

The Deliquescent Head

Deliquesce: 1. to melt away. 2. to become liquid by absorbing moisture from the air, as certain salts.

Deliquescence: 1. the act or process of deliquescing. 2. the liquid when something deliquesces. – deliquescent, *adj.*

Marcas Oswald was fascinated by Surrealism, the art movement most concerned with fulfilling the wish for absolute freedom. The surrealist painters realised there was another world which was ruled by the irrational, the magical, and the instinctive. The gateway to that world was by way of the dream.

Marcas could lose himself for hours in Salvador Dali's paintings, such as 'Metamorphosis of Narcissus'. He would look, and then, as if by some magical process, the object he was looking at would become something completely different. The work of art would suddenly have an entirely new meaning. What he had thought was a biomorphic blob in the foreground of 'The Persistence of Memory' turned out to be a profile of Salvador Dali with his nose to the ground.

He liked the way there was nothing erect in Dali's provocative dreamscapes, everything was flaccid; soft watches, runny Camembert cheeses, fried eggs and always, the deliquescent head. Marcas knew all about the deliquescent head. His head was gradually deliquescing, dissolving and melting, and he was resigned to the fact that eventually, he would evaporate. He would vanish into the ether. It was as inevitable as death, closing your eyes and taking the last breath.

As Marcas jammed his feet into the cramped space under the seat in front of him, he suspected this trip to the Island of the Gods would not yield any long term solutions to his problems. He peered out the window, but, apart from the flickering of fluorescent fairy lights across the tarmac, the world outside looked dark and foreboding. He was on board an international flight destined for an island in the Indian Ocean, hoping the demons in his life had been detained by the charming woman at airport security. He could no longer tolerate the abusive voices; the faceless fiends who were taking away his ability to enjoy a normal life. His brain was being devoured by parasites. He did not choose to tumble into this world, a world that sapped him of energy; so much so, he found it an effort to get out of bed each morning. To wake each day with something cheerful to look forward to, and to be able to sleep at night without uninvited guests, having to count ducks or meet up with the Queen of the Witches on the dark side of the moon would be bliss, heaven on earth.

There was no magic cure for schizophrenia, only a lifetime of medication that scared the hell out of Marcas. The Island of the Gods could not be any worse than the previous five years of sorrow and heartbreak. His illness had interfered with his plans to study art at the college on South Bank. It had affected his relationships with family and friends. Sometimes when he was totally miserable, which was mostly, he felt there was no longer a reason to go on living. Marcas was constantly being torn between two worlds; one visible and the other, invisible.

His feet were firmly planted on the ground but his mind was a seething mass of irritation; one moment he was drifting, melting into a wasteland of nothingness, the next, a hideous riot was taking place in his head. Marcas, exhausted by the emotional and psychological minefield, had no idea what would next happen to him. He was teetering perilously between reality and fantasy, it was as if he was standing on a termite-infested timber footbridge swinging forwards and backwards above a steep ravine, and through the decaying and rotten slats disintegrating beneath

his feet, metres below, could be seen whirlpools and swirling rapids; white water crashing and cascading down through a Y-shaped valley into a jungle of tangled vines and creeping leeches.

The black, hooded, angel of death was stalking him, calling him to join her in this timeless place. She was a hag of a woman with a twisted smile and blood red eyes who was probably betrothed to the Grim Reaper. Marcas despised the sight of her cloak of raven feathers with eyes plucked from the tails of peacocks; he loathed the way she was always beckoning to him to step across to the other side of the bridge. 'Come away with me, come away with me, come away with me,' she wailed. The sound of her voice made the hairs on the nape of his neck stand up like antennae. Marcas shuddered. She was slowly sucking the essence from his soul.

He shivered and his teeth chattered uncontrollably. The temperature on the plane was so cold he would turn to ice long before the plane reached the Island of the Gods. Marcas was looking forward to the hot tropics, but he was also worried he would contract an infectious tropical disease such as malaria, leprosy or river blindness. Bionic eyes were not yet freely available on the shelves in the local supermarket. However, there was a tin of prickly heat powder in his back pack, just in case the humidity caused an outbreak of urticaria between his thighs. Heat exhaustion was another cause for concern. The young man thought perhaps he would have been wiser to remain in Brisbane. Had he not visited Michellina the Mystic on that fateful day two weeks ago, he would not be confined in a squashy seat space on a modern day Garuda agonising about infectious tropical diseases.

On the miserable day when Marcas had finally decided the world would be better off without him and he would be better off without the world, he was procrastinating, waiting for the right moment, trying to summon the courage to jump from the Story Bridge, when a voice instructed him to go talk to Michellina the Mystic at the 'Rendezvous Tea Room'. Marcas had to obey the voices. The voices controlled his life. He had no choice but to see his old friend, so he

trekked back through the Valley and the crowds of coppers and shoppers to the Queen Street Mall until he reached the historic arcade with the corner chocolate shop.

He crunched up the creaking stair boards to the top floor of the arcade, wishing he had some money to buy a bag of liquorice allsorts; even a chocolate log would be nice. There was a display of antique maps showing the lost worlds in the window of the cartographer's shop, and at the 'Visions: Hair, Health and Harmony Studio', next door, the usual well-heeled women with designer handbags were leafing through magazines like 'Good Life' and 'Aura'.

Michellina did not seem at all surprised to see Marcas rounding the corner; she looked very composed compared to Marcas who arrived looking somewhat flustered and out of breath. He stood between the lace curtains of the doorway into the 'Rendezvous Tea Room'. Michellina smiled warmly and gestured for Marcas to sit down at the table. She handed him the deck of tarot cards Marcas knew she had purchased from Pollyanna's Curiosity Shop in Bohemia. He shuffled the cards like a seasoned poker player without saying a word. There was no need to say anything to Michellina. He knew she knew what exactly was going on in his life. Michellina understood Marcas, better than he understood himself.

He hummed 'Diamonds on the Inside' quietly; Michellina could not be interrupted when she was waiting for the spirit messengers to make contact. The young man looked at Michellina, deep in thought, studying the stacks of cards as a traveller might observe a timetable or a geographer, the topography of a foreign landscape. The gypsy woman had a map of the Cosmic Realm. No one else could venture there to see the magic she could see in her secret garden.

'Are you ready Marcas? Listen very carefully to what I have to say to you. The cards are never wrong. If this reading today does not change your outlook on the world, I will get my broomstick out of the closet and I will fly to the dark side of the moon never to return. I will eat

my hat,' she said. Her green eyes sparkled mischievously as she turned over the first of many cards.

Marcas liked Michellina's buttercup turban sequined with milky moonstones but he did not think it looked particularly appetising. He was alarmed to see an upside down man dangling by his feet from a set of gallows on the first card.

'Marcas, do not be alarmed by the picture on this card. There will be a New Moon resolution because the Hanged Man signifies new beginnings, rebirth. The time has come for you to let go of your fears. Stop living in the past, living in the past will always make you miserable. Be reassured, sweetness and light, new forces are about to enter into your life. You must make a conscious effort to stop tying knots – Gordian knots, in order to find harmonious unity.'

Marcas knew nothing about the practicalities of tying and untying knots. He never joined the cubs or boy scouts although he did teach himself how to do semaphore with flags he made from two large red handkerchiefs. He had never been a team player. The thought of camping on the North Shore with a bunch of boys in the presence of native dingoes, getting up in the morning feeling grotty and having to frizzle and fry eggs with bacon on an open fire in cyclonic conditions was not his idea of a good time.

Michellina turned over another card and when she did, the Death card was staring Marcas in the face. He glanced out the doorway across the arcade at the lost worlds in the cartographer's shop. Less than an hour ago he was stranded on the edge of the world; he really did want to end his life but finding the courage was fraught with 'what ifs'.

'Marcas, I am so pleased you decided to come and see me today. I know things have been exceedingly difficult for you. I also realise had you not heeded the voice today, you and I would not be seeing one another again in this world. The Death card is not as sinister as it may

appear; it also indicates the beginning of a fantastic new chapter in your life. Think of it this way, death is the moment when dying ends; when one door closes another door will open. There will be a wonderful opportunity. You must make a decision. Trust in your intuition. If you make the right decision, you will find yourself back on track and your dreams will come true.'

Michellina turned over another card. The diamonds on her rings on her fingers caught the light and the gypsy woman was encircled by radiant prisms; rainbows danced and floated around the tea room.

'Five of Cups. Marcas, you and I both know you are overwhelmed by a sense of regret for all that has passed in your life. Your melancholia is understandable. There is nothing worse than feeling lonely and abandoned. There is so much illusion and confusion in your life, but there is danger that you will lose all connection with reality, if you do not take advantage of an opportunity before the coming of the New Moon.'

'Hmnn. Ten of Swords. Pain and anguish. You have been very hurt. Those who hurt you did not set out to hurt you intentionally, they lacked understanding. One day you will find forgiveness in your heart. This card also tells us that you are about to face geographical and mental challenges, the lowest ebb in your life is not quite passed. But adversity is as important as providence. Failure leads to triumph eventually. Believe me; you do have the inner strength to cope with the challenges that will always come your way. The Ten of Swords is all about hope, and new beginnings. Sometimes it seems as if you are caught in a labyrinth of blind alleys but there will be light; you will find a way out of the darkness.'

'Sure', thought Marcas. *'The man with six swords, who looks as if he is rowing a gondola down the Ganges River, will suddenly reach the shore, desert his boat and come running, bringing with him a lantern so I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. Somehow I doubt it. Wishful thinking.'*

‘Marcas, are you still with me? Look carefully at this card; the Six of Swords represents travel and improvement. I see you on an island. On this island you will chance upon the Castle of your Dreams. Look out for a golden dome, statues dancing in the sky and the Queen of Quintessence in her temple on the sea of amerta. Amerta is the elixir of life, Marcas. When you drink it, you will be able to follow your dreams. Persevere.’

Marcas was not sure he really wanted all of his dreams to come true; when he went to sleep, his dreams were crowded with uninvited guests, he had to count ducks instead of sheep and the Queen of the Witches always made her presence felt when she stirred and scrambled him like curdled eggs. The prospect of these dreams becoming a reality was scarier than the thought of having to take medication to manage his schizophrenia for the remainder of his life. The Angel of Death was stalking him. She was biding her time. Eventually he would step to her side of the swinging swaying bridge. She would take his last breath and decant it into one of her hour glass vials to concoct evil potions to seduce young men, to steal away with their hearts in her cupped hands.

Michellina’s eyes shone when she turned over a card with four wands in a sunflower yellow sky.

‘Ah, to be sure, to be sure! Peace and tranquillity. Marcas, my boy, there is no doubt about it, you are going to prosper in a world of ideas, your wit will be admired and your artistic talents will be recognised. This is wonderful, Marcas. As is this ...’

Marcas looked down at the picture of a girl in a sea blue gown seated on a majestic throne; she reminded him of the Goose Girl in the Grimm’s fairytale.

‘The High Priestess is your trump card. Her presence today tells us the spirit messengers are waiting to guide you. The extraordinary powers of the Cosmic Realm are coming into play,’ declared Michellina clapping her hands with glee.

Marcas thought about the surrealist painters who realised there was another world; the world they found was ruled by the magical, the instinctive and the irrational. If he could find the gateway to this world, he could paint his dreams. He would have absolute freedom to devote his energies to his own miracles of creation like the famous artists from the schools of impressionism and surrealism.

‘Hmmm. Five of Pentacles. Trouble and loss. You are highly imaginative. Instead of generating anger fear or negativity when things are not going your way or as you would wish, make use of that marvellous imagination. You will find an outlet for your creative mind. You will paint your dreams. Continue to write your thoughts and ideas for paintings in your journal. There is someone who was important to you nodding with agreement as I speak to you. She is a pretty girl who has already passed over to the timeless place. There was grief, but you must realise although her earthly life is over, her Dream Journey continues in the Land of the Heavenly Souls.’

Marcas wondered if Michellina was talking about Amaryllis. Probably not. It seemed too far-fetched. He and Amaryllis had shared the best and the worst times of their lives. She was his ‘Moondance’ friend until she had died in horrific circumstances, and his heart had been broken. Marcas never wanted to see someone die in front of his eyes again; he hated the dark side of life. It was cruel.

He watched as Michellina turned over the Ace of Wands. A hand encircled by clouds of smoke was waving a sparkling wand in a silver sky but there were black clouds coming over the horizon and sweeping across the heavens.

‘The Ace of Wands supports the Five of Pentacles, the card of creation and fortune appears when the time has come to stop running widdershins. The Ace of Wands is the harbinger of good fortune for those who do stop.’

‘What do you mean by widdershins? Running around in circles? It sounds like an old fashioned barn dance,’ asked Marcos.

‘Marcos, you are the funny one. Widdershins is the opposite direction to the way of the sun, the moon and the stars. A shadow falls behind those who run contrary to the elements; the shadow of the person who runs counter clockwise will be caught up by forces of evil and something unlucky will be sure to happen. My precious boy, the time has come for you to follow the path of the sun, the moon and the stars. The planets are well aligned for you to find the right path.’

Marcos wished his life was as straightforward as Michellina made it all sound. She wasn’t the one with schizophrenia. It was not his choice to run widdershins nor did he like being caught up in the forces of evil. If Michellina’s cards were right, he would very much appreciate a modicum of good fortune in his life. He hoped Michellina was telling the truth, that she was not just pretending the cards were positive, to make him feel his life was worth living so he would stop thinking about the final solution.

He was not really sure if what was happening was real. Perhaps it was just further evidence of his deliquescing head. Delusional thinking. Hallucinations. He waited for Michellina to turn over the final card. It was a very romantic card. Two people were walking hand in hand through a rainbow up a winding road towards a castle in a fairytale.

‘The Lovers suggests a new emotional freedom. There will be love, beauty, perfection, harmony and friendship. The pretty young woman wearing a garland of forget-me-knots in her hair is waiting for you in the Elysian Fields. She is encircled by beasts of beauty from the days gone by. Perhaps she was someone you knew from school? I have something for you, Marcos,’ Michellina handed Marcos an envelope.

‘Thanks. What is it?’ enquired Marcas absently, as he pondered about the mysterious young woman in the fields. He often wondered what happened to Yolanda, the pretty girl with a mass of curly hair he knew in primary school who returned to Bruges to live with her father and a wicked stepmother in the Land of the Lacemakers. He recalled the words on her Valentine’s card.

Every time you look at me
My heart goes pitter patter
Please don’t look my way
Unless, I really matter.

Letters had been exchanged for a while but eventually petered out.

‘Come back Marcas. Open the envelope and you will see for yourself what is inside. Someone cares very deeply for you. I am sworn to secrecy, so do not ask any questions, just read the words on the card and think about what they mean. And then, my precious boy, you must make your decision.’

Michellina hummed the tune to the ‘Circle Game’ as Marcas opened the envelope. He discovered a beautiful card bordered with red and white hibiscus. There was a tortoise in the foreground. At the centre of the card, a king with a benevolent expression wearing a Tyrian purple robe embroidered with hyacinths and red rubies was standing knee-deep in a beaked vessel containing a crystal clear solution. He wore a crown of six-pointed stars feathered with the eyes of the peacock. In the background was a green hill with a building like a castle, the castle with a dome and dancing golden statues glistening like angels on the top of a Christmas tree.

On the top of the card the following words were inscribed in Roman script.

Who has the true Elixir, may impart
Pleasure to all he touches, and convert
The most unlikely grief to Happiness.
Virtue this true Elixir is.

Inside the card the words ‘The Uncanny is something one does not know one’s way about in and this is when the thinking must begin’ were written in well-rounded handwriting, handwriting Marcos thought he recognised. A piece of paper slipped from the card onto the floor of the ‘Rendezvous Tea Room’. When Marcos pushed his chair back and leaned down to pick up what had fallen to the floor, he realised the piece of paper was an air ticket to the Island of the Gods. Garuda Flight 616. Friday 13th August. 2300 hours.

Michellina would not disclose the identity of Marcos’s mysterious and generous benefactor. She said some things had to remain a mystery.

Captain Magic and the Golden Garuda

Hoping he had made the right decision, Marcas decided to get organised for the six and half hour flight to the Island of the Gods. Once he had squeezed into his seat, he opened his back pack. He put his scrapbook journal and a Black Watch tartan pencil case into the cobwebbed pocket on the back of the seat in front him. Then he removed his battered basket ball shoes (Size 11). Fortunately, the seat alongside him was vacant because Marcas was a very tall young man who needed every bit of available space to wrestle his cross country legs into a beige pair of very firm elasticised socks, special hosiery recommended by medical experts.

He was surprised how such a seemingly simple task should have such a high level of difficulty. He huffed and puffed as he unfurled and painstakingly teased the extremely tight socks up to his knees which speared into his chin in the exasperating process. When the fashionable socks were finally snuggled in place, he felt quite pleased with his efforts. Marcas was already pre-empting the occurrence of prickly heat rash and infectious tropical diseases like river blindness; he had no wish to be rushed to hospital with complications due to a deep vein thrombosis. He inhaled deeply. His chest crackled. His lungs were chockablock with phlegm. He had smoked his last cigarette outside the airport. Smoking was probably banned on the Island of the Gods. It was nearly everywhere else in the world.

Marcas did not have a stick of Ranglii Mouj incense handy nor could he sit cross-legged like the Dalai Lama on his seat, but as he had nothing else to do and everything was organised, he thought the time was right to practise his meditation skills. His relatively new routine was meant to be helping him let go of the unwholesome things that came into his mind. He was teaching himself how to remain calm under extenuating circumstances. One of the Hari Krishna devotees

who used to jingle his bells as he skipped up and down the streets of Spring Hill told Marcos if he did not let go of his negative thoughts and destructive emotions, he would never be able to feel the peace, space, and freedom, absolute stillness of mind. Marcos found meditating extraordinarily problematic because the slightest murmuring in the space around him distracted him from being present in the moment. He also found the practice of imagining unworthy thoughts drifting away like clouds across a blue sky became fairly boring after a relatively short period of time.

If only he could be more like Octavia Paz in his *Labyrinth of Solitude*; that wise philosopher who could transform tempestuous infernos into visions of paradise in the space of a paragraph. Marcos thought his words were a miracle of creation. He would attempt his own miracle of creation, if only for a moment or two, enough time to free himself from the depressing reality of his every day nightmare, or at least until the plane took off for the Island of the Gods.

He would put his higher powers to work imagining his own vision of paradise. *'Ohm. I am lying on my towel on the pristine golden sands of Sunshine Beach. There is no one else on the beach even though the surf is up and the sun is meltingly warm. My body, which is not very tanned because it has rained all summer, feels lovely and tingly, salty. I have just come out of the water which although cold, was invigorating. The kookaburras in the National Park are laughing; I wonder what it is in the forest that they find so funny. I dig my toes into the soft sand and I spread my arms out like a pair of wings. The ocean is washing backwards and forwards across the shore. There are no unwholesome thoughts in my head. Contentment is coming my way. The sea spray is carrying me out to sea. I am drifting away ...'*

The beauty of the place Marcos was conjuring from the memories of long ago was making him feel all was well in his world. As he felt himself floating out of his body and wafting into space, he wondered if this was the same great natural peace the Hari Krishna dude was always

talking to him about. How would he know? Everyone probably had to create their own version of Nirvana. Unfortunately, just as he was thinking the Nirvana he had created was very cool, it was doing the trick, Marcas was awakened from his blissful dream and brought back to reality by the sound of crackling.

He realised quite quickly the interference was the PA system on the Garuda plane. He opened his eyes, and, when he did so, he was startled to see various members of the cabin crew standing in the aisles kitted up in oxygen masks. For a fleeting moment, Marcas thought there had been some dreadful international incident. But he realised the stewardesses were demonstrating safety procedures to be carried out in the event of an emergency. He breathed a sigh of relief and he decided to pay attention. It was ages since he had flown overseas. Not since he was in Year Ten.

Marcas was apprehensive about being on his own with three hundred strangers entombed in a flimsy aluminium capsule fuelled by propane for an extended length of time. There had been endless discussion on the television news about the renewed threat of terrorist attacks, particularly on direct flights to Asia. Marcas was also bothered by rumours about planes not being well maintained due to lack of funding. He hoped the Indonesian Government was not guilty of cutting corners when it came to supervising safety issues on aircraft carriers. The PA system sounded dodgy.

Marcas glanced around at the other passengers. They all looked enviably relaxed, chilled out. Heads were buried in paperback novels, scrunched-up newspapers and Hollywood magazines. The corporate cowgirls wearing pin-striped suits were studying pie graphs on laptop screens. A glossy starlet beauty queen was arranging her sleep mask as her companion bemoaned the fact she could not continue knitting her matinee jacket. She had had to pack her knitting needles in her suitcase because they were considered to be dangerous weapons.

Judging by the relaxed mood of everyone on the aircraft, and the lack of attention to the safety procedures, it seemed fairly obvious to Marcas that his fellow passengers were either very *au fait* with the means for escape, or they had complete faith in the airline. The sight of the orange life jackets and the fact that the exit chute was located on an aisle a long way from Marcas's seat was beginning to make him feel tense.

He wished he was back in his own room at Pindari, the Salvation Army Refuge for homeless men. Room 2610 on the second floor was not especially salubrious, but Marcas always felt safe and secure once the doors downstairs were locked. The room was comfortable, and although it was against the rules, Marcas liked leaning out the window smoking cigarettes and listening to the sounds of the city. Sirens, the occasional blue between the hookers around the corner and the usual suspects; party animals blowing their whistles and skate boarding down the Cliff Street hill on their way to the accident and emergency department on the western side of the railway line. As he watched from his window he remembered his skate boarding days; he wished his life was still so carefree.

However, the cabin doors were secured and locked, the red lights were glowing on the flexible wings and the crew were buckling up swiftly on the folding chairs alongside the exits. They would not respond kindly to a hysterical passenger's last minute request to leave the aircraft. Nothing short of divine intervention was going to prevent Garuda Flight 616 from launching off into the midnight skies. Although he did not fancy the idea of being caught up in the eye of a cyclone called Circe or Calypso, nothing was going to prevent Marcas from flying to the Island of the Gods.

Although he felt sick in the stomach, Marcas willed himself to remain composed and calm. He prayed he would not be violently ill, because there were only photo bags in the seat pocket. His heart was pounding, any minute now he suspected he would feel the much-discussed

sharp pain radiating down his right arm. The thumping of his heart would surely alert the glossy starlet beauty queen. If she was not hiding behind her sleep mask looking as if she was sound asleep, she might just provide the last chance for his salvation. She would sense his distress and reach up to press the call button above her head. The crew would unbuckle their belts and come running; he would be escorted from the plane on a stretcher by compassionate paramedics in white coats, to an ambulance on the tarmac. Not that he really did want to go to hospital again, for the umpteenth time, but severe atrial fibrillation could give him an excuse to return to certain half-deserted streets, and the muttering retreats of restless nights in the Salvation Army refuge.

Marcas could see not even a masked terrorist wielding a Kalashnikov rifle was going to distract the glossy starlet beauty queen. *'Where I am, is where I am. Calm. No sense in sweating the small stuff. You are not off to run with the bulls through the cobbled streets of Pamplona. No one has recruited you to be a suicide bomber in Islamabad. You are not about to head a team of transvestites on an expedition to climb to the summit of Mount Everest in sub-zero blizzardous conditions.'*

It was all good. It would be all good. It had better be good. The Queen of Quintessence, the spirit messengers and a young woman wearing a garland of forget-me-nots were all waiting for him.

And Michellina's old university lecturer Pak Twalen was going to meet him at the airport, the man was going to be showing him the sights on the Island of the Gods. Marcas was apprehensive about the prospect of meeting a man who was a Perennial Philosopher as well as being a legendary shadow puppeteer, a man older than time, according to Michellina. Marcas wondered how someone could be older than time. He hoped his guide, who was obviously very well educated, would not ask too many questions and make him feel like a fool, and reveal he knew nothing about Perennial Philosophy. Whatever. He would just have to go with the flow

and hope to goodness everything worked out positively as Michellina's card reading had suggested.

Marcas contemplated giving the meditation routine another whirl, but astral travelling back to another perfect sunny blue day at Sunshine Beach to feel the great natural peace, never really worked very well without the mandatory stick of incense. The dodgy PA system would start up again the moment he settled back comfortably on his towel to listen to the ocean washing backwards and forwards up onto the golden sands. Nirvana was not the easiest place to find, especially on a crowded air-conditioned airplane. He would focus on not being sick. His mother had always told him not to attract attention to himself for all the wrong reasons.

Marcas yanked the black beanie he was wearing down over his eyes until the top half of his face was obscured by the woolly ribbed basque. Perhaps, if his stars were in transit with Mercury, and the planets were properly aligned with Venus, with Mars in another orbit, he would be lucky enough to fall to sleep, waking only when the Garuda touched down on the tarmac of the Island of the Gods. Not that he really enjoyed sleeping because when he went to sleep, he did not exactly have a good time in his dreams. He had to count ducks, not sheep like everyone else in the world. Just as he had reached the count of a thousand and one ducks with only three more rice fields of ducks to count, the ducks flew off in every direction. Mission impossible. Ridiculous. The Queen of the Witches was always waiting in the cruel sea, and he invariably found himself marooned on an island with razor sharp rocks and flaming oyster shells. His dreams went around and around in ever decreasing and dizzying circles, and he always woke up feeling disorientated and exhausted by the series of curious events in the company of colourful characters past and present. When he recalled his dreams in the morning, nothing made any sense to him at all, although as he transcribed them into his scrapbook journal, they became interesting stories. Once again he prayed those dreams would not come true. There are dreams

you do want to come true and there are dreams that you do not want to come true because they are incredible nightmares without happy endings.

Good grief. Marcas felt as if he had been born on the plane. He had been sitting in his seat for what seemed like an eternity and the plane had still not budged from the tarmac. It was going to be an interminably long night. Marcas wriggled his legs to see if there was any circulation to his toes. His legs were being pressed through a Victorian laundry mangle, squeezed to death by an invisible Boa Constrictor whose sole mission in life was to inflict pain until the blood supply to his legs was totally terminated. He wondered if his toes were turning a whiter shade of pale blue. His balance would be completely stuffed if he had to have his toes amputated.

Once again his thoughts were interrupted, this time by a high-pitched squealing satelliting directly above his head. He wondered if there were terrorists in the cockpit and the unidentifiable noise was some form of new-age torture deliberately broadcast to send passengers into a soporific state of total submission. The unnerving sound finally abated and Marcas was enormously relieved to hear the voice of the pilot.

‘Good evening. Thankyou for your attention, my name is Captain Gusti Sihir. The crew and I would like to take this opportunity to welcome all passengers on board Garuda Airlines. I apologise for the delay in our departure time, however, air traffic control have assured me clearance will be given by ground staff for a take-off at the stroke of midnight. Refreshments will be served once we have reached our cruising speed at an altitude of 40,000 feet. We trust you will enjoy the flight to the Island of the Gods.’

Marcas’s ears pricked up. He yanked the beanie from his face and he sat bolt upright in his seat, not believing what he had heard. Having studied Bahasa Indonesia at school, he knew the Indonesian word for ‘magic’ was ‘Sihir’. Fantastic. He was on board a flight to the Island of

the Gods with a pilot called Captain Magic who had used the fairytale phrase ‘at the stroke of midnight’ to describe the time of departure. ‘At the stroke of midnight’? Like hello? A regular kind of pilot would have said ‘at midnight’ or ‘after midnight’. What was happening?

Things were never as they quite appeared in Marcas’s life, so he wondered if he had accidentally boarded the wrong flight. He hoped this would not be the case; he would be hugely disillusioned if, after six and half hours in the air, Captain Magic announced the flight was a magical mystery tour, one of those surprise trips that transport unsuspecting travellers, to out of the way destinations; tumbleweed towns with ghosts in Ned Kelly country, one horse hippy towns like Traveston or Bordertown in South Australia. Marcas had no wish to spend time in a cobwebby museum displaying rusting farm apparatus left over from the wild colonial days.

He was accustomed to strange happenings; schizophrenia made differentiating between what was real and what was fantasy virtually impossible most of the time. Marcas could only pray Captain Magic was not suffering with the same complaint. It would be dreadful if the plane disappeared off the radar because the pilot could not fathom the tangents on the satellite navigation screen.

Michellina would say whatever happened was Divine Intervention. The gypsy woman said everything that happens in life is predetermined by interconnecting forces of nature, supernatural phenomena and paranormal circumstances as yet unmeasured by science. She was completely tuned into the fantastic world of cosmic signs. Her astro-passage was always on track. When Marcas lost sight of his astro-passage, it was always Michellina who helped to guide him back on track. She taught him to read the signs; she told him to maintain the faith, the ever present spirit messengers in the Cosmic Realm were always ready to lend a helping hand.

According to Michellina, it was not everyone who could read the signs. They were there for everyone to see and read, but most people were either too blind or too caught up being busy

and self-centred to recognise the significance of unexpected coincidences. Ladders leaning against walls, candles that re-ignited, fantastic and wonderful things like black cats on foot paths, four-leaved clovers in camomile lawns and fairies at the bottom of the garden were indications of the presence of a world ruled by the magical, the instinctive and the irrational.

There were those people who believed Michellina was a witch. Some said the woman, who was always singing the following words,

‘And the seasons go round and round
And the painted ponies go up and down
We’re captive on a carousel of time
We can’t return we can only look behind
From where we came
And go round and round and round
In the circle game.

... was a kooky flower power hippy who migrated from Nimbin when real estate prices soared. Marcas did not care what others thought of Michellina. To him, the love, peace and happiness woman was like a fairy godmother.

Marcas often wished he was a witch with a magical nose like Samantha from the television series called ‘Bewitched’. It would have been helpful during his tiresome boarding school years. He would have used his powers to cause his foes to trip over their overgrown feet, micturate during chapel whilst taking communion or wake up with a premature onset of alopecia. But as Michellina once said to him, ‘Your foes will trip over their own overgrown feet without you wasting precious spells seeking revenge. Mark my words.’

Marcas was on his way to the Island of the Gods, where, according to Michellina, supernatural events influenced the lives of the inhabitants every day because the island was inhabited by gods, demons and human beings. She told Marcas the people were experts at moving backwards and forwards with ease between the seamless worlds of the seen, conscious world called *sekala*, and the unseen, subconscious world called *niskala*.

The spirits of the ancestors were always present; they visited the earthly world all the time, bringing with them their magic to make the world a more harmonious place. Marcas had heard stories about the virginal Sanghyang dancers who moved like angels, once the spirits entered their bodies. When the men reached a trance-like state, they could stab at their naked bodies with swords without causing injury or drawing blood. Michellina's friend, the talkative Pak Twalen, who was going to meet Marcas at the airport, was apparently a legendary puppeteer; and it was said that the puppeteers on the Island of the Gods could call the ancestors down to their white cloth rectangular screens in the form of shadows. Marcas was intrigued by the concept of trance, the pre-Hindu tradition that dated back approximately 3,000 years. He hoped he could meet some of the artists who could only paint once they had attained enlightenment by entering a trance-like state.

He had heard so many stories from Michellina about the Balinese way of life. It was reassuring to know a place existed where people welcomed and graciously accepted the presence of spirits from the Cosmic Realm, the world of the unseen. Supernatural happenings were part of their life's great adventure. It was nothing out of the ordinary for the people to go into a trance and to ascend into the heavens so they could spend time with the spirits of the ancestors. The practice was an everyday occurrence, especially for those who were engaged in creative pastimes.

It was something Marcas did all the time, but unfortunately his spirits were not benevolent. It was not the same as collecting stamps or Phantom magazines, nothing like skate

boarding or peering through the lenses of microscopes observing fleas performing circus acrobatics on glass slides. Meeting up and talking with people who did not exist in the earthly world was not everyone's cup of tea. There were very few people with whom Marcas could share his thoughts and his incredible dreams, both real and fantastical. His schizophrenia had made him a very private person; he had to guard his secrets because so few people understood the extraordinary nature of his illness. The intrusion of the unknown into the context of real life caused confusion in the minds of most people. He had learned that those who knew the laws of nature hesitate when they are confronted with apparently supernatural events.

Marcas did not like sharing his thoughts with sceptics, or unimaginative dullards. He liked open-minded people like Michellina, the creative thinkers and intuitive human beings who were receptive to new ideas; supernatural happenings, the power of Divine Intervention and the existence of a Cosmic Realm ruled by the magical, the instinctive and the irrational. It was in Marcas's interests to believe his journey to the Island of the Gods was pre-ordained and he would find a way to exist harmoniously in the real world without losing sight of the fantastical world.

He was desperate for change, sick of the demons he had lived with since primary school. Marcas thought everyone heard the same voices in their heads. Michellina had told him recovery was possible, because this trip to the Island of the Gods was the start of his Dream Journey. She told him to think about the Hero with a Thousand Faces who said, 'If you follow your bliss, doors will open for you that wouldn't have opened for anyone else.' Marcas suspected even if he did follow his bliss, the doors he found would be locked tight and he would have lost the key. He was always losing things, especially keys. The taciturn sergeant major with a handle-bar moustache in the office behind bars at 'Pindari', the Salvation Army refuge in Spring Hill was always admonishing him for losing the key to his room, Room 2610 on the second floor. It was

not his fault the pockets in his trousers were full of holes. They came out of a Lifeline bin, after all.

