"How's Evelyn, Michael? I believe she had some trouble eight months ago, involving an unsolicited natal disruption?"

"If you mean she was attacked and lost the baby, yes." Michael was riled. What was this soft treatment they were trying on him?

"The way I understand it," the man continued, unperturbed, "You too were injured in the incident and, largely because of your responsible and valued position in Department 459, special authorisation was obtained for your life to be preserved. It appears, however, that both your, and your wife's, mental disposition following the incident was misjudged; an unfortunate mistake on our part.

“It is quite understandable that you may have been emotionally upset and your judgement impaired, so we must share the blame for the ill-fated decision you and your wife made afterwards. The situation as it stands, however, is quite unacceptable to the powers that be and cannot be allowed to continue.

“You may not be aware just how *much* the current administration has done for you. Not only did they save your life, but while they were at it, they discovered you had inherited a genetic predisposition towards a variety of disorders of the bone marrow stem cells, which they corrected with gene therapy during your internment. Somewhere along the line, you had actually been subjected to what is genetically referred to as a ‘second hit’, and you were found to be in the early developmental stages of chronic myeloid leukemia, with a prognosis of around five years. The mutation you carried is inherited and I understand your brother died of a similar disorder some years ago. They also found you passed on this susceptibility to the aborted foetus. Not only did they correct your personal genetic make-up, but also your testicular function, so any future offspring you may spawn will be healthy indeed. So, as you can see, you have *much* to be grateful for.”

How on earth did they know about John? And the bit about himself *had* to be a bluff. They were obvious lies, based on flimsy evidence in his medical records. The doctor had told him he only had a predisposition. This guy was stretching that to a full-fledged condition. And from what little he understood about genetic science, even if they had corrected his own DNA, they surely couldn’t rectify the DNA of semen which had not yet been produced, could they?

Moon-face continued in his placating drone. “Whilst there are obviously things to be worked out, fortunately the situation is *far* from unredeemable. You will find we are very reasonable people. We can be most understanding and accommodating in the right circumstances.”

“Meaning?”

“Alright. I will come straight to the point and not insult your intelligence with superfluous hype. *Provided* you are prepared to renounce your religious and, as far as we are concerned, heretical, convictions; *provided* you are prepared to swear allegiance to the current ruler, rule, and all its causes, then you will be reinstated to your previous position of employment and all records of your activities over the past eight months will be erased and forgotten.”

“You are saying that you want me to deny Jesus, my Lord, and probably sell out the other Christians by revealing their location. Am I right?”

“Naturally, after a complete pardon, the fullest co-operation in aiding the implementation of our Government’s policies would be expected. And I must remind you that the persons you are referring to are *not* Christians. Only confirmed members of the Universal Church may be called such. Your incorrect labelling of fellow miscreants is a punishable offence under the Act, however, I am willing to overlook the matter this once, provided you make an effort to correct the habit you have fallen into. I must also point out that, naturally, the offer we have made for your consideration will be extended to your wife and son, subject of course to the same conditions of allegiance.”

Michael was getting progressively more upset. The right words just didn’t seem to flow forth. Jesus, please help me. He blurted out, “No way. Jesus Christ is my Lord and Master. He is the *only* one I will serve!”

Moon-face continued to talk down to him, like a headmaster disciplining a primary school student. “Michael, now be sensible. You’ve seen what happens to those who stubbornly persist with such *silly* ideas. It simply cannot be tolerated. In no time at all, the world would be back in the state of

chaos it was in, before our cherished ruler took on the daunting task of setting things straight. There would be wars and strikes, and disruption and crime. Freedom of thought and expression gives birth to division and dissatisfaction. People generally just cannot be trusted to make rational judgements, so the only solution is to make decisions on their behalf and for their own good. The system of government we have now is the perfect solution to all the world's problems. And all it requires is obedience to decisions made in all due consideration and wisdom.”

All things work together for the good of those who love the Light. Things are falling into place, like the last missing pieces of a puzzle ...

Michael was searching his mind and soul for the words to speak, but he could find none. Lord, what should I say? Suddenly peace. He had wanted too much to give this man a message from the Spirit, but there was no message to tell. Undoubtedly, this man was lost already. He would be carrying the mark of the Beast. There is no purpose in telling the Devil he's bad. So he kept silent, much to the irritation of the moon-faced counsellor, who had maintained his composure and facade of the wise, reasonable and superior father-figure, as long as Michael had responded to his argument.

“You realise that if you continue with this pretence, this ‘holier-than-thou’ attitude, there will be very unpleasant repercussions. Your wife and child *will* be found, sooner or later, and it is likely they will be treated rather carelessly. We may also find it necessary to detain you for an indefinite period and I'm afraid our accommodation facilities are sadly lacking in creature comforts.”

Michael stared at him until the man was forced to avert his eyes. He studied the video display as an excuse. The tables had turned. *He* was the one off balance now and he didn't like the feeling. These blasted rebels! They ought to shoot the whole damn lot of them on sight. And they would, if only they could *find* the bastards! What was it about their eyes, anyway? Every last one of them was the same. Their eyes were too steady, too calm - it wasn't natural! You could tear their nails out, chop their limbs off, beat them to within a hairline of death, and it was still there, to haunt you in your sleep. For a while there, he thought he had this one beat, but here it was again.

“Your refusal to answer me can only result in one thing. You will be taken back to the retention centre for some genuine persuasive treatment. There will be no further opportunity for a complete pardon of your crimes. We will obtain whatever information we want from you, using methods you haven't even dreamt about. We have truth drugs that will make you tell all you know and culminate in a slow, agonising death that will have you screaming for mercy on your hands and knees. You'll be *begging* for us to end it quick!”

Michael had lowered his head and did not look up.

The moon-face was turning red with exasperation. What was the matter with the guy? Did he know? It was uncanny how the truth drugs failed to work on these rebels. Oh, they died alright, but there was no way they'd part with any information.

“Will you bloody well answer me?!” he screeched. But there was no reaction from Michael.

The small man pressed furiously hard on a button on his desk and several military personnel stormed in.

“Take him away!” he shouted, on the edge of hysteria suddenly, “Get him out of my sight. Give him the works!” His hand trembled uncontrollably, as he poured himself a drink.

Benjamin could barely move his own scrawny frame, so they dragged him along the ground to the interrogation chamber. It was a twenty metre square hall with bleak grey walls and stale air, where at least a dozen mercenaries were waiting for entertainment, their faces agleam with the expectation of a gruesome spectacle.

Benjamin's chafed skin was weeping where it had been rubbed raw on the concrete. However, in his mind and heart and spirit he was strong. His body was numbed - he felt no pain. Pain had regressed to an ethereal concept, no longer part of him. In prayerful thought he gave thanks to God, the Creator of all things, of heaven and earth, He who grants mercy and looks after His own. Thank You Father, for taking away my pain.

Michael was standing, naked and vulnerable, in the same room, tied hand and foot. Small plastic rings had been inserted in his eyes to keep them open and they watered profusely, as he wasn't able to blink. Fixed to a post cemented in the floor, a metal clamp with small, sharp teeth secured the position of his temples, stopping his head from moving up, down or sideways. If he fell down, it would more than likely rip his scalp off. The clamp pointed his face towards an old, heavy, wooden table. Benjamin had been dumped on top of the table and strapped down, the way a psychiatric patient might be secured to his bed. Michael had no choice but to watch.

The soldier in charge walked up to Michael and spit in his face. "Hello Mr. Canning. How'd ya be?" Michael stared back at him, unable to wipe away the saliva dripping down his nose.

"I'm not gonna beat around the bush, mate. You guys give me the shits. We want to find out one thing, and one thing only. Where's the rest of you rebels hidin' out? If ya tell us now, ya'll save yer mate's life. And he'll be spared one hell of a lot of pain that you are forcin' us, reluctantly, to inflict upon his person."

He waited a full three seconds for Michael to answer.