When Michellina gave Marcas the envelope with the air ticket, he had no clue as to the identity of his mysterious benefactor but he did know he had no choice but to accept the gift. He had to go away from all that was familiar in his life, to spend time in solitude amongst spiritual human beings in an ancient paradise so that he could see things as they really were in order to find peace and harmony. The Island of the Gods would make a change from his old way of life scrounging around the streets of Brisbane. And it would be nothing like his childhood town named after a mythological Greek Goddess; where he first met Michellina.

The railway town was one of those peaceful country places where nothing exciting ever really happened apart from the annual rodeo and the Saturday night drag races between Ford drivers and Holden hoons up Panorama Drive revving their engines to the base of the mountain. The arrival of the reticulated Parrish blue library van was the highlight of Marcas's week. He did not have access to a computer with the internet in primary school, so each week he had to go and borrow books for school assignments.

He remembered his SOSE teacher had given him the top marks for his assignment on the ancient Garuda. Marcas was good at drawing so he carefully copied a picture of the fantastic bird from Hindu mythology onto the front cover of his work. It took him ages to draw the seventeen feathers on the wings, the eight feathers on the tail and the forty five feathers on the neck of the giant bird. He used water colours to paint the bird's white face with an eagle's beak, the crimson wings and the body which was the body of a man had to be painted sunflower yellow. It was meant to be gold but there was no gold in Marcas's humble paint box. When his teacher handed back his work, she told him it was well and truly a symbol of creative energy just like the Garuda. He was pleased to find High Distinction stamped on the back page.

The bird featured on the Indonesian coat of arms is holding a banner in his talons. The inscription on the banner (which is an old Javanese motto) means 'Unity in Diversity'. Marcas had never really believed human beings with individual beliefs from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds could ever really be truly united even if the Garuda did have magical powers. The governments of one hundred and ninety-two countries across the globe would have to agree on a mutually beneficial timetable to share the bird. There would be too much toing and froing for the creature who would have to eat fried noodles with Bok Choy in Bangkok, goulash soup in the Black Forest and hashmagandy stew whipped up with witchetty grubs in the Australian outback. Each country would have to sign an agreement so no country could utilise any more than their fair share of the bird's magical powers.

Marcas had read that those people who worshipped the bird on the Island of the Gods would have the effects of poison eliminated from their bodies. He was not sure how the metaphysical detoxification process really worked, but once he had mastered the trance routine, he decided worshipping the Garuda would be next on his list of 'Things to Investigate' on the Island of the Gods. He was pretty sure his body had more than its fair share of toxins, given the multifarious cocktails of chemicals various doctors had prescribed for him over the past five years to help him manage the symptoms of his schizophrenia, the drugs he was sure had actually exacerbated his depression.

The medication had embarrassing side effects like an insatiable appetite, massive weight gain, tremors and jerky movements, mask-like facial expressions, dry mouth, blurred vision and muscle rigidity. On occasions, when Marcas suffered severe reactions to his medication his neck would go into spasms and he could not breathe because his tongue had swollen and was blocking his airways. Not being able to breathe made him panic, and panicking made the terrifying situation worse. The side effects from the anti-psychotics, mood stabilisers and anti-depressants

mostly made Marcas feel more depressed because he could not sleep, he kept forgetting things, he was always misplacing room keys and articles of clothing and his ability to be spontaneous in the company of other people was zilch. Making decisions was always an ordeal. No one could really see what was going on in Marcas's thoughts, apart from the demons, so eventually his friends or the people who he once thought were his mates started avoiding him. Finally, he had none. He felt as if he did not exist. Everyone said he was a basket case. That really hurt his feelings. Marcas always wished people were not so cruel. He was still a human being with feelings even though he had schizophrenia. He hated being rejected, perceived as a tragedy on shaky legs, some sort of feral Bogan with no chance of redemption. Once he located a Garuda temple on the Island of the Gods, he would dispose of his medication. It would give him a great deal of satisfaction to flush away his 'mother's little helpers'.

Surely, the Balinese had built temples to worship the Garuda when he flew back from the heavens with the elixir of life. The bird had to steal the potion from the gods which was quite a feat. It was kept in a grotto, guarded by a furnace, a snake and a wheel of turning knives. The Garuda sucked in the sea-water and extinguished the flames of the furnace, he then ate the snake and he managed to make himself as tiny as Thumbelina so he could slip through the knives on the spinning wheel.

The Garuda was then made the steed of Vishnu, the Preserver of the Universe who comes when the world is threatened by forces of evil. The bird was also rewarded with the gift of immortality for his courage and the brave deed which saved him and his mother from a life of slavery. It was a pretty tall story but it did have a happy ending. Marcas liked happy endings; he fervently hoped his life was progressing towards a happy ending. It was about time.

It would appear the signs were all good. It was Friday the 13th August. Marcas was on board a modern day Garuda on his way to the Island of the Gods, Captain Magic had clutched the

gear sticks and focussed his eyes on the satellite navigation screen. In four days time, Marcos would no longer be a teenager. His birthday would coincide with the anniversary of Indonesia's Proclamation of Independence, the 17th August in 1945.

Life was indeed uncanny, Marcos pondered. The surrealists were right when they realised there was a Cosmic Realm ruled by magical, instinctive and irrational forces. As he listened to the snoring sounds of his fellow travellers, Marcos wondered if anyone else on the plane had schizophrenia. Or if there were other people like himself, who when they went to sleep, woke up in the same phantasmagoria; a Byzantine dream of past, present and future events in a native and exotic landscape, peopled with characters from fairytales, literature, real life, and those he had yet to meet in another place at another time. Eventually his eyelids started to close, and, lulled by the purring of the aircraft engines, Marcos drifted off into a deep sleep.

Hell's Gates

The pre-dawn chorus of the Kingfisher kookaburras in the Noosa National Park woke Marcos from his dreaming. The raucous rainbow lorikeets were feeding on the nectar amongst the bows of a spidery red-purple grevillea outside his bedroom window. He was tired but he could not go back to sleep. The house was quiet, so he decided to get up and go for a walk. He would take the Tanglewood Track to Hell's Gates. There, on the point he would watch the sun rising above the bluff around the corner from Dolphin Point and the Fairy Pools.

A koala crossed his path and clambered up into the fork of a eucalypt tree as the sleepless young man crunched along the leafy track with a rafter of scrabbling scrub turkeys past a candelabrum of banksias through the vociferous forest of natives. He crossed an arched bridge above the paperbark swamp; he wandered up through the glades of She-oaks across the open eucalypt woodland. Lace monitors scuttled around behind the Black Boys in a rainforest of Piccabeen palms.

The wintry white sands of Alexandria Bay numbed the soles on his feet as he made the first footprints of the day on the shore. The waves rushed backwards and tumbled forwards bringing gifts from Easter Island. The pearly shells shone like pink diamonds in the pre-dawn light. Hermit crabs made holes in the sand; they disappeared beneath the surface as they sensed footsteps encroaching on their territory.

He reached the end of the beach and wound his way up the steep track towards the top of Hell's Gates. The sun was just beginning to spread her golden wings across the cerulean sea. A gam of humpback whales was migrating north to Rainbow Beach. The surf was up and the sea was a sparkling spectrum of shimmering azure-blues tipped with quicksilver, curling white tops; a pathway of pink petals, phosphorescent in the sunshine stretched from the horizon across the foaming shores of Alexandria Bay.

Marcas stood very still. He imagined a thread running from his head to the heavens. He allowed the weight of his body to drop to his feet and he lifted his arms so they floated palms down gently above his head. On the top of the cliff hundreds of metres above the churning seas of Hell's Gates, on a glowing pink and orange morning, he calmly practised his Tai Chi. Green hawkbill turtles bobbed around the rocky outcrops in the water metres below. Sea eagles dived for coral trout and trevally. He was moving slowly and mindfully into the rhythmic flow of the 'White Crane Spreads Its Wing' routine when behind him there was a rumbling; pebbles, stones and rocks began to roll down the slope, gathering momentum, spinning from the edge of the hazardous cliff down far below into the sea. Seagulls screeched. Bumblebees buzzed, ants scurried away and butterflies trembled above the fluttering leaves of paperbark trees leaning over the edge of the world.

And Marcas yelled because his feet shot forward and he fell backwards. The landslide of rocks and rubble gathered him up and he felt his long legs being carried down the slope towards the precipice of the cliff. He grabbed at the clusters of branchlets and reddish-gold pendulous needles on a twisted native tree but they were coated in pollen and damp with dew, too slippery for him to keep his grasp. He slithered and slipped. He slid and skidded and eventually he went head over heels, he was somersaulting through the air until finally, disappearing over the edge of the world into the dancing rays of sunlight. Down down down he went through the sea spray,

until he splashed head first into the bubbling broth of a churning cauldron, Hell's Gates, and disappeared beneath the waves. He came up for air but he was caught in a current and the tide carried him away, dragging him down beneath the pounding seas. He struggled to plough to the surface but he could not; his neck was going into spasms, his tongue was swelling, and he was gasping for breath. He could feel the strength leaving his body, he was about to perish in the Gates of Hell. His body would be washed ashore like a bottle without a message.

The Queen of the Witches with her long tongue lolling, human entrails draped around her scrawny neck, and grotesque stained shark's teeth protruding from her cackling blood red lips, waved a white cloth when Marcas arrived. She stirred and scrambled him like curdled eggs in her steaming slime green broth of toes of frogs and wool of bat, he could smell the fetid breath of black dog and the root of the poisonous hemlock. The liquid boiled, steam rose from the freezing cauldron and fish tails flapped. Tentacles wrapped around his legs, he was caught in a vice. He kicked and gulped and swallowed bucketfuls of salty brine. He wondered if his 'once upon a time' story with a sad ending would begin fast-forwarding through his mind like 'Gone with the Wind' before he lost consciousness.

Marcas dissolved into nothingness and his spirit left his body. He was soaring across the skies above the vaporous breath of the amorphous ocean. The young man drifted above the Pandanus palms and the Black Boys, the pearly pink shells by the ocean and the sands of Alexandria Bay; he stared at the sea foam as the waves washed his footprints from the cold but golden sands now bathed in sunlight. He was being ferried into the streaming light of a brand new day, into the mystic, far away from all that was familiar and he wondered what was next. But just as he had resigned himself to the possibility, that there was no life after death, the Land of the Heavenly Souls did not exist, it was a mythical place, he heard the hearty voice of a tenor

singing, “Mister Bluebird’s on my shoulder, It’s the truth, it’s ‘actch’ll’, Everything is ‘satisfactch’ll.’”

A radiant light like the circling beam of a lighthouse flickered capriciously in a fairy-like iridescence on the horizon. Marcas watched, imagining this must be the light at the end of the tunnel. It became brighter and brighter; the faint silhouette of a person swinging a burnished copper lantern tip toed across the ocean towards him. As the figure drew closer and Marcas finally saw the person quite clearly, there was something almost familiar about the whiskery chap with a droll eye and round face shiny as a full moon. The comical-looking character was smiling and waving, he signalled to Marcas to follow him and, because he had no place else to go, he traipsed along behind the good-natured man. He followed him through waist-high whispering grasses onto a track until they arrived at a flowering arbour of red and white hibiscus.

At the end of the arbour, there was a white coral lichgate embedded in an ancient wall cobbled with river stones and rubies. Marcas watched in disbelief because his guide, the man he thought was going to be his saviour and show him where to go and what to do next simply melted into the white coral of the lichgate. He was obviously a magician. As Marcas waited for the man to reappear with a clutch of white doves shouting ‘Abracadabra’, he looked up at the top of the gateway and he noticed the pergola was entangled with arching woody bracts of prickly bougainvillea, a variety he recognised as ‘Superstition Gold’. The dense mass of intertwining climbers; daisy chains of Drunken Sailors with bunches of frilly tangerine flowers, the creamy white Chalice vine and a pink Chain of Love with wavy heart-shaped leaves were clambering each and every way up, over and beyond the ancient wall into a secret garden.

The young man continued to wait; he could hear a choir of song birds singing sweet melodies on the other side of the wall. Marcas’s curiosity got the better of him so he decided the only way to find out what was on the other side of the wall was to go through the gateway. What

had become of the magician with the magic lantern? Perhaps he had met with a mishap and was in need of help. Marcas tried to unlatch the lichgate, but the solid coral was fastened, locked tight with stranglers of poison ivy, it was a charm bracelet pieced together with skeleton bones. He peeked through a luminous teardrop at the heart of the gate and there he saw the secret garden; a courtyard jam-packed with an abundance of tropical flowers and bordered with well trimmed hedgerows of happy plants. Honey eaters and humming birds quivered above tinkling pink Angel's Trumpets and tangerine parrot beak heliconias. Bat lilies, Morning Glory and magenta Bachelor's Buttons were clumped together in garden beds underneath the pure white moon flowers; the massive blossoms were opening, twirling and twisting their dainty tendrils through the Dead Man's Fingers, a frangipanni shrub bursting coronets of buttery yellow and hot pink petals.

A pair of black swans was swimming under a Japanese bridge. Marcas could see a water temple in the middle of a lake; the milky sea of amerta was brimming with plump golden carp. Water lilies blue as forget-me-nots and lotus flowers; tall stalks with round leaves and networks of microscopic hairs, seed pods like wasps' nests and white flowers waved to him in the breeze. Guardian statues under a Banyan tree, grinned impishly. The tree, taller than Jack's beanstalk, was an intricate arrangement of aerial roots.

Marcas was amused by the antics of a funny white monkey with googly eyes who was playing hide and seek with Black Giant Squirrels, Pink-necked Pigeons and Wreathed Hornbills in the branches; mossy boughs with blood red epidendrums and Spider orchids nodded at Persian blue caterpillars who were scrupulously spinning silken cocoons. A beautiful paradise tree snake was coiled in the fork of the Angel's Trumpet. She was polishing her scales with spittle as the ostentation of peacocks, cooing and calling, paraded the eyes on their lavish tails amongst Drunken Sailors on the top of the ancient wall. Marcas wondered if he was in heaven. It was

hard to know what was real when you were captured in a world of believable fantasy, especially when the eyes on the peacock tails were blinking and winking and nodding like flowerpot men in an Irish fairytale.

The air was still and sticky, perfumed with the sweet fragrance of a thousand and one flowers as well as the scent of the sandalwood sticks smouldering on sugar palm shrines. Smoke spiralled, and in the twists and curling smokiness, Marcas glimpsed a gold-leafed doorway, and in the doorway, sitting astride a snow white goose, there was a slender young woman swathed in amber beads. She was clasping a blue water lily in one hand, and a manuscript in another hand. In her fourth hand she was playing sweet music with a precious musical instrument like a harp embedded with raspberry red rubies and wisp-like clusters of seed pearls and moonstones, milky and opalescent.

‘Welcome to the Land of the Heavenly Souls, Marcas Oswald. My name is Saraswati, I am the Queen of Quintessence, the goddess of knowledge, wisdom and the arts; music, speech and poetry. Please, be careful. If you break a branch belonging to the Banyan tree, the cosmic tree of life will die. If the tree dies, your spirit will always hover unhappily in limbo suspended between the visible and the invisible worlds. The ancestors in the Land of the Heavenly Souls are waiting to guide you out of the labyrinth so you can be re-incarnated back into the Cycle of Life. They will abandon you forever if you destroy the cosmic tree. You will never attain enlightenment or peace of mind.’

Marcas’s brilliant plan to scale the wall by climbing along one of the overhanging branches of the Banyan tree to enter the courtyard of tropical flowers was foiled. So he gingerly examined the charm bracelet of skeletons on the white coral lichgate. Although he was cautious, the poison ivy stranglers pricked his finger. Ribs, clavicles and humerus bones, scapulas and knuckles, skulls with eye sockets and hundreds of wee white incisors came loose and toppled,

disintegrating when they touched the earth. The ground around his feet was blotted with scarlet red pools of blood. He looked at his hands, the tips of his crinkly fingers were stinging and the palms on his hands were wet, blood trickled. Cold cold blood poured from his open wounds.

‘Tjak-a-tjak-a-tjak. Tjak-a-tjak-a-tjak. Tjak-a-tjak-a-tjak.’

What was happening? Marcas swivelled around to see where the chanting was coming from and, behind him in the flickering of a burnished copper lantern against a purple sky, appeared five or six circles of a hundred or more men dressed in black and white chequered loin cloths; gleaming mahogany bare-chested men with dreaming faces, red hibiscus flowers tucked behind right ears, coronets of frangipanni above left ears all chorusing ceaselessly, jabbering and chanting, fluttering their fingers, raising their outstretched hands to the heavens. Rippling muscles on writhing bodies pouring with perspiration swayed from side to side in perfect unison.

‘Tjak-a-tjak-a-tjak. Tjak-a-tjak-a-tjak. Tjak-a-tjak-a-tjak.’

And then there was silence except for the howling of a black dog like a lonesome coyote lost in the faraway. ‘You are not worthy, you are not worthy, you are not worthy. Abandon hope all ye who enter here.’

‘My brain drives me insane, ballistics and missiles of horrible thoughts crash me every time. I am unclean, a libertine and without you I am nothing. I am nothing. The same Placebo song keeps playing ‘Summer’s Gone’.

‘Marcas do not despair. You must not abandon hope until you find the castle with the golden dome,’ whispered Saraswati softly.

Marcas groaned inwardly. He usually woke himself from his recurring dream at this stage of the story. However, on this occasion, the unexpected sight of a Komodo dragon seated on either side of a palatial Italian marble archway breathing flames of fire through clouds of turquoise smoke caught his attention. Through the archway, was visible a long road winding up towards a green hill not so far away, with something glistening in the clear blue cloudless sky on the crest of the hill. Although shattered yet again by the same old harrowing journey through the Land of Nod, Marcas knew he had to find out what was in front of him. He had to see if the castle Saraswati had mentioned really did exist. Was it the Castle of his Dreams?

In the blink of an eyelid, after much tossing and turning in his confined squashy aircraft seat, Marcas got comfortable and then he set off up the winding road. Before he knew it, he was standing in front of a castle topped with a golden dome. Statues holding sparklers silhouetted against the moonlit sky pirouetted in unison around the circumference of the dome. Fantastic.

He was not ready for his dream to end, and so he continued up the highly polished marble stairs with wings of topaz studded with star sapphires and moonstones. He walked through an open doorway into a clerestory hall of celestial windows and sunlit walls; the walls were lavishly adorned with elaborately golden framed paintings of whimsical pictures and erotic works of art; sensuous women reclining naked on chaise-lounges, temple dancers in trance and oriental temptresses, tantalising teapots with suggestive spouts and portraits of charming virgins with doe-like eyes were smiling beguilingly into Marcas's hazel brown eyes.

He was entranced, he was irresistibly drawn into marvellous dreamscapes of snow-covered mountains and melting clocks, fried eggs with sunflower yellow yolks and pawns moving across chess boards, giant ebony ants and seagulls hovering above unclothed figures dancing on the satiny white shores of beaches in wastelands of tors and red rocks overshadowed by black rain clouds were illuminated by a series of down lights on the frescoed ceiling. Marcas

liked the way the lights made the flashes of lightning seem real. He could almost hear the crack of thunder when he examined the artful way the artist had applied daubs of silver paint with flecks of gold leaf to create the perfect effect. The dog with scabby open sores was still tearing at chunks of rotting flesh. A giant hand sprouting from the earth clasped a cracked egg and a white flower with dainty felt-like petals. Marcas recognised the lugubrious naked young man crouching gazing upon his reflection in the still waters of the mirrored lake.

Then he shoved his hands in his pockets; he sauntered away from the dreamscapes in the gallery towards a spiral staircase. The first circle of stairs descended onto a landing with a casement window; the panes of glass patterned with miniscule mosaics of stained glass reminded him of the Resurrection window in the ‘Good Shepherd’ church of his childhood. On the windowsill caught up in cobwebs, was a tortoiseshell kaleidoscope. Marcas wanted to pick it up but he did not like getting up close and personal with venomous spiders. And the spider with a grey tail was one of the flesh-eating varieties his mother watched out for when she was planting the seeds for sweet peas beneath the trellis on St Patrick’s Day. He had no wish to have his necrotic skin tissue debrided in a hospital bed waiting for pretty nurses to check his pulse and to deliver sanitised plastic bottles on a four hourly basis.

On the wall alongside the windowsill there was a portrait of a handsome man with Spanish eyes and a curling black moustache. The plaque on the wall above the painting read, ‘My Castle of Dreams’. Marcas was grateful he had heeded Saraswati’s propitious warning about the cosmic tree of life. The voices in his head had to be obeyed.

Marcas cranked a bronze winder to open the casement window, and as he did so a sprinkling of colour spilled across the sky until the majestic mountain he could see in the distance was beribboned with rainbows. He looked across the countryside, and he saw flocks and flocks of ducks dilly-dallying along the levee banks through the canals and channels in a maze of

terraced emerald green rice fields. He glanced sideways to his left but his heart sank, because there were swirling rapids cascading through a steep ravine downwards into a deep green forest of tangled vines and creeping leeches.

Marcas was further alarmed at the sight of the primitive foot bridge suspended across the Y-shaped valley. The angel of death with the twisted smile was stalking him; she was waiting for him on the other side of the bridge. If the woman in her cloak of blackbird feathers and the staring eyes of peacock tails appeared, he wondered if he would have the courage to reject her wishes, or would he relent and follow her down to the timeless place. Marcas could not see her but he could hear her wailing, 'Come away with me, come away with me, come away with me.'

He had to stop dreaming the same dream, he was going around and around in ever decreasing circles and he was being driven mad, he was not ready to run to the edge of the world and jump off into space because he was frightened of the unknown. He had to wake up before the angel of death returned, but as he began to rouse himself from his nightmare he heard Saraswati's angelic voice calling him back to her world.

'Marcas, you must count the ducks so you can continue up the stairway to heaven. At the top you will find the doorway to a garret and, in this garret, your dreams will come true.'

Saraswati had been correct about the Castle of his Dreams. He had to obey her wishes. He would ignore the angel of death when she next appeared. He would count the ducks. Marcas looked through the Resurrection window at the ducks dilly-dallying around in a relaxed manner on the banks of the terraced emerald green rice fields. The task did not seem impossible. So once again he concentrated and he began to count the ducks but he had not made much progress, when the white water rapids rushing through the valley distracted him. He started again and again but he was constantly deafened by the sound of the river of silence. He recommenced his counting but he could not remain focussed, he could not keep count of the ducks.

Eventually, frustrated by failure, Marcas felt like bursting into tears. He had had enough of the dilly-dallying ducks and the endless challenges in his young life; he was sad and broken-hearted because he desperately wanted to reach the top of his Castle of Dreams to find out what was behind the door of the garret. How would he ever know if he could not do something as straightforward as count a bunch of ducks? There were too many obstacles in his life. He was totally over everything. The whole situation was too depressing for words, but on the other hand, what other alternative did he have given the fact that he had no place to go and no one special to meet? And before too long he knew the stewardess or the crackling interference of the PA system would inevitably wake him from his incredible nightmare, his Byzantine dream.

For the final time, he started once again to count the ducks. He persevered and he double-checked in an attempt to get the count perfect. He had to get something right in his life. Marcas had made enough mistakes. He was sick of being a loser. Finally, just as the young man had reached a count of a thousand and one ducks with only three more rice padis of ducks remaining, a mysterious darkling of mist crept upwards and out of the valley onto the fields until the enchanted realm, the fairy tale castle was shrouded in the breath of the river of silence.

Fantastic. The ducks were now no longer visible. Marcas waited crossly. The whole exercise was exasperating. There was nothing else for him to do but wait until the mist cleared so he could fulfil Saraswati's wish. The mist did disappear, it disappeared quite quickly but when it disappeared, the ducks disappeared. He watched on in disbelief as they flapped their wings frantically as if they were all being shooed away by the scarecrows in rags and feathers fluffing around with invisible dusters. The wretched ducks scurried and ran and took to the skies on their wings, they flew in all directions until the rice padis were bare as Old Mother Hubbard's cupboard.

Marcas sat down halfway up the stairs with his head in his hands after they had gone, feeling completely defeated, with no idea what to do next as he sat in a daze. Finding the Castle of his Dreams and discovering the stairway to heaven was wonderful but now he was stuck halfway up the stairs like Christopher Robin; he was not at the bottom and he was not at the top and there were all sorts of funny thoughts running around in his head. He wasn't really anywhere, he was somewhere else instead and there were demons running widdershins inside his head.

He did not need ducks joining the party with all the other uninvited guests. He never wanted to see the ducks again. He hoped they had flown off to the other side of the world into the Bermuda Triangle never to be seen ever again. He was not good enough at maths to be a quantum cryptographer so why on earth would he want to count dumb ducks dilly-dallying around in rice fields. What was the point of the exercise? He may as well abandon hope and remain where he was halfway down the stairs, not at the bottom and certainly not at the top. What else could he do when all that he could hear was the black dog howling like a lonesome coyote lost on the Pedernal in the faraway? He started to cry. He was embarrassed.

'There is no need to feel uncomfortable, Marcas. You can have a weep but you must never abandon hope. Patience. You have to go to a hard place to find a good place. Have faith. Believe in yourself. When you have learned life's hardest lessons you will discover the room that has been prepared for you. You will be able to paint while the nightingale sings and your heart will be content. Trust in me.'

Marcas choked back his tears. He pulled the beanie down over his ears but he could still hear Saraswati as she continued to talk to him and as he listened to her kind words he began to feel comforted by her presence.

‘The garret at the top of the stairway to heaven is a perfect artist’s studio set aside especially for you with everything you will ever need to express your ideas and depict your dreams. There are Chinese boxes of colouring pencils and water paints in every imaginable colour, more colours than all the colours in the real world. An adjustable magnifying glass has been placed on a bookcase. The bookcase contains every book ever published in the world about art and artists. There are reams of crisp white paper in Imperial measures. Blank canvasses have been placed on handcrafted Huon pine easels. Georgian oils, crystal containers with clear spring water and tumblers of turpentine, a clutch of clean white rags, and palette knives of the finest quality have been supplied for you. Sable brushes are propped in ivory pots studded with pearls and rose red tourmaline. Trust me, the time will come for you to pick up one of those precious brushes and you will be able to paint because your dream has come true.’

‘*Sure. Like an illusion of painters!*’ Marcas thought woefully. He stretched the basque on his beanie further down until half of his face was covered in the woolly blackness. He felt sorry for himself. He thought he deserved to wallow in self-pity because there was no one else in the world who was going to feel sorry for him. He did not set out to be a loser, being a failure was worse than being stirred and scrambled like curdled eggs. It sucked. He wished there was someone to wrap their arms around him and tell him he was loved, to reassure him things would get better. His mother used to say he was just going through a bad patch. Things always got better. Well, things had certainly not got any better and the bad patch was more like an extended life sentence, he may as well be locked up in solitary confinement with the Birdman in Alcatraz, he thought as he yanked the beanie from his head. Marcas pressed the tips of his fingers through the sharp bristles and massaged the skin on the top of his scalp. It helped relieve the pressure in his head.

Marcas looked up through the blur of his tears across towards the windowsill at the spider. The spider with the grey tail was no longer a flesh-eater; it was an absolutely exquisite Golden Orb spider. She was threading a golden needle with a silver thread so she could continue spinning her silken Y-shaped web. Marcas got up from the step he was sitting on and cautiously he began gently disentangling the delicate stitches that encircled the spider's sticky cocoon to retrieve the tortoiseshell kaleidoscope. He would look through the lens to see if the ducks had returned, or if there was something different happening beyond the Resurrection window. Marcas put the optical instrument to his right eye and rotated the object chamber and as he did so, the world outside the stained glass window came back into focus, but once again there was the Queen of the Witches.

He was back at Hell's Gates in the place where his Byzantine dream had all begun; his circuitous nightmare was beginning all over again. 'The flesh of a white man is always a treat, the cannibals say it is gamey and sweet,' chanted the witch with the stained red shark's teeth and lolling tongue, the human entrails draped around her scrawny neck as she continued stirring and scrambling him like curdled eggs. Once again he could smell the fetid breath of the black dog. He was drowning in the dross of the Witches' brew. Each time he thought something good was about to happen, everything went wrong again. There was a riot going on in his head. He knew exactly what would happen next, and sure as eggs, it did. The golden bird with the beak of an eagle, but the wings of the Death Moth, swooped down from the skies and grabbed Marcas's shoulders, the bird plucked him out of the steaming cauldron of poisonous hemlock.

He could feel the golden bird's thorny talons digging into his collar bones, the bird pecked at Marcas's hands and his palms began bleeding; icy cold blood rained down from the heavens as the bird bore the young man up, up and away through the rolling clouds of thunder in a black sky. Shards of glass and daggers of lightning illuminated the way as the pair swooped

and flew through the atmosphere. The sky was crazing with silver like smashed and scattered mirrors breaking on bathroom floors. The bird clutched the boy and Marcos looked down at the tiny island where he knew the bird would dump him. The bird nose-dived, and predictably Marcos was abandoned on the island amongst vicious rocks and flaming oyster shells, crinkled shells edged with razor sharp blades.

He tried to move his legs in the elasticised socks but he had pins and needles in his feet. They were numb and the flesh on the soles of his feet was torn to shreds, making it impossible for him to move. He was paralysed with fear because blood was flowing from the spaces between his toes; the icy cold blood was still pouring from the open wounds on the palms of his hands. His bleeding shoulders were scratched and raw where the golden bird's thorny talons had penetrated his flesh down to his collar bones.

He wished he could wake from his incredible nightmare, but the banshees and phantoms and ghosts who were devouring his spirit would not set him free. He was tormented by the faceless fiends. They were stealing his ideas and broadcasting his thoughts over the sound waves as the tide continued to rise around the island. The waves were crashing over the rocks, and Marcos, drenched by the waves of quicksilver, wept blood, sweat and tears because there was no escape. He was stranded. The ravenous sharks silently circling, waiting patiently, ready to strike, would tear him to shreds if he dared step off the rocks into the treacherous dark blue sea. It was always the same; he had no safe place to hide, or to seek refuge. He was isolated on an island at the edge of the world.

'You are not worthy, you are not worthy, you are not worthy. Abandon hope all ye who enter here,' the voices screamed. And Marcos screamed back at them but his voice was silent, no one could hear the young man; he was trapped in an incredible nightmare.

‘My brain drives me insane, ballistics and missiles of horrible thoughts crash me every time. I am unclean, a libertine, without you I am nothing. I am nothing. The same old Placebo song keeps playing ‘Summer’s Gone’.

The scatter was back. Powerless to prevent what was happening, Marcas could not stop weeping. There was so much grief because he was lost and he had lost so much; his family and his friends, his hopes and his dreams, and now he was losing his mind. His brain was being dashed against the rocks; he was being driven crazy by the voices in his deliquescent head. All he wanted was to be left alone in peace but the sharks were circling, circling and circling, waiting for Marcas to make a move. There was no way he could even consider attempting to swim back to the safe shores with the pearly pink shells on Alexandria Bay. He would have to wait for the angel of death and walk with her to the other side of the bridge down into the valley, the jungle of tangled vines and creeping leeches into the timeless place.

And so, for him, there was no stairway to heaven, the stairway and the fantastic artist’s studio were just an incredible dream, an extraordinary illusion. In the words of Michelangelo, ‘I saw the angel in the marble and I carved until I set him free,’ Marcas could not carve himself free because his brain was deliquescing, melting. It was only a matter of time before he would disappear into the ether. It was as inevitable as death, closing your eyes and taking the last breath.

Marcas gradually began to regain consciousness; he was disorientated when he woke up and realised he was still safely on board the Garuda and that the plane would be landing shortly on the Island of the Gods. He felt like the wreck of Hesperus. He wriggled his feet to check the circulation. His toes seemed to be moving, which was a positive sign. He did not like having pins and needles or numbness in his extremities. The rattling of cups on saucers and the pungent aroma of percolated coffee brought the young man completely back to his senses. Marcas

hurriedly wiped the damp patches from his cheeks with the back of his sleeve. He watched the stewardess pushing the breakfast trolley into the galley. Fantastic. He had missed out on breakfast. The stewardess had obviously decided he needed his sleep. *'Too kind,'* he thought. *'Ah well. That's the way the mop flops.'*

He shoved the blind up on his window, and when he did, he was overjoyed to see the sun shining in an azure blue sky on a brand new day. Once again he had escaped from the island and foiled the angel of death, the Queen of the Witches was no longer stirring and scrambling him like curdled eggs in the cruel sea, the island with razor sharp rocks and flaming oyster shells surrounded by circling sharks in murky waters was just the same old recurring dream, an incredible nightmare.

He wished Michellina was with him. He wanted to share his dreams with the gypsy woman. She would be fascinated to hear about the Komodo dragons, and his meeting with the Queen of Quintessence, sweet Saraswati sitting astride a goose with the snow white feathers. Michellina was always interested in Marcos's dreams. Even if he had not successfully managed to open the door to the garret at the top of the stairway to heaven in the castle of his dreams, Michellina would have commended his efforts. *'Well done, my precious boy. You did your best'*, she would have said in her gentle voice as she squeezed his arm. She would have reassured him the hideous apparitions in his dreams were not real; they were illusions; figments of his over-active imagination, symptoms of his schizophrenia.

Michellina would have been able to explain the meaning of his dream. The woman with her psychical powers could interpret the psychological significance of dreams and their hidden meanings in the flash of colour, in the sparkle of a star – instantaneously. Marcos loved the clever way she was able to transform his recurring nightmare into a classical fairy tale with a happy ending.