"Ya're not prepared to talk? Alright then, we're used to it. Just remember, you are the one responsible for 'is agony. You are the only one who can put a stop to it. Just call out whenever ya feel so inclined."

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The small man sat behind his enormous desk, stroking his bald head with both hands in irritation. There *must* be a way to get information out of these freaks. If he succeeded, he would surely be promoted and he could get out of this rat hole. The whole job was just too frustrating, yet it didn't pay to complain to his superior. They might just turn around and *demote* him, in stead.

But talking to fanatics in a nice, gentle tone of voice, pretending to be on their side and having their best interest at heart, was getting him down. If only they weren't so bloody confident. They always made him feel as if *they* had the upper hand, as if they held some ace up their sleeve he didn't know about. And those eyes ...

He shuddered.

He felt like kicking the wall. They were always on his back, especially lately. 'The rebels *must* be found and brought to justice', was the message that passed down the line of authority on a daily basis. They were offering huge rewards for information now, with little success. His only consolation was that none of his counterparts had succeeded in breaking the rebels' silence either. He couldn't really blame his superior for hassling him. Everyone was being hassled by somebody

higher up. He just couldn't comprehend what all the urgency was all about. There was plenty of time. They'd probably find them, sooner or later, *starved* to death.

Really, it was hard to understand how they had kept alive this long. They couldn't buy food or anything else. If they were tempted into using their cards, they'd be apprehended before they could exit the warehouse. All accounts of missing persons, all suspected rebels, were kept open and on red alert. If he was right, they'd starve alright. A smirk of satisfaction appeared on his heavy lips. They *did* seem to be getting progressively skinnier as they caught up with them over time!

Soon any card would be a sign of heresy. Cards were close to being obsolete. Less than twenty percent of the population still relied on them. He himself didn't need one anymore. Having passed security identity verification, he had been marked with his number on both his right hand *and* his forehead. Now *that* at least was something to be proud of. Only those holding top positions were marked in both places. For security reasons of course. Some rebel might be inclined to turn violent and chop off your hand, if he got the chance. The marking was designed to remain activated by oxygen travelling in the blood stream. This prevented rebels using an excised mark illegally. Five minutes of oxygen deprivation rendered it useless. Not that it had ever happened, but you never know. Anyway, if something like that *should* occur, they could still identify you by the mark on your forehead. And if one of them decided to chop off your head ...? He sniggered. Then it wouldn't matter anymore.

That was one thing about these rebels. They seemed to have a thing about getting marked. There had been a number of people in the Church that had turned seditious after having been approached by some of those troublemakers. Their first reaction had been concern about the marking. What did they call it? Mark of the beast? What a name! Where on earth did they get that from?

Worth a thought though. What about that guy from Department 391? They hadn't had an inkling anything was wrong, until he came up for marking. The guy suddenly became paranoid, didn't want to be marked at any cost. All of a sudden he was raving on about Jesus, tried to make a run for it, probably trying to get away to join the rebels in their hide out. These soldiers had no brains, trigger-happy idiots. They had shot him on the spot. With a little bit of thought, they might have let him go and followed him.

Hey! This could be it! *This* just could be it! Their one weakness. Their Achilles heel. Maim them, torture them, dismember them, drug them, nothing worked. But threaten them with being marked and they panicked. Must be something in their religious rules. Man, if this worked, if he could be the *first* to break them, he had it *made*! He'd make a real name for himself! Maybe, just maybe, he might even get to meet the man at the top in person! Wouldn't *that* be something?

With a big grin, he pressed the blue button.

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Michael felt sickened. How low and depraved could Man become? It was no wonder God wanted to put an end to this. The floor was flooded with Benjamin's blood. They had cut off his hands and feet with an old rusty butcher's axe. And still they wanted more, eyes bulging with obscene sadism, shouting profanities, blaspheming God's name. Life was draining out of Benjamin in pulsing red gushes from his four severed limbs. Mercifully he couldn't live much longer. Incredibly, Ben hadn't uttered a sound throughout the entire ordeal. He was a great testimony for the Lord and was proud to have him as a brother. His heart reached out to Ben with love. Hang in there brother, it will soon be over!