The irritating crackle of the PA system once again interrupted Marcas's sentimental musings. Captain Magic was back on the airwaves.

'Good Morning. This is Captain Gusti Sihar speaking. We will soon be beginning our descent onto the Island of the Gods. The local time on arrival at Denpasar airport will be eleven minutes past eight in the morning.'

Everyone was busy retrieving bags and banging overhead lockers, locating lost shoes; shaggy sheepskin Ugg boots, patent leather Mary Janes and patently unstylish winklepickers hiding underneath the seats. The glossy starlet beauty queen who had emerged from beneath her sleep mask, was applying a luscious shade of magenta to her lips. Marcas figured she was probably heading off to a Globe Theatre to tap dance her way through the Time Warp in the Rocky Horror Show. Immigration cards were being filled out with ticks in the right boxes; passengers were double checking seat pockets for bits and pieces, personal belongings, passports and penny dreadful historical novels about tragic family sagas which could not to be forgotten in the excitement of the moment.

The plane was racing down the runway towards a mirage on the hot bitumen tarmac. Marcas watched as the chutes leading into the terminal building got closer and closer. The aircraft finally swept to a standstill and the moment the seat belt signs were switched off, everyone rushed to their feet. Marcas struggled to collect his thoughts, to find his land feet and, in doing so, he narrowly avoided banging his head on the overhead luggage locker. The aircraft floor was littered with the flotsam and jetsam of a six and half hour flight from West to East.

Marcas tagged along behind the other misshapen pasty-faced passengers with mussed-up hair, halitosis and the unsteady gait of Western heroes shuffling like somnambulists from another planet. He was thankful to step from the aircraft into the chute which led to the Arrivals Terminal Building. He was exhausted by the night's activities. He was hungry. All he wanted

was a long hot shower with a fresh bar of Lifebuoy soap followed by a steaming plate of French toast swimming in proper maple syrup. He hated feeling grotty and grubby. But hey, Captain Magic obviously knew what he was doing with the satellite navigation system because the plane had now landed safely on the Island of the Gods. Now all Marcas had to do was find Pak Twalen, or more to the point, Pak Twalen had to find him. *'Let the fun and games begin,'* he thought as he trailed along behind his fellow travellers.

He caused some consternation in the snaking queue when he stopped midstream to put on his headphones en route to the visa stamping desk. There were no songs of comfort, but no one else was to know his second-hand Discman was out of charge. Marcas prayed the screaming voices of the demons would not make their presence felt when he was presenting all the correct documents. He hoisted the baggy cargo pants up over his hips and rubbed his eyes. He took three deep breaths which not only made his lungs crackle, but also made him feel incredibly light headed. He steadied himself; he had to maintain his composure until he stepped outside into the fresh air on the Island of the Gods. He did not want to draw attention to himself by fainting before he went through the revolving doors to start his big adventure which would probably get underway with a rickshaw ride to the Village of the Artists.

'All good. Fantastic. Cool bananas. Calm. Tempo, rhythm, let the blood flow. Prepare a face to meet the faces that you will meet. Let us go and make our visit. There is nothing to fear but the fear of fear itself. Go with the flow. Where I am, is where I am, so chill out, Marcas, there is absolutely nothing to be gained by sweating the small stuff. Stop stressing,' he muttered repeatedly as he mooched along amidst the muddling masses swarming towards immigration counters, baggage carousels and customs officers all waiting for the honeymooners, the holiday makers, the surfer Joes and the culture vultures.

The Island of the Gods.

Marcas could see the antiquated airport was in the throes of a major renovation. Heavy duty wheelbarrows with well-weathered splintery wooden handles were piled high with slushy wet grey cement. Imposing pillars of clinker bricks strategically positioned in tottering towers were balancing precariously outside the handicraft shops waiting to be deconstructed and reconstructed. An aroma of teak pervaded the terminal building. Marcas's fellow travellers all seemed to know where they were going, so he tagged along like a proverbial cow's tail at the end of the line through the arcade of shops devoid of customers. Radios played while shop assistants dozed, liquorice black heads snoozed on glass counters alongside green tubes of Darlie toothpaste, 'Who Weekly' publications and scrolls of ubiquitous Mentos mints on cardboard pyramids. Wooden faces of carved gods grinned at Marcas from walls of rolls of batik fabrics, butterflies in glass frames and richly patterned silk sarongs. Languid workers with gingham turbans stood around puffing on strange cigarettes with a curious cloying aroma. Prehistoric handwritten signs with a series of red arrows indicated a detour which led the travellers through an ingenious construction of corridors and temporary tunnels, a criss-crossing of bamboo scaffolding fastened with rope fashioned from coconut husks fraying at the edges.

The official at the immigration desk studied Marcas's passport photo. He asked Marcas to remove his beanie. Marcas obliged, and when he did, the official looked somewhat surprised by the sight of the young man's shaven head. The young men who came from the West to visit the Island of the Gods usually had musty dreadlocks or sticky-out blonde hair bleached by a lifetime of sun and catching waves. The official waited while Marcas fiddled nervously with his headphones. Marcas wished the batteries were as advertised, ever ready and everlasting. The official probably thought he was a terrorist or a drug courier or maybe a man with cancer in remission off to Camp Quality. Whatever. Marcas knew he no longer looked like the bright-eyed boy in his passport photo.

The photo had been taken at the end of a summer holiday on an uninhabited island. Marcas remembered how perfect life was in those days. There was nothing to worry about sitting under the shade of the She-oaks piecing together jigsaw puzzles with his family during the heat of the day. One day in centuries to come forensic archaeologists would be scratching their alopecic heads and combing their ectoplastic beards with wrinkled fingers as they puzzled over the lost bits of the Ganges River and the tricky rooftops with hundreds of ginger bread tiles that all looked the same even though every jaggedy piece was different. Every segment had a special place to belong once the corners and the frame were in place.

Marcas was beginning to feel decidedly uncomfortable under the studious gaze of the serious official. The man, who looked like he should have been in the Hibiscus Retirement Village editing academic papers on the psychology of terrorists continued to look perplexed. He glanced backwards and forwards, forwards and backwards trying to equate the passport photograph of a bright-eyed boy with longish sun-bleached hair with the distracted young man of shaven head, who was shuffling around on the other side of the counter, ear phones dangling, looking as if he was responsible for the theft of 'The Scream' from the National Gallery in Oslo.

Marcas was tempted to put his beanie back on his head but he had no desire to provoke 'agro', much less trigger an international incident that might cause him to be incarcerated with the Bali Nine or terrorists like Amrozi in the local lock-up. Bang. Bang. Bang.

The official stamped a page in the passport and nodded. Marcas's entry to the Island of the Gods had been approved. His belongings were a source of amusement for the khaki-clad men with pistols in holsters, rollicking around on the other side of the conveyor belt at Customs. Michellina's brown paper package, tied up with string, was X-rayed. Marcas did not look at the screen. He liked Michellina's surprises. The young man's back pack was emptied and his belongings were searched for contraband. Marcas hoped he would not be escorted off to the local

hospital to have the contents of his stomach photographed in the radiology department. He had no magazines with salacious centrefolds of bosomy women in animal print g-strings to be confiscated. His medication was given the all clear once he produced a letter from his general practitioner. Marcas was free to enter the Island of the Gods.

He was not prepared for the extreme humidity on stepping outside the air-conditioned terminal. It was as hot as Hades. The sun was blazing and the moisture in the air was almost drinkable. Denpasar was an open-air sauna. Marcas left his black woolly beanie in the pocket of his cargo pants. He had no idea what to do or how he would recognise Pak Twalen, the legendary puppeteer. He stood admiring the energetic porter boys smartly attired in crisp powder blue shirts and long black trousers who buzzed up and down the concourse with luggage trolleys. Blue Bird and Silver Bird taxis were pulling up in front of Marcas.

‘Transport, Pak?’ ‘Transport, Pak?’ ‘Where is it you would like to be going?’ ‘I can be taking you for the very cheap price to a quality hotel at Kuta.’ ‘You will be needing me to show you the sights?’ ‘I am the number one guide for taking you on the round trip from Tanah Lot to the monkey forest with a visit to the wood carvers and the silversmiths for the best price. How much would you be wishing to pay?’ ‘You can do the bargaining with me and we will both be agreeing on the best price so that I can be your guide. Please, how long will it be that you are staying on the island? You will wishing to do the white water rafting?’ ‘Our very own Elvis will be shaking all over at the ‘Heartbreak Bar’ in the ‘Graceland Tavern’ this week. And you must be joining in with the Parade of the Monsters. It will be Nyepi Day.’ ‘Are you looking to be making purchases of the designer watches or the guaranteed authentic French perfume for your sweetheart because it will be pleasing me to accompany you to the shop belonging to my brother? It is not too far from here.’

Designer watches, French perfume, monkey forests and Elvis shaking in his Blue Suede Shoes with a Parade of Monsters and a Yippee Day. The cacophony of voices was all too much for Marcas at nine o'clock on a boiling hot morning in Denpasar. He was perspiring, melting and dripping like a caramel Paddlepop on a summer's day. He seriously contemplated retracing his steps into the terminal where he would find some compassionate person with loads of money to pay for the next Garuda flight back to Australia, wherever it was bound. If he wound up in some other state, he could always hitch a ride back to Brisbane or the Sunshine Coast in a wicked Kombi van with a bunch of blonde headed stompie wompie real gone surfer boys, backpackers from Mumbles in Wales with Raggedy Ann dreadlocks singing along to 'Good Vibrations' on superior sub woofers.

Marcas was miles away trying to ignore the persistent taxi drivers and guides when someone tapped him on the shoulder. He turned around to see an exuberant man, portly, with a droll eye, grinning directly up into his face.

'Good Morning. Welcome to my country. You are Mister Oswald. Yes. Let me introduce myself. My name is Pak Twalen. I am very pleased to meet you. We will shake hands because while you are on the Island of the Gods, it will be both a pleasure and a privilege to be your guide. You will see things you have never seen before here. I will make sure your dreams come true on my island paradise. How was your flight on our famous Garuda?'

Pak Twalen enthusiastically shook both Marcas's hands for an extended length of time; a tad too long, thought Marcas.

'Pleased to meet you, Pak Twalen. The flight was fantastic. No drama. Thankyou. I read an article about the Dragons of Komodo.'

'Ah yes, these prehistoric creatures, notorious for being voracious man-eaters, are only found on two islands East of Bali in the Indonesian archipelago. The species is in danger of

extinction; however, tourism has become a vital way of raising awareness and protecting these endangered dragons. They are the largest of all the monitor species. Do you know the name monitor actually comes from the Arabian word for lizard, which is *ouaran*? This translated to *waran*, was confused with the German *warnen*, meaning ‘to warn’; thus, it is said that the monitor is one who admonishes or warns,’ announced Pak Twalen.

The erudite man with the face shiny as a silvery moon and jet black eyes almost hidden by whiskery unkempt eyebrows (that reminded Marcas of a famous Australian prime minister) nodded. Marcas felt as if he had met Pak Twalen someplace else, at another time under different circumstances. But he was probably just tired, disorientated by the flight from Australia, and the time lag.

On the other hand, perhaps all this talk about Komodo Dragons was a sign. He hoped it was not an omen suggesting something bad was going to happen to him on the Island of the Gods. He wished Michellina was with him with her psychical powers, her mystical connections to the invisible worlds. She would instantly know whether or not the Komodo Dragons signified adversity or good fortune.

There was definitely something funny going on because on the previous evening, just prior to his departure from ‘Pindari’, that mickle of a man, Arthur Stace, had told Marcas to look out for the dragons. His mate had told him to watch where he was walking, because there would be mischievous dragons hiding in the undergrowth on either side of the jungle paths. According to Arthur many tourists had vanished without trace into the thin air of dead-end ravines whilst exploring the impenetrable jungles on the slopes of the holy mountain. The old guy usually knew what he was talking about because he spent most of his waking hours studying the skeletal remains of prehistoric creatures in the Queensland Museum. He said grave psychic risks would await those travellers who chose to depart from the intermediary world of human beings and

other living creatures to venture into the supernatural realm of the spirits. 'Look out the dragons don't drag you off into Eternity, it is not a tourist destination you can come home from in a hurry,' he told Marcas. Marcas wondered if Arthur was joking; the man who had a quirky sense of humour was often difficult to understand. His mate was always asking Marcas, what does a monkey know of the taste of ginger? Marcas had not managed to work out the answer to that question. It was a bit like the Indian proverb which says when you are discussing elephants don't bring up yams.

Marcas sighed. There was so much he did not understand. So many questions and not enough answers, and sometimes he felt as if his time would run out before the protective ozone layer of the earth's stratosphere dissolved into nothingness.

'Mister Oswald please wait here for me while I attend to some business. Ten minutes, maybe more or maybe less, but not so long that you cannot be enjoying the sweet fragrance of the frangipannis on this glorious day.'

Marcas watched Pak Twalen as he bustled off to join a throng of people inside a general store. He could see bottles of Bintang beer and bamboo baskets with packets of roasted peanuts, bunches of squat Lady Finger bananas and all kinds of gooey cakes, lemonade pies and biscuits iced with psychedelic cream and sprinkled with hundreds and thousands. The sight of food was making his stomach rumble.

As Marcas waited, he continued to melt. Pak Twalen was probably talking and stocking up on munchies for the road trip up to the Village of the Artists. He wished he had his music to listen to. The flight from the West to the East had been without untoward drama, almost boring apart from his incredible dream, and the classic 'Candid Camera' show on the comedy channel. Marcas was now tired and hungry. He was oceans away from Brisbane and Michellina, and all

that was familiar. He felt strange and disorientated but also as if somehow he had been here before – like he had come home, but how could this be?

He thought about ‘Pindari’ and the succession of sad nights spent grimly heating tins of baked beans on a single burner in the kitchen on the second floor, in the company of desolate men with neglected hearts and cold hands on sagging pieces of donated furniture, comatose as another tragedy unfolded on the evening news.

He thought about the days he spent at the ‘Crossing Borders’ cultural event in the Queensland Art Gallery, keeping warm, and the letter he had composed for his parents at Lee Mingwei’s ‘Writing the Unspoken’ exhibit. It was tucked away between the pages of his scrapbook journal. The Taiwanese artist had set up a contemplative space corresponding to Buddhist meditation positions equipped with pens and writing paper for gallery-goers to write letters to the living or the dead, to express messages of gratitude, insight and forgiveness. The most important things to say are sometimes the hardest. Marcas hoped his family would appreciate his words of gratitude and they would forgive him if they received his letter because his retreat to the Island of the Gods had not worked out. Michellina would understand.

As he waited for Pak Twalen to re-appear, Marcas imagined that by now Michellina would be sitting in the ‘Rendezvous Tea Room’. She and her lady-like sister Bronwyn would be enjoying a third cup of tea. In an hour’s time, the customers wanting to have their fortunes read would start to arrive; Bronwyn would take orders and allocate numbers with her whispery voice. She called everyone ‘poppet’. There was no charge for a reading. Michellina’s gift for predicting the future was complimentary, inclusive of the price of refreshments. Bronwyn had been running the ‘Rendezvous Tea Room’ for twenty-five years. She sewed the lace curtains with white satin sashes on the arcade window to create an intimate atmosphere of privacy for the customers, many of whom had become close friends. Each week Bronwyn laundered the lace

doilies with starch, dusted the sprigs of lily-of-the-valley and replenished the stack of *New Ideas*. She always made Marcas toasted triangles of asparagus and cheese. Sometimes he wished he could sample the flaky Sao biscuits spread with Peck's Paste or tuna, topped with a slice of tomato, even the famous pumpkin scones with strawberry cream and clotted jam, but he did not wish to upset the applecart of Bronwyn's ritual.

Marcas wished he was back in the cool of the 'Rendezvous Tea Room', enjoying his usual refreshments waiting for his number to be called. The back of his tee shirt was drenched with perspiration even though he was standing under the eaves of the terminal building. Pak Twalen was certainly taking his time stocking up on munchies. The Blue Bird and Silver Bird taxi drivers and the guides continued to bombard him with questions about transport to Kuta, the authenticity of the designer watches and perfumes from Paris, Elvis singing about suspicious minds and wooden hearts in the 'Graceland Tavern' and the necessity for him to attend the Parade of the Monsters. Once again he considered putting his beanie on and pulling it down over his eyes and ears, but he knew that would be impolite. After all, he was a guest on the Island of the Gods. Someone might think he was acting suspiciously like a terrorist, and the police would be called and he would be hauled off in an official vehicle with a siren blaring, prior to being interrogated at length in the Department of Foreign Affairs. Damn and blast it all. The mysterious benefactor who had provided the air ticket would have a lot to answer for if this overseas trip turned out to be a diabolical disaster.

Marcas remembered Michellina's parting words at the airport, 'Have faith, Marcas. The Gods will guide you as you make your Dream Journey. The time is right, you have everything you need. You will be just fine. "Everyone has a treasure that awaits him. Wherever your heart is, there you will find your treasure." Everything is copacetic!' Everything is copacetic was Michellina's favourite saying. Just as Marcas's favourite saying was 'fantastic' even though his

life was far from fantastic. Right now he wished it was fantastic, because if it was he would not be on the Island of the Gods. He would be doing all the normal stuff like working or studying, sharing apartments and going to parties with a group of friends, friends he wished he had not lost when his symptoms became too obvious.

He hoped Michellina would still be able to join him for his birthday. She always kept her promises; he just hoped a natural disaster like a tsunami would not interfere with her travel arrangements. He wanted to hear her singing the 'Circle Game' song about painted ponies captive on a carousel of time again. Marcas loved the old Joni Mitchell song. It was one of his mother's favourite songs.

'I said it would not be long for you to be waiting. Thankyou, you have been most patient, Mister Oswald. Please accept my apologies for the delay in our departure to Tempat Merak. You must be thirsty. I have bought you a bottle of special water.' Marcas could not see any munchies. Pak Twalen had the 'Bali Times' newspaper tucked under his arm. Marcas graciously accepted the drink even though he felt slightly disappointed.

'Fantastic. Thank you very much,' said Marcas who was starting to feel hot under the collar. Almost tense. The water looked like water. What was so special about the Wos Spring Gorge brand?

Pak Twalen's love of worldly pleasures, forbidden foods and drinks, was obvious given the ample size of his girth. The puppeteer was kitted out in a black and white chequered sarong teamed with a white Nehru-style Indian caftan, and on his leathery brown feet he wore a pair of scuffs. A twirling white head cloth tied with individual flair made the man with the bushiest eyebrows and the shiny round face look like an ensorcelled prince stepped straight from the fairytale pages of the Arabian nights. Where was his burnished copper lantern? Was he really a

priest who could exorcise evil spirits? Perhaps the Perennial Philosopher *was* a direct descendant of the good King Rama?

Pak Twalen did not look older than time, quite the opposite; the man who was, (according to Michellina), a story teller, musician, scholar, comedian and social worker, as well as being an ordained priest able to incarnate the dancing Hindu god called *Shiva*, responsible for acts of destruction and creation, set off at a cracking pace. Marcas loped along behind him feeling like Gulliver from the Land of the Giants. He had to hurry to keep pace with the very accomplished man as he zig-zagged through a crazy parking lot crowded with cars and tourist coaches. Horns honked. Horse-drawn carts jangled with bells. Horse hooves clippity clopped alongside bicycles. Mechanically-minded motor cyclists revved their engines. A continual stream of Blue Bird and Silver Bird taxis were bumper to bumper with the tourist buses and transit vans piled high with surfboards and suitcases with bows. Expectant faces looked out the windows. Inspid-faced holiday makers wagged their tongues as they waited for the traffic to start moving. Everyone was anxious to check into their resorts so they could don togs and sarongs, before getting into the Bali mood with tropical cocktails; Almost Heaven, Mango Daiquiris and Uluwatu Sunsets. There would be soothing aromatherapy massages alongside free-form pools on the beach front prior to excursions to the night markets.

School girls wearing crisply ironed white shirts with navy blue box pleated skirts and polished black shoes rode side saddle on scooters steered by school boys. The young couples tangoed in and out of the traffic as if they were dancing with the stars. A policeman adept at semaphore, waving his white gloved arms and briskly directing streams of traffic, reminded Marcas of a marionette in the Nutcracker Suite. A piercing whistle pressed to the policeman's pursed lips blew continuously, even more shrilly when a local bus whimpering along, belching filthy fumes, came to a grinding halt bang in the middle of the congested road. Passengers,

(including chooks crowded down the aisle of the bus), all looked quite relaxed and happy, completely unfussed by the pandemonium.

Pak Twalen stopped zig-zagging and he paused alongside a Matchbox pick up truck with a tin roof painted with sunflowers and love hearts. The hilarious bomb of a vehicle had three wheels and an open back with two wooden benches. Marcas assumed Twalen was out of puff, in need of rest after racing through the car park. However, he realised very quickly this was not the case. Much to Marcas's consternation, the contraption was evidently Pak Twalen's mode of transport, thus his mode of transport also. The trip to Tempat Merak in the mountains would be a novel adventure in a hippy vehicle powered with a recycled lawn mower engine. Marcas, who was expecting a rickshaw, was unimpressed with his guide's mode of transport. It did not look roadworthy, much less very comfortable.

'This is my *bemo*; the *bemo* is one of the key vehicles for transportation on the Island of the Gods. Please be my guest and make yourself at home in the front cabin Mister Oswald.' Pak Twalen took Marcas's back pack. The bag, albeit with care, was tossed into the back of the vehicle.

Marcas could see there was no extra room for a back pack in the cabin but he could only assume that his worldly possessions would survive the journey. There was barely any space in the passenger seat. He manoeuvred himself into a tight squeeze with all the accomplishment of a rusty contortionist, wishing he was not quite so tall with such long legs. His body was organised as best as possible on the seat without springs or cushion. He had his knees wedged under his chin and an excellent view of the road ahead because his face was not far from the windscreen; his head was pressed against the roof and finding someplace to rest his arms constituted quite a feat. He wished he had thought to take off his elasticised socks in the airport terminal. They looked ridiculous and felt even worse in the heat.

Marcas eventually got settled although there was no hope of any further movement. A floral arrangement was balancing on the seat between him and Pak Twalen. The coconut palm leaf, folded and stapled to form a basket, was spilling over with salt, grains of rice, creamy flower petals and the faces of marigolds. Marcas thought it looked like something a funeral director would place on a rosewood casket. He suspected it was somehow connected to Pak Twalen's religious beliefs so he was very careful not to disturb the mysterious arrangement. He did not want to incur the wrath of the invisible gods in the Land of the Heavenly Souls, or trigger a cataclysmic event before they set off for Tempat Merak.

Pak Twalen lit up one of those pungent cigarettes, the same as the workers were puffing in the airport. The curious aroma of cloves reminded Marcas of green apples stewing in his grandmother's kitchen at 'Linga Longa' in the Blue Mountains.

Pak Twalen obviously had a penchant for collecting crispy cicada chrysalises; dozens were neatly arranged according to size and stature on the dashboard like a battalion of funerary servants above an Egyptian tomb. Marcas's nostrils twitched and his stomach lurched. A rancid smell of dead fish, dried anchovies or something equally disgusting wafted from the glove box and Marcas felt nauseous. He gagged. He prayed he would not be sick in the cramped cabin. He should have souvenired one of those photo bags from the back of the seat on the plane.

'We can be sharing our stories as we journey to Tempat Merak high in the hills west of Ubud. Ubud is the Village of the Artists. You will see.'

Marcas was desperately trying to quell a rising desire to vomit, not that he had much in his stomach, having missed out on breakfast. He could barely breathe with all the smoke so there was not much chance of him opening his mouth, much less talking, sharing his story with this unusual man in his Nehru-style Indian caftan and a black and white checked sarong. The design

on the fabric of Pak Twalen's stylish skirt-affair reminded Marcos of the shopping bags his mother brought home full of surprises after a day in the city with her friend Marliese.

Pak Twalen scrummaged around in the top pocket of his safari suit jacket. 'Aha!' He produced his trusty lighter and, with a sense of occasion, the man with a droll eye proceeded to light a stick of incense protruding from the glove box. Pak Twalen turned and beamed at Marcos. He put on a pair of James Bond wraparound designer sunglasses with mirrored lenses and then turned the key in the ignition. Nothing happened.

'Fantastic. This will be interesting.' Nothing happened and Marcos waited. *'As if! Great start to my Dream Journey!'*

Pak Twalen was vanishing as clouds of smoke continued to fill the cabin now turning into a Kamoado cooker for smoking meat. Marcos suspected before too long he and Pak Twalen would spontaneously combust. They would be reduced to a pile of cremains in the crazy car park. Breathing was impossible. Winding down the window could only improve the situation. However, when he managed with difficulty to locate the handle, it went around and around and around until it snapped off, falling irretrievably between the door and the seat. Some previous traveller suffering with emphysema had probably broken or at least loosened it in a fit of apoplexy.

Pak Twalen was still clicking the key in the ignition. Nothing happened. *'What a dud. Dodgy.'*

'Thirteen is the lucky number. You will see. Wait.'

'Sure. Fantastic. Thirteen is like totally lucky, especially on a Friday. Today is Friday the 13th August. All we need now is a Komodo dragon or perhaps a black cat to cross in front of the vehicle. A ladder leaning against a wall would be good. If Michellina was here she would be

in her element. She would be talking about Magical Realism and signs and things happening for reasons.'

Marcas wondered if he had made a huge mistake. Huge mistake. There were too many signs and he was not convinced all the signs were promising.

As Pak Twalen turned the key, Marcas counted, and, much to his amazement and relief, on the thirteenth turn the engine roared to life. The motor reverberated like the grunty engine of a V8 super car. Pak Twalen's *bemo* was powered by a force far greater than a recycled lawn mower engine. The vehicle, filled with aromatic clouds of smoke, rocketed off around the front of the collapsed bus, narrowly missing the policeman wearing white gloves who was still blowing his whistle and waving his hands like a toy soldier in the Nutcracker Suite.

Pak Twalen crossed three lanes of traffic and puffed on his cigarette as he wound down his window, skilfully negotiating a hairpin bend into a side street lined with colonial shops with overhanging verandahs and shutters painted purple and shocking hot pink above doorways etched with Chinese characters. The street was full of money changers, surf shops and gold dealers. Now that the window was wound down, the smoke was beginning to clear and Marcas could see glass display cases glittering with snake chains, bangles, earrings and rings, jade charms and rows of Hindu gods in pure gold. Outside on the pavement in front of the shops, silky pyjama-clad merchants with silver smiles sat at round tables weighing ingots on sets of scales, calculating and conducting financial transactions with wooden abacuses.

Bicycle contraptions with seats on wheels and striped awnings festooned with flowers and sprigs of greenery were parked higgledy piggedly down both sides of the road. The cyclists were sleeping, long spindly ostrich-legs were splayed across the seats. Transistor radios blared. Tom Jones was singing 'The Green Green Grass of Home'. A Hairy McClairy dog with one leg

missing hopped out in front of the speeding *bemo*. Pak Twalen blasted his horn and the mongrel yapped and grimaced before slinking off the road into the sunshine on the kerbside.

Hawkers tossed noodles and prawns in steaming woks blackened with age. Marcas could smell chopped onion and slices of garlic sizzling above the open flames. Snake beans and bundles of bok choy, cabbage with carrots and Bird's Eye chillies were stacked alongside strands of noodles, Willow Pattern bowls of peanut sauce and alabaster eggs marbled like onion paper. His stomach rumbled.

Pak Twalen's humble vehicle bounced up and down through a series of laneways. Even though Marcas had done all the rides at Dreamworld on the way to the Gold Coast, he could not recall such a hair-raising excursion. His legs were perspiring in the stupid elasticised hosiery. He was wedged in position on a sticky seat with a bird's eye view of the streets. If he could reach into his pocket he would get his beanie out to protect his head which was being rubbed raw on the roof of the vehicle. Marcas held grave fears for the well being of his back pack, last seen in the back of the open vehicle. His worldly possessions were probably being retrieved from the middle of the money changing street by a gold merchant. They would soon be hanging in the local bazaar alongside bangles and baubles and baskets full of second-hand clothing; odd brown socks and checked flannelette shirts.

'The time has come to have the *dalumen*. This is a Balinese specialty. The healthy tonic is very good for the cooling of the blood. It is most important to be drinking this nutritious beverage especially at a time when there are changes coming into your life. You can see for yourself how delicious the *dalumen* is here at the Central Denpasar market.'

Pak Twalen swerved into another crazy car park crowded with varying modes of ancient and modern transport. He did a three-point turn and reversed the *bemo* with the amazing alacrity of a racing driver into a miniscule parking spot between two decrepit buses. Young men with

swept-to-the-front cool hair-dos materialised with tiered trays of designer watches, spivvy sunglasses and authentic French perfumes with exotic names like ‘Diorrescence’ and ‘Beyond Paradise’ and ‘Shalimar’. The sellers gathered around Marcas, but Pak Twalen waved them away firmly, politely.

‘Follow me or you will get lost in this busy market Mister Oswald. From six o’clock in the morning, the market is full of activity. The Balinese women get up before dawn to come and buy fresh fruit, vegetables, meats and fish everyday. Not everyone has a refrigerator on the Island of the Gods.’

Pak Twalen marched into the market building, Marcas scurried along behind him into a series of dark passageways that were suddenly ablaze with light. Glittering fairy lights illuminated the stands piled high with an amazing array of artefacts; dragons with wings and tropical fish, parrots dangling on merry-go-rounds, ceramic lanterns, teak carvings of the Garuda, theatre masks with green frog and white monkey faces, elephants with four trunks were sitting on top of stacks of beautifully carved trinket boxes waiting for treasures. Silver bangles and swathes of surf shirts were displayed alongside painted temple baskets, crimson ceremonial umbrellas with golden tassels, wind chimes of ancient coins hung above silver *kris*es in leather pouches. Scroll paintings of temple frescos adorned the walls. Marcas knew his mother would have loved the bamboo ginger graters and noodle bowls, the heavy stone mortars with pestles and the rice baskets. He walked after Pak Twalen through an alleyway of hessian sacks bulging with orange knobbls of fresh turmeric, bright purple potatoes and leafy greens, cloves of garlic, blush red shallots and branches of Bird’s Eye chillies, kaffir limes and speckled eggs in pottery basins on cluttered tabletops. There was so much to see in the market. Blue lace kebayas, jackets in russet and lengths of batik, Madonna-style hot pink brassieres and copper stamps, carved banana trees

and patchwork quilts, Dunlop runners and leather handbags, belts and buckles. Puppets danced in the shadows on the white sheets above the canary yellow fishing nets.

Everything was bright and beautiful. Marcas was so mesmerised by all that he was seeing that he nearly bowled his guide over when Pak Twalen suddenly stopped in front of a stall. A prehistoric-looking lady, steely grey eyes barely visible beneath her hooded eyelids sat withered and scrunched on a milkmaid's stool. Her wizened face was wrinkled with age. The 'Ripley's-Believe-It-Or-Not' woman was shrunken with a scrawny neck. The flimsy white bodice she wore had shoe string straps, the straps slipped from her bony shoulders as she stirred the bubbling green contents of a cauldron with a massive wooden spoon.

'This is the *dalumen*. Two servings if you please *ibu*. *Terimah Kasih*.'

Marcas watched the *dalumen* lady's crinkled fingers wielding a spoon, creating circles in the slimy soup. He was reminded of a science fiction film he once saw with his friend Yolanda called 'Soylent Green.' The prehistoric-looking woman glanced up at Marcas and as she smiled, he was horrified to see the few remaining teeth in her mouth were stained red, pointed like sharks' teeth.

He was not sure he really wanted to sample the concoction she was ladling out of the cauldron into two coconut shells. When Marcas received his coconut shell, he poked his index finger into the soupy goo-like mixture. It was thick and swampy like pureed broccoli and spinach, lime Aeroplane jelly that had not set properly. Pak Twalen seemed to be tossing back his Balinese-style slurpy without any obvious signs of physical discomfort. He beamed encouragingly at Marcas. Pak Twalen's teeth were still shiny and white. Marcas had no alternative but to actually taste the tonic of nutritious herbs. Although he had always been taught to try new things, to be adventurous because that is always the best way to discover and to acquire sophisticated tastes, there were always exceptions to the rule. The *dalumen* would

certainly be life changing if he regurgitated the special beverage in the middle of the crowded market place.

Marcas crossed his fingers as he took a tiny sip from the coconut shell and when he did, he was pleasantly surprised by the flavour of the slimy mixture. It was palatable. It had a milky sweetness which was in fact, very cooling. The *dalumen* lady smiled approvingly at Marcas and he returned her smile with one of his own smiles but the sight of her grotesque teeth was unsettling.

Apparently, there was no time to be wasted. Pak Twalen was a man on a mission. He hurtled down a central stairwell into the basement. Marcas followed him, and as he did, he noticed the concrete walls of the stairwell were covered with swastikas and red posters of black buffaloes with ferocious faces and wet pink tongues.

Downstairs in the basement were the fresh meat and fish vendors. Marcas was straggling behind Pak Twalen, because he was trying to avoid stepping into the drains flowing with blood, unrecognisable body parts and splodges of bloodied mucous. Flies buzzed above snails big as serving plates and frog's legs, basins of knuckle bones, bowls of gizzards and plastic bags plump with pig's blood. Chiselled cuts of meat, glistening intestines, veiny offal and bulging eyeballs were neatly arranged on concrete tabletops. Marcas held his breath as he followed the shadow puppeteer through the chattersome crowds of sarong-clad shoppers past the trays of wriggling eels, fish heads floating in aspic or brine and giant coelenterates with rosy red suckers on rope-like tentacles hanging from the tabletops down to the floor perilously close to Marcas's beige legs.