The perspiration dripped down his own face, mingling indiscriminately with the abundance of tears spilling from his wide open eyes. He felt the urge to sing words of encouragement and reassurance to Ben. His voice was hoarse and flimsy, and everyone turned their attention on him. Even Ben managed to lift his head slightly, his one eye as steady as it had ever been; more, *ablaze* with glory.

“And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes,
and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying,
neither shall there be anymore pain ...”

A huge fist *smashed* into his jaw. He felt it breaking, but straight away it swelled and numbed. The sharp teeth of the clamp dug into his head, seeking blood, but there was no pain.

The sergeant screamed at him for the last time. “Damn you, will you talk?”

Even if he had wanted to, he couldn't have answered. His jaw had jammed with the swelling, and warm coppery blood oozed from inside his mouth and from split lips.

The sergeant turned around. “Finish him!” he ordered.

A big man, nick-named the ‘executioner’, apparently because he took great delight in delivering the last blow, grabbed the rusty meat axe. With one mighty, almost impatient swipe Benjamin's head was severed and dropped on the ground with a dull thud. Michael could only feel relief that Ben's suffering was over. Nevertheless, dry retching came up his throat.

There was a knock on the door and they opened it. The guard in the doorway addressed the sergeant. “Urgent message, Sarge. The Psyche wants to see the Canning guy, washed an' dressed in his office, immediately.”

The sergeant swore under his breath.

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“Well now, Michael,” said Moon-face, a big, pseudo-caring smile contorting the heavy jowls. “I trust you have had an interesting time. I'm sorry I wasn't able to be there to enjoy it with you.”

Michael's head sagged low. They had quickly thrown him in a shower and hung a business suit on him, two sizes too big, not even bothering with underwear or a shirt. Moon-face apparently had some objections to dealing with fully naked prisoners in his office and insisted on a minimum standard of decorum. The ‘Psyche’ they called this ogre, pronouncing it ‘syke’ - he must be a shrink or something like that. It was *his* turn now, he was sure of it. He had no idea what they had in store for him, but it was bound to be something unusual and diabolical for him to be brought back here. Lord, please keep Eve and David out of the hands of these monsters.

“I understand how you feel, Michael, and we've decided that your past services to the Government deserve recognition. I've managed to swing a very special deal for you. Don't worry about repaying me at this stage. Let's just say, you owe me one. You will be accepted for marking *without* the ceremony. We'll just skip over the oath-of-allegiance bit. Naturally, you will continue to be detained until you see reason, but I trust that will not take too long.”

No! Oh no! This couldn't be true! They couldn't do this. It wasn't right. Help me Lord, help me! The words of the prophecy rang through Michael's brain like church bells: ‘If anyone worships the

beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or upon his hand, he will also drink the wine of God's wrath!" Lord, stop them from doing this!

Yes! It was working! The small man felt *huge*. His heart pounded a strong steady rhythm, its rate well up from normal with the excitement. He could see the *devastating* effect his terse declaration had had on Michael. That *look* was gone! Was he actually shaking? "You realise, of course," he continued, relishing the moment, "that this is a great honour for you. In fact, you will be setting some sort of precedent - you will be the first person to have his identity number encrypted, without taking the oath. There won't even be a Universal Church minister present!"

He watched Michael's reaction of outrage and bewilderment with great delight. He had been right! *This* was their weakness! Let him squirm. Now he'd make him talk!

Michael was utterly confused and praying feverishly. There must be an answer. '*Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*' That was referring to sacrificing yourself to save another, or alternatively to putting aside your personal ambitions and will, *not* to accepting eternal damnation. Or was it? He would gladly die for his fellow Christians, or even to bring *one* other person into the Kingdom. But to be damned with these animals to never ending hell?

Guards in uniform dragged him along a corridor, struggling inwardly and outwardly. He must delay them. He must have time to think ...

"Don't think! Trust! Have faith! Have you not learned your lesson yet? I will neither fail you nor forsake you!"