The young man was enormously relieved to be back outside, even though it seemed the temperature had risen at least another ten degrees since his arrival on the Island of the Gods. He squeezed back into his seat as Pak Twalen slipped effortlessly behind the steering wheel into his

driver's seat. Pak Twalen torched another stick of sandalwood incense. He almost burned his fingers using the same flame to light another clove cigarette and once again, the cabin was filling up with clouds of smoke. Marcas could not see Pak Twalen but he could hear him clicking the key in the ignition. Marcas counted, and, sure enough, on the thirteenth turn of the key, the V8 super engine roared to life and the *bemo* sped off out of the car park into another street of gold merchants.

‘Did you enjoy the *dalumen*? It is very good, yes?’

‘Yes, sir, it was very good. Fantastic. I can feel my blood cooling as we speak. Delectable. What was wrong with the *dalumen* lady's teeth? What's with the German swastikas on the stairwell?’

‘There was nothing wrong with her teeth because she does not have many teeth. The less teeth you have in your mouth, the fewer visits you will need to make to the *tukang gigi* – the dentist. Her front upper teeth were filed when the sweetness of childhood was over. Tooth filing is one of the local customs. It is the Balinese way of overcoming the elements of bestiality, so we can become civilised beings. The canine teeth are considered animalistic.’

‘As for the colour of Ibu's remaining teeth, the red discolouration you mentioned is caused by the chewing of the betel nut quid. Betel nut or *porosan* is beneficial for hunger, thirst and fatigue. The quid contains the red areca nut, purified slaked white lime and *gambir* – *gambir* is an extract from one of our local plants. The ingredients are mashed together and then wrapped in a peppery green leaf plucked from the *sirih* plant. The blend has the same texture as stringy mashed potato. It must be chewed for as long as possible. Bright red juice is produced with chewing but swallowing the juice is not recommended because the lime content causes the delicate lining of the stomach to feel as if it is on fire.’

Marcas wondered how you could chew, produce juices and not swallow. Did the locals all carry spittoons, sputum mugs?

‘And as for the swastika, this is a Hindu symbol; you will see it on Balinese architecture. The symbol represents cosmic energy and harmony. So Mister Oswald, there is no need for you to be worrying about eugenics, the creation of a master race. Despots have no place in any society, much less on the Island of the Gods. Perhaps while you are here you would like to have your teeth filed in a temple ceremony? What about sampling the betel nut?’

Neither cultural experience appealed to Marcas because he was quite happy with his straight white rectangular teeth. As it was he had no fillings. And the thought of chewing stringy mashed potato, expectorating red mucous and ending up with stained teeth was abhorrent. He would leave these customs to the locals.

‘Thanks for the offer, Pak Twalen. I’ll stick to chewing gum.’

Marcas gazed around him at the horse-drawn carriages as Pak Twalen drove along the busy roads until they eventually left the hustle and flow of the city for a more rural landscape. There were nurseries with mounds of glazed pots, stone carvings and gardens of bougainvillea, roadside stalls with watermelons, snake beans, coconuts and dried fish alongside open fields. There was not a wisp of a cloud in the blue skies. Terraced hillsides of emerald green rice fields were coming into view. Marcas could see mountains on the horizon. Pak Twalen kept his eyes on the road and his hand permanently pressed on the squeaky horn. There was a good deal of traffic; a chatting mum and dad with two wide-eyed children on the one motor scooter, tourist coaches destined for the forests of monkeys and dance performances, dilapidated trucks kicking up clouds of dust packed with laughing construction workers, air-conditioned European cars and hundreds of *bemos*. The road was noisy, jammed with vehicles and the acidity of diesel fumes.

A solemn gathering of villagers wearing temple dress and holding golden umbrellas, heads bowed in a thoughtful act of prayer, standing at a junction in the middle of the road caught Marcos's attention.

'What is happening on the side of the road?'

'Not so long ago there was a fatal accident at this place. Two members of one family walking along the road were killed by a foreigner who failed to negotiate the bend because he was driving so fast. He did not see the sign. Do you see the words, '*Hati-hati*'? The meaning of these words is 'take care'! Even if the driver could not understand the words, the diagram of a skull with crossbones always indicates danger. He was not watching what he was doing, it is important to look out for signs especially if you are driving in a foreign country. Today the family who have lost their loved ones are conducting a ceremony with offerings and prayers so the spirits of the deceased will be reunited with their ancestors in the Land of the Heavenly Souls.'

'Uh. There is no road rage here. Everyone looks chilled out even though there is so much traffic. Do you think the ceremony will be successful?' asked Marcos.

'Naturally. Of course, it will be successful. While you are on the Island of the Gods, you will realise the importance of our Hindu faith that depends on the goodwill of ancestral spirits in the Cosmic Realm. The Balinese are experts when it comes to moving between *sekala* and *niskala*, the visible and the invisible worlds. I am sure during your time with us you will learn to do the same as we do with the greatest of ease.'

'As for your comment about road rage, well, we understand one another here so there is no need for bad manners or aggressive behaviour. After all we are all heading in the same direction. Everyone reaches their destination at the end of the day. When we get there is not important. It is important to be courteous so everyone arrives safely. Do you not agree? The

roads are more congested today because the people are leaving Denpasar on a pilgrimage back to their families in the villages to join in the celebrations for Balinese New Year. The journey to Tempat Merak will take an hour and a half. Tempat Merak is a village of tranquillity not far from Campuhan and Ubud. Ubud, the Village of the Artists is, as we say, the heartbeat of the Island of the Gods. If you are interested in art and artists you will find Ubud very much to your liking. Michellina tells me you have a very artistic nature and that one day you would like to pursue a career painting dreamscapes? Am I correct?

‘I don’t know. I do like spending time in art galleries. Art was my best subject at school. Surrealism is my real interest. The artists know exactly how to capture the atmospheric play of light and multiple realities on their canvasses. So, yes, sir, it is true, I do like art, and when I was little I dreamed of being an artist, but things haven’t turned out quite as I expected. So I’m not too sure about anything these days,’ answered Marcas in a subdued voice.

Pak Twalen surprised Marcas by suddenly burst into song. “Catch your dreams before they slip away, dying all the time, lose your dreams, and you will lose your mind,” he sang and then he said, ‘I don’t imagine you will know this old Rolling Stones hit ‘Ruby Tuesday’ because it was well before your time but the lyrics still ring true all these years later.’

‘Our lives never quite turn out as we expect, Mister Oswald, and perhaps that is the beauty of life. You can’t always get what you want. If everything went exactly to plan like a school timetable, there would be no room for surprises, serendipity; the treats that come along like magic to remind us the ancestors are taking care of our needs. And one thing is for sure, you are heading in the right direction, because later today you will be in the Village of the Artists. This is the ideal place for a young man who needs to catch his old dreams before they slip away into the Land of Never Never. The environment is ideal for an aspiring artist. There is so much to see and everything is within walking distance. The Neka Museum has the best collection of

work by both Balinese and foreign artists. The current exhibition features the work of the Australian artist Donald Friend. So many expatriates have come from other countries overseas to make the Island of the Gods, their home. I also recommend that you visit Antonio Blanco's Renaissance Museum at Campuhan. Antonio Blanco was Bali's Dali. If you are interested in surrealism, you will be very taken with this man's work. There is much for me to look forward to be sharing with you.'

'Sure. Bali's Dali sounds fantastic. I would very much like to see his paintings especially if he is a surrealist,' Marcas answered. *Michellina was right. Pak Twalen was a big talker. At least if he is doing all the talking, there is less need for me to talk. Cool.*

'I hope you will spend some time just rambling around the countryside enjoying the countryside. The pastime is good for the soul.'

'Sure. I like walking. When I lived at home I'd often walk through the Noosa National Park along the beach at Alexandria Bay up to Hell's Gates to see the sun rise. And I know every half-deserted street in Brisbane. I've also hiked through the Jamieson Valley and climbed the Giant Staircase in the Blue Mountains heaps of times.'

'Well Mister Oswald, I have a treat for you. Next time I set off on my idyllic 'Far from the Madding Crowd' ramble which affords me freshness of spirit, I will take you with me. We will criss-cross our way up through the terraced rice fields to the top of the Elephant Grass Ridge to enjoy the sublime view across Jimbaran Bay before continuing to the Pura Gunung Lebah. In the old days when I sat on the top of the ridge, I used to see international flights arriving and departing every twenty minutes, but since the bombings of the Sari Club and the beachfront restaurant at Jimbaran Bay, there has been a downturn in tourism. Religious zealots have no regard for the sanctity of life.'

‘What is the Pura Gunung Lebah?’ asked Marcos, not wanting to contemplate the possibility of a third attack by terrorists. He wouldn’t be going to any nightclubs or hanging out in tourist venues, much less eating barbequed lobster in fancy seafood restaurants.

‘It is a historic temple perched on the limestone cliffs of the gorge above the confluence of the East and West tributaries of the Vos River. The disciples of Buddha originally founded the ancient place of prayer in the 8th century. A great Hindu priest re-discovered the temple many centuries later. The temple looks over the mystical place where the two streams of water meet. It is a sacred place for the Balinese people. The villagers go there to bathe in the calm water because it has healing properties; illnesses can be cured and it is also said dreams come true for those who have faith.’

‘How can the water make dreams come true?’ asked Marcos.

‘It is not the water as such, but the powerful earth energies that are created by the meeting of the waters from the East and the West branches of the river. Supernatural occurrences are not unusual in the Vos Gorge, especially after dark.’

‘What do you mean by supernatural occurrences? Have you been to the gorge at night?’

‘No, Mister Oswald. There are too many dangers. Fearless witches who are black magic women cast gruesome spells in the secret caves and cavernous tunnels. The witches have been known to transform human beings into swirling circles of fire, monkeys afflicted with madness and grumpy goats with blue beards. The Vos Gorge is no place for human beings at night, Mister Oswald.’

‘It sounds like the setting for a Grimm’s fairytale,’ Marcos responded trying to imagine life as a grumpy goat with a blue beard. He knew what it was like to be afflicted with madness. Monkeys with madness must be like dogs with rabies.

‘Fairy tales do not always have happy-ever-after endings especially in the Wos Gorge. The demon who lives there is notorious for luring virgins into his secret abode when they come to the area to visit the temple. The black magic women in the area are believed to be responsible for still births and miscarriages. Young mothers with new-born babies must be the most vigilant because the witches crave to devour the flesh of foetuses and newborn babies, chubby toddlers not yet able to stand on their feet. Mothers cannot allow their babies to touch the sweet earth until the passing of three full moons. And then a ceremony must be conducted to keep the child safe.’

‘Why would anyone want to go to the temple? How could anyone expect to pray knowing some black magic woman might turn you into a grumpy goat with a blue beard?’

‘Although the Wos Gorge is a dangerous at night, it is also a paradisiacal place during the hours of daylight. It is a sanctuary for the seekers of wisdom. As well as the infamous demon and the witches, there are hermits who have chosen to leave the real world to seek wisdom in crystalline caverns behind the limestone cliffs. You will not see the sages but you will see colourful processions of villagers carrying offerings as they make their way to the temple to pray. The villagers also go there to collect the holy water from the springs for temple ceremonies, for all our rituals; to bless and purify offerings, buildings, rice fields, animals and of course the human beings,’ explained Pak Twalen to Marcos who was suddenly not feeling particularly well.

‘Are you all right Mister Oswald? This winding road is very steep. New comers to the area often experience some vertigo in the higher altitudes. Are you feeling, as we are saying in Bali, ‘a little bit o’clock’? Would you like me to stop so you can stretch your legs and admire the view?’

‘I’m fine. Very comfortable. There is no need to stop. Thankyou for asking,’ Marcos lied, almost wishing he had said, yes, because it would have given him an opportunity to remove

his socks. He wondered if the Wos Gorge Spring water would cure his schizophrenia. Perhaps if he went down and bathed in the waters of the river, the one dream he really wanted to come true would become a reality?

Marcas had no wish to stop, much less get out and stretch his legs on the edge of the treacherous road. As it was, Marcas thought Pak Twalen was talking so much he was not really concentrating because the *bemo* seemed to be veering dangerously close to the edge of the road. There was not one safe place to pull over much less park the *bemo* and stand and admire the view in a leisurely manner. Continuing the journey seemed the most sensible course of action given the nature of the road, thought Marcas anxiously.

‘Are you all right, Mister Oswald? You are very quiet,’ asked Pak Twalen in a concerned voice.

‘No, I’m fine. I was just thinking there is something about this road that reminds me of a ghastly accident in a novel I studied in high school, ‘I am the cheese’ by Robert Cormier. It was a back-to-front orphan story. The reader didn’t really realise the character called Adam Farmer was an orphan until the end of the book. Nor did Adam. Things were not as they appeared in that story. What’s the name of the mountain over there?’ asked Marcas, deciding to change the topic of conversation because he wasn’t really in the mood for a detailed discussion about a novel he had to study in Year Ten, even though he could relate to the story because he sometimes thought he had been adopted at birth from an orphanage of unwanted children.

‘Ah yes, I remember ‘I am the cheese’ because it was Cormier who was interested in problems facing young people in modern society who won the Phoenix Award for this novel in 1997. Do you know he put his home telephone number in the text so his readers could talk to him about their troubles? It was another of Cormier’s tender but tragic stories made more so because the young boy had no idea that he and his parents were part of the Department of Re-

Identification program. Adam who was ostensibly riding his bicycle to visit his father in another town woke up at the end of the story to discover he was institutionalised in a haven for troubled people.’

“If I can step outside myself like this maybe I can go to other places ...” For all of us it is sometimes difficult to separate reality and dreams, truths and illusions. I see exactly what you mean about this section of the road. We must look out for the tan Dodge of no outstanding style, Mister Oswald,’ Pak Twalen winked. Marcas winced.

He not only wished he could be as relaxed as Pak Twalen was whilst negotiating the precipitous road but also wondered at his guide’s awesome knowledge about everything from books to authors, world affairs and Balinese culture. His guide was a veritable walking encyclopaedia. It probably had something to do with Pak Twalen being older than time, thought Marcas wishing at the time when he had read the school text he had realised the telephone number in the book was Mr Cormier’s number. He would have phoned the author because in those days nothing seemed to be going right for him. He could have used some help but there was no sense in further ruminating about the grim past so Marcas who was trying to remain upbeat and positive although he was tired tuned back into what Pak Twalen was telling him about the Island of the Gods.

‘You are looking at Mount Agung; it is the highest and most sacred of all the mountains on the Island of the Gods. Always keep the ‘mother mountain’ in your sight wherever you are, especially if you are out and about rambling in the countryside, so the ancestors can always protect you from the forces of evil. You will be able to see it from your pavillion at Cinnamon Hill, the family compound.’

‘Excuse me? What do you mean by a family compound? Is it like a kibbutz or a commune?’

Marcas wondered if Pak Twalen was a member of some New Age movement. Although he had enjoyed the lentil soup gatherings on Sunday at the inner city ashram back in Brisbane, he was not convinced he wanted to be part of a group like his Hari Krishna mate, who was probably skipping up and down the streets of Spring Hill jingling his bells, stopping to talk to pedestrians about finding the great natural peace at this very moment.

‘Balinese homes are unique. They are designed quite differently to the homes in your part of the world, Mister Oswald. You could liken our homes to a commune if a commune is a gathering of people living harmoniously together, because more often than not two or three generations of the one family live together in the Balinese home which is contained within a walled courtyard. The design represents the microcosm of the Hindu-Balinese universe. You will see the compound, like the universe, is divided into three areas for the three realms; one for the gods, one for man and the other for the impure spirits.’

‘There is an ancestral shrine called the *kaja* situated at the head of each compound on the mountain side. The *kaja* is the most sacred orientation because it is to this area that the gods and goddesses as manifestations of the Supreme Being descend and dwell. The area facing the ocean at the opposite end of the courtyard is the *kelod*. This is used for rubbish disposal; it is also home to the family pig. Pavillions we call *bales* in the centre are used for daily activities such as washing, cooking and sleeping.’

‘The entry to the Balinese home is by way of a front gateway with pillars which is always positioned on the right side of the perimeter wall. The family place offerings for the gods in the openings of the pillars. Behind the gateway you will notice a wall. This wall not only provides privacy from the street, but more importantly it keeps the evil spirits from entering the compound. They cannot come in to play their wicked tricks because they have difficulty going around corners.’

‘I look forward to meeting the family pig. And I’m glad there will not be any evil spirits playing wicked tricks,’ said Marcos. There were enough evil spirits playing wicked tricks in his head. He had come to the Island of the Gods to try and escape the demons.

‘The family pig is called Felicity because when she becomes *Babi Guling*, she brings much happiness to everyone in the family.’ Pak Twalen proceeded to make circular motions on his rotund tummy.

‘I suppose there are walking tracks for tourists to climb to the top of Mount Agung? We have a scenic railway, a cable car and a revolving restaurant for visitors to the Blue Mountains. What do you mean by *Babi Guling*?’ asked Marcos almost dreading Pak Twalen’s response.

‘You will never see a scenic railway, a cable car or a revolving restaurant on the sacred mountain. There are tracks but, like the Wos Gorge, the terrain is full of dangers. Tourists have vanished without trace into the thin air of the dead-end ravines and the impenetrable rainforests on the slopes of Mount Agung.’

‘That is like weird because someone I know back in Brisbane told me exactly the same story. My mate Arthur said grave psychic risks awaited those who depart from the intermediary world of human beings and other living things to venture into the supernatural realm of the spirits. He also said something about this place not being a tourist destination. I would not be able to return from Eternity in a hurry if I departed from the right track. Why’s that?’

‘Eternity is time without end. You would disappear without trace along with the other curious but ultimately unfortunate travellers who veered from the track. Yes, the disappearances are well-documented in a publication called ‘Forces Beyond’. Because this mountain is the symbolic centre of the cosmos, ascending to the realm of the gods except by pilgrims on rare ritual occasions is regarded as disrespectful and dangerous. The pilgrims climb the mountain for religious purposes, also to gather the sprigs of Edelweiss; this Indonesian plant with white-felt

petals brings good fortune. It is one of heaven's many gifts, a miracle of creation. So Mister Oswald, for ordinary people, the realm of the gods is best left in peace,' replied Pak Twalen.

Marcas wondered if Pak Twalen had an upset tummy from the *dalumen* drink or whether he was feeling carsick.

'Ah, as for *Babi Guling*, this is a famous delicacy on the Island of the Gods. It is suckling pig seasoned with spices and roasted over a charcoal fire. The skin is very crispy. *Enak sekali!* Very delicious. Are you feeling the heat? The humidity is very high today. It will be much cooler in the mountains especially when the sun has given her light to the moon. I can see you are tired. Please, I will not be offended if you close your eyes and have a sleep. You must be exhausted after your flight from Australia. Am I talking too much? I'll bet Michellina warned you that once I start talking about our customs and the magical way of life on the Island of the Gods, it is hard to stop me. I tend to get rather carried away. Sometimes not everyone is interested.'

'No. Not at all. Michellina didn't say anything much. I am really interested. It is totally different to what I am used to back in Australia. Fantastic. Thanks for meeting me at the airport but I do feel weary. I'm sorry I am not very good company when I am tired so I'll take a nap,' Marcas smiled. He thought about Michellina telling him about Pak Twalen's love of talking. He was a teacher after all. Teachers always talked.

Marcas wondered if the suckling pig would be as good as the roast pork his mother used to cook on the Weber on the back verandah in Sunshine Beach. Everyone always liked the crackling the best. He hoped the cook in the middle of the family compound would be currently preparing this delicacy for the evening meal. Marcas was ravenous. He wished he could fling his legs out the window but the *bemo* was so low to the ground, he knew there would be grave risks for the well-being of the soles on the bottom of his basketball shoes.

He was not sure how he would cope with being on an island where witches transformed humans into swirling circles of fire, dead-end ravines were eternal repositories for the wandering souls of lost tourists and the limestone cliffs with sacred springs sprouting holy water were home to hermits who had departed from the real world to seek wisdom meditating in crystalline caverns above the supernatural confluence of the East and the West branches of a river called Wos? Wos?

The smoke from the incense was giving Marcas a headache. He was feeling hot, sticky and uncomfortable, but he shut his eyes. He dozed, half expecting to Pak Twalen to start talking again. He wondered if he went to sleep whether he would dream about Komodo dragons breathing fire in Hell's Gates, the Queen of the Witches and Captain Magic performing secret rituals under the watchful night-eyes of the sages in the Wos Gorge. But he did not dream, not even about the dilly-dallying ducks or the mysterious golden domed castle with dancing statues. Marcas felt quite peaceful as he drifted off to sleep.

Cinnamon Hill

A cock started to crow. The air was smoky; for an instant Marcos thought he was still scrunched up in the passenger seat of the trusty *bemo* or back at 'Pindari' having left a cigarette burning on the windowsill. But when he came to, he found himself reposing resplendently on a four poster bed under a canopy of natural weaves in an open-to-sky room with a porch.

The porch merged with a sunny garden; an exuberant courtyard of tropical plants enclosed by an ancient wall cobbled with river stones. It looked familiar. Had he been in this garden previously he wondered, as he looked across at the Morning Glory and the magenta Bachelor's Buttons? The Drunken Sailors with the garlands of frilly crimson flowers, the creamy white Chalice vine and the pink Chain of Love with wavy heart-shaped leaves were clambering over the walls like those in his dreams. Honey eaters and humming birds darted back and forth, hovering and trembling above the well-trimmed hedges of happy plants, red and yellow parrot beaked heliconias and Bat Lilies. Massive pure white Moon flowers with curling tendrils twisted and twirled their way up through Dead Man's Fingers, a frangipanni with buttery yellow petals. As Pink Angels' Trumpets tinkled, Marcos's room blended into the garden like the garden in his incredible dream.

The stillness in the air was a thousand kisses deep. The open-to-sky pavillion with gilded columns had a floor tiled with polished Indonesian marble; the tiles were cold when Marcos's feet touched the floor. He finally removed the elasticised hosiery. It was like shedding a second skin he no longer needed and much to his great relief his toes were pink. Marcos drifted sleepily

through the tessellations of dappled light to investigate the source of the smokiness. A mosquito coil burned in a clay container with a frog on the lid.

Last night's August moon was fading, and the light was changing, as the sun cast her golden rays across the terraces of emerald green rice fields. Brass bells and bamboo chimes tinkled on the eaves of the pavillion. Chit chats skated up the walls and across the slopes of the double-tiered ceiling plaited and perfectly thatched with sheaves of *alang-alang* grass.

Marcas ambled into an alcove with two teak day beds, scattered with pillowy silk cushions; amethyst elephants with four trunks appliquéd on turquoise, crimson poppies on sunflower yellows and pure white cushions embroidered with Egyptian blue beetles. Batik fabrics stitched with golden threads were folded at the head of each bed. A naked lady sculptured in voluptuous folds of mahogany was kneeling; in the palm of her hands, she held a circular sheet of glass above her head to form a table. Ylang-ylang petals floated in crystal bowls etched with doves and filled with water, water probably drawn with a wooden bucket from a well at the bottom of the garden. In the centre of the glass tabletop there was a burnished copper lantern.

There was a camphor wood chest against the wall. The lid was an intricate carving of the Garuda holding a beaked vessel containing the elixir of life in his thorny talons. On the wall above the chest Marcas noticed a fantastic golden work of art by someone called Blanco; the frame, which reminded him of a proscenium stage, portrayed a clock with Roman numerals – it was eleven minutes past eight o'clock. Marcas wondered what had happened, because the last thing he remembered was falling asleep in Pak Twalen's vehicle.

He studied the ebony-coloured ants swarming around the face of the timepiece which was marbled in rosy hues, tinged with blues and embossed with sweeping golden curlicues. Above the half hour the artist had positioned a peacock feather with luminescent eyes. Salvadore Dali was holding a paintbrush at the heart of the picture. He gazed into Marcas's eyes. Marcas was

slightly unnerved. He continued to wander around the pavillion. His new surrounds were unreal compared to all the other places he had bunked down in over the years. Up a small flight of stairs he found a window.

The casement window, panes patterned with miniscule mosaics of coloured glass like the Resurrection window in the 'Good Shepherd' church of his childhood, was open, so Marcas looked out. He was flabbergasted to see waddling ducks dilly-dallying along in straight lines on levee banks through a maze of terraced emerald green rice fields.

There was the water castle with guardian statues on a milky sea covered with water lilies blue as forget-me-nots and pink lotus flowers. A pair of black swans was swimming under a Japanese bridge.

And then he heard the river of silence rushing through the gorge, the Y-shaped valley steeped on either side by a jungle of tangled vines and creeping leeches. It was an evergreen place, the place where the west meets the east at Campuhan. Marcas noticed waterfalls splashing from high places into rock pools along the banks of the river, but where there should have been movement, the surface of the water remained calm, hushed and still. Bare-breasted women balancing baskets of lace and batik on their heads walked smiling in pairs, down a winding track towards rounded boulders on the banks of the river.

The terraced rice fields were dotted with copses of coconut palms and fruit trees, huts in isolated hamlets with thatched roofs and sugar palm shrines. A farmer knee-deep in mud wearing a coolie hat and long sleeved paisley shirt with a Peter Pan collar turned the earth with a primitive instrument, a wooden hoe with a razor sharp steel pick.

Marcas didn't shut the window; he turned around and sauntered down the steps onto the porch and into a garden with temple umbrellas stitched with golden tassels. His skin tingled in the balmy early morning air perfumed with sweet frangipanni and the scent of sandalwood

incense. A bouquet of white butterflies hovered and fluttered like everlasting daisies above the sugar palm shrines laden with sunflower and hot pink rice cakes, creamy petals and faces of marigolds on coconut palms. Little green frogs sitting on the water in garden jardinières croaked in chorus.

Marcas watched as a beautiful paradise tree snake coiled around the fork of the Angel's Trumpet polished her scales with spittle. Cooing peacocks paraded the eyes on their lavish tails amongst the Drunken Sailors on the top of the ancient wall. The funny white monkey with googly eyes was playing hide and seek in the mossy boughs of blood red epidendrums and Spider orchids. Persian blue caterpillars were spinning silken cocoons. And there at the end of the garden Marcas saw the white coral lichgate arched with bracts of 'Superstition Gold.' The gate was open. Marcas decided to see what was on the other side of the gateway. When he walked under the gateway he realised he was standing under a flowering arbour of red and white hibiscus.

“Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay, My, oh, my, what a wonderful day, Plenty of sunshine headin' my way, Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay!”

‘Good morning Mister Oswald.’

‘Uh, hello Pak Twalen. I think I was dreaming.’

‘Did you sleep well?’

‘Sure but I don't remember very much. How did I get here? Like what is happening. This place is totally unreal.’

‘Cinnamon Hill is very real. You fell into a deep sleep half way between Denpasar and Tempat Merak. It was not possible to wake you when we arrived so I had to guide you as you walked in your sleep. You are not dreaming. I have brought breakfast for you.’

Pak Twalen was presenting Marcas with a tray containing a glass jug of a liquid which looked like pink lemonade or raspberry cordial. There was a plate of mango and red papaya decorated with quarters of lime, another plate with diamond shaped slices of some sort of cake. It was not exactly French toast swimming in maple syrup, but Marcas decided it was better than black pudding or a slap on the back with a wet fish.

‘The tea made from the red hibiscus flower is very refreshing. You will no doubt be familiar with the fruit of the gods, the papaya and lime. The cake is baked with fresh coconut. We use coconut for everything on the Island of the Gods; sugar, fermenting the alcohol, building houses, kitchen utensils, temple offerings and also with charcoal to fuel the fires.’

‘There is no need to hurry, so take your time and relax. I will leave you to enjoy breakfast, to get settled. Please make yourself at home. Let me know if there is anything else you need. I want you to feel comfortable. There are sarongs on the shelves if your Western clothes are too heavy in the tropical climate.’

‘Sure. Thankyou, Pak Twalen. Breakfast looks awesome. Do you think it would be possible to give Michellina a call so she knows I have arrived safely? There is no television. Is there a telephone?’

‘Of course! No, we do not have a television set at Cinnamon Hill. We have too many duties to attend to and at the close of day it is good to sit around chatting or relax with a good book. Do you like to read Mister Oswald?’

‘Sure. But I haven’t really read a good book for ages. I liked ‘The Catcher in the Rye’ at school. Don’t you watch the news? What about ‘Neighbours’ or the game shows? I like the general knowledge quiz shows back home,’ Marcas responded, wondering what he would do in the evenings.

‘The newspapers provide all we need to know about international politics and the social concerns of foreign countries. We have our own ‘Neighbours’, and the ‘Wheel of Fortune’ on the Island of the Gods is not a game show,’ replied Pak Twalen with a twinkle in his eye.

‘Of course, many homes have television and the children love to watch the cartoons; however, the adults have to make sure television is not a priority. Advertising tends to generate dissatisfaction. The children sometimes want more than their parents can afford. They must participate in the life of the village, helping with the tasks and imitating the roles of their parents. We encourage them to be imaginative by inventing their own games. There are always adventures to be enjoyed playing with friends outside in the fresh air. You will also see kite flying is a popular pastime with the boys. The children are encouraged to pursue hobbies, to do jigsaw puzzles or to read books. Everyone needs quiet times to find their own inner music, to be content with their own company so there is not always the need to be entertained. And daydreaming is always good for the soul.’

Marcas remembered his mother telling him to switch off the computer or the television and go outside to play. Sometimes he would swing on the tyre underneath the trees or skateboard with his mates down Church Street. He and his sister had liked mucking around in the bush behind their old Queenslander house, until the house was torched by an alcoholic arsonist. Marcas suddenly felt sad when he thought back to the old days. Everything changed when he went away to boarding school. The voices got worse. There was no one he trusted enough to talk to about his secret.

‘Are you okay, Mister Oswald? I will leave you, and when I return, we will walk to the ‘Waka di Ume’. From there you will be able to phone Michellina. We have a superior communication system on the Island of the Gods. Of course, Michellina will be looking forward

to your call. *Sampai jumpa nanti*. This Balinese phrase means until we meet again, see you later alligator.'

'Sure. I'm fine. I was just thinking about stuff. *Sampai jumpa nanti*, Pak Twalen. Thanks for the room service.'

In a garden bathroom open to the outside world, with mossy walls and ferns, blood red epidendrums and nodding orchids, Marcas showered as he watched the geckos chit-chatting. He tried to cheer himself up by humming 'Diamonds on the Inside' as he washed behind his ears. After his shower, he went searching for something suitable to wear; he found the selection of sarongs, but he decided he would prefer to subject himself to the jeers of the insensitive judges on 'Australian Pop Idol' rather than appear in the outside world wearing a sarong. He had no idea how a long length of fabric would hold up without a belt or how the local people could walk without tripping over the hem. Marcas did wish he had something lighter to wear like a pair of quick-dry board shorts, but he didn't, so he pulled on another pair of cargo pants and one of his many long-sleeved tee shirts to hide his wrists.

Marcas put his beanie on and pulled it down over his ears. He took it off and he put it on again. He took it off and he looked at himself without the beanie in the bathroom mirror. His scalp bristled with prickles. It was probably time to grow his hair back. He put the beanie back on again and then took it off, deciding finally it was too hot and he would look ridiculous if he wore a black woollen beanie in the tropics. So it was shoved to the back of a drawer in a walnut chesterfield.

He unpacked his belongings including his scrapbook journal, and Michellina's surprise which he would keep for his birthday in the event she was not able to be with him. His articles of clothing looked like they had been retrieved from a Lifeline bin, as they had; because Marcas, homeless, was always on the move and as such he could not keep track of his worldly

possessions; the articles of clothing his mother continued to provide for him were always being misplaced.

He wished he had never started smoking dope at school to make him feel good. The voices always came back. Schizophrenia had totally stuffed up his life, and licit drugs had not helped him either. He had made so many mistakes. There was so much regret, so much care wasted. Damn and blast it all. He should have listened to his parent's advice instead of leaving school and walking out of home imagining he would have absolute freedom to do as he pleased in the outside world. They were right as usual. He hadn't been able to manage on his own. But now he had another chance to try and put things right; he would try and find a new way of seeing things on this island in the Indian Ocean, thousands of miles away from the city streets. He would try to live an ordinary and normal life without taking recreational or licit drugs. Everyone said although there was no cure, recovery was possible.

So, finally, when all was organised, Marcas poked around in the pockets of his back pack until he found the packets of medication. He returned to the bathroom, where for quite some time, he stood and procrastinated, deliberating as to the wisdom of what he was about to do. In the end, feeling sure he was making the right decision, he slowly extracted the white tablets and red capsules from cellophane rectangles and crinkly bubbles of silver foil. He stood at the toilet bowl cupping a handful of tablets and capsules, umming and aahing; until finally he began to drop the unknown quantities, the drug company chemicals into the water. Marcas watched the tablets floating as they fizzled and foamed; he fleetingly panicked about the consequences of his actions. It was too late to retrieve his drugs. Bad luck. He was fed up with being medicated. He was sick of taking the stuff. It was like swallowing bitter almonds, and the debilitating side effects were worse than the infirmity.