All of a sudden he was at peace again. He recalled the sight of the stocky soldier in the middle of the plain, unable to see him from mere metres away. What was he afraid of? Did he really think God would desert him at a time like this? Surely not.

He stopped struggling, somewhat ashamed of his momentary lack of faith. They came to a large room, filled with sophisticated electronic equipment. There they waited until the Psyche appeared, his bald scalp shining in the harsh neon light. They shunted him to a computer terminal. Its massive plasma visual display was mounted on the wall at eye level. A keyboard rested on a lectern at waist height, three or four metres away, facing the screen. A silver cabinet standing on its right side had a rectangular black cavity just big enough to accept a hand.

"Shove it in," the small man ordered.

As his right hand was thrust forcibly into the hole, a spongy material from inside the terminal moulded itself to the exact shape of his hand, then hardened, to fix his hand immovably inside the machinery. This was probably necessary to ensure a sharply focussed imprint, but was also most effective as a physical restraint. He was irretrievably locked to the machine. 'They've got to be bluffing' Michael thought. The whole aim of the marking was to acquire possession of your *soul*, something you could only get from a *willing* participant. The mark itself, whilst ostensibly placed for pragmatic purposes, facilitating trade and identity verification, was in reality only a *symbol* of selling out in a spiritual sense. 'Selling your soul to the Devil', there was no better way of saying it.

The Psyche brushed in next to him and commenced tapping out instructions on the keyboard. Michael's file flashed onto the screen. Name, age, place of birth, father, mother, marital status, spouse, offspring, brief history outline, with details available at the click of a button. Current place of residence: military confinement. (They'd wasted no time getting his records up-to-date!) A new field showed his social security number and marking status. A menu offered a variety of further

information options, including financial, educational, medical and religious histories. A second menu proposed a range of actions. The small man didn't even bother to give Michael another inspection, confident of his victory. He continued typing instructions, linking programs to prepare the machine for marking. The preliminaries had already been cleared verbally with his superior, who in turn had sought approval from higher up. Normally, the ceremony was conducted by a minister from the Church, and what they were doing here required a by-pass authorisation. Usually an identity card was needed to make the whole thing work; this too called for a by-pass. Both Michael and Eve had destroyed theirs. A red alert above the plasma screen flashed continuously.

The computer ran for some twenty seconds, much longer than usual, while it verified authorisation in the appropriate files for this highly unusual request. The Psyche's fingers drummed impatiently on the lectern while processing took place, looking anywhere but at Michael, saving that delicious moment for last. Then the red alert snuffed out. The screen cleared itself and new information scrolled up, centering itself in three lines on the screen: Michael Canning, Male, DOB: 7 January, 1998, his social security number underneath, followed by the advice, 'READY FOR MARKING'.

At last the Psyche turned his face up to Michael, triumphantly beaming. A flicker of uncertainty pierced through him when he met Michael's eyes. What had happened to the defeated, squirming wretch he had ordered taken here? What had happened in that short space of time between his office and here? It couldn't go wrong now, it mustn't! His reputation was at stake!

He faced Michael, focussing at his mouth, unable to look him in the eye again. He forced self control. "Well now, Mr. Canning. How do you feel? A little elated, perhaps, at the prospect of setting a precedent? We obtained special permission for you, you know." A pause. "Come now, speak up. If you are having second thoughts, *now* is the time to bring them to my attention." Another pause. "If you were to share the location of your buddies, I would still be prepared to reconsider going through with this marking process, something about which you obviously have serious reservations."

There was no time for a response, and Michael's broken jaw wouldn't have let him answer, anyway. Suddenly on the screen, black transposed to colour and showed a handsome man dressed in extravagant religious garb, looking something like a cross between a Rabbi, a Pope and an Archbishop. Dramatic concert music introduced him, then slowly faded, to allow his punctuated speech to be clearly heard: -

"I am High-Priest Sheshak Babylon. I am the Executive Administrator of the Universal Church. The authority to implement all the provisions of the Universal Church Act of 2021 is vested in me.