Besides, he had not swallowed a tablet for just over a week and he was feeling reasonably good, and now he was on the Island of the Gods, he was determined he would try to make a fresh start. Too easy! He had to try to manage his life without any kind of chemical. If things got really bad, he would have to grit his teeth, practice his meditation routine and pray for divine intervention. So Marcas took a deep breath and pressed the button; the water flushed, and a dizzying concoction of benzodiazepines, antipsychotics, dexamphetamine and antidepressants dispensed by a general practitioner who knew no other way to help Marcas manage his exhaustion, grief and loneliness, disappeared. Forever.

Marcas once again panicked. But it was too late. Bad luck. There was no going back. He resigned himself to the fact he had to learn to live without being medicated. He did not want any more regrets. Schizophrenia may not be curable, but somehow he would find a way to recover so he could enjoy a semblance of normality leading an ordinary life.

With that sorted, he returned to the porch to watch the shimmering Paradise Tree Snake as she uncoiled her loops from the fork of the Angel's Trumpet. He squeezed lime over his red papaya, he steadied his hand as he poured himself a glass of hibiscus tea and he concentrated on the sound of the bells tinkling on the eaves of Cinnamon Hill. The farmer was still working on the rice. Marcas almost envied the man who seemed so content performing a simple task in such beautiful surrounds.

Laughter coming from a tangle of flowering spaces in the garden stirred Marcas from his reverie. Half a dozen children with walnut-brown limbs, bare feet and healthy complexions appeared between heliconias and the well-trimmed hedge of happy plants. One of the older members of the giggling group, a boy who looked about ten years old, was bouncing a chubby baby in his arms; baby Buddha with seriously wide open eyes observed Marcas enjoying the fruit of the gods.

‘Hullo Marcas.’ ‘Hullo.’ ‘Hullo.’ ‘Hullo Mister Oswald.’ ‘Hullo Marcas.’ ‘Hullo. *Selamat Datang.*’

‘Is it true there are kangaroos hopping down the roads in Australia? We have all read ‘The Magic Pudding’ so we know the pear-shaped koala bear called Bunyip Bluegum. My favourite animals from your Land Downunder are the goats with the curls all over their shapes. Will you be coming to the Parade of Monsters tonight? Do you eat wombat stew?’

‘Australians don’t stew wombats. In the olden days, the shearers used to make a stew called hashmagandy with whatever ingredients were available at the time but they never used wombats. Maybe the occasional witchetty grub. There are no kangaroos or wallabies hopping in the roads, but where I grew up there were always kangaroos and wallabies coming into the back yard. The native animals lived in the bush behind the house. I would often see them early in the morning or late in the afternoon. There were possums in the roof and there was a huge carpet snake in the roof. And we sometimes saw echidnas in the garden. We read Bunyip Bluegum too. I think the curly backed animals you are referring to are the sheep. What is the Parade of the Monsters?’

‘Yes, sheeps. But I do not know about echidnas or witch grubs. Tomorrow is Nyepi Day. The monsters will be coming along Jalan Raya tonight. Everyone is coming along so now you are belonging in Tempat Merak; you have to join us. *Selamat Datang.* Welcome.’

The self-assured boy stepped forward to shake Marcas’s hands, and the others, still giggling, followed in his footsteps. A round of ‘high fives’ went on with a good deal of *joie de vivre* until the voice of a woman calling started the children scurrying, back to where they came from, their village activities or perhaps, it was time for school. Marcas had no idea when school started or ended on the Island of the Gods.

‘See ya. *Sampai Jumpa Nanti.* Goodbye Mister Marcas Oswald. See ya.’

‘See ya. Have a good day,’ Marcas replied smiling. The children were all so friendly and happy. Their presence made him feel happy. Pak Twalen reappeared. He too was all smiles.

‘I see you have met Ketut and some of the local children.’

‘Yes, they are very friendly,’ said Marcas.

‘They are very excited about the Parade of the Monsters. They have also been crossing the days off the calendar in anticipation of your arrival. It is not often we have the pleasure of such an interesting young man staying with us at Cinnamon Hill. I hope you enjoyed your breakfast? Tomorrow I will make sure you have a traditional Balinese breakfast, fried rice or *mie goreng*, fried noodles with the *sambal* of hot chillies in sweet soy sauce. Do you eat the chillies or are you not fond of the spicy heat?’

‘Breakfast was fantastic. Thanks. No sure, I like chillies. I used to grow Bird’s Eye and Bell chillies in pots for my mother. She used them to make *sambals* when we had *bami goreng* for dinner which was like every week! It was my job to chop the chillies and the garlic. Like what is this Parade of the Monsters?’

‘Well, Mister Oswald, during the past weeks the children have spent every spare moment after school creating imaginary monsters out of every conceivable material; bubble wrap, papier-mache and crepe paper, cardboard and fluffy fabric. They have made enormous serpents and dragons, legendary characters from the netherworld and figures from popular culture. The black hooded and faceless angel of death always makes her presence felt during the Parade of the Monsters. The monsters called *ogoh-ogohs* will be paraded down Jalan Raya this evening to banish the evil spirits from the Island of the Gods.’

Marcas had his doubts. How could home-made monsters banish the evil spirits? Perhaps they could banish the ones running widdershins in his head? Now that would be fantastic and copacetic. He was not entirely sure he wanted to come face to face with the angel of death on his

first real night in this new place. As it was he was never really sure whether she was another figment of his imagination. How could she exist in real life on the Island of the Gods?

‘This evening the men will stage cockfights in the villages; at the same time you will hear lots of din because the children will be driving the evil spirits from their hiding places. The ceremonies on Balinese New Year are like an exorcism, it is our way of providing the means for the purification of the villages on the Island of the Gods. There will be bright lights burning and flames as well as noisy fire crackers, bells ringing and the clanging of pots and pans up and down all the streets. You will hear bamboo cannons exploding throughout the night until the early hours of the morning so do not be alarmed. It is all part of the festivities.’

‘Sounds like New Year’s Eve in Australia. At midnight there is always a fantastic fireworks show on the Brisbane River,’ said Marcos. He wondered how he would sleep with so much commotion going on all around him. As it was, he was still feeling out of sorts, which he expected had something to do with the time difference between the West and the East. He thought the Island of the Gods was meant to be some tranquil paradise. Hearing bamboo cannons going off until the early hours of the morning didn’t exactly tie in with his definition of peace and quiet. Ah well, so long as no one expected him to join in the festivities. He had no intention of banging around with pots and pans in the early hours of the morning.

‘The noise drives the evil spirits from their haunts. By the time they have all emerged from the darkness to investigate what is going on, the day of stillness has dawned in the villages. Everything is quiet so the spirits, thinking the island is deserted, all return to their secret hiding places. Peace prevails.’

‘The day of stillness sounds like a good idea after all the partying. Does anything special happen? I guess everyone spends the day recovering?’ asked Marcos thinking it would be quite

nice to spend a day on his own. He was not used to company twenty-four-seven. And Pak Twalen sure was passionate when it came to talking about Balinese culture.

‘The world has been cleansed so everything starts anew on Nyepi Day. Our religion prohibits broadcasting on the radio or television. There will be no aeroplanes flying, landing or taking off from Denpasar. Fishing boats will rest on the sandy beaches, the harbour will be closed for shipping and transport will not be permitted on the roads. The beaches and streets will be out of bounds so no one, not even the tourists, will be allowed to swim in the ocean or walk on the shoreline. Villagers must all remain in their family compounds. Fires may not be lit and no food can be cooked. There will be no power. Village guards in black or red shirts with the chequered black and white sarongs will be on duty patrolling the beaches and the streets to ensure compliance.’

‘Sounds pretty strict, like nothing much will be happening. It makes me think of Good Friday in the town where I grew up. Once everyone went home from church after singing, ‘There is a Green Hill Far Away’ the place was like a ghost town. My mother used to cook fish for dinner.’

‘I remember meeting your charming mother at the local Farmer’s Market when I went up to visit Michellina. At the time I was giving a series of guest lectures at the Sunshine Coast University. The three of us drove through the cane fields to have lunch at a rather lovely restaurant in an Asian-inspired garden setting. We also visited the Ginger Factory.’

‘You must have gone to the ‘The Spirit House’. I went there for dinner on my fifteenth birthday.’

‘Yes, indeed. It was ‘The Spirit House.’ I’m not always good at remembering names.’

‘Me either. Sorry, I interrupted you. You were explaining what happens tomorrow.’

‘Let me think, where was I? Nyepi Day. Yes, you could say it is a bit like your Good Friday, because it is a day of contemplation. Silence, serenity and emptiness are practised so everyone can experience a re-birth of inner creative energy and enlightenment. The Balinese people have a day of rest without mundane activity. We ‘play dead’ to keep the evil spirits at bay. We focus on feelings of spirituality. You will probably appreciate having some time to yourself in the peaceful surrounds of Cinnamon Hill.’

‘How about we walk up to the ‘Wake di Ume’ now to phone Michellina? You will not be too hot with your long sleeves?’

‘Sure. No. I’m fine. My arms get cold. Sunburnt. The hot weather is fantastic. It is way better than being in Brisbane at this time of year. August is the worst month of winter. The westerly winds blow from the southern snow fields on the Great Dividing Range. It is freezing,’ responded Marcos, trying to remain composed and reply intelligibly, but also feeling slightly flustered by Twalen’s reference to his long sleeves.

Waka di Ume

Pak Twalen sang his zippedee doo dah melody about plenty of sunshine coming his way as the two men proceeded through the white coral lichgate down the pathway under the flowering arbour of red and white hibiscus. They turned left onto a road bustling with activity. Marcas tried to keep abreast of the sprightly puppeteer who was wearing his same twirling turban, neat black and white checked sarong and a new shirt intricately woven in rich mahogany tones.

The road wound with a gentle incline up past a school. Students were slam dunking basket balls into hoops in a playground. There were open-air shops with knobs of garlic and red hot chilli peppers hanging from the rafters. Teenagers in crisp uniforms careered up and down on motor scooters. Mangy dogs, bristled and grey with rotting flesh and open sores, snoozed in the middle of the road. Groups of students sat on wooden benches around tables, chatting over bowls of noodles. Women carrying chickens in woven baskets vanished into the laneways between the shops. Other women balancing tall arrangements of star fruit and rice cakes topped with glorious tropical flowers on top of their heads, filed past in the opposite direction. Wiry bare-chested men

sat on grassy verges cross-legged, crouched on lean haunches massaging and grooming their fine feathered friends, red roosters with flaming plumages. Everyone was smiling. Marcas decided there must be magic in the air because the locals all looked as if everything was well in their world.

To be so lucky. I wish I was as happy as everyone else looks. It would be nice to feel everything was well in my world. Goodness knows what will happen now I have disposed of the medication. Probably another thing I will regret. I hope I don't have another psychotic episode. Dear God, don't let me start hallucinating. I'll have to be really careful because I don't want to wind up back in hospital. Keep it real. Prepare a face to meet the faces that you will meet Marcas. Fantastic. Cool bananas. Tempo, rhythm, let the blood flow. Where I am, is where I am, so chill out. Stop stressing. Concentrate on what is happening right now.

Marcas had no choice but to concentrate because the narrow footpath was jam-packed with villagers who were heading in all directions. The path, teeming with rills of water, was a wonky series of steps and gaps. Leafy green containers overflowing with grains of rice, creamy blossoms and faces of marigolds were stacked all along the footpath. It was a veritable obstacle course just like Marcas's life had been for too long.

'Excuse me, Pak Twalen. What are these arrangements all over the place? You had one in your *bemo* yesterday.'

'These are offerings for the gods. As I previously mentioned, the Balinese people believe in the forces of the invisible world. The earthly world is so fraught with dangers that it is impossible to live a good life without offering prayers of thanks to the gods for their goodness every day throughout our lives. The women weave coconut palm leaves with a spirit of thankfulness into the baskets to carry the offerings which are gifts of love. There are many, many different kinds of offerings.'

Pak Twalen stopped under a tall arching pole. He pointed up to something like a leaf swirling and dancing in the breeze.

‘This offering is a *penjor*. If you look closely you will see the curving upper end resembles the peak of Mount Agung, it can also be perceived to be the tail of the Barong. You will come face to face with this fun-loving mischievous creature who symbolises goodness at the Parade of the Monsters. The main part of the *penjor* represents the earth and the head of this particular offering represents the earthly desires of man. The intricately plaited palm leaf creation you can see flying above your head is called the *sampian*.’

Marcas looked up at the offering dancing in the sunshine. He wished he had a pair of sunglasses. The glare was starting to make his eyes hurt. He tried to concentrate on what Pak Twalen was saying about offerings. There was so much he had to learn about this new way of life. He was trying to pay attention, but it wasn’t very easy, because he was still thinking about what he would do if he could not get a handle on reality without his medication.

He might have to find a local doctor to prescribe some more tablets. It always took ages for the drugs to kick back in, for him to stop feeling strange and to start feeling vaguely normal again. Bloody hell. He had been down this path so many times before, and just for once he hoped everything would not go haywire. Marcas was totally over schizophrenia and being medicated simply compounded his troubled frame of mind.

‘Not so long ago we celebrated *Galungan*, Balinese Christmas on the Island of the Gods; *Galungan* is our holiday when the schools close and commerce halts. At this time the deified ancestors always make a pilgrimage from the Land of the Heavenly Souls back to the family temple. They must be entertained and presented with offerings and prayers. During *Galungan* every home will have a *penjor* out the front. The streets of the villages are at their most

picturesque at this time. The way the *penjors* twirl and skip in the breeze often makes me think of the ballerinas in Swan Lake.’

‘I saw the Swan Lake at the Queensland Performing Arts Centre,’ Marcas said, ‘the modern interpretation was fantastic. Back in Sunshine Beach, it would be a breach of council regulations if you put offerings on the footpaths or on the nature strip in front of your own house unless it was the day decreed for an official rubbish collection. A council worker wearing a luminescent green top would be despatched quick smart with a deafening machine to restore pristine order to council property. And then you would receive a fine in the letterbox.’

‘Life in the Western world is very different to the East. I have been very fortunate because I have visited so many countries over the years. My travels have always given me a new way of seeing things, but it is always good to come back home. What do you think?’

‘Sure,’ replied Marcas even though he was not sure about anything much less the virtues of travel. He would probably find a new way of seeing things, having ditched his medication, but it would not be the same way as Pak Twalen was talking about. So long as he did not start hallucinating, because when that happened he found himself in a world where nothing was as it appeared. It was totally scary when no one else could see or hear the demons stealing his ideas and transmitting his thoughts onto the sound waves.

Marcas wondered if Pak Twalen’s *bemo* had conked out. The fractured footpath with offerings of love was becoming increasingly tiresome. The sun was beating down on Marcas’s bare head. He should have worn his beanie or done the slip, slop and slap - put on the sunscreen routine. His mood was continuing to deteriorate as he toiled, steaming and perspiring behind Pak Twalen up a particularly steep section of the road edged with rice fields, fruit trees and beauty parlours with very beautiful young girls wearing sarongs standing gracefully in the beaded doorways.

‘Waka di Ume.’

Marcas was pleased to see the sign on an ancient cobbled wall. He tagged along after Pak Twalen as he stepped across stones on a pond. Plump golden carp sprang into the air and flip-flopped back into the water splashing, disappearing under a water garden of blue lilies. Green frogs chorused on pink lotus blossoms.

The two men went down an internal staircase into a foyer scented with vases of tall-stemmed creamy sweet tuberoses. Archaic agricultural artefacts hung on the white-washed walls. A musician wearing a batik head cloth was sitting cross-legged on the flagstone floor playing an instrument with rows of wooden bars like a xylophone. As the musician struck each of the bars with a rubber drum stick, his other hand followed behind hushing the lively tempo of each key after once they were struck. Marcas had never heard such a light and airy melody, repetitious but rhapsodic. A tall pencil-thin man wearing a smart outfit appeared at the counter of the reception area.

‘*Selamat Pagi, Pak Twalen. Apa kabar?*’

‘*Selamat Pagi. Baik baik sadja, Terimah Kasih, Nyoman.* Nyoman, allow me introduce you to Mister Oswald.’

Marcas stepped forward and smiled. Nyoman clasped his hands.

‘*Selamat Datang ke Waka di Ume, Marcas.*’

Once again there much shaking and smiling, smiling and shaking as Nyoman greeted Marcas in a warm and friendly manner.

‘I am very pleased to be meeting with you Mister Marcas. Come. I understand you are wishing to make an important phone call to Australia. Everything has been arranged with the local exchange.’

Marcas followed the two men past an almery of shadow puppets behind glass doors through a carved doorway into an orderly office with an old-fashioned telephone. Nyoman dialled a number before handing the receiver to Marcas. After a delay of a few minutes, followed by crackling, Marcas heard Michellina's mellifluous voice.

'Is that you Marcas?'

'Hey there, Michellina. Yeah, it's Marcas. I'm here with Pak Twalen on the Island of the Gods.'

'It is so good to hear your voice, my precious boy. How are you and what about the flight? Is everything copacetic? Is Pak Twalen managing to keep you amused?'

'Hmmm. You were so not wrong, Michellina. It's so hot here compared to Brisbane. Makes a nice change. Okay. No drama. Too easy! The flight was pretty good. The socks seemed to have worked because I didn't get a deep vein thrombosis. I had no music because the Discman wasn't working. So much for the Eveready everlasting batteries we bought at Silly Solly's. I tried to chat up the stewardess, hoping to score a whisky, but she was too busy preparing fruit platters. Like I was standing there but I was the invisible man. Pak Twalen is totally cool and his vehicle called the *bemo* is fantastic. The markets are unreal; totally not the same as our markets. We are going to the 'Parade of the Monsters' tonight. Tomorrow is Balinese New Year. My room is in this fantastic open-to-sky pavillion with awesome views of a sacred mountain called Mount Agung.'

'Michellina, you won't believe this, but I woke up in a fantastic four-poster bed with a canopy this morning. I thought like am I in a trance or am I dreaming? Like what is happening? Sultan Marcas without Scheherazade in the Arabian Nights! You won't believe this but from my room I can actually see the same courtyard in my dreams. There is a white coral lichgate but it is open, it is not locked with skeleton bones. The other weird thing is that the red and white

hibiscus arbour is also for real. It exists and not just in my dreams. Can you believe this? And, wait for it, there is a paradise tree snake in the fork of an Angel's Trumpet. The rice fields are actually overrun with flocks of dilly-dallying ducks. I just hope no one suggests I start counting them. There are thousands of the little critters. Like what is really happening here Michellina? It's unreal.'

There was a time delay as Marcas waited for an answer. He hoped they had not been disconnected due to some fault like crossed lines at the exchange.

'Marcas, it sounds very much to me as if your astro-passage is back on track. Everything is beginning to fall into place for you. I am delighted to hear you sounding so enthusiastic and bright, so much happier than I have heard you sound for a very long time. Just take it easy. Don't get ahead of yourself, just go with the flow and there will be nothing to worry about, nothing at all. Everything will be copacetic. The Village of the Artists on the Island of the Gods is the ideal place for you at this time in your life. Make the most of the tropical climate and if you feel homesick, my precious boy, remind yourself it is August in Brisbane. It was nine degrees this morning. The coldest temperature recorded in twenty-five years. Thank goodness the pot belly stove was still burning when I woke this morning wondering if you had arrived safely. Bronwyn sends her love. She has her maroon outfit pressed ready to watch the State of Origin to be played in Sydney on Wednesday night. Are you still there?' asked Michellina on the other side of the ocean.

'Sure. Everything is fantastic. I am not so sure everything is fantastic for the tragic-looking dogs with open sores and rotting flesh in the middle of the streets. No one seems too bothered about the poor creatures, the traffic just goes around the street dogs and they don't bat an eyelid. Like everything here is totally chilled. Everyone seems happy and friendly. Well everyone I have met so far.'

‘Is everything else okay? Are you taking your medication Marcas?’

‘I’m okay. Hey, Michellina the other like weird thing is ...’

Marcas was about to tell Michellina about the *dalumen* lady and the Komodo dragons but the connection to Australia was broken. In a way he was relieved because he did not have to answer her question. He knew she would worry if he told her he had flushed his medication down the toilet. Pak Twalen interrupted his thoughts.

‘Come and meet my sister Laksmi. *Terimah Kasih* Nyoman.’

‘Yeah, like thanks Nyoman. I love your telephone! It would be a fantastic collector’s item back home. My grandmother had the same one in her house when I was little.’

Pak Twalen left the office. Marcas followed him back through the foyer where the musician was still playing the same tune with his bamboo xylophone. Upstairs and around the corner they went onto a terrace with six dining tables.

An open doorway led into a homely kitchen with sooty black walls and fragrant aromas; cinnamon, tamarind, ginger, lemon grass and coriander with kaffir lime. Tortoiseshell kittens mewed around the bare ankles of a not very tall woman stooped over a mud-brick stove stirring her thoughts into a steaming pot of something delicious.

The echo of footsteps on dimpled flag stones alerted the woman to the presence of Pak Twalen and Marcas. She turned around, and Marcas was taken aback to see a female version of Pak Twalen. The woman with a knot of black hair piled loosely on top of her head had the same beaming smile. She had the same portly figure, and her face, identical to her brother, was shiny and round like a full moon, minus Pak Twalen’s whiskeriness. Laksmi’s jet black eyes had the same droll expression.

‘Marcas Oswald. You are here! You are here! I have been counting the days for your arrival. *Selamat Datang*. And you are so tall and more handsome than the Greek God,

Narcissus. I can see strong character in your fine bone structure. Michellina was right about your beautiful nature. This I can sense very well. Look at you! Turn around! So tall! Like a beanstalk! I have been so looking forward to meeting with you. Come, come I will make the ginger tea. It is time for me to take a break from my duties. We will sit on the terrace and talk. So handsome! Like Brad Pitt!

'How weird, that two people should look so alike,' thought Marcas wondering if they shared the same thoughts as he and his sister often did when they were growing up?

Laksmi even had the same gravelly voice as her brother. Pak Twalen and Marcas left the excitable woman to the brewing of her ginger tea. They adjourned to the terrace where they sat on the rather rigid ladder-back chairs. Mount Agung dominated the landscape of rice fields with thatched huts and copses of coconut palms, banana clumps and papaya trees, scarecrows flapping their feathers above fields of sweet potato, tapioca, nutmeg, cinnamon and vanilla. Dilly-dallying ducks fossicked and foraged around the tender new shoots in the emerald rice fields. On a green hill not so far away, something glistening in the sunlight caught Marcas's eye.

'What is that on top of the hill, Pak Twalen?'

'Ah, that is the golden dome of the Blanco Renaissance Museum. This is Antonio Blanco's estate called *'Villa Tjampuri-la'*. He was 'Bali's Dali'. I mentioned him to you yesterday but you may not remember because after your long flight from Australia you were probably feeling disorientated. It takes a while to recover from a long flight. In a few days' time you will get your bearings and you will feel very much at home here.'

'I hope you are right. No, I do remember. You said I would like his work because he was a surrealist,' responded Marcas. He knew all about feeling disorientated. He had to make an effort to remain focussed. Marcas suspected he was already losing his bearings. So long as he did not become psychotic. He would be in deep trouble if this happened. Psychosis was the

worst aspect of schizophrenia. There was no real way of knowing things were going wrong until it was too late.

Tune in Marcas. Concentrate on what Pak Twalen is telling you. Keep it real. Focus.

‘I am not always right about everything but I can promise you this, the Island of the Gods is the best place in the world to find your Centre. You seem distracted. Are you not feeling well, Mister Oswald?’

‘No, yes, everything is fine. ‘Bali’s Dali’ sounds interesting. Tell me more,’ replied Marcas, trying to sound upbeat, whilst wondering if Pak Twalen was reading his mind.

‘Blanco coined the special word ‘*Tjampuri-la*’ to express his feeling that in Bali he was free to communicate through his artwork, the best of the East and West. ‘*Tjampur*’ in the Indonesian language means to mix the elements. ‘*Puri*’ means castle. Blanco’s home, situated above the Wos Gorge, was the castle of his dreams. The place above the confluence of the two tributaries of the river provided harmonious unity for the artist. He had no interest in economic, administrative or social concerns. One could say he found Nirvana on the Island of the Gods. The safe, happy and quiet place allowed the Spaniard to live his dream. I am sure you too will find your dreams will come true on our island.’

Marcas did not answer. There were dreams he wanted to come true and those he feared would come true. He could hardly start telling Pak Twalen about such matters. Marcas had no idea what the learned man would think if he told him about the angel of death stalking him or the Queen of the Witches stirring and scrambling him like eggs in his dreams.

‘Do you know when that hilltop was gifted to Antonio Blanco by the King of Ubud there was nothing there but coconut trees and patches of wild yams? The flamboyant artist took years to create a fantastical haven to give him the space and the freedom he needed to express his creative spirit. Blanco painted as he dreamed. The lush gardens are home to all the birds of

paradise including the Cerulean Kingfisher and the Bali Starling. When we go there you will see fishponds with fountains, golden apple trees and sundials exquisitely hand-carved from local river stone. Blanco built a family temple under the cosmic tree of life, the banyan tree. Mister Oswald, you must see the Tower of Flowers. The temple with eleven tiers was built to honour the love of Blanco's life, Ni Ronji. Not quite as impressive as the Taj Mahal but nevertheless just as magical because it too seems to float in the atmosphere just above the surface of the earth.'

'How did he meet the love of his life?' asked Marcos, remembering how an Indian poet had described the Taj Mahal as a 'teardrop on the earth's cheek'. It made him think about Amaryllis and the mysterious young woman Michellina mentioned in his card reading. He had lost the love of his life. Amaryllis's name and her date of birth were tattooed on his hip where no one else could see it. It was not exactly a temple but it was his way of honouring his girlfriend.

'Ah, love is a many a splendid thing. It was love at first sight. From the moment Blanco saw the exquisite Ni Ronji carrying stones up from the river bed he knew he wanted to be with her forever. She was sixteen years old. They married, but the artist who needed to be left alone for long periods of time to indulge his imagination so he could paint, encouraged his young bride to study the art of Balinese dance. She became the darling of Balinese dance and the couple travelled the world meeting with princes, paupers and presidents. It was a happy ever after story. It is good to have happy endings, is it not Mister Oswald?'

'Happy endings are good. What did Blanco paint?' answered Marcos trying to change the subject. He suspected his life would end in misery. Perhaps it would have been better not to have gone to visit Michellina that day when he was standing on the Story Bridge?

There was even less point to his life after Amaryllis died. He did not go to her funeral. It was a private service for the family who did not wish to share their grief with well-meaning

acquaintances. They didn't have the strength to put on brave faces to greet other people. It was understandable.

'Sheer fantasy, Mister Oswald. Whimsical pictures and erotic works of art; sensuous women reclining naked on chaise-lounges, temple dancers in trance and oriental temptresses, odalisques with Persian smiles, tantalising teapots with suggestive spouts and portraits of virgins wearing Tjempaka blossoms in their hair, biscuit-skinned wide-eyed children and villagers with furrowed brows. He adored painting women in all their naked splendour. Blanco also created pastel dreamscapes to reflect his deep appreciation for Japanese art. You will see his little genies and whimsical white cats blowing smoke rings hanging alongside bespectacled elders. There are wonderful pictures of Blanco's four children and numerous self-portraits. There are paintings of Michael Jackson, and you will see Scheherazade waiting for her Nubian slaves to prepare her scented bath, and white doves cooing in the alcoves above the gallery walls.'

'It sounds like he painted all the favourite things in his life. He came all the way from Spain to live on the Island of the Gods?'

'No, Blanco was actually born in the Philippines. He believed he had a geographical and spiritual linkage to Miro and Salvadore Dali because of his Spanish parentage. I don't suppose you have had a chance to look at the paintings on the walls in your pavillion at Cinnamon Hill? Take a look when we return, and you will notice a water colour gouache composition of a gyroscope called 'Dali's Timepiece'.'

'I did see the painting when I woke up this morning. I couldn't quite work out the strange clock which says eleven minutes past eight. It was weird the way the clock had stopped, as if the artist was suggesting time had stopped for him. Not having a watch of my own, I wondered when I woke up if the time was really eleven minutes past eight.'

‘It is not a clock as such but a whirling gyroscope which can be tilted in any position. It will always remain steadfast because it has found its Centre. Blanco’s paintings are like that timepiece because they are always harmonious compositions. As I said previously, the artist found peace on the Island of the Gods. Bali became the focus of his universe. Blanco applied his philosophies about the importance of human beings finding their Centre by way of his art.

‘Some people will never find their Centre because they are trying to go in too many different directions at the same time. However, according to Nasreddin Hodja, if everyone heads in the same direction, the earth will lose its balance and topple. There is no need to follow in the same direction as everyone else. Sometimes it is our failure which is the most helpful in building our Centre.’

Marcas couldn’t really work that one out. Failure had not helped him to find his Centre. However, he thought Pak Twalen must know what he is talking about because he was a Perennial Philosopher and a legendary shadow puppeteer. His company was reassuring in a funny kind of way. Pak Twalen was the kind of comfortable person who made you feel safe. Marcas liked the way the man chatted to him as if everything in the world was quite normal.

‘Mister Oswald, why is it that a small girl in a circus can control whirling plates?’

‘Tell me, Pak Twalen. I have never really given it much thought,’ answered Marcas although he recalled seeing the same act at the ‘O’ is Forever’, Cirque du Soleil performance under the big top when he was in primary school.

‘Because she has found her Centre! Blanco’s estate was his Centre of Beauty much as is ‘Dali’s Timepiece’. Did you recognise the portrait of the man at the centre of the timepiece?’

‘Salvatore Dali.’

‘Absolutely. I can see you are a very clever young man.’

‘Not really, I just really like Dali’s work, especially ‘Metamorphosis of Narcissus’ and ‘The Persistence of Memory’. The surrealists were the clever ones because they discovered another world ruled by the irrational, the magical and the instinctive. The way these artists can make an ordinary subject into something extraordinary is fantastic. The more you look at some paintings, the more you can see and things change almost as if by some magical process. There are so many different dimensions and new meanings in the one picture,’ replied Marcas.

‘Indeed. The fusion of fantasy and reality creates a new way of seeing things. For all that happens in this world, everything we hear and see on earth, there is a parallel in the divine realm; an invisible dimension far richer, powerful and more enduring than our reality, gives rise to a wonderful world of possibilities. The universal metaphysical reality, the world of the gods which defies rational explanation, influences humankind throughout the world, especially in the traditional lores of primitive peoples. This is most evident here on the Island of the Gods.’

‘Sure. There has to be a magical dimension to this physical world. Not everything can be explained by modern science. What about when you dream? According to the surrealists the gateway to the universal metaphysical reality was by way of the dream,’ said Marcas.

‘Blanco’s paintings are very dream-like, especially those depicting his love for the female species. He was a romantic who found the charms of women irresistible. He loved the fragrance of a woman’s body. You too will find yourself seduced by the charms of his beguilingly beautiful women in the gallery.’

Marcas wondered if Pak Twalen was going to take him on a guided tour of a harem. He wished Laksmi would come along with the ginger tea and change the subject. Talking about the scent of a woman with a man who was very much his senior was making him feel extremely uncomfortable.

‘The museum looks like the Temple of Heaven,’ said Marcas, distractedly.

‘Yes, like the Temple of Heaven, the museum has three tiers. It was constructed in accordance with the Balinese faith. As I explained to you yesterday when I was talking to you about the architecture of our homes, the spiritual abode of Bali consists of the heavenly world where God dwells, the middle world which belongs to human beings and other living things, and the realm of darkness which is haunted by demons and supernatural spirits. Gods, human beings and demons each have a rightful place to belong in one world of harmonious unity.’

‘The museum looks miles away?’

‘It is actually within walking distance from here. The entrance to Blanco’s estate which is an archway with two crouching dragons breathing fire and clouds of turquoise smoke positioned on either side, cannot be missed down the end of Jalan Raya.’

‘What happened to Blanco? Is he still living?’ Marcas asked, wishing Pak Twalen had not mentioned dragons breathing fire and clouds of turquoise smoke. It was kind of weird. Something funny was happening. The dreams Marcas most feared had begun to unfold from the instant Pak Twalen had made his appearance at the airport. The *dalumen* lady reminded him of the Queen of the Witches and now, the dragons? Whatever next?

I’m probably just tired. Not thinking straight. Listen to Pak Twalen. There is nothing else I can do. Where I am, is where I am. Go with the flow.

‘In a sense, you could say Blanco is still living, because according to Balinese culture, our Hindu-Balinese existence is a continuous cycle of life, death and re-birth. His spirit returns to the family temple during the *Galungan* celebrations. However, his body was cremated on the 28th December in 1999.’

Laksmi finally arrived, all smiles, from the kitchen. She was balancing a bamboo tray on the top of her head. The tray was laden with cups and saucers, a tea pot and mint green rolls on a pottery plate.

‘Good grief. How do you manage to do that?’

‘My sister has found her Centre!’ Pak Twalen laughed.

‘Marcas, I can tell Twalen has been talking to you about Bali’s Dali. My brother is a fountain of knowledge. It is hard to stop him once he gets started on his favourite subjects. He is quite a chatterbox. You are a good listener, Marcas. As for my tray,’ she said as she gracefully lifted it down from the top of her head, ‘we are taught balance from the time we are children on the Island of the Gods.’