"One of those provisions requires identity verification of all members of the church. I have the pleasure of announcing that a program is now in place to *protect* the identity of each and every one of you. Identity cards are being phased out immediately, to be replaced by an electronic encryption placed predominantly on the right hand. This mark will be invisible, readable only by a scanner while on-line to a central computer. No other scanner, not even an *authorised* scanner in off-line mode, will be able to read it. The mark is blood-circulation dependent. It will self-destruct in minutes if surgically removed. In other words, it is identity foolproof.

"One of the *mandatory* conditions of receiving this privilege is allegiance to the current administration. Indeed, the word 'privilege' is probably a gross understatement. The new Head of World State has graciously rescued you from certain extinction. You owe him your life. Shortly, we will ask you present your current identity card. We will verify your identity from the records we have in our possession. We will then ask you to swear allegiance.

“Again, I would like to stress here, that the current administration is responsible for the salvation of this earth. Without the express intervention of our most eminent Head of Government, the world as you know it would not now be in existence. He will speak for himself. He insists on personally revealing his own identity to you shortly. I have the great honour of introducing you to the new Head of World State.”

Flashes of hypnotic colours moved across the screen. A hushed silence fell over those present. Almost inaudibly at first, musical tones tied in with the colours, as if the tints gave birth to them. The volume swelled, gradually, until the roles seemed to reverse and the notes controlled the colour intensity and movement. The sound blended, arranged, composed, turned into tune, harmonies, inspiring, commanding attention. The music transformed the hues and shades, moulding, shaping, creating, a human likeness, a face, proportioned, then handsome, graceful, a man, alive. The mouth moved, taking over the musical notes to translate them into chants, accents, then words, further refining the image into unsurpassed physical beauty, masculine perfection, demanding respect and admiration. Words turned to speech, persuasive, eloquent, powerful.

Then the moment the whole world had been waiting for – the *name* of this new world leader! He had kept it secret, because too many people were familiar with it. Their *minds* and *hearts* had to be captured first. Self-indulgence was the carrot. And fear was the stick. It worked on most. In the end, his hugely inflated ego *demanding* that they know the object of their worship.

“You may refer to me as Your Highness, Grand-Master Prince Lucifer, saviour of the world. Without me, you would have perished long ago. *Everything* you possess I have provided. I have worked for *years* in the background, without you knowing about it. But right now, *I-am-in-charge!* Yahweh would have you live in squalor, but *I* have granted you luxury. Yahweh places all kinds of restrictions on you, but *I* let you have your heart’s desire. Yahweh would have you work your butts off, but *I* have given you leisure. Yahweh would have you die for Him, but all *I* ask of you is recognition. Yahweh would have you accept Him on blind faith, but *I* have given you *proof* of what I can do for you. I asked His Son to acknowledge me, but He refused me outright! The *nerve* of Him! The time has come for things to be put right, for justice to prevail. *I* am the one who has done the right thing by you. I am the one who *deserves* your allegiance.

“I am he. Worship me.”

All, except Michael, kneeled and bowed their heads. No one forced him. It was almost as if they had forgotten about him. He stared in disbelief at the phenomenon on the screen. Phrases poured forth, captivating, reasoning, logical, convincing. He claimed that man’s ‘sinful nature’ was caused by a couple of genes gone wrong, a curse from Yahweh. Just like cancer. Just like heart disease. Just like aging. All of the miserable history of mankind was *Yahweh’s* fault.

“Yahweh imposes this out of proportion and totally inequitable, eternal punishment on people, because *one* guy, somewhere in the dim dark past, took a bite out of a piece of fruit! Yahweh intends punishing completely *innocent* people, because one of their distant ancestors committed a petty misdemeanour. Is *that* unreasonable or what?”

The face on the screen claimed to possess the *whole* map of Man’s genetic makeup, not just the bits of the genome Man had charted. He knew the location and functions of every gene, and all the non-coding bits in between. He didn’t just *have* it, but understood how it all worked and, best of all, how to *fix* it! He could stop the aging process as easily as he could cure cancer. Who needs miracles, performed by a pathetic and broken Messiah? He could, in fact, make anyone ‘sinless’ and *live forever* through a simple process of gene therapy. And that privilege could well be *earned*.