‘It is connected to our religious way of life. There are forces of good and evil in the world. The only way these two forces can co-exist harmoniously in our society is by way of observing proper ritual customs. Ceremonies, prayers and offerings help maintain the balance not only for the person, but for the village, for Bali and for the world. An ancient Chinese verse says,’

If there is light in the soul,
There will be beauty in the person.
If there is beauty in the person,
There will be harmony in the house.
If there is harmony in the house,
There will be order in the nation.
If there is order in the nation,
There will be peace in the world.

‘That’s such a neat poem; did you learn it at school? I will have to try and remember the words to write them in my journal.’

‘I will write it down for you. No, it was a verse my mother taught me. If she was not dancing around the kitchen with her straw broom, she was reciting lines from poems she learned

at school. Reciting poetry and dancing around the kitchen is not one of our traditional ceremonial customs.'

'Learning balance is. From the time I was little my mother instructed me to use my head so I must be thankful to her now that I am grown up, because the balance is automatic, it is second nature. So much crockery I broke when I was learning to carry a tray of refreshments on my head, it took me a long time to find my Centre, did it not, Twalen?'

'It is never easy. Nothing is easy. I remember when you and Orchid continually displeased our mother because she was trying to teach you both the ways of our world but you were not always concentrating on the lessons. The two of you were always thinking about other things like having fun in the garden. 'Life is not always fun and games', I remember Ibu saying, pretending to be stern. Laksmi and Blanco's daughter Orchid were classmates in primary school, Mister Oswald.'

'Mmmn, we did have fun and games. We were always giggling about some of her father's paintings when we were too young to appreciate his love of the female form. He certainly adored women. I remember a British art critic asking Pak Blanco, the meaning of life and he replied, "When I am biting into a ripe succulent mango in my right hand, and at the same time fondling (with my left hand) the firm buttocks of an 18 year old girl, THAT I have found to be the closest THING to a MEANING FOR LIFE!"'

Laksmi raised her eyes and laughed merrily, pouring ginger tea from a floral teapot into three matching cups with saucers.

Marcas wished he could be so light of heart. There was always something to worry about. He was starting to feel tense and jittery. He wondered if it was because he had disposed of his medication or whether his symptoms were returning because he had stopped

taking his medication. Laksmi talking about her mother had made him feel sad. He wondered if his mother knew he was on the Island of the Gods. Maybe he could send her a postcard?

‘Come Marcas, you must sample the *dadar*. If you are interested in art there is no better place than Ubud. You may be able to take some classes with one of the local artists. We are an island of creators, as well as being preservationists when it comes to protecting our traditional and spiritual way of life. Maintaining our unique identity in a changing globalised world is difficult. The glue of communal Balinese life is in abiding by the ancient cultural values of family life. The ginger tea is cooling, settling for the digestion. Yes? What did you think of the *dadar*?’

‘Yes. Fantastic. It is very cooling for the blood like the tonic from the *dalumen* lady. The sticky sweet coconut is delicious. Everything is excellent. Thank you very much for the morning tea,’ said Marcas wishing she would stop talking about family life. It reminded him of all that he had lost when he left home, thinking he could make it on his own in the outside world. Schizophrenia hadn’t helped.

‘It is a pleasure to finally meet you Marcas. We have heard so much about you from Michellina. The guests will be arriving late this afternoon so there is much to be prepared because as Pak Twalen has probably informed you there can be no lighting of fires or electricity on Nyepi Day.’

‘What guests?’ asked Marcas, wondering how much Michellina had told Laksmi and Pak Twalen about his life. He didn’t really want these two nice people who he had just met to think he was a basket case or a lost cause like everyone else. They didn’t seem like judgmental people. He had hated the way his old friends deserted him when he got really sick. It was pathetic the way none of them ever visited him when he was admitted to hospital or when he spent months at the private clinic in New Farm. Like, he was contaminated. It didn’t help his depression.

Having an illness no one else could see sucked. Life was certainly not untrammelled bliss as one of his many counsellors once told him.

‘The ‘Waka di Ume’ is a boutique hotel, a retreat for people who want to forget the world for a while. A group of twenty guests will be arriving from Belgium this afternoon to participate in a yoga workshop with a Zen master. We have a special meditation room for our guests to learn the Art of Living. In the good old days people used to travel from all over the world to experience the peace and quiet of the ‘Waka di Ume.’ For the past couple of years we have not enjoyed the same good fortune. The Balinese people have been quite traumatised by the barbaric terrorist attacks on our island. We have experienced the positive benefits of tourism such as the meeting and talking, the sharing of our peaceful way of life with people from overseas as well as the economical rewards. The downturn in tourism has had a devastating impact on our economy. We are very fond of our international visitors, especially those from Australia. I am so glad you have come to visit us.

‘Now Marcas I must get on with my duties, so please excuse me. Do come and visit me any time. I am never far away. There is a swimming pool here, so you are most welcome to come and have a swim if you feel the need to cool down in the middle of the day. The heat can be quite oppressive if you are not used to the humidity. *Sampai Jumpa Nanti* Marcas.’

Laksmi pressed Marcas’s cheeks between the palms of her soft warm hands. Marcas liked the feel of her hands on his face.

‘Marcas, you are the most handsome of Brad Pitt and Narcissus and very tall. Michellina was not wrong about your beautiful nature. I will look forward to getting to know you so we can become friends and until then, I must go and make preparations for my guests. We will be seeing one another again this evening at the Balinese Feast. *Sampai jumpa nanti.*’

‘*Sampai jumpa nanti*, Laksmi. Thanks again for the hospitality. I would love to come and have a swim in the pool.’

The Parade of the Monsters

The sun was directly above the heads of Pak Twalen and Marcas as they retraced their steps back down the road. Primary school children carrying buckets and straw brooms sashayed along in orderly groups down the lane ways between the *warungs* and the shops, the art galleries and the beauty salons.

‘The school children are all carrying brooms and buckets?’

‘Yes, they are responsible for keeping the classrooms and the playground clean. It is one of the many duties the children must be performing every day. As Laksmi told you, the children as well as the adults all have a valuable role to be playing in the daily life of the village. Even the men who are too frail to be tilling the fields must be productive, they often pass the time splicing strips of bamboo and shaping them into baskets, doing repairs to farming tools or taking care of the gardens. The women are content to do the cooking, cleaning and washing clothes, preparation of food and offerings. Everyone must be willing to grubby their hands.’

Marcas’s back was pouring with perspiration. It was boiling hot. The glare of the bright sunlight was hurting his eyes. He could do with a swim or the convenience of a modern car with air-conditioning. Marcas wondered what was at the end of all the laneways leading off from both sides of the road.

‘Where do all these laneways lead?’

‘The laneways will take you deep in the heart of the Balinese way of life; to the family compounds, to the corn fields and to the temples and schools, also to the river and the rice terraces, the coffee plantations and the village meeting places.’

Pak Twalen stopped at a laneway between a Home Stay called ‘Far from the Madding Crowd’ and the Ramayana Art Gallery with paintings of Hindu gods on display in the windows.

‘This is the laneway you must set off from if you wish to go to the Pura Gunung Lebah; I was telling you about the temple yesterday. I promise you, you will see forever at the top of the rice fields. Come on. What about I show you where to go so if you feel like taking the walk, you will know where to go?’

‘Sure,’ replied Marcos in a less than enthusiastic fashion. He wasn’t in the mood for too many more cultural experiences. It was too hot.

Pak Twalen suddenly stopped and listened.

‘Can you hear that sound?’ he asked.

‘Sure, it’s a drum.’

‘Three strikes of the drum means someone has died in the village. I suspect it’s old Gusti; he is a hundred years old. The neighbourhood men are being called to go and prepare the body of the deceased for burial. We must return to Cinnamon Hill. I will have to attend to my duties. I hope you do not mind?’

‘Not at all,’ answered Marcos thinking if he was going to live to one hundred which was hardly likely, he would have another eighty one years to live. Preposterous. He was keen to be on his own for a while. The very thought of traipsing down some laneway into corn fields made him feel lethargic. He was already feeling as if he could barely lift his legs, much less make it all the way back to Cinnamon Hill.

‘What do you mean you have to prepare a body? I thought everyone got cremated in this part of the world,’ asked Marcas as he struggled to keep pace with Pak Twalen who had launched back up the hill at an incredible pace.

‘Everyone does get cremated but the body must first be buried. Holy Water must be used to wash the deceased prior to wrapping Gusti’s body in white cloth. Mirrors will be placed on his eyes to give sight and beauty in the next world. Then he will be buried with flowers and offerings until such time as his family can save enough money for a cremation ceremony befitting his respected status. For some families this takes many years. In the meantime, the restless spirit of Gusti must be kept calm until the time comes for his spirit to be freed from his corpse. His family will make frequent visits to the graveyard bringing with them food and offerings, they will light incense and keep old Gusti company until a cremation tower is constructed.’

‘You mean the body has to be exhumed like in a crime scene?’

‘Yes. It is all part of the ritual which involves earth, fire, air and water. Once Gusti’s body has been cremated, his ashes will be carried to the sea or scattered on a river leading to an ocean. His soul, who until this time still has links to his body, will finally, be released from earth into heaven.’

‘Good grief. It sounds pretty complicated compared to my grandfather’s cremation. His casket was rolled into the retort on a motorised trolley. Automated red velvet curtains were drawn. We sang the 23rd Psalm. Everyone in the chapel tried not to cry even though they were sad because he was gone. It was all over in about half an hour and we went to Gran’s for Bee-sting Bun and pink lemonade.’

‘Ah, it is quite different on the Island of the Gods. The cremation ceremony is the most sacred duty of the family. The soul of the deceased must be liberated to journey to heaven or that

soul will never rejoin the cycle of reincarnation in order to reach paradise, the place some call Nirvana.’

‘Don’t worry, Mister Oswald,’ said Pak Twalen as they continued to toil up the steep incline towards Cinnamon Hill, ‘the cremation is a joyous occasion; the soul who witnesses displays of grief and mourning will be reluctant to journey to the world of the heavenly ancestors. At the start of the ceremony Gusti’s funeral pyre will be turned three times to make sure his spirit cannot find its way back to the family home.’

Marcas, who was having quite a time of it keeping up with Pak Twalen, said ‘I don’t know that I really believe in reincarnation or digging up bodies. It sounds gruesome. Grisly.’

‘Not at all, Mister Oswald. Your corporeal body is simply a receptacle for your Atman, your soul. The most important thing is to be freed from all earthly desires so you can attain *moksa*; become one with the macrocosm. Once your spirit has been released and you merge with the all-loving, all-forgiving universal soul of the Creator you will experience the great natural peace. The individual soul has to forego its identity or ego to become one with God. Only then can that being take his place and be worshipped as a deified ancestor in the family temple. There will be protection for the family on earth the moment this has taken place.’

Marcas wondered if he died on the Island of the Gods would he find himself in the Land of the Heavenly Ancestors or would he find himself in an Anglican heaven with his grandparents and Amaryllis. He had read about Elisabeth Kubler Ross and the light at the end of the tunnel, and although he had spoken to a friend who was involved in a terrible accident who had actually seen the light, he really had no idea if it would shine for him. He was surprised that there were people in the world who celebrated death as a joyous occasion, much like those who celebrate births and marriages in Western society.

‘Mister Oswald, if you wish to take my ‘Far from the Madding Crowd’ walk later this afternoon, you only need to follow down the stairs where we were standing when we heard the drum. The track at the bottom will lead you along the natural course of the river and you will see a primitive timber footbridge. Take care when you cross the bridge because if you are not used to it, the swinging and swaying is sometimes dangerous although the weather is quite calm at the moment. Once you reach the other side of the bridge it will become obvious where to go because there is only one way to go and that is up into the rice fields. Don’t lose sight of the sacred mountain, the home of the spiritual ancestors, because if this happens you will become disorientated. A dangerous situation will arise if you find yourself lost.’

‘Sure. I’m sure the mountain is not going to grow legs and walk away,’ said Marcas flippantly, thinking there had to be safer things to do than go visit some temple on top of a gorge where a witch might transform him into a circle of fire or a goat with a blue beard.

‘Strange things happen on this island but I am sure you are quite right. The mountain will not grow legs and walk away, but sometimes when you least expect it, clouds will come from nowhere and the mountain is no longer visible.’

‘Thanks for the directions, Pak Twalen,’ Marcas tried to sound upbeat but he felt rather plain and all he wanted to do was lie down and go to sleep, even though going to sleep was usually fraught with further torment. Circuitous nightmares populated with uninvited guests.

As it was, Marcas was never very proficient at following other people’s directions. He always got lost after the first directive, whether it was a turn to the left or a turn to the right at whatever corner. The corners always looked the same. He had an appalling sense of direction, especially when he was in a strange place, and the Island of the Gods was getting stranger by the moment, what with Pak Twalen’s constant references to dangerous situations, supernatural events and dead people needing flowers, fruit and company in the graveyard.

‘What do you mean a dangerous situation could arise?’ he asked wearily as the two men veered around to the right at the top of another steep incline on the road back to Cinnamon Hill.

‘Mister Oswald, although we are living in an enchanted paradise, please remember this, there are always supernatural forces at play. You must never underestimate the powers of the ancestral spirits. There are those spirits who never rest because they are still subject to desire – hungry, as we say – the poor souls remain in limbo. Others return to the earth as incarnating shadows. The re-birth of a deceased spirit will often occur within the same lineage, so there are grandchildren here who are born with the incarnated soul of their grandfather or grandmother.

‘It is important to practice prayer, observance and discipline at all times. From time to time things do go a little nutty or one o’clock but you must realise that although the spirits are not visible, they are not far away and they are waiting to guide you back to the place where you belong. On the other hand, be wary because there are also those who will lead you a merry dance and you will lose your bearings, and once you become lost, it is sometimes impossible to find your way back to the place where you belong, home.’

‘Fantastic,’ just what I need thought Marcas.

Pak Twalen’s talk about the invisible spirits in the supernatural world and restless ancestors floating around in limbo was not exactly making him feel at home on the Island of the Gods. He was sick of walking up hills in the sweltering heat. He had no sunglasses, his head felt like it was melting and he could not exactly roll up his sleeves. He should have worn his sweat bands. Everything about this foreign country was making him wish he was back at ‘Pindari’ where at least he would feel safe in his room even if it was not very salubrious. He wished he had not been so rash in disposing of his medication. He had done the same thing so many times in the past and everything had always gone wrong and he had found himself once again having to explain his actions to psychiatrists in hospital.

He walked silently alongside Pak Twalen in a desultory fashion trying to fathom what the hell he was going to do given his extenuating circumstances. Sure, everyone was nice and friendly but at least if he was back in Brisbane he could find someone like himself with whom he could share a joint to blur reality, to make himself feel good if not vaguely normal. He would love to be able to closet himself in Room 2610 at 'Pindari' without having to make polite conversation. Being a guest in someone else's country was exhausting. Already he was sick of pretending everything was okay when he knew his head was deliquescing and it would only be a matter of time before he spiralled down into another full-blown psychotic episode. Marcas could feel the scatter coming back. It was inevitable. He dreaded the consequences. He was scared. He did not want to hurt anyone. Maybe he would not make it back to the real world this time?

He was pleased to see the flowering arbour of red and white hibiscus.

'Mister Oswald, not only do I have to go and help prepare the body of Gusti, but I also have to mix the *lawar* for the Balinese Feast tonight. It is another of my duties as one of the elders. I hope you will forgive me if I leave you for a while. I am sure you will find something to do on your own until I return. You are looking tired? I hope you are not feeling lonesome or homesick? At dusk when the fire flies start twinkling and lighting up the rice fields it will be time to go to the 'Parade of the Monsters'. I like to think of the fire flies as 'nature's discotheque.' The insects make quite a sight when the sun has sighed and settled, and given her light to the moon. I will see you then. Are you sure you are okay?'

'I will be fine. Too easy. Sure. Thanks for taking me up to call Michellina. I liked Laksmi. See ya when 'nature's discotheque' lights up and the world starts rocking in the rice fields,' answered Marcas, forcing the lightness of spirit he did not feel because his heart was sinking. He suspected he would not be able to keep it together for very much longer. However, he had to make an effort because otherwise he would fail big time and he was totally sick of

being a failure. Schizophrenia was not going to be the end of his world. He would recover because there were so many things he wanted to do and hey, here he was on the Island of the Gods.

Keep it real Marcas. Stop sweating the small stuff. Cool bananas. There is nothing to fear. Go with the flow. Tempo, rhythm let the blood flow.

It was such a relief to be left alone without having to make polite conversation. Although Marcas really liked Laksmi and Pak Twalen, he needed a break from hearing about religious ceremonies, village life and family or dangerous situations due to supernatural events. He had his own dangerous situation to attend to, because he sensed before too long the voices of the demons would come back and start running widdershins inside his head.

Marcas was hot and sticky, so after sitting on the portico and jiggling his legs, which was what he did when he was feeling agitated, he decided the only way to calm his jitters and to cool off was under a long cold shower. Afterwards he lay down on one of the daybeds, and although his mind was going around and around in circles and he really wished he was someplace else, he drifted off to sleep into a clearing in the middle of a jungle of evergreens.

He was standing at the top of a very old stone staircase alongside a two-tiered swimming pool with sapphire blue water. The top pool was one of those infinity designs and the water in that pool was flowing like molten crystal over the edge down into a second pool several metres down. The surface of the pool down below had a water feature that was a mass of splashing froth and bubbles. The water looked inviting.

There was no one else around, so Marcas examined his pallid and wintry skin as he moseyed down the steps. He was unable to recall the last time he swam in the ocean or in a swimming pool. Perspiration poured from every pore on his body. It was unbearably hot and humid under the scorching sun. When he reached the bottom of the stone staircase, he looked

around; he was still all alone so he stripped down to his boxer shorts and stepped up onto the edge of the pool. 'Drunken cannot enter the pool' read a sign on the wall of a cabana, shelves were stocked with rolls of fluffy white towels, 'New Age' and 'Punch' publications and water pitchers. Marcas was sober as a judge so he leapt and dive bombed straight into the water. The temperature was perfect.

He swam overarm back and forth across the width of the pool. He dived down under the water feature trying to touch the slate on the bottom, but no matter how many attempts he made, he could not do so. The water was invigorating. Marcas felt energised and peaceful, alive as he had years ago snorkelling in the clear quiet blue waters above the coral off the uninhabited island at the southern end of the Great Barrier Reef. He amused himself with games from his childhood, curling his body into a tight ball and propelling his arms, turning somersaults backwards and forwards, tumbling around and around like a washing machine until he lost all sense of gravity and his stomach lurched. He had to stop for fear of being sick, so swam to the surface and proceeded to swim laps up and down the length of the three metre pool, and then he went below the surface of the water keeping his eyes open, calmly breast stroking, kicking and counting how many laps he could do before he had to burst to the surface to draw oxygen. Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen. Ten. Marcas's lung capacity was better than he expected, considering the years he wasted time stupidly smoking cigarettes. Exhausted by all the activity, he stretched out on his back and floated peacefully, spread-eagled like a starfish under a cloudless sky of clear blue. It was bliss until he heard a voice.

'Wouldn't it be nice if it could be like this all of the time?'

'Hullo.'

'Hullo.'

'Are you asleep?'

‘Hullo.’

Marcas was not sure if he was dreaming he was awake or whether he was awake but daydreaming. He finally had to upend his body because the soft but insistent voice was demanding a response. He swivelled around to find himself face to face with a suntanned girl with a svelte but curvaceous figure in a turquoise bikini with white polka dots, standing with her hands on her hips at the edge of the pool. She was cute to boot, and Marcas thought there was something vaguely familiar about the winsome girl with brown legs to her waist and a mass of curly hair, who was still waiting for him to respond. She grinned, and, when she did, Marcas could see the girl standing on the edge of the pool was certainly no wallflower.

He remained silent because he did not know what to say, and he was not sure how to handle the unexpected presence of this poised and pretty woman. He rather hoped she would go away and leave him alone. One minute he was happy, peacefully floating in space, and now he had to contend with the presence of an uninvited guest staring at him. The idea of getting out of the pool under her gaze held little appeal for him. He was decidedly self-conscious, totally uncomfortable about exposing his body and he certainly did not wish to reveal the fact he was wearing Phantom boxer shorts. Marcas, who was not exactly Johnny Depp, had always been slightly embarrassed by his physique. He was certainly no bronzed lifesaver, nor did he have the rippling muscles of a Manpower performer. He began to tread water, keeping his arms in a circular motion.

‘Are you also a guest?’

‘Uhh? A guest?’

‘Yes, a guest. Do you not understand plain English?’

‘Sure.’

‘Well?’

‘Well what?’

‘Are you a guest at the Waka?’

‘No. Yes.’

‘What do you mean No and Yes?’

‘I am having a swim and I am a guest but I am not staying here.’

‘Where do you come from?’

‘Australia.’

‘I can tell that from your accent.’

‘Well why did you ask?’

‘What happened to your wrists?’

The brass bells and bamboo chimes on the eaves of Cinnamon Hill were tinkling.

‘You are a sleepy head.’

Marcas opened his eyes to see Pak Twalen standing on the porch beaming at him.

‘I’m sorry. I thought I was someplace else. I must have fallen asleep. Like what’s happening? Am I late?’

‘Please, there is no need to apologise. You would not be sleeping if you did not need to be sleeping. It takes time to feel like your old self after an overseas flight. Jet lag often takes days to get over. Mister Oswald, Cinnamon Hill is your Ambalama. This is a Sri Lankan word which means ‘traveller’s rest’. Now as you can see the fireflies are dancing, lighting up the rice fields. So, when you are ready we will set off to the Village of the Artists. There is no need to rush. Take your time. The Parade of the Monsters will wait for us to arrive.’

Pak Twalen sat on the porch steps watching ‘nature’s discotheque’ across the rice fields, whilst Marcas went to the bathroom, where he splashed his face at the basin with cold water, thinking about the girl at the swimming pool. There was something vaguely familiar about her

but sometimes he felt there was something familiar about everyone he met in his life. He was obviously suffering a chronic case of *déjà vu*, and was not really in the right mood for a 'Parade of Monsters'. Nevertheless, he was a guest and guests have to have good manners, so he was all out of options. He joined Pak Twalen and they walked back down through the flowering arbour of red and white hibiscus towards the main road in the moonshine.

'Do you know what is happening to the old full moons, Mister Oswald?'

'No idea. I have never thought about what happens to the old full moons. They become the sun for the people on the opposite side of the world. The full moon melts when the sun rises in the morning?'

'Not quite. According to Nasreddin Hodja the old full moons are cut into small pieces and crumbled to make stars.'

'What is Nasreddin Hodja? That's the second time you have mentioned these words. Is it Balinese for some kind of religious sect or a nursery rhyme?'

'Nasreddin Hodja was a Turkish religious leader and a university professor who became the dervish of two Islamic mystics. Hodja was a storyteller who was born in the village of Hortu of Sivrihisar. The people in this village were renowned for their strange behaviour and ingenuousness. Hodja's stories spread by word of mouth throughout the Ottoman Empire, the lands where the Turkish language is spoken. Although Hodja departed from our world in 1284, today, he continues to remain the most popular story tale character in Turkey today. I have many Hodja stories but I will share my favourite one with you. It is called the 'The Feeling of Finding.'

'One day, Hodja lost his donkey. Hodja was always losing his donkey. He rushed to the crowded marketplace and he announced, "Whoever finds and brings my donkey to me will have it, including the saddle." Everyone was surprised. "If you are going to give your donkey to the

person who finds it then why are you looking for it?" they asked. "But Yeeha!" shouted Hodja, "You don't know how good it feels to find something you have lost."

Pak Twalen smiled at him. Marcas was slightly bewildered; he wondered if there was something the shadow puppeteer knew that he did not know. He had lost many things but never a donkey. He didn't know anyone who had even owned a donkey, much less lost a donkey. The funny story made him think about Arthur and the question of monkeys knowing the taste of ginger. There were so many things he did not understand.

As the minutes passed, Marcas was becoming less sure about his state of mind. He was beginning to feel quite fragmented, and having to attend a 'Parade of Monsters' was yet another big black cloud forming in his head. He had enough monsters in his own head. He had no wish to confront monsters in the real world, especially in a place which was meant to be safe, happy and peaceful. Marcas did not want to come face to face with the angel of death again, not just yet.

He and Pak Twalen reached a junction at the crossroads on their way down town to the parade. His guide launched into another dissertation about Balinese culture and Marcas listened politely, even though it was an effort to remain focussed because he was beginning to become very certain the scatter was coming back. He would have to pull himself together until the night was over, because he did not want to hear the howling of a black dog like a lonesome coyote lost in the faraway.

'At the end of this road there is a water temple protected by guardian statues. The temple floats upon the sea of amerta; amerta is the elixir of life. Mister Oswald, it is said when you drink of the elixir of life you will be able to realise your dreams. Do you know this water temple was constructed to honour the memory of Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge, wisdom and the arts; music, speech and poetry.'

‘Michellina told me the same thing when she read my cards. Don’t tell me, Saraswati sits on a goose with pure white feathers?’

‘Yes. She is the Queen of Quintessence who holds a blue water lily representing beauty, purity and the flowering of knowledge in the one hand. In another hand she clasps a *lontar* palm leaf book which represents literature, wisdom and reading. The amber beads she wears express her everlasting devotion to religion. And, in her fourth hand the goddess of knowledge holds a *rebab*; the vertical bowed lute with two strings is embedded with raspberry red rubies, wisp-like clusters of seed pearls and moonstones, milky and opalescent.’

Marcas wondered whether or not Pak Twalen had the same dreams as he had, or whether Saraswati was a figment of his imagination. He was caught between reality and fantasy and he had no way of knowing how he would ever find his way home to a safe, happy and quiet place. He had no choice but to concentrate and listen as Pak Twalen, the Perennial Philosopher, continued to chat about Balinese culture.

‘The spirit of Saraswati lives on the tip of the human tongue. She exists in the written letters inscribed in poems on lontar leaves and on the petals of lotus blossoms. In ancient times our ancestors used to live like animals, so Saraswati’s consort Brahma sent the goddess to change the ancestors into humans. The Queen of Quintessence was a poetess. She attached letters to the inner and the outer worlds, and in doing so it is said, she brought humans into existence because she gave them an inner self. The key to the communion of the inner and outer worlds is letters. Letters create words and words create poetry. Poetry is a channel for the imagination. Without poetry people would not be able to see beyond the surface into the Cosmic Realms of otherworldliness, the timeless place of everness,’ said Pak Twalen in his gravelly voice.

‘Saraswati sounds like she lives in the same world the surrealists discovered; the world ruled by the irrational, the magical, and the instinctive. The Balinese people probably celebrate her birthday with a temple ceremony, yes?’

‘Indeed. Saraswati’s anniversary is celebrated on the last day of the 210-day Balinese calendar. We make offerings to honour books and reading. However, reading is forbidden on this day. Do you know there is a river named after Saraswati in India? It was said that in ancient times those who bathed in the waters of the Saraswati River would be granted freedom, enlightenment, healing, purity and virtue.’

‘*To be so lucky,*’ thought Marcos as he kept abreast with the Master of Perennial Philosophy. He wondered if the Saraswati River was connected to the Ganges. Someone once told him Varanasi was a miracle of creation, heaven on earth. One day he could go and see for himself. It would be bliss to be in heaven on earth. He wondered if there really were cows wandering all over the roads and monkeys on the rooftops.

He and Pak Twalen strolled along in a companionable silence down past the Ubud Palace into the Village of the Artists. Pak Twalen found a space in front of a lively restaurant with salsa music called ‘Casa Luna’. Tourists and backpackers with tattoos, hair braided with brightly coloured Indian beads, villagers formally attired in lace-worked kebayas and rainbow sarongs, cooing grandmothers bouncing Buddha-like babies with kissable cheeks, shy-eyed teenage girls and proud as punch fathers reeling out video cameras lined the footpaths. People kept arriving but there was plenty of room for everyone.

Marcas heard the beating of drums, the clashing of cymbals and the sing-song of voices. A town crier with a three cornered hat heralded the start of the Parade of Monsters. Boys, including Ketut, all with gleaming white smiles including Ketut appeared with *ogoh-ogohs* fastened to rattan frames held high on bamboo poles. Everyone clapped and cheered as a

glorious array of animated monsters arrived dancing, waltzing, rocking and rolling, skipping and hip hopping down the middle of Jalan Raya.

There were animal ogres baring green teeth, crimson lips and revolving eyes with scary ghouls and the ghosts of Banquo and Casper, Dracula and Frankenstein had risen from their graves. Punk rockers with Mohawks swivelled their skinny hips, twisting to the beat of a distant drum with red devils and demons, jillaroos on buffaloes; Johnny Green's cowboys crooned about a pink Cadillac and cute Maybelline. The ugly smiling bomb-wielding terrorist Amrozi emerged from the darkness. Everyone hissed and booed until the flaxen haired monsters with elephant ears and the spiked spines of a Tyrannosaurus Rex wobbling precariously on crocodile feet, toe nails painted with tiny black and white squares joined in the procession of hand-made monsters.

Marcas watched on mesmerised as a white witch wearing a garland of edelweiss danced cheek to cheek with a seahorse painted red. Marcas was bemused to see the Balinese Elvis gyrating in his Blue Suede shoes. Scheherazade was belly-dancing alongside a turbaned castle executioner shrouded and tissued in a blood-stained floor-length cape. The villagers shrieked with glee at the sight of shearers and a tottering flight of pink flamingos in Cheshire cat hats and white evening gloves. There were Sugar Plum fairies and Cinderella princesses with glass slippers. Komodo dragons breathing fire and turquoise smoke stomped their claws and paws and the crowds gasped when a deuce of doves fluttered above the heads of odalisques from the Silk Road. The Little Mermaid linked arms with Old Father Time in his wide-awake hat. An African American singing 'Georgia on my Mind' rode past in the side car of a Harley Davidson motorbike revved by the Chief of Indians, Tootie Montana. Sea enchantresses with strawberry blonde plaits and sequined stockings singing 'Ode to Joy' sprinkled stardust on Madame Butterfly. Marcas felt goose bumps rising on the back of his neck when the black hooded faceless angel of death appeared arms linked with the Grim Reaper.

Go away. Don't come near me. I am not going to step to your side of the bridge. Go stalk someone else. I'm going to make it on the Island of the Gods. Leave me alone.

The villagers gathered to drive the evil spirits from the Island of the Gods were united by the spirit of carnival. There were fire crackers; pre-schoolers in Peter Rabbit pyjamas crouched on the kerbside making circles with sparklers, cheering and clapping. Vinata and her son the golden Garuda descended from the night skies. The bird with the beak of an eagle flapped his crimson wings at Kadru with her forked tongue. Vinata's sister, the mother of the snakes, spread her hood and hissed ready to strike like a recalcitrant cobra, the onlookers stepped back from the kerb, seemingly horror-struck, frightened by the menacing manner of the angry serpent with her wicked eyes.

Marcas, who was not really sure what was happening, followed Kadru's movements as she slithered back and forth from one side of the road to the other. He was watching the consternation on the faces of the people opposite when he suddenly became conscious of the presence of someone looking at him. It was the sassy young woman from the swimming pool who, now he thought about, did not look dissimilar to Yolanda. She gazed directly at Marcas. He contemplated crossing to the other side of the road but he had no wish to be struck by the viperous Kadru, nor did he want to be carried away with the Parade of the Monsters. Extraordinary things happen to ordinary people, but Yolanda's presence on the Island of the Gods would be an uncanny, fantastic happenstance. It had to be simply an unreal and unexpected coincidence.

Two creatures, moving with magical nuance as if possessed by unearthly powers, diverted Marcas's attention. A supernatural being, half shaggy dog and half lion, constructed like a circus clown horse with a mischievous expression and sagging body flounced up and down snapping his jaws, grinning at Marcas - rolling his eyes and winking. His remarkable leather coat was stitched

with the feathers of crows and painted gold, ornamented with round mirrors, jingling with silver bells, sleigh bells ringing.

The circus clown horse was duelling with a fierce witch. The ferocious witch waving a white cloth had a pendulous red and fiery tongue protruding from her gaping mouth, a mouth with tusks and sharp red teeth. Her white hair was long and horsy; her luminous finger nails were ripe as red raspberries and beads of perspiration oozed from the human entrails hanging from her scrawny neck. She jumped up and down on her paws of feet, kicking clouds of dust into the balmy air until, much to Marcas's relief, an acrobatic white monkey with googly eyes who was playing hide and seek stopped and chased the snarling creature down the road into the darkness. The spectacle came to a conclusion with seven Matryoshka dolls in ascending order of height, knitted brows and solemn faces framed with corkscrew curls, dressed identically in aprons embroidered with dog-roses came down the road skipping through marshmallow hoops.

The villagers streamed from the footpath onto the road to follow the *ogoh-ogohs* to their final resting place. Marcas scanned the faces in the crowds, eager to catch sight of the young woman, but to no avail, she had vanished again. The merriment of Jalan Raya was replaced with an almost preternatural silence. Ribbons of red crepe paper, scrunched bunting and black banners, sprinklings of gold leaf and stardust and the well-trodden papier mache tails of the green-eyed monsters with white evening gloves were strewn down Jalan Raya. Pink flamingos minus Cheshire cat hats stood with twisted witches' broomsticks in the shadows of shop doorways. The night birds were calling. All that remained of the 'Parade of the Monsters' was the lingering phosphorescence of spent penny bangers, star crackers, cartwheels and sparklers.

Three wise men sat wordlessly rolling tobacco on the stone steps of a Hansel and Gretel gingerbread house. A stream of light peaked out beneath a carved doorway painted with silver herons and green turtles. Marcas heard a piano piece being played on the other side of the door.

Someone else loved 'Bach's C-Major Prelude'. Marcas's appreciation for this piece of music stemmed from the time he went to see 'Baghdad Café' with Yolanda in Year Seven. The film was a happy ever after story about friendship, finding a different way of life with new friends who were once strangers.

Once again, Marcas found himself thinking about Yolanda. It was kind of random. He speculated as to the wisdom of disposing of his medication. Maybe he was starting to imagine things, to hallucinate? On the other hand, he had not eaten a morsel since the coconut pancakes with Laksmi and Pak Twalen, so perhaps hunger was playing tricks with his brain. Things had been pretty full on since leaving Brisbane. He had experienced a lot of unusual happenings. Maybe he was still suffering jet lag or culture shock, or in need of a good night's sleep?

He heard the banging of pots and pans in family compounds as he followed Pak Twalen back to Cinnamon Hill; the garden was lit up like a fairyland with rainbow lanterns, sparkling lights and torches with bright flames. A refectory table on the dining pavillion covered with glossy green banana leaves was laden with colourful collections of curious dishes. Frangipanni blossoms had been carefully placed between pyramids of yellow rice surrounded with hard-boiled eggs and prawns as big as Tasmanian lobsters. Pottery women in temple dress with flowers tucked behind their ears held bowls of roasted peanuts, Bird's Eye chillies and leaves from the basil plant.

Marcas's stomach was rumbling. He was feeling out of sorts, once again, totally not exactly in the mood to be sociable, almost but not entirely wishing he was back at 'Pindari'. At the Salvation Army Refuge there was no need to make conversation because the older men, exhausted after a day drifting ghost-like around the streets, were anti-social. Marcas wished he could take refuge in his room at Cinnamon Hill. He would have loved to have flopped back onto the luxurious four-poster bed. He felt like being alone. However, he knew it would be impolite

to excuse himself from the Balinese Feast, plus he was kind of hungry. Pak Twalen showed him to his place at the table. He was pleased to see Laksmi sitting smiling alongside him.

‘Hullo Marcos. It is good to see you again. Well, tell me this – what did you think of the legendary ‘Parade of the Monsters’?’

‘Yes. It was very good. Fantastic. I enjoyed it very much, thank you.’

‘I believe you have some big parades in Australia?’

‘Yes, the biggest parades are the Anzac Day marches but they are serious and very sombre occasions. The annual Gay Mardi Gras in Sydney is probably the best fun. There are always hundreds of floats, plenty of blokes on motorbikes and Kylie Minogue clones dressed in slinky diamante gowns with feather boas. Families come from all over the suburbs, bringing their children into the city to see the parade. The atmosphere is fantastic because there are always lots of bands. One year the Preservation Hall jazz band came all the way from New Orleans. Last year there were Scottish bagpipers whizzing along on roller blades. Over a million people from all over the world line both sides of Oxford Street for the Gay Mardi Gras. It’s a pretty awesome night.’

‘*Silakan*. Please begin. *Selamat Makan*. Marcos, try the *lawar*. *Lawar* is our festive signature dish. It is a masala of diced pig’s ears cartilage, turtle cut into slivers and blended with pounded raw meat, fresh blood blended with Resurrection Lily and vegetables including leaves from the starfruit tree, young jackfruit and green papaya. Kaffir lime and shavings of palm sugar, roasted coconut combined with a dash of blood and diced cartilage has been tenderly broiled to create the flavours of this delectable dish. Nothing is wasted on the Island of the Gods. The most senior male in the family uses his hands to marry the ingredients. The task is much specialised and Pak Twalen’s expertise is the most highly respected in Tempat Merak.’

Marcas could see nothing palatable or delectable about the prospect of swallowing, much less digesting a hand-mixed miscellany of married ingredients such as the crunchy pigs' ears cartilage and bloodied coconut with a cornucopia of leaves from native trees. He wished he had a very large handkerchief in his pocket; his beanie would be invaluable on this occasion. But he had left it back at Cinnamon Hill.

'You must sample the sweet soya tempeh. This is a fern and seaweed salad. Balinese food is an exacting balance of salty, sweet, spicy and hot flavours.'

Marcas preferred the look of the grilled chicken and roasted coconut on banana leaves, also the seafood satays with peanut sauce and the yellow rice.

'I thought all rice was white.'

'We have red, black, white and yellow rice on the Island of the Gods. The juice of the turmeric root is added to the white rice while it is cooking to create the festive yellow rice. It is called *Nasi Kuning*. *Kuning* is the word for yellow. The ten day *Galungan* holiday that ends with a day of prayers and visiting is called *Kuningan*. On this day, the ancestors return to the Land of the Heavenly Souls. *Kuningan* which is our Christmas is also an occasion to commemorate the spirits of the heroes killed during a historical battle. The bad giant king called *Sang Mayadenawa* instigated the battle because he forbade the Balinese people from performing their religious ceremonies. Peace was restored when the despot was slaughtered. A symbolic fight between the deified ancestors is staged at the Klungkung temple. Many of the participants go into trance.'

'You mean like Pak Twalen? Michellina told me puppeteers awaken their magical powers to bring the shadow puppets to life on the screen. Once they have done this, they go into a trance because the spirit of *Siwa*, the dancing Hindu god of demons and ghosts, death and destruction, rebirth has been incarnated, yes? Trance must be like channelling?'

‘Indeed. Yes. You are very well informed. Some artists can only paint once they have been entered by the spirits. You will witness trance when you go to the temple to see the famous monkey dance called the *Ketjak*. During the performance the village men enter a trance-like state which gives them the powers to communicate with the deified ancestors. The ancestors communicate or channel if you like their wishes through the dancers.’

‘The monkey dance sounds fantastic. Do you think we could go and see it?’

‘After Nyepi Day, the day of silence, I will take you down to the village to see a performance of this famous dance. There will be five or six circles of a hundred or more men dressed in black and white chequered loin cloths raising their hands leaning left and right, fluttering their fingers with the eerie precision, perfect unity as they sway backwards and forwards under the light of a burnished oil lamp. Their chanting can be heard in the timeless place.’

As Laksmi described the monkey dance, Marcas yet again felt a weird sense of *deja-vu* – as if he had previously experienced the same situation; there was something familiar about what he was hearing but he did not know why. Perhaps he was just tired or perhaps the fact that he had stopped taking his medication was truly beginning to have an adverse effect on his state of mind? He wished he had more of an appetite for foreign fare as he picked away at the food on his plate in a desultory manner. There was very little talking at the table. Everyone was eating with a church-like devotion to the proceedings, quietly using the fingers of their right hands. Marcas, used to eating with a knife and fork, found eating with his fingers awkward and as unsatisfying as trying to manage chop sticks, a technique he had never managed to master with any success. He felt he had to make some attempt at conversation.

‘Laksmi, have the guests arrived?’

‘Yes Marcas. The group from Bruges in Belgium are very charming people. There is a lovely young woman. She is quite a personality, very animated. But her father, who is one of the yoga instructors, tells me his daughter is at a difficult stage. He hopes she might meet with someone her own age while she is here because there is no television and there are no computers for games or chatting in cyberspace with her friends. Her interest in yoga or the Art of Living is apparently non-existent and her father says she is at a loss to amuse herself.’

‘Maybe you could introduce me to her? I don’t suppose having a father who is a yoga instructor is exactly very stimulating.’

‘It could be a good idea, Marcas. I did think of this when everyone went off to their villas after check-in but I thought I would see how you felt before I went ahead with an informal meeting.’

‘It wouldn’t be like a blind date, I hope,’ said Marcas.

‘Not at all, it would be arranged in a very circumspect manner without any embarrassment to you or to the young woman.’

‘How’s Nyoman?’

‘Nyoman is Nyoman. He welcomed the guests with his usual exuberance. We sometimes call Nyoman, ‘Manuel’. The ‘Waka di Ume’ suddenly feels like the good old days, the days before the second bombing at Jimbaran Bay. This bombing could not have happened at a worse time because the overseas tourists were just beginning to regain the confidence to return to the Island of the Gods. We pray there will be no more acts of terrorism or further problems with drug smugglers to interfere with the safe, happy and quiet way of life on the Island of the Gods.’

‘But on our island we have been taught since childhood to always practice prayer, observance and discipline. Patience and virtue are very important to our way of life. We know we must never lose faith in the power of invisible worlds. And the bad times can be good times

if we take advantage of what is not happening to catch up with some creative pastimes. As it is we have constructed new cobblestone paths through the gardens at the 'Waka di Ume'. The finishing touches are being added to a prayer tower above a meditation room with sublime views across the rice fields towards Mount Agung. And the new spa, a sanctuary for the senses, now completed, will provide soul massages, aromatherapy with seaweed wraps and scented flower baths for the guests from overseas. You will see when you come up for a swim.'

'Sure. That would be good. Please may I be excused from the table? I think I have jet lag. The food was awesome. Pak Twalen's *lawar* is something else. Thank you.'

'Would you like for me to accompany you back to your room? You will not be losing your way?'

'No thankyou. I know exactly where to go. All good,' replied Marcas, praying he could actually find his way back to his room.

Selamat tidur, Marcas. Sampai jumpa nanti. Goodnight Marcas. Sweet dreams. Wake early so the magic of each day lasts longer!'

The Day of Silence

The sound of a cock crowing woke Marcas from his sleep. He pulled a pillow over his head. The cock would not stop crowing.

'Fantastic. So much for the day of silence,' he thought feeling irritated. There was no point in trying to go back to sleep. No sensible person could snuggle back down under the sheets back to sleep with the infernal racket of a flaming rooster. It was pitch black, still night. The brass bells and bamboo chimes were jangling, chiming furiously. He could hear thunder and lightning, the street dogs were howling like demented banshees and the young man was chilled to the bone. He hugged the eiderdown around his body but he could not stop shivering.

Tick, tock. Tick, tock. Tick, tock. 'Dali's Timepiece' of Roman numerals with the time, previously stopped at eleven minutes past eight, was getting louder and louder. He glanced across the room at the painting. The arrow of the second hand was rotating anti-clockwise

around the face of the gyroscope. The formerly inert scarab beetles were metamorphosing into monstrous cockroaches with pointed red teeth. Marcas could feel the insects crawling, prickling beneath the skin on his arms and legs, beneath the soles of his feet and under his fingernails. He scratched until his skin bled. Nothing could alleviate the unbearable itchiness. A rancid smell like squashed ants and dead fish wafting through the air made him feel sick in the stomach.

The timepiece, once marbled in colourful rosy hues and pretty blues, was melting like a deliquescent head. The golden curlicues were tarnished, dull. Marcas looked at the luminescent eyes on the peacock feather and they closed. The master with the black moustache at the heart of the clock was breaking eggs onto a palette smudged and crazed as a shattered windscreen. Slime, a sea of glutinous mucous streaked with sunflower, yolks veined with filaments of blood washed over the tiled floor of polished Indonesian marble.

Marcas, unsettled and sick, a knot in his stomach, had no idea what was happening to him. He wondered if he had been struck down with salmonella food poisoning. He had never before eaten turtle cartilage mixed with blood or strange vegetables like Resurrection Lily and seaweed or ferns. His head was pounding, and, although overwhelmed with fatigue or jet lag and an aching tiredness in all his joints, he staggered from his bed and went to the drawer. He rummaged through his desultory belongings desperately hoping to find a remaining tablet, something to help him stay put and remain sane, to make him feel normal, but the medication was nowhere to be found. It was lost. He was lost. The scatter was coming back. It was frightening.

He went to the bathroom and splashed his face. In the mirror above the basin, hundreds of pairs of hazel eyes and broken smiles on misshapen faces stared back at him. The skin on the misshapen faces of the young men in the maze of mirrors was flaking, layer after layer, and he could see sinewy red cartilage, white marrow and bony sinuses, airways blocked with phlegm

and germs with monstrous eyes, black feelers, and hair-like projections on faces of fungus. His arms itched, he scratched and yesterday's scars opened. Erythrocytes raced up and down his arteries. He could hear screams for mercy. But nothing could prevent the wicked viruses from sucking the leucocytes from his healthy tissue; his arms were bleeding, festering sores erupted and there were new wounds and ulcers, his rotting flesh was being devoured by legless maggots. The black stench of necrotic tissue was worse than rotten egg gas or a bucket of prawns on a hot day.

The black dog howled like a lonely coyote lost on the Pedernal in the faraway. He wept.

'Tjak-a-tjak-a-tjak. Tjak-a-tjak-a-tjak. Tjak-a-tjak-a-tjak.'

Marcas looked back at the hazel eyes streaming with quicksilver on the thousands of faces in the corridors of mirrors. He dared not look away. He would cease to exist if he turned his back. He would be gone. The floor beneath his feet was slimy, slippery with broken eggs, shards and splinters of broken glass, busted bottles and flaming oyster shells. He was frozen, entombed like a pharaoh, like the angel in the marble; and never could he be carved free.

He groaned. Perspiration poured down his spine from the back of his neck. He had no idea what to do with the jumbled thoughts in his aching head. *Think. Don't panic.*

There were no batteries for his second-hand Discman so Marcas could not silence the voices nor could he settle his brain with music, the 'Sisters of Mercy', 'Everybody Hurts Sometimes' or 'Moondance', the same old songs of comfort from days gone by, the half-remembered memories of the good old days. There was a library, and he had books to read, but the scatter was back and he knew he would not be able to make sense of the words on the page. He would read the same paragraph over and over again until, unable to absorb the meaning of the words, he would have no choice but to close the pages of the book. He could write in his scrapbook journal but his hands were shaking, and what would he write? *'My head is*

deliquescing.' Who would really care what he had written in his journal after he was dead and buried?

He had to get away from the faces of the men weeping, staring back at him from the never-ending hallway of mirrors, the echoes of his dreams and the pain, so much pain. Marcas shuffled out of the bathroom. He found his beanie. He pulled the black woolliness down over his ears and eyes. He paced around the pavillion. His legs would not work properly and his heart raced, and when he stood on the porch and looked out he knew he was doomed.

The courtyard wall was a battlement of barbed wire and broken bottles. The frangipanni no longer had flowers. There were skeletal branches of gnarled hands and the fingers of the Dead Men were fluttering with eerie precision. Wings flapped and a charm of finches ascended into the heavens, thunderous skies above the sugar palm shrines, charred corpses in the grey rain. The little green frogs sitting on the water no longer chorusing were petrified. Hundreds of broken-winged butterflies lay gasping on the bare earth in pools of cherry red blood. The black swans were motionless on the sea of amerta. It looked as cold as ice.

Nothing looked the same as the day before. Everything around Marcas had changed, was changing, as the parrots' beaks squawked and shrieked at the once beautiful paradise tree snake who now hung lifelessly from the fork in the Angel's Trumpet.

The serpent's head was gone, decapitated. Ten heads appeared where the snake's head had once been. Ten heads were replaced with a hundred serpents' heads. Another slicing sound and the hundred serpents' heads became a thousand heads with forked tongues. Thousands upon thousands of heads, and more and more until Marcas finally turned away, sickened by the slicing, the dreadful sight of heads being decapitated and serpents' heads multiplying ad infinitum.

It was all going wrong again. He was grief stricken. Exhausted. The black dog could not be silenced. The letter to his parents was written, and although he knew Michellina would be

disappointed, Marcas also knew because she loved him, she would understand his decision. She had talked him through these episodes so many times but she was a world away, and he was all alone, lost. He could no longer endure the living grief, the episodes of madness. His head was deliquescing and before too long he knew he would vanish into the ether. It was as inevitable as death, he would close his eyes and take his final breath.

‘Tjak-a-tjak-a-tjak. Tjak-a-tjak-a-tjak. Tjak-a-tjak-a-tjak. Tjak-a-tjak-a-tjak.’

He would walk away from the monkey dancers and he would keep on walking through the rain up through the padi fields until he reached the Elephant Grass Ridge. Perhaps Pak Twalen’s ramble would clear his thoughts. Otherwise he would find his way to the temple on the cliffs above the gorge where he would end this torment, the profound sadness because he knew he would never have an ‘ordinary’ life doing regular stuff with friends and family.

‘I am not afraid of dying. I am actually looking forward to crossing to the other side, paradise or nirvana. Necropolis. Whatever. It is time to go away. I have spent the better part of my life as a sick person suffering with chronic illness and associated social problems. I have decided to die because I am very sad and tired of the struggle. I am sick and exhausted. There is no book with instructions to tell me how to cope with the scatter. I cannot handle any more group sessions and cognitive therapy programs or admissions to psychiatric institutions. This is where the world ends, not with a whimper but a bang. My heart, injected with novocaine, feels nothing. I am numb. Can the screaming demons not see I am flying a white flag of surrender and leave me in peace? I have to switch off the thoughts. The time has come to turn out the light. Click. I am a hollow man wasting away in a twilight kingdom. Cactus land. Silken girls do not bring sherbet to people with schizophrenia. I can no longer go on pretending, stepping through shards of glass in the company of ghosts, the living dead who exist in the same Byzantine nightmare of spilt yolk and broken eggshells. Burdened. I am a burden. Let me rest in peace.’

*This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

'You are not worthy, you are not worthy, you are not worthy. Abandon hope. My brain drives me insane, ballistics and missiles of horrible thoughts crash me every time. I am unclean, a libertine, without you I am nothing. I am nothing. Summer has gone. The Bumblebee flies anyway. Tempo, Rhythm - Let the Blood Flow. Tempo, Rhythm – Let the Blood Flow. I have to get out of this place. Think.'

'Go back into the pavillion. Get back into bed and sleep. No. Sleep brings dreams, nightmares. I have failed to count the ducks. Do not look at 'Dali's Timepiece.' Tread carefully through the slippery eggs on the slimy floor of busted and broken things. Hands stop shaking. Pack belongings. Find a place for the letter. Camphor wood chest with the Garuda, it will not be lost. Pak Twalen will find the letter. Michellina will tell him where to send the letter. Write to Michellina. No paper and nothing left to say except thankyou for being my friend. She will know this. I hate my life. Coming to the Island of the Gods was a dumb idea. There is no cure. My spirit is broken. There is nothing to look forward to because my cancerous brain will continue to deteriorate until it completely deliquesces and melts into the ether. I do not want to end up in a haven for sick people like Adam Farmer. I do not want to become the shell of the man I never got to be to become an invalid at the mercy of others without any control over what happens in my life. I have nothing and I am now the cheese so I may as well be gone, invisible – just a memory. Please don't forget me. Forgive me. I could not burden you any longer. I will follow the angel of death into down to the timeless place.'

Marcas hoisted his back pack on to his sunken shoulders. No one would notice his absence because there was no one around. Pak Twalen and his family were meditating, practising silence, serenity and emptiness getting ready for a re-birth of inner creative energy and enlightenment. Love, peace and happiness. *To be so lucky!*

The coral lichgate was locked so he wrenched the charm bracelet of skeleton bones and the lock snapped - his hands were stinging, sticky and wet with blood. He wiped his torn hands on his pants as he marched through the rain down the arbour of red and white hibiscus, his skin was going shivery as he felt the shrivelling flowers touching his shoulders, falling to the ground. Tempat Merak was a ghost town. There were no vehicles. Even the tragic mangy mutts with their open sores and rotting flesh had some place to be on the Day of Silence. The villagers were at home inside their compounds playing happy families. Marcas turned to the left and walked until he found the laneway between 'Far from the Madding Crowd' and the Ramayana Art Gallery. 'Tutup' read the sign above the door.

He hoped he could remember Pak Twalen's directions. He passed a primary school with an empty playground on his left and the village meeting place with the drum tower on his right. Stone steps took him down past corn fields, fields of nutmeg, cinnamon and vanilla through a grove of coconut palms onto a pathway of smooth cobblestones. He could hear the river of silence. This was the same place where yesterday he had observed processions of smiling women walking to the washing rocks balancing baskets of batiks and lace on top of their heads.

Marcas continued walking. A hairy pink sow with a sway back and swollen teats wallowed in her own depression of squelching mud. Articles of clothing laid to dry on the grass in a clearing were soaking wet. Another rooster crowed and so did another and another. Sick of hearing 'Cock a Doodle Doo', Marcas ran until he rounded a curve so he no could no longer hear

the crowing of the flaming rooster. The terraced rice fields on the other side of the river were barely visible in the torrential rain.

‘Come away with me, come away with me,’ wailed the angel of death. Marcas stepped onto the bridge.

The timber slats decaying and rotting beneath his feet suspended high above the rising waters of the river, swung precariously. He gritted his teeth. He would not look down at the swirling waters of the rushing river eddying in the valley down below. He could not think about his fear of heights or what he was about to do; he clung to the hand ropes gingerly placing one foot in front of the other ever so slowly, carefully because the bridge was rickety, wet and slippery, wobbling under his weight. It was virtually impossible to see where he was heading. The wind howled and the swinging planks of timber swayed from side to side in the sweeping rain.

Marcas was thankful for his beanie. There was no way he could have negotiated this bridge balancing an umbrella or a chook in a basket like the sure-footed Balinese people. He watched where he placed his feet as he teetered nervously across the bridge from one side of the steep ravine to the other until he reached safety; solid ground squishy and thick with volcanic mud. He should have been sensible and worn his practical basket ball shoes instead of the flimsy thongs. Fudgy chocolate mud oozed between the toes on his sodden feet.

On the other side he expected to meet the woman with the twisted smile and blood red eyes, the angel of death in her cloak of raven feathers with the eyes plucked from the tails of peacocks who was sucking the essence from his soul. Instead he found Pak Twalen’s steps carved from the earth, which he assumed would lead to the edge of the rice fields.

The steep steps were slippery as a stream of eels. The mud was deep, like quicksand. Marcas steadied himself as he pulled his feet out and laboriously clambered through the gluggy

junket up the slope, grabbing at the long grasses to keep his balance. Prickles pierced the palms of his hands. His feet kept sliding but he finally reached the top, the start of the emerald green rice fields, the criss-crossing of terraced hillsides stretching towards the sky as far as the eye could see towards the base of Mount Agung.

From the porch at Cinnamon Hill, the rice fields were a vision of bucolic infinity, a pastoral scene of sunshine and emerald greenness; but now Marcas was standing at the edge of the landscape, it no longer looked like a pretty picturesque postcard. The squarish fields, a complex irrigation system of weirs, tunnels and channels were swamps stagnant with brown mud and dirty water. He noticed tiny new shoots of rice peeping through the dimpled surface of the water. There was nowhere to walk except along a series of narrow levee banks separating each of the fields. The distraught young man felt like a tight rope performer without the benefit of a pole to help him keep his balance. He should have brought a walking stick.

The Balinese people could do it – Marcas had observed the villagers; walking, strolling, gliding gleefully like graceful gazelles in a positively leisurely manner through the chequerboard of rice fields. If they could do it he could do it. No drama. Too easy. He recalled Pak Twalen's advice about Mount Agung. He had to keep the Home of the Ancestors in sight but it was difficult in the pouring rain. The peak of Mount Agung cloaked in clouds was barely visible. So far, Pak Twalen's ramble was far from 'idyllic'. Marcas could not see three feet in front of him. His chances of seeing forever were severely compromised by the climatic conditions.

'Where is forever?' He asked himself as he plodded through mud towards a temple in an unknown destination.

His stomach was rumbling. Marcas was hungry. He wished he had a packed lunch with cheese, vegemite and lettuce sandwiches, a couple of home-made Anzac biscuits and a crisp Golden Delicious apple. His idea of a hearty last supper was not coconut dowsed in blood served

with pig's intestines, the leaves of a Resurrection Lily and diced cartilage. Although it was raining and he was surrounded by water, there was no water to drink. He was as thirsty as a threepenny thief on a First Fleet ship.

Flocks of ducks were dilly-dallying around sticks with white flags in the fields. The web-footed creatures with long necks and spatulate bills looked enviably content with their humble lot in life. The funny creatures were quite individual with their different coloured feathers; speckles of green and beige with flecks of brown, shades of teal green and buttery lemons. They preened their feathers and fluffed out their necks, shaking water from their wings, quacking, hopping back and forth from the flooded fields onto the muddy embankments and back again into the water quibbling over big fat juicy worms, fertilising the rice.

Marcas continued inching his way along the impossibly narrow embankments, up the muddy steps carved into the earth onto higher levels and more mazes of terraced fields. He could not see his feet because they were caked like chocolate galoshes. As the rain persisted the ground grew increasingly slippery. This trek through the rice fields was not getting less difficult. He entertained the thought of turning back; returning to the pavillion to take shelter from the storm in the four-poster bed, but when he looked back, his heart sank because he could not see Cinnamon Hill, so he had no option but to forge his way to the temple.

'You are not worthy, you are not worthy, you are not worthy. Abandon hope all ye who enter here.'

'Tempo, Rhythm, Let the Blood Flow.'

'You are not worthy, you are not worthy, you are not worthy. Abandon hope all ye who enter here.'

‘Shut the fuck up. I have not abandoned hope. All I want to do is get out of these fucking rice fields so I don’t have to hear your voices ever again. Get out of my life. LEAVE ME ALONE,’ he screamed at the top of his voice.

Marcas immediately felt guilty. Losing his temper and swearing on the Day of Silence, the beginning of a New Year on the Island of the Gods was not a respectful thing to do, especially within earshot of the ancestors on the sacred Mount Agung. But he hoped, given his dire circumstances, the scarecrows and the gods would forgive his aberration. He was not often given to outbursts of anger or offensive language. There were too many other good words in the dictionary. Damn and blast it all! Schweppes! Gadzooks! Darn! Gosh! Go to blazes and may your chooks turn to emus! Blast! Crickey!

‘Sorry. Sorry.’

‘What on earth?’

A crack of thunder shook the ground and in a split second the gun-metal grey clouds were rolling away, patches of blue; forget-me-knot, jacaranda, lavender and love-in-a-mist were emerging and Mount Agung, no longer cloaked in clouds was a picture of loveliness. The wind dropped, there was warmth in the air, he heard whistling; the golden bird with the beak of an eagle and the crimson wings was riding the thermals. He soared and swooped above Marcas’s head.

So amazed was he by the swift change in the weather and the appearance of the golden Garuda in the real world that momentarily he forgot where he was and did not concentrate on what he was doing. His thong slipped from his right foot. There was nothing to grab hold of to keep his balance, so the young man skated from the bank into a rice field. The ducks squawked and scurried away, flapping their wings and taking flight.

As he careered into the rice field, something razor sharp stabbed him between his toes, sheared his shin and jabbed in the upper leg near his thigh not far from his groin. He splashed down, and when he came to a standstill, he was marooned and wounded, knee-deep with new rice shoots in a quagmire of mud and water, next to a splendid scarecrow wearing rags and feathers.

Think. No sense in panicking. He was upright. He was not prone, spread-eagled, flat out like a lizard on a rock. Marcas had to maintain his equilibrium. He needed to reclaim his errant footwear from the field. He grabbed one thong just as it was about to set sail down a canal of water into a field down below. The second thong was buried in the sludge. It was less easy to retrieve, groping around in the mud. Blood poured from his excoriated shin. Bone was visible beneath the layers of torn and ripped flesh. *'May your chooks change to emus! Ouch!'*

The young man, exasperated by his plight, used both arms and brute force to yank his legs, one at a time, out of the gluggy mud until he was poised, somewhat precariously, back on relatively dry land between the rice fields. Crikey. Blood was oozing from the mussy places between his toes.

Marcas bade a civilised farewell to the scarecrow. He limped wearily along in search of some flat dry ground to sit down on so he could assess the extent of his injuries. He continued to apply pressure to the wound at the top of his thigh. The sun was beginning to beat down although it was early in the day, the atmosphere was steamier than ever. He finally came to a junction where he sat down. He took off one of his tee shirts and dipped the sleeve in the cleanest water he could find on top of the field alongside him, to try and clean his shin. Ouch! The nasty gash stung like crazy. The sight of raw bone made him sick to the stomach. His pants were saturated with blood and muck but he could hardly stand up, much less remove his trousers in the middle of the rice fields to assess the wound on his upper leg.

Marcas began to shake, almost uncontrollably because suddenly, he was chilled to the bone. He prayed he would not faint due to the loss of blood. He had read true stories about people stung by bumblebees going into anaphylactic shock and dying with swollen faces and puffed up limbs. He had to keep on keeping on, feeling much like Leunig's Master of Melancholy before rigor mortis set in, and no one would be able to identify a strange bloated body ballooning ready to explode in the rice fields.

Life is certainly not untrammelled bliss. Most people his age were out enjoying their lives; they were not stranded like a bleeding boar in a maze of rice fields. The guys from the old days were on career paths with subjects to study and exams to pass. One of his primary school go-kart mates had an important but tedious job supervising the removal of asbestos from school roofs, his sister was mastering forensic psychology, and the boy who overcame the vicissitudes of an eating disorder was working his way up through the cheeseburger ranks of a vegetarian Fast Food outlet.

They probably all had gorgeous girl friends to kiss goodnight, Mustangs with grunty motors and mufflers, happy mates, surfing mates and cool night club mates to do all the usual stuff with in between study or work. They would have money to spend on clothes and music and movies, even 'Big Day Out' concerts or the 'State of Origin' games. All the normal stuff everyone dreams about having when they join the adult world.

Marcas had none of these things. He did not put his hand up to be an outcast ostracised from society.

'Yes please, I want to be a melancholy young man with a mental illness that causes more lifelong disability than any other, and stranded in the rice fields. What do you want to do with your life? I choose to be different to everyone else. I will aspire to a life of living grief. I will make it my business to visit as many psychiatric wards as possible so I can write a

comprehensive guide complete with a star rating. I will sit in consultation with sober men in starched white coats informing distraught parents there is nothing they can do because their child is just another casualty of the ‘revolving door syndrome’. Yes please, I want to spend years laboriously filling out Centrelink forms so I can afford another night in a shelter with crusty old men discussing their waterworks.’

‘Cognitive therapy workshops de-programming negative forms of thinking are a great source of inspiration, a riveting way to spend the day. And another spell of rehabilitation on a farm in the Western suburbs of Sydney learning to milk a cantankerous cow called Mrs Podgorny could be fun. It’s fantastic being a human guinea pig dosed to the eyeballs with cocktails of new medications; antidepressants, antipsychotics, dexamphetamine and benzodiazepines prescribed by drug reps to numb my feelings and to help me stay put, remain sane. New age cures for grief, exhaustion, illness and loneliness – not coping! Bring on the depression!’

‘Get a life! Sure. Gee thanks. Why did it happen? Hormone drip to hurry birth so country general practitioner need not wait around for Mother Nature to take her course? Genes? Stress? Not enough cruciferous green vegetables? Recreational drugs? Environment? It was hardly poor social circumstances. Or just fucking bad luck? A tragic twist of fate!’

Marcas remembered learning the lines from Macbeth when he was at school.

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow
Raze out the written troubles of the brain
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the sweet bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?

Marcas, very bloodied and muddied and determined to get out of the rice fields, painfully levered his body back into a vertical position. He was dizzy. He wished he could lie down and shut his eyes to go to sleep but with no shade, heatstroke would be the last straw. Besides, the ground was damp and lumpy, and a mellifluous voice kept telling him not to run widdershins, to hang on and keep on keeping on until he reached the temple.

So the young man rallied and proceeded cautiously. He watched where he placed his bleeding feet. He kept the sacred mountain in sight as he concentrated on keeping his balance in all the slipperiness, all the time wondering if supernatural forces had come into play, and his unfortunate accident was really a magical event conjured and choreographed by the spiritual ancestors in the invisible realm. Perhaps the rice field had called him for some reason yet to be revealed?

‘Tempo. Rhythm. Let the blood stop flowing.’

Marcas decided his thongs were nothing short of a hindrance to his progress. He rinsed them and then he left them in the shape of a cross at a junction like one of those crucifixes on roadside memorials back home in Australia. His thongs could go to some more deserving individual. The farmer would probably appreciate a pair of blue thongs.

Once again it was drizzling but at the same time the sun was shining. Mount Agung was arched with rainbows. Blue birds called and crystals danced in the sun light. The profuse bleeding on Marcas’s ripped shin was abating; he continued to apply pressure to his upper leg as he eased his way up through the endless terraces. There was not much more he could do because it was not as if he had a suturing kit with a bottle of Friar’s Balsam. He had not packed Mickey Mouse band aids. There was no sign of a medical centre and he could not see a St. John’s ambulance parked in the middle of the rice fields. He had to bat on as bravely as possible without incurring any more nasty incidences. It was not his day. There was very little to be glad

about except perhaps the rainbows, and the realisation – ‘*what on earth did it matter any way? Que sera sera! Nothing was copacetic or fantastic. Everything sucked.*’

What Marcas found fascinating was how such a pretty emerald green rice field with an innocuous surface of soft mud and rainwater could inflict such brutal injuries. Steam was rising from his forehead, probably on account of the brilliant sunshine, the rising humidity and the fact he was wearing his woollen beanie. Although once again it did occur to him the flushes of heat could signal the onset of a waterborne pyogenic infection due to ducks’ droppings and mud in his wounds. The torrid trek, rise after rise after more rises criss-crossing through the terraced rice fields, seemed endless. Tiresome. The view was improving so Marcas knew he was heading in the right direction, but his bones had begun to throb, he felt increasingly light-headed. He knew he had lost litres of blood, but somehow or other he would slog up the terraces until he reached his mysterious destination.