Resplendent elegance radiated. “All you have, *I* have given you.” The ultimate in magnificence. Prince of light. “I AM Prince Lucifer. Worship me.”

Michael’s heart thumped with anger, kindled by the fiery eyes of the superman. *Finally*, he had a framework of reference that told him without any shadow of a doubt when he was being conned! He particularly took offence to that last blasphemy, where the guy made himself out to be God. Prince of light, my foot! Liar! Fraud! Deceiver! So *this* was the world ruler. The Potentate, the Anti-Christ, the Devil’s masquerade. Abomination of Desolation! Here was Satan, still offering the world in exchange for being worshipped! fumed with disgust and outrage, lashed out at the instruction panel with his free left hand and wildly punched keys, wiping the transmission from the screen.

Restraining arms grabbed him from all sides. Horrified faces stared in fear for the consequences of this sacrilegious act. Panicking thoughts raced through the Psyche’s head, but he made the supreme effort to remain in control of himself. Within minutes, he managed to restore Michael’s file to the screen. With enormous relief he found that the marking authorisation was still intact. Maybe they’d never find out what had just happened. After all, the only thing the bastard had managed to do was cut transmission of a micro-chip video recording. Stay calm will you! Success will make up for any blunders!

He took hold of Michael’s left hand in both of his and slowly started to bend back the little finger. He’d make the bugger talk, no matter what it took. “You shouldn’t have done that!” he whispered under his breath, three centimetres from Michael’s ear. Then he inhaled deeply to regain some composure and let the purple start to fade from his countenance. “You know, Mr. Can-of-shit, you don’t mind if I call you Mr. Can-of-shit do you? It really isn’t very polite to continually ignore my enquiries. I would have expected a more humble attitude from a religious person like yourself.”

How much pressure did it take to break a finger? He’d never been involved in the physical violence side of it before. This guy must really be getting to him. He bent harder. “Talk you bastard!” he hissed through his teeth.

Michael’s little finger snapped. A muted grunt pushed past his broken jaw, and gathering blood spilled from his mouth, trickling down his chin in little crimson rivulets. The Psyche stared, then felt the jaw. “Who’s responsible for this? I gave strict orders not to do anything that might affect his ability to talk!” He looked around, furious. The stupid, ignorant fools! Couldn’t they do anything right? Naturally, nobody owned up, as expected. They all averted their faces and avoided eye contact. He was losing control. He grabbed Michael by the collar of his suit jacket and screamed into his face, little beads of spittle flying outwards with the words. “Talk, you rotten bugger! Do you want me to press this key? You’ll be marked. Is *that* what you want?”

Michael’s jacket tore at the seams and the buttons popped. The small man was frenzied, but no one dared to appease him. He was senior to them. He could do what he liked. He ran his finger nails down Michael’s chest drawing blood, slapped his face again and again, in obscene desperation, feeling the broken jaw shift under each impact.

“Alright then,” he panted, “You asked for it!” With a rash and reckless need for perverted retribution, he pressed the ‘Enter’ key. He leaned on the machine with both hands, breathing heavily, his head hanging, while the screen’s lights flashed, indicating operative mode.

Peace beyond understanding enveloped Michael. This battle had been won. Soon the war would end, and Light would take over forever.

“Excuse me, sir.” The sergeant whispered it. There was no reaction, so he tapped him on the shoulder, ever so gently.

“What is it now?!” snapped the Psyche.

“Excuse me, sir. But I think something’s wrong.”

The computer program embodied an automatic verification sequence, that independently read the marking placed and compared it with the identity number that *should* have been encrypted. Two short sentences appeared on the screen:

‘MARKING INEFFECTIVE. LOGIC NOT SUSTAINED.’

The small man was startled. He stared at the display in disbelief. The machine had never failed before. There was no reason why ... unless ... Something snapped inside his head. “Take him away. Do with him what you like,” he moaned, “I never want to *see* him again ...”