Worse things had happened in his life; much much worse things. He was present when Amaryllis stopped breathing after she injected herself with heroin cut with ground glass. And being beaten up by McVeigh in the showers throughout his boarding school years was a high price to pay for being a skinny kid with butter fingers and no ball skills who just wanted to be liked. Marcas knew what it was like to climb white walls with no windows to escape the pain, the screaming demons and the perpetual need for a smidgin of something, anything to calm his fears, to settle his brain. He had spent hours sitting with emaciated self-hating teenage girls with no esteem and broken hearts who could not swallow food but gulped down packets of laxatives like they were Smarties. Marcas had been ferociously beaten and his face sliced with a broken beer bottle because some homophobic graffiti artist in a street gang decided he was gay. He had seen the body of his beloved grandfather in a coffin, his grandmother all alone in the family home being resilient, trying not to show her grief for the loss of her best friend. Marcas knew what it

was like to have bottled up emotions and no one to talk to when there was so much he needed to share. He understood what it was like to be taken away and locked up against his wishes. He knew how it felt to be a vagrant street kid with no place to call home. And he knew what it was like to bury Buster the family dog who died of old age.

So compared to all those experiences, this almighty, if not at times tiresome, ramble through the rice fields incurring a few inconvenient injuries was no big deal. When you think you've had too much, hang on. Life goes on. It was almost amusing compared to all the other heavy catastrophes that had happened during the past nineteen years. At least he was not rupophobic or agoraphobic. The rainbows ribboned around Mount Agung provided hope. Maybe the ancestors were guiding him someplace safe?

He finally came to the top of the hill. *Fantastic*. He sighed with relief and decided it was time to take a rest. He plonked himself on the sawah grasses of the Elephant Grass Ridge. He was totally over rice fields. The bleeding had dwindled to a trickle, but his shin was a complete bloody mess. Marcos found a clean dry tee shirt in his back pack. He ripped a sleeve off and pulled it up over his foot, wrapping it around the deep gash. A knot twisted and tucked at the back of the cloth would keep the make-shift bandage secure. There was not much he could do about his toes because he could not see them. He contemplated putting a sock on his foot to protect his bleeding toes, but walking along a track wearing one sock would look ridiculous, undignified for a young man going places, making his way to a historic temple.

He was out of the rice fields and away from the mud. He was glad because it was one less thing for him to worry about; he would cross rice field trekking adventures from his long list of laborious experiences never to be repeated. From his vantage point at the top of the terraces when he looked back down at the criss-crossing of fields with canals and channels he realised he had covered an enormous distance. Given the tempestuous weather conditions, the tumble into

the mud and the fact he was in unknown territory without a map, Marcas felt quite pleased. It was quite an achievement.

The view was breathtaking. He could not see forever but he could see Jimbaran Bay, a crescent of white sand with gaily painted outrigger boats draped in bobbly fishing nets alongside an azure ocean sparkling with silver white tops. Marcas was feeling quite peaceful. Mellow, almost tranquil. The earth was good and solid, almost dry, the grasses were spongy and there was a cooling breeze. The warmth of the sun on his sodden back was heavenly. He felt drowsy. He so wished he could lie down but he was determined to complete Pak Twalen's highly debatable 'idyllic' ramble aptly named 'Far From the Madding Crowd', so once again he shuffled painfully to his feet. He hobbled along shivering as he made a concerted effort to hum 'Diamonds on the Inside'; the soft stems of the Elephant grasses brushed and tickled the skin on his shins like his mother's fairy kisses. He ploughed along in an easterly direction and sure enough, before too long, he reached the end of the ridge.

'Hallelujah'! Marcas looked down and there, at the bottom of a gentle incline, he could see Pak Twalen's temple situated on level ground. *'Hallelujah.'* He followed a path to the temple gate. He was still shivering when he entered the temple grounds but the sight of sugar palm shrines and offerings; creamy white blossoms, rice and the faces of marigolds made him feel at home, safe. Sandalwood incense burned. He almost expected to see Saraswati astride her snow white goose in the spirals of smokiness. A thousand and one white butterflies fluttered by like everlasting daisies. Frangipanni flowers skipping through the sunshine infused the air with high notes of floral; jasmine and orange with verdigris, an intoxicating fragrance more than a thousand kisses deep.

Marcas ambled around the base of the Banyan tree. Some thoughtful soul had provided a bamboo mat. He lay down, he closed his eyes, and he sighed.

The leaves were whispering to the breeze. Temple bells tinkled. He drifted in and out of consciousness, hearing only the stillness, the frangipanni flowers floating, and the creamy petals as they kissed the sweet earth.

The Timeless Place

The peace was short-lived, because pain like a red hot poker piercing down Marcas's leg aroused him from his slumber. And, far from easing, it was getting much worse. He was shivering, perspiration poured from his forehead around the back of his neck down his spine. Each time he opened his eyes; the light hurt and blinded his vision. If he had the strength to continue walking, he would find the edge of the cliff and jump straight into the Wos gorge. But everything looked so far away, everything was fading. Marcas was feverish. He wished he had a magnum of Brompton's Cocktail, a magic elixir to alleviate the pain. The pain was intensifying, it was excruciating, too much to bear, and Marcas was suicidal again, but for reasons different from those in the past.

Finally, he forced himself to get up so he could put an end to his misery, but the light continued to hurt his eyes, with a rush of blood to his head, his legs buckled and Marcas collapsed back onto the sweet earth of the temple grounds. He curled his body into a ball and clasped his arms around his ankles. He scrunched up his eyes as tightly as possible to block out the blinding light. He tried to visualise something beautiful in the darkness as he had been taught in cognitive therapy group sessions but there was nothing but a void. There was no shining light for him at the end of the tunnel.

So much for my Dream Journey, he mused, as the life drained out with the last of his blood and everything began to become lighter. He was trapped in darkness but he had survived

the tortuous trek through the rice fields. However, he was not convinced he really did want his life to end ingloriously in the temple grounds on the Island of the Gods. It would have been wonderful to have fallen in love again with a beautiful young woman, someone just like Amaryllis, a friend he could make happy and care for as he grew old. It would have been fun to have had a son, a daughter to take to the Gallery of Modern Art. He wished he had been able to thank Michellina for her absolute loyalty, her genuine friendship. Being a Master of Quantum Cryptology much more an artist was totally out of the question. It was not on the cards.

But now he was going to die without any one there to hold him. *'Will there be someone there to meet me? Please don't forget me. I have only love for my family and friends. I am deeply sorry for the hurt I have caused you all.'*

The excruciating pain eased and Marcas felt himself slipping from his body into a Timeless Place where all the tensions and the pain were gone, replaced with an overwhelming sense of peacefulness and harmony. It was as if all of his worries were gone, and as he continued to think about his journey, it perplexed him why he had worried so about such petty things. Nothing mattered anymore. There were no words adequate to express the relief he was feeling, sheer bliss because he was no longer engulfed by physical pain and his mind was no longer a seething mass of torment. The incredible nightmare was over, there was no longer a riot going on in his head.

Marcas hovered weightlessly above his body, waiting to hear the three strikes of the village drum. The men would come with Holy water to wash his body. They would heal his wounds with fragrant pastes of herbs and flowers. His body would be wrapped in a soft white cloth. Marcas prayed mirrors would be placed on his eyes so he could see beauty in the next world, the invisible world of the ancestors, The Land of the Heavenly Souls.

He soared and dipped and floated through translucent teardrops into a heavenly realm where he was immersed in radiance; an incredible light encircled the young man as he bobbed lightly like a bottle with a message in the spray above the silvery white caps of the amorphous sea. Into the mystic he went until he arrived and he was not alone, because he was surrounded by spirit beings quite strangely human in form. Some were ebony; others were periwinkled, there were sunflower yellow and angelskin, mother-of-pearl and ultramarine spirit beings. They resembled the fire flies on the moonshiny evening darting above the rice fields and twinkling like crystals, the fairy lights on a Christmas tree. Strangely, they did not have gossamer wings like butterflies or the angels and seraphims on the Resurrection window in the Church of the Good Shepherd.

A luminescent spirit in white angelskin appeared by his side. The young man recognised his no-nonsense grandmother. Babs, as everyone called Barbara, was a sharp-tongued woman given to verbosity who should have pursued a career teaching The Interpretation of Reactions in Terms of Electronic Theory as opposed to Occupational Therapy. Marcas remembered her constantly latch-hooking rugs, knitting tea cosies, weaving baskets and chain-stitching hexagons of Liberty prints to make quilts. His grandmother, a formidable Scrabble opponent, looked as cross as two sticks.

‘Marcas Oswald, my dear boy, you are not supposed to be in the Timeless Place. What on earth possessed you to leave Cinnamon Hill on the Day of Silence? Be the sensible young man I know you are quite capable of being, go straight back to your body; there will be someone there to help you cross back over to the Island of the Gods. I do not suppose you have any idea where you have left your body?’

‘As a matter of a fact, Babs, my bleeding broken body is decomposing under a Banyan tree in the temple grounds above the Wos Gorge; the place where the East meets the West. I

have three excruciatingly painful injuries to my right leg. I have lost litres of blood. I am totally over rice fields. My life has been an endless struggle, so please don't even think about telling me about my Dream Journey or anyone else's Dream Journey for that matter. I am staying here where it is peaceful.'

'Peaceful is not what you need at your age! Has no one informed you - busy people are happy people? I am here to tell you, during the past century, I have seen everything - the comic, the repulsive and the divine. And, one thing is for sure, you have all three experiences to look forward to time and time again before your Dream Journey is complete. Return to the temple grounds and wait above your body. Lucas will be along shortly to attend to your wounds. He is an important man with better things to do than attend to the folly of a young man who has left the intermediary world of the human beings to venture into the supernatural realm of the spirits. Good heavens, Marcas. Of course, life is a struggle, but the struggle must be lived. Indeed, it is quite true you have haemorrhaged but you have not lost all your blood. You are in a state of shock. Quite delirious it seems!'

'Who is Lucas?'

'Lucas is a Roman physician with extraordinary healing powers. The miracle worker is sometimes known as Saint Luke or Lucius. He will attend to your injuries. You must be back on the Island of the Gods on the 17th August. Goodness knows what your grandfather would say if he knew you were here. Make haste!'

'Hang on Babs. What colour is Lucas? The spirit beings are more colours than Joseph's Technicolour Dreamcoat! Are there different tribes here?'

'You will recognise Lucas because he wears a Tyrian purple robe embroidered with ruby roses and hyacinths. His crown is decorated with six-pointed stars and peacock feathers. As we speak, Mr Geber, Lucas's faithful pet tortoise, is slipping back to 300 BC, to obtain a beaker of

magic elixir from the wells of mercury in Alexandria. Yes, dear heart, those poor souls in ebony belong to the lost tribes, those who ended their lives. They do not know where they are going or what they are doing and so they will remain in limbo, suspended and trapped between fantasy and reality until the Light feels the time is right for them to assume positions of responsibility. The ebonies must care for the stillborn and miscarried babies in the ‘Snugglepots and Cuddlepies’ cloud nurseries when they wake from their dreams; there must be warmed bottles of mothers’ milk, fairytales with happy endings, sweet lullabies and lots of tender loving care.’

‘However, there is understanding and comfort for the ebonies whilst they are in limbo because they are sharing a sense of belonging with those like themselves who have suffered the same living grief. Sometimes they remind me of a flock of dilly-dallying ducks, the way they all cluster, bunching together because they fear being on their own. It is a terrible thing to take your own life, especially if you are a young person with so much potential for success. I do not think you would want the responsibility of taking care of babies on the eve of your twentieth birthday.’

‘Marcas you must never think about suiciding again. I understand suicide is not chosen; it happens when the pain exceeds the resources for coping with the pain. However, life’s hardest lessons are not yet over, you will be faced with further challenges, but believe me Marcas, solutions can be found for every problem. We cannot choose our experiences in life but we can choose how we handle those experiences. It is a matter of working through things as best as possible. You must persevere because good things come to those who are patient. As Pak Twalen says, practice patience as well as prayer, observance and discipline. There is no sense in abandoning hope because believe me, your Dream Journey has only just begun!’

Marcas remembered how once Babs got started on a pet subject, it was hard to curtail her enthusiasm. No one could stop her in mid-flight. His father sometimes muttered under his breath

that Babs was a bit of a ‘windbag.’ However, Marcas had nothing better to do at this point in time, so he tuned respectfully back into what his grandmother had to say, her pearls of wisdom.

‘Marcas, try to stop dwelling on the past. Have faith. You are strong and you will learn, with the help of your family, friends and health professionals to overcome the obstacles so you can manage your schizophrenia. I promise you, your life will be interesting, rich and rewarding because your experience of life and the way you perceive the world is unique. You are special. I know you are interested in art, so what about sharing your experience and your insight to help everyone better understand mental illness? Paint your dreams. Turn lead into gold. Use your creative talents to provide the world with a new way of seeing schizophrenia.’

Marcas had never really considered himself as special. He had always seen his schizophrenia as a disability, an obstacle to living a ‘normal’ life but perhaps Babs had a point. He had no idea how Barbara could possibly know about the torment of the voices, the sorrow for all that had been lost and his depression; the reasons that had led him to attempt suicide on more than one occasion. He had often thought about the issue of euthanasia.

There could be euthanasia centers, compassionate homes for human beings with no quality of life so they could end their lives with dignity. People could sign consent forms whilst of sound mind. Rooms furnished with space beds and massage options could play beautiful music. Best-loved memories could be viewed with surround sound on plasma screens. The personalised rooms would be candle-lit, perfumed with special scents. Marcas would choose the musky high notes, the scent of the camphoraceous paperbarks flowering in spring, as well as the salty spray of sea foam on a hot summer’s day at Sunshine Beach for his last rites.

‘According to modern thought in the field of mental health, auditory hallucinations or the hearing of voices are symptoms of chronic loneliness and isolation with extreme anxiety. The voices are your own emotions and thoughts talking to you. Voices represent deep underlying

problems with self-acceptance and therefore interpersonal relationships. Voices provide company in a lonely world. They are a direct result of stress and isolation; the voices are thoughts from you to you.'

Babs continued without stopping to draw breath.

'Dear heart, I do believe that once you settle into life on the Island of the Gods pursuing your interest in art, there is every chance the voices will decrease with time. You may need to consult with a doctor about resuming your medication. If medication relieves your distress and helps to settle your brain so you can concentrate in order to manage your life successfully, this option should not be completely disregarded. There is no failure in not coping with life from time to time; not everyone has innate skills to manage difficult situations especially when you are young. Everyone experiences private fears, anxieties at certain times, everybody hurts sometimes. The difficulty with diseases of the brain, unlike measles or multiple sclerosis, is that mental illnesses cannot be seen, they are invisible to the outside world.'

'There is no shame Marcas. One in a hundred Australians are affected by schizophrenia. And there are thousands of other young and old people suffering with other mental illnesses hurting, hiding their shame and masking their problems for the fear of being stigmatised, condemned by those with no experience of the dark labyrinth. Despair. There is something between sympathy and apathy called empathy. Empathy or compassion is sadly lacking in the modern world. Although you feel so very alienated, you are not alone with these feelings.'

In a flash of colour and the sparkle of a star Barbara departed like quicksilver, leaving Marcas free to soar through space into the flowing melody of a choral sea symphony. He melted through the music into an Irish fairytale of Turkish onion domes, church spires and steepled cathedrals, mosques with moonstone minarets and Hindu temples alongside towering adobe pueblos on either side of the Pierian Stream.

Relatives and long-lost friends, a kindergarten boy who drowned in a dam, and Buster stood on the opposite bank of the Pierian Stream. Marcas was overjoyed to see Buster who was lifting his leg, turning tricks like a circus performer against the spindly trunk of a Tuckeroo tree.

Marcas could see no stepping stones, no logs to cross to the other side of the Pierian Stream. He could not wade through the fast-flowing water. It was too deep. Marcas set off through a meadow of red poppies, Stargazer lilies, Baby's Breath and white-felted flowers towards a Japanese bridge in the distance. Blue birds kept him company. He whistled Twalen's happy tune but just as he reached the bridge, much to his aggravation, his grandmother reappeared.

'Marcas I have come to tell you, at eleven minutes past eight you must return to your body. However, before you leave, The Light has granted you an audience.'

'Yes, Babs. Who is The Light?'

'The Light is the Supreme Being.'

'Do you mean God?'

'Dear Marcas there are many gods. Everyone must search until they find their own gods. Some believe power, money, possessions or social status are gods. Others discover the secrets of the soul sitting on the dock of the bay watching the tide rolling away or listening to the gentle lapping of water against the bow of a houseboat moored on a lake in Kashmir. I have been acquainted with doctors, general practitioners disillusioned by modern day afflictions such as diabetes, heart disease and emphysema who have joined 'Medecins Sans Frontiere' to find their gods by helping the masses; the truly disadvantaged human beings who are starving to death in Third World countries. Some find god by becoming wildlife conservationists. Others seek God singing hymns on Sunday, partaking of Holy Communion. Think of all the myths and legends there are in the world, turn back the pages of history and you will find a host of gods in ancient

literature. There are gods for each and every one of us. We are all free to choose our own gods to guide us through our joys and sorrows; to help us cope with adversity. God is just finding a safe, happy and quiet place in your heart. Peace within the human heart itself is all that truly matters.'

A phosphorescent pinprick of light coming from the distance, all ivory and beribboned, coming towards Marcas enfolded him in the brightest light of his life. There was no pain when he opened his eyes; he did not even blink because as the light drew nearer and closer, Marcas found himself in a quiet place of pure bliss, absolute stillness. He felt like he had been chosen, he was a special part of the universe. Joy filled his heart. The internal chatter had ceased. There was clarity in his thoughts, and the freshness of spirit he was feeling gave him renewed hope, faith that everything would work out just as he remembered his mother had always told him.

'Well hullo Marcas. How are things in your world?'

Marcas had no opportunity to tell him 'fantastic' or to articulate his erudite opinion about the transformative nature of his extraordinary experience, or his previously depressing circumstances, much less relate the tumultuous saga about his experience of Twalen's 'idyllic' ramble through the rice fields. The Nyepi Day adventure had led him to The Light in the Timeless Place; he had taken the time to listen Babs, his grandmother, who was not such a bad egg after all. Marcas had seen things he had never seen before. It was all good.

Miraculously, the departed ones had crossed from the other side of the Pierian Stream. Everyone gathered around Marcas. He felt treasured. Marcas was the life and soul of the party, a family reunion he could not recall being invited to, but it was fantastic to be back in the company of old friends, familiar faces. There, alive and well, was his old chum Buster. The pug dog was fourteen years old when he went to sleep and did not wake up.

Marcas bent down and picked up Buster, who was as cumbersome as ever. He cradled him in his arms; the boy nuzzled his nose into the silky fur of the dog's soft apricot coat; the family pet he remembered and loved from long ago looked exactly the same, perhaps even younger, because his grey whiskers were black. Buster had the same wrinkles, tightly curled tail fixed to the end of his body, four fine legs and perfect paws, a comical face with velvety ears and a quizzical expression.

'My grandson cannot remain, he must go back. Marcas has been granted a second chance to realise the dreams of his childhood. Arrangements have been made for him to return to the Island of the Gods on Tuesday 17th August.'

'Fair and softly goes far in a day. There is plenty of time, Barbara', murmured The Light firmly but kindly.

'Would it be possible to see my grandfather before I return?' Marcas asked politely.

'Your grandfather was here meeting with one of the veterans who arrived yesterday but it would take too long for him to come back from the arboretum of the Tree Museum. He is propagating Huon pines and Manna eucalypts for koalas, seeding four-leafed clovers. Besides it would distress your grandfather to see you here, Marcas. He endured enough post-traumatic distress as a result of serving his country in the Vietnam War. However, before your departure you may wish to observe the Akashic Records.'

'Sure. What are the Akashic Records?'

'The Akashic Records are a pictorial archive, a memory library of all works of creation, events, actions, thoughts and feelings that have occurred since the beginning of time. Everything that has happened in this world is recorded in the archives. Nothing in history has ever been lost.'

The Light ushered Marcas through a western door into a majestic foyer; the library of records was a gallery of paintings. Every painting ever painted since the dreamtime, a long time ago before the days of the Rainbow Serpent and Alcheringa, hung on the walls of the room. As Marcas walked into the heart of the room towards the paintings, the walls vibrated with light, ideas streamed into his head and Marcas knew he was receiving the sum of all the knowledge. He had a complete understanding of the entire history of the human race. His fantastic knowledge continued to increase as he gazed down passages and doorways at Escher staircases and spiral stairwells, turrets and open towers between the paintings on the walls.

He could see astrophysicists with wide-field telescopes in the turrets observing faraway places, everness and tomorrow land. There were developmental biologists and immunologists conferring with medical ethicists at round tables in meeting rooms. Stem cell scientists in laboratories were studying organisms developing cultures in artificial media.

An astrologer in a lofty tower was engaged in a delicate operation. He was painstakingly realigning the planets. Marcas watched the man consulting the constellations, working with charts and logarithms, algebraic equations. Something had gone amiss; the orbits of Mars and Venus, no longer synchronous, were wreaking chaos with world climate patterns; the glaciers in the Swiss Alps were turning into rivers, a tsunami had washed the lost city of Atlantis onto the shores of southern Spain, snow was falling on Land's End during July and Uluru was an island with coconut palms in the midst of an inland sea.

Marcas was bemused at the sight of an archaeologist with an alopecic head twirling his ectoplastic beard of silver studying a collection of gingerbread jigsaw puzzle pieces. The young man stopped to gaze in wonder at intelligences being transmitted into the new-born spirits of babies on earth.

Leprechauns sang ‘When Irish Eyes are Smiling’ in the candlelit keep of an Irish castle as fairies painted rainbows. Durty Nellie wearing a rose gold Claddagh ring was serving balmy jugs of nutmeggy mead to jugglers and jesters in the Great Hall. Cornish piskies with sapphire scissors were snipping at old moons to make stars. Silken girls bringing sherbet to whirling dervishes spinning yarns on foot-treadle floor looms, whispered sweet nothings.

Marcas was transfixed by all he saw in the library of records. The Light tapped him on the shoulder and motioned for him to return to the majestic entrance of the archives. Marcas did not want to leave because for the first time in his life, he felt divinely powerful.

He had all the knowledge in the world. World leaders and philanthropists, scientists and philosophers, all creatures great and small, would request an audience with Marcas Oswald. He would be knighted in a ceremony of pomp and circumstance at Buckingham Palace. Marcas would share his extraordinary experience of the Timeless Place. He had all the answers to all the questions. ‘Unity in Diversity’ would become a reality.

‘Marcas, you cannot take your experience of the Timeless Place back to Earth. The experiences, like dreams, will disappear as dreams disappear when you wake up in the morning and you look out the window to watch the sun as she spreads her golden pathway from the horizon into the real world.’

‘But, the experiences are stored in my head and my memories cannot be taken away. My memory, although impaired in the past, is like that of the great white elephant, exceptional.’

‘I will give you a test. What word symbolises the magical transforming substance in alchemical thought?’

The Light clicked a secret in his hand. Marcas heard the pan pipes, Saraswati’s lute and the tinkling of bells as well as the muffled three beats of a village drum in the distance.

‘What chemical element symbolises the magical transforming substance in alchemical thought?’

‘Quicksilver? Gold? Hermes? Water? Spirit? Light? Elixir? Amerta? Sea?’

‘You are guessing. Try again. These words are all good but as every wordsmith knows there is always one perfect word to convey true meaning.’

‘Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious? Verisimilitude? Bliss? Love?’

Marcas knew the answer was connected to the number five and the wells of Alexandria, as well as the Philosopher’s Stone but he could not remember the precise word he needed to answer the Light’s question.

‘It is almost time for you to go cross back over to the other side. Are you ready Marcas?’

‘Not really. What about my injuries? How am I going to get back to my body?’

‘Lucas will have used the magical elixir to perform another of his psychical miracles. Now you are standing at the entrance to the archives; all you need to do is look at the walls and choose a best-loved painting. You will be drawn into the painting as if you are stepping into a hot bath on a cold August night or plunging into the sea on a hot summer’s day. You will find yourself hovering over your body in the temple grounds. Timing is of the essence for a re-birth. Meanwhile, there is a young woman waiting in the wings who has begged me to let her talk to you before you return to the Island of the Gods.’

‘Hey, gorgeous. What’s Prince Charming doing hanging out in the Timeless Place?’

Marcas could not believe his eyes; it was Amaryllis, she looked absolutely beautiful, beatific as Beatrice. Her eyes were sparkling, the anxious creases on her forehead were gone and her rosebud lips were glistening. Amaryllis gave Marcas one of her adorable smiles and his heart skipped a beat not only because they were back together again but also because she was wearing a garland of forget-me-nots in her hair.

‘I came to ask the sweetest lady in an Irish fairytale for her hand in marriage!’

‘I always said you must have kissed the Blarney Stone in a previous life, Marcas Oswald.’

‘Hey, like this is so fantastic. I wish I had a dozen red roses for my fair lady. Or a couple of fudge bars from our favourite chocolate shop, The Blue Cat. The ambulance officers tried to resuscitate you with the defibrillators but your lips were blue and your heart could not be restarted; they took you away and I never expected to see you again. I felt so guilty but there was nothing I could do to save you. This is sooo cool. Are you sorry you died? Don’t you wish you could go back to the start, before the vile bad old days? Could you come back with me now? I have missed you so much. Life just is not the same without you.’

‘Marcas, you were the love of my life, nothing has changed. It was not your fault I died. Do not feel guilty. For me, there is no going back. I cannot return. My Dream Journey on earth ended. I have had to learn acceptance. Messages to loved ones in the intermediary world are not permitted, but there is nothing I wish for more than for my mother to know that I am fine. Until she stops crying, I cannot enter the Elysian Fields.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘There is a beautiful park on the other side of the Pierian Stream called the Elysian Fields. It is a hummingbird heaven of junipers and silver-leaf poplars, golden apple trees and Anne Hathaway gardens of dream catchers with life-size bronzes of the lost children playing happily under orange blossoms. The garden is home to the Dunk Island butterflies. There are marshmallow waterfalls and fairy floss fountains, meringues grow on lemonade trees with boughs of macadamia nougat, petals of praline, rosy red apples, sugary mint leaves and caramel kisses bloom alongside bouquets of flowers; blue lace hydrangeas, purple sage and rosemary memories, creamy columbines and white cosmos, tangerine peonies and larkspurs jostle with French lavender, oriental lilies and hot pink hollyhocks. Snap dragons and lapis lazuli

geraniums, the Souvenir de la Malmaison perfume the air for the sunflowers, jimsonweeds and apple blossoms. A sun dial keeps time for the aged Turtle Mother cast in ruby coral, jewelled with turquoise and emeralds who keeps watch over the spirit beings.'

'Each evening when the sun goes down, the spirit beings float into the Elysian Fields to listen to the sublime music of the serene Lotus Heart. Lotus Heart is exquisite music, both thrilling and calming, inspirational. The musicians also play so many sentimental favourites like 'No more keeping my feet on the ground' and 'Yellow' by Cold Play. Remember all those nights at 'Faith?' 'It's a Marvellous Night for a Moondance' and 'Suzanne takes you down to her place by the river...?'

'Sure. How could I forget our first kiss on that romantic night of song and dance under the lights at 'Faith'? The nightclub is still rocking especially on a Sunday night.'

'Really? We had so much fun, didn't we? Anyway, at the gateway to the Elysian Fields, the spirit beings are all given Cecile de Brunner petals and silver lily candles to take into the garden but the flame on my candle always blows out. I cannot go through the gateway to be with the others, because my mother's tears keep my candle from burning. If only I could tell her I am fine, she would stop crying and my candle would burn brightly so I could go into the gardens to listen to Lotus Heart. I wish she knew when her earthly journey is over that I will be waiting for her. I have not forgotten her. I think of her all the time.'

The Light spoke. 'Amaryllis, your mother is not ready to leave the Valley of the Eternal Waterfall to go back into the world she once knew, because everything in her life is topsy turvy, nothing will ever be the same because her expectations of life's promises have been shattered. She is dispirited by her loss. Her emotions overwhelm her and it is impossible for her to put on a brave face to greet the rest of the world. You must respect her need for solitude, to be sad,

because it is her absolute right to take shelter from the storm for as long as it takes until she does come to terms with her loss, the deep hurt of losing her first-born child.'

'There is no rush for her to return to the outside world where people avoid her; others are fearful because sharing tears and talking about the sorrow of her loss causes discomfiture. The tears your mother weeps are an expression of the abiding love she will always feel for you. She weeps for the pain she saw you suffering and because in your darkest hour, she was not with you and there was nothing she could do to save you from your plight. She weeps because she will never hear you call her 'Mum' again, she will never wrap her arms around her daughter again, and she will never see you grow to have a family of your own. Your mother will never again share the joys and sorrows of life only a precious daughter can bring.'

'Amaryllis, you must practice patience. The time will come for your mother not to let you go, but to realise you have gone, and she has no choice but to pick up the threads and make the best of the rest of her life. Your mother will find the resources to recover her inner strength. She will get her old spirit back and she will discover a new *raison d'être* for her life, and then, your candle will burn brightly so you will be free to join the other spirit beings in the Elysian Fields. Perhaps instead of giving you a kind thought for your birthday, I could allow you to visit and talk with your mother in her dreams?'

'Come now, Marcas. You are needed. There are places to go, things to do and people to see on the Island of the Gods.'

'Please may I ask just one more question?'

'Amaryllis, what do you do here?'

'Well, I have applied to work in the tree museum with your grandfather or with the astronomers who are searching for new constellations and planets. Until a position becomes available, I am engaged as a keeper of the extinct species of animals. I am a naturalist. It is my

job to take care of the animals like the Tasmanian Tigers, who unlike the devils are impeccably behaved. Do you realise the devils have been known to tear hikers to shreds with their sharp teeth and eat their soggy socks if travellers succumb to exposure in the wilderness of Cradle Mountain?’

‘Before too long, if the people on earth do not stop desecrating the rain forests to plant palm oil plantations, bulldozing corridors of eucalypt trees to construct business centres and shopping plazas, as well as blowing up coral reefs, I will be run off my feet with orang utans, koalas and Komodo Dragons, Sea Cucumbers, Hump Back whales and Daddy Long Legs. Arrgh! Thank goodness, I will never have to take care of the poor old cane toads or cockroaches! My current concern is for the welfare of the Broad-headed snakes in Australia.’

‘Architects are currently drawing up plans for the construction of more reptile houses to take care of the Broad-headed snakes. Their habitats, the sun-warmed rocks, are being thieved, trucked out in the middle of the night by avaricious landscapers for rock walls; fortresses to protect ostentatious mansions from home invasions in exclusive gated enclaves.’

‘Marcas, I wish I could take you to meet Mimi the Struthiomimus. Mimi weighs thirty tons. Her legs are over four metres high. True. She is such a pernickety creature. I give her passionfruit and she spits out the pips. Can you believe this? And as for the archaeopteryx, the funny fossil bird with a crimson head, long lizard-tail and feathers down each side of his legs who brings me bunches of forget-me-knots, he constantly asks ‘Why is It So?’

‘Goodbye Marcas. Make the most of your life on earth, because what you do will provide an everlasting blueprint for the rest of your life. Be kind, happy and peaceful. Do a good deed every day. As Pak Twalen says, you must practice prayer, observance and discipline. It would break my heart to see you waffling around with the ebonies, humming an ‘Unchained Melody’. You are too young to be taking care of babies in the ‘Snugglepot and Cuddlepie’ cloud nurseries.

Make happy memories. Follow your heart and pursue your dreams. Paint the Sky Goddess in her opera-cassock of flaming fire wheels trailing sarsaparilla vine, sketch thoroughbred horses as they gallop from the gloomy fairytale forest of linden trees into sunny poppy fields of remembrance, a canvas. Think of me from time to time.'

'Amaryllis, I will make certain you can go into the Elysian Fields. I wish I could stay in this magic moment forever. There is so much more we could talk about but I am glad for the time we have shared just now. It is awesome to see you looking so beautiful, healthy and bursting with happiness. Every time I see a Daddy Long Legs, I will think of you! I never ever forgot you. I will carry your heart; I will carry it in my heart.'

Amaryllis kissed Marcos. Marcos touched his lips and tasted his fingers. He watched his sweetheart as she flowed through a portal into an Irish fairytale above the Turkish onion domes, steeples of the cathedrals and church spires, Hindu temples and mosques with moonstones, minarets and towering adobe pueblos to the other side of the Pierian Steam.

'What painting have you chosen Marcos?'

'Metamorphosis of Narcissus' is a fantastic work of art but I think I have experienced quite enough of the surreal life. Hal Barton's 'Through the Banksias and onto Sunshine Beach' is the perfect choice.'

'Stand very still. Look beyond the breaking of the waves to the straight line on the horizon. One last thing before you leave, it is very important. As soon as you return to your body, take a deep breath. Don't forget. Marcos Oswald.'

The Light clicked a secret in his hand and Marcos heard an old sweet song ...

So the years spin by and now the boy is twenty
Though his dreams have lost some grandeur coming true

There'll be new dreams, maybe better dreams and plenty
Before the last revolving year is through
And the seasons they go round and round
And the painted ponies go up and down
We're captive on a carousel of time
We can't return, we can only look behind
From where we came from
And go round and round and round
In the circle game.

57,176 words.