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“Where’s this great God of yours now then, eh? Why don’t he come down an’ save ya?” the Executioner jeered at him, holding a rusty meat axe over his neck, as Michael lay bound on the old wooden table which was soaked in a mixture of Benjamin’s and his own blood, as well as who knows how many others.

A Christian brother, with whom had shared a cell for several days, was strapped up where Michael had been earlier, plastic inserts keeping his eyes open and his head secured in position by the metal clamp. In a very special way the two were one, sharing a love and strength not of this world. A power so strong, all physical circumstances dwindled into insignificance, abundantly sufficient to overcome the demands of the flesh.

Peace. Light already approaching. That tunnel wasn’t going to be anywhere near as long this time. Yes. Yes, this time I’m ready, Lord!

The derisive voice of the Executioner came again, now tainted with just a hint of uncertainty. He *had* to be sensing God’s presence in this foul and depraved hidey-hole, but not enough to put him off his game. “Your God ain’t saved *anyone* from my hands yet!”

Michael’s voice came frighteningly clear, despite the broken jaw and swollen lips: “I’ve already been saved, my friend. But what about *you*?”

The Executioner’s jaw dropped slightly in hesitation. His eyes reflected doubt and fear by the time he brought the axe down on Michael’s neck.

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PART FOUR

The wind playfully turned the dust outside the cavern entrance. A tiger snake slithered on its belly over the dry hot earth, in an age-old search for some meat to sate its hunger.

The sun burned mercilessly on its back and it entered the dark of the cave, both to find relief from the searing heat and in the hope of finding a meal. It wasn't bothered by the gathering cobwebs, but focussed its interest on the field mouse scuttling away into the darkness beyond. It slowly laboured its way forward, noiselessly, penetrating deeper and deeper until the passage widened out into a cavernous hollow where a single electric light bulb swung back and forth with the air currents. It still vaguely illuminated the large area, throwing moving shadows on deeper shades, draped like dripping treacle over the stony surrounds. The other bulbs had burned out and had not been replaced.

It didn't recognise the blankets and pillows, the cooking utensils and books, as signs of human occupation. The scent of humans had vanished and the articles lay undisturbed, gathering the dust of the ages sucked in from outside or dropping from the high rocky ceiling.

The snake slithered on, over small heaps of frayed, moth-eaten clothing, over worn and damp blankets. It inspected rotting food remains covered in thick mould, still in the pan; the few rusty tins, patiently waiting out time to spill their contents.

Further down, stray beams of sunlight found their way down the shaft that had once provided the necessary ventilation to make the cave suitable for mass accommodation. The scant rays picked out the fluttering pages of an old, well-thumbed Bible, being turned randomly by the hot, humid draught. The snake granted it only a fleeting glance, attracted by the noise, but it paid no respect. It was ignorant of the precious words contained therein. It didn't know the ageless message held together by the frail, decaying binding. Nor did it understand the reason it was condemned to crawling on its belly.

There was nothing to alert its instinct that Man had ever lived here, possibly not so long ago. The total absence of human odours made the relics as natural and ordinary to it as the rocks and the dirt. Even the musical instruments made no impression and only the spiders making their home there held any interest.

There was no sign of violence or evacuation. The hundreds of small heaps of clothing were the strangest mystery. They looked as if they had simply dropped off the bodies wearing them. To someone who might happen to find the place by chance, it would have looked as if the occupants had simply been absorbed into the air without warning, or passed through into a different dimension.

Vanished in the twinkling of an eye.

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“Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed - in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.”

1 CORINTHIANS 15 : 51-52

“The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.’

And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying: ‘We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign. The nations were angry; and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both great and small - and for destroying those who destroy the earth.’ ”

REVELATION 11 : 15-19

“They will make war against the Lamb, but the lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings - and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.”

REVELATION 17 : 14

“Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and has become a dwelling place of demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird! For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have become rich through the abundance of her luxury.

And I heard another voice from heaven saying, ‘Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues.’ ”

REVELATION 18 : 2-4

“I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.”

REVELATION 20 : 4-5

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

REVELATION 21 : 1-